



E A S T E R T O W N

a novel by

Max Crawford

LITERATURE OF THE AMERICAN WEST  
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Eastertown

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# Eastertown

*A Novel*



Max Crawford

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for  
Larry Jeff and John Henry

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Blessed is the man who has laid hold of the knowledge that comes from the enquiry into Nature. He stirreth up no evil for the citizens nor gives himself to unjust acts, but surveys the ageless order of immortal Nature, of what it is composed and how and why. In the heart of such as he the study of base acts can find no lodging.

EURIPIDES

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Eastertown

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**T**hey were short three dwarfs, Gustav was dying, Bella felt her own mind reeling out to unknown depths, and all the while the superintendent persisted in calling her Miss White. One moment he might mumble heart-felt condolences, then the next, in a maddeningly cheerful voice, press her for more detail. He did not understand. The troupe was falling apart.

Bella held the receiver away from her, to gaze out of the phone booth upon the empty bus—oh it so looked empty—and the grime and misery and injustice and torment that the wind and the world in its turning whipped around her. Now the superintendent was in tears, so it sounded. Bella explained, calmly, quietly at first, that Happy and Doc had eloped, or the equivalent, just over the state line and not long after, it had been, Sneezy had had surely the last of his countless breakdowns. They had left the snuffling, shuffling old man waiting for nothing in a forgotten bus stop, a ticket to nowhere pinned to his collar. He hadn't been able to carry on, see. Then a few miles outside some burg, some hole with a name like Levelland or Brownfield or Plainview or Earth, at about dark, though blowing sand had been rising like night for hours, the bus's universal joint had cracked. And then Bella herself, it was then she had cracked herself.

“Oh my sacred Jesus, Gussie is right, it's perfeck. Our whole crummy world is coming to pieces.”

Night had fallen freezing, so early in the fall, summer only days ago, and they had passed those dark hours huddled beneath mountains of balled newspapers, there had been nothing else to provide warmth, nothing else but one another and Bella had stayed cold, with every fiber of her being she had longed for the cold. So it was the following morning—the superintendent couldn't picture, could he, the looks on the faces of the cops and the wrecker-drivers and the cafe commanders along for the ride? Four dwarfs, one fine-looking girl, a man whose head was filling to bursting with blood crawling out of the bus, while all about them fluffy balls of newsprint bounded like lemmings toward the horizon.

“They couldn’t run us in, see. We wasn’t in their stupid town.”

Had Bella said that or, now exhausted from shouting over the wind which had begun to rise, as it had risen every morning this last week, to a tortured, unrelenting shriek, had it been but a thought? No, the cops hadn’t busted them—now she was speaking, bewildered, beaten, but speaking—they had only, for the last of their folding money, towed them into their lost town, fixed the bus and left them there, parked in front of the garage, time on the meter running out, nothing left of the future but this one last stop, this one last engagement.

“We don’t even know how much gas we got left. The gauge was bust in the fight last night, see.”

Bella listened to something. The superintendent assuring her that, though money could not possibly be wired, their small bank not being equipped for the transaction, they would probably receive most of their fee. Though they were going to be late and, more to the point, were producing only four dwarfs. There should have been seven.

Tears seeped from Bella’s eyes. “Forty miles? We can make it. It ain’t the gas we’re worried about, bud. It’s—I don’t think I can drive, see!” While something without meaning was being said in reply, Bella looked toward the bus, praying there would be something large moving there; but still there were only the bobbing tops of heads to be seen, there beneath them her lover lying exhausted, laid out on the long back seat, Rath and Henning watching, waiting for him to turn his face and close his eyes and die. Bella mentioned the driver was ill. Nothing got through. “See, their little legs is way too short to reach the pedals. They’re midgets, bud.” The superintendent made assertions that he was getting through to that part. “See, the seat can’t move up or down, and if I get to holding one of them little rats in my lap it’s—*it’s all over.*”

The superintendent tried to explain his position.

So much of Snow White’s tale of woe was ending up garbled in transmission. The lines, static electricity, wind, sand, perhaps merely shoddy apparatus maintenance, perhaps merely the superintendent’s own frantic state of mind, his *panic*—whatever, he was hearing things a thoroughbred, as were all thespians, could not possibly have said.

Bella held the receiver against her breast and waited, and waited. When its small buzzing there stopped she told the superintendent she was sure everything would work out. They would arrive, somehow, within the hour. “But that’s why I called up, bud. We got to get us three dwarfs. The mechanic says they ain’t got one dwarf in this whole crummy town. We got to get the dwarfs from *you*. They ain’t got em here.”

There was a silence. The superintendent said his school didn't have a single dwarf either. Certainly not three.

Bella began speaking in a calm, controlled fashion. "Of course you don't run no school for dwarfs. *I* run the dwarf act. But you got some kids there, ain't you? Well, round me up three short ones and we'll get this show on the road. Right, bud?" And Bella hung up and hung on to the phone, for dear life, or so it would have seemed to a local citizen passing by.

Meanwhile the superintendent found himself shaken by the sudden silence on the line, though he soon recovered. Snow White's problems were the same—or similar, as there was the language—to his wife's own on her opening nights. Nerves. All the girl needed was for the curtain to ring up. All would be fine then.

■ ■ ■

Llewellyn Rainborough was a large man unaccustomed to command. Tall, stately, athletically shaped but soft. A colonel in the reserves, even during the war, he took care to appear well appointed among his teachers, wore crisp old suits and wept when students were bad, instead of punishing them. His face was high and broad and white. He wore rimless glasses that weren't always noticed. Nor did observers often remember whether he had much hair or not. He lisped slightly, considered himself a moral man, so long as such morality did not transgress Christian practices, and tried to stay in his office as often as possible. Principal Cook, the coaches, and the superintendent's own wife, she the drama coach, handled that end of education very well. His responsibilities were to higher authority. The bank, the school board, various civic and veterans' organizations, and the voting public. The superintendent was not a humorless man, only very nearly so. He joked when he was relaxed or was beside himself and wanted more than anything in the world to appear relaxed. When he learned that three dwarfs were missing from the troupe, he came out of his office, and into his secretary's. She happened to be there.

"Snow White and the Four Dwarfs! Eh Miss Minor? Eh? Eh?"

Moselle Minor did not know what to think. Therefore she thought she was being fired, this her very first week on the job. She grabbed up her pad and sprang from the corner in which she had stashed her desk, the idea being: out of sight, out of mind. Now Moselle took it into her mind to laugh loudly. Why? Good question. So far as the superintendent was concerned, a man who seldom jests can be unused to having his wit noted; he did not immediately recognize the hard, huffing noise issuing from his secretary. But in time he said, "Oh yes, that of course," and invited his secretary into his office, a place

she had never been before. Not to sit down. The superintendent made fitful gestures toward a chair. Moselle pushed it around, like to catch a better light.

“No, no, please, sit down, Miss Minor. Have a chair, as they say.” But then as soon as she had done as bidden, ready for more cracks, the superintendent swivelled his executive model away and took to staring morosely out the window.

Moselle knew it now. Back in the cafeteria serving line—at best. Faced with that there was nothing left to do but strike back. One: blame the outbreak of coffee breaks on the necessity of keeping old friends while making the new.

“I just can’t abandon the cafeteria ladies like *that*.” Moselle clicked a couple fingers. Cracked like snapping a kitten’s neck. “It’ll take a little time.”

Sometimes Moselle concentrated so hard on winning an argument she failed to note that her debate foe had long ago given up all notions of right or wrong. She went on then till at length the superintendent assured her that absenteeism—occasional, frequent, chronic—was not the problem. Moselle pondered the old boy’s shift. Maybe it was the crouching, from time to time, behind her desk. The dropped bobby pin, a fumbled pencil took care of that. Still, the superintendent went on shaking his head. Maybe that meant something. Like maybe the catnaps weren’t the problem at all; maybe when viewed by a tall, near-sighted man from above they took on the look of secretarial study. Who knew? With a directness characteristic of many a cafeteria girl, even those who had moved on, Moselle went to the heart of the matter:

“Yeah well what is the beef then? I give up.”

The superintendent was on his feet in a flash. He waved a hand toward the ceiling. “This is the last assembly we’re having the first week of school, no matter *who* Dorothea comes up with! Not even the Boshoi Ballet!”

That was it. The Ruskie again. The old girl threw them around all the time. Now she had the old boy at it.

The superintendent returned to his chair, meek as that guy who didn’t love his country and they made him live on a boat forever. As the old fellow slid deeper into brown study, Moselle concluded he was no quicker here in his polished office than he had been poking along the cafeteria serving line, tasting this, nibbling that, never knowing the name for anything. An insolence bred by perceiving that real power in this world was physical, rather than mental or social or whoever you knew or whatever, led Moselle to cross her abbreviated legs, stretch equally compact arms and yawn in the man’s face. A couple more days of such chunky charm and she would be fixed in the front office for life.

It was not unusual for the superintendent to carry on disastrous imaginings in his head. No doubt due to having seen so many of his wife's play productions. What he was imagining during this silent spell were the consequences of the decimated midget band arriving late. What if they arrived later still, too late even for a performance this afternoon? Let's see, well they would have to sleep somewhere, to rest up for tomorrow's production. Yes, that was it. There they were checking into the City Hotel, scrambling like ill-made children up the stairs, all cramming their knotted bodies into one bed, an economy due to contractual niceties, as the superintendent could not legally pay but a quarter of their fee till the play was done and the last curtain fallen. Oh but before sleeping they would be hungry of course and a bit lonely, being new in town and, due to their misfortune, generally finding it difficult to strike up acquaintances. After a meal at Loren's Cafe, all in one booth, they would troop down to the Ritz for a movie, all but the bearded passing as minors. *Back to the bus!* To ride around the better parts of town like first-graders hijacked by a demented bus driver, hooting and hollering at such freedom till they woke the good citizenry, they who would rise up and toss them all in jail. But from there escape was only a matter of wriggling through grown-up bars and back to the street, a ragged little pack of outlaws, breaking and entering houses through windows left open for kitty! And on and on. Hans Christian Andersen had never dreamed of anything so grim.

The superintendent often moved his lips during these wretched projections—occasionally going so far as to bark out word or phrase, *all in one booth!* say, or *left open for kitty!*—so that he was not entirely screwy did not occur to his secretary. Llewellyn Rainborough noted this and spoke out with enough vigor to give the former cafeteria girl the shock of her new career:

“It seems they are expecting us to produce three dwarfs, Miss Minor!”

“Huh, sir!”

The superintendent was pleased. Two jokes in one day. One morning actually.

Moselle found the superintendent watching her banzai laughter with puzzled suspicion. This was the superintendent thinking of offering some reproof, not all of which would be directed toward his secretary. Never should he have relayed Miss White's blunt request quite so bluntly, particularly to one so new to office responsibility, one so obviously bowled over by the large shiny desk and so on. An explanation was owed.

“No, not three dwarfs, Miss Minor. Rather three short children. There not being many dwarfs in this neck of the woods, certainly none with talent,

children will have to play their roles. And as we seem overrun by these, we have been asked to supply them. It's all about a drama, you see."

On the other hand, the superintendent noted, once initiated Miss Minor grasped the situation perhaps only too well.

"Three dwarfy shorties huh. Well how about Tiny?"

"Timothy?"

"Sure. He's got a carload of sawed-off pals. Just do it."

"I'm not sure—I'm not so sure that would be a good idea at all." The superintendent drew up courage. The boy's deficiencies were not to be merchandized. He demanded or perhaps rather suggested that an apology be directed to his wife, she did have that one slow uncle.

If no tears actually welled, the threat of their doing so had the superintendent lavishing apologies on his secretary, she who rattled on, displaying no discernable human emotion.

"It's just that the kid has had so much experience in things of this nature, dramas and plays of this sort. What I mean, the kid is a natural, with his mother without a doubt one of your finer drama coaches in the history of this place, a legend before many of us was born. How well I remember Finnegan's Rainbow—no insult intended—from my own high-school days, even though I was stuck in chorus and not allowed to cross over to drama and cheerleading and other hollering practices. But now you think back, Mr. Rainborough. Who among us could forget Tiny in that old Charlie Dickens thing, the classic? And only in the third grade at the time."

The superintendent thought back. "I've always wondered if it might not have been that performance that gave him the unfortunate nickname. He's actually not all that small, you know. Not at all."

"Well big or little, I bet Mrs. Rainborough wouldn't want him to miss the boat. Like playing a dwarf would be good practice. She sure used to think banging around the walls like a rubber ball was."

The superintendent tried to remember the boy being up to snuff in the Dickens classic and failed. "I'm afraid his concentration is not all it should be."

"Oh shush. So he was prompted ever now and then. His crying and the fits was so real. Why the way Dwight Cage—his stage father, you'll recall, we was dating at the time—the way Dwight had to contain him! Poor little fellow, so unhappy about all that Limey misery and poverty. And how he *bated* that old Mr. Scrooge—who I believe you played at the time, if I recall—and him not having his good Christmas. Wow what acting! Afterwards Dwight was showing around the teethmarks."

“I was never sure there was that much actual kicking in the Dickens. In the original.”

“Well there musta been or Mrs. Rainborough wouldn’t have let it go on that long. It’s pretty well known she just jumps right in and starts throwing actors around, they muff a line.”

The superintendent reconsidered. “Yes, you do have a point. And he has been in some things that weren’t *total* disasters. Mainly non-speaking parts. There was last year’s Easter Sunrise Pageant—on those rocky canyon slopes, even Pilate stumbled now and then. The boy didn’t *stand out*.” The superintendent took a pad from his desk.

“I know in my heart you are doing the right thing, sir. It would irk Mrs. Rainborough to distraction if some other short kid got the part.”

It was that which the superintendent had reconsidered. He scratched out a note.

“We might as well excuse him and his friends now, so they can get used to the idea. Isn’t there a silent dwarf? Let’s hope so,” said the superintendent with a sigh. “Oh yes.” He took the note and added a line. “Prince Charming is ill, it seems. We’ll have to find a boy for that role as well. Someone older, though I’m afraid the charming aspect . . .” And the superintendent faded to silence at the mere thought of such a search.

Moselle had stretched herself out in her chair, an attitude no other secretary of the superintendent had ever accomplished, not the first week of school. She all but had her feet propped up on the old boy’s desk.

“I been wondering, sir, if they’re coming in a full-size bus. Or maybe it might be one of them midget cars like they have got at the circus. You know, where all these nutty midgets keep piling out of this nutty car, thirty or forty of them in all, everyone of them popping right out of that cute little midge of a jalop.”

The superintendent was about to speak to his secretary on matters of posture and position, when a pretty young woman in dazzling red passed his outer doorway. He rose; he thought; he almost called out, *White! Miss White!*; but then he remembered he had been warned. No pale fabled heroine she. Rather: the worst student his wife, or any of them, to hear his wife tell, had ever had had after ten long years come back to haunt the halls of her alma mater, to gaze up at the various senior class photographs hung on the walls, a pilgrimage of remembrance every returned student seemed driven to make. But, as Miss Steen had moved on and Miss Minor was at hand, it was the latter who received the look of true distress.

“I’ve been led to believe they’re coming in a bus, though I’m unsure of its size.”



“Angela,” Moselle sweetly sang out as in passing she snagged her arm on the principal’s secretary’s outer door and twirled herself into her office like one of those ballerinas, a stocky one, the boy ballerinas were ever wheeling about. “Guess who’s back in town. Carrie Steen, arch rival. Just saw her in the hall.”

“Good. She can have him.”

Angela Fulks, said secretary, raised from behind her desk. She had been filing absentee reports or making it look like it, her fleshy red nose fleshier and redder than normal. She greeted Moselle by throwing one shredded tissue after another into the wastepaper basket. Moselle moved in close. Tears. Big ones. Bigger yet seen through the girl’s goggles, glass thick as a sleuth’s magnifier.

“Angela, you’ve been fired!”

“No such luck.”

Angela sat up, very straight. Moselle didn’t have to take one step closer to understand what was going on here. Love and it was lost. And lost to Dwight Cage, of all people. Dwight Cage then, when they had all been in highschool, and Dwight Cage now, when they were all still in highschool, in a way. And how unfair it all was. And how unworthy and freckled *he* was. Freckled, if not unworthy, all over, Moselle recalled, her very small heart thumping away, freckled down to the nails on his hands and other dangling places. And double ugly! Hair and teeth parted down the middle, splayed stance, long duck bottom, not to forget the bathroom whistles and toilet burps, those and the outhouse songs he used to use to woo the girls and now employed to amuse if not tame his Math One students. Moselle let this girl know: no reason to be bawling your eyes out, losing that sex fiend to Carrie Steen or anyone else for that matter.

Angela put on a face. “Oh not him. Not her.”

“I’ll bet.”

“Well it’s only partially him. But not entirely. And hardly her. Hardly mainly.”

“Huh, well!”

Angela moved her head sluggishly, as if her neck were but more back, in looking over her desk. “It’s just the new year. Getting everything started *again*. Again and again. Every year I think *this* bunch will be the end of it. But not for us.”

“Uhn hmmm,” Moselle observed, understanding nothing and knowing it all.

She took it all in, for one thing. Just look at the principal’s office, a junk pile compared to the executive emptiness of her own. Maybe Angela was

tracking her job. Something loftier. Moselle considered such an exchange one heart beat. More fun over here, but how about all that paper-pushing, not to mention having to deal directly with students, teachers and their riff-raff. The heart beat on, unmoved.

“Now listen, girl. Maybe I only been out of the cafeteria a week, but I been living since junior year.” Actually several grades before that, but Moselle figured it wise not to go into that just now, not in detail. Some people might see it as along the lines of that Marco Polo, going on a bit too much about his worldly ways. “You want any advice on how to handle either of them—you look me up. I’m right next door. Usually.”

Was this girl listening or not? Hard to say.

“It’s that I hadn’t seen him in three months, all summer, and I thought that hell would be burned out. But this morning when he handed me the absentee reports—no, I offered him the phone, oh it doesn’t matter! *whatever*, our hands touched. I could barely walk back to my desk.”

This was offered in a manner peculiar to Angela, incipient hysteria contained by a certain self-knowledge. She reminded everyone a lot of Marie Blum, the almost beautiful and ever romantic senior English teacher, she who herself spent a lot of time hanging around the principal’s office.

If Moselle was being told that Dwight Cage, three-handed horny toad, had only touched this girl’s *hand*, Moselle would have to find that hard to believe. Angela’s response was to jerk her head backwards, the buck of a hanged person, toward the principal’s frosted door. Against which the mountainous shadow of Jack Cook moved, silently, back and forth. What that twitch had to mean, other than nothing, was that things were further along than Moselle had imagined. Dwight Cage was well on the way, as the cafeteria ladies politely put it, to getting this girl in the way. And now him more than likely to be running around with that returned Steen person, she having picked up some speedy ways in New York surely.

Well who knew? was how Moselle looked on a good rumor seeing first light of day. Somebody had to do it.

Moselle explained in so many words that she knew exactly how it had been, was and would be, but it seemed no amount of empathy, sympathy or so on could alter the dull glaze on the duped girl’s dumb face. On the other hand, even with that look about her, Angela could blurt out something pretty smart now and then:

“Would you like to change jobs?”

Of course. Right the first time and now it was out. Office people just couldn’t take she—or was it *her*?—Moselle, in any case, leap-frogging to the top. Many of the cafeteria ladies had observed as much of late.

“Listen, I got to deliver this three-dwarf note,” Moselle confided kindly. “But before that a word to the wise. After getting the Rainbow kid this part, other people with more or less more experience won’t stand a chance. So forget it.”

“Maybe I should marry him,” Angela said and added something helpless, not a laugh, not a cry. “I don’t really actually *dislike* him.”

“Humph. Well think and think again, girl,” Moselle advised but didn’t really have time to chew the fat. Relentless was more like it as she pursued her mission, out in the hall and down into the north wing, toward the sixth-grade rooms, the sound of her short high heels fading very little in the distance.

■ ■ ■

In one of these sixth-grade rooms, where all the little troublemakers were sent and called special, Miss Abshire, without the aid of sound effect, was trying to explain that flatulence, which one of her students had recently experienced dramatically, could be seen as a disease. The opinion of those little ones directly under her command was divided as to the nature of this malady, what it looked like, say, except to agree that if Miss Abshire suffered from it it wasn’t a skin affliction. Teacher appeared before them day after day as polished and smooth and white and cool as marble. Tiny Rainborough, the farting boy, was in any case being lectured only generally. It was not so much that he was the superintendent’s son and the superintendent was the drama coach’s husband and around here the drama coach’s word was law, but rather that Miss Abshire knew and knew well that *any* sort of recognition would have made a nervous, uncertain and tearful boy only the more nervous, uncertain and tearful. That following his last scolding Tiny had lain on the floor till nightfall did much to encourage leniency as well. Miss Abshire was well into pig fat as the cause, decorum the cure, when Miss Minor arrived with the note.

Miss Abshire read this strange document with a stone carver’s deliberation. That Tiny and two of his friends were to be dwarfs today was quite mad enough, but the addendum jammed into one corner asking someone, possibly Miss Abshire herself, to scout around for an older Prince Charming aroused the sixth-grade teacher’s curiosity. Unfortunately Miss Abshire, whose intelligence had successfully driven off three Ph.D.s, one of which should have been her own, was not long in understanding that the boys were to be stand-ins in today’s assembly play, mundane logic ever scattering the marvelously magical possibilities the mind had set loose before mother reason stepped in. Despite the superintendent’s secretary’s majestic rush, Miss Abshire lined Tiny and the other two, these chosen for the specific

grief they would unleash on all involved, against the wall and gave them final instructions.

“As you shall be missing class, there will be an extra assignment. You will imagine yourselves the boys of a traveling family of players. The purpose of any education is to understand the lives of others, particularly those whose lives are very different from our own. In addition, when you return you will enact before the class a conversation that might occur between an East Indian, a Red Indian and a Cleveland Indian. Dismissed.”

Moselle thumped the three boys along the hall, cutting around them with the dexterity of a sheep dog. The boys were herded toward their fate without so much as a bleat. If one had come upon them this early fall afternoon there would have been Tiny, a soft, lumbering, awkwardly oversized boy. Possessing vacant if handsome features, he was the Rainborough's only child and a late arrival at that. Van would come next. A small, round, brown boy with a quick mischievous face set on a small, round brown head, he was the science teacher's younger boy and, more to the point, the grandson of the town's most powerful man, the local banker and owner of much else. And last there would be Red, a near white-headed youth, nervous in gait and gesture, with bird-like, pink-edged eyes and features that were equally sharp and that could turn, in the presence of weakness, nasty. Called an orphan, though his mother had only gone off with the nickelodeon repairman, he lived with his grandmother who was ever diving into the root cellar, with Red in tow, at the sight of a cloud not perfectly silver. Best friends, the boys had little in common but that they lived in the same neighborhood and collectively cursed fate that one of them had a mother ever casting him and his friends up onto a raised platform, there not to remember so much as their own names. They had seriously considered packing up a few things in a bag and hiking off to find new parents, a new school and a new town—this at summer's end, the beginning of the fall school term, when such dramas and plays commenced to abound—but had been made understand by Miss Abshire that these wretched events occurred near everywhere one might travel.

This brief journey soon came to an end. Moselle Minor stood the trio before the trophy case, this where errant students were ever brought to sweat it out before they were to be punished, and imparted the threatening sort of advice the boys knew well from the cafeteria serving line; though now, instead of being rapped at the back of the head with a wooden spoon and told to move briskly toward mashed potatoes, they were informed that if they wished to remain, if not necessarily healthy, then at least in one piece, they should consider not moving a muscle. This done, the former cafeteria girl disappeared inside the superintendent's office.

Through this opened door the boys saw Tiny's father trying to see Tiny, but then the door closed and all hope of rescue, justice or escape receded. Though they were not so alone now as they would be shortly—standing there beneath the scorching lights, three hundred pairs of eyes watching, a like number of ears listening, all waiting for them to do and say things that only moments before had been memorized and memorized again and now had faded or totally flat-out fled—it was close enough to such isolation, such solitary confinement that they knew of the coming terror. Their eyes teared and their knees knocked.

“God bless us everyone!” Tiny cried out, the one and only line he had ever remembered; and in so delivering with such misery and pain he might well have been addressing the world at large, speaking to all humankind of the trials he and his little pals had suffered at the hands of his mother and her abiding passion, her noble profession, the stage.



When the bus pulled up in the rear yard and Snow White at length stepped down, the superintendent was so stricken with such beauty he had been unable to bring himself to go out and properly greet the troupe. Instead he stayed there inside the rear fire door, a good observation point, to be soon joined by Jo Peters who, followed by his entire typing class, was ever running about the halls, followed by his entire typing class, to nose into executive, administrative and every other sort of matter that concerned the school and its running. As the superintendent was debating whether to order Peters and his class back to class or to inquire of the herd if they cared to go out and show the troupe around the school yard, while all thirty or so of them were discussing this, Principal Cook came along. Generally this would have settled the matter. Generally the principal, a man whose shape was fat but was about as fat as a great big round rock, took over in the case of visitors arriving and any demonstration massed to view their arrival; but in matters concerning drama and its production he gave way to the school's sole authority in such affairs, and so it was that the principal, in synch with the superintendent, the typing teacher and his class, stood aside for Dorothea Rainborough as she swept through to take charge. All went on to make a friendly, greeting sort of laughter as the drama coach banged open the fire door, trotted out and commenced to pound on various parts of the bus, the door and nearby windows and the one remaining fender, thereby inviting the troupe, what was left of it, to step out and have a short stroll about on their way to the band hall, the only dressing room their backward institution could offer.

It was then, when Snow White followed Mrs. Rainborough off the bus—touching the ground so lightly that the earth she and his wife shared could not possibly be made of the same stuff—that the superintendent’s professional chuckle grew to a cry of delight. Thirty incipient typists studied this *ballo!* with malicious wonder. But then to have returned to an executive amusement or the husbandly chortle, the superintendent concluded, would have provided poor harbor in which to moor his true feelings. In fact, laughing out loud, now that the four dwarfs were out and bounding along behind Mrs. Rainborough and Snow White, could get him into water surely as hot as having an entire typing class imagining he had fallen head over heels for a traveling player. *Think about it*, Llewellyn Rainborough said to himself and did. What if a member of the school board or Banker Glassmoyer or, worse, a voting taxpayer happened to be passing along the hall just now? Might they not mistake such laughter, or a yelp of joy for that matter, for the mocking of misfortune? And as well, there would be the thirty or so youths blocking the fire exit. Generally the principal would have been there to save the day and today was no exception. Sensing that disaster lay in every direction, Jack Cook barked and, as one, Jo Peters and his charges leapt to it and were headed back to their shorthand class, perhaps it was, gone quick as a flash.

The superintendent had intended to utter a moralism before this departure—discipline and duty, you see, could be seen as kin to mere reflex, an animal’s flinch to avoid pain, without the edenic reminder that every act committed by man must be so done, or not, due to reasons of right or wrong—but by the time he had formulated an apposite axiom Cook, Peters and the youths were gone. And he had discovered he had other matters on his mind. The girl. Had he ever seen anything live look quite so delicate in its beauty? Quite so fragile and abstract? A figurine, a China doll. The superintendent simply could not imagine that up close she might be real. Be flesh and blood and skin and bone. Her figure so tidy and well-formed—he couldn’t remember, had her legs moved as she crossed the yard? No. At every moment her beauty had been a perfect still point. Her square face, highly-colored cheeks, skin alabaster, hair jet black and pulled behind her ears—and here the superintendent stopped to consider that these two orifices had alone appeared to be corporeal. They were round ears, fixed rather flat against the skull and small, certainly no larger than an old pocket watch. The mind thus leaping, the superintendent extracted his own time-piece: it would appear as if he were checking the hour. This proved a gloomy deed. An act to destroy all notions of the perfectly ethereal, never ending, ever unrequited love. Metal which could be rubbed like thick velvet between

one's fingers, flesh so tender it bent like fur—these vivid perceptions, of something along the lines of a soft clock, brought to mind the ubiquitous gristle and steady march of life, and that sweated and swift act of procreation that sustains it.

The superintendent turned to observe his wife as, after having deposited the troupe in the band hall, she made her way back toward him, the fire door and the main building. He tried to see the woman as he had seen the girl, before the girl's ears had ruined everything.

Dorothea was as ever laughing or crying or seeming to be doing so and talking, definitely talking to him even now, long before a word could be heard, before she reached the fire door and came into the building. Her clothes had gone askew in transit—this usual as well—blouse button number one unbuttoned, number two making a threat to pop free; those sizeable breasts underneath falling toward a belly not a great deal larger than a basketball; spike legs thrust into a pair of manly, sensible shoes; her face as pale and shaky as something undercooked; the bun of hair at the back of her head, pierced by pencils, all forgotten and trailing along, sagging toward imminent collapse; now to yank off an earring as she came over the yard, or so it seemed by the movement of her hand, and throw it away. For that instant, as his wife stood slapping the glass-paneled fire door, before the superintendent pushed it open, the superintendent considered leaving it shut. The reality of Dorothea could always be counted on to raze the dream of anyone else, ears or no ears.

As the drama coach had previously arranged that the assembly be held sixth period, the last of the school day, and there was some time till then, she allowed her husband to escort her along the hall, this managed in a courtly fashion. She found the superintendent curiously curious today. Normally he looked upon the acting profession as help—or at least had once noted that if a play didn't have a butler in it it was all Greek to him—but now he brimmed with questions. She tried to be as generous as possible in describing the troupe:

“Thoroughbreds, of course, Llewellyn, but only up to a point. It is the travel, constant and overdone, that has lowered their standards. And, as is often the case with many of their class, they are helplessly disorganized. It seems that Mr. Gustav, who is ill, was not only to be their Prince Charming but was to direct the production and manage business affairs as well. And I'm afraid they have overlooked informing us that we, the school to be visited, are to supply a Wicked Queen. *It's in the contract*, is what the girl said.” The superintendent offered some sort of reply; it was rejected. “I could have one of my girls, either Jay or Nina, play the Grande Dame of

Evil and Spite, but they're more the Snow White types. But then this *other girl* gets the meaty role—that's in the contract as well. It certainly will be a case of playing against the grain."

The superintendent mused. "Well she certainly *looks* a good Snow White. Like a doll or a child or . . .?"

"I suppose to the untrained eye she could seem so. From the distant reaches of the auditorium—perhaps. But near up she's—well, her language alone would make Broadway blush."

"Not that it shouldn't," was what the superintendent would have liked to have pointed out, but that point, of the fall of written talk in modern writing, had been made and lost long ago. Instead he wondered along these lines: "Perhaps we didn't have a bad connection at all! Perhaps everything heard was said!" His wife paid such mumbling no mind whatsoever, she going on about the arrangements still to be made, that the drama coach herself must once again take up war paint—by this the superintendent understood that she meant she herself would tackle the role of the Wicked Queen—so that the show might go on. By now they had arrived at the door to the Faculty Lounge—the opium den, so called by Jack Cook as it was legally the only smoking spot in the building and to prove it, even now billows of smoke rolled out the door—where Mrs. Rainborough would make up, and the superintendent's dread eased and excitement returned. Not all of which was due to his wife having disappeared into the Lounge.

"However that may be, I'm certainly looking forward to meeting her. The star," the superintendent found himself saying to absolutely no one at all, it being two minutes shy of the bell, the hall dead empty, but for that patch of smoke. On his way back to his office the superintendent paused before one of the senior portraits, as those lost, lonely, failed returned students ever stood before the assembled photographs of those with whom they had graduated long years ago. However the superintendent seemed to be gazing at this particular year by chance. He did not know a single face there, nor would have probably had it been his own class which, because of its ancient age, had been moved somewhere down in the depths of the north wing amongst the teeming maelstrom of the lower grades. But even had it been his and his wife's own year, the superintendent would have had scant time for such nostalgia. Rather he was thinking, as he made quickly for his office, that such a star as Snow White, surely she would have a snapshot of herself, in costume perhaps, preferably one without those snarling little men all about. And she would be wearing a crown, no doubt, and it would be pulled down tight over her little ears!

“Perhaps she’ll autograph it for me,” the superintendent panted upon entering his office, his secretary popping up from behind her desk. “Surely a star would have a pin-up or something along those lines. Of course it’s always possible she’s never learned to write. Make an X, I suppose.”

As his secretary had taken to eyeing him warily—perhaps *pin-up* was not the up-to-date slang he had been searching for, no doubt another word was in fashion these days—he did not wait for her opinion. Rather, he suggested the former cafeteria girl might ring the bell a few moments early and take her position for hall duty, a function she performed with the gusto of a football coach, the efficiency of a drill sergeant, and the lethal threat of a cafeteria girl.



It was during the break before Doc Bavender’s physics class that Jo Peters came to the science wing to tell his friend that his sons—for lately the scientist had come to take the older boy, the boy he had adopted, as his own—would be performing in that afternoon’s assembly play. Bavender was neither distressed, as Mrs. Rainborough was said to have been, nor excited, as was Jo Peters, decidedly, by the prospect; in this or any other matter for that matter, this small warm man had come to find himself knowing neither dread nor pride. Doc Bavender, you see, had come to a crossroads in his life and at this crossroad there was nothing there or anywhere else in the world that was not right, that was not the way it should be. Nothing that was not natural, nothing that needed him or anyone else in the world to change it. Comedy, tragedy, good or evil, it was all of one piece and he welcomed all equally. Now, these days, was he so content with the way things were that, beyond the fact that Van would play a dwarf and Dudley Prince Charming, he scarcely heard a word Jo Peters said. It was not unusual for Bavender to be lulled by his colleague rattling on about one thing or another, to be charmed by this boy-man’s feline, near feminine grace, but now, these days, even the ways of those infinitely less innocently charming and graceful had been found mesmerizing. He tried to collect in his mind his coming lecture—or was it to be an experiment?—but now such things as physics, once the only matter he found alive and real, appeared in his mind as faded and distant as long lost dreams. As for his recent interest in biology and, even stranger than that, literature, Doc Bavender could only smile (a small warm smile from this small warm man) at the book of poems he held under his arm, the book of poems given him by one of the girls, the blonde girl, of course. He turned the book in his hand: a long-ago cleric who wrote so finely of love and longing and long lost dreams. If he did not

yet understand the poems, not thoroughly, nor perhaps ever would, his partial comprehension struck him as that exact, wonderful chaos the poet had imagined he might create, in such a man's mind, in writing them.

He turned the book in his hand.

When his attention returned to such things, he found Jo Peters burbling on happily on the matter of the genius of Dorothea Rainborough, she who had dedicated her life to bringing such culture to this small lost town. This was not to say that the typing teacher himself was today without *nerves*, as Mother called what a judge or a preacher might call *guilt*, and to prove it Jo Peters tugged randomly at the venetian blind strings nearby, shuttering jittery light onto the crowd of students making its way into the science wing. So Jo Peters and everyone else, save Doc Bavender who could be out-of-touch now and then, knew that Jo Peters should be on hall duty before his own room just now; but, hang it all, Jo Peters knew further that all, save Principal Cook who somehow managed to know just about everything about nothing, would agree, surely, that an artistic discussion with Doc Bavender was of far greater import than *riding herd*, as Mother called what a rustler or cowpoke might call *making a living*, on unruly youth. And so Jo Peters, taking the chance, felt it his duty to *culturize* a man sorely in need of it.

"Yes. We in typing and shorthand, typing and shorthand, we shall be making our own contribution too. *Per se*. I have just finished my first oil and will hang it in my homeroom. It will only add to Dorothea's superhuman effort. My own struggle. In typing and shorthand. *Per se*."

Bavender's drowsy attention had turned and was now moving in another direction, to another place, a place that existed only in his mind, not a memory or a dream but some place like them. If Jo Peters's words came more clearly to him now, he had lost hold on the world in which words had any meaning: they were but sound. He was quite frightened by this dulling of thought, but the fear felt old and, though he did not think he remembered it or had ever dreamed it, he was ever drawn there. It was as if he were sinking in water, and still able to see and to hear and to breathe.

"I'm sorry, Jo. Daydreaming again. You say you've finished a painting."

So that having a simple chat could itself be seen as a work of art, Jo Peters, from time to time, savored choice words or phrases, the embroidery of his sentences, repeating them thoughtfully before going on to make the point.

"It's a *pastorial*, in that it has a river and trees and a boulder. But these are not painted as you've seen them ever before. Ever before. I've changed the—well, even if I did tell you the *idea* it wouldn't do justice to the original.

The original. I've discovered being *an original* is so simple. I'm surprised I hadn't thought of it before, as is Mother, who is surprised I have thought of it now. The power, the flower of my imagination is booming out all over! Even Dorothea has asked my opinion of what play she should offer us this year. Can you imagine the *flattergastion!* I was. Guess what I have decided."

"I'm sorry, Jo. I am gathering wool this morning. And what have you decided?"

"Hamlet."

"Hamlet?"

"*Hamlet!*"

"Oh yes. Hamlet. Yes, it does have a ghost in it, doesn't it?"

"One of the language's greatest plays delivered by one of our country's finest directors. Some have said Dorothea could be working anywhere, even Broadway, but for the language. Yes. I have suggested Hamlet. Or maybe Macbeth or Othello."

Doc Bavender smiled. "Now you wouldn't have been talking to the English teachers, I suppose."

Jo Peters drew up a lip. He thrust forward his chin. "Only inci- and acci- Dentally, that is. Mrs. Frost recommends Macbeth, while Mrs. Lowry prefers Othello, which they do teach—if only inci- and acci- of course—but Miss Blum and I have agreed. Hamlet is the bart's best by far. Aside from how I feel about Miss Blum, *seriously*, she *is* the superior teacher. Mrs. Frost is a blue ribbon with Silas Marner and telling windy stories about Hawaii and the coronation, while Mrs. Lowry has no peer insofar as diagramming sentences on the blackboard and spotting fake book reports go, but, *however*—"

Bavender raised himself as the bell rang, thankful that Shakespeare had never, not in his wildest dreams, conceived that his works might be brutally revived by Dorothea Rainborough bullying her youngsters through his foreign passions. Late students came darting into the science wing, darting into his lab and home room. Let them. Let them all be late. Let them stay away. Bavender turned to Jo Peters.

"The problem there, Jo, is who would play Hamlet? The two girls are the only real players she's got."

Jo Peters agreed and disagreed. A girl Hamlet was out or was she? But on the other hand the Hooper twins, the only boys anywhere around who hadn't had their brains beat out by football or heads kicked in by cows, couldn't act their way out of a paper bag, not even given scissors and swords. But there was hope for the future; there had to be. Look there to the freshman class. In the excitement of seeing so far ahead when he couldn't

remember the front end of a sentence, Jo Peters clasped the science teacher by the arm. He immediately yanked away and wrung the grabby things. Mother had always said: keep them to yourself unless you're asking for money to get Mother back home.

"The present is past, and the future is present," he told Doc Bavender who, being a mundane man of science, didn't get it. Nor did Mr. Practical even have pen handy so Jo Peters could write that one down. It had been a good one and now gone forever. Well, do a new one. "The there is here. It's the then that's now." The man of science had taken to watching him closely. Why? Because with these nuts-and-bolts types you had to spell everything out. "What I mean is—and here we all agree—is that in a few years Dorothea's male lead problems will be solved. By your stepson, Dudley."

Bavender looked away. "Yes. I suppose so. In some ways he's a very accomplished actor now."

"And with your *real* son, Van, playing that wonderful child last year—I believe he saw his Daddy's ghost and no one would deny it—and now him getting this valuable time in as a dwarf—you have spawned a dramatic dynasty, Doc Bavender! Or half of one."

A few more words of encouragement—that the mopey physicist should let his mind *run free*—and the spinsterish young man hurried into the main hall, making for the typing room where the riot was on.

Jo Peters felt worse than the rioters would, and that would be very bad very soon, having reminded his kind, gentle friend—the kindest, gentlest man in town some said, and in this rare case the some, even Mother agreed, were right—of his lack of paternity, *in that one case*. Jo Peters snatched up a piece of chalk and walked back and forth across the front of the room, dragging the chalk stick across the blackboard as he went, a great long dusty Z trailing along behind. To shock them all he stopped before his lectern. He snatched up a crumpled sheet of paper a litterer had tossed there. On this paper had been typed an exercise sprinkled with Broadway words. *Now is the time for all* and a word not even Broadway had come up with yet *men to come to* something quite different than *the aid of their country*. Ho ho ho, said Jo Peters and gave the class a grueling assignment in French and observed them begin, the two talented girls, Nina and Jay, leading the pack, their carriages returning almost simultaneously. Jay an angel in blonde, Nina a devil in black. Or was it the other way around? The naughty and nice parts—one was obviously fair, the other fairly dark. Oh well, who knew? Nobody for sure. Not even Dorothea who at this very moment surely was having a deuce of a time choosing which to be her Ophelia, which her Desdemona . . . which her Lady Macbeth? Jo Peters jotted that down on the blackboard:

*Macbeth out!* Or maybe in. It was all up in the air. So Jo Peters, who liked to play little tricks on his mind, as if it were a puppy or a pinching nephew, took the Hooper twins. Those fat boys with their evil faces and Englishy manners, what fun if *they* played Lady Macbeth! Jo Peters had to have a laugh now and then. Two Lady Macbeths and those two! He buried his face in his arms. All would think he was lost in thought. He forgot a lot and let the test run over. Thirty second or more. “Oh well,” he announced, “it will be like training a swimmer so arduously that he welcomes match races. Or maybe the practice should be shorter. Hm? Whatever, *it will be a sweaty workout.*”

While this rather backward bunch looked about in puzzlement, Jo Peters recorded the scores. Of course the girls were tied for the lead, all but. As for the rest of the class, they fell into the stumbling and weaving categories, had fingertips been feet. One of the Hoopers, cheating like a *farmster* (hobbies, hobbies—the typing teacher also coined new sayings and quotations), had registered forty-one words per minute with seventeen mistakes. His honest brother had recorded inverted figures. Obviously put out, the one twin left in the dust, the brothers fell out. Turmoil ensued. Jay and Nina held themselves aloof from the racket. Nina: hair black and blacker, not a trace of brown, curly as a cap; skin white as ice and surely as frosty to the touch; eyes aslant, some, mouth negroid, not much—it was a large seductive mouth. Though Jo Peters did not often think of girls or anyone in such terms, he now found himself imagining himself a tiny man climbing right up to and all over Nina’s full, lush mouth. As if it were a monument in a national park and there were signs everywhere saying *Keep Off?*—Jo Peters knew he was being bad but the view was unsurpassed and the drop took your breath away. In fact today seemed to be the day for Jo Peters to imagine he was a tiny person. Like now he had shrunk down to an inch high or so and was standing on Jay’s shoulder, there to frolic and wallow in her thick ash blonde hair, this which hung like a wan velvet robe to her back. When Jay leaned over her typewriter, correcting that rare mistake, and such hair fell into the black, gummy keys, Jo Peters could not look in any other direction. As for the girl’s features, they were beautiful and regular, as was her intelligence; never did Jay deport herself in the erratic and showy fashion that was common these days, as had Nina even before she could type a note. While Nina could still forget herself and be sharp at times—even with a typing teacher, even with a drama coach—Jay remained calm and expressionless. Detached, distant, no matter what came up.

Jo Peters so envied these young girls their brio and self-control. Particularly now that he had been gripped by *the gusting giggles*. Who knew why

or where or when—they came and they went. *Grand mal* when he was little, Mother opined and advised time spent in that sanatorium in the mountains, the one there over the state line, near the casino, not far from the track. The mornings passed restfully at the stables, an afternoon of shock therapy at the slots—Jo Peters sometimes wondered just who this treatment was for, but did have to agree that sometimes he did simply get carried away. Sometimes he broke pencils. Of course that cheered the class right up, it always did. And nothing amused Jo Peters more than a roomful of happy scholars. He grabbed up another pencil. Snap and it was in two! Many students had sprawled themselves over their typewriters, pounding keyboards, holding an aching jaw. Tears of merriment grew and grew, till they filled Jo Peters's eyes, though not so many of them that he could not still see Principal Cook standing in the doorway, never getting the joke. It was definitely something he would have to talk over with Miss Blum, sometime during her free hour, if he could ever find her during her free hour. The subject of such a chat would not only be Jack Cook being wit's chief antagonist in this stuffy place, but how to cheer him up. Had you ever seen such a sad sack? That was the question.

■ ■ ■

Bella pulled the bus to a stop in a sheltered area back of the school. It was so still here, so quiet this place, so far from the wind and the dirt the wind blew, that she did not care ever to go anywhere else. Yes, that was it. The school looked as gritty and deserted and forlorn as any place she had ever been and she could not move from it. She began to tremble and, in doing so, turned in the driving seat to face them. There Gustav lay, across the long bench at the back of the bus. Was he only sleeping? Yes, that was it. And his mouth, his lips, no matter how she cleaned them, still they showed so red and rosy from the blood. The little men sat in various seats around the bus, each to his seat. Rath, Henning, Snowball and Papie, old Pop. Henning, the leader now, the ringleader since he had come on the tour, sat nearest the front of the bus, nearest Bella. He came with a hop from his seat forward to the front of the bus. His voice burred, it buzzed, as he came to the front of the bus, to the windshield that showed the back of the school.

“Wow! To think people actually live in these dumps. All their lives. Wow!”

Henning was not bad, Bella kept telling herself, he wasn't so bad. Not so bad as Rath, not so bad as the pair that had left. Henning, there was something about him, Bella kept telling herself, he's almost like us.

“It’s falling apart. After today—I don’t see how we can keep it together. I don’t see how we can hold it together, not after today.”

Henning looked back to the others. Rath, he was with Henning, maybe, and maybe the others, maybe they were with him too now. “Today might not be so bad.”

“I can’t even get near him any more. I can’t go back to see how bad he really is.”

Henning touched her arm and she did not mind. He understood; he took his hand away. “He’s resting. He’ll be better tonight. You’ll see.”

Now came the sound of the others, Rath and Snowball, coming off their seats, waddling and quacking to the front of the bus. The old man, Papie, Pop, they called him, he stayed back on his seat, reading and thumbing and filing his postcards, hundreds of them arranged in some system in a shoebox. Once, long ago, before the war, the old man had told Bella, he had received these cards from friends, friends from all over the country, all over the world, writing old Papie as he moved around the country. There had been a system then to their tour. For nine months, for the entire school year, they had known where they would be next, where they would be and when, and people from all over the world had known where to send their cards to Papie. But not now. Now the system was gone and no one, not even Gussie when he had been well, knew where they would be this week, the next. Today, tomorrow. A phone call from a booth and Gussie would come back to the bus and tell them what was on, and where, and maybe where they would be the day after that. Now nobody knew where they would be, nobody knew where they were now, nobody but Gussie and Gussie was resting, Gussie was dying, and the only cards old Papie had added to his collection in years and years were those cards he bought and wrote to himself.

Rath and Snowball came forward to the front of the bus. Rath was large, larger than the others, and, except for his head, if only his head hadn’t been quite so large, if the rest of him hadn’t been that much too small, then Rath would have looked like nothing but a very short man. Not Snowball, Snowball was the freak. Snowball stank, he breathed and touched you and it stank. When Snowball touched Bella she wept at the stink.

Henning turned to the two men who had come up. “We were just talking. We’ll have a meeting tonight. Gussie will be better. He’ll call the agency for us. We’ll go somewhere. Some big city first. We’ll find some more men. Gussie will be better. This is not the end of the world. The world is full of little towns like this. This is not the only town in the world.”

Snowball laughed, he made some filthy sound and came close to Bella. “This ain’t the only town in the world! This ain’t the last town on earth!”

And Snowball laughed and Rath laughed with him, and Henning smiled, it was as good as he ever laughed, and Bella joined them and laughed too. She laughed at the only town in the world, at the last town on earth. She honked the bus horn and laughed.

“Sure. Why not? That’s why we come. Make some little kiddie happy he’s *here*. Now, where *are* the little kiddies?”

Bella laughed and honked the horn at the emptiness, the pointlessness of the place they had come to. Why was this place here anyway, if there weren’t any little kiddies? Why was it just *here*? The sodden old red brick building, red so long it had gone near black, hundreds of dusty, dirty, blank windows chopped in the brick walls, and no one anywhere, not one child or adult or anyone on the grounds around the building, not in the building, not at the windows—no one anywhere—and Bella began to laugh and honk the horn.

“Where are all the little kiddies, bud! I know they’re here cause you said you got ’em here!” And Bella laughed and the small men buzzed and burred all around her. “I said we was coming, bud, now, you, bud—*show up!*” Bella laughed and honked the horn and the small men buzzed and burred their knotted talk and dense laughter like children, like missing children.

Now they began to appear, the people who lived in this place that was *here*. The pointed head and frightened face of a young man—in white shirt, tie, glasses, it was the haircut that brought his head to a point—popped out one of the windows and popped back in again. Then next, there at the back door of the school, there appeared a tall, soft, elegantly elderly man, but, after a look toward the bus, he withdrew as well. Next at the door were the pin-headed young man and a following throng; next came a fat man, very fat and very hard; and the old gentleman, he had a second look out at the bus; then all of these stood or were shoved away from the door and a woman suffering hysterics came running and walking—she ran at the pace of a walk, she walked with all the effort, legs and arms jerking and swinging, of a run—out to the bus. As this woman now came to beat on the bus, on the door principally but some blows strayed, Bella considered starting up the motor, yanking the transmission into gear and driving the bus away. It would be the end, she knew, the end of the world, the end of everything, if she opened the door. Bella reached to the lever that attached to the door and pulled the lever toward her and opened the door.

The woman came onto the bus. Had they done something wrong, broken some rule or law, parked in a no-parking zone, something wrong like that; or was the woman merely beside herself, gone wild and hysterical, she was so glad to see them? The woman smiled at Bella, flesh writhed about

her mouth, and patted her arm sweetly and took to pointing toward the rear of the bus.

“One, two, three, four! My God! Llewellyn was right. Oh well. One must soldier on. Which ones are missing anyway?”

Bella looked to the back of the bus. “Tiger, Fred and Mr. Pittman,” Bella said. “Happy, Sneezy and Doc,” Bella said.

The woman shuddered. She patted Bella sweetly. “And you? And you, my dear . . .?”

“Snow White,” Bella said. “Snow White,” she said.

“Yes. Yes, of course. Should go without saying, I suppose.” The woman’s great, fanged laughter reached all the way to the back of the bus, to Gustav lying there, not moving, lying there on the back seat, and that, Bella knew, laughing too, back to Gustav was a long way for laughter to reach. “And the swart man there on the back seat—having a little nap, I suppose—Prince Charming, I suppose?”

“Him? Yeah, that. And the Royal Huntsman and the director and the business manager and the bus driver and my boyfriend, sometimes. Oh we don’t know what we’re going to do without him! We don’t know how we’re going to keep on going on!”

“How to keep going on? Why, soldier on, of course. Sink or swim. Now—” and the woman surveyed the bus. “Isn’t there someone else?”

“The Wicked Queen,” Bella said. “That’s you, honey. It’s in the contract.”

“I? Well, on such short notice—I don’t suppose you know who I am, do you? Not being from around these parts.”

“Sure. I know you. You’re the Wicked Queen,” said Bella and rose and pushed the woman back and down the steps and out the door of the bus. “You’re just perfect.”

The woman made her great, fanged laugh. Yes, that was it—so right indeed for the Wicked Queen and the woman laughed again.

“Well, I suppose one must put a shoulder in now and then. But as for Snow White—I have two lovely young girls, lovely and talented creatures—perhaps you would consider, well, perhaps a *breather*?”

“No breather,” Bella said, pushing or being pulled along by the woman, their hands laid on one another in any case, grappling as they went along. “I’m the Snow White in this crowd, sister, and don’t fergit it.”

And so the four small men followed the two large women—the old woman who seemed to be falling apart, her clothes and hair and face and legs and arms yanked and yanking this way and that, and now Bella had taken to twirling and whirling and spinning across the schoolyard, her Snow White dress sailing out and up and around and around like the flying

top on a carousel—now the men came out of the bus and across the yard, the ground hard and graveled, ground packed hard by anger, kicked loose by despair, the buildings all about them empty, bleak and hopeless as prison. And as they went along behind the two women the men chattered and laughed, their voices and laughter buzzed and burred, and their walking, they had to run, to skip along to keep up with the women, so that they went along merrily, it seemed, skipping and hopping like children, like missing children, children who had gone missing and now had been found and were to be welcomed home by their happy, thankful parents.

They entered a building that was nothing but a long hall. There were many chairs placed in half rings about a podium and music stands stood before the chairs and they all went through this to the back of the hall to the two small rooms where the band's instruments were stashed, some cased, some not. It was in these small rooms that they would make up and change into costume—so said the woman guiding them—though they were already in costume, it seemed they had been in costume forever, and they were as made up as they would ever be. The four men were shoved into the room to the left; Bella and the woman guiding them—the woman who seemed to be falling apart—went into the other.

In their room the men found three boys, the boys who would take on the roles played by Fred and Tiger and Mr. Pittman, the boys who would bring the dwarf count up to seven. The three boys were in costume and had been made up and they watched the four small men with fear and fascination. So thought old Papie. The boys looked at the small men and they thought: this could happen to us, you know. It's not too late. We're the right size now and something could happen, some disease, some miracle, some curse or plague or infliction could strike and we could stop growing. We would not stop growing, not exactly, the boys thought, we would only stop growing larger. We would stop growing tall and straight. Our arms and legs and hands and arms would crab and twist and gnarl and our heads and faces bulge and balloon. We would grow, the boys thought, but we would not grow up. We would forever stay the same, the way we are now, the boys thought and were afraid and fascinated—so mused old Papie and climbed up on a chair and took his box of postcards and a pencil with him.

The old man took a card from the box, a card he had been writing for weeks, months, years. Card after card after card and it was never finished. It was a card written to his grandchildren and he had none, nor children, nor a brother or sister, nor mother and father, none that were not large or dead or did not much care for boys who would not grow up and stayed small overlong. In his writing he told them all what it was like to be a small

man in a world where only they and children were not large. He told them and told them exactly what it was like to be one of the seven dwarfs, to find and save, to protect and lose Snow White day after day. He told them what it was like to watch helplessly as Rath and Henning and Snowball and Tiger and Fred and poor old Mr. Pittman and men like them, he told how it was to watch such small men, day after day, as they revived the fallen Bella and made her well again and saw her married to Gustav or a man like him. What it was like to see some old woman who was falling apart, or some young woman pretending she was old and falling apart, pretending she was the Wicked Queen, to cheer as the old girl finally damned herself to death and donned shoes glowing red with fire and danced herself to that death. Day after day Papie wrote a card to the kids and told them what it was like to live happily forever and ever.

*Small.* That was what Papie was writing on his postcards, what he had been writing for years. *Little.* That was what Papie was writing now.

Now Papie put away the card and looked over the small room across the hall. The children had gone over and the little men too and they and Bella, all had gathered at the window there. Before, all about the school and its yard had been quiet and still, still as a tomb, but now a great buzzing, rasping, grinding, screaming bell rang out. And now from the grimy brick building came scores, hundreds, thousands of small people, and they screamed as they spilled out of the great brick building and now they swarmed and thronged where before there had been no one, where before there had been nothing that was not empty and quiet and still, now they came out with the screaming bell, screaming themselves, screaming and running into the hall where the little men and the boys dressed out as little men and the woman who looked so like an innocent girl crouched there in the back room, hiding, waiting, praying that they might not be found. Now this swarm of children came shrieking and tearing and clawing into the very small rooms, shrieking and tearing and clawing at the horns and cymbals and drums and fifes and chimes and bells and taking them down and out and from within their hiding places, all these screaming children set out to make a single discordant shrieking howl.

Yes, that was it, Papie thought as now he and Rath and Henning and Snowball and Bella and the three boy done up to look like small men crouched and cowered and quaked, that was why they had come to this forlorn, friendless, forgotten place. To make these children laugh awhile and leave that laughter with them and then go on to another lost town, another silent school, and make the children there laugh and leave that laughter with them. And now Papie took to laughing and the others, they saw this

small old man with tears in his eyes, that he was laughing, and they began to laugh as well. Rath, Henning, Snowball, Bella, the three boys fitted out to look like small men, now they were laughing and Papie as well and they laughed and laughed till they could not breathe. Till their sides would split. Till their jaws ached. Till their heads rang, till their throats were parched, till tears spilled from their eyes and coursed down their cheeks. Yes, that was it, Papie thought. They would put on their show—Bella and the four dwarfs and three boys who might look like them—and the children in this town would laugh till they cried.



With the troupe's arrival all was ready and set to go, but still it took some time for the drama to unfold. There were the assembling and the preliminaries to start. Three bells rang and the school filed by class into the auditorium, the older students seated in front, the lower grades lost in the rear, well under the balcony overhang, there to pass a bitter hour staring at the back of some big kid's noggin. A religious girl led a prayer and that went on for some time. Afterwards the school's cripple boy (polio: every town had one), he who was given all patriotic tasks, say, running up the flag every morning, led the pledge of allegiance. Jay Turner, the first girl student-body president in ten long years, made official announcements, then the criminal element, not always Ag boys, sometimes there were sophomores involved, came on to shoot spit wads and other foul matter toward the stage and the curtain that cloaked the stage, this being done till the football players, and some of these were Ag boys and sophomores as well, took to stamping their feet and howling, and so all joined in a chorus to demand that the freak show—*trot the little suckers out!*—commence. Even so, for the longest time, nothing happened at all. The school, then, thought it might safely grow unruly, rambunctious and rowdy, but now Principal Cook entered the rear door and took his customary seat in the back and with this appearance silence and decorum descended swift as a blade. The religious girl found herself prodded back into action and she pressed on to play a few hymns on the piano, and to sing along with them, so that soon what fear had not stifled, depression numbed.

Backstage everything looked to be ready, all were in place, yet no one made a move toward playing. The delay had been started along by Mrs. Rainborough—she worrying that though her costume in the bosom area did well to emphasize her character's loose nature, its strained fitting entirely ignored such matters as regality—but at length the drama coach, understanding most entreaty and ignoring the epithet, assumed the stature and

sacrifice of a trouper and poured herself into the thing. But when the last latch had been kneed coupled and Mrs. Rainborough had given a sigh and the high sign, still nothing stirred. It then struck Mrs. Rainborough that the sick Mr. Gustav (the drama coach had offered to make embassy to the ill thespian, that he must raise himself, even from death's door, but had been dissuaded by the troupe) must have been the company's director, as well as Prince Charming, Royal Huntsman, and so forth. Could there be any other explanation for such inertia? Not likely. Take Snow White standing off to one side looking positively crazed. While the dwarfs went here and there equally irrationally. One of them—a man old enough to be Mrs. Rainborough's father—busied himself weeping and writing down notes. Another, a glistening white little fellow yet still, somehow, filthy as a rag, scratched about in places that took scratching beyond an itch. Yet another, a dark, perhaps Mediterranean and certainly ill-shaven man, stunted arms sprouting crabbed and willful from his little pork-barrel frame, stood defiant at center stage, though all reminded him that his cue did not come till well into the first scene. The fourth dwarf, a youth who possessed a noble, near-normal head, went about trying to calm one, cheer another, move a third to best behavior—in general doing his all to marshal all to curtain position—but he was so small, so young, so short of his task, that even his slapping, shoving and shouting brought faint result.

Even the three boys—such old-timers, as had they been all in the band hall, donning their quaint costumes, memorizing lines, retching—seemed to have gone berserk. Tiny, his back ever to the curtain, simply refused to give over the playbook he had stashed in his trousers, no matter what part of him one might twist; while Red, the orphan boy, jabbered on and on, which had little if anything to do with being a mute dwarf, his role; in fact, the sole member of the trio getting into the spirit of things was Olive Bavender's brat, he going about in the dwarfy rolling gait, speaking his lines in the dwarfy duckish voice, such quacking some relief, as one accustomed to higher standards might go on about her business as if she understood not a word and, believe the drama coach, there were plenty to understand.

And so it grew obvious. Someone was going to have to pull the production together. Knowing that the senior person onstage generally found herself blamed for the flop, Mrs. Rainborough, there in the thick yellow backstage gloom, took the company by the neck and shook some life into it. Or would do, once some changes had been made. Never one to be unfaithful to an author's intentions, or hardly ever, still a director on occasion was forced to deal first and foremost with personnel problems. Stupefied, amnesic, hysterical—dwarfs, orphan boy and a lower-class girl—obviously

the Wicked Queen would have to take on a more prominent role in the affair, perhaps becoming a less unsympathetic character than her dismally grim creator had intended. There seemed to be little other choice really, the players all wandering about as if this were one of those modern Broadway things, where the characters not only did not know one another, they scarcely seemed to know the time of day. And so it was that when Jay Turner, after making yet more announcements, stuck her head inside the curtain for the umpteenth time, Mrs. Rainborough gestured that she now was the production's heroine, leader and sole grip on sanity, and that the play, no matter the clutter onstage, could get underway. Jay spoke to the crippled boy at the curtain controls (he a sullen youth who figured it had to be the counterweight made by his braces, what else saw him ever given the job of pulling things, flags and curtains and such, up and down?) and in a series of rapid jerks the company and the audience were made visible to one another.

The groups each seemed puzzled by the other's presence. The audience, however, recovered in no time and a round of raucous, perhaps it bordered on the sarcastic, applause followed.

Thus Mrs. Rainborough delivered her opening line with a touch more aggression than planned:

"Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who is the fairest of them all!"

After some silence it struck Mrs. Rainborough further that Mr. Gustav had not only been Prince Charming etc but must have taken on the role of Magic Mirror as well. Mrs. Rainborough repeated the question, this in fact a call to action to any of the many potential Mirrors lounging around backstage with nothing better to do. The audience, then, simply howled. But then could one blame them? Well Mrs. Rainborough could and couldn't. Eschewing manners, decency and pity, they had merely chosen to play by the cardinal rule of comedy. Namely, laugh wildly at the first thing that goes wrong. Tragedy, it seemed, would have to be improvised. If, say, a door knob came off in one's hand, one complained of repairmen, labor unions, and drafty houses. Something along those lines.

"What? You say Snow White is the fairest of them all?" Mrs. Rainborough said to absolutely no one, not even a talking mirror. "Now who in the world is she?"

Well for one thing, someone who was not going to have to spend the rest of this play answering her own questions. But then Mrs. Rainborough gathered herself; she noted that if the crowd did roar on a touch, there now seemed a hollowness to it. A certain sadness had crept into the shrieking. And there were other bright signs. For instance, now almost everyone but

Mrs. Rainborough, who belonged there, had wandered offstage. And even if they hadn't, if now and then people appeared before the lights who shouldn't have appeared, not just now, then Dorothea Rainborough's mind had gone blank to it, blinkered and blinded to all but the play. It alone rose before her, lifting *her* reality above all others, as soon her own belief in make-believe would create a new reality for *them*. The audience's callow insensitivity, the disruptions backstage, none of it could touch the perfect world of the play. Let dwarf chase boy, girl kick dwarf, Mrs. Rainborough was in character:

"And so who is this fancypants who is called the fairest of them all? No, shining liar! I and only I am the fairest of them all!"

Mrs. Rainborough now took a short hop back, a stage direction probably not written into the script. You see, the Mirror had suddenly taken it into its head to speak.

"Please, Mistress, do not smash me! I am doomed to speak the truth. My bodiless voice is bound like hide to it. It is true, that in this harsh land Snow White is the fairest of us all."

Ten long years had passed, and depressions and wars and tornados had intervened, since Mrs. Rainborough had had her hands on such a talent as this Mirror, as that of Jay Turner. Not since Carrie Steen had trod this stage had this school of dreary twangers produced such an actress. The drama coach found herself basking in the girl's intelligent, eloquent improvisation. The man who had made a fortune drawing back-talking ducks had never written such lines:

"It is your own step-daughter, my Queen, who is the fairest in the land. She is called Snow White, as one winter eve her mother, the Good Queen, pricked her finger whilst sewing, and saw she the red of the blood and the white of the flesh and the black of the sky, and did so name the child she was carrying, so naming Snow White."

Now the Wicked Queen rang for her Royal Huntsman, also to have been played by Mr. Gustav, and Mrs. Rainborough received another jolt. She distinctly remembered telling someone, whom she had forgotten, that one of her senior boys (thank the gods there were only the Hooper twins, but then it was no doubt the very same gods who had made two of them) was to take this, as well as Prince Charming's, part. Instead, Dudley Baverder, the quacking brat's older brother and himself a boy given to havoc, appeared. The sight of this youth, one of their own, in lederhosen and alpine hat—a garb as well-known to the Swiss as it was to fellows who were not quite right, but who among this mob cared for travel and sympathy?—sent the sophomore hooligans into a frenzy.

They commenced joyfully to propel small, rather adhesive objects toward their chum and anyone else onstage, somehow employing rubber bands to do the trick. That now the Wicked Queen must ask Dudley, the Huntsman, to take Snow White into the woods only served to make matters worse. There followed a celebration that simply could not be quelled. During the breathing spell Mrs. Rainborough mulled over the murderous aspects of the play—it had a fiendish violence to it if one forgot it was a fairy tale—but considering the alternative, what boy and girl might otherwise, in some up-to-date fandango, have concluded *sur l'herbe*, Mrs. Rainborough uttered the terrible lines:

“You are ordered to kill her there in the leafy woods. As proof of death: cut out her heart and her liver and her lungs and bring them to me!”

With that the Wicked Queen exited and Snow White came onto the stage, weeping.

Now it was only the youth playing the Huntsman who was so close to Snow White as to make out her pleading, the true nature of it. That she was simply asking him to go on and get it over with.

“Listen, bud, are you the one I talked to on the phone?”

If the youth playing the Huntsman delivered his lines miserably, that he delivered them at all was well done. “I don’t think so. All I know is that I am supposed to kill you and take out your heart and liver, but I cannot.”

Snow White spread her skirt at the boy’s feet. “Oh why not? Go ahead. Who cares?”

“I simply cannot,” the youth replied and put away his wooden sword. “I cannot kill anyone so beautiful as you. You are so beautiful. You really are. I will kill a boar and cut out his lungs and liver and the Wicked Queen will boil them and eat them and never know the difference. Are you going to be all right?”

Snow White looked out over the audience, looking as if she knew every child there, looking dazed. There was no laughter now. “Thank you for not killing me. Is there any place here I can be safe from them? Is there any place I won’t be killed? I would like to stay here and live. Forever and ever.”

The Huntsman stammered a reply—he did not know such a cue—and left the stage.

Snow White gracefully lowered her face to the floor. The Seven Dwarfs came bouncing and singing onto the stage.

“Over the hills and through the woods

To Grandmother’s house we’ll go!

The horse knows the way to carry the sleigh

Through the white and drifting snow, woe!”

In dancing about the stage these little people came to a halt before Snow White's crumpled figure. They gathered about her, quivering with wonder. The man who played Grumpy put his boot to the girl's ribs. He rasped, "What are you doing here, child? What is your name?"

The girl looked up at the dwarf. "Fuck off, Rath."

One of the boys read lines pell-mell from his playbook, another shouted ejaculations known to come from Dickens, while the third simply barked. The dwarfs fared little better. The one who had been weeping before wept again, another scratched, he never stopped doing so, while a third, a man called Henning, a young man, no more than twenty, stepped between Rath and the girl, tossing off lines, whatever came into his head, anything to be keep the troupe together, what was left of the troupe to be kept together, only a bit longer, only till the play was done and they were paid off and they might leave town riding something other than a rail. He and one of the boys got the girl to her feet and singing "Heigh ho! Heigh ho! It's off to work we go!" dragged her off stage.

Mrs. Rainborough made a grand entrance stage right. In doing so she observed that Snow White's lungs and liver had made a dish to suit a Queen. The world was in sad shape, the drama coach figured, when people would laugh at anything. Wondering if missing verisimilitude might be cause of this ill-placed merriment, Mrs. Rainborough made as if to pat a few crumbs off her dress. Actually, this bit of business seemed rather to encourage them. She fairly had to bellow out her line:

"Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who now is the fairest of them all!"

The Mirror replied: "My Queen, you are the fairest *here* by far, but far, far over the seven mountains, there Snow White lives with the Seven Dwarfs. She is a thousand times fairer, fairer by far."

Mrs. Rainborough fell into a rage that would have turned Broadway green. She ordered terrible things done to the Huntsman, disguised herself by drawing a shawl over her head and bending her back and took seven large steps across the seven mountains, a detail much appreciated by the lower orders in the back of the house. She made to hammer on the rear drop curtain, while someone behind it thoughtfully banged boards together, if they did go on several beats beyond necessary, then to stop immediately once Mrs. Rainborough made desperate attempt to catch up with the knocks. Ah well, all in good fun, she supposed, as would be the wringing of the neck of the miscreant assigned to sound effects.

"Yoo hoo! Wares! Pretty wares for sale!"

Snow White peered through a window box in the rear curtain. She delivered her line rather flatly: "Well what do you want?"

In theory the Wicked Queen had poisoned laces to drape around Snow White's neck, that was how the story went, but in this chaos laces had slipped the mind. Mrs. Rainborough stood facing a dilemma—how would one go about improvising laces both invisible *and* poisoned?—when the girl sensed her quandary and walked out from behind the curtain. She spoke her lines completely bereft of emotion:

“I think I'm going to die.”

And in a curling motion, this most graceful, Snow White fell to the ground.

The Wicked Queen left the stage and once again the dwarfs and children came along, bouncing and singing. They formed around the fallen Snow White. One of their number stepped forward with a small knife, as if to cut the poisoned lace from the girl's neck. They all scolded the girl and revived her and pulled her to her feet and all left the stage, singing and clapping.

Mrs. Rainborough entered anew. The play was now well in hand. Such minor inconsistencies and necessary digressions from the text, such as they were, all now was overwhelmed by a dramatic rush toward climax. The whole ruled these parts. If there was a snicker here or there, it was but an exception to the substantial awe in which the audience found itself suspended. Mrs. Rainborough's own lines flowed, her characterization had sharpened, razor sharp. And Jay Turner, the Magic Mirror, playing through cheap laughter, had created a touching, unique being. Sympathetic to the Wicked Queen's doomed search for beauty, the bodiless voice forever trapped in the reflection of others, the knowledge of her inexorably shared fate, all this, all sang out—plaintive, tragic, heartbreaking. The drama coach was moved.

Backstage still had its problems. Snow White looked as if she might break down at any moment, if she hadn't already. She sat there not moving, not speaking, not seeming to see. The dwarfs gathered about her, with little hope to their encirclement. They turned to Mrs. Rainborough, their sad eyes, as large as anyone's, seeming to say—being small makes life tough. Yet somehow they got themselves all in line, ready for the next scene, not one of them, by the looks of them, caring if he ever went onstage again in his life, yet not one able to pull out. It was the stage, really, that was what ran in their blood.

Having finished a major speech, and having thought to have brought along an apple from the Faculty Lounge, one of whose cheeks she had further thought to powder white, Mrs. Rainborough took those giant steps over the mountains, to appear at Snow White's window.

“Apples for sale! Yoo hoo! Pretty red and white apples!”

For a heartbeat it looked as though Snow White would not be able to carry on. All color had drained from her cheeks, while other places about

her face had begun to twitch; but it passed, this seizure, and the dwarfs led the girl to her position behind the drop curtain.

“Apples! Apples!” came the cry

The girl responded:

“I mustn’t let you in. The dwarfs have warned me against you.”

“Ah ha ha! They have a point there, I’m sure. Everyone trying his best to do you in. But I’m only an old farmer’s wife, trying to make ends meet. Here, I’ll give you an apple.”

“No. I can’t accept anything. Nothing is safe.”

“Now now—are you afraid of poison, my dear?”

“Yes. I am. Everything.”

“Well then, you have nothing to worry about. See? I’ve cut the apple in half—I’ll eat the red bit and you the white. Then you’ll know there’s no poison there.”

“I wish there was.”

“Of course not! I’ll have the first bite to show you.” Mrs. Rainborough was able to expel most of the wrinkled fruit into her shawl, few noticing.

Snow White raised the fruit to her lips, then fell into a swoon. The fall had hardly been as graceful as the others, but she did look so dead lying there.

Mrs. Rainborough burst out, a witchish laughter. “*White as snow, red as blood, black as night!* This time you’re dead, *dead*, girl, and the Seven Dwarfs can never help you!” She turned to the Mirror. “Mirror, mirror on the wall, *now* who is the fairest of them all!”

The Mirror replied with infinite sadness: “My Queen, now you are the fairest of all.”

Mrs. Rainborough uttered her final line: “My evil heart is at rest, my enemy dead, my beauty triumphant!” And she exited.

There was nothing left now but Snow White’s regeneration, the happy ending with Prince Charming, and the Queen’s own dance in red hot shoes. Mrs. Rainborough smiled at each dwarf as he hopped by, scarcely recognizing her own son and his little friends among them, the play had succeeded so. “Dead? Dead again?” There they were onstage, worrying. Such weeping, so real was it—her own eyes glistened. Now came talk of making a glass coffin, that Snow White might be seen forever.

Mrs. Rainborough turned from the stage action and went to Dudley Bavender, to straighten his collar, brush down his hair, he now Prince Charming, and otherwise make him handsome for the final scene. Looking into that dark, flawless face, Mrs. Rainborough could not remember why previously she had disliked him so. Then she remembered. His mother. Olive Bavender born Glassmoyer. Born the banker’s daughter, born the richest girl

in town—and there came little Dotty Rainbow born Poole skipping along toward her first day at school. . . . And it took everything within the drama coach to shake off her rage and take away her hands before she did more than stroke the boy. But no. She must leave the teeming corral and go, a thoroughbred, into the lonely peaks, there to . . . Yes, that was it. Surely there was *something* about the boy—if only his dark, solemn, blank, dispassionate, lifeless, pitiless eyes—to lift her above the crowded loathing of him, his mother and their high-kicking life. That dead look about the boy, perhaps that was merely sadness or sorrow or something akin. Let's take it for that, Dorothea Rainborough concluded, and in her heart let pity swoop on hatred, fasten it in its talons, and soar into the forgiving clouds. Gently then she leaned down to kiss the boy on the brow. And to her reborn and rising rage—how could she *ever* forget? she would *never* forget!—a cloud all right, a cloud of disgust crossed the boy's face. With luck the youth was called onstage before the drama coach had the opportunity to do aught but fume. As for revenge, retribution and redress, plenty of time for that later, after the curtain.

Mrs. Rainborough viewed the denouement from the wings. Snow White had been placed on a bier and the dwarfs went about as if to carry her to a cave in the mountains, to be buried there. It was then that Prince Charming came upon them and, so stricken was he by her beauty, he asked that this body in its glass coffin might rest for all of time in his castle. Were there tears, real tears, in Prince Charming's eyes as he offered the dwarfs a purse of gold for their troubles? Some onstage, those quite close to the youth, thought so. Now, as the bier moved away, the wheels struck a root and Snow White toppled to the ground. The fall was to have dislodged the poison apple from the girl's throat. The fall was to have revived her. It did not. Nothing happened at all.

"The fall has knocked the poison from her throat! She's alive! It's a miracle, Prince!"

"Hurrah! Hurrah! God bless us everyone!"

But no matter how they celebrated her rebirth, goaded, nudged or urged on revival, Snow White lay there still as death. The dwarfs' reaction was simple and unanimous. They threw up their hands and walked offstage. No improvisation could make sense of this, no dramatics would save them now. While the boys too knew worry and concern. They gathered around the actress's still form, each wondering how he had caused such stillness, and what punishment for such might be. It was only Dorothea Rainborough, in the wings, who knew what was going on and what had to be done about it. She rang the curtain down. The play was over.



The curtain plumped down. The fight broke out. One of the dwarfs took up Snow White by the neck and shook her fiercely. He went to sink his fangs into her flesh, to gouge her eyes, twist her ears, but Mrs. Rainborough reached down and took him off. The little man felt like a child in her arms. Soon he ceased to struggle and began his weep. It was the man old enough to be Mrs. Rainborough's father, the one who had been such a peacemaker before, ever humming and writing postcards. Someone led him away. Mrs. Rainborough knelt by the girl. The drama coach straightened her lovely arms—nothing broken, she noted as she pulled her this way and that—and laid her out on her back. She took the Wicked Queen's shawl and folded it beneath her head.

She felt the girl's pulse, she put an ear to her heart. She could hear no beat, but there was so much noise beyond the curtain, in the audience. In any case, the girl's small breasts rose and fell, warm and hard, beneath her cheek. Mrs. Rainborough stroked the girl's hand and fanned her face. No one else did anything of note. Mrs. Rainborough took hold of her son and gave him a shake.

"Bring your father! Bring the nurse!"

But Mrs. Rainborough soon, as ever, regretted any chastisement of the baffled boy. She pushed him off and sent another to fetch the nurse. As she waited, sitting there beside the body, Mrs. Rainborough found herself whistling something, the tune from the show, perhaps, it had a snappy beat.

A strange scene, Mrs. Rainborough considered, all bathed in brownish yellow from the weak stage lights, the surrounding curtains a glowing amber, sounds from without soft, muddy. There came a feeling that life beyond this place was far too harsh to bear. The closed stage being a receptacle of timelessness onto which they had stumbled and which now the others, those outside, were seeking. Not one of them cared to leave, the drama coach felt, they could be safe hidden here, safe forever. The sound of the school filing out of the auditorium, row after row, trooping back to their classes or off home, their rising murmur might have been the world blindly raging at such good luck as known by these few.

Now the dwarfs came and squatted around Mrs. Rainborough and the girl and the remaining boys joined them. In time the superintendent pushed his head through the curtain break, but his wife waved him away. Things were well in hand, or would be after medical attention arrived. At length Nurse Snell—a small plump woman who wore her uniform uncomfortably, someone going to her first costume party—came on the scene,

bewildered and frightened, to provide such. The nurse surveyed all and grinned illogically. She pulled starched cap down tight about her ears and springing ringlets. She took a great breath and groaned toward Snow White lying on the floor.

“That boy didn’t tell me she was fainted flat. Now she looks so peaceful there, don’t she?” Nurse Snell patted her heart, her own heart, as if it were a pet hidden in her blouse. “She don’t look much sick. I didn’t expect nothing laid out. Here. Have some of smelling salts. You can keep it,” she offered.

Mrs. Rainborough took the bottle. “What do you think is wrong with this girl, nurse?”

Nurse Snell rolled her eyes. “Is she alive?”

“Of course she’s alive.”

“Then she’s only afainted,” said Nurse Snell. “That’s all.”

Mrs. Rainborough now found herself rather interested in the nurse’s condition—the laid-out girl seemed in better shape. Why had it taken the nurse so long to arrive? Hadn’t she seen the girl fall while onstage, hadn’t the nurse been in the auditorium? And now to learn that the boy sent to find her had found her there crouched in her office, there down behind the desk. What sort of research that?

Nurse Snell admitted she had had a lot on her mind lately, mainly medical topics. “One thing I been pretty busy treating the man on the bus.” The nurse sat beside Snow White, there on the floor. She would not look at the patient, but took up one of her hands and gave it a good rub, a thing to be polished bright. “He’s all right. That man on the bus. He’s only asleeping. I went out there and thought, *That bus is empty, Nurse*. I had knocked and knocked and walked all around it twice, hearing nothing. Not a peep. All they told me was—headache. Maybe some nosebleed. I figured—he must have left, all was so quiet. Better, that was it. Maybe he got better. And sure enough. There he was stretched out on the floor there at the back, taking himself a little doze. I tossed him a couple aspirin and a warsh rag and took off.” Nurse Snell fanned her pink face. “He’ll be good as new tomorrow.”

With that Snow White sat up, so bright and cheery she could have been a child faking her fit all along. She smiled crookedly at the nurse. “You mean he’s only asleeping?”

The nurse took up the smelling salts, she ran it under her own nose. “That’s it. Good as new tomorrow.”

Snow White began to laugh. If not a gay sound, it was lively. The dwarfs pulled her to her feet and clapped their hands, round as paws, and danced about, though they did not go on to sing one of their merry songs. Even so,

Mrs. Rainborough liked the change well enough to join them. She rose and asked the boys to participate with her, dwarfs and girl, all dancing. Even Nurse Snell, not to be left out when a healing was to be celebrated, clapped cap tight to shallow skull and took to jiggling here and there, with fine concentration paid to maneuvers. And so around and around they went in a great galloping circle.

“God bless us, everyone!” cried out someone and Mrs. Rainborough gave her son’s hand a generous squeeze. Of course it had been he to bless them. It was the only line he knew.



It seemed odd, at least to Llewellyn Rainborough, that he couldn’t say he was sorry to see Snow White go. It seemed easier to understand some matters, oh say heartbreak, and think them out now that the company had loaded into the bus and was gone. There hadn’t been much to-do made over the departure in any case, but he and Mrs. Rainborough standing out back of the school, waving good-bye. The leave-taking had been swift. Though the superintendent had offered some of the Ag boys, those who had won prizes for pig-lifting and such, to help with the loading and packing, the troupe had marched straight from stage door to bus door and was gone. And so much had they left behind. Many articles of clothing, many of these those costumes that hadn’t been worn, what few props the meager company possessed, some financial papers or papers with numbers on them, a large box of picture postcards, some from home, some to be sent there, and what looked like a child’s diary, probably the girl’s, for it was sky blue, fastened with a light strap and shut by a lighter lock, and across its face written in gold *My Thoughts*. What hadn’t been taken off by the aforementioned Ag boys or the band’s tuba section, pretty good lifters themselves, the superintendent had stashed in his office. There it would be kept till the troupe returned next year. But all that later. For now the superintendent and his wife stood out back by the band hall, waving and waving as the tattered vehicle rounded the north-wing corner on two wheels and disappeared in a cloud of smoke and dust. In case the dwarfs remembered or cared that they had left behind near everything they owned, and thought to return for it rather sooner than later, the superintendent and Mrs. Rainborough stood there awhile and waved on. And then waving done, they stood awhile longer and looked to the deserted corner. When in time that edge remained quiet, they gave a final fling of arms and turned and went back inside the school building.

The halls were empty now, pleasantly so. Principal Cook had dismissed school a few minutes before time, shortly after the play's abrupt curtain, and shortly after that all were gone. Oh a few teachers and their very good or very bad students were still about somewhere, in their rooms, one supposed, their voices ringing like soft chant against the quiet. The exterior doors were braced open, the front doors, the rear fire exit, the doors at both ends of the main hall, they all, so that a breeze swept the length of the building. As they passed before the trophy case, the superintendent could see, just, one of the janitors beginning his long sweep down in the north wing. It seemed to the superintendent that it would take the man forever to make it this far. Mrs. Rainborough allowed that she had some things to fetch, or do, while the superintendent, he too had some odds and ends to clear away, and they arranged to meet here, before the trophy case, where they always met when there wasn't late drama practice. This however was one day that the superintendent, who rarely, if ever, had any odds and ends to clear away, was pleased to have this brief time to himself, though one might not have thought so by the strain about his face. After his wife had gone off, the superintendent turned to the trophy-case glass. The man reflected there looked as if either he or his wife, one of them, were about to embark on a long journey and the other had forgotten or refused to bid the traveler farewell.

The superintendent checked his outer office with care. No secretary anywhere. Only a week and Miss Minor had adopted the custom practiced by previous assistants: gone with the bell. He went to his own office and closed its door. He stood looking out the window awhile, then cleared some papers from his desk, whistling a tune from the play. He sat suddenly, cleaned his glasses in no time, and swiftly took an envelope from his pocket. This he laid on the desk. From the envelope he took a photograph, six by eight inches or so, glossy, black and white, said to have been shot a year ago. The company's formal portrait. There Snow White was, smiling, one mouth corner curled higher than the other, the dwarfs arranged around her, all grinning horribly, with Prince Charming, a sallow, morose young man, standing at an odd tilt in the background. Across the bottom of the photo ran the company name, *Snow White etc.* The portrait was printed on stiff paper; perhaps it had been intended to act as a large postcard, an advertisement to be sent around to various places. All this the superintendent noted in the instant before he cocked the photograph left, to read the scrawl across the face of it, this running from one corner down to the other. The hand was childish.

*My dear Lew, it read, it has been real good to be here with you and your school and all your family! No matter what you think we just love it here among ya! We love ya! Would like to stay myself but gotta run! Ha! Ha! Love ya! . . .*

It was here that Snow White had thrust the card upon him and had indeed run. In recollection of such running, fingers trembling, the superintendent pushed the picture back into the envelope, slipped the envelope into his desk and pressed his hands firmly on its top, as if the furniture itself might fly away. The superintendent remained in this position for some time. Could these possibly be the words of a woman in love? Perhaps. But then—maybe not. Still, on the other hand, it wouldn't be a foolish thing to lock the desk drawer anyway. So, he did so. He locked the desk and he locked the door of his inner office and he locked the outer door. That done, he went and stood before the trophy case, looking out the wide front doors, along the sidewalk toward the flag pole. And he waited, as he ever waited, his wife ever late, she always concluding some business in the auditorium or somewhere. The superintendent decided to have a look. No, nothing in the auditorium. Nothing onstage, the curtain now drawn back. He returned to his position before the trophy case and waited some more. And the longer he waited the stronger it grew, the sensation that he was not alone. The superintendent looked south toward the typing room and the science wing, the happy end of the school, relatively speaking. Nothing there. He turned and went a couple paces toward the gloom of the north wing, where the little ones were kept. Yes. There she was, deep in the distance, his wife or a returned student, a woman in any case, looking up at one of the class pictures. Dorothea gazing at their own senior year? Unlikely, their year being even farther down in the gloom, there at the pit of the wing. The superintendent couldn't say from this distance, but the woman seemed to be standing before the car-crash year—four seniors, one junior, two sophomores and a Pontiac. Yes, that was it. The superintendent could it see now. The woman, Dorothea or a returned student, someone, was looking up to the picture and now she raised a hand and brushed at a tear in her eye.

The superintendent retreated to his position before the trophy case. He would wait for his wife, if it was his wife, there. He never went down into the north wing, not even when it was dead empty, not even when it was still as a tomb.

**T**he Bavender house woke pleasantly on Saturday mornings. If Red's grandmother had him up at six scrubbing things and Tiny was let sleep as long as he liked, sometimes till noon, dazed and dizzy, Van Bavender was waked at just the right moment and in just the right way. His father would come and sit on his bed and Van would tell jokes and his father would laugh.

The Bavender house was dark and warm, even on this mid-fall morning. The boys' room—large, low-ceilinged, irregularly-shaped, carpeted, crowded with soft, low furniture—occupied the rear of the house, itself crowded by a great number and variety of shrubs and trees, the backyard enclosed by a whispering wall of poplars, the front a fascinating maze of hedge. Alongside the house stood three huge cottonwoods, the earth beneath these clean, cool and hard. Here the house had a side entrance, through the boys' room, to the side street. For all purposes it was the front door—Doc Bavender rarely used any other.

The Rainborough house was to be found down the street—a two-story mansion (in this town) with a brick facade (the sides were plank) and a winding staircase—and across from there sat Red's grandmother's place, a renovated shotgun shack that would have sat easier on the eastside, on the other side of the tracks, so some neighbors thought. The neighborhood bordered the western edge of town: beyond the Rainboroughs' there spread fields of wheat and grass, no road crossed them. It was an old neighborhood, but for the mansion, though that would soon change, Doc Bavender supposed. His father-in-law had explained it: credit was loosening now that the war was over, and when new houses were built they would be built here, out in the wheat and the grass. Even at this end of town, a very small corner of the world indeed, some things were expanding, even if that growth meant loss to others.

A pleasant street, then, passive and shaded to the end, before it opened to all that grass and wheat: come spring these grasses and grains would flow to the horizon. This October morning the street seemed particularly still, make-believe. Air drifted in pockets of warm and cool, the patterns of shade

varying so powerfully with the brilliance of the dusted brown fields beyond, the absolute silence, nothing stirring but the dark and light tracings on the ground, that it seemed to Doc Bavender, as he stood outside his sons' door, a sacrilege to move, this a cathedral to space and timelessness. The soft wind would carry one far enough.



Van woke this morning not to his father slyly poking a rib, but rather to his brother beating on his head, it could have been a drum, it could have been a nail. Van clamped pillow over ears, curled into a ball and waited for something, anything, rescue probably being out of the question. The thrashing lasted less than a minute and a minute can go on, Van could tell you, during thrashings. There now came a pause, the pounder drawing breath, one assumed, then a resumption; but when Dudley stopped the second time, severely weakened surely, Van could chance it, uncoil and open the pillow a bit, a spy hole. Dudley, face liverish, streaked white about grim grinning mouth and glassy black eyes, had taken to pacing back and forth, sobbing, slamming doors, kicking furniture, etc. "Who else read it besides you!" and other incoherencies were followed by promises, yea threats, "Today, you die!" and so on. Generally there was something about his brother that Van could not quite take seriously, though it might have been a mistake, Van considered, as Dudley grabbed the bedspread and began pulling him onto the floor, to have allowed as much at this particular moment.

However, drop-kicking little bub about awhile seemed to satisfy some and Dudley went to his dressing table and took to combing hair, savagely. Van sat back against the bedstead, drew covers close, and whimpered, though there might have been seen a deadly cowboy look to the eyes, there under the tears. Dudley kept at the combing, over and over the teeth of the groomer cutting down the same furrows of greased hair.

What really did Dudley want to know anyway? Who else had read Dudley's diary? Just about every friend Van had, which were numbered two actually, that's who, and they had read it aloud and laughed their asses off. *Virgin, virgin*, was what the diary had said and they had cackled and rolled.

To Van—who was a Cinderella of a sort, at least in his own mind, at least till you got to the glass slipper bit—Dudley's dressing table gleamed like a movie star's. Bulbs, they glowed like lit ping-pong balls, and snapshots were strung around the mirror, while dozens of bottles, shaving lotion, cologne and other anti-virginal potions cluttered the top. The photos were all of Dudley—well, a few of Van, a few of them both, most of them snapped by their grandfather when he had treated them to a week at the fat stock show

or the state fair or the racetrack over the state line. Hats stood atop every noggin in these photographs—the closet was stuffed with such headgear—and under them the boys stood stiffly posed, as if to balance all those brims there about their crowns, at a carnival booth, say, or with an exhibition animal or a race horse, Dudley pointing a gun at a wooden duck, Van gingerly twisting a whiteface ear.

The walls of the room were papered with more photographs, class pictures, athletic teams (Dudley in every sport, Van's brown, pudgy body in swimming trunks), religious groups, quasi-religious groups, paramilitary groups formed specially to ready the country's youth for the country's next, and on and on, the boys without enthusiasm belonging to every social organization in town. Someone expected it of them, it seemed, though their father paid dues to nothing but the golf club and nowadays Olive went out even less than her husband. Perhaps it was how they imagined their mother's jazzy youth—the New Year's party at the Adolphus, that crazy trip to Havana, their legacy—that drove the boys into every crowd that gathered.

Dudley turned from himself. He approached his brother. Van redonned the pillow, but no need. Dudley had grown pacific.

"You and those two creeps you hang out with are coming with me today."

As Van felt it might be his final Saturday afternoon, he wondered if they could be allowed the double-feature first, along the lines of a last meal.

Sweet laughter crawled from the older boy's mouth. They could come peacefully, or be hunted down. Less torture if they didn't struggle.

Van agreed, he would come along, but only if he got to see Olive first. He would need her permission to die.

Van could not imagine why he kept at it. This wising off brought nothing but grief and her sister harm. It was expected of him, he supposed, the little smart-ass. Van let himself, as if he had any choice in the matter, be dragged across the room and tossed out into the hall. Dudley gave great attention to slamming the door on his foot and missed anyway. Van lay there in the hall awhile considering life, that there was something not quite right somewhere. For one thing, if Dudley thought he, Van, was the favored son, Dudley had a screw loose.

Van rose, wrapped the bedspread about his body, a toga, clamped the pillow over his head, the turban, and went off looking for Olive, his mother. She would be in the bathroom, she near always was. The door was ajar. He went in, sat on the toilet seat, as he near always did, and drew the spread about him as a mantle. Van looked perfunctorily—it would seem all small males were expected to be sex maniacs—but Olive's breasts were sunk under some suds, her face behind a magazine. There wasn't much to be

seen of Olive but some fingers. A crack came from behind the magazine. Olive eating an apple maybe, maybe getting into a nut. The magazine concerned Japanese war atrocities.

“You usually walk in on lady’s toilets, sonny? What if Wanda had been in the tub?” Olive shrieked a sort of laughter when talk turned to Wanda. Wanda was an aunt who wasn’t any kind of aunt who boarded with them. She was absolutely terrifying.

“I would have diddled her.” This, the dirty mouth, expected too. All part of the act: the foul little rat. “Anyway, she’s not home. She didn’t come in last night.”

Olive did not find this amusing. She spoke from beyond the magazine. “She’s been in and out.” Van would not argue she hadn’t. “And watch your language, sonny, or I’ll hold you under.”

Olive tossed the magazine to the floor. Spread before Van was an orange oriental soldier lashing a pale girl in black underwear to a post. Van took a toe and pushed the magazine under the tub, out of sight. If that, as Wanda had told him, was what  *fucking*  was, he was going to become one of those preachers who didn’t have to do any.

Olive smiled at her toes. They could have been people she didn’t like, friends of Granddaddy, and she had to be nice to them anyway. Olive had preachers on the brain these days. Wanda was dating one. He seemed not to be the kind who didn’t have to do any. Olive shrieked a sort of laughter when she hurt.

“You ought to seen how wrinkled her ass was when they came in last night!” She threw her head back against the tub, to make it hurt too.

Breasts floated to the surface. Van watched them. “I haven’t been feeling that good lately, Olive,” he began, and it was true. Since nine-thirty this morning, waking.

“You been smoking again, sonny? I better not catch you smoking again, sonny, or I’ll hold you under.”

Olive reached over the side of the tub. She speared a cigaret, lit it and blew a cone of pale blue smoke at Van. If this was to put him off smoking, it worked. Van drew the bedspread around him, tight.

“Dudley’s going to kill me. Today.”

Olive grimaced. “Fight back for once in your life. You got to learn how to take care of yourself.”

“Yeah well I would, except that bastard’s about twice as big as me.”

“Tough.” Cigaret dangling from a lip, Olive took to examining her calves. She went at it, she might have discovered scales growing. “Why don’t you get out of here. I’m busy.”

This was it, so far as talking to his mother ever went. He pulled the toilet lever. “Where’s Pop this morning?”

“Downtown to see Daddy. Going to get his fanny out of that highschool and into the bank. Maybe bring us home some money for a change—and I don’t mean change.”

Van waited. “I guess he left pretty early.”

Olive waited. “Not so early,” she said slow, slowly turning her leg this way and that, watching her son. “No earlier than usual.”

Van pushed the pillow over his face. Now he could see his mother and not be seen. A four-legged spider, she could’ve been—round head, one side flattened for a face, thin grimy black hair parted in the middle, drawn to a bun behind her head. Her face was older than it should have been, older than any other mother’s, except for Dotty Rainbow of course, a face ever in the grip of grin or grimace, squint or scowl, wrinkles gathered around the strain. Was she trying to soak them off, spending all morning, every morning, in the bath? Maybe, maybe she was. Teeth stained brown, flesh under fingernail muddy blue, pores on the legs big as freckles—none of that would wash away, not ever, but still she soaked because she had nothing better to do, because now she was free of the filthy cling of clothes, because she was so lighter now, fresh gentle water bearing the weight of life away.

He had gotten this from her, Van supposed, this love of water. During the winter Van would stand on the diving board, he would have cried the pool full, he would have swam in his own tears. In the winter he grew hot, not cold, so dry and leaden, knowing that unless it rained enough, unless it came a flood and filled the caliche pit, he had no pleasure in life but the dream of distant summer and its pooled waters.

Van broke to the surface. “What sort of job at the bank? President? Clerk? What’s there down there to do?”

“Maybe. Nothing. Who knows.” Olive’s face, one side of it, had begun to twitch. “Go away. Go get Aunt Jewel off her fanny. She can do something around here, right? Get you and Dud some breakfast. You’re out of the house today. I’m alone today. I’m having a talk with that Wanda girl today.”

Van rose, toga, turban topping misery, but maybe you could see through to it. Olive called after him, her voice some soft, a little like a mother’s. He was to put his father’s golf clubs on the side porch, he would find a double allowance under his breakfast plate today.

■ ■ ■

Aunt Jewel lived in another world. She was despised, ridiculed, overworked, underpaid, ill-treated, maligned, lied to, cursed at, spat upon (well

more often *at*) and left to live alone in a shack across town. On the other hand, looking at it from the other point of view, Aunt Jewel knew she was old, senile, stupid, bent, weak, dying or feeling like, absent-minded, slow, sloppy, dirty, shriveled, near deaf, toothless, near blind, only eighty pounds and didn't wear the right clothes. Still, Aunt Jewel, after all the bank president's daughter's husband's mother's sister, wanted her room back.

Now Aunt Jewel didn't think she had it so bad. Though she had kicked off her campaign the moment Olive had kicked her out and moved in the hussy, nobody's aunt at all, the old woman liked living alone. So she did cry herself to sleep every night, she had begun such nocturnal weeping years ago, back when she was still living with her nephew and the aristocrats. She had made herself a rag doll and punished it when she, Aunt Jewel, was bad and that was crazy, but on the other hand, who could fight human nature? Nobody. It always won out, boarding a trollop over a war horse any day.

Not that Aunt Jewel applied those terms to anybody around here. They were meant to describe underlying truths.

They had let Aunt Jewel keep her job though, a real mistake. She had, before her campaign had kicked in, made a bed or two, tidied some, vacuumed some, and rinsed around a few old dishes here and there now and then. Olive had asked her to cook once, early on. It hadn't made it two meals, all sprinting back down to Loren's Cafe. What a wholesome family practice, Aunt Jewel figured, eating out every night. It was the only time the aristos ever saw each other and they thanked her for these reunions. And the boys had remained true, the nice older one anyway, often assuring Aunt Jewel that those couple three meals stood head and shoulders above other boys' mothers', where things had names like Sally Spinach and dinner was practiced as religious rite.

Aunt Jewel never said she did much work. It was how much it took out of you that counted. Some beds never looked right, not even after a morning's battle. So who was surprised when she lay down over the spread to catch her breath? Well Olive always seemed to be. If Aunt Jewel pointed out the hospital corners, Olive would rip the covers off and fling them around and stomp all over the house. And Aunt Jewel would tackle the bed again, tucking sheets till she was tuckered out. It was then Aunt Jewel saw who she was. An old woman trapped in this insane and lonely world, trapped in this insane and lonely body, one which through the accumulation of such small exhaustions was becoming finally and profoundly weary. One rumped bed looked like starting out life all over again. And at the end, old lonely death, waiting like a nap. So you might understand she didn't

much care what her own room looked like. Nobody ever came over anyway. They just sat outside and honked the horn.

But there was still some fight left in Aunt Jewel. She got even every now and then. She kept an eye open and moved quick when guard was down. Take this morning. It was hymn time, they wanted her to make breakfast. The boys hunched glowering at table, ridiculing stupidity, sloth, slow service etc—and the hallelujahs kept rolling out. Eggs were a fine revenge as well. When she finally saw them cooked flat and dry, when she finally got them on plates and got them to the table, there triumph waited. Aunt Jewel rather liked how the eggs sailed through the air, whirling about good as the saucers that followed. They all missed and the hymning bubbled right along. As the boys had now gone entirely berserk, Aunt Jewel went and stood behind the refrigerator, where the garbage was kept. Aunt Jewel couldn't much follow the fight from there. It seemed the younger one, the brat, was coming to her defense. Whatever, the boys butted and thrashed around the kitchen, choking and clawing, for a while. They had stopped breathing and were lying crashed on the floor when the young trollop appeared in the doorway. Her wicked tongue had them at it again. The older boy, the nice, handsome one, took to stuffing the brat into the oven, and was doing a pretty good job of it, fiddling with the gas knob and striking matches. When the oven lit, Aunt Jewel sent up a prayer. Maybe today would be the day.

The young trollop kept her mouth open laughing and hopping around till Olive, naked and wet, appeared in the other door. The two harlots slapping thigh and cheering, the smell of roast boy heavy in the air, Aunt Jewel slipped out of the kitchen. She would observe the morning off. Nobody noticed much after breakfast anyway and she hit the road. If one of their big cars came whooshing by, Aunt Jewel would wait a spell, then come out from behind the tree, to hike on toward her quiet, cluttered cabin on the wrong side of town. There to wait for the honking horn, time to hit it again.

■ ■ ■

Loren's Cafe—capacious, cool, dark enough this morning that its white walls shone pale blue—occupied a long narrow building behind Jester's Grocery, across the street from the barbershop and the bank, its flank. Way in the back where the ceiling went high, so high you tended to forget it was there, a shaft of light fell through a grate and spread over the floor; and when it was quiet, as it was this morning, customers found themselves serenaded through the same portal by mockingbirds nesting on the roof. Along

one wall of the cafe were lined six sober mahogany booths, broad enough to sit four across, eight a booth, the intervening tables topped with sheets of marble as cool and blue as the walls, and there were booths too before the wide front window. An ample counter and twenty plump stools divided the cafe in half, the area behind the counter spacious enough for three hustling waitresses to hustle without coming to blows, though this generosity left the kitchen crammed into a cave in the back wall, where through a high delivery window customers could watch Loren cooking, Loren stooping to watch them, those who had eaten or would, as they came and went. The cafe's back entrance opened from the kitchen onto a small concrete enclosure. This Loren had done up like patio, with orange crates and soda cases and milk cans, these to rest on while he smoked a cigaret mid-morning or twilight, when the cooking was done, observing, if he cared to, the ups and downs of cash carry grocery through Jester's back door.

On most Saturday mornings W. E. Weeb (Saturdays the old vet, the Colonel he was called, most often by himself, sacked groceries for Aaron Jester, Coach he was called, but never by himself, near volunteer, a can of this or that his wages) joined Loren there in that hideaway back of the two stores, the Colonel ever looking for an open ear, an ear to bend. This morning the Colonel would be condemning a government that forgot its limping warriors when all was said and done, letting it be understood by all in earshot, Coach unexceptional, that the Colonel himself could break in half at a moment's notice and go on splintering till dark, so far as the government and Coach Jester were concerned. This Saturday morning however the Colonel did not find Loren out back. Well, things being slow to dead stop in grocery matters, Colonel Weeb went on inside the cafe, pushing his quest for a hearing there. Now there he found another thing that wasn't usual. Nobody in the cafe but Doc Bavender, that was usual, but now Loren had come out of the kitchen and had taken a counter stool with Bavender, that was what was unusual. Doc Bavender sat sipping at coffee and smoking his first cigar of the day, probably. While Loren had gone so far relaxed he had untied his apron, though not so far gone relaxed that he looked like a customer. Just idle. Therefore Colonel Weeb joined the pair at the counter and took up explaining work, particularly to the school teacher, speaking slow and calm like it was a foreign language and these two were just starting out.

"Now you, Doc, I could get you fixed up right this morning. Saturday job with Coach. I'll put you right with the old skinhead. Don't say no. I can't last forever. And don't start thinking you're too old and too good to start sacking spuds, Doc. It's a trade, it's a skill."

The old man's lips and eyes—moist, bulbous—hung from his face, this his bent back carried low, quite near the counter. Every now and then the Colonel would slosh it, his face, a loose cap of skin over the front of his head, around to follow how his insults were taking. This morning, it could have been better. Doc Bavender only smiled, at Loren, and blew smoke at the old vet.

“What would it be, Colonel? Just sacking or toting too?”

“Sacking and toting the both for you.” The old vet knew what was going on. He turned to Loren. “Id be good fer him, right, Loren? Bust a sweat on that egghead.”

The Colonel turned his coffee cup this way and that. That's what you got from somebody who knew what was what. Comeuppance

Except when Loren smiled, and this only among those he had known for a long long time, there was an uncertainty to his look, as if he didn't quite understand, or hadn't heard, what was being said. Loren was a tall, lank man. His hair dark, curly, it shone with kitchen grease. He wiped the counter with his apron. It looked like he might have smiled. Something flickered in his flat eyes.

As nobody was saying a word, the Colonel agreed with himself for himself, his voice ever soft, a pettish gargle. “Ever man needs a job where there's work done. Jobs where you don't work are bad for man.” He thought. “School teaching. Bank presidenting.” He thought. “Coupling rich women.”

What the Colonel had been thinking was he saw no reason not to keep quiet now, but that had been beforehand. Bavender stirred his coffee cup though there wasn't that much in it. Maybe the Colonel had lucked out. Maybe nobody was listening to a thing. The old vet started into a line that had gotten him out of many a fix:

“Lord, if I'd had the body, the work I'd done. I would pulled cotton this morning, I'd be sweeping floors like Coach says. I would worked my tail off—if it hadn't been shot off, Doc. You boys don't know the value of sweat till one November morning at Lay John they roll you up in that ball to take you home but when they get you there you don't unroll.”

Loren ran his hands through his hair. He looked at his hands and didn't exactly have nothing to say. “I have to get a haircut this morning, Doc. You think you could handle the store a couple minutes? Just give out coffee till I get back.”

Doc Bavender raised his attention. “Can't this morning, Loren. I'm supposed to meet someone this morning.” He then asked about Wanda, where she was.

The Colonel offered: "I'll mind it fer you, Loren."

Loren moved his head. "I thought maybe you'd know."

Doc Bavender knew this: that the man wanted to be told something he already knew. The girl had been waitressing at the cafe only a few weeks, sleeping in a car she had probably stolen, when Loren had come to Bavender for the favor of putting her up till she found a place of her own. That had been the beginning of summer, five months ago. The girl had just graduated from reform school, Loren explained, the only joke he knew, the same school that had gone off with most of Loren's youth. And Helene, who had suddenly cut short her retirement as the counter waitress, she had made her pitch too: Wanda was like a daughter to them, she went on ever apologizing, but they couldn't have the girl room at their place, it was that one body too small. Doc Bavender had watched the girl serving tables, clearing them. No taller than most women, about the same height as Olive, but with powerful sloping shoulders, long-muscled arms, flat breasts, wide waist, a man's legs, a man's walk, a man's voice—Doc Bavender had agreed to let the girl move in. Olive might fall in love with her, and did, and he let the girl come in anyway, and he let her stay on.

"I haven't seen her this morning. Maybe she slept in. I don't know."

"Coacher don't have shit fer me this morning, Loren, I'll do 'er. Perch right here by the register. They can come to me."

Loren kept after his misery, as if it were an excitement, a chase. "Yeah, that's got to be it. She's got to be to be tired. We worked our tails off last night."

"Aw, we all did that, Loren, me and Coach, and we're still up and at 'em."

"Young women need more sleep than us old men," Doc Bavender smiled. "So I'm told."

"Spend more time in bed fer dang sure!"

"She's probably been out screwing like a snake," Loren said and no, it wasn't the way this sweet man talked, not ever.

"I don't know about that, Loren," Doc Bavender replied. "I think she's dating somebody. A nice young fellow, from over the county line. So I hear."

Colonel Weeb so liked this talk—now choking, rocking back and forth, laugh turning fit. The barrel of the old vet's body had been crushed from the side and top, they had thrown a pair of baggy pants on it, dangled shoes from the pants, thrown a shirt over the mangled spine from which grew two other spines, powerful simian arms, and a deformed melon skull that went on ever bloating with age—oh yes, a man who had been rolled into a

ball and left to grow out of it the best he could. Doc Bavender patted the old vet on the back—lightly—not to feel too near the pain.

Loren reached behind the counter and poured whiskey into the vet's water glass. He offered Doc Bavender a glass, which he took himself when the other man refused.

"Maybe another time. Maybe later," Bavender said. "After I see the father-in-law. Maybe I'll want it then. After what's left to sell is sold." So he had said it. It hadn't been much, not the large, painful thing he had expected. But then maybe it was only that no one was listening.

The Colonel had taken his drink straight down. "Bankers, school teachers, you can drink all day there. You got to be sober to sack spuds. Cain't be putting the bread on the bottom!" The old vet stared into his oily glass, he lifted it. "Seventeen, we drunk cornyak like tea in the trenches. Too scared to get drunk. Pour it in the canteen, pour it straight down. Bottle after bottle."

Loren held a stick of gum in his hand. He had unwrapped it and did not remember why. To Bavender: "Come back when you're done with seeing Mr. Glassmoyer, Doc. I got something I want advice on."

"If I can," said Doc Bavender, thinking, meaning: no, he did not want to hear it. Then he said another thing he thought he would not say, he should not have said, he should not have done, should not be going to do. He had an appointment later on in the day, he was going to see a student, the student was a girl. And what he did not say: a girl who so wanted to be in love. Maybe even wanted to be in love with him.

Colonel Weeb looked from one man to the other. He had missed something, but what? Bavender was blowing smoke rings, Loren coughing in his throat.

"That same girl?"

So that was it, sure, Weeb figured, taking himself a cigar. "Now can't blame a man fer going after it, Doc. That's where they got me. Pfffft, clean off, never felt a thing. Lying there in the palm a your hand, bloody little worm. Missed the booger once he was gone." The old vet hung his head, tears melting from his face. "Sonofabitch shitty life. Little more that black bird there, Loren, please sir."

Loren reached behind the counter and in so doing turned to the front window. The morning sun had begun to warm and raise the street, like bread. There were few on it. They would be coming into the cafe today, Loren thought, but they would be coming in later, it was early now. Maybe it was the harvest keeping them all away from town, he thought, knowing nothing would keep them away from town. But still, Loren thought, it was slow today, and maybe it would grow slower still, later. He would call

Helene then, he would tell Helene not to come in. He and Wanda could handle everything today. The two of them. Yes, that was it. They would sit out back, on the orange crates and soda cases, when things went slow, when they went dead, when the day was done, and they would smoke Luckies and sip Old Crow and they would talk and go quiet.

Loren raised himself and turned the bottle to the old vet. Doc Bavender was talking and Loren hadn't heard, hadn't understood.

"She only wants me to advise her on her studies. What she should do after graduation." Doc Bavender had mentioned the girl against his will or maybe not thinking and now he could not stop thinking, not stop speaking of her. He spoke as if addressing her, or another student but there was no other student, he spoke not sharply, not quite, never sharply. "I think she thinks I can tell her—I don't know what she thinks I can tell her. I don't know. I don't know what to tell any of them, I really don't."

"She probably wants to know how you helped build that A Bomb, Doc. Everybody does. That bomb that kills them all."

Once Doc Bavender would not have looked beyond his friend's, Loren's sweet simplicity, but now, he could not look his way and he could not look away. The old vet knew. He knew a man who had lost something before he had known how good it had been, back before he had lost it.

"Going to make us another goddamn killer of mankind, are you?" The old vet weaved on his stool, he jerked his hat over his eyes. "Build us another bomb. Blow us another Kingdom Come. Goddamn test-tubers, goddamn bankers, start up another war, make another *depression*. Bombs, Glassmoyer, hording all his dough—shits, all a you. Pore old Japs over there, nothing but yeller grease. Who we gonna get next? Who we gonna *teach* next?"

Loren came up furious so quick, it was a man the others did not know. "I'll tell you. It's going to be the Reds next time. Any man that won't fight, he can be a doctor, he can be a fancy actress, he is going to be cut down."

Doc Bavender followed the direction of his friend's fury. There on the street, the flat side wall of the bank backdrop, a tall sloping man carrying the black satchel of a physician and a pretty young woman were moving toward the courthouse square. The doctor, what had he done to be cut down? Gone off to Spain, healed people there in their war, the wrong people, the wrong people now. And the young woman, a returning student, always dressed, everything she wore, in a single bright color—today a dazzling green—she had come home after ten long years, and she had brought with her the wrong ideas, the wrong ideas now. So intent was this pair on their conversation they did not see the approaching girl. The student who

wanted to know what to do, who to be when she was no longer a student. Today there was something about the girl, she did not look the same. Yes. Her hair had been cut. The blonde robe was now a shining yellow helmet, cut short and square, a soft helmet, its fringe coming to her neck, reaching to brush her shoulders but it would not. The shortened hair made her look only more—only more what? Only more like a woman. The girl hailed the doctor and the returning student. The three stood a few moments talking. Then the girl turned and joined the others and the three went on out of sight, behind the corner of the bank, they would be going toward the courthouse square.

Bavender stood. “A trouble I may have been spared.” The others looked and looked again. Everybody was used to it, Doc Bavender breaking out some riddle or the other. Not making sense half the time was genius or the price of it anyway. “If she had asked me, I would’ve told her to be a poet. Not a scientist, anything but a scientist. Nor a doctor nor an actress. Yes. Let her write us a poem. Something wrong, something right. Yes. That would’ve been worth it.”

Loren stood as well. He tied on his apron. His anger had gone, it would not be gone long. “What this country needs, Doc. Another scribbler.”

The Colonel agreed. “Piss on that. And piss on that too,” the Colonel observed, now Coach Jester’s voice coming from the rear, calling out for his sacker, and the others laughed, as if nothing had happened, when something had.



Dudley described the boys’ future in terms of war, torture and bloody murder. And Van well believed him. Taking precautions, Van had locked himself inside Dudley’s car, but when the air ran out and the seat covers took to sizzling, Dudley got to him through the front wing vent. Van grappled with the door handle while they proceeded at forty miles an hour down the street, when actually Red—next—lived but a half block away. Dudley wished Van would get out of the car, he would run him down like a dog.

“And I’ll make it look like an accident. Why who in the world would go and murder his own little brother?” Spoken with a suavity that had the smaller boy trembling. Dudley slammed the car to a halt before Red’s house. Dudley’s head banged against the car ceiling, he pressed the horn with vigor. “Where is that little albino bastard!”

“Maybe he doesn’t feel like coming out to play today.” Drew a good backhand. Now on it was staying zipped.

Red's grandmother—an old woman of young silver hair and strong jaw—had come out on the front porch. She had brought with her a big stick, which she shook at the car of bad boys, then took to slamming against the side of the house. Meanwhile Red had made a somewhat illegal break-out through the back of the house and, head down, pumping hard, dived into the car. The old woman had unrolled the hose but hadn't sprayed much, Dudley had them back on the street that quick, another half block, the Ford screaming full circle, two laps, around the Rainboroughs' arched drive. No telling how long Tiny had been out there, hiding behind a porch column. Dudley parked the Ford half-way up the steps, pressed horn like siren, and experienced a seizure—they had been waiting out front, to hear Dudley play it, for hours. Tiny was yanked inside the car, some doors slammed, all clinging for dear life as Dudley took the car, tires howling, a victory lap around the drive. Tiny, even his little friends, would liked to have waved farewell to Mrs. Rainborough there at the window, she waving farewell to them, but centrifugal force being what it is, not a finger was lifted.

Dudley headed the Ford and headed it hard toward the other side of town, the eastside. There lay the poor white neighborhood (as Dudley's cruel and merciless friends were poor white boys), this bounded by the gin block and Eastertown, some called it, the stockyards and rodeo grounds, and the small rail yard and the elevator. The fourth flank of the area faded into what some had come to call the seedy side of the business district. Here were to be found the fire station and city hall, the town's water tower standing sentinel, it seemed, over them all, the city power plant, the old hotel, so called though there was none newer, the new lumberyard, a tractor dealership and the junkyard. The few houses that stood here still still had a dignity to them somehow, huge, frail structures, unpainted, unfenced, no grass or shrubbery about them, only great dying trees that moaned in the gentlest breeze, their limbs brushing their soft gray walls and yellowing windows, all so quiet. Nothing, nothing like light anyway, penetrated these houses' gloom. The anger and despair of the dozens of families that had come and gone in these forty years had left their rooms silent, dark, empty of energy and hope. It made those, Dorothea Rainborough one, who had escaped such ill, to return. The drama coach would not drive through this part of town, she did not like to have its children—their pinched faces, their bleached straw hair, their clothes too old to be so clean, their hands too young to be so soiled—in her classes. She would recommend other courses. She had thrown away all pictures of herself as a girl.

Not everyone left poverty here, some found it. While Hub's father had been poor forever, Mr. Abernathy held to be a gentleman of the crash and hoped it showed in his son. It did not. The boy Abernathy was thin, small,

ever ill, near malformed. The trunk of his body was poorly shaped, like a bird cage, his ribs anyway looked to run in a circle about him, showing through skin like fangs; his arms were far too long, hands far too small, while his knees and elbows, some malady had swollen these the size of stuffed pies. What other condition had the boy always scratching, his hair so thin and ill-attached he could pull out bunches of it, to amuse his friends? Few wondered then that there was a faded look behind the boy's faded blue eyes, one would have wondered had there not been.

Now take Hub, he was a strong boy. He could have played football, probably, had he tried or cared, but he did not, his sporting events shooting pool and running from the sheriff. Lank, raw-boned, thin yellow hair pasted across his forehead, much in the style of Hitler whom, like his father, he thought he admired. Oh the boy did know that pure mad hatred, that was certain. He hated everyone, he hated them all. His friends, himself, his broken mother and his sisters and their fat families. He hated animals and teachers and everyone he did not know; he hated the sheriff and blacks and women and the president and anyone who might be one day. There was only one man he did not hate, his father who, though he had once killed a man and would kill again before he died, was as gentle with his son as he would had he been a girl.

Dudley stopped the car before one of these houses of the poor, Hub's house. And the boys, it was their last chance to escape, and what did they do? Nothing. Docile, frozen with fear, simply imbecilic, they allowed themselves to be herded inside the house: it was cool and dark and quiet there. They probed down the hall, its soft, old floor sagging under their step, to find the poor boys in a bedroom in the rear, Hub lying in bed, hands clasped behind his head, Hub watching Abernathy there on the floor, maybe he was trying to do a pushup. The three younger boys were lined against a wall. They were made to kneel, then prostrate themselves, then ordered to stand again. Today Hub was their king. Now Hub turned and gazed at the three quaking boys. He showed them his hatred, his long yellow teeth. He questioned the boys. They trembled and barked and stamped the floor, with reason. Abernathy came and strutted before the boys, showing them his muscles, his bicep, there had to be more there than bone. Soon one of the boys, Dotty Rainbow's boy, his quiver went to shake, his shake became mad dance, and Hub turned away. The boy had been known to froth and fall about and you did not want him there fish-flopping on the floor come dark. Hub snapped his fingers and as Abernathy got the three boys on their knees, they would be cleaning the poor palace room today, he called Dudley to the bed, the throne. He questioned this other, older rich boy there.

“Now why is it you want to get rid of these three little fellows, Dud? What was it they read—some diary? I thought only girls kept diaries, Dud.” Hub lay back and stared at the ceiling, this fouled by stain, rot and tear, water, smoke and age, their mark gathered there. The boy smiled up toward them. “Ah. I know it’s just a list of everybody you fucked, Dud. I know how it is.”

Abernathy came up now. Hub watched him come. He had murder in him somewhere. Pee Wee had seen that. Pee Wee had said that. That this boy would murder too. “We could thow them off the water tower. We could take them over to the gin and thow them in the press.”

“That would probably do it.” Hub looked over to Dudley. “But you don’t really want to kill them, do you, Dud? He just wants to scare them, Ab. He’s just joking, he’s just kidding Hub, now aren’t you, Dud?” The poor boy smiled. He held out his hand. “You got that five bucks on you, Dud?” The rich boy handed over the bill. The poor boy studied it. “That’s good. Pee Wee’s bootlegging some beer in tonight. This will get us a case. We’ll drink some beer tonight, won’t we, Dud?” The boy folded the bill and slipped it into his pocket. He smiled. “You know, I told Pee Wee about your problem. You wanted these boys executed for reading a man’s inner thoughts. Pee Wee said he’d do it for five bucks, he said he’d do it for nothing. Pee Wee’s done sent two hub city cabbies to their grave.” Hub smiled. “You see, me and Pee Wee are tired of playing at things,” he turned to the boys on the floor, “*ararent* we, children?”

Hub smiled at the boys. There they were, scrubbing the floor, scrubbing hard toward the door. Hub smiled at that. That it had been in the movie at the Ritz last week, that escape. These boys were rich boys, they lived on the good side of town anyway, and they went to the movies and they believed them. Now there came a report from the street. A muffler back-fire, a plank falling from a lumberyard truck—it came like gunshot, close enough for these boys scrubbing floor in this back room in this poor man’s poor old house. Hub smiled at the boys. They had scrubbed right up to the door and now they leapt up and were down the hall and out of the house, making their escape, just like in some movie. Hub turned to Abernathy, to Dudley. He smiled at the boys.

“Let’s let them go for now. That’s part of the game, ain’t it? That’s what we’re playing, ain’t that right? Just some old game.”

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It was the third Saturday in a row Doc Bavender was to see his father-in-law, about this job at the bank, and when he finally did go, this third time,

he was late and Mr. Glassmoyer told him to come back at three. Bavender went and drank as much coffee as he could at the drugstore, listened to the Hooper twins—they worked behind the counter on Saturdays—speak of movie stars as much as he could, watched them polish as many tan plates as he could, then he went back to Loren's Cafe. It was there he spent the early afternoon, drinking a little whiskey and sitting in the sun in the small patio Loren had made in the alley back of the cafe and Jester's grocery, sitting till the sun moved on.

He then returned to his father-in-law's office, late again, and the old gentleman took him out of the bank and away from the suffering, supplicant farmers and walked him around the courthouse square and with the still stiff kindness that characterized the banker told Bavender what he wanted to hear. Dudley would be a man in ten years or so and the old gent was willing to wait for that. He would handle his daughter, he said, and her ambitions and sent Bavender on his way, in theory a free and happy man.

By now it was six, when the afternoon had turned cool and blue and the streets had grown rich with people in from the country, the place and time Bavender preferred over any other in the world, and he lingered in the crowds and felt that what he wanted, that which was missing, lay somewhere in this. At one point he saw Van and his little friends dashing by, involved in some game—war, musketeers, prison break, whatever had played that afternoon at the Ritz—and at another Carrie Steen and Jay Turner, the girl who so wanted to be a woman, driving past the square. Bavender's mind told him something about that but he did not listen. Bavender waited till seven and dark, then went home. It made no difference. There was no one there even then.

Bavender entered the house through the boys' room, this dark and cluttered with their things. Bavender turned on a low lamp and picked up these things for a time but grew tired of it and went and sat at the older boy's desk. He switched on the light there and idly went through what he found on the desk, truly not prying, rather, curious at how different boyhood had become, the amazing variety, the many many things these boys had. He came on a diary beneath a stack of comic books and before he realized what it was, so he told himself, opened it. He looked down the neat script, too neat really for a boy, and saw the words *love* and *hate* and *frightened* and *fighting* and that the people whom the boy hated or loved or fought or was frightened of were identified by letter, so that Bavender could close the book and replace it without knowing which of these he or any of the rest of them were.

Bavender turned off the boys' lights and stepped down to the sun porch. The large room was not so dark as the rest of the house—some moonlight

filtered through the shutters—and Bavender went without further light to a chaise longue across the room. He threw his hat off into the dark and sat. The buzz of voices, the muffled ticking of pool balls came from beneath him, from the basement playroom. The basement door was thrown open and light from the enclosed stairwell flared against the ceiling. Olive's figure cast a grotesque shadow as she came up the stairs, stumbling, laughing, Wanda's voice following. There rose the sound of ice tinkling in glasses as they came. Bavender crossed the room and crouched behind the stairwell wall. As Olive appeared over the wall, Bavender leaped out from hiding, growling, and Olive screamed and threw her ice into the air and fell back into Wanda's arms. Bavender pulled the two women up into the room—all laughing—and they fell into chairs and laughed again, all of them, though soon Wanda grew silent, as she pursued no emotion or thing long, ever returning to watchfulness, her eyes dead as a doll's.

"Boo! Boo!" Olive laughed, it scratched, it ripped at something in her throat, it dragged like a needle dragged across a record. "Boo! Boo!"

Yes. Boo, thought Bavender, watching the girl, how she sat, straddled a chair turned backwards. Her legs were bare, she wore shorts and a halter, this October. Bavender went to the kitchen and made drinks and came back and gave them around. He sat across the room from the women, the women sitting near.

Now there were other jokes, Bavender did not follow them, not well. Something about Loren, something about his love or lust for the girl, whatever it was, whichever. Yes, the joke was Wanda's first interview for the waitress job, Loren conducting the interview in the back booth, after work, door locked, cafe lights out. And there was a joke about Bavender. Yes. Teaching school on Saturday. Holding a class for one, a pretty girl, that was getting around town as well and was very funny indeed. Yes, they were laughing now and Bavender found himself praying his wife would stop, but she wrung laughter from her body as if it were a poison, she poured it into his hidden wound, his hatred. But the hatred soon passed and his mind, purged, went somewhere else, a place cool and calm. He was well again and saw things clearly now. He saw that he had come to a place that was not bearable. He had wasted a gift—one might call it that—that was the horror. He saw too how people might believe in God, for a moment he almost believed himself, for there had to be someone, some *thing*, that gave them this gift, nothing this rich, this good could be accident. And then he remembered that accident was all it was and that was the horror. But now, under that, he found another. He loved his son and to survive one horror he had forgotten everything he knew and now he could never tell his son

not to waste his gift, how not to waste it. Yes, that was another horror. That without him his son was lost and he could not reach him.

These were the tunnels his mind made when he was in control, when he was not wanting to kill his wife.

Now their glasses were empty and Wanda came for them and went into the kitchen. Bavender watched the girl walk toward him and he watched her walk away. The skin on her legs looked soft, soft as what? The skin on her legs looked soft as sand. Bavender pulled his mind back from skin soft as sand and turned it to listening to Olive. Through that talk, through whatever his wife was saying, there came the sound of ice dropping into glasses, the girl singing a song. What Olive was saying was that he had not got the job at the bank. Daddy had called. Daddy had explained it all.

Wanda returned with the drinks. She handed them about and went to her chair and turned it and sat on it correctly, the chair facing forward. What would they speak of now? Rich, being rich. And jobs. Wanda was a waitress now. She had not fucked Loren in the back booth, the cafe lights off, and had gotten a job. Bavender had gone to see a banker, he had gone late, time and again, and had not gotten a job. What would he do now? What job was there for him to do? Now he remembered—his wife remembered and she was right—it was he who had wanted to quit teaching, to leave science, what little there was of it in teaching. What was the joke now? Why were they laughing? Yes. Another joke was going around town. That Bavender would go downtown, he would get a job there, an ordinary job. That was the joke going around. Bavender would get a job sacking groceries, and toting too, and he would grow rich. And the strangest thing was, it was Bavender telling the joke. The women laughed so, Olive on the floor from such laughing, on her hands and knees, choking laughter, crawling over the floor closer and closer to the girl and her bare legs, the skin on them soft as what? Yes, that was the joke. The gift. The horror. The skin on her legs looked as soft as sand, and it was.

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How many cigarets had they smoked? Enough to get them hung.

After the escape from Hub and Abernathy and that one treacherous brother, the boys had gone to earth, gone to hide in the Ritz and the afternoon darkness there. But as the movie was some knight being stretched on the rack they had cut that short. Over then to Loren's Cafe, to crouch in a back booth. But there the talk was all about gaping wounds and death marches, the old vets going on as if these were childhood sweethearts, and

they skipped out on that, into the alley and into Jester's store. But then *there* everybody was going on about lynched nigger and fried Jap, so the boys, taking their chances, went out onto the open street, anything for air. There they ran into the highschool girls and for a couple of jokes got themselves smuggled out of downtown. The highschool girls were acting like grown-ups—or one was a highschool girl acting like a grownup and one was a grownup acting like a highschool girl—smoking cigarets and drinking beer and using rough talk and since it was expected of them, as little rats, Van at least trotted out some bad words and had a smoke and then a taste of something awful and now Olive had caught that smoke and sour on his breath and death marches and hangings and being strapped to a big wheel and stretched seemed easy.

The girl and the woman had driven them around town for a time and then let them out at the caliche pit, this the gang's hideout. There they had waited in its soft, crumbling caves, their entrances guarded by weed and junked cars, till dark. Then they had come home. Or to the tent set up in the Bavender backyard. That would be home for the night and the boys were glad to be there. Olive, to get them out of the house, the tent, when Mounties were keeping indoors, had been her idea. Fine. A frozen toe or two, still there was life. Van went into the house—no one about—and found beans and milk and bread and they ate in the dark and they waited. There was a spotlight moon and too some light fell through the house's closed shutters, but the tent was placed well in the shadows of a hedge and some trees and was not there unless you knew it was there.

Dudley's car passed once, twice, then the third time stopped. Abernathy crawled out and crawled around the house, peering into windows, but he didn't look in the shadows for a tent, not in October, and Abernathy went back to the car and got in and the killers left. After watching some time for a return, Van let the tent flap down. They fired up the flashlight and, as if they weren't frightened out of their minds anyway, had got to making eerie shadows on their twisted faces when there came mad screams from the night. The first attacker threw herself against the tent flank, cursing and shrieking. There was also much fiendish laughter. The tent was then struck from another quarter and there came more cursing and screaming and wild laughter etc from all around them.

The other boys moaned and prayed and asked for their mothers, but Van, who lived here, calmly went outside. Over here sat Olive cross-legged in the grass, yelping like a dog. Over there Wanda flopped about, legs tangled in the tent ropes. Van retreated inside the tent. No instruction needed: the boys hopped into their sleeping bags and began snoring like little

engines. Even so, Olive's head popped through the tent flap. Van, her own, was hauled outside.

"It smells like a gin joint in there, Wand. We know you little rats been smoking cigs and drinking beer. That nice Abernathy boy called up and said so. Gimme some breath, sonny."

Van rather held his, but as that can be done only so long, shortly the three of them were dragged through the thick frosted grass—above the winking stars, the pallid moon—and dumped in the house. The three grownups arranged themselves about, getting comfy, the Christians were on time but the lions were late. Bavender had his hat pushed down low, all to be seen some smile and cigar. Wanda had curled up on a low chair, head leaned back, eyes closed. While Olive, the ringmaster, had taken to tearing open pack after pack of cigarets and tossing these out onto the floor.

"You want to smoke, sonny, you got some smokes. Start smoking, sonny. I'll mix the drinks."

Van and his friends huddled in the center of the room, among the scattered cigarets, the lighting up of which was said to have provided, in wars anyway, in movies about wars anyway, that last moment of pleasure, after being tied to the pole, before the blindfold. So they fired up some matches and began puffing away, flinging cigarets off into the dark after a puff or two and firing up others. The idea being that the place might burn down. That some nice firemen might come and arrest their tormentors for tempting minors, however that law went. Van did make an attempt to look stylish going down, smoking like you were supposed to smoke facing the Kraut firing squad, but in no time he was flopped on his back with the rest of them.

Down here, where the haze was not quite so thick, he looked about. Nearby Red lay collapsed nose flat to the floor. The boy's face looked waxed and it wasn't any floor polish that had rubbed off. Through the fog Tiny could just be seen, head drooping, not looking well at all. Van thought. What might save them? A joke or two? Would a chuckle win freedom? What was there to lose? Van took all twenty cigarets from a pack, stuck six or so in his mouth, and the rest in his ears and nose and between toes and fingers. Not a smile. Nothing. Could try eating a few, but that really might prove worse than smoking, giving Olive ideas. He would have to come up with something that led logically toward mercy. Meanwhile Red was telling the floor he was dying and it looked to be true. His face had taken to shimmering like a pond, glassy and green. Well there was always sobbing and flailing and why not? On occasion pity had been known to follow a good flopping weep. The problem was, Van had never felt less like crying in his

life, though he could not imagine why. Every sad thought—Olive burning at the stake, say—only brought up a chuckle. There was always pain. On occasion tears were known to follow a good hurt, as pity followed tears and forgiveness pity etc. Van kicked himself, bit his tongue and thought of lighting up a finger—and still the eye was dry. He looked to Tiny for help. What they needed now was a good fit. But Tiny, a white ring having risen about his mouth, looked far too gone for epilepsy. Van, at wit's end, then lay out on the floor and flopped around for a while—there had been a gripping madhouse movie a couple weeks back—and sure enough, in time, his father noted the foamed mouth, eyes rolled back in head, something.

Bavender pushed the hat off his face. “Van, I saw you today downtown. You and your little friends. You went dashing by, you didn’t see me. Were you playing a game?”

Right, Pop. They had been playing that Dudley and his fiendish friends weren’t really going to toss them off the water tower.

Red beat his head against the floor, he implored Van to tell them, tell them it was no game, but Van knew it would be a waste of breath. Each and every grownup he had ever known had had his or her own idea about childhood and not one of them had ever had anything to do with what it was really like. Wanda could go on and on about the grade-school janitor getting her at twelve or maybe ten, and Bavender remembered the country school he had gone to and how simple and good life had been to children then, if you forgot the parts about being hungry and cold and fevered, and Olive, she could bawl with the best about orphans and poverty, the last things in the world she knew anything about. And so how had all these people grown up since childhood? Not much was how. There was Wanda showing her pussy through her shorts as if she wanted to get *them* at ten or twelve, however old they were now, while Bavender had pushed his hat over his face to dream of walking miles to some country school that had probably been one of the most dangerous places on earth, and now Olive, there she was down on the floor squeezing Red for being a poor little orphan boy and offering to light his cigarets if he didn’t feel well, about as far as her sympathy for the impoverished and the lonely ever got. Van lay on his back and promised himself, if he ever had the chance to remember, he would remember childhood and he would get it right.

It was well into their final hour when a knock sounded at the sunroom door. A squeaky, sniveling voice followed:

“It’s Abernathy, Miz Bavender. Them other big boys have left me all alone and lonesome. Can Van and his little pals come out and play with me?”

Now who would believe this lying waterdog? Van considered. His mother.

“Oh you poor orphan kid! Of course your little pals can come out and play with you.” Then something with a bit more snarl to it: “Van, get off your butt and go out and keep that orphan company.”

“You know they’re going to jump us soon as we step out the door.”

Olive doubled a fist and Van and the others dragged toward that door.

“Thank you, Miz Bavender!” came a cry from the night.

“Sleep tight!” called out Bavender.

“Don’t let no janitor get you!”

“And no smoking, sonny. Next time I’ll hold you under.”

The door closed behind them. Abernathy stepped out of the shadows. No human being had ever looked less lonely for his little playmates.

“Into the tent, creeps. Move it.”

The boys went without hope to the tent. They went into it with less. Black. You could hear some breathing. The boys crouched on the ground between the cots. Abernathy came into the tent after them. “I got them,” he said. There was a silence. Van pushed himself under one of the cots. Someone was nearby, but the dark was like ink, he could see nothing. Hub’s voice, cool and slurred, came from the back of the tent.

“You little fuckers got any last wishes before you die?”

That they didn’t have to die.

No, that probably wouldn’t get it done. With nothing to lose, Van did a pretty good imitation of that cowboy sidekick, the one with the gravelly voice. The double feature last week.

“The Injuns got Miss Dale, Roy. Best we saddle up and ride.”

The older boy laughed, calm, cool. “That was terrible. Now we don’t have any other choice but to take you up the water tower and toss you off.”

The boys pled, with all sincerity, truly, for mercy.

Hub thought it over. “All right. We’re going to give you one more chance. We’re going to give you one more run for it.”

“Thank you! God bless us, everyone!” etc.

Hub stopped. He waited. He hissed something, a word Van didn’t understand. Abernathy crawled forward and pulled back the tent flap. In the flash of moonlight Van saw Hub and Dudley in the back of the tent, Tiny laid out on one of the cots, Red trembling in a corner. On the street a silent car pulled by, its headlights dim. The car moved down the street, stopped, then backed under the trees alongside the Bavender house. The headlights, then the motor was shut off. Van could not see the driver, only the glow made by his cigaret moving in the darkness, tracing slowly back and forth, from his

mouth to the side of the car. Abernathy let the tent flap slide to. He could scarcely be heard:

“Pee Wee.”

Hub’s voice came strained, unrecognizable. He could have been little too. “Somebody go out and tell him I’m not here. Tell him I’m not here.”

Now the car door slammed. Then came a soft movement in the yard, the man walking slowly toward them through the grass. There came a shower of sparks against the tent flap. A soft hazy voice said:

“Tell Hub to step outside. We got something to go over tonight.”

No one in the tent said a word, no one in his right mind, only Van saving his executioner: “He’s not in here. We’re just three little boys camping out.”

There was a silence. Van could hear: the man struck a match, sucked in smoke. The dead match rattled against the tent. “Ain’t that Dud’s car by the house?”

“Sure, but he’s asleep in the house. Where you ought to be this time of night. Home in bed.”

The man laughed softly. “All right. You tell Hub Pee Wee is looking for him. When you see him.”

And with a movement as soft and blurred as his voice, the man moved off. The car door opened and closed, the motor came to life, the headlights flashed through the dark, and the car moved away. Then: silence. Then: Hub’s voice coming out of the dark. Snarling, brutal.

“Run, little boys, run. Run fast as you can.”

■ ■ ■

The boys were outside, in the clear frosted moonlit air, running without thinking, without thinking where. When they had run for some time they stopped and saw that each of them could have run home and been safe there, two out of three anyway, but now it was too late for that. They lay out in a shallow ditch, gasping for breath, discussing where they might hide and be safe. Red wanted to lie very still, they could cover each other with dead leaves, as runaway slaves once did, Miss Abshire, sixth-grade home-room, being conversant with the matter, having written treatises on such in college. Tiny thought they might lie on the highway till some truck driver came along and picked them up, as his mother said that during hard times truck drivers always appeared thoughtful of hitchhikers and if these weren’t hard times, what were? Van’s idea—the most practical plan from the most practical boy—appealed to no one. A culvert lay nearby. But on approaching the gaping black hole, walled with cobwebs and no doubt harboring

within great shiny spiders and probably bats, the boys chose to take to their feet and run on.

In time they saw they had come to the school. Across the vast empty playground stood its hulking black blocks. The boys staggered out onto the playground, some distance from the road, hit the deck and consulted. The voices of the other boys, carrying like bells through the silver air, sounded dissent—there had to be someplace else to hide—while Van listened and quieted them. From behind came the purr of a car, this patrolling the city streets, methodically hunting them down. Suddenly another car, its headlights off, roared up out of the ground, as a flat winged thing would rise from the ocean floor. The dark car sped by on the road, that which they had just crossed, turned at the school and came back, now blocking all retreat to town. The car stopped, car doors slammed, three of them, and then figures, three of them, came over the playground, toward them.

The boys were considering simply giving up when the three pursuers stopped—they hadn't been seen there, lying flat on their bellies. After a time the three hunters split up. One went right, one left, the one with the flashlight making straight for the boys. The school was it now, two hundred yards of open playground to cross and what would they find there? The place they were dragged to every morning locked tight. Well not quite tight. Van gathered the two others to him. They had two chances. The gym window the basketball team left open so they might practice free throws over the weekend, and there was the fire escape ladder to the roof. The boys swore brotherhood forever, then each leapt up and started running to save his very own skin. Van, who may have bolted a step earlier than the others, hadn't been running long when Red came up on him and then Tiny, a camel so far as dashes went, came up on them both. Van cursed ill fortune. In water no one would have overtaken him, but here on earth those chubby frog legs wobbled and warped, dragging him back and down. He could have been drowning in dirt. His little movie-mad mind went back. Why not try the Olympic Indian who beat all those white boys in every race of all lengths and had to give his trophies back? And so Van held his fists high and pumped his knees and bared his teeth and breathed in great snorts and fell even farther behind. The ground sucked beneath his feet, his head crashed, his lungs burned. Shouts came from behind. As he was all but standing still, Van stopped and had a look around. The killers were not there, not hot on their heels anyway. Rather, they had gone back to the car. Van saw some logic in this. Why suffer like an Olympic Indian when Henry Ford would do all the work for you? Still, the car would have to circle the playground, to find some

way over the ditch, it lying like moat around the school. By that time the good guys in this yarn would be hiding in the gym, with the open window closed and locked behind them. Safe and sound or close enough.

Van then pressed on. Now he came into the little kids' things—swings, merry-go-rounds, slides, relics of a lost past, when your mother still walked you to school, now rearing over him, the twisted steel of a war ruin—and made for the gym. Van had to give his buddies, his brothers, some credit. There they were, waiting for him, their leader, two little gentlemen, under the open gym window. The very gym window that was closed and locked tight, the basketball jerks still being football jerks and to go on being so for two months or so, long after the three bodies had been dug out of the sidewalk under the water tower, the town turned out for the triple funeral, three little caskets, the yearbook dedicated to their memory. In what might have looked like a casual walk to the outside observer, but was in fact a frantic dash, Van went to the fire-escape ladder, climbed on Tiny's shoulders, grabbed the retractable first section and let his weight pull it to the ground. The three crawled up to the first landing. The ladder to the ground slowly rose after them. Maybe, just maybe. They could breathe anyway. Some. For now.

From this height the boys saw Dudley's car had stuck trying to cross the playground ditch, two hundred yards away. The car rocked back and forth, whining, gears gnashing, two figures humping against the rear fenders, their curses floating over the playground. By the time the boys made the second landing, the car looked ever more mired. Well hallelujah, that was something, they agreed. But then another car—the car that had earlier stopped in the trees behind the Bavender house—had pulled up on the road alongside and now the three figures had abandoned their vehicle and were climbing into it. The boys went quickly up the third ladder to the roof. Nothing there but thin air, but given the alternative—killers on the ground—up they went to the roof.

There, as they pulled Tiny over the ledge, Van felt they just might make it. If they hadn't been seen, and he didn't think they had, their pursuers might think they had climbed in the gym and had themselves locked the window behind them. As those four on the ground were all very definitely burglar sorts, they would break in a window to search pointlessly for them inside the building. Roofs of schools were pretty much forgotten places, was the way Van looked at it. Now to find a hiding place and keep still and quiet. Yes. When they heard the car stop in the playground below, doors slamming, a confusion of voices and theories rising to them, not one of them advocating a search of the roof, there was surely hope for them then.

Such hope now seeped down to Tiny, who previously had not been at all certain what all this was about. Now he leaned over the ledge with the others and watched the figures below. They went back and forth, around and around, like children, ones smaller than they. Van had said if they kept quiet as mice they would not die and that made Tiny happy. And when Tiny was happy he thought of things far away from where he was. That he also thought about strange and distant places when he was unhappy presented no problem, as Tiny usually kept such to himself, made no public demonstrations of woe. But when he was happy he sometimes liked to call out, a way of sharing his joy. In this instance his mind wandered back to that play he had been in some time back—the one with the ghosts and the poor people and the bad boss—and he recalled how happy that stage family had been and then how not very happy some of the actors in his stage family had been when he had let his mind wander, as it was wandering now. Yes, that had been the unhappy part. They had come to some place in some festive meal, he and his happy family, and they had no festive food on their plates and then the happy father had come in with something roasted and tasty and though there hadn't been any more on their plates now than there had been before, they were all to cut into things that weren't there, and fork things that weren't there into their mouths, and chew largely on things that weren't there to be chewed, and laugh loudly and clink glasses in which there was nothing to drink. But then there had been applause and the roars of acclamation anyway and now Tiny remembered why. The whole town, it seemed, had come to gather in that large dark room and to cheer like mad when Tiny uttered the only line he had ever remembered, in that play or any other. Yes, that was it. Now, that he was so happy again, why not remember and cry out that line anew? There being no obvious reason not to, Tiny did so, delivering it letter perfect, and in a great bellow as well.

The figures below froze in place. There was no sound from anywhere. No one moved. Now came a voice from the ground:

“What the hell was *that*?”

Another replied, a voice lazy and cruel. “They’re up there. On the roof.”

The other boys might panic and burst into tears and run off to look for other ways down, another ladder or a trap door to the attic or a tree they could climb down, but Tiny waited where he was. Soon Mr. Scrooge would come in and all would greet him and his own father would lift him in his arms and he would throw down his crutch and then the curtain would fall and the play would be done. And he would get to go home. That was the happy part.



Llewellyn Rainborough was the last person in town, it seemed, to learn of the tragedy. That a tragedy had occurred at his school. He hadn't received the terrible call till long after his wife, hearing the first siren, had waked to worry him about going out. When he arrived at the glaring southeast corner of the building half the town had already gathered there, there was such a crowd. Such was the confusion, such the agony and the sorrow, that the superintendent did not much mind being clad only in bathrobe and slacks, that his wispy hair was uncombed, that his face twitched and twisted at the pointless, unalterable cruelty of accident.

It took a time for the superintendent to make his way through to the inner circles of the crowd. And then another while to learn what had happened. The ambulance door closed on the last body, now it pulled slow through the milling mob, its siren mournful. For a moment none filled the vacancy left by the ambulance, then all rushed in for a better look. Two boys had been loaded into the ambulance, but one pushy man, he had been on-site early, offered that only one of them had actually fallen. The other boy had merely collapsed from grief. Another had other things to say. The boy who had fallen was not yet dead but was dying. Yet others came forward. The boy was dead before he hit the ground. A woman came up and shook the superintendent. She gasped and shrank from him. The crowd pulled back. They left him standing alone. There the superintendent wept. Fear blinded him, and what fear was there worse than that? Nothing. There was nothing worse than outliving a child. The superintendent turned from the mob. How would he tell his wife? How could he struggle through her pain when he could not bear his own? Then a man who understood grasped him. Harshly.

"It wasn't your boy. I was here quick. Don't worry. It was somebody else."

Perhaps. But what did one harsh man know? The superintendent fought his way deep into the crowd. To know, to know. A strong hand there caught his arm. He was pulled in another direction. Where he did not know. "What has happened? What has happened?" was all he could think to say. The man brought him to the inner circle of the crowd. They had come close to the building's rough brick wall.

"Here's the superintendent," announced the man who had brought him here.

Another stepped forward. The sheriff. The lawman held the superintendent now. "It doesn't look good, Mr. Rainborough. No sir."

He asked—how had it happened? His mouth felt a thousand years old.

"Now there's a good question." The sheriff took out his pocket notebook. He took out a pen. He looked over what he had written. "Every-

body's got a different story. I was counting on you helping out. Talking to some of the boys. Maybe they're too shook up for questioning. Maybe not. I don't know."

"Will he live? I don't care so long as he lives."

The sheriff studied the superintendent. "Maybe you can start out by talking to your own boy. I ain't got a way with kids. They smart off or clam up and they end up in jail. We got Doc Bavender over there resting. Soon as we get another ambulance we'll be taking him home."

There, *there*, the superintendent saw his son. Sitting behind a tree. His back to the wall. Now he saw others in the crowd. Tears coursed down his cheeks. He looked more closely. Another boy sat beside his son. A doctor had done tending them. Still their faces stood out white, drawn. The superintendent pushed beyond that tree. Two older boys sat farther down the wall, shielded from the crowd by shrub and hedge, the foliage that bordered the building. And beyond these boys were parked two police cars, near the south entrance, no longer, never again the happy end of school. Bavender sat in the back of one of the cars. A groan behind the superintendent turned him. The sheriff kicked a hand-cuffed man toward him. The sheriff kicked the man again. The superintendent went toward them. He asked again—*what had happened?*

The sheriff gave the young man a final kick. It sent him to his knees. The young man smiled ugly, angry. Perhaps the superintendent knew him from some place. Perhaps he had been a student one day. The ugly, angry young man smiled up at the superintendent. His eyes showed bleared brown and red. The sheriff touched him with the toe of his boot.

"Pee Wee here says he saw the whole thing. Now ain't that right, Pee Wee?"

The young man spoke, his voice slow, cruel. "I'll tell you what happened, Rainbow." The young man smiled, dreamily. He buried his fingers in the loose earth. His voice had gone blurred, milky. "I was down here at the corner looking up watching them. Them little kids was up on the roof. And the big kids was chasing them. They started up after them. There was this one kid that was real mad. It was him that fell. He was cussing and it was him that was first up on to the roof. He was saying he was going to throw them off of the roof. I was standing about right there." He raised his bound hands to the corner of the building. "See I was following the dead kid round the building, trying to see how it was happening. He was walking the ledge of the building there." The young man stared into the ground. He rubbed his manacled hands through his hair, he raised his face to the black sky. "It looked like the wind caught him. It looked like the wind pulled him off the

building. But there weren't no wind. It looked like one of them little ones was grabbing after him. Maybe he was pushing him off of it. Maybe he was trying to catch him. The one that was to fall, he was hanging there in the air. His arms was moving, like he was swimming. If he hadn't come off backwards maybe he could've grabbed hold of that tree. I thought of that for him to do. He hit that tree on the way down. But he was upside down and he was moving too fast to grab hold. Now I did think about catching the kid, but my legs hadn't moved when he hit the ground. He hit the wall coming down. I imagine that's what got him. Head popped when he hit the wall. Chest busted soft when he hit the ground. It was over but for some bubbling."

The superintendent turned away. He left the two men—the sheriff dragging his prisoner to his feet—and stood close to the wall, his face only inches from it. Did he have to know, how hard it had been? He pressed his face, his cheek against the harsh grit surface. He recoiled. Had the brick been damp *just there*? The superintendent turned from the death spot. Now the sheriff had stashed the young man in the deputy's car. In the other Bavender had been joined by the dead boy's grandfather. They sat together in the rear. The superintendent thought to console the two men, but what could one say that they could not say themselves, to one another? The superintendent moved back to where the boys had been secured, behind the shrubs, their backs to the wall. The building wall was darker now, now that the ambulance had gone. The superintendent moved silently. He stood unseen. He studied the boys. Surely they were crying—those knotted coughs—then in his horror he imagined it was laughter. He stepped out of the shadows and grasped his son.

"What happened! What happened!" He pushed the boy away.

"They pushed him! They pushed him!" someone cried out. No doubt one of the older boys. Which, the superintendent was never to know. He had closed his eyes so that he could not see. He wiped his face and moved his fingers to adjust the glasses he had forgotten to wear. With trembling hands he lifted his son to his feet. He took his son's friend's hand in his as well. The older boys would be left to the sheriff.

The crowd, now grown respectful of position, parted for them, the superintendent and the two boys. The superintendent led them to the car. There they sat for a moment, watching the townspeople disperse. The floodlights were being dismantled. The patrol cars' lights had been shut off. The corner of the building had gone dark. The sheriff had mounted the bumper of his car. He addressed the crowd. The young prisoner could no longer be seen, perhaps he was lying down in the back seat. Glassmoyer

and Bavender sat quite still in the other patrol car. If they were speaking now, they did not show it. The superintendent looked down at the boys beside him, there in the front seat of his own car. They were so small. They were all but asleep. One of them was his own. They all were, in a way. The superintendent looked back toward the corner of the building. Then up to the roof. It was dark there now, as it had been then. He tried to imagine how it had been. The boys on the ledge there, far into the night sky. One of them falling, another trying to catch him, *another pushing!* The vision ran through the superintendent thick as electric shock. His voice trembled still when later that night he wondered to his wife:

*Could they be murderers? They all?*

**M**rs. Rainborough formed her mouth into an oval, one through which, her class imagined, an egg might have passed with safety, and gave out a similarly rounded sound:  
“Oooooooooooooooooooooo.”

The students fixed their mouths into deltoids, flat grimaces, many crescents and one remarkable trapezoid. “Oooooooooooooowrr.”

Mrs. Rainborough would not be denied. “Oooooooooooooooooooooo!”  
“Uuuuoooooooooowrr!” the class responded willfully. “Arrrroooooooooowrr!”

Mrs. Rainborough would not let them get away with it. But later. For now she shut her mouth and let them howl on. Were they deliberately defying her? Then she would look lovingly at each and every one of them. It took a full minute. It was work. By the time the last purple boy had croaked into silence, Mrs. Rainborough had considered leniency. Seniors would have suffered for such noise, but these beginners must be nurtured. Only with tenderness, and patience, would the heroes, villains etc necessary to fill any stage be coaxed from their ear-splitting chorus. This necessity only the graver now that one of her most gifted youngsters had been cut down. So, Mrs. Rainborough snatched up a long yellow pencil and stabbed it into her hair bun. She held her hands together quite still, thus her wrist jewelry would not sound. Composure complete, still she found herself quoting the poet with a certain bitterness:

“Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, *trrr*ippingly on the tongue.”

She found another yellow pencil somewhere and aimed it at a youth in the front row.

“Spik tha spich ah pray yew etc.”

Beyond awful. Mrs. Rainborough considered moving on to the next child and considered again. She would take the line herself.

“Nor do not *saw the air* with your hands too much thus!” Mrs. Rainborough rather indulged in the stabbing and flailing and poking that accompa-

nied the line. It got something out of one's system. She fondly recalled with what intelligence her finest class had been amused when she had hefted a knee upon an imaginary sawhorse and pantomimed the actually cutting of a board. But that had been ten long years ago, that class, and as subsequent years had become, say, overly amused at the conceit—some going on to guffaw for weeks on end—she had dropped it. She gave such current students an exercise and allowed her mind to drift. That first group, most of them dead now (the war, the tornado, the car crash), or scattered over the continent, had been truly brilliant. They had produced *Unknown Guest* that year and with it had won second in the state contest.

"First," Mrs. Rainborough said and arrested the class in its destruction of the iamb. "We truly won first that year!" There. She had said it and she was glad to have said it. She had sheltered Hazy (Jo Peters, a queer young man but boon support, had given her that one) Hazeltine, arch rival, long enough! Now the world would know how she and her dear dead gone beauties had been bilked of first that year!

The class settled back. They had been looking forward to it, this speech. It was famous. Rainbow gave it every year, to such beginners as they. The drama coach's grievance sang out soft and clear. You had been up milking before dawn, you could doze to it.

"It was the most haunting play," Mrs. Rainborough began. "I'm sure you all remember it or have heard tell. All in town came. Even some country folk. You're probably wondering, one and all, why I never produced it again. Well, I retired it, as they have now retired Boy Bavender's football jersey. Never to be seen again. Not under the lights. Still the drama, that production of it, ten long years ago, lives on in the mind. How can one forget the curtain rising on young Henry, he standing at center stage, head bowed, features lost in shadow, the stage black but for a single white spot, his shirt glowing in the dark?" Mrs. Rainborough came forward now. Though she spoke chillingly enough, this was all so much better received if there were storm brewing, not quite so much sunshine at the window. "Then," she whispered, "the youth raised his face. Then he showed his ashen visage. Then his blank, baleful stare pierced every heart. It was then you knew you were looking at *a dead man!*"

Mrs. Rainborough smiled. That woke a few dozers. It always did. But far enough. As a few years back a girl had gone on into a green faint, the drama coach had cut much detail—such as the week she had spent at the funeral parlor, following Mr. Underwood around, so as to get the makeup just right—and now softened her voice. Some.

“A ghost actually,” she hissed, smiling, she supposed, a bit on the icy side. “Now I ask all of you. Was it mere coincidence that that very same boy actor died later that night, in the car crash?” Mrs. Rainborough considered for a moment that all this really was not part of the usual speech and, not understanding why she was coming out with it now, came out with it anyway: “I had warned Girl Steen to keep her car behind me that night. Or had I? I was so confused. As were they, driving ninety miles an hour. You see, it was the night of our defeat. Yes. Hazeltine had crowed three times that night as the judges, there were three of them, had each reversed his decision. Now I ask of you all, how could any normal human being not be a bit muddled, seeing this masterpiece relegated to *second ribbon!*”

Here Mrs. Rainborough covered her eyes. The usual gesture at this point, but now, again unusually, for the first time in ten long years the vision of the play gripped her mind. Yes. The curtain rises. The young man, now a ghost, returns, after ten long years, to his mother’s house. This the night, the anniversary of his death, his mother has invited to supper the very detective who had shot the boy, ten long etc, this meal to be the detective’s own last, as the mother has poisoned the stew or whatever. Oh the speeches the boy ghost has! Now what had he done for the detective to shoot him in the first place? Robbed a filling station or a grocery—that part had never been clear. A bad boy, in any case, due to his mother’s leniency, probably. Whatever, the boy ghost admits he deserved his punishment, this done right off, and so the stage is set. Now invisible, words soundless, blows incorporeal, the boy somehow manages to persuade Mother not to continue this cycle of murder and revenge.

That part hadn’t been filled in properly either, how Mother (played by Steen) had got the message unless she heard voices. Steen and the drama coach had gone round and round over that, among other things, Steen dead set against Mother hearing anything unless it was written in the script. That probably, apart from Hazy having the judges in her pocket, had been the cause of the play’s flop. That and Steen, and probably the detective as well, being drunk as lords that night. Cackling, tittering, the pair of them tossing back cups of tea as if they were, well, *not hot*—that hadn’t been in the script either. In truth the entire tableau had come out looking more the bordello than some widow’s tidy home. And then the poor sober youth who played Henry the Ghost. The more he emoted the more the audience screamed and held an aching side. Near the end there were tears in every eye, but then neither were these, Mrs. Rainborough could tell you, the sort that had been written in any script.

Now a red rage rose in Mrs. Rainborough. Betrayed by Steen that night and Steen the only one to live through the crash later that night and now Steen, after ten long years, coming back to haunt the drama coach, and maybe to try and take her job away from her (after flopping on Broadway, who knew?)—now tears came flooding and real ones, these as well not in the usual speech, not so early in the year anyway. But then real tears were a small matter. Rage soon dried them. Mrs. Rainborough stared out over her charges. She would end with her well-trying words of advice to all beginning youngsters, though these, this year, would be delivered rather menacingly:

“Life is cruel and unfair but only to the thoroughbred. The mongrel knows naught but happiness. Second place for him,” Mrs. Rainborough said, the line delivered flat, as if by a player who had played it once too often, and now, at the very end, like the same jaded actor, the drama coach could not remember what came next. But then one of the little ones from the rear prompted her:

“And a blue ribbon for us!”

Delivered in a sharp, distressingly undistinguished pipe. Still, the drama coach felt, her reputation had preceded her. To get on with it then.

“Oooooooooooooooooooooo,” said Mrs. Rainborough with all the hope she could muster.

“Oooooaaaarrrrrrrr,” responded the class with none whatsoever.



Jack Cook lived in his office, more or less. He stored his books here, double-stacked in cases that stood floor to ceiling against every wall and one window. There was a hot plate somewhere, under a pile of something, and a severe couch that did as well for bed at night as it served during the day as coat rack and filing tray. As well as study and abode the office was the private place where the principal and his beloved Marie Blum met most late afternoons, some early eves, for a cocktail and a chat and to make love when there were holidays and on some long weekends *only*, Miss Blum was quite firm about that. Cook kept a small house just outside of town. This pleased his mother when she visited, she impressed what a tidy housekeeper the army had made him, and its propriety kept happy as well the school board and Dorothea Rainborough. Only once had this, his true home, been threatened. That the morning the drama coach had come to school so early as to find the principal there earlier still. Perhaps not so much would have been made of this, had not Dorothea thought the principal, in his ample dressing gown, a ghost. She had been in need of relaxation the rest of the

day. After that Jack Cook took to dressing before going down the hall to brush his teeth and the matter settled. He had after all, he reminded the superintendent, played a ghost in one of Dorothea's plays, this when he was a student here himself, and the superintendent understood.

And finally, beyond abode and study and private place, the principal's office served as refuge, a refuge always open to his friends. A refuge where they could come and rage, laugh or weep, have a smoke or drink (after school hours only), gossip, seek advice, make confession, let their hair down and on special occasions be in love. Though there were times during those long weekends, say, that Cook made Jo Peters, say, go out and stand by the flag-pole if he refused to go home, the door to the principal's office was closed to no one. There were even times when Superintendent Rainborough came over to get away or, perhaps, simply to hide out.

Today it was Doc Bavender who had come to the office. The first day Bavender had been to school in a week, the week it had taken his step-son to be mourned and interred. Bavender, save for a word with his father-in-law at the funeral, had spoken to no one during that week, so he said, and now had come to Jack Cook's office to talk. And now Jack Cook put his massive frame far back in his chair, eyes near closed, his evilly fat face masking thought and sympathy, and listened and said nothing. Doc Bavender or any of them might run on to say the things they had not said last week, things they had never said, and Jack Cook would sit back in his chair and listen and say nothing, so strong was his belief that if a man break down, then he must put himself right for it to hold. Strength was made alone. There were those, such as Marie Blum, who thought this attitude an indulgence, mere passivity, but Cook had never so regretted anything as he had that once he had not kept his shattering a secret. The man he had spoken to, there in the jungle, had said nothing in response. That man had leaned back against the dugout wall and listened and said nothing and went on to act as if nothing had been said, so that the following night Jack Cook could take his fear out and himself put himself back together. Jack Cook understood now, particularly, as this friend talked, the price he paid for keeping himself whole. That if he ever thought of speaking out, of reaching out, it might be too difficult or too late to do so. He might then be trapped within himself. His friends, his beloved Marie Blum might then be gone. And then he would be whole and wholly alone.

But for now, what was his friend, his closest, saying? Something, if not the exact words, along these lines:

"I will never believe in anything again. Not in anything I can't touch. There is no plan. No idea. No old gentlemanly overseer in the sky. You once told me, Jack, never love anything. I thought then you would grow out of this.

Now I see it is a thing one grows up to. That a child would die before me, I simply did not think possible. Of course I never loved the boy, but that night I was with a man who did. I saw the loss more clearly in him. The pain was sharper not feeling it. I lost my own son that night as surely as if it had been he who had fallen. I can never love him again, you see. I am too afraid of it. But that's not why I'm here. Jack, I must quit. What can I teach now? That there's nothing but absurdity? No, that's not really it. It's that I can no longer be in the presence of their youth. Do you know that I once thought despair came only with age. No. It's there from the beginning. They are like suns. I cannot look directly at them; no longer. And do you know something funny, Jack, really funny? I had a happy childhood. And there is the real horror. In my son's despair, he is teaching me. This cannot go on. I cannot go on, not like this. I must rebuild my life now or get out of it. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Maybe. Maybe not. Probably. In fact, Jack Cook did have something to say, at long last, to his friend, but Angela Fulks, coming into the room, prevented it. She knocked on a door swung open and stopped at the desk. She put some papers on some others and looked around. Done with his talk, Bavender had now slouched back against the wall. His hat sat low over his face. He had lit a new cigar. Angela took the stub of the former and stabbed it out dead somewhere.

"It look like a forest fire in here." Angela held up a hand. Now, in the other, she held up a note. "I've only been told to remind you. Smoking—Faculty Lounge only." She put the note directly before the principal. "Something from someone named Miss Blum. I've been told to remind you about that as well." Angela puffed a bit of air. "Something about something about *not during school hours*, Mr.Cook. "

Jack Cook took up the note. "Angela, would you care for a cigar?"

Angela turned on her heel. "Don't hold your breath. Or *do*."

Jack Cook leaned out to watch his secretary walk away. The door rather slammed behind her. Jack Cook read the note. That done, he looked over. Bavender had taken to breathing light, regular. Jack Cook took the cigar from his friend's fingers. He gave it a strong pull. He studied the cap of ash forming over the coal. He gave the cigar another pull, then another, reread the note, then smoked the cigar till the ash grew long and drooped and seemed surely to break from the coal soon, anytime now. It was then, when the ash dropped from the coal, that he remembered he indeed had something to say to his friend.

"You know something, Doc? Sometimes you're full of shit."

The soft breathing beneath the hat hitched. The hat wobbled. "You too, Jack."



Jo Peters' love for Marie Blum was uncommon. No transient beauty could do more than temporarily distract it. This, the cover girl Jo Peters had tacked up in his homeroom, had been of such little significance Jo Peters imagined Miss Blum might not have even noticed it. Certainly she had showed no sign of jealousy. Well most of the time Jo Peters understood that Miss Blum didn't give a hang if he loved her or not. He had been on the verge of asking Doc Bavender's advice—but then there had been the fall. That impossible, he had approached Jack Cook, who liked to think of himself as a rival. The surly administrator had barked him back to his class. This had been going on since highschool. *Their* highschool. Jo Peters had been the freshman water boy, Jack Cook some kind of star. Jo Peters thought that one day soon, surely, he would march into Superintendent Rainborough's office, there to declare himself washed up with washing out unmentionables, symbolically speaking. Doc Bavender generally advised that this step would be overstepping it. Well, it was certainly true that Jack Cook wasn't as bossy as he used to be as Captain or whatever. As Dorothea Rainborough said, the man she had made principal, a brute when young, had turned out well. Not a thoroughbred but—the drama coach had chosen her words—a *diamond in the rough*. In defending Jack Cook, the drama coach had gone on to encourage her husband to stand up for the typing teacher from time to time. Jo Peters was not sure if this defense had ever been mounted (the only communication between superintendent and principal seemed to be the former asking the latter when the holidays began), but there came an odd power behind the thought.

"Dorothea runs this school. Almost," Jo Peters told Marie Blum during their coffee break. "Cross her and you're *out*. Unless you're a friend of you know who."

Marie Blum only smiled. It meant her mind was far far away. Usually when Jo Peters mentioned the fat fullback (in fairness, in those days he had not been so much fat as simply very big), Marie Blum looked cross or grew misty or that one time she had burst into tears and run from the cafeteria. That girl was in love, Jo Peters knew, and not with him—perhaps Mother had pointed that out—but still love in a beloved, even for a fullback, can be a lovely thing. Jo Peters often wondered what a fullback was, exactly, when he was blue. Or said things right off the top of his head.

"Imagine the fracas if she ever found out about us. Fired, both, probably."

Marie Blum's voice could, from time to time, have an edge to it. "Found out what?" Now came that gloomy look again, the one that usually came

after being sharp with Jo Peters. He and Mother had discussed that. Whether sadness made Marie Blum ever more beautiful or, as Mother maintained, gave her the air of a hound dog. Granddaddy Peters had kept a herd of these mutts and they had often chased little Jo Peters up on the porch where he would have cheerfully passed the winter had they not had to go home that evening. But that, Jo Peters reminded himself, was not the point. And *that* was that Jo Peter's hands had wormed their way out from under his arms and were fluttering around—he could have been catching flies. As the cafeteria ladies had taken to watching with sound suspicion—*no flies*—Jo Peters sat on them, his hands.

Marie Blum had taken her long face over her coffee cup. "I don't imagine things would be any better if *he* were. Not for me."

Referring back to some obscure point made days before, ending sentences with enigma—these quirks in the senior English teacher drove Jo Peters ever deeper into that jungle where no one ever understood a word he was saying.

"I happen to know she's not guilty of some highschool hi-jinks herself."  
"What?"

Turnabout fair play was how Jo Peters looked at it.

"I happen to know on fact or hearsay of fact, that," and here Jo Peters dropped the bomb, "that Dorothea had a fullback in her past too. Not the same one. Probably second string!" Jo Peters chortled wildly.

Marie Blum's head had taken to swinging about as if that fly you couldn't see was trying to land on the point of her nose. "Jo, what in the world are you talking about? And do sit down," her hand on his arm rather yanking than anything else, "the cafeteria ladies are going to think you've swallowed something backwards. And do something with your hands. Or *don't* do something."

Jo Peters sat and sat on his hands, though he sometimes thought they were his only fun in life.

"And don't do *that*," which referred probably to the sitten hands, which, when they fluttered out were taken in Marie Blum's own and held gently, the cafeteria ladies watching with pink disapprobation. Still Marie Blum held on, tighter and tighter, as if she were pulling someone to safety. She turned her face and spoke as if there were a small bird perched on her shoulder, one that not only spoke but understood languages. "Oh I'm sorry, Jo. Please forgive me. I crack my knuckles like crazy when *he's* not around. Others can be the fool too."

The valedictory *too* could have referred to anyone, Jo Peters knew that and knew further that great artists are considered a bit on the idiosyncratic

side until they are famous or dead enough that people don't pay much attention to hands. Jo Peters raced on past that *too* and those hands, directly to *genius*. He had started a new painting or was thinking about it. A double portrait. Night and Day. Nina and Jay, his star girls, would sit for it. One's eyes would be happy, one's eyes sad. Which would be which? He hadn't decided. A genius would probably make the one eye of one girl sad, the other eye happy. Or perhaps but one face, one eye sad, one eye happy. That solved, on raced his plans. To the new subject he would be teaching. Painting. At first, before he got actual permission from fatso, he would probably have to mix in brush with carbon paper, canvas with those little wheeled erasers the typists weren't supposed to use anyway. They, the powers-that-be, had already had a foretaste and a forewarning anyway. The hanging, the Grand Opening, of his first oil, this celebrated in the typing room two days before. Here Jo Peters burned. At the usual reception genius receives, before it becomes household word. The others, their derision could be endured, but Dorothea Rainborough, perhaps she was not quite so cultured as she thought everyone else thought. Her first comment—this after he had explained all in the mimeographed invitations he had passed around—ran something like: *What is it?* The shorthand class (it was their hour so they more or less had to be invited) had come unglued. Now, in recollection, could Jo Peters grow amused. Dorothea the Art Critic. *No tree is entirely red, Jo. Only the leaves and these only at certain times of the year, autumn, everyone knows that.* Now, in recollection, Jo Peters was chuckling away, in a sinister fashion. What *bon mot* came next? *Chartreuse—unlikely color for a river no matter the time of year! Class yawling. Put a little more gray in that rock and its chin is too long!* Class suffocating, Dorothea fanning the fires of philistinism over the palette of centuries: *And the sky generally is blue, while clouds generally are white*—and those things, are they birds or bugs? *Ha ha ha!* etc etc etc and Jo Peters fuming now, recollection could take a leap, blurted out what Mother had been saying all along, every morning she crawled out of bed and looked out the window:

“I've got to get out of this dump!”

Marie Blum looked about bemused. “What time is it?” Then she understood or understood something. She turned her face. “Oh that. Jack Cook is behind all this. Sometimes I think he wants us all to quit. Me, him, Doc Bavender, now you. I don't know who he thinks is going to be around to do the teaching.”

Well, actually it was Mother, not *him*, who had come up with the idea of Jo Peters and Mother moving off to the mountains over the state line. There was an artist colony somewhere over there, amidst the clouds, and, Mother said, a quite good race track over in the next valley.

In the meantime, Marie Blum did not seem to have been listening. “It’s the accident. He hasn’t been right. He can’t quit. If *he* quits, what hope is there for the rest of us? He’s the only one with any sense left. I’ve got to talk to him.” Marie Blum grew quite beautiful when she talked on and on. She took up their tandem fists, all four of them, and brought them down against the table. “What’s wrong with us? What’s going to happen to us?”

The condition of the world and everything in it was not exactly the condition Jo Peters had in mind to talk over.

Marie Blum, *she said*, didn’t want to talk about anything.

What Jo Peters wanted to talk about was this: “Frankly, Marie, I’m worried about Mother, living there in the mountains. Here, when she falls about, this place really is so flat, she usually doesn’t go off so far. But up there, near the summits, who knows where she might roll? Now if there were two of us, one could run and get around on her downhill side, while the other could wrap her up with rope—*ha ha ha!*”

But no. Marie Blum had burst into tears. She had yanked her hands from Jo Peter’s. She had stood. In standing and weeping and shaking her fists, she spoke angrily:

“I’m going to have it out with him right now! No more of this wait for summer stuff and we’ll see then! *Now!* Or perhaps during my free period,” said Marie Blum and rushed from the cafeteria.

And he, the heartbreaker, Jo Peters, heartbroken, sitting on his hands, sat and sat under the perturbed gaze of the interested cafeteria ladies.

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Marie Blum read *Hamlet* every winter. Yes, she taught the play to her senior English class, but no, that was not why. It came from her father and, her father had said, from his mother, this reading the play every winter. She still had her father’s copy of the play, it had been his mother’s copy, a book so old she dared not open it but on those occasions when she could no longer stand missing them so, her father and his mother, and she must look at their names written inside the cover, and her own under theirs. This to imagine them there, the three of them, in a sod dugout on the plain, a kerosene lamp their light, her father’s mother reading to him as a boy, her father reading to her as a girl, in that yellowing dark, the wind howling outside, rattling at the door. Now Marie Blum read another copy of *Hamlet* every winter, the words of which, now that her father and his mother were gone, she loved more than any others in the world.

But not today. Today Marie Blum did not give a hang about *Hamlet* or all of Shakespeare or all the poetry—such lilting heartbreaking poetry—

ever written. But now wait. Let's stop and think—that's what Marie Blum thought and stopped. No. Not today. She would not be the one rushing to him again, time and again. No. This was her small period of peace. Nothing to do but a cup of coffee with a friend, the rest of the hour passed in her homeroom staring at the blackboard, looking, well, looking to anyone who might pass her door or pop in to say hello that she could not care in the least that it would not be he doing either. That he never had and never would.

Well now that *Hamlet* and he were out of the way, what next was there? Jay Turner. What would Marie Blum have to think about Jay Turner? That she had completely forgotten the girl existed. That the forgotten lovely talented brilliant girl would be sitting there in Marie Blum's homeroom, patiently waiting, as she had patiently waited every day this fall this hour, that she and the senior English teacher might have one of their wildly improbable discussions about, well, life and literature would be a beginning. What else? That Jay Turner and Miss Blum could get away with the former skipping out of study hall, the latter missing all that blackboard-watching time, as the one was student senate president, the other its faculty adviser. All this was official, see, if he, who in practice ran this school, happened to stroll by to say *hello* and wonder what was going on, one teacher lecturing, ever so gently, one student, ever so young, so youthful, on matters of life and literature.

It began immediately. "What would you, Marie—"

"Miss Blum, please, at school, Miss Blum. Only at school, but definitely at school. Please."

"—if you had been alive in 1600—"

"—1602—"

"—if you had been living in London in 1602 and had by chance walked past the Globe one sullen yellow afternoon, your feet swollen, your children black with plague and pox, your own face ravaged and pitted from such, your mind raw, angry, unformed but for its hatred—would you have thought *Hamlet* then was as great as you think it now?"

Marie Blum recalled fondly their earlier discussions, those at the term's beginning, when Jay Turner had been a mere political activist. Outlawing the school prayer in deference to the sole student atheist, the girl herself; forcing a student onto the school board, probably said sole atheist; and either removing the football schedule from the schools pencils or passing out the pencils free—yes, fond memories. Now, today, the girl was a poet, or would be.

Probably because the girl had discovered she could raise as much hell writing and be remembered longer. No. That was unfair. The girl really could write, oh, promising poetry. And as for poetry's power, its deathless-

ness, Marie Blum, her own poetry promising still, she knew that attraction well. And today, the girl's poetic attractions, the youth Chatterton and Miss Millay, were not alien to Marie Blum. The one's precocity, the other's strength as a woman. The young man's fearlessness in the face of death; the woman's contempt of it. But then there was the waiting for fame, wasn't there? Waiting and waiting and death coming first. Marie Blum could not imagine such greatness—Catullus, Shakespeare, Melville—such pain as to be dying and have *Moby Dick* and failure locked in a single mind. Such the fearful dread locked in poetry's deathlessness.

Marie Blum raised from her own small waiting. "After those brief four hours I would have walked out of the theatre and walked along the Thames, my brats and me, thinking I had seen a drama, heard poetry said, been in the presence of characters who would live for centuries, who would live so long as the English tongue is written, spoke or read."

Jay Turner had this most maddeningly attractive trait. She could smile and one could not for one's life see it had actually been done. "Do you know I think you would have."

And of course Marie Blum set into one of her vast, incoherent, rambling apologies, the very same she set into with him, when all she had done had been but a bit sharp. No: when all she had done was let them know she would not, not always, take everything off anyone. But Jay Turner stopped this immediately. Marie Blum's heart grew heavy; it sank. Sometimes this girl seemed like an older sister. Then sometimes, sometimes in the very next moment, she seemed like her own dear daughter, wherever she was.

"Do you know, I am growing weary of being a virgin."

"Well that would be the last thing I would know about, wouldn't it?" or "Well do something about it then." But no, a finer apology was what was said:

"I wouldn't grow too weary. Not so soon. I really wouldn't."

Jay Turner nodded, slightly. "Have you ever been in love with an older man?"

"They've all seemed older. Or I've seemed younger. A *real* older man? I can't remember."

Jay Turner waited. "Do you think fucking, actually doing it, would make one think of it more or less?"

"*Making love* will do very well, Jay, thank you very much. Now. Let's see. Probably more. But not necessarily. It really is a very strange world. I certainly don't know anything about it after all these, well, years. I'm only thirty-two," she said, helplessly, meaning, helplessly, that she preferred doing it or thinking about it, anything but talking about it.

Jay Turner waited. One two three. "I've written a new poem."

"Good! Or—what is it about, generally?"

Jay Turner smiled. "I'd like to read it to you sometime."

"I guess it's a chance I'll have to take. Just don't shout it."

Jay Turner kept on smiling without really doing it at all. "Have you ever thought of killing yourself?"

Marie Blum went back in her chair. "Jay, really, please. Not today. I mean—let's not talk about *it, that*, today."

Jo Peters' head popped in the door. One moment ago Marie Blum had been desperate for a head, any head, to pop through this door, any door, but now, not this head, not through this door, not now, not ever. What memory was there clinging to her, and it only minutes old, how could it have been kicked down so far, so cruelly? Sitting in the cafeteria, pink-white cafeteria ladies gazing on, holding hands, both of them, all four of them, yanking them away, dashing out, tears for someone who deserved nothing, this man, this boy, this youth who should have been a boy, who should have been a man, who deserved some tears from someone and would never, ever, so long as he lived, ever see them, rising as she left, to see that his nervous hands were being seen, now sitting down, sitting on his hands, no dignity, nothing left but to watch the sunshine spill over the table, to have nothing to be in life but to sit there being nothing, to watch the sunshine smear so very slowly over the table—yes, dear daughter, she had once been in love with an older man. Yes, dear sister, she had once thought of killing herself.

Jo Peters's head popped in the door. "Miss Blum, may I speak to you for a moment?"

"No. Go away. All of you."

Marie Blum leaned down behind her desk. She could have been tying her shoes had her shoes had laces. She could have dropped a football pencil had she not been boycotting them. But then, when she raised herself, they were gone. All of them. No one there now but her friend the blackboard. Her mind went over and erased and erased till she found herself calm and clean, smoothed with a very fine white powder. This till it was time to chalk up a score.

Yes. Her campaign. The first skirmish in the battle in the final war for independence. The time to begin was now. All right. So she would go see him, as she had promised herself one moment ago she never ever would not again, and this might look to anyone who cared as yet another abject surrender, yet there was in it that which the casual observer could never note, the seeds of victory. Yes. That was it. She would take the long way

down to Jack Cook's office. Avoid Jo Peters's typing room, take her really nice legs past Mr. Mack's room.

On any other day she would have considered simply leaping out the window, anything to avoid them both, these suitors, but not today. Today triumph hung in the air. A new, frightfully boring life awaited. Mrs. Coach Mack. Marie Blum shuddered. She went to the window and opened it. Not to jump out of it, not necessarily. Rather, to let its cool breeze dry her face. Yet there, beyond, lay the football field. In addition to teaching or at least handing out books that had *something* to do with ancient history, Mr. Mack coached something that broke bones. Still, the wind marked its path over the field grass as it made its way to her. Yes, that was it. Life would be simple as grass and the wind crossing it. And she would be calm, dignified and bored to tears. And if she went now, during the class break, before the bell, there Mr. Mack would be standing before his homeroom ogling her very nice legs. Mr. Mack would be handsome. He would be square, head, shoulders, face etc. His neat hair would be the color of sand. His neat face, the skin of it would be the color of sand. His neat sports jacket would be the color of sand. All in all, Mr. Mack would look like a neat block of sand, one which would call out, as it ogled her nice legs, that one of his bone-breaking teams shall—or perhaps should or will or would—be beating another such collection this Friday night. And Marie Blum would jump out the window.

No, not really. Not necessarily. Only joking. This time. What she would do was wait till the class bell—with Jo Peters lashing the backs of his thirty suffering typists, with Mr. Mack in his room diagramming football plays on the blackboard—then lead her cowardly lovelorn column of good intentions in safety and solitude down to the principal's office. There to find Angela Fulks near tears too. That would be something, a sort of solace. Though grammatically incorrect, they two could surely be called, with all reason behind it, the two unhappiest women in town. And there, too, would be Moselle Minor, perched on the edge of Angela's desk, her chunky leg swinging to the time of champed gum.

Marie Blum often forgot that Moselle Minor was no longer a sophomore. "Don't you ever work?"

What Moselle Minor never forgot was position. "Of the executive kind. *Champ champ champ.*"

Then Marie Blum would start. She had thought Angela had mounted the head of some unfortunately deformed beast on her office wall. It was rather Dwight Cage, freckled math teacher, standing behind a filing cabinet, chin resting on arm resting on the cabinet top.

"Hello there, Miss Blum. What's new?"

"Oh be quiet." Angela turned an evil look to Marie Blum. "What do you want?"

"Huh huh huh," said Dwight Cage. "That's not new."

"Dwi-yut," advised Angela. To Marie Blum: "Well?"

Marie Blum raised herself yet again. "I'm not feeling well. I'd like to see Mr. Cook about arranging a substitute for the rest of the day. If you don't mind."

The latter parts of which were spoken over:

"Huh huh. No substitute for me." and

"Period, honey? *Champ champ*," and

"My toughest's the fourth. Algebra one. Huh huh."

Angela Fulks turned to the wall, as if there might indeed be heads mounted there soon, two of them.

"If you are truly ill, Miss Blum, I suggest you see Nurse Snell." Angela shook herself and steadied. "Then, on the other hand, perhaps not." She consulted the substitute list. "Oh well. Why not. *One* of you out of here would bring *that* peace of mind."

While Angela dialed Mrs. Bledsoe or Mr. Snyder, two certified maniacs, every morning the students wished their regular teachers long life and good health, the following discussion occurred:

"We've been talking about love, Miss Blum." As Dwight Cage spoke his jaw remained stationary on his arm on the cabinet top. It was the remainder of his head that went up and down.

"Dwight here's been saying he loves everybody. *Champ champ champ*." Moselle Minor bit on gum as if it were a minor Olympic event. The thirty mile walk, say.

"All women only."

"I'll say."

"But there is only one I'm in love with in the marriage sense."

(Angela dialed furiously.)

"With whom I'm in love, in the marriage sense, Dwight."

"It all comes down to the same thing."

"That's so nice, Miss Blum. I wish you still wrote poetry, Miss Blum. That would make a nice poem. With whom I'm in love, in the marriage sense."

"I bet she still writes it. On the side. *Ha*."

"*They* were sonnets, Miss Minor. Dry, dull, Miltonian sonnets. And I no longer write *them*."

"Just as bad."

"With whom I'm in love—"

*“Dwight!”*

It seemed Angela had done with her calls.

“I agree, whole hog.”

She certainly did not seem to be about to make any more.

“Moselle, would you just shut up.”

Yes, it was definite now. Her phoning was finished.

“And *you*, why don’t you just go on in. It can’t get any worse in there.”

During the time it took Marie Blum to cross the room, open the principal’s door, cross the threshold and close the door behind her, the following was spoken:

“I love something in all women. All I do is find it, love it to pieces and watch it flower.”

“Guess what, ninety-nine times out a hundred.”

“Surely I’m going mad—”

The inner room was filled with smoke. The cloud seemed to be rising from the vicinity of Jack Cook. A man who was probably Doc Bavender lay slouched back on the couch, hat over face, snoring gently. And there Marie Blum stood, still a stick-leg little girl called to the principal’s office, she had climbed a tree or missed the bus. Jack Cook stirred himself.

“Have a seat, Miss Blum.”

The hell with that. There she was, the only girl sitting top branch, and there would always be another bus and if there wasn’t, the hell with that too.

“Go to hell, Jack,” said Marie Blum and went to the desk, pushed something somewhere else, sat on that part, a nice knee showing.

Jack Cook looked the knee over and looked over it to the man on the couch, as if to say they all had one, each his own, no need to go anywhere.

“I don’t think he’s slept much this week.”

“I can imagine not. Has he talked to you?”

“Some. Enough for now.”

“Is he going to quit?”

“I don’t know. If I can get him to last out the year, maybe not. He’s back now. That’s the first step.”

“My. And this from the one so big on everyone sailing off to South America in banana boats.”

“Not him. I need him.”

Marie Blum looked over to the small, gentle, hat-faced man snoring softly on the couch. “So do we all, I think.” She looked back to Jack Cook. “Well, I’m not going to quit. Are you?”

“Only if you do.”

“As you know from previous conversations, that will happen in only one circumstance.”

Jack Cook said nothing. He blew smoke toward Marie Blum.

Marie Blum waved it off. “I did have a proposal this morning. To run away to the mountains and live there in a colony of artists.”

Jack Cook blew smoke at Marie Blum. “And what was your response?”

Marie Blum waved the smoke away. “I’ve decided to wait till summer. See how things go.”

Jack Cook smiled at Marie Blum. “Agreeable bitch.”

Marie Blum smiled at Jack Cook. “Tubbikins.”

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Klaxons sounded, sirens wailed. Emergency, emergency! Mrs. Rainborough had called a drama practice, and one at night. The drama coach did so every year about this time, when she finally grew fed up with daylight. When she grew fed up with being a small-town amateur drama coach, with her players being highschool students, with the auditorium being little more than a gym with a slanted floor and nailed-down chairs. For this one night of the season Mrs. Rainborough could pretend, almost, this to be Broadway, these Equity actors, and she a world-famous director. And besides there was a nuts-and-bolts reason for this year’s extraordinary session. To choose a play and choose one quick. For some reason, this year, her mind was blank and her breast filled with panic. She could think of nothing, nothing to fit her talent, the two girls. If only Chekhov had not tossed in that third sister. If only Lady Macbeth had had a close girlfriend instead of that rather ponderous husband.

The drama students embraced their coach’s excitement, the spirit of the night, that which mixed fantasy and practical purpose. Take the Hooper twins, Boyd and Cloyd. They kissed their aged parents goodnight, grabbed a couple packs of cigarets and a pint from their cache, piled into their old Caddy convertible and raced off into a night of dreams. Starting out they were rushing toward a Havana casino, Jap houseboy left behind to feed the piranhas, their palatial stilted bungalow overlooking a luminous crescent of beach, arthritic cypress, ermine-capped breakers—that and all the rest they had lifted from the travel magazine they had lifted from the drugstore. But as they neared town reality gripped them. The school dark, empty, defenseless (if Principal Cook wasn’t there entertaining his friends Jo Peters and Miss Blum), they thought they might begin by writing some unprintables on the typing teacher’s blackboard, see if the senior English teacher had left the upcoming exam in her desk, maybe break their way into the principal’s

office and erase demerits from their department cards, add some to others. If these chores took some time to accomplish, this created cruel hope in the drama coach's heart. For those five tardy minutes Mrs. Rainborough imagined that these paired hams might not have got the emergency announcement at all.

Oh well, Mrs. Rainborough considered as the boys rushed down the aisle to front and center, to look about for butlers and other background parts.

Mrs. Rainborough stood alone onstage, her dozen or so thespians, now that the boys were here, all present and seated in the front two rows below her. The girls, Nina and Jay, had not been among the earlybirds—Jay in fact almost as late as the twins—and Mrs. Rainborough had shuffled others off the front center seats so that the two sat just under her. There had to be someone to play to.

Mrs. Rainborough stalked the footlights. She wheeled and spoke without warning:

“Tragedy has visited our town, our school, our company of players.” Her face grew long and gaunt. “Tragedy is ever amongst us.” The drama coach threw back her head and thus walked back and forth. “Tragedy man cannot escape. I had intended to stage a comedy this year. Something to cheer everyone up—” She wheeled and came to tower over them, her students. “—but then this death, the early taking of Boy Bavender, in all its *suspicious circumstances*, has driven out laughter, has wiped the smiles off all our faces!”

“Here we go again.”

Mrs. Rainborough paused to consider. Not a lip had moved, not an eye blinked, nor a jaw worked, but she could have sworn this came from front and center. From her two lovely talented starlets. But no, Mrs. Rainborough went on to conclude—gazing deep into their black and blue eyes, into those faces made formless by beauty, angels of light and dark, one night, one day—there had to be a voice thrower somewhere in the crowd, probably one of the Hoopers or that grimy little Ag boy, how he had gotten onto the drama team only Heaven knew. Still, admonishment was called for.

Say, the one about life on Broadway, what would have happened to a wisecracker there. Fired. Equity card torn to bits before one's very eyes. The long bus ride home, such as that recently made by Girl Steen, unless of course one chose to stay on in New York and sell shoes for the rest of one's life.

The voice came again, again from nowhere. “Let's get on with it.”

Followed by another: “That shore is a purty dress you almost got on, Miz Rainbow.”

The Ag boy obviously, or someone doing a rustic accent. Still, not bad, if there was a place for a farmer or village idiot somewhere. Mrs. Rainborough hitched up her skirt anyway and glowered over them.

“It’s the tidiness of the mind that counts. No thoughts with dirty socks!”

She trotted laughter back and forth, a poodle among mutts. There came some response from the nether wings, from those sophomores doomed to make-up, prompting and scene-shifting, no sycophancy would save them. When their amusement had been well ground down, Mrs. Rainborough lifted a hand.

“Whichever one of you is speaking without *mouthing your words at all*—I forgive you! Almost. I do understand how these things go, in any case. Sometimes my very own mind thinks things without my permission, and foolish words are sure to follow. One might even go so far as to say that sometimes the mind has a mind of its own. That this mind’s mind has a life of its own. One whose thoughts are a mystery to us.” The drama coach hunched her back and, looming, peered into the gloom. “There are some in New York, these method actors that Girl Steen got caught up with, who let this second, unknown mind take over and do their acting for them. *Here we don’t.*”

Now Jay Turner’s voice rang from the gloom, lips and jaw making all the proper movements, a voice cool and for all practical purposes twangless. One had to admire the sound of it, till what it was saying sunk in.

“I haven’t understood a word you’ve said. Are you saying our mind and our will are two different things? Surely the one is simply a task performed by the other.”

Talk about not understanding a word. Mrs. Rainborough’s smile drew flesh back to her eyes. “Just take my word for it, girl.”

Now that would have shut up Maw Harbish, the school board’s talking woman, but not Miss Carrie Steen Jr.

“I’m afraid I can’t. I think all this talk of the subconscious merely excuses thought from responsibility. If we are human beings, then we must be rational animals. Save for madness, our minds are under complete control at all times. We must be held to account for what we think as surely as we are held to account for what we do.”

The girl went on for some time—Plato, the examined life and so on—till Mrs. Rainborough thought she might have got the date wrong and stumbled onto the Philosophy Club. Still, even Socratic upstarts had to take breath sometime and when that time came, the drama coach pushed the poet into the breach—*there is more in this world than is dreamt of in your philosophy, girl*—and had someone, not the Ag boy, someone with moderately unsoiled hands, pass out the play booklets.



It was an awful play really, simply awful. Mrs. Rainborough found herself dismayed now that she hadn't seen so last night when, it had to be admitted, she had actually rather flipped through it. The people in the small drama were barbarians or worse, their situation hopeless and, as the wisecracking ventriloquist had observed, really everyone in it was alive. Ah well, it would be an exercise. The drama coach had dragged them all from their cozy homes tonight, there must be some cold reason for it.

Ten minutes of perusal, then to assign roles. Father, Daughter, she returning home after ten long years, a social worker, a policeman and various charwomen and gossips, the locals. Father: one of the Hoopers, which one, what difference did it make? Ditto for the policeman. But then at Daughter, Mrs. Rainborough came to a dead stop. What she only now, tonight, understood was that in those ten long years the daughter had become a streetwalker. Mrs. Rainborough thought that might be changed to out-of-work actress who sold shoes for a living, but wondered if it might not quite be sufficient cause for Father to chase the girl around the house with a meat cleaver. This axe was another Mrs. Rainborough had missed in last night's quick study. Perhaps a paddle or some sort of long board—but later.

Now there was a decision to be made. Nina, by nature's cruel trick, had indeed the look of a good girl gone bad, while Jay, who if she kept up the backtalk was headed straight for real life everyday trouble, could easily be mistaken for a government worker with a heart of gold. That settled it then. Meaty role for the girl who knew when to keep it shut, scraps for the know-it-all philosopher. The local busybodies—anybody.

Now that these six or seven were onstage, and some chairs and a table were being set about, Mrs. Rainborough recalled what had attracted her to the drama. The accents. Nothing like them to hide the twangers and bring the cream to the top. The problem was the author had not been specific in setting the play, some slum in some large city. Same for the characters. Obviously lower-class immigrants but no mention whence they had immigrated. Let's see. The social worker would have some hoity-toity accent, let the policeman be Irish, they usual were, the father German or from somewhere over there where fathers growled and kept cleavers, the loose daughter, she could be a Swede or the like, they were easy, while the neighbors, a Chinese accent would be identifiable if nothing else—oh let there be a babel of tongues, a multitude of races, what difference would it possibly make? If this dreary tale were ever to be produced hereabouts, it would all have to be changed anyway. To a small-town setting, a town not unlike their

own, the slum would simply be the wrong side of the tracks, Father an old farmer, Daughter the out-of-work waitress, the social worker a sympathetic former drama teacher, the policeman a sheriff, and the axe would have to become a hoe, some local color, though Mrs. Rainborough was not certain that the most dedicated farmer kept these implements quite so at hand, right there inside the house.

So far as the plot went, that was simple enough. Father waking up to reality. Yes. Mrs. Rainborough now saw with dread, it really was the father's play, this poor brute's gradual realization that this girl, despite her strict upbringing, had turned out white trash; his entirely justified rage, if one dropped the axe; then his overcoming these fits of temper, the denouement, to see that he must still love his daughter because, despite her fall, it was he, the axe-wielder, who had probably driven her away from home in the first place. Well, even if all this was not made perfectly clear in the text, the spineless daughter, the nosy social worker, a policeman who understood family matters, the Greek chorus of neighbors who didn't understand anything, these and all the rest were nothing without Father's stupidity, his rage, his enlightenment, his forgiveness. The stupidity, Mrs. Rainborough sighed, looking over at the Hoopers, as they strolled about muttering their lines, no problem there. As for the rest—an experiment, an experience, Mrs. Rainborough told herself, and got the thing underway.

Boyd or Cloyd bellowed, Nina forgot the good girl and remembered the bad, Cloyd or Boyd was such a nice cop it put you to sleep, the cacophonous neighbor ladies woke you up—it really was Jay and Jay alone who did something with her role. The girl's social worker, she brought to the play subtleties the drama coach had not perceived. As the father and the social worker began their painful, groping dialogue, Mrs. Rainborough stood back from the action and in doing so, her mind drifted away. To what—her own father, she supposed. A country man, no cleaver-flailer he. Rather a good and simple man who had longed to preach or teach and had instead worked the earth. Yes, that was where her mind was taking her. To the day the sympathetic teacher had come to their farm and her father had packed her bag, so sad there was nothing new for her to wear this year, so sad his daughter was leaving home, to leave the fields and go into town, there to live with the sympathetic teacher, so that she, the girl Dorothea, might study there and become the teacher her father had never been. But there was something there now that jolted the teacher she had struggled those lonely years to become. A monkey-face girl in her first class her first day at the big school, *this very school*, in town. Olive Glassmoyer then howling at

her dress *feedsack feedsack!* and the way she spoke *alkybol alkybol!* and now, so many years later, Dorothea Rainborough's fear, her humiliation, her anger lifted her swift and clean from these sappy memories. And now that anger turned to what was being played on the stage.

What was being played on the stage was not the play at all. It was Olive Glassmoyer all over again. Her nasty, shrieking, ridiculing spirit anyway. They, these well-bred, so-called, children of the fortunate were still, after all those long years, making fun of the country girl. Boyd was playing Father a fool. He rolled his eyes, he beat his chest, he bellowed out the simplest lines—HAVE A CHAIR MISS! and so on. And the others as well, Nina bopping around like some sluttish cheerleader, Cloyd acting the nice policeman as if he were a hairdresser, while Jay had turned the sympathetic social worker into some kind of sorority girl whose Daddy owned a big bank.

Someone would pay for this. They all would. Mrs. Rainborough stepped in and stopped the action. What humiliation, something near at hand, could she wreak on these cynics? The book-on-the-head humiliation was what. Mrs. Rainborough reached in and grabbed some arms and yanked them all in line.

"Terrible. Terrible. How many times have I told you—your heads are bobbing like apples when you speak. They always have. All of you. We'll cure that right now and forever. Stage boy! Bring some books, please." These were brought and Mrs. Rainborough gave out the thick tomes, one to each player. "Now each of you—place the book on your head." This was done by all but Jay Turner, the ringleader it now became apparent, standing at the end of the line. "Girl Turner!" The book went petulantly on the head. Mrs. Rainborough smiled. "Now recite after me: the Highwayman comes ariding, riding, riding . . ." This cried out in a galloping rhythm and, as her naughty students came trotting along behind, the drama coach turned from them and went forward, to the footlights, and smiled down savagely on the few thespians left to cower in the seats below.

There came a loud report from behind the drama coach, who turned. Jay Turner's book had fallen off her head.

"Girl Turner! Replace the book and recite alone!"

Jay Turner knelt as nicely as one might curtsy to the Queen, took up the book daintily, pinkies raised, lifted the book squarely above her head—it might have been the mortarboard the girl would wear by year's end if she kept her nose clean—but then, instead of balancing the book gently on her crown, rather the girl grabbed it in one hand as a pitcher might throttle the ball, lifted a leg and sent the book sailing far out into the auditorium's gloom.

Twenty rows out, Mrs. Rainborough noted when later, after Jay had gone on to storm out of the theatre and Mrs. Rainborough had gone on to dismiss the others, she had gone out, counting rows, to retrieve it.

Mrs. Rainborough took up the book and sat down, there in the twentieth row, the very row or very near to it where Mrs. Rainborough as director sat during dress rehearsal. Her last dress rehearsal, Mrs. Rainborough considered. The way things were going this year, there wouldn't be any others. The lights in the great hall had been shut down, all but for a bulb somewhere backstage, the stage made dimly lit by it. This lighting, it was much like that of one of her plays—yes, the play the year after the car-crash year, when no one in town had thought there would be a play that year, so many players graduated or buried. But of course she had come back. They all had, all but those who were off working or were dead. But no. She was wrong there. One had come back, she who had skipped both death and graduation. Carrie Steen. Yes. The nervous collapse after the tragedy, some had thought Steen might not feel, well, up to acting that last, lonely year, but Steen, a trouper, had soldiered on. And Mrs. Rainborough, her genius, had found the exact play to fit such narrow circumstances (so few players) and her leading lady's talent (her sorrow). A war play. Well immediate postwar. Ruins. Bombed buildings. Scorched earth. A two-hander really (for the soldiers there at the end, she had drafted ubiquitous Ag boys), a boy and a girl meeting in this sad blue light, rubble all about—what had happened then? Fallen in love perhaps. They had talked a lot certainly. And then the jolt at the end. The sound of soldiers approaching from offstage, the boy and the girl embracing, fearfully perhaps, they would be shot and raped, or, perhaps, they would be discovered and saved! But then the soldiers had come clomping onstage and they had gone on to clomp right past the boy and the girl. The soldiers had looked them right through. Nor had they heard a word of their pleas to be discovered and saved.

Yes, Mrs. Rainborough smiled in recollection, that had shook up a playgoer or two that night. Not deaf soldiers (as someone of little heart had cracked) but rather a boy and a girl who were not there! Yes! All along they had been dead! Ghosts! Nothing had could have been better, not coming hard on the car-crash year. Mrs. Rainborough touched a finger to her eye. And Steen, she had outdone herself that year. The judges at the state contest said they had never seen death made so alive, the unreal so real. They had gone on to award Steen best actress and then, in this cruel world, had gone on to award Hazeltine best play, *again*.

Mrs. Rainborough raised herself. No, not again. Not this year. Whatever had to be done, it would be done. Jay Turner would come back. The

drama coach would accept her apology. She might even drop a tear and apologize, or look like apologizing, herself. Whatever it took, for the drama coach's revenge would be using this bolshie young miss as her own instrument of revenge. Hazy might be best buddies with all the hub city judges, but no one, not even Carrie Steen, could act on the same stage with this girl. This girl was special and she would win hands down—what? Best actress? No! Well yes, Turner would win best actress, but after and only after Dorothea Rainborough had won best play!

Mrs. Rainborough stood. She collected herself. The poet knew her problem and knew it well. He had in fact said a mouthful when he had written the lines that now Dorothea Rainborough cried out to the darkened auditorium:

“The play's the thing! Now to find a play!”



Bavender walked at night. Every night since the boy fell. He walked away from where he lived, the west of the town, toward its center, the courthouse square, where the town began to change. Where the east of the town began, where the town was mixed. The bank dominated the southwest corner of the square, and that was good, but then three doors along could be found the pawn shop, not good, to be followed by the second-best barber, but then hard on these came the cleaners and the appliance store, and respectable people went there. Across from the bank sat Bull's small market, fine people traded there and paid for it, but close by that was Jester's grocery and Coach gave credit to those who needed it or admitted needing it. Behind the bank was the best barber, this across from Loren's Cafe, both fine but for the old veterans, they sometimes got out of hand. Down the street a ways: the Ford dealership, then came the movie house, itself mixed from time to time, though a balcony served to segregate the wheat from the chaff once they had passed the box office. On the third point of the southwest corner stood the drugstore, this across from Bull's, and they allowed no riffraff, and then came the optometrist, the newspaper office, a tractor dealership, all respectable, but beyond these was Dr. Aubrey's office and clinic and the doctor treated anyone, no matter their circumstances. But then to end this street came the town's largest church, which sported a neon sign, and that ended this street in fine fashion. These were the streets that made the south and west sides of the square and those streets that ran south and west away from them, toward the better parts of town, away from the north and the east sides.

The courthouse itself reflected this division. Judges, lawyers, if one wanted to borrow a book from the library or pay one's taxes or take a driver's

test or if one was a juror, one entered the courthouse from the west. Only those in trouble came to the east portal, that was where the sheriff's office and the jail were. To the east and the north of the courthouse, this was where the seed set in. A respectable lumberyard (boards need space and cheaper space meant cheaper boards—everyone understood that), the oldest hardware store in town, built before the town shifted west, and the town museum scraping by—other than for these it was all pool hall and second-hand store and a questionable boarding house and a tawdry hair-do parlor (the beauty shoppe had moved out on the highway) and those who were not tawdry or questionable and bought new and knew naught of pool halls, they would not be seen there, except to buy boards, as but a block east of these lay the tracks and, unless one were a farmer frequenting the grain elevator or a cowboy making use of the stockyard, the better people in town, they would no sooner go there than to a foreign country.

And that was what this netherworld was. A strange and exotic and dangerous place. A distant land. It was there that Bavender's nightly walks took him. Toward the east side, the wrong side of the tracks. Toward Eastertown, as it was called by those like Doc Bavender who did not care for the common word for it.

Bavender did not know where he might walk tonight, where he might end. He would go to the jail, that was certain. It had been his first step, the first he could remember, his second or third night walking toward the east side of town. A man had been there at the jail's barred window, framed by the cell light, looking out, and he had called out Bavender's name. He had been a student, the man had called down, back when. Biology, the man had laughed, he had killed the cat the class would cut. Bavender had given him a C, just for killing the cat. He could kill, but he couldn't cut, the man laughed, the cutting had made him sick. The sheriff had then come out, quicker than the sheriff usually moved, and shone his flashlight on Bavender. The sheriff had told the man at the window, no talking, and had taken Bavender into his office and told him, no talking, as well. It looked like the man at the window had been involved in some robberies in the hub city to the west, heading over toward the state line, this the metropolis where everyone went to buy booze and big things you couldn't find around here and bring them back, and a couple cab drivers had been killed and it looked like, the sheriff had said, the man who couldn't cut up a cat had been the one who had done the killing. No talking. And so tonight Bavender passed under the jail window and the man at the window lifted a hand and Bavender did so as well and went on, as he had every night since the first, without speaking to the man.

From there Bavender went on down to the tracks, that was usual too, and walked them down toward the old passenger station. The building had long been closed, boarded shut. A passenger-carrying train had not run these lines for, forever it seemed, before the war anyway. Nowadays only grain and cattle and new automobiles and other freight were carried along here. Bavender found the open boxcar on the siding, it had been there since the first night, and climbed up into it and sat at one end and smoked a cigar. At first he had thought he might stay there in the boxcar, till a locomotive came along and took the car away—that would have solved his problem, what to do with what was left of his life—but now he knew the boxcar was as stranded in this town as was Bavender stranded in his life and there he sat, out of the cool night breeze, and smoked a cigar. After that Bavender walked on down the tracks, toward the elevator, and then beyond that to the gully that made the edge of Eastertown, the way he had come every night. And now, looking down into the dark mass of Eastertown, Bavender stopped and went no farther. Stopping here, not going on, this was as far as Bavender's walk ever went.

A good part of Eastertown was set in the gully, heavily treed, roads and paths twisting through it, and Bavender was looking down toward the lights there and the sound of music and laughter when the car came along the road that ran alongside the tracks, along their west side. This was usual as well, an event as solid as the man in the jail or the abandoned train station. After the first night, the girl coming along the road by chance—rather, coming along the road to pay visit to a bootlegger in Eastertown and coming upon Bavender by chance—the girl had come along the road at about this time, every night but one and that night had been dedicated to football or some function the girl could not avoid. But tonight the girl, driving wild as all the youths in the town, did not stop. She went on along the road a way, crossed the tracks and took her car into the wooded gully, toward the sound of men and women laughing and music. Bavender waited till the pall of dust had cleared from the road, then crossed over the ditch and walked along the road, away from Eastertown, toward the grain elevator. There he waited.

The elevator was new to the town, probably the newest thing in town, built after the war. The elevators Bavender had known as a boy had been but tin shacks that had gone up three stories or so, but this, the new elevator, was a magnificent structure, a great towering white wall that might make a ruin someday, standing still when the rest of the town had been blown away or abandoned.

Bavender found the side of the wall that would shelter him from the north breeze and that caught the moonlight full and he waited. The girl returned along the road in a matter of minutes, driving as if being pursued. She turned

the car as if to go back to the courthouse square, as if she had not seen him, but she braked the car hard and backed into the lee of the wall. The motor she left running, music playing on the radio, and came and leaned against the car's trunk. The car was white as the wall, so white in the moonlight, and new. Not only was the girl beautiful, intelligent, talented, she or her parents or an uncle, perhaps, they all were rich. She was drinking beer from a can.

"I didn't think I could make it tonight. But I found a way. I threw a book across the auditorium. If it would have stayed closed I think it would have made the balcony. But it opened, like a parachute, and was dragged down."

Bavender smiled. The girl took this as critical response. Everyone knew the story, that Carrie Steen had once thrown, not a book across the auditorium, but a spear rather in the direction of Dorothea Rainborough. The girl told this story now and they laughed. The girl stopped. She lit a cigarette, doing it well. She inhaled and raised the beer.

"You think I'm doing all this," she blew smoke, "to be like her, trying to be like her, don't you?"

"I don't know. I don't know what she was like then. I was gone off to school or maybe it was the war. I wasn't here."

"But then you've heard all the stories."

Bavender smiled. "Yes. Dorothea never tires of telling them."

The girl looked down the tracks, toward Eastertown. "You should come with me some night. To the bootlegger's. He has something like a bar set up in his house. You might like it. You would find it interesting. They all, Tony and his friends, they all fought in the war too, you know." The girl looked back. "Are you afraid to come?"

"No. I will come some night. Just not yet."

The girl sipped the beer. "And Carrie's house—not yet?" The girl threw the can into the grass alongside the elevator wall. She watched Bavender. "And me? Not yet?"

It was this part of the girl's act—perhaps he had once called it her Carrie Steen imitation—that Bavender knew was not play. She was not a girl, as he had told her the first night. She was not a student, as he had told her the second night. She was a woman. He had thought, before now, that he would never be with such a woman, that it would not be possible. But she was a girl, she was a student, she was not the woman he had thought he would never be with.

The girl stood away from the car. She looked behind her, toward town. "I've got to get back. Carrie's having a few people over. I've got beer for them." She turned to look toward another part of town, the north side. "The gins will be starting up soon." She turned back to Bavender. "Let's do

something when they do. Some night when the air is thick from their smoke, when the cotton collects like snow on the power lines and alongside the roads. When this place looks like a land from another world.”

Bavender had told the girl that. That the times he liked best in the town were in the fall, when the gins had begun to bellow and blast smoke, and in the spring, when the sand storms came. It was then, he had told the girl, that he felt he had come to some place not found on earth, a lunar landscape, an alien place, another world.

The girl walked around the car, to the driver’s door. “You sure you won’t come?”

Bavender stood. “No. Not tonight. But tell her—soon.” He went to the other side of the car and stood by the door there. “But you could drive me home, if you’ve got the time. I’m tired. I think I’m going to sleep tonight. And I’m hungry. If you know someplace open—I think I’m going to eat tonight as well.”

The girl looked toward him a moment, over the top of the car.

“Jump in,” she said and he did.

“And maybe a place that sells a cigar. I think I’m going to smoke a cigar tonight,” he said and she smiled.

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“Last week it was epic poet. Week before trial lawyer. Yesterday nuclear physicist. Now she’s going to run away with an older man. What next?” said the first idiot.

“Missionary among lepers. Movie star *again*,” said the second, identical idiot.

Nina said nothing. She smoked, doing it well, the best in school, sitting there at the counter, the Hooper twins behind it polishing tan plates, and while she smoked and half listened to these two idiots thought full: *If that blonde bitch thinks she’s going to play the lead this year, again, she’s out of her tiny little mind.*

They, the three of them, the two idiots and the girl, had come here, to the drugstore, after the drama practice had been, to put it kindly, cancelled without notice. Baxter, the junkie who owned the drugstore, had given over the keys to the idiots and, sporting a pocketful of pills, had gone off into the night. In charge, the idiots had poured whiskey in coffee cups and had fired up cigarets and then had fired up their usual intellectual bullshit and had generally pretended they were grownups, while Nina had sat and sipped whiskey from a cup and smoked well and had thought: *these two idiots will never grow up.*

Then shortly, not long after they had arrived, in had waltzed the blonde bitch, the book flinger of the night, and she had been out doing her own grownup act, overplaying to the point that she actually had an older man, some poor deluded teacher, in tow. As last year the blonde bitch had had the football captain in tow, as next year she would have another football captain (college) in tow and the year after that another poor deluded teacher (college) in tow. Their eyes had not met, Nina's and the blonde bitch's. While the poor deluded teacher had bought something at the counter, the blonde bitch had gone to the magazine rack and, waiting, had rapidly, breathlessly, to be kind, flipped through magazine after magazine, seeing nothing, waiting, waiting, till she and the poor deluded teacher could rush off into the night. And Nina, sipping whiskey and smoking well and listening to the idiots bullshit, had thought: *I would give anything to be standing there at the magazine rack, waiting, breathless, before rushing off into the night with an older man, even if he was only some poor deluded teacher. I have never known anything so lonely*, she had thought, *as seeing them in love. Or about to fuck. Whatever.*

And now, now that the rushing off into the night had been accomplished, Nina's mind went back to last year. But why? A small boy now bursting through the front door, running a crazy pattern through the store to arrive at one of the back booths, to hide there while he wasn't shoplifting—somehow the arrival of this small, darting, secret, thieving boy had sent Nina back to last year and this return to last year had landed her back in the stupidest, most mindless play ever written, produced, attended, dreamed of etc. And the beginning of the end for the blonde bitch, though she knew it not now.

The play had been written by an idiot, to be kind. Take the title to start. *The Wind Is Forty*. Now what in the world did that mean? The blonde bitch had taken to calling it *The Speed of Flatulence* and on that one matter the blonde bitch and Nina had agreed. To read through the thing without hooting was a test of self-discipline, to play it without hooting, torture. Now Nina remembered. She made the connection.

The boy who had come zigzagging through the drugstore—now he was at the counter, slamming a quarter against it, now off to shoplift while his burger broiled—he had played the play's insipid son. That in itself, that casting, called for a hoot. A boy who showed signs—all save horns, tail and cloven hoofs—of being an actual devil made up to be the most tedious angel ever devised in American letters. On that the blonde bitch and Nina had agreed as well. If childlessness demanded celibacy, so be it. Lannie. Could the boy, the boy in the play, possibly have been called Lannie? Prob-

ably. Nina smiled now, in remembering: Mrs. Rainborough's dance across the stage in demonstration: how the boy was to run to greet his father's ghost. The real boy blowing out his tummy and rather strutting toward one of the Hooper idiots. That had been worth another hoot. One idiot playing the Daddy ghost, the other playing Daddy's sidekick ghost, people in the audience muttering: Husband: *What the hell is going on? Why do those two ghosts look exactly alike?* Wife: *Shut up, dear. It's only the Hooper idiots.* While hooting, let's take the plot of this thing. Captain Daddy, a bomber pilot, has been shot down during the war. His ghost has now returned home, accompanied by, for some reason not made clear, this sidekick ghost, he a wise old corporal killed in the war one before Daddy's war. These two proceed to lounge around the home's rose garden a couple of days waiting for the family to receive the telegram notifying them of Daddy's death. During this time there is a great deal of ghostly debate, and agonizing by Captain Daddy, as to whether or not Captain Daddy should accept death (he seems to have a choice) and go off peacefully with the rustic enlisted man to Valhalla. Now the plot turn—and really this was *all* there was—that boy Lannie was able to see Daddy, he the only member of the family with such powers. Now instead of carting this insufferable child off to some quiet, secluded institution chockablock with nutcase shorties, as would surely have been done in the real world, the rest of the family sit around their rose garden trying to figure out why they can't see Daddy, too.

There had probably been more, folks, much more, but not for Nina, not tonight. What Nina was remembering now, tonight, was that the blonde bitch got to play the role of Daddy's hysterically good yet slim-waisted wife, while Nina, all padded and frocked, got to waddle around the garden as Granny, a true rose-cutting saint. That was what Nina was thinking now, tonight: *Never again, folks.*

The boy had come to the counter now to fetch his burger, it sitting eternally round on the round tan plate. However the boy turned the plate, the burger stayed always the same. Round.

Nina formed a nice smile, one of the nicer ones. "Aren't you going to say hello to Granny, brat?"

The boy turned the plate, turned and turned it. "Fatso."

"Come sit by Granny, kid. I'll box your ears."

The boy came along the counter, turning each round stool as he came. He sat next to the girl. He took a quarter from Nina's change, pocketed it. He shook a cigaret from her pack. He watched himself smoke in the back mirror, the cigaret unlit.

"What's your real name anyway?"

The boy put the cigaret on the counter. He hung his head. He was not crying, he was fighting so hard not to. "Will you take me home?"

Now Nina remembered. One of the kids on the roof. The pusher, maybe. It was going around, the rumor. Nina couldn't remember. Would she have felt this bad, this young, if she had been a pusher? Would she have fought so hard not to cry? Not very bad, not very hard, the pushed happened to be a blonde bitch. Nina stroked the kid's hair. He seemed to like it.

"All right. Let's go now."

They left the drugstore, the Hoopers watching like something was up, as if they were rushing off into the night, and drove around in Nina's car. The kid couldn't remember where he lived. He told her one place, one of the oldest, richest streets in town. No kids lived here. Only old, rich people. He told her another place. A nice street, a nice part of town. At its end lay nothing but fields, burning silver under the moon. The kid had Nina park here, by the fields, like teenagers parking. The kid went forward in his seat and looked hard down into the dark well of the street, trees thick and dark toward its end. Now Nina saw what the kid was watching. A white car parked under the trees, down at the foot of the block, by one of the houses there, the house dark under the trees. There were a lot of white cars in town nowadays. The blonde bitch drove a white car. Nina's car was red. Now Nina saw more clearly. Two people sat in the white car. A woman behind the wheel. A man on the other side. The man was smoking a cigaret, a cigar, something. Now Nina remembered who this kid was, whose house that was. That there were a lot of white cars in town, but not that many. The door opened on the white car's passenger side. The kid moved forward, peering into the dark under the trees, watching harder and harder. The man got out of the white car. Now you could hear their voices, the man's and the woman's. They were laughing. The man closed the door. The woman started the car, touched the horn so soft she might have brushed it with her arm, and pulled the white car away from the man standing under the black trees. The woman driving did not turn on the headlights till she had the white car a block away, moving away from where Nina and the kid sat watching, watching hard as a man would run, watching the kid's father turn to watch the blonde bitch and the white car pull away.

That would be it, Nina considered. The blonde bitch in love. In love with an older man. The older man a teacher. The teacher the father of this kid. This kid the pusher. *Somewhere in there, in all that*, Nina thought, *there has to be a way through*. Thinking this, again and again, Nina started the car and took the kid home. Wherever it was he wanted to drop off.



Bavender did not immediately go in. He stood under the trees alongside the house for some time, watching the girl's white car grow small in the hole of the street, then watching the street for some time after the car had gone. He turned then away from that, toward the open end of the street, there to the west. There were lights in the houses where the other boys lived. He thought he might see the boys in their houses—and wanted to—but then he saw one of the lighted rooms showed Dorothea Rainborough pacing the room, back and forth, she seemed to be reading to someone, perhaps herself, from a book; while in the other lighted room Mrs. Fauver, the other boy's grandmother, stood over something, a sink, a pan, washing something and washing it again, as if it might never come clean. Now, there at the open end of the street, where there was nothing but field, a car motor came to life, roaring, its headlights flashed on. The car spun around and went away from Bavender who thought he had disturbed two young lovers, a couple of kids necking. In a red car made black by night, now that a cloud had come under the moon.

Bavender entered the house by the side door. He had not been here, in this room, since the boy fell. Even when the boy died someone else had gone into the room to choose a suit for the burial. But for that the room had stood empty, unless someone had come to clean. He had not gone into it, nor had his wife, nor had the younger boy. After his brother's fall the younger boy had gone to stay with his grandparents and might stay there forever, it seemed. It was said the younger boy wanted never to return to the room, nor to the house. No one wanted to return to the house, it seemed. Everyone was leaving it.

Bavender crossed the room, to the boys' beds and found the lamp there between them and turned it on. From what he could see in the low light, he thought—yes, someone had come and cleaned the room. Bavender went to the older boy's desk, where he thought he must return, thinking this every night since the boy had fallen and had not lived. The papers and books on the desk had not been moved during the cleaning and Bavender went through them till he found the boy's diary. Till he had returned to the scene of the crime.

And what crimes were there? There were many, Bavender considered. There was the crime of reading the diary the first time and now slipping it into his pocket to take it away and destroy it or read in it a second time and destroy it or read in it again and again and never destroy it—these too, they were all crimes. Oh there were others he had committed, but to those in

time. First, those of the others. First, his wife, her crime, one of them, was now sorrowing for a departed lover as before she had sorrowed for the death of a son. That was a crime, it must be. His father-in-law, the boys' grandfather, his crime was to take Bavender away from the others at the funeral and tell him with this boy's death his love for the other boy, for them all, was gone. Oh there were other crimes—those who went about saying the one was pushed, the other had pushed him; those who went about saying the one boy wanted to die, the other wanted to save him—but Bavender passed over these quickly, to come to his own. These were the crimes that most interested him. You see, they were still being committed, day after day, night after night. The elation he had known that first night, when he had learned the one boy had fallen and the other had not; the elation he had known when a man who did not love his son had taken him from him, the elation of being free of that love; the elation he had known the night before their son's death, her son's death, when he had come in, his wife sobbing that her lover had left, the elation of that triumph—nor were these really the crimes that interested Bavender now, tonight. What interested Bavender now was his first crime, that which he would write tonight. That which he had written every night since the boy had fallen and had not lived.

But first Bavender would go along the hall, to his wife's room. The door stood open, a light burned, as the light had been left burning the night she had gone off into the mountains to follow after her lover there. Bavender went into the room. The letter from his wife's lover and his wife's paraphernalia, those things to which she was addicted, had not been moved from the table by the bed. It was there he had found them the night after their son's death. That night his wife had wept without stop and he had taken up the letter and read in it far enough and his heart had soared in reading only far enough. That night Bavender had sat on the bed and put out his hand and touched his wife's shoulder. That night the heart of this, the gentlest of men, had dived, it could not be held back, toward something small and moving in the dark below. Something small and moving as the shoulder of a woman weeping, a girl laughing.

He turned from that room now and went back through the house to the kitchen, where he had passed his nights. The light there burned, it had been burning since he had started coming here, and would do so till it burned out. From one pocket he took the sack of something that would not be eaten and tossed it in the pail with the others. He made coffee. He watched it brew, then turned off the fire under it. He would probably forget he had made the coffee, as he had forgotten all the other nights, but he

did like to watch the pot rise to a boil and then, with the fire off, slowly grow still, only steam and the aroma there now. That done, he went to the kitchen table. Everything he needed for the night was laid out. Nothing had been touched. A stack of paper, a pen, an ash tray, a cigar and matches. He sat at the table, removed the cover from the cigar, struck a match and lit the cigar. He smoked for a while, then took a sheet of paper from the stack, took up the pen and began to write, as he had written every night since he had started coming here. As well, what he wrote tonight was what he had written the nights before. The words he wrote were not his, they were a boy's. A boy he had known before the war, a boy he had known during the war, a boy he had known after the war. Words written very near the last thing the boy ever did. Words that Bavender would make his. Some night he would make them his.

"I am escaping an intolerable existence. In every direction there is only the wrong I will do. By taking this step, that may seem wrong to you now, I will only be saving you from further wrongs. A man who is his own enemy can do no good for himself and a man who can do no good for himself can do no good for anyone. Some day you will understand this. That this is the only thing right I have ever done. Thus the means of my departure."

Bavender lay the paper out on the table and looked at the boy's words for a time, as he had done every night before this. Then, as he had done before, he struck a match and took up the paper and burned it, holding the flames so that the ashes crumpled and fell into the ash tray. Then, as he had done before, he rested his arms on the table and his head on his arms and closed his eyes and slept a time.

When he woke the room was dark. It would come in time. The light would burn out. It had been burning for days, weeks, months and now it had gone out. He would close his eyes then and return to sleep. Yes, that was it. That which was not the same as before. That which would come. The dark.

**T**he office was to be found in the bank building, on the second floor, there on the long flank of the building, toward the rear, above the barbershop. From its wide window one looked down and across the street to Loren's Cafe. To the left, then, as one looked out the window, and on the corner opposite the bank, there stood Bull's Market and then beyond that, on the street that ran away from the bank, there was Jester's Grocery, which could not be seen from the window. On the third corner of what was called the bank corner, the busiest intersection in town, sat Baxter's drugstore, and on the fourth the courthouse and the square. If Bavender leaned out the window he could see the Ritz marquee to the right, the bank clock to the left. He felt he could have touched the top of the candy-stripe barber pole, just, had he leaned out quite far.

This was Saturday morning, not long before seven. Bavender had slept that night on the couch by his desk, as he had done every night this last week. He had slept late this morning—the morning dark with fog, no sun to wake him—but still he did not hurry. Rather he stood for a time at the window, looking down on the street, the place he had come to make his home. Though the cafe blinds were drawn, the closed sign leaning against the glass, Bavender knew that Loren was there, in his cafe, lighting the oven and the grills. Nor could he see into Jester's Grocery, but he knew as well that the old coach would be there in his market, waiting for Bavender and Colonel Weeb, now the market's chief sacker and toter, and his new assistant, the new boy, still in training, to arrive for work. The sound of someone moving about in the barbershop came up through the floor. The bank was silent so early in the day and the drugstore stood dark. A dozen or so cars and pickups were parked along the street, but those who had driven them there were not to be seen. The fog stood so thick, so soft along the street it seemed that no one might ever appear, that the town would lie empty on market day, the busiest day of the week.

Bavender turned from the window. The room was not large, its ceiling was high, the walls thick, solid and, this morning, damp and cool to the touch.

Bavender had yet to gather much furniture. An ancient oak desk, a swivel chair of lighter wood, a goose-neck floor lamp, the couch he had slept on, another chair, a table. The floor and walls were bare. Clean fresh blocks of paint marked those places the previous tenant had displayed his plaques, photographs, licenses, calendars, whatever. For now these absences were decoration enough. A small, surly gas heater crouched in one corner; so far as Bavender had been able to discover, the device knew no master, promising explosion one moment, threatening asphyxiation the next. During his occupancy Bavender had made little mark on the room. The previous tenant, Mr. Hickey, who had died alone, without kin, had kept an adjacent room to store a vast collection of old newspapers, magazines and dime novels, these mostly westerns, and Bavender had come into possession of the collection. In his spare time he had taken to sorting through the material, sorting out those things he imagined would interest him and him alone in this town: those things that one day would make the history of this town, if only he could imagine how to write it beyond the first sentence he had written his first night here:

*I am writing to tell you what our lives were like, those of us who have lived in this town, during a time that must be forgotten to you now.*

The book itself, in which these words were written, was some sort of accounts journal, large, thick, its cover gray cloth, its ridged spine and corners bound in red leather, its only marking the figure 6 in gilt on the leather spine. Normally Bavender would have sat at his desk and reread the sentence he had written, he would have sorted through the material gathered from Hickey's store and thought, perhaps, of a second sentence to write, perhaps a third, a fourth; but this morning he had only time to check the box of gear he had accumulated for tonight's camping out—camping *in*, he had told his son and the boy had smiled—before he donned coat and hat, locked the office and went down the broad front stairs and began, a minute or so early, his ritual of work on this, his third Saturday working at the store.

He came down the bank clock stairs, crossed the street and, when he found the front door of Loren's Cafe locked (this usual now that the girl, his waitress, had gone), went behind the building, into the alley that ran back of the cafe and the market, where Loren had fashioned the small patio on the loading dock shared by the cafe and the store. Bavender found the small kitchen empty, coffee boiling on the stove, and there at one of the counter stools sat Loren, his arms on the counter, his head in his arms, all this usual as well, now that the girl who had been his waitress was gone. Bavender took the coffee and left his friend to his weariness and sorrow and crossed the alley to the market's rear door.

Now there in the stockroom, the old veteran Weeb waiting to be served on an overturned crate, what matters of the world would they two discuss in the few minutes left before—*time to hit it*. Work was what was on Weeb's mind this morning. Work and play. What was work for Weeb, and for Coach, was but play for this highschool teacher, this son-in-law of the banker, come to play at sacking and toting groceries on a Saturday market day.

As the old vet went on, Bavender's mind went away. Not that he was turning from the truth in the old man's charges and insults, rather that the truth there drew him nearer another, something beyond it. No, these Saturdays were not work for him; they were play. These Saturdays were something he could do or not do. If by some chance he did not come to these days of work—it would not matter. Not working would not ruin him. His children would not starve. His life would not become meaningless without these days of work. On these Saturdays he looked about him, at those who must work, and saw that the danger, the excitement of their work was that it was their life. Their work was not done for a day or a month or even years. It was something to be done forever, till they died, and if they did not do it, then they would die.

Now the clock showed 7:20 and Coach's head appeared at the door—*time to hit it*—and Bavender saw all these people as freed by their entrapment and himself trapped by his freedom, and so this Saturday morning he went into the store seeking some necessity, some work of his own, some one thing to do that would enslave him and set him free, understanding well that such things can never be sought out. That it is they who do the seeking.

Bavender washed the cups at the sink by the back door and left them there to be returned to the cafe later. He donned his white apron and helped Weeb into his. They went into the front of the store, Bavender checking the stock on the shelves, Weeb pulling a broom behind him, all done without purpose, as these tasks had been done the night before, as tonight, exhausted, Bavender and Weeb would restock and clean, that the market would be fresh and full for Monday morning.

In a short time Bavender was called to the rear of the store, to the stockroom. *Emergency, emergency*—so said Weeb who had done the calling, now much in command of the newest and lowliest sacker and toter. A farmer had brought in an emergency basket of eggs, a great basket and dozens and dozens of eggs, and as Coach would not let the shaky old vet near the fragile, Bavender was given the job of cleaning the eggs, some—*you don't polish 'em*, Weeb said, overseeing, *they ain't crown jewels*—and putting them into small brown paper sacks, a dozen to the sack, Weeb the overseer

counting from above, till Weeb, the chief sacker, was called to the front of the store, something to sack, and Bavender was left alone in the stockroom.

This room, the back of the store, was cavernous, the floor and walls dark wood, stained and worn by years of labor and dank air. Stacks of boxes and crates and sacks made narrow, high-walled aisles, these making the stockroom a fascinating labyrinth, a maze that sent Bavender back to his childhood, when all the markets in town were thus, their store fronts but extended aisles and walls of stock.

As Bavender cleaned and sacked the eggs—so many browns, from tan to chocolate, rich ivory whites, some speckled, some freckled, all still warm from the nest—his mind went from the far past to the near future, a place he saw as simply as he remembered his boyhood. His wife would return from the mountains and her time there with her lover—vacation, rest at the sanatorium, whatever it would be called—and she would indeed be rested and well and perhaps happy, maybe that as well. And Bavender would stop seeing the girls, his students, beyond school, and he would stop seeing the woman, the returned student, and, though there was nothing in all this but seeing, the talk that there was more, that there would be more, that talk would stop. And there were other things that would stop and yet others that would start again. Bavender would quit the foolish notion that he would live in an office above his father-in-law's bank and he would quit the foolish notion that he, a grown man, a respected teacher at the local school, would come to a market in the town and sack and tote groceries, the work of a boy, the work of an old man made cripple by war, an old man who came to work not to be lonely and without purpose in life. And the boy, his son, he would come home and join his mother and father there and in time he, like his mother and father, would heal and his fear and his hatred of himself would end and he would be given back his childhood as they three would make themselves a family again.

These thoughts—things that would stop and things that would start again—went on till Bavender saw he had dropped and broken an egg. And now, in its dark yellow eye, he saw further, that none of these things would come about. That they were but dreams made while performing this mindless work, the dreams of a fool. That nothing would stop and nothing start again.

Bavender cleaned the floor, finished his work and went into the front of the store, there where, as Weeb instructed, there was now some carrying out to be done and the newcomer was to be doing it. The woman whose bags must be carried proved a migrant worker—in the town only till the cotton was in—and the walk to her car took them over the courthouse square, to the vacant lots to the east of there, where the fairs and passing carnivals

were played, and where now, during cotton harvest, the migrant workers parked their old trucks and cars and pitched tents and made a small foreign town within the town on these fall weekends. At times the carriers received a nickel, sometimes a dime for their work, but the immigrant woman had no money, nor would till the cotton was in, and Bavender took the steaming meat pie wrapped in corn husks the woman offered and went easy back toward the store.

The four streets bounding the courthouse square were broad, so broad that cars could be parked slanted nose in to their curbs and still there was room down the center of these streets for more cars to be parked. The town was filling, near filled, early this morning. This because of the heavy rains last night, the rain that had been heavy for weeks and tonight, Colonel Weeb predicted, would turn to snow, this early in the year to be so cold. Usually these workers now filling the town, both migrant and native, would not be free from their work till near evening on Saturday, when the town would fill suddenly, dramatically, with night; but with the fields heavy with mud and standing water these workers had been given a second Sunday, an unmarked holiday, and they had come to town in a festive spirit, as if this were that one Saturday a year when a holiday was marked.

That late spring Saturday without work was yearly set apart to commemorate the town's founding and the old settlers still alive who had done it now fifty years ago. A half century, so said the town fathers in proclaiming the anniversary, and Bavender understood their reasoning. A half century: said thus it sounded a respectable period of time, ancient civilizations had been marked in centuries; but fifty years: it was but a brief time for a place to be a town, a town that, according to some who were *not* town fathers, would have even less time than that till its end. The new highway to the hub city would be widened soon, these of little faith said, and all would be going there to buy and sell, to live and learn, and in another fifty years, a half century if one must, the town would be as dead and gone as any ancient civilization.

As Bavender went back over the courthouse square, the four broad streets about him filling with vehicles and people and their excitement at being in town so early this Saturday, he tried to imagine the town as some said it would be in a second half century, its streets empty and blown with sand, its store fronts boarded over, its schools shut down, its houses empty, but he could not bring himself to see so clearly, so bleakly, into this future, not on this festive Saturday morning.

Bavender returned to the store, there to be promoted, old Weeb said, from carrying to delivering, a move up in the cash-and-carry world, the old

vet said. And so Bavender went to perform the special service offered by Bull's market, Mr. Bull himself driving about town delivering to those who did not care to spend their Saturdays shopping in a store and could pay for it; and so, in response, Jester's performed a like service, but fitfully and then only for those who could not get out—those old or invalid—and could not afford Bull's prices or those who were not welcomed in Bull's, those who lived in the wrong parts of town. And these were the addresses on the delivery list this morning. Old people and the ill, most on the south side of town, that side of town that had been respectable once and had not yet grown poor, not like the eastside, not quite, and then the final address on the delivery list, no address at all, stated merely: Johnson, Eastertown.

It was as though he were feeding houses: there were no people anywhere he went. Oh they were there, somewhere, they had to be, for that was why he had come: they were too old or ill or impoverished to go out: but when he knocked at the rear door and called out *Jester's! Delivery!* no one answered and no one came to let him in. And so like a thief he went from house to house, entering the kitchen only, though he felt he could have gone anywhere, putting away milk and butter and what might spoil in the refrigerator or ice box, stacking the rest on the counter, the bill from the market left pinned under the heel of a can. In time he had done with these deliveries and turned the van toward Eastertown—Johnson, the only family there to be delivered to—and as he did found himself taken by excitement and some fear. A faint taste, he imagined, of what the simple men on those small ships had known, sailing toward a new land, their captain had said, sailing toward the end of the earth, those simpler among them said. A faint taste of what the good men in their chapels had felt when better men had come to them and whispered that there were no gods, that they were alone in the world and would bear alone what would come to them. Bavender smiled as he imagined that these simple sailors and these good god fearing men might have prayed at night, as he had once prayed, hard, against all their knowledge and belief, that there was no end to the earth, that there would be new worlds beyond the horizon, that there were no more gods, that good men everywhere might rule themselves.

Yes, Bavender smiled at his excitement and small fear, that as he approached Eastertown he was moving toward a new world, a world in which he would be alone.

Now Bavender came to the end of the town's paved roads and entered Eastertown. The rain had made these roads heavy with mud and rutted and slick between the ruts where he must drive if the van was not to be caught in the ruts and mired to the axle. The streets here had no names and if a

house was numbered, and few were, the address would read simply: Eastertown 19. Bavender made for the school, for Eastertown had its own school as it had its own church, and the house that sat behind the school, for there the Johnsons lived, the man and woman who ran and taught at the school, the only house in Eastertown that was to receive deliveries.

Bavender had never been inside the school, but it looked so like the country school he had known as a boy that he knew it without having been inside it. There would be two rooms, one for highschool, one for the younger students. The students would be seated in files of desks, grades one through eight, and Mrs. Johnson taught these youths, while in the adjoining room Mr. Johnson taught the highschool students and ruled as principal. There were fifty or so students at the school and those fifty, year after year, so far as Bavender knew, among those fifty, year after year, the school had graduated but two students who had gone on, Johnson and a girl who had received a scholarship from a university in another part of the state and had gone off there and had never returned. Surely, Bavender considered as he took the van behind the school and parked it before the house there, surely there had been more than the two graduates who had gone on, the girl on scholarship, just the one among those fifty year after year, and then there was Johnson, he had worked through college, sacking and toting, some said.

The house he had come to behind the school, the Johnson's house, this house did not belong here in Eastertown; it belonged somewhere else in town. If not in the town's best section, then surely in the better parts, those streets bordering where the richest and the very best lived. For this, for keeping their house painted and repaired, the garden tidy, the lawn trimmed, the Johnsons were acclaimed by those who lived in the very best parts of town and distrusted by those who lived merely in the better parts, a house that belonged neither where it was, nor would be allowed where it did not.

Now the darkening morning scarcely faded the house's brightness: soft light stucco walls, blue shingled roof, a white picket fence, low neat shrubs marking the lateral boundaries. Though autumn had tanned the yard's grass, this cover stood thick and was cut short and come spring would grow thicker still and grow to a fine green and be cut even shorter than now. Rose vines climbed parts of the fence and the rear wall of the house; while flowers, those that bloomed late in the year, stood in pots on the front porch. In all, Bavender might have been coming to his own house, certainly one in the better parts of town, and so, as if he were, he went to the rear door and called out *Jester's! Delivery!* before entering the house.

Bavender had done putting the things that needed it in the ice box and stacking those that did not on the counter, when a sound came to him, a car pulling up before the house. Bavender left by the rear door. He did not want to be inside the house, caught like a thief or a spy, when the Johnsons came. Bavender and Mr. Johnson met at the gate. The man smiled at Bavender, for they had met and conferred concerning the science, a matter Mr. Johnson was not trained to teach, that would be taught at his school. The man smiled still as they shook hands and smiled still as his eyes went down to Bavender's white apron—the crazy teacher who was toting and sacking at Jester's Saturdays, the work that had put Johnson through school. Johnson held back the gate for Bavender and called him *sir*, smiling still, lightly, not mocking at all, and Bavender thought he had taken his first step, and he had not been rebuffed, in entering this new, forbidden world. But then as he and Johnson laughed and Bavender came through the gate, there he saw Mrs. Johnson standing on the far side of the car and saw that she was watching him as a trapped animal watches a kind master, thinking of nothing but to be free of his kindness, his mastery.

And so he saw that his first step into this new world had not been taken, not successfully, and that he had been rebuffed and he would go on to be rejected by them all. And as he took the van back over the tracks, turning its nose toward the courthouse square, he further saw that his vision of joining these people, of helping them somehow, of somehow making them equal, that it was all wrong and another fear struck him. That his entire understanding of this new world he would enter and make for himself was wrong, and that everything he would ever do here would fail and be wrong. These people he would help and make equal to himself and his kind, they would loathe him for entering their world. They would come to think they and their world would have been better and better off had he never come here where he did not belong.

Bavender returned to town and found the talk there among the crowd milling about the courthouse square to be of the weather, a great black wall forming in the north, the storm coming in. Such was the talk as well of those few in the store now, a half dozen or so old men. In the old days, the boyhood Bavender remembered now, these old men would have been gathered around the pickle barrel, a cherry-red pot-bellied stove, but now they stood about listlessly, where they and these old-time things would have been had Coach not put in steam heat and the state declared pickle barrels a danger to the health, and talked not of the weather coming in—it wouldn't be much—but of the old storms, the storm of '37 or '38, now that'd been a storm. Country people snowed in for three weeks. Snow drifted to the eaves.

Maybe that had been '39. The year Christmas had come before Halloween. '37, '38, '39, they couldn't agree. Before the war anyway. Before everything had started to go wrong. Back in the old days, when bad weather had been bad. On that they all were agreed. This newfangled storm would be a flop.

Bavender stood with the old men awhile and listened. And then after a time he did not listen. Yes, the historian, the man who would write the story of this town, could not bring himself to hear the tales these old men were telling. Tales of the old days. The days when the town was just starting out. How the town had had no name the first year it had been a town. The days when Indian fighters were still around. The days when you could buy whiskey across a bar. The days when the streets in the town ran this way and that, straight as a drunk from where you lived to where you wanted to go, before somebody with newfangled ideas had come in and laid out everything on a grid. The days it had rained forty days and forty nights, mud around the courthouse square belly deep on a horse, this before there was a courthouse, before there was a square, the good old days, before somebody with newfangled ideas had come in and given a name to the town. Bavender listened to this awhile and then he did not. He heard their words, they were clear, each of them, but put together they made scant sense. The stories the old men were telling, stories that should have meant something to a man who would be a historian of the town, they did not even have such significance as to be told in a foreign language, a language he did not understand. No, they were but sound. But the past. Nothing. And so when a woman came to the checkout counter, Bavender sacked what she had bought and though there was only the one sack, nothing that needed totting, Bavender put on his jacket and took up the sack and followed the woman out of the store.

It had grown cold now or he noticed it now as he followed the woman across the courthouse square. A black wall of storm stood to the north, its pincers spreading east and west as the storm bore down on the town. The wind had risen; the air had gone roiled and was fresh and dry and carried bits of snow hard as sand. The heaviness after a week of rain had been driven away and so, as he returned from carrying the woman's sack, were Bavender's spirits cleansed and calmed, this now before the storm struck. Tonight the square and the streets around it, the entire town and the country all around it, everything would lie quiet and cold beneath a blanket of snow. Yes, that was it. Tonight the world would be made new and any fear of the past and dread of the future would be gone.

As he came back over the square, making for the market, a man standing under the bank clock, out of the wind, called out to him.

“Hey, Doc! Good night to stay home tonight!”

And Bavender smiled and returned the call. “A good night for camping out, Fred! Or to be more precise—for camping *in*!”

And as Bavender went on he saw in a window’s reflection the man who had called out shaking his head. A grown man, teacher of physics and such at the big school, sacking and toting for Jester’s on Saturdays, now he had gone on and lost total possession of his senses, camping on a night like this.

And Bavender smiled as he went on toward the store. And maybe not. Maybe tonight he would be coming back into the possession of them. Maybe that was where he would begin. On this one night, the future and the past lying quiet under a blanket of snow, camping *in* with his son.



The tables had turned, now that Dudley was dead. In the summer Van had been chief among the boys, but now all that had changed. The old ways were gone. Dudley’s death, that was what had done it. That and summer being gone. In the summer Van had ruled with ease. In the summer their world had been water and Van had been their prince in the pool, in the creeks, in the caliche pit, when the summer rain had come and filled the pit. The other boys, Tiny and Red, had dogpaddled around and dived like rocks and had near drowned trying to swim the length of the pool underwater; while Van swam with his face in the water, rolling up to breathe every fourth stroke, and he dived like a seal and he could swim the length of the pool and then some underwater. Yes, that was it. Van could stay under water, he could hold his breath for a minute or more, while the other boys came bursting to the surface after seconds, coughing and spewing and thrashing around, desperately dogpaddling for dry land, where Van had ruled as well and with ease, with so much water threatening all around. But now with summer gone, and Dudley dead—Van so sick his brother was dead that he had given up, he no longer cared who led, who followed—that hierarchy had splintered and fallen asunder.

Now it was time for a new prince or chief or boss or whatever to rise and to lead.

Van had not gone back to the neighborhood since Dudley had died. After Dudley had died he had gone to live with his grandfather and he had not gone back to his house and the room in the house where he and his brother had lived. They had all gone off somewhere after Dudley had died. Olive had gone off to the mountains over the state line, to a clinic or something, she had been there before. And his father, somebody said, had gone off too. He had left the house and gone off and rented a room downtown

or somewhere away from the neighborhood. On Saturday mornings, those before today, Van had stayed in his grandfather's house, behind its wall, and had not gone back to the old neighborhood to see his friends. When he saw his friends he saw them at school. After Dudley's funeral Van had stayed home for a week, which seemed fine with everyone even if no one believed he was sick. Then Van had gone back to school for a day or so and he had seen his friends there, but then Van had grown sick again and had stopped going to school. One morning he woke and his legs would not move. His grandmother had worried and called the doctor, *polio polio*, and the doctor had come and checked him out, shaking his head, *no, not polio*, and had told his grandmother he could stay home from school, till he could walk again. After a couple of days he could walk and a couple more days and his grandfather said he should try and go back to school. And Van had gone back and so long as he stayed away from that northeast corner where his brother had fallen he could walk and was no longer sick and he began seeing his friends again but only there, at school. They would say *come over Saturday let's do something Saturday* and Van would agree, but come Saturday morning he would be sick again, sick at the thought of being anywhere near the old neighborhood and their house and the room in it where he and his brother had lived before his brother died.

But now, this Saturday morning, Van saw that his legs were fine, he could walk just fine, and he went out and walked and soon had walked back to the old neighborhood, and now that he was here he wondered that it had taken him so long to return.

Van stood under the basketball net in the backyard, where he used to live. Before, if he had risen too early to go to Red's house or Tiny's, he would take a basketball and bang it against the backboard, a signal to the other boys their chief was up and out and it was time for them to be up and out too; but this morning he had no basketball, and would not go back into the house, into the room where he and his brother had lived, to find one, so he took up rocks and banged them against the backboard till finally Tiny and then Red came out of their houses and then came over the street to him. That was when Van knew the old ways were gone and he was no longer chief. Before, the first boy to come out of his house would have come directly to Van banging the basketball against the backboard; but this morning Tiny, the first to come out of his house, had gone and stood in front of Red's house and waited till Red came out and then the two of them had crossed over the street to where their old chief was flinging rocks against the backboard.

Red was chief now, or boss or prince or captain or honcho, whatever game they would be playing today, whatever movie had showed at the Ritz

last Saturday. Van knew it as the boys came over the street to him. Red was leader now. Tiny couldn't lead, like Dudley once said, his own ass behind him, not even if you put it in a wagon and he pulled it along. Something in Van grew heavy now as the two boys came up near. Dudley. He was gone. He wasn't inside the house this morning, waiting to come out and back him up if his two cretinous lieutenants gave him any trouble. Van felt himself go heavy, but then as the boys came up and he saw their faces, scowling hard, sneering, trying so hard to look like leaders, doomed to be lieutenants forever, power surged back into him and he flung a rock hard against the backboard and the rock came ricocheting back, skipping away at the feet of the two cretins doomed forever to be lieutenants or squaws or pages or flunkies, whatever had played at the Ritz last week.

"What the heck do you think you're doing?"

This was Red. He couldn't even cuss. He couldn't say *damn* or *fuck*, he couldn't even get *heck* right, knowing Granny would beat him with a stick just for trying. Some leader and Van whizzed another rock at the backboard and it went zinging off.

"Gotta make two points. What the hell does it look like I'm doing?"

And when Red led the other cretin into some weak sniggering and sneering, they sniggered and sneered like Red said *heck*, Van felt his power returning. Swimming wasn't the only power he held over these two dog-paddlers and bellyflopers. Maybe he had to run full out to make it up to a trot, but he had the best wing in school, that was what Dudley and all the older boys said. In the summer there wasn't a phone pole Van couldn't nick with a rock, there wasn't a street light in town he couldn't make dark. Van turned to the two sneerers and smiled the smile of a real prince.

"Here. Red. Why don't you try it? You take a shot. Here. Two points. You can use my basketball."

And Van took a rock and sent it zinging right between their two sneering heads and he laughed, all power, when those sneering faces went white.

"You almost hit us with that rock." This was Red. One more zinger past his ear and he'd be back over the street to Granny.

"If I'da wanted to hit you, Red, you'da been hit. Savvy?"

Right out of that movie at the Ritz, right out of the mouth of that crazy caped cowboy who went around cracking his bullwhip and shooting guns out of bad guys' hands. *Lordamighty, Blackie, that caped nitwit shot that gun right outta yore hand. If I'da wanted to hit you, Blackie, you'da been hit. And don't call me no caped nitwit. Savvy?*

It was all over now. He was all but back in the saddle. But then he hadn't counted on Tiny. He hadn't counted on anybody being so stupid it made

him fearless. The first rock had gone whizzing past them and Tiny hadn't even noticed. And when the second rock went whizzing past, when anybody in his right mind, when anybody who *had* a mind, would have at least flinched, there Tiny stood, standing his ground, as if Van couldn't have taken off an ear if he had wanted to. And now, with Red flinching, making ready to dart back to Granny, now Tiny delivered the killing blow, so stupid he didn't even know he had.

Gulping, blinking, eternally stupid: "Those aren't basketballs. Those are rocks."

And now Red recovered. Now he came back, sneering. "That's right. Only somebody crazy is going to take rocks for a basketball." And now Red came in for the kill. "You got a whole closet-full of basketballs. Right there inside that house, poor crazy little rich boy. Why don't you just go inside there and bring us out three basketballs. One for everybody. We'll shoot some goals."

It went dead inside Van. All power fled. His legs grew heavy. He could not move. He could not even turn to look toward the house, Red moving in closer for the kill, killing him.

"But you can't go back in that house. Can you, poor little rich boy. You're going to find a ghost in there, that's why. That house is haunted, that's why. The ghost of Dud is in there right now. You go in and he'll rise up, head busted all open, face hanging off his head, and he'll come for you. *You killed me. You killed me. It was you that pushed me off that school top.*"

*You are killing me. You are killing me.* Van turned, his legs were doing it for him, the rest of him was dead, and moved away. And they came behind him, sniggering and sneering, killing him. He was a crazy rich boy, he had killed his brother and nobody had thrown him in jail. His father was a crazy father, he lived in an office downtown and sacked and toted and hung out with highschool girls. His mother was a crazy mother, drinking and drug-ging in some place for crazies way up in the mountains. They were all crazy. That house was haunted and they were crazy. That's why they couldn't go back in it, not for basketballs, not for anything. The ghost of Dud was stalking that house, that's why. Van went on, his legs carrying his dead body away, but they came after him, killing him. That's what they were going to play today. Not war, not scalping the Injuns, not torturing the Japs, the games they had played in the summer. Today they were going to play crazy. The crazy boy who escapes the crazy house and they come after him and track him down, this crazy boy, and they catch him with nets and tie him up in a straitjacket and they haul him back to that crazy house and they leave him there, all tied up, all night long, and when dark comes the ghost of Dud

rises from the grave, head busted open, face hanging off his head, and he comes stalking that house, looking for that crazy little rich boy, crying out, *Why did you kill me? Why did you push me off that school top? Why? Why?*

“Because if I hadn’t you would’ve pushed me off of it.”

And now they had come around and stood before Van, blocking the way.

No, Van smiled. They were still behind him. They didn’t have the guts or the sense to come around and block the way. What had happened was: he had turned to face them. And now their sniggering and sneering had stopped. Now they were looking worried. They were gulping and swallowing and going white in the face and shaking. And now Van saw why. There in his hand was the last rock. It shone like jewel, red as ruby, as he tossed it up and down. And now power came back to Van. It came everywhere, but where it gathered, just now, was in his arm. He tossed the rock up, it came down, straight into his palm, and Van made a two-finger grip around it and sent it winging straight for Red’s white, worried, shaky face.

Red went down like he had been shot. He did some clutching at his throat, there on his back, and some kicking his feet about. Van went over and stood with Tiny, looking down at Red, Red’s white face now gone purple from holding his breath. Tiny leaned in for a closer look, Red flopping around.

“I think you killed him.”

Van smiled, feeling power now, backing away. “I had to do it, Blackie. It was either him or me.” Van kept backing away, kept feeling the power in him now, kept smiling. “You’re the only one who can save me now, Blackie. The only one who knows the true story.” Backing, power, smiling, Tiny looking down at Red, looking up at Van, looking from one to the other as if they all were crazy. “I’ll be back, Blackie. I’ll clear my name. But right now I got to hide out. I got to ride, Blackie. You just keep telling them the word. It was him or me. I’ll be riding back in some day. I’ll be clearing my name. Savvy?”

And Van turned and with power coming into his legs made toward the badlands.

■ ■ ■

So that was the game they would play today.

Well this honest cowpoke driven to kill had to have some vittles before he rode out of town. So Van went downtown, to the drugstore. By the time he got there he had forgotten it was supposed to be the saloon. By the time he got downtown the game was over. It hadn’t taken long. Now they really would be out after him, Van figured as he took the booth by the front window, there to watch all the people on the street, anyone of which could be

not the posse leader but a real-life reform-school warden with a real-life warrant to haul him away.

But let's look at all this in the light of reason, Van figured as one of the identical fatties brought him a burger. All that stuff about the power surging into his wing, his whizzing the rock, aiming straight for Red's face, all that could be seen as being a bit overdone. His arm had felt as dead as the rest of him, or close, and the rock had been rather lobbed than whizzed and it hadn't hit Red in the neck or throat but lower down, nearer the chest. Probably hadn't made a dent in him, forget a puncture, probably not even a blue spot. And as for all the thrashing and choking, Van saw now, looking back on Red's flopping coolly, all that struck Van as similar to Tiny's fits when Miss Abshire spoke of digestive noises. And so far as Red running home to report the attack to Granny and Granny rushing down to report it to the sheriff, you could forget that too. Red knew better than anyone he could come home with a hand chopped off and Granny would beat him with a stick for letting the stump drip on the carpet; and so far as rushing, the only place Granny rushed was down to the root cellar at the first sight of cloud.

So now, by the time the sheriff did come into the drugstore, passing by Van's booth without a glance, Van could sit there cool, calm, turning the burger plate, the burger turning with it, turning it and turning it, the burger plate, the burger on it, always round.

The girl who had been asleep at the counter or passed out on it (the identical fatties behind the counter polishing tan plates without approval) had now waked or come to and had now got it into her groggy noggin to come over to the booth and talk to Van in that stupendously stupid way big people talk to little people.

The girl smoked cigaret after cigaret. Whatever was in her cup did not stink like tea. "Are you well now?"

Turn the plate, turn the burger. Around and around. "I wasn't sick. I was dying."

This girl looked at Van hard and she didn't look good. Dark circles around her eyes, they looked bruised, like she had been hitting herself, right in the eye, over and over. This wasn't the dark one, the bitch, who usually came over to Van's booth, calling him names. This was the blonde one, the nice one, now really trying to be nice to somebody small, only she couldn't figure out any way smart to do it.

"Have you seen your father today?"

That's what they all said. The dark bitch, the nice blonde one, and the third girl, the older out-of-town one who went around town acting like a

girl. That's what they all said. These were the highschool girls his father was running around with. That's what his grandmother whispered to his grandfather night after night. *Running around with teenage girls and that one who acts like one. Sacking and toting at Jester's. Living in an office downtown.* And his grandfather had whispered to his grandmother. *These things take time. The boy might not have been his but he loved him all the same. He'll come to his senses. Let him be for now. He's a good man. He'll come back to us.*

"I haven't seen him today. But he'll come back to us," Van said to the nice girl with the dark eyes and blonde hair but she was gone.

Van looked through the window. There she was, out on the street, talking to some market delivery boy, the boy in his white apron, jacket over that, hat pulled down over his ears, smoking a cigar. Most delivery boys didn't smoke cigars. Fathers did. His father did. And the blonde nice girl was talking and talking to his father, touching his arm, tugging at his jacket from time to time. Van liked the way the girl was talking to his father. Earnestly, beseechingly, smartly—whatever she was saying to his father, Van figured it wasn't stupendously stupid. Van liked the way the girl was following his father now, his father looking at his watch, looking over toward Jester's, moving away, the girl following, like Van wished he could follow his father, tug at his jacket, and talk to his father, earnestly, exactly, not the stupendously stupid way little people talked to big people. Now they passed by the drugstore window, only feet from Van and Van waved, but they didn't see him and they didn't wave back. This because, Van figured, his face was directly behind the X in BAXTER'S PHARMACY and all they saw, probably, was this crazy X with an arm and a hand wiggling its fingers.

After they had gone, gone off their separate ways, the nice girl and his father, Van left the drugstore. Where would he go now, what would he do now, now that there was no game to play? Van knew. He would go where he had gone those nights he had slipped out of his grandfather's house, those nights his dead morning legs had come to life and come downtown. He would go watch the killer.

Van crossed the courthouse square. Everywhere were people wearing jackets and caps, some shivering, some shaking, as if it were cold, while Van was warm as a seal in his pudge-padded body. He went to the back of the courthouse. Here the sheriff and the highway cops kept their cars, these with their flashing lights on top, lettering on the doors. With the sheriff back at the drugstore chatting shotguns and antlers with his hunting buddies, Van went on around to the jail. He was safe. He would not be run off. Not run down and caught and taken back to his grandfather's house. The killer was there at the jail window. He always was, night or day, looking

down on the crowds, waiting day after day, night after night, for the sheriff or maybe the highway cops to take him away and kill him somewhere else. That was what the sheriff told Van that night he had caught him and taken him back to his grandfather's house. They didn't kill killers in this town. Somebody someplace else would do that. The killer was there at the window now, looking down. The killer raised his hand when Van came under the window. He said what he always said when Van came under the window.

"Better run, kid. Better get outta town. They're coming for you. Better run somewhere and hide."

And Van couldn't say today what he could never say. *How're you going to die? How're they going to kill you?*

The electric chair. Maybe they would hang him with a rope. That's what Hub and Abernathy, all the older boys said. Maybe they would shoot him with a gun, like he had antlers. Maybe they'd put him weeping and screaming in a small room with a small glass window and pump invisible gas into the room, the way his father killed the cats and rats they cut up in his classes. That's what they said.

Now the killer smiled and raised his eyes beyond Van, looking behind him, still smiling as if they were coming for Van now. As if they were going to run him down and catch him and take him somewhere else and kill him there.

Van turned. There they were, across the street, standing outside the pool hall. If little kids weren't out hunting him, then bigger ones were. Hub and Abernathy. They were watching him. They were smiling too. They had been on the roof the night Dudley died. They knew he was a killer.

"Hey you! Killer. Come here. We want to talk to you." That's what they were calling out now, now crossing the street, coming for him. While above him now the killer was laughing. "Better run, kid. Better run somewhere and hide."

And Van turned and ran, like he had run that night on the roof. That's what had happened. Everybody knew that. Dudley had come along the roof toward them, the three boys trapped there at the north end, nowhere to hide, no way to escape. Van crouched against the low roof wall in one corner, Red crouched in the other corner, Tiny wandering around like he was wondering where he was. Dudley had come for Van. He tried to drag him out of the corner, drag him up on the roof wall ledge so he could drop him off it. Van had got away and run that night toward the fire escape, toward some tree he could climb down. But Hub and Abernathy had been there, blocking the way to the fire escape, to the tree, any other way to escape. Van turned now and ran away from them. He ran back toward Dudley, he

ran back toward Hub, he ran back toward Abernathy. He ran around and around. And finally Dudley trapped him back in that same corner, there at the north end of the roof. And Van climbed up on the roof wall ledge to find some way of escape. There was a tree there at that corner of the building. But it was a tall thin tree. It had no large wide branches reaching out to the roof. The tall thin tree stood away from the roof. Van had never seen anything so remote, so far far away. It was then, Van standing up on the ledge, looking out into the night toward the tall thin tree, that Dudley came up on the ledge. And now Dudley wasn't going to drop him off the roof. He never had been going to. All Dudley had been going to do was scare him, like he always scared him, making him think he was going to drop him off the roof, and when Van was scared enough, then Dudley would have dragged him off the roof, down to the ground. Now Dudley came up on the ledge. Now Dudley looked scared in that black night light. He was scared his brother was going to jump for the tall thin tree, it was so far away, and he came up on the ledge and he reached out to take hold of his brother and pull him back and save him. And Van, seeing all this now as he had seen it all then, he had seen that his brother wasn't going to grab him and drop him off the roof. And when his brother reached out, about to touch him and save him, Van knowing his brother was only going to save him, he had reached out and pushed hard and his brother had fallen off the roof. And then Van, as now, had turned and he ran and ran and ran.



The badlands. That was the game he would play today. The hunted killer. He hadn't wanted to do it, but it was either him or me. And now, the killer had to get out of town. Till he came back and cleared his name. But now—he had to hightail it for the badlands.

Van stood on the tracks looking down into Eastertown. Down into the gully where all the bootleggers hung out. This gully kept on going south of town, growing deeper and wider and wilder, till five or six miles south of town it grew into a canyon. The badlands. Where a killer driven to kill could hide out. The highway went down through the canyon there, on its way to the hub city. There in the canyon, along with some kind of camp where all the church people got together and shouted and rolled, there lay the country club, the golf course and the swimming pool. That was it. The killer on the run would hightail it down into the badlands and have a swim. Everybody else in town had on jackets and caps pulled down over their ears, teeth chattering, noses going blue, but Van had taken to feeling hot and dusty and dry. He would go out to the pool that had no water in it now and have

a swim there and he would dive to the bottom and stay there, live there, and be safe from harm, from them all. Yes, he would dive to the bottom and live there and never come up.

Van lay down on the tracks—head on one rail, feet on the other—and thought about it. Yes, Van had rolled his ear over on the rail, listening for trains, one had to come along soon, and was thinking this out, about high-tailing it to the badlands and swimming in a pool, sinking to the bottom, and there was no water in it, when some car horn honking and laughing came to him.

“Waiting for a train, kid?”

The red car. The black-haired highschool bitch behind the wheel. The woman who went around acting like a highschool bitch riding shotgun.

Van got up off the tracks and crossed over to the road and got into the back of the red car. The nice blonde girl was there, in the back seat, sleeping now like she had been sleeping at the drugstore. The highschool girls had been down to the bootlegger in Eastertown. There were beer cans and whiskey bottles and cigaret packs everywhere. The black-haired bitch took the red car off and they started riding around, like Van and Tiny and Red had rode around with these highschool girls, hiding out, the day Dudley had died. *Wanna beer, kid? Whiskey? Cigaret? No no no.* And they rode around, now the black-haired bitch taking the car out on the highway, heading it south, toward the badlands, the killer on the run not even having to tell them he was a killer, heading out of town till he could come back and clear his name.

The nice blonde girl looked happy sleeping. Well, she looked happier than she had in the drugstore, with her eyes open. Her eyes had looked bad at the drugstore. Bruised and dark all around them. Blue eyes shutting, shrinking, dying—*Have you seen your father today?* Now she looked at peace, resting. Now she could have been his mother, he her son, like in that play last year, all of them wandering around the rose garden, not being able to see Captain Daddy’s ghost. All but Van, the boy. He had seen his father’s ghost and he had talked to him. And his mother, she had believed Van, she had been the only one, when he had told everyone he had seen Captain Daddy and some philosophizing codger out in the rose garden. And believing him his mother had taken him in her arms when no one else would believe him, while all the others, led by the dark bitch all padded out and painted gray as Granny, had maintained he was just one kid with a screw loose.

And now Van leaned into the girl’s arms and played that game. They were in a rose garden and the girl was his mother and she believed him and held him in her arms and he pretended to cry because no one would believe

him and the girl whispered words in his ear, things for him to say when he couldn't think of what to say next.

The dark bitch at the wheel laughed. She was watching Van in the girl's arms in the rear-view mirror. "She's a virgin, kid. Why don't you try me?" the dark bitch laughed and drank beer and smoked her cigaret.

The woman in the passenger's seat was watching too. She had the side mirror turned to see Van and the girl in the back seat. And she drank beer and smoked her cigaret, but she didn't laugh like the dark bitch laughed. She watched Van and the girl till Van moved away from the girl to the other side of the car and stopped playing that game.

They had come to the canyon now and the car went down toward the bottom of the canyon, where the country club and the golf course were. As they were coming to the country club turn off, Van told the dark bitch to stop the car, he had to piss. And the dark bitch laughed as if he had said something wildly funny, like he had to tinkle or sprinkle or whatever it was wildly funny that Red had to say if he didn't want Granny to hit him with a stick. When the car stopped, that woke the girl in the back seat and she looked at Van with her dying blue eyes and he pushed open the door and jumped out of the car and ran fast, fast as he could, down the road to the country club, the women in the car, the dark bitch anyway, drinking beer and smoking her cigaret and laughing and laughing as if the game he was playing were wildly funny.



The clubhouse sat on the banks of a creek. That was where the swimming pool was, and where they held dances and parties, and where golfers bought golf balls, and that was where the first tee was. If you were a golfer you hit your new golf balls over the creek, you hoped, and then there on the other side of the creek lay the rest of the golf course. The rest of the golf course wound around in the canyon, winding in a great circle around a butte, to finish up back at the creek you had first crossed, the last green sitting on the banks of the creek below the clubhouse.

That was where Van went first, to the clubhouse. There was no one there. No one dancing or partying, no one buying or selling golf balls, and the gates to the swimming pool were closed and locked and the swimming pool behind them, Van could see through the grating, had been drained and was covered. Van then went to the first tee and followed the path down to the bridge that crossed over the creek. During the summer and early fall the creek lay dry, but now that it had been raining and raining water flowed down the creek, flowing to bigger creeks and rivers and then to the sea. Van

went over the bridge and crossed a green, a tee, whatever, making for the butte that loomed over the golf course and the clubhouse like a castle, like a fortress.

That was what the butte had once been, Van thought as he started his climb. A great castled fortress. In the times during the summer when Van and his friends had grown weary of swimming, they had climbed the walls of the butte and explored the caves stuck into the sheer wall that made the lid of the butte and had gone on up to the flat top of the butte, and everywhere they had explored they had found arrowheads and tomahawk heads and old cartridge casings, as if the Indians who had lived here long ago had made the butte a fortress when the Indian fighters were hunting them and then later the Indian fighters had held off the Indians here, when the Indians had turned and taken to hunting them. On the high flat top of the butte, where Van had now climbed, there was an Indian grave and Van now made for it. There was nothing of the grave now but a hole in the ground. It was here that Van and his friends had found many arrowheads and that one tomahawk head and other things.

They had taken many of these things and had kept them at home for a while, but then some grownups, Miss Abshire one of them, had said these things belonged in a museum and the boys had handed them over to the grownups. Then other grownups had come from the museum in the hub city and they had dug up the rest of the Indian grave, skeleton and all, and had taken everything over to the museum. What these grownups had done, these grownups themselves had told the boys, was called Science, while what the boys had been up to was called Pillaging. Van had given over everything he had pillaged to the scientists, everything but a tooth. He could have secretly kept an arrowhead, its stone chipped away in a pattern like a tortoise's shell, or a tomahawk head, its stone heavy and smooth, one end blunt, the other smoothed sharp, but he had kept the tooth. Now, standing over the hole that had once been the Indian grave, Van tried to remember why he had kept the tooth. Maybe if the scientists came and searched his room and found the tooth on him he could claim it was his own tooth. Maybe he only wanted to keep part of the Indian who had once been buried here. Maybe some day he would bring the tooth back here and drop it in the hole and kick some dirt over it, so that some part of the Indian, if only one of his teeth, would still be buried in his grave.

Van turned from the grave and went to the edge of the butte top and walked around its rim, looking down on the golf course, looking for his father. He knew his father would not be there today, that today his father was sacking and toting at Jester's and running around with highschool girls,

but not long ago he would have been here, playing golf on this wintry morning, for his father never played when others did, when it was spring or summer and warm, only when it was cold and there was no one about. Last year Van had come with his father to play golf on those gray, still, lonely days his father liked best. Van did not so much play the game, rather he took a club from his father's bag and an old ball and walked along with his father, hitting the ball not far, and walking along and hitting the ball again. Van's father smiled as the boy hit the ball and grew serious when it came time to hit his own and then Van smiled at his father's seriousness. When Van grew bored with the game, which was soon usually, he arranged to meet his father on the far side of the course, near its end, and he climbed to the top of the butte and walked its rim, following his father as he went around the course, his father a small dark figure now, dark against the parched grass, small as a boy, as he approached his ball with great seriousness, hit the ball seriously and with renewed seriousness walked on to where the ball had gone. When his father came to the end of the course Van would descend the butte and join his father on the final green and Van would carry his father's bag to the car and then they would drive back to town and have lunch at the drugstore.

That was what Van was seeing now, the gray wintry mornings he and his father had passed on the golf course last year.

The air had turned white with snow and Van could see little of the golf course when he saw, just, the two cars coming along the road from the highway, coming along toward the clubhouse. The first car was the red car, this Van saw as it stopped before the clubhouse, and the vehicle behind was Abernathy's old pickup, the vehicle Abernathy's father let him drive now that he was retired. In the red car, Van supposed, were the dark bitch driving, the woman acting like a highschool girl beside her, the blonde girl in the back, the same as before. Hub was driving the pickup with Abernathy riding beside him, this Van saw as the two older boys now got out of the truck. In the bed of the truck rode two boys, smaller, Tiny and Red, he knew, though he could not see them clearly through the snow. The red car turned and left the clubhouse parking lot and went back toward the highway. They had performed their treachery: they had led the trackers to him and were gone.

During this time the four boys—two large killers, two small traitors—disappeared beneath the trees around the clubhouse, to search first for him there, before they came out onto the golf course and climbed the butte to trap and track him down there. Before the trackers had done with their search of the clubhouse, Van—a small dark figure on the rim of the butte, there to be seen even through the snow—went down off the butte and made his way around the wall that made the butte's top, to the far side of the butte,

away from the clubhouse. This sheer rock wall, the top of the butte, held caves, a half dozen maybe, most shallow and exposed, and Van searched the rock wall till he found the deepest cave, its entrance shielded by brush and a small gnarled tree. Van went into the cave and waited to be tracked down and hauled back to town, to jail or to his grandfather's house or maybe up through the snow to the top of the water tower where he would be dropped off, whatever punishment awaited the boy who had killed his brother.

Van did not know how much time he had passed in the cave. He had sat and watched the snow's white veil grow thick and thicker over the cave's entrance and had not thought of time, only that in time he would be tracked down and found and hauled away. Now he heard voices or thought he did and went deeper into the cave. Here the cave's ceiling was low and he crawled into its recess and crouched under it. Here the walls and the ceiling of the cave carried figures drawn by burnt sticks and designs made by smoking sticks held close to the rock. And there were the ashes and the charred remains of a camp fire. Van knew well all these things had been left here last summer and the summers before that, when he and his friends had come to camp here, to roast hot dogs and other things over the fire. It was they who had drawn and written with burned sticks on the walls and had made designs on the ceiling with sticks from the fire; but he imagined now these things had been done and left here by a band of Indians. Weary of fighting their trackers these Indians had come to the cave to hide till their trackers grew weary of hunting them and had gone away or till the snows came and fell so thick that they might escape their trackers under its cover.

So this was the game Van would play now, and he would escape his own trackers by playing it, and he went out of the cave.

The world had gone white. The ground all about the butte and the golf course was covered with snow and the sky was filled with it. There was nothing anywhere that was not white and, so far as he could see from the cave entrance, no dark figures moving anywhere. Van went down the butte's steep sloping wall backwards and in doing so saw that the tracks he had made, if his trackers came upon them, would lead them up to the cave and away from where Van was escaping. Yes, that was it. The Indian movie at the Ritz, the Indian fooling all his pursuers by walking backwards, leading them away and not toward him, and when Van got to the flat ground of the golf course he walked toward the clubhouse backwards, something he might have done anyway, even had he not been pursued, the sensation so strange, moving backward through a world in which everything was white. Van crossed the bridge over the creek and went under the trees near the clubhouse and there, where there was no snow, turned and crept forward.

The lights of the pickup, the pickup parked in the lot above the clubhouse, flashed on and Van froze. Yes, now another game would save him. Miss Abshire, who had written books in college on the matter, had told them this game, how the black slaves escaping their masters had saved themselves. As the masters pursued the slaves, drawing nearer and nearer, the slaves would freeze, they would stand not moving at all, and the masters would pass them by, thinking they were black trees or their shadows. Van froze, not moving at all, and the pickup headlights flashed over him as the pickup turned. But his masters did not see him standing under the trees and the pickup turned and went back down the road to the highway and he was free.

Yes, that was the game he would play now, he decided as he went on up the canyon that would lead him back to town, a slave escaping his masters and bound for freedom, though near the end of his trek, the snow growing thicker and thicker, for a time there, before he saw the town's lights, he changed the game to one of those explorers, starving and lost in a blizzard, trekking across the Arctic.

Whatever game it took to get there.

■ ■ ■

Van knew he was going home. Not his grandfather's house, but home. It was Christmas, he knew this now as he went through the snow, the town covered in it, toward home. His father would be there waiting for him and Olive, all right, his mother usually came in later, and Dudley, well, he wouldn't be there, being dead, but maybe his ghost would visit on Christmas Eve and Van would be the only one who could see him, like the kid in the play, the only one of them able to see Captain Daddy. And if the things went like that play they had dragged him into, then like Captain Daddy whose ghost hadn't looked at all like someone who had just climbed out of a crashed plane, then Dudley's ghost would look like Dudley had looked before the fall. His head wouldn't be busted open, his face hanging from his head, and Van would talk to Dudley and tell him what had happened, his version anyway, that night on the school roof. That he hadn't meant to push him off the roof that night, he had only been trying to get away. That straightened out, then maybe Dudley's ghost could go haunt Tiny and Red. It might not be a bad idea then, Van figured, for Dudley's ghost to change over and have his head busted open, his face hanging from his head. Something like that, Van figured as he stood outside his home, might make the haunting more memorable, more believable, and, Van figured as he went under the trees alongside the house, scare the living breeze out of them in the bargain.

Van went into the house by the side entrance. Into his and Dudley's room. His room. Van couldn't remember if he had been in the room since Dudley fell. It seemed like he had, but maybe his return had only been a memory. Maybe he had returned in a dream, as he often dreamed and remembered that Dudley hadn't fallen and wasn't dead. Van went around the room turning on lights. The room looked the same as Van remembered it and then it looked like a hotel room, some place he had never been before; it looked like both. The same for the rest of the house, Van going from room to room: a place he knew and a place he had never been. Olive's room, Wanda's room, the living room where nobody ever went, the kitchen, no food or anything that had anything to do with the cooking of food in it, just some pencils and paper and an ashtray on the kitchen table, the light there burning still, the sunroom at the rear of the house, where everybody hung out—Van slowly circled through the house, trying to remember the house, trying to learn it anew, till he came back to his and Dudley's room. His room. He stood for a while in the center of the room, turning slowly, in circle after circle, to be certain there was nobody or nothing creeping up behind him. Then he spoke:

“Dudley. Talk to me.”

And he really felt like adding *you bastard* or some such from the old days, when Dudley had been alive and the house hadn't looked like a hotel room, but decided to leave it off for now. The ghost might be late, it might take some time for the ghost to get here from wherever ghosts stayed while not out actively haunting.

While Van waited and kept his mouth shut and an eye on his back, he went around the room. He went to Dudley's desk. He sat at the chair there and turned on all the lights around the mirror behind the desk like he had turned on all the lights in the house when he had circled through it. With the mirror watching his back for him Van went through all the crap—books, magazines, notebooks—piled on the desk. The diary wasn't there. He went through the stack again. The ghost must have taken it. And why shouldn't he? It was bad enough being alive and having your little brother and his idiot friends knowing all about your being a virgin and being afraid of everyone and wanting to kill everyone, but to be dead and not be able to change any of those things—Van hoped the ghost had taken the diary off somewhere and burned it or torn it to pieces.

It was the diary that had started Dudley in his fall, Van figured, leaving the desk, leaving on all the lights around the mirror. He and his friends reading it and then going around and telling everybody about it, it had been that dumb diary that had pushed Dudley off the school roof.

Van wandered about the room and in wandering he took to examining the photographs on the wall. Someone had taken away all the photographs

of Dudley and those that had had Dudley in them. There were only photographs of Van left hanging. Van did not much like the looks of the round, brown, smirking kid in these photographs. Van got a black pen from Dudley's desk and set about changing that. Van started on the first photograph, the biggest one, Van in Boy Scout uniform, he had won his first merit badge, for letting the air out of people's tires or ringing their door bells and running or something. Van gave the round brown scout a moustache and some big round glasses and a put a little black hat on his head and a big black cigar in his mouth—what Van would look like if he was ever dumb enough to grow up. The moustache, the cigar, the glasses, the hat—what his own father looked like now. Now Van remembered why he had come here to this room. His father. He and his father were camping out tonight. Camping *in*.

Van went into the closet and tossed things about and came out with what he needed. He took off his clothes and put on the scout uniform and scout socks and the scout cap. He put his scout mess kit and his scout first-aid kit in his scout pack and went into the kitchen and got some cans of something and put them into the pack as well. He went back to the room and sat at Dudley's desk. He looked in the mirror. Still everything was wrong. He was still a boy. He went into the closet and got a black hat that looked something like his father's. With this he returned to the mirror and took up the black pen and made a black moustache on his lip and made circles around his eyes, these were the glasses, and put on the black hat and stuck the black pen in his mouth, that would be the cigar. He then took up a book and went to the big chair across the room and turned on the reading lamp there and sat in the chair and opened the book and soon fell asleep, as his father had done, night after night, when they all had lived here.

Some time later there came a knock at the side door. Van waited. The ghost knocked again. Van said:

“Come in, Dudley.”

The door opened and his grandfather's head poked into the room. His grandfather's face was white, but he smiled when he saw Van. His grandfather came into the room. He looked about as if it were a hotel room, some place he had never been. He came over and crouched by Van's chair, as if he were the boy and Van the father.

“I saw the lights. We've been looking for you all over town. Your grandmother—” the old man shook his head, “—your grandmother has been very worried.”

“People have been looking for me all day. I've been hiding out.”

His grandfather smiled. “Well, you certainly did a good job of it.”

"I had to. If they had caught me they would have taken me to jail or tortured me or taken me back to your house."

His grandfather's smile dropped but came back on. "Surely my house isn't that bad."

"It was just a game."

"Of course." His grandfather stood and put his hand on Van's shoulder. "Would you like to come back to my house now? Just for a while. Your grandmother would like to see you very much."

"I can't. I'm waiting for my father."

The old man smiled at the scout uniform. "Of course. I'll drive you over to him—after you've seen your grandmother."

Van's grandfather took him by the arm and gently raised him from the chair and they went out the side door, leaving all the lights in the house on. The ground and everything on it was white, covered with snow, and the sky was black but for the stars. Van and his grandfather got in his grandfather's long black car, the longest car in town. Van moved over and sat close to his grandfather. Van's grandfather drove the car through the cold, quiet, white streets. Van moved closer to his grandfather.

"We're going to be pioneers or settlers or cowboys or something. That's the game we're going to play. We're going to be like the first people who came to this town, before it was a town. We're going to pretend we're in a tent or something and there is nobody around but us. And then when we wake in the morning, we'll decide we like it so much here, we'll just stay and make it a town."

Van's grandfather laughed lightly as he drove. "Do you know, that's exactly how my father and I came here. We came in a wagon and pitched our tent not far from the gully, where Eastertown is now, and when we woke in the morning, we decided to stay."

Van moved closer to his grandfather, next to him, and felt something so good he did not know the name for it. Warm. He had been so cold for so long he had forgotten the name for it.

"Then tonight I'll be you and my father will be your father."

"That would be nice," his grandfather said and smiled and put his arm around him and drove with one hand through the cold, quiet streets, everything covered with white.



They were going to talk to the dead. This pleased Jo Peters no end, that Dorothea had chosen him to accompany her on this mission, but first there was the matter of getting out of the house. One's timing had to be exact.

Too early in the day, before Mother had her medicine, and she might be seen as cranky. Too late, and perhaps too much, there was the sarcasm to deal with, as well as her not thinking and seeing particularly clearly. On more than one occasion, when Dorothea had dropped by, they on their way to a movie or play or concert or some other cultural outing in the hub city, Mother had come onto the porch and hooted at the drama coach and called her *bussy* and had mistaken her for one of those fast highschool girls who had taken, in these loose times, to running around with older men, sometimes even highschool teachers. Jo Peters smiled that anyone, even Mother on her medicine, might take Dorothea for a highschool girl, fast, loose, of any sort.

Jo Peters considered as they left the house (the departure made with ease, bit before noon, Mother smiley and yawny) that surely Dorothea had been a highschool girl once (there was after all Dorothea's senior class picture at the school, the photograph of Dorothea looking something, ever so slightly, like a highschool girl), but the idea that Dorothea might have once run around with older men, one of her teachers, say, and pondering this Jo Peters fell silent, thinking of these days, all new and modern. It was all that bad talk going around, this tainting his faith in and loyalty to surely the least fast and least loose highschool girl and teacher in the history of the school. That talk being that some unnamed highschool teacher was running around with an unnamed highschool girl, no one willing as yet to name, not to Jo Peters anyway, who exactly this teacher and these girls were, not exactly.

That, all these new and modern ways, that, Jo Peters considered as they made their way overland toward the hub city, was something to ask Madame Melba. Some names if there were any names. This after they had had their chat with the dead of course.

Now let's see, how had this jaunt to rendezvous with the dead started? Dorothea maintained that it had been Olive Glassmoyer, now Bavender, who had called her. Jo Peters found this unlikely. These two archenemies since their own highschool days scarcely spoke, even when they bumped into on the street. And so far as the formality of a telephone call, Dorothea had once confided the only calls she received from Olive were those when, much like Mother, Olive had had too much and had dialed to hoot or wax sarcastic upon how poorly Dorothea, when a highschool girl, had pronounced, say, the word *alcohol*. This a word, Dorothea went on to confide further, Olive Glassmoyer spoke very well indeed, if not perfectly, having been barking it out, and not at the drugstore, ten to twenty times a day most of her life. Be that as it may, whoever had called whom, everyone in town

knew that Dorothea had an *in* with Madame Melba and Madame Melba had an *in* with the dead and if you, Olive Glassmoyer, say, wanted to speak to the dead, a son recently departed, say, it would be done most easily and successfully if you did so through the auspices of Dorothea Rainborough.

In any case, such was to be their day's outing. To rendezvous with Olive Glassmoyer so that she, through Dorothea's pull, might speak, through Madame Melba's power, to her dead son, Dudley.

Jo Peters had never before been with Dorothea to confer with Madame Melba and he had to say he was disappointed when Dorothea slowed the car on the outskirts of the hub city and pulled into a gravel parking lot on which sat a tattered trailer house. Jo Peters had imagined a great, gaunt mansion to be found in the absolutely terrifying heart of hub city—somewhere near the bus station where murders and theft and loitering occurred—but no, there was no mistaking it. There above the trailer house door hung a sign, this cluttered with stars and a crescent moon and an arch-back black cat, which read:

MADAME MELBA. PALMISTRY.

CARD READINGS.

FUTURES TOLD.

Nothing at all about speaking to the dead. This omission, Dorothea informed as they climbed out of the car, had come about through the meddling of some state or hub city official who had made Madame Melba paint out, or star over, the perfectly harmless SÉANCES. Some mumbo jumbo to do with truth in advertising, Dorothea further informed, and they made their way toward the trailer house at the rear of the lot.

Another car sat in the lot. Jo Peters did not recognize the car till he had come right up on it.

Olive Glassmoyer's convertible had been a creamy yellow once, but now it was brown, all covered with dust and dirt and mud. Jo Peters lagged behind, Dorothea pressing on, to have a look around.

The convertible top was down. This on a day cold and gray, a storm's black lid rising from the north, soon to clamp down darkness and more cold over them; and now flecks of snow had begun to drift like dust in the air. Inside the car were bottles and cans and cigarets and their butts and match sticks and crumpled bills, fives, tens, twenties, and coins and rinds and crusts and cores of things half eaten and broken-back books and torn magazines and pieces of clothing and hats and shoes and curios and other relics bought by the roadside and there was a pistol or what looked like one's butt protruding from under a cushion—all this and more littered the car's floor-

boards and seats. And in the back there was a sleeping bag and a shelter half and an uncovered pillow spread out, so that Jo Peters knew it was here, and not in some fancy spa over the state line, that Olive Glassmoyer had been living. Such were the rumors that had been put out about Olive since high-school. That during the summers then Olive would take the convertible her Daddy had bought her and take off and drive, without destination, without any purpose but to be moving, till the road turned or ended and she would drive on, some said, across fields, till she found another road, living in her car for weeks on end and living nowhere, as if she were damned like the Flying Dutchman to find no rest or peace anywhere.

Jo Peters thought to ask after this lost, tormented, wandering soul, when he saw his guide had gone on and disappeared inside, he hoped, the trailer house. That it had begun to snow more heavily now, a fine white cover forming over this damned car and everything in it, sent Jo Peters away from the car and its wintry fate and hard for Madame Melba and her shelter.

The door stood open. Jo Peters rapped on the frame. Nothing. Jo Peters went into the trailer house. It looked like a dentist's waiting room—cheap chairs and low tables put about, magazines scattered over them, and some framed prints and a diploma hanging on the walls—than a place the dead would visit to tell tales from beyond the grave. But then the prints, Jo Peters now saw as he went about the room, were things like shrouded figures rising from the mists and scantily-clothed young women with glowing light-bulb eyes, and there was one picture of some animal that might have been a cow but for its dragon's head and claws and wings, the beast crouched on a crag overlooking a deep whirlpool, this sucking a host of howling people down to the center of the earth. More like it. As was the diploma that showed that Madame Melba had graduated with honors from some patascientific institute in California.

Yes, Jo Peters considered as he approached a door hung with a bead curtain, this was it. All beyond the bead curtain lay quiet. Jo Peters parted the bead strings and peeked in. The walls and ceiling and floor of this room had surely been painted black, as the room was dark as night. Nothing could be seen beyond the round table on which sat a glowing globe, around which were gathered four figures, all still as the dead.

More like it still, Jo Peters figured, and better yet when a low moaning voice rose from the dark.

"I see a stranger approaching. A traveler who has come far to be at this place. Come, stranger, and enter here and tell those of us who are gathered why you have come to us at this hour."

Perfect. Just perfect.

Jo Peters went through the bead curtain and after groping found a chair with no one in it. He drew the chair to the table.

“Well, Dorothea called this morning—”

“Shhht!” came from the gloom. This not at all the querulous, moaning voice of before. Rather more like Mother backing down a barking dog. “And take your elbows off the table.” Jo Peters looked hard into the gloom. Mother again. Exactly. Had the old girl kicked off in the last hour or so, her spirit soaring over to Madame Melba’s to keep an eye on him? No, he concluded as Madame Melba went on to do more moaning, Madame Melba probably had a son who lived with her and took care of her, with Madame Melba, like Mother, still thinking it was she who was taking care of him.

While Madame Melba moaned on, Jo Peters, eyes adjusting to the dark, studied the figures around the table. First the table itself. It wasn’t round, as Jo Peters had thought when he first came into the room, rather: half round, a half moon, like those card tables they had in the casinos over the state line, those from which Mother had been banned for life. Madame Melba sat at the flat side of the table, where the cheaters who dealt off the bottom usually sat, while they four were positioned along the round side of the table, where those being bilked would have been found, had this been a casino.

Jo Peters had thought a palm-reading fortune teller might look something like a sorceress or a witch, along those lines, long pallid cadaverish face, long lank black hair, eyes of green fire, clawish fingernails painted black, a turban maybe; but here Madame Melba ruled, a dumpy little old lady with stubby arms, hands round as paws. And so far as costume, Jo Peters could have done better himself. A bandana tied around her head, many bead necklaces wrapped around the stubby neck, lot of rings rammed on the stubby fingers, and heavy makeup—lipstick, rouge, mascara—that looked like someone had stood across the room and tossed it toward Madame Melba.

Of the others, Jo Peters sitting at the right side of the table, first came Dorothea seated next to him, eyes closed, hands placed palms down on the table. Beyond Dorothea sat a woman who was probably Olive Bavender, though Jo Peters couldn’t make out a face, the woman’s head bowed. This woman’s shoulders shook, she was making some strange sounds in her throat, she could have been laughing or weeping. Now, as his vision became used to the dark, Jo Peters turned to the figure sitting at the far end of the table. It was Doc Bavender! But now came disappointment, this mistaken identity, as Jo Peters wouldn’t have minded seeing the man of science,

though a good friend and trusted colleague, come off his high horse and entertain some truths you couldn't brew up and test in a tube. Well, this lookalike at the end of the table wore a Doc Bavender sort of hat, same for the jacket, same for the cigar, and now that Madame Melba seemed to have done most of her moaning this figure said something that sounded an awful lot like, well less Doc Bavender and more Jack Cook:

"What a load of crap."

"Oooooooooooooo," countered Madame Melba, grabbing her crystal ball, which had an electrical wire attached to its base, and rolled her eyes back in her head. "I feel. I feel. I feel there is an unbeliever in our midst."

"Not me." Jo Peters, to set the record straight.

"*Shhh!*" Mother Melba, as Jo Peters was beginning to think of the séancer.

"Pure crap." Lookalike stressing previous point.

Madame Melba plunked the electric crystal ball back on the table, opened her beady little eyes and seemed willing to let the matter pass. "Listen, just—" Madame Melba began a bit harshly, then shifted into a drifting, ghostly sort of delivery: "Just place your hands palm down on the table and close your eyes, as Sister Dorothea has so already done."

"Hallelujah," said lookalike.

"Do it," growled Madame Melba.

Jo Peters did part of it. Hands on the table, but he kept eyes open, a slit, to keep an eye on the lookalike. First, the lookalike couldn't possibly have been Doc Bavender because the lookalike, Jo Peters now saw, was a woman, the top part of her only dressed like a man. As for the woman's bottom part, as she now put her feet up on the table, her feet and her ankles and all the rest of her legs were bare, that part of the woman didn't seem to be dressed at all. The woman had also taken to swigging from a bottle, which she now put on the table alongside bare feet, and puffed away on her cigar, scattering ash.

Madame Melba eyed bare feet, bare legs, cigar and bottle, licked her lips and looked in the mood to get on with it. And so she muttered as if to herself:

"Let's just get this over with, honey." Then she bellowed, in a ghostly, moaning sort of way: "Dudley! Dudley Bavender! Can you hear us! We speak to you from the land of the living!"

"Earth to Dudley. Earth to Dudley. Can you read? Over and out," said lookalike.

Now a new voice called out and a chill crept along Jo Peters' spine. Now Jo Peters knew this voice was coming from Dorothea Rainborough, she was sitting right next to him, and peeking he saw Dorothea's lips

move, but—*the voice was the voice of Dudley Bavender!* Or pretty close. The voice seemed to be responding a bit to Madame Melba, a bit to the wise-off lookalike:

“I hear you, Madame Melba, but not clearly. There seems to be some static in the air.”

“Amen.” Growled, from Madame Melba.

Now these odd things happened and they happened very quickly. Olive Bavender, who had been sitting, head bowed, hands on the table, like they all, now Olive slammed her face onto the table and took to laughing or crying volubly, her shoulders shaking, body heaving, fists pounding the table top. This was followed by the bottle leaving the lookalike’s mouth, being drawn back by her strong right arm and now, immediately and very swiftly, making straight for Dorothea Rainborough and perhaps Jo Peters crouched behind her. Jo Peters ducked in any case. When Jo Peters came up a great deal of chaos had broken out around the table. Dorothea, perhaps receiving some warning from Dudley, had ducked too, arms wrapped over her head. The lookalike had come over the table for Dorothea, as once one of the casino card dealers had come over the table for Mother, while Madame Melba had gotten a stick from somewhere, maybe part of a magic trick, and was banging it on the table. All were shouting or making noise. And the following conversation, or exchange, occurred.

“Who brung this floosey in here! Nobody told me she was coming in! That’s an extra five bucks!” This Madame Melba, Mother just before the card dealer had come over the table for her.

“Help! She tried to kill me! Help, police!” Dorothea, no longer speaking for Dudley.

“Oh my god! It was him! Oh my god it was his voice! Oh he’s dead oh he’s dead!” etc from Olive, being dragged out of the chair and out of the room by the lookalike and trying, by the looks of her struggle, to come back and speak to her dead son. While, in fact, it was the lookalike, after having shoved Olive into the front room, doing the coming back.

“I ought to kick your ass right here and now, Dotty Rainbow, and let me tell you,” the lookalike coming very close to Dorothea, bringing her face right down to Dorothea’s and speaking with perfectly lethal threat, “if I hear any more of these stories about that boy being murdered I’m going to drive all the way back over to that miserable hometown of yours and kick it there. Up one street and down the other. Understood?”

Oh well. All this soon moved out into the front parlor and then on out to the parking lot, leaving Jo Peters alone in the gloomy room. During this time of peace Jo Peters reached over the table and drew to him the crystal

ball, so far as the electrical wire would allow. Jo Peters held the glowing ball in his hands and closed his eyes.

“Mother. Are you there? This is your son, Jo. Speaking from Madame Melba’s.”

Jo Peters waited, till the ball grew too hot to handle, but, as no word came back, Jo Peters supposed the old girl still alive, such timing would have been too much to hope for. But still it was something, if not exactly to look forward to, then to anticipate, Jo Peters considered, joining the fray in the parking lot.



They were lost. So Jo Peters thought first. The snow falling thick as fleece, the parking lot hubbub, the bottle toss, the kick-butt football threats, all these and more had so disconcerted Dorothea that, not thinking, she had taken the road back to their town that no one not ghoulish ever took. The death road. But then perhaps Dorothea *was* thinking, Jo Peters considered, Dorothea plunging the car with great purpose into the wall of snow and gathering night. “The town! Our town! *Hometown!* The classic! Why haven’t I thought of it before!” And so Dorothea went on and on, the car now coming to the rim of the canyon, the death site lying silent in the pit below. Surely all this babble meant that Dorothea meant to stop by the death site on the way home and pay her respects to her long lost troupers. But then as the car tipped over the bluff and dived down the winding road, Jo Peters began to wonder: what if Dorothea had some other purpose in coming along the death road, some secret desire, say, to repeat that tragedy of ten long years ago? What cruel twist of fate, Jo Peters considered bitterly, if it turned out to be Mother driving over to Madame Melba’s week-ends and holidays to visit *him*.

But no. Dorothea neither tumbled or crashed the car over the canyon wall nor did she slow or stop to pay respect to the six black crosses, more or less planted where the bodies had been found. Rather she whipped the car past the crosses without so much as a glance and drove it hard on up the canyon wall, as if pursued by demons, all the while talking on and on of their town. In fact, going on so far as to talk about the town when they had passed the city limits and were well in it, as if, despite all her going on about it, she had forgotten the town’s existence. The drama coach certainly had forgotten about Jo Peters’s. Instead of taking him home, after, perhaps, cocoa at the drugstore, she drove directly to the school. Nor did she notice the three cars parked there—these belonging to her own husband, Jack Cook and Marie Blum—nor the lights framing the school’s front entrance, these coming from the principal’s office to the right, the superintendent’s to

the left. Rather, Dorothea hurled the car against the curb, threw herself out the door and into the storm, and made hard for the school. As it was still fairly early, Jo Peters vetoed hiking home in the snow and went after Dorothea, toward the school, curiously.

Jo Peters passed into the school through the broad front entrance, these four doors abreast. There stood the trophy case, its loot gleaming brass and tin in the shimmering snow light, and beyond: the auditorium black as a pit. To his right there came from the principal's office the sounds of yet another after-hours teachers' ho ho ho conference. As Jo Peters thought it might strike the passerby as strange, a man standing out by the flagpole (his usual post during these ho ho ho conferences) in a blizzard, he avoided that and went left, to track Dorothea on her way to the upper floor. In doing so, he passed the superintendent's office. As the superintendent had never, to common knowledge, let a minute past the last bell pass in getting out of this place, Jo Peters thought he might investigate. He lowered his face to the keyhole. There sat Llewellyn Rainborough at his desk in his inner office. The superintendent held what looked to be a very large picture postcard before him. Now he moved it to his face. Now he touched his lips to it, as if dampening a spot for a stamp. Though it looked as if the stamp might be fixed to the wrong side, the picture side of the postcard, square in the center of said picture, that was where the superintendent was licking or smacking or whatever.

Oh well, mailmen had ways of dealing with infractions, and Jo Peters went on. Up the south stairs, Dorothea having left a light on there, and down the hall to the long room that was called the study hall, rather oddly, as during school hours, with Jo Peters in charge, the place more resembled a roller rink. At the far end of the study hall there stood the small library, from which another light showed. The library possessed certain characteristics of a jail. There was a small waiting area just inside the door, with hard benches for the loved ones who had come visiting on holidays and weekends, and then a heavy metal mesh behind which the books were locked away. Jo Peters had once asked Mrs. Archer, the librarian, a humorless woman, if this chain-link fence was to keep the books in or the students out. And Mrs. Archer had replied, humorlessly, no one around having read a book in years, you didn't need wire to do either. Whatever, there, tonight, was Dorothea in the cell, behind the fence, seated at a table, reading through a book while pounding a fist against the table top.

"Eureka! *Hometown!* The classic! Why hadn't I thought of it before!" and other rants similar to those expressed on the drive home.

Now Dorothea stood and started a hike around the table, holding the book overhead, a trophy taken, all the while ranting about Hazy Hazel-

tine. As this was a subject that could leave Dorothea cranky as Mother when she missed the front end of the daily double, Jo Peters quietly left the library and out of the study hall and made for the north stairs. These led down to the north wing where the smaller scholars began those studies that would land them, the superintendent had once joshed, in every penitentiary in the land.

Jo Peters did not know at first he had come down into this wing for a reason. Rather: he did not at first tell himself the true reason. At first he told himself he was making the returned students' ritual pilgrimage: to view the collected senior photograph of his own senior year. As he went along Jo Peters considered there to be little pretend in such a search. He was, after all, a returned student, one who simply returned every day, save holidays, weekends and the summer break. It was imagining himself a *real* returned student, living in the mountains with Marie Blum and Mother (in body or spirit), now come to wander these halls after ten long years, that Jo Peters stopped before a senior year picture not his own and there realized the *real* reason for this descent. The six black crosses recently rushed by had put the car-crash year in the back of his mind. Now it came front and center. Even in this poor light there was no difficulty distinguishing the car-crash year from all the others; no other year had so many gold stars, the stars they put by the pictures of the dead. (You died during highschool you got the star, as if you had done good work; you died after highschool you were on your own.) Jo Peters strained to make out the faces of the dead, but in the gloom he saw only dark ovals, with lighter ovals, their faces, near the top. Now a chill wind swept the hall and crept up Jo Peters's spine. They had become mounded graves, all these dark ovals, not only the dark ovals with stars by them, not only the ovals of the car-crash year, but every oval in every senior picture along the hall. All, they all were graves, one for everyone who had ever come and gone from this place, and they all were dead.

Jo Peters promptly left this memorial wing and the vision—mass death, mass burial, the work of war or famine or plague or the bomb or only the passage of time and ordinary old age—that had gripped him and went toward the safety of the trophy case and the broad front entrance. In passing Jo Peters noted the principal's office was quiet. No laughter, naughty mutterings, the sound of ice cubes being flung into glasses—the usual signs that another near orgy was in progress—but no, orgy or no, no keyhole investigation, not tonight. Enough of Llewellyn misstamping cards, Dorothea ranting in the library, the spooky thoughts you thought in the north wing and, above all, enough of Jack Cook's hi-jinks with the trusting Miss Blum. He went on out in a hurry and stood by the pole on his own. Just as well or

he would have missed ride home. When Dorothea came bursting through the broad front entrance, raving *Hometown! Etc etc!*, waving some book over her head, her pace was such that Jo Peters, already halfway to the car, was soon passed by the swiftly mushing drama coach and in the end had to fling himself into a moving vehicle to avoid a long trek through the snow. There to find Mother still alive, spread out over the couch, snoring blissfully, broom cradled harmlessly in her arms; and to find himself, as usual as well, not disappointed that he would not have to drive back to Madame Melba's tomorrow morning to be told which socks went with what slacks.



Carrie Steen. What stories, what secrets would she tell of herself? Such had been her means of getting to the heart of this town, to get under their skins, having all the others tell her and then tell each other something no one knew but them. The study club she called it with meticulous irony. A parody of and challenge to those gatherings of old women—clambakes without clams, Kirk had called them with less meticulous irony—a speaker invited, that invariably a member herself, to speak on some matter of great intellectual import. Yes, the study club. That was how Carrie Steen had begun to worm herself into the soul of this town. Thursday nights, Saturday afternoons, whenever, she and Kirk would host a small gathering at their house and there one of the guests would begin to talk. He or she would talk on some matter of great intellectual import, to begin, and then talk on and under Kirk's prodding and her guidance this member of the study club would soon be talking of herself or himself and soon that member would reveal that secret they all kept and soon that member would be hers. And soon another would come and talk and another secret would be out and in time the heart and soul of this town would be hers. That was how it began. That was how it had been planned. But what had begun had changed and what had been planned had gone crazy and now, tonight, Carrie Steen found herself thinking her own secret and longing for someone to tell.

What had gone wrong, there in the early fall, some time close after the beginning? The girls. They had been the beginning of the change that had come to Carrie Steen. They had been so easy, at first. Their dreams, ambitions, fears, rivalries, their petty, childish affairs of the heart, their desperate desire to be older, to know the world—Carrie Steen had played with these things as though they were dolls. But then as Carrie Steen grew to know the girls she saw their simplicity was merely youth, that they were not simple at all, no simpler than she had been as a girl in this town ten

years ago. And their complexity came to Carrie Steen paired. The girls' differences—one light, one dark, one a dreamer, one made for a rude world, one plagued by doubt, one carelessly certain—Carrie Steen came to see as those two sides of herself. That these two scheming, dreaming girls carried within them her own innocence, her own corruption. And so when the girls first came to Carrie Steen to talk, to tell their secrets, they were telling Carrie Steen her own and so from the very beginning were Carrie Steen's secrets laid bare.

Then came the others. Those that Carrie Steen had thought she might pin to the wall as specimens, study and dissect under a glass. Not one of these fools was the fool Carrie Steen had come back to know and manipulate and destroy. Jack Cook. He had been the first to see through her little study club. Early in the fall he had come to a meeting, bringing a bottle of gin to pour down Kirk, and had told his secrets. These turned out to be braggarty, boisterous war stories, parodies of the dark fears she had meant to unearth, and Kirk, her loyal lieutenant, staggering about, wanting so to have his own braggarty, boisterous war stories to confess, had by the end of the gin and evening taken to roaring laughter at Jack Cook's mock savagery, slapping the ex-soldier on the back as if they had shared a fucking foxhole. No, that night had not been what Carrie Steen had had in mind when she had come home to lay this town low. Next came Jo Peters. Coming with his perfectly terrible oils and perfectly wild and hilarious tales of Mother—all of them, even Carrie Steen, had rocked with laughter and that had not been right either, not exactly. Then Dorothea Rainborough arrived one night. More comedy was expected and Carrie Steen would not have minded that. Dorothea's feud with Hazy Hazeltine, Dorothea and her house picked up by a tornado and set down safely five miles away, Dorothea communing with the dead, Dorothea coming to the big school in town as a girl to say *alcohol* all wrong . . . but no, Dorothea had come that night with her own war story. Not dragging dead Japs away from gun emplacements so you could see to kill more Japs, but rather a solemn, moving tale of the internment camp Dorothea and her husband had administered during the war. These Japanese taken like thieves or traitors from their homes and farms and taken deep into the mountains to live behind wire till the war passed and then, after the war had passed, to be set free, to learn that their homes and land and all their property had been taken from them. And by this solemn, moving tale had Carrie Steen and her plans to diminish and demolish this town been themselves diminished and demolished. Then John Aubrey, the doctor who had tended communists or those called it in Spain and had come home to open a free hospital, he had placed his coming home

before Carrie Steen, mocking her shallow games with his own seriousness in coming home to treat and heal those who had not the money to be treated and healed. And seeing herself so disfigured by the works of this good doctor, this good man, that was not what Carrie Steen had planned either. But then it was Doc Bavender, the boring little man of science at the local school, who had finally, irrevocably turned Carrie Steen and her small, vicious, vindictive world on their heads. You see, it was with Doc Bavender, the boring little man of science at the local school, that Carrie Steen had fallen in love. And that was not what Carrie Steen had had in mind in coming home. No, not at all.

Before the boy's death Bavender had not come to Carrie Steen with his secret, promising *soon but not yet*, and then after the boy's death he had not gone anywhere but to go out at night, alone, to walk the town. It was on one of these nights that Carrie Steen had come upon the man, by chance. Carrie Steen did not often go out at night to walk alone, but on this night she had and seeing Bavender crossing the courthouse square had followed him. He had gone about without much purpose, it seemed, moving east to the deserted train depot, then along the tracks toward Eastertown. She had thought he would be going to the bootlegger who lived there in the gully, but he stopped short of Eastertown and turned back and in doing so had seen Carrie Steen behind him.

If she had been rather lurking, not wanting to be caught out following the man, Bavender laughed and that was forgotten. They then walked together and talked. The talk was easy—the man was so easy to talk to, with—and now Carrie Steen could not remember much of what they said, only their ease together. Ginning season had begun and they went toward the gin block. There monstrous machines, mansions of industry, he had called them, bellowed smoke and dust and cotton lint so that the air was thick and light died in it and men moved in work as if they were shades, all silent under the roar of the machines. The man came here often now that the machines were ginning; it was like a place, he said, from another world, like the end of the world.

They went from the gin block to the courthouse square. There was a man penned there who had once been a student and Bavender nightly passed his cell window to pay call. Talking was not allowed and Bavender raised his hand and the man who had once been a boy in the town and now had killed raised his hand in reply. They had gone on to walk about the courthouse square, talking of the boy, whom Carrie Steen did not remember, till they came to the bank corner. There Bavender took a ring of keys from his pocket and said he had something to show her.

Bavender had rented the office that very day and did not yet know of the back entrance on the alley and they went up the front stairs, those by the bank clock, to the office he thought he might come to live in. There was little in the office. A desk and an old swivel chair and a flat couch without arms or back. The night was warm for the season and Bavender opened the window and heavy, furred light crept like fog into the room. Carrie Steen sat cross-legged on the couch, like a student, she laughed, and Bavender took the swivel chair and propped his feet on the desk, like a teacher, and he had laughed as well. They talked and talked on through the night, easily, telling all their secrets, these not the secrets one kept hidden, the other sought to dig out, but rather those secrets that people, when they are falling in love, willingly tell. And so when Carrie Steen woke the following morning, curled on the couch, Bavender's jacket over her, Bavender writing at the desk, rich sunlight now falling through the window, it was then Carrie Steen knew she had fallen in love. And that morning, Bavender smiling as she woke, it had not seemed like a disaster at all. No, not at all.



But now, tonight, however many weeks later, snow filling the air and covering the ground, now all that had changed. Now Carrie Steen, empty but for fear, her dread of something unknown, felt disaster all about, it lay in every direction she turned. Take tonight's study club to start—the last, surely, of these events—even that had turned out, well, if not a disaster—a dying study club could not be so dignified—then surely a *flop*. Carrie Steen, Kirk, the two girls, *et voilà*. Not even Jo Peters, a regular, one might even say an addict to the club, had showed. The snow, perhaps the snow had kept them away, thought Carrie Steen, taking up her coat and muffler to go out into it, and no little boredom. Even Jo Peters had been known to nod when Kirk sallied forth on one of his bright new hobbyhorses, something he'd lifted from a magazine without pictures, from his latest correspondence course. And so she left them. Kirk standing before the fire, smoking jacket, ascot, cigaret in holder, a sidecar on the side bar, holding forth on something deep and broad. A nice-looking man, a nice man, a talented man, a safe and slightly silly man for a frightened small-town actress just come to New York. And the girls there on the couch, Jay, drinking all day, anything to suffocate her love for an older man, long passed out; and now Nina's eyes closing as well, almost closing as she pretended sleep and watched Carrie Steen go out to meet the man she loved, an older man, an older man she loved more than she loved life itself. Maybe even more than she loved herself.

But no, dear Nina, not tonight. Tonight Bavender would be camping *in* with his son, the only person he would ever love, so he had told her, a fair warning, she supposed. No, dear Nina, tonight Carrie Steen would set out in the snow to trace the walk they had made that night she had fallen in love. But now, tonight, was different. The night was cold, bitterly cold, the air filled with snow, the ground thick with the binding, slippery stuff. White mud, Carrie Steen considered as she went wading through the stuff, Carrie Steen growing colder, harder, talking some sense to herself, talking herself out of love as she went on toward the abandoned train depot. And why shouldn't it be abandoned? considered Carrie Steen coming through the snow to the tracks. No one of any importance or interest ever came to this miserable town. Nothing of any value ever left it, save for some cows maybe, and the mush they ate. And the town's great monument, the tallest thing in town, save for the water tower, it would be a grain elevator, great tubes stood on end and filled with the mush cows ate. And on down the tracks toward Eastertown and what would you find there? The town's nightlife, save for Loren's Cafe and the drugstore, a bunch of darkies sitting around a shack drinking beer. Maybe some highschool girls there, buying beer and whiskey and smoking cigarets like someone had a camera on them, calling this dangerous, calling it sophisticated, calling this shack a bar, this burg a life.

On and on Carrie Steen went through the snow, Carrie Steen growing colder and harder as she turned away from tracing the sappy walk they had made the night she had fallen in love. Carrie Steen working hard on falling out of love as she slogged through the snow, back to safe and silly, poor young and talented Kirk, and not being in love. On and on Carrie Steen went, going back, going back over it all, the night she had fallen in love. The night they had talked through the night, all night long. What really had they talked about that night that had brought on this emotional rash that people go around calling love? Bavender. The usual stories he told his classes. How he helped build the atom bomb. How the little workers like himself, not knowing exactly how this bomb worked, thought once the thing got started it would go on and on forever and blow every one of them, everyone in the world, to kingdom come. Good idea if it had, Carrie Steen considered, slogging through the mush. And his happy childhood. Maybe, he was thinking—he had taken up this doing a lot of thinking recently—maybe it hadn't been so happy after all. Maybe all childhoods were unhappy, he had started to think recently. Well boo hoo and a gold star for all that thinking recently, Carrie Steen considered. And his little projects. To bring the darkies, all of them, students and teachers, from their shanty school

over the gully to the big school in town, all high and dry there. And let's go on the next day and have a revolution and run riot in the street, to top things off, Carrie Steen considered. And the little book he was going to write. Some history of a town so small and lost and without significance it had no history. Hoo boy, a real bestseller there, move over *Gone With The Wind*, Carrie Steen considered. And not to forget, finally, this boring little man's boring little secret. It had come out just before dawn. His letter of resignation. The letter he had been writing nightly since the boy's death. Now there you had it in a nutshell, Carrie Steen considered. This boring little man who didn't have the guts to resign a boring little job and go off over the state line and live there in the mountains with a woman who loved him so, more than she loved life itself, not to forget her ownself—this little man was supposed to find the guts somewhere to resign from life itself? Don't hold your breath, Carrie Steen considered and then considered further, to consider Carrie Steen herself.

No. Let's not let her off so light this night she was falling out of love. Now what part of that night's billing and cooing had been her own? The gurgling and panting surely. Carrie Steen, schoolgirl, back ten years, staying awake all night, smoking cigarets and sipping whiskey and telling secrets. Telling all. Her dreams, her fears, her failures, back to dreams again. The girlish dream of New York. Of going there, to become a fine actress, to play all the classics on Broadway. And next came reality. Day after day of shuffling through the snow—*nothing today, dearie, take a class*—and night after sweated night of slinging hash. That was Carrie Steen's war story. Prancing in the chorus line. *It's what the boys all want these days, dearie. The war's over we'll start talking again.* Next Kirk. A lot of drivel on that, most of it drivel, all but his talent, his very real talent, Carrie Steen considered, falling out of love. Then came peace, then came failure. More of that, always that. *Faces, they want faces, nowadays, dearie. Faces that're pixie cute and puppy young and nothing intelligent. And voices too, none of that, dearie, nothing that'll reach the back row. Nothing but purr and pout with peace. Next war—we'll see voices, real voices then.* Then there came the wait. And the not standing, she simply could not stand the wait. Then the decision to leave, to quit, to tuck tail and retreat. Kirk's talent, her lonely, woman's face, the voice, its intelligence—let's move 'em out, head for the high ground, go West, young woman. Then came the end. The planning, the packing, the leaving. No one really to bid them farewell, to bid farewell to. Just an old friend keeping up hope, saying *maybe, something for a face, a voice, an intelligence, maybe something soon, sooner or later, after the peace, come the next war, they'll want serious then.* And then, and then the long drive home. Just a rest stop on the

way to the coast, that's what they told themselves, Kirk had something there, with the industry, some studio was interested in his lighting, something would come of that, something would follow for her, surely, with all that talent, that face, that voice. Ah yes. That amusement. Ah yes. That defeat. The bitter bitter defeat of that. The defeat they found in coming home, something would turn up for her in Hollywood, till then they would wait, wait there at home, her home. The cynicism, the sarcasm, night after night she and Kirk had laughed at that: the burg, the dump, the hometown, they laughed. The hole. Blink your eyes you miss it, they had laughed. And Carrie Steen, defeated, failed, bitter, so bitterly angry, she had laughed without knowing why when Kirk had laughed without reason, and she had gone on and gone out to play her games with the town, while they waited, she was waiting. To run her experiments. Yes, the study club. All those secrets and more, she did not think there was a secret she had not like a schoolgirl blurted out that night she was falling in love. Then came the change. The girls, Jack Cook, Jo Peters, John Aubrey, even poor pathetic Dotty Rainbow—yes, she had told all that that night of falling in love. How each and every one of them had not turned out as she had planned. *And you*, she had told the man, *and you*. Yes, she had told him that. The secret she had not thought she had, that night she had told it, she had blurted it, gurgled and panted it, the very night it had become the most disastrous secret of all. *I think I am falling in love. I think I am falling in love with you. I am falling in love with you more than I love life itself.* Idiot idiot idiot idiot idiot idiot, she considered and began to weep and sat in the snow, here in the courthouse square, beneath the killer's window, where they had come that night she had fallen in love. And she could not stop herself now, sitting there weeping in the snow, from falling, like the falling snow, ever more desperately, helplessly and hopelessly, in love. In fucking love.



They sat in the cafe, in the booth by the front window, the window looking out on the street and the barbershop across the street and the lighted window above the barbershop. They had come here from the courthouse, the jail in the rear. The doctor wanted coffee, more coffee. He would not sleep tonight. He would watch over the man in the cell, to see that he would live so they might kill him later, and somewhere someone would give birth before dawn. When the woman had come in her walk to the courthouse, she had seen that the man in the cell was not at the window, as he had been the night she had fallen in love and every night after that. Rather she had seen the sheriff in the cell, or his big hat moving about, the sheriff

pacing the cell. Then there appeared another big hat, a state trooper, then a nurse's white cap, all moving about in the frame made by the window. Shortly the doctor had come to the window and opened it and had breathed the cold night air and looking out had seen the woman standing under the window. The man in the cell had tried to kill himself before it was his time to die and at the jail entrance, at the back of the courthouse, stood an ambulance and a state trooper's car and the sheriff's car and the nurse's and the doctor's cars. In a short while all these, the ambulance attendants, the sheriff, the state trooper, the doctor and the nurse had brought out the man who had tried to kill himself early. As they had loaded the stretcher into the ambulance to take the man to the hospital, the woman had seen that the man did not look like a killer now. Rather, lying on the stretcher, he had looked like a small, kind, the gentlest of men, and the woman had begun to weep again, as she had been weeping before, sitting in the snow, and the doctor had come from the killer who had tried to kill himself and he had taken her away and had brought her here to the cafe, to drink coffee, more coffee, as if the doctor thought she was shaking, her face white and drawn, from the cold. No. The doctor did not think she was suffering from the cold. He knew. As the woman sat in the booth by the window and rubbed a small circle in the frost on the pane so that she might see the lighted office window in the building across the street, the doctor knew and had the woman drink coffee, more coffee, as if she were suffering from the cold.

The doctor and the woman sat in the booth at the front of the cafe. In the rear of the cafe, in the booth farthest back, were collected the owner of the cafe and other veterans, some of these veterans from the last war, some, the older ones, veterans of the war before that. All wore little caps and various pins and badges that indicated they were veterans. When the doctor and the woman came into the cafe they had not been served by the owner or the old veteran who sometimes brought things and took things away when there was no waitress and the owner was occupied. The doctor had gone behind the counter and brought back coffee, more coffee, to them. This was not unusual. The doctor was free to go into any part of any office or shop or house in the town. The veterans had watched the doctor go for the coffee and bring it back and then had turned inward to talk among themselves. Tonight there was spread a large national flag over one wall and another draped from a pole standing in a corner. On another wall, where in another office or shop in town there might have been a photograph of the president or the state's governor, tonight there hung a photograph of a famous general, a veteran of both the great wars of the century. Beneath this had been tacked a poster. This denounced the enemies of the state, those bent on

destroying the state and the liberties the state provided its populace. All these things—the flags, the famous general’s likeness, the poster—had not been in the cafe the last time the woman had been here. These things had been brought in, the woman knew, to prepare the nation’s populace, or that part of it that might come into the cafe, for the coming war. To urge the populace that, before this coming war, first they must rid the nation of those enemies within the populace, and then they might strike out in war against the nation’s enemies who lived in foreign lands. The woman knew what the veterans were about tonight, sitting in the back booth, talking low, from time to time turning to look toward the doctor and the woman. She knew what they whispered. That the doctor and the woman were among these enemies within. The doctor had healed communists and saved their lives in Spain and had come back to the town to open a hospital that healed and saved the lives of those who did not have the money to pay for being well and alive. The woman had gone off to New York and married a man who was a communist, or thought he had been one for a few weeks, and now had come back to the town to defile the minds and corrupt the morals of the town’s youth. The woman knew that the doctor was safe from these veterans. He had healed too many of them and saved their lives and would be safe from their hunt so long as he went on doing so. And the woman knew further that she would not be safe from them. Not so long as her husband went on talking his commie-for-a-month talk, not so long as she went on corrupting the thought and defiling the ways of the two girls who came to her house from time to time. The woman knew that in time these foolish men in their foolish caps, sporting their foolish pins and badges, that soon these fools would hunt her down like a witch. And the woman found herself, made dead by her love for the man in the office across the street, simply not caring. Simply not giving a damn.

The doctor turned his coffee cup, this way and that, watching the woman rub a small circle in the frost on the window pane. The doctor had been speaking of the man in the cell, the man whose life he had saved so that he might be killed later, but the woman did not immediately understand that.

“He’ll live. He’ll be fine. But I’m afraid we’ll lose him,” the doctor said. “Or lose his trial. Whoever it is who decides these things,” the doctor looked toward the veterans in the rear, “has decided he wouldn’t get a fair trial here. In his hometown. That we would go too easy on him or too hard, I’m not sure which. So he’ll be shipped off soon to another town, where he’s not known and they simply don’t care. And he’ll receive a fair trial there. Not too hard. Not too easy. Just right. But the sheriff has told me,” said the doctor, turning his cup, “that our town won’t be disappointed. As

we have lost one murder trial, those who decide these things have decided to ship us another killer in return. It's only fair," the doctor said.

The woman turned away from the small hole she had made in the frost on the pane. "Is this new killer a man or a woman?"

"A man."

"And who did he kill?"

"A woman."

"I see. And did he love this woman he killed?"

"It would seem that he did, though the actual word never came up. The sheriff called it a crime of passion."

"Yes. I can understand that," the woman said. "A crime of passion."

They sat for a time, the doctor turning his coffee cup, the woman making another small hole in the frost, and now another, and another. The doctor reached out and took the woman's hand from the frosted glass. He held the woman's hand in his, as a doctor would hold a patient's hand.

"You shouldn't have come back here. You can't stay here. You must leave."

"Yes. Yes. Yes."

The doctor took the woman's other hand in his. The doctor's hands were large and warm and gentle. Hands whose knuckles still showed the scars of his youth. The doctor had been born and raised on the eastside, and he would be there still, had he not married a rich girl from the hub city and her father not sent him off to school, away from the town, so that he could return and heal its people. The woman's small, white, chilled hands rested in the doctor's hands.

"How did you leave the first time? You packed a bag and left in the middle of the night. You can leave like that now. Tonight."

"I can't. Then I was with a boy I loved. We left together. It will never be the same. Never ever ever."

"Carrie. Get in your car and drive away. You're going to do it sooner or later. Do it now."

"I can't. I can't. Not now."

The doctor took his hands from the woman's. The woman's hands rested on the table like dead things, like things in a morgue, cold and still and white. The doctor pressed his hands against his face, so that his eyes were covered. The woman knew the doctor's mind. She knew what he was thinking. This love of yours is but another of your experiments. Now after all the other games you have played with us, and their failure, this love is merely another game. One you are playing with yourself. All you want in this game is his love in return and then your love will die and the game will be over

and you will pack a bag and steal away in the night. No, not the doctor: this was the woman thinking now and she thought and thought, hard as battle, and grew cold inside. Yes, that was it. A game that she was losing now, but not forever. One day she would win. She would win his love and the game would be over and then, yes, then she would be free and she would pack a bag and leave this burg, this hole and the boring little man she had thought she loved.

The doctor took his hands from his face. He did not, for a moment, open his eyes. The doctor's face was that of a boxer, a street fighter, an eastside tough: broken nose, broken again and again, an ear twisted, some gold in his mouth, a swollen, hard, scarred mouth. But his body, now that he stood, was lean and lithe, graceful, elegant as he moved. The body of a dancer. The doctor opened his eyes and stood. He looked down on the woman. He stood there watching her carefully. He had seen she had gone cold inside. He looked to the many small circles she had rubbed in the frost on the glass. He looked out the frosted window. The lighted office window across the street made a blur on the frost.

"I should be at the hospital. It's on the way. I'll give you a ride home."

The woman did not move. "No. I'm going to stay," she said. "Just for a while. I'll walk home. It's not far. I like walking in the cold. It's good for me. It makes me see everything so much more clearly."

"Then by all means, walk home," the doctor said. "Take the long way," he said and went to the counter and placed a bill there. He then left the cafe. In leaving the cafe he passed behind the woman. The woman felt the doctor stop as he went behind her, as if he wanted to speak to her again. But he was only buttoning his coat, the woman knew, before going into the cold. He had nothing else to say to her, the woman knew.

The woman did not know how long she sat in the booth. Only that she knew that if she did not move, only then would she stay cold and hard and would not be in love. But in time the veterans in the rear of the cafe began to stir and the lights in the room began to go off, one by one, till all the veterans had left the cafe and the cafe was dark. Now the cafe owner came and stood behind the woman, at the door of the cafe. He made some impatient noise. He rattled his keys. They made a sort of music, like sleigh bells. But the man's voice was slow, near stalled, by suspicion.

"I'm closing up," the cafe owner said. "I'm going home."

"And so am I," the woman said and she stood and went out the door into the cold.

The snow had stopped falling while they were in the cafe. The sky was black and clear and the stars shone hard and bright, like bits of candy. Like lights on a Christmas tree. Like when Carrie Steen was a girl. That was the walk Carrie Steen took now, home, into the past. How hard they had hoped for snow at Christmas, she and her sisters and her mother. They came out into the snow on Christmas Eve, before the light had gone, when the light was blue, so blue the snow was dusted blue. First, a snowman in the front yard, Mother directing, keeping the snowball fights down till the main work was done, the snowman's big belly made, and a smaller belly for his head. Then the girls took some interest in making the stacked balls of snow into a man. Various things for the snowman's eyes and nose and mouth and ears. The old top hat, the pipe, something for his jacket buttons, a dried flower in his buttonhole and broomstick under his arm. That done, Mother and the girls left their small house on the south side of town and walked down to the courthouse square. There, in all the streets around the square and the two best streets leading away from the square, the stores and markets and cafes were filled with hurried shoppers and colored lights had been strung across the streets and the large pine in the square, it had been fixed with lights as well. Carols played from a loudspeaker atop the courthouse and this music reached Mother and the girls everywhere they went, they going from shop to shop to imagine what in these bright windows might be under their tree the following morning. As the blue light went dark Mother said they must be home before it grew very dark and they made their way home through the nicer streets of the westside, so many of the houses here strung with colored lights. From time to time they stopped before a lighted house and led by Mother and her fine voice sang carols and those in the houses would, from time to time, come out to listen to their singing. And so they made their way home. There their final Christmas ritual began. Father was a working man, a hard-working man, and before they had gone out into the snow he had scoffed and made much of foolish women and girls going out into the snow when they could have sat like him, a sensible hard-working man, by a toasty fire in the grate. And now the girls crept across the yard to the window nearest Father's chair and there he sat, smoking a pipe, reading a paper, looking owlish and sensible in the heavy spectacles he wore only to read. The quarry spotted, the girls made snowballs and pelted the window near Father's chair. For a time Father ignored the snowballs tapping at his window, but then in a grump he rose and came out onto the front porch and shook his fist at the girls and called them names like *ragamuffins* and the girls, with a good supply of snowballs made, would pelt Father as he came onto the porch. Now Mother took up a snowball

and gave Father a good pelt, as she threw like a boy not a girl, and Father roared some terrible warning or threat, *so you're the one behind this, are you?* and he would take up some snowballs and pelt Mother as she had pelted him, the girls now pelting them both. In time, with a signal from Mother, the pelting stopped and Mother gathered the girls around her and they sang a carol to Father standing there on the porch, well pelted. After this Father took in his arms as many of the girls as he could carry, his arms strong and warm beneath his icy shirt, and all went into the house to find that Father had made far more hot cocoa than he could possibly drink and all sat before the fire and had their chocolate and relived the evening's adventures, the time Mother pelted Father a really good one, and one by one the girls would fall off to sleep, curled on quilts before the fire, and when they woke they would find themselves in their beds, always, and that it was morning and it was Christmas.

That was the walk Carrie Steen had made in her mind, into the past, and now she had come back to where she had begun, where she had always been, standing outside the cafe, in its awning's night shadow, looking up to the lighted window in the building across the street. The man who now lived in the office came to the window from time to time, looking down to the street, not seeing Carrie Steen standing in the night shadows, the man waiting, waiting. In time a long black car, the longest car in town, came along the street and stopped beneath the lighted office window. The old man at the car's wheel, the banker, the man's father-in-law, tapped the car's horn and the man came to the window and raised it and looked down. A boy got out of the car and waved up to the man who returned the greeting. The boy wore some sort of costume or uniform and his face was painted as if for Halloween though Halloween was weeks past. The boy spoke to the old man at the wheel and took a sack from the car and closed the door. He turned and ran along the sidewalk to the bank clock, running as hard as he could, it seemed, though he did not move quickly through the snow. The boy entered the office building there, at the door near the bank clock, and ran up the steps, running as hard as he could though he did not move quickly going up the stairs. The old man in the car waited. Soon the man and the boy appeared at the window and waved down to the old man in the car. The car horn sounded farewell and the car pulled away and turned a circle at the intersection and came back past the lighted window and moved off, in the direction from which it had come, moving slowly through the snow.

Now it was Carrie Steen who waited and watched. From time to time the man's head appeared in the lighted frame of the window as he moved

about the room, and then his head disappeared from the lighted frame and did not reappear. Carrie Steen took up a mound of snow in her hands and rolled and tightened the snow into a ball and went out into the street. Carrie Steen threw like a boy not a girl and she threw the snowball and hit the window first time. First the boy, then the man came to the window. The second snowball missed the window, and the boy and the man laughed, but the third snowball struck the window glass. The man opened the window and he and the boy took up snow from the window ledge and made balls of snow and threw them down at Carrie Steen, Carrie Steen hitting the man and the boy more often than they hit her. Then, as if by signal from Mother, the snowball fight stopped and Carrie Steen, standing there in the street, sang a carol to the man and the boy, as if it were Christmastime. When the song was done the man motioned for Carrie Steen to come up, to join them, but Carrie Steen waved farewell and went back to the night shadow on the far side of the street and walked in the shadow to the corner. There she turned and waved farewell again, though now the boy and the man had gone from the window. And Carrie Steen wept as she walked home through the snow. But it was only her eyes that were weeping, not her heart. That was what Mother had said, she and the girls hurrying through the snow toward home. It was only her eyes weeping from the cold, Mother had laughed through the tears. Her heart was laughing and it was warm there.

**O**pen House and Opening Night all in one. Well not the real opening night, not Dotty Rainbow's opening night. That would come sometime after Christmas, sometime before Easter, the unveiling of yet another Rainbow masterpiece, the veil around this year's masterpiece, the casting and practicing of it and so forth, so dense and tightly held that even Moselle Minor, with all her connections from top to bottom, from the superintendent to the cafeteria ladies, had yet to pry out even the name of the thing that was to be put on. Maybe it was going to be something with some dirt in it, some old men chasing skirt, some of the things that had been going on in this town of late. Maybe that was the reason for all this secrecy. Well Moselle supposed she would have to wait for that secret to be unveiled, maybe. As for tonight's opening night, that would not be the unveiling of anything, rather the putting on of that religious thing by Charlie Dickens, the drama coach always put it on this time of year, as over toward Easter she always put on that other religious thing by the Bible. Now what Moselle Minor would liked to have known tonight was what was all this secrecy going on about the Dickens thing, this being put on every year for so many years that everybody in town just about had the thing memorized. Maybe it was that this year the drama coach, being ever so deeply involved in her own secret masterpiece, had handed over the reins, for this one night only, to that returned Steen person, and this person, what with all her wild radical ideas from New York, was going to put some dirt in the Dickens thing, maybe. Have old Mr. Scrooge chasing skirt, maybe. But Moselle Minor couldn't see, not quite, that sort of thing going on in the Christmas classic, not any more than she could see, later on in the year, Mark, Matthew and so on chasing toga, in the Easter classic.

What it probably was, Moselle Minor decided, arriving at school early to do some investigating into another matter, was that everybody around this school and this town had been bitten by the secrecy bug. That is to say: the making up and the keeping of secrets merely to see those who merely wanted to be in the know climbing the walls with curiosity. Well tonight was

one night, Moselle had vowed, coming to school well before the opening of Open House, this opening well before Opening Night, that this one cat was coming down off the wall to unveil, if she had to claw it open, one secret. Namely, that of the superintendent's locked drawer and what was in there.

Now the superintendent was probably the least secretive person in the history of this place. All the desk drawers but that one, the filing cabinet, even the small wall safe, were nightly left open to raids and curiosity and the like. Tax forms, loan applications, attendance figures—there was nothing about this school that the average interested sort of person had not committed to memory and, to be frank, nothing there worth all that remembering. Surely there had to be something else going on in Lew Rainbow's reign, surely some dirt on someone—who was going to be fired, who hired, who sent back to the cafeteria serving line—and that something had to be, a curious person would have thought, what was locked away in that desk drawer, whatever it was.

And so now, arriving so early at the school she might have been staying late, checking out the halls, checking out the auditorium, the principal's office, nobody anywhere, now a modestly interested sort of person found herself in the superintendent's inner office down on her hands and knees before the locked drawer. A couple extra bobby pins had been slammed into the bun for the night's work, one came out and Moselle went after the lock. Twist, turn, jiggle and probe. What was needed, Moselle came to figure, building to a fine sweat, were claw hammers and a crowbar. The delicate caress, the brutal thrust, some language retained from the cafeteria days, all that and more and still the little lock refused to yield. Moselle had considered kicking over the desk and kicking in the bottom of the drawer, the school mice did it, some of them ran pretty large, when a change came to the superintendent's inner office. The little room had grown considerably darker. Moselle eased face up to desk top level. There, standing in the doorway, blocking out light, stood the biggest darkie Moselle had ever seen. And this darkie—or Moor as Dorothea Rainborough would have it, after some play by somebody—was dressed fit to kill. Make it half-dressed. A robe of many colors was laid open to the waist and this exposed bare chest, same robe hemmed at knees and this exposed bare legs, and some little old sandal things on some big bare feet. And the Moor's hairdo—tangled locks flowing to his shoulders, beard thick as a bush, fur rug on the chest—a visit to a well-rested barber would not have been out of line. And a holly wreath had been wrapped around the brute's brow, and gold necklaces draped from his neck, and many rings twinkled on his fingers and the great staff in his hand, now this was raised and brought down three times.

“*Ho ho ho! Ha ha ha!*” the monster cried out. “And what have we here!”

Now Moselle knew this was Jack Cook all dressed out and made up to play his usual part in tonight’s yuletide fare, the Ghost of Christmas Presents (*ho ho ho, ha ha ha*, people replied when Moselle mentioned the Ghost of Christmas Presents, but, as she gave a few, got a few every year, all this occurring for no rational reason Moselle could see, it seemed possible some sort of spook was involved), but she jumped straight up in the air anyway.

“A bob pin just popped right outta the bun,” she explained on coming down.

“*Ho ho ho! And it popped right into a key hole! Ha ha ha!*”

“Got snagged coming up,” Moselle replied and slammed the worthless pin back in the bun.

“*Ho ho ho!*” boomed the big fat Ghost wheeling away. “There’s nothing in there but love letters from Mrs. Grundy! *Ha ha ha!*”

Now Moselle knew that Jack Cook was forever saying things that Moselle did not always get, not right away—like informing Moselle she should upon arriving at school in the morning feel free to park her broom in the bike rack if she so desired—but it took some time of Moselle trying to imagine the superintendent and Mrs. Grundy, chief cafeteria lady—Grundy Khan of the Serving Line, Jack Cook had once said, mysteriously—in embrace or even holding hands, and failing, to finally get it. Or did she? Sometimes there were things Jack Cook said that Moselle didn’t get after she had got them. Oh well, food for thought—as Angela Fulks was always saying, as if thought were those little animals in the zoo you tossed nuts at—and Moselle Minor left the office and went out into the hall.

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The early comers had begun to arrive. These the parents of the smaller scholars, the idea being, Moselle supposed, to get their charges in quick, observe their drawings and other handiwork quick,



and get them back

chained to their beds even quicker than that. These unfortunate parents had helpless, resigned looks about them as their smaller selves, guides for the night, dragged them off toward the north wing.

But these little folks hadn't learned something for nothing during their tenure here, Moselle observed as she emerged from the superintendent's office. The sight of her and the runts made a wide berth and got Mom and Dad down to the classroom pronto. As Moselle moved along toward the principal's office she considered the wisdom of the superintendent's admonishment earlier in the year: *Let authority be our only weapon, Miss Minor*. Now how true could you get? It had been weeks and weeks since Moselle had brought the steel-edged ruler out for hall duty and still the knee-high shorties flinched at the sight of her.

Moselle arrived at the principal's office. Angela Fulks sitting there at her desk, as ever, the door to the principal's inner office closed, as ever. But those were about the only things that were as ever. First take Angela Fulks. Gone was the snuffling, sarcastic girl of yore. Now, tonight, there sat the principal's secretary at her desk beaming away as she went through absentee reports or whatever, the bits of paper that, of yore, had caused Angela to shriek and tear them and anything else she could lay her hands on into tinier bits. Moselle knew exactly what was behind this change. Dwight Cage then and Dwight Cage now. You see, back sometime in the fall, when everybody was snuffly and sarcastic, Dwight Cage had asked Moselle out a couple times or maybe she had asked him and Moselle had turned the grabby math teacher down or maybe he just hadn't showed up. Well however all that had gone, Moselle had known this poor girl's goose was cooked the day she had walked into the principal's office and had said something casual about Dwight Cage, probably him asking her out and her turning him down, something along those lines, and instead of the usual *oh not him*, Angela Fulks had smiled dreamily and replied *Oh he's not so bad*. Probably still at the petting stage, probably still on first base, Moselle considered as she sat herself on the edge of Angela's desk. They ever reached third, Moselle knew and knew well, snuffle, snarl and snap would be waiting there at home plate.

Angela looked up from her work. She smiled dreamily. "Oh hello there. How are you tonight?"

One thing. The principal's secretary's conversation had lost some of its bite in forgetting its snap. Not that Moselle preferred *Get-it-off-of-my-desk!* but surely there was some neutral ground, a no-man's land somewhere between menace and vapor.

Moselle looked toward Jack Cook's closed door. Little light showed behind the frosted glass. "Big Boy in?"

Angela looked around her desk vaguely, the room the same, at Moselle the same and then, when her eyes rested on the dark, closed door, smiled the same. “Do you know, I’m not sure. I think he may be. But then I think he might have gone out. I’m sorry. I simply don’t know,” Angela concluded the same.

Lobotomy. Operation performed by Doctor Love. No charge.

Moselle stretched her short arms and short legs. Never happen to her. Or would it? She yawned. That took care of that.

“He just gave me the fright of my life. In his wigs and get up and all. There I was down on hand and knee polishing Super Lew’s desk for the opening—” Absolutely nothing from Calf Eyes. And it, *Super Lew*, not only was it one of Moselle’s better ones, it was one she had offered this gone girl ten, fifteen times now and still nothing but that gooey grin. “—and then—now let me see. What was that point I was going to make anyway?”

Goofy grin, what else. “I’m sure I haven’t the slightest idea.”

“Probably not.” Moselle took a look over the paperwork on Angela’s desk. Those little notes from the principal’s office saying so-and-so could be excused from class—like when granny took with the grand mal all of a sudden. There must have been a dozen of them. “Somebody sick and sinking slowly? Must be a epidemic.”

Angela looked about the desk amazed. Like it had just now grown up out of the floor a toadstool. She lifted an excused slip. “These? Oh no. They’re for the players. Telling them at what time to meet backstage. The people who are performing in tonight’s play.”

All of which Moselle understood perfectly. Didn’t have to drum it in. She leaned in closer to the principal’s secretary. “Listen. Just between you, me and the trophy case—what’s so hush hush about this thing tonight? It’s the same old Charlie Dickens thing, *isn’t*,” as Super Lew had drummed it into her to put it, “it?”

Angela smiled. “Well, it’s going to be the same and yet it’s going to be different too. I am so looking forward to it. Carrie,” and now the secretary had started some bird-flutter laughing, “she’s going to turn the world on its head. But in a nice way. It doesn’t hurt for us to see the same things in a different way, does it? And Dwight in a—” and now the little bird had got stuck in the girl’s throat, she had taken to laughing up a strangle storm, “—Dwight in his—” and all this ended in Moselle having to come around and pat the girl’s back a good one. In doing so Moselle had a look over the shoulder to the excused slips on the desk. The top one was addressed to Jo Peters. And now a small commotion grew in Moselle’s chest. As if the little

bird had hopped over and was doing its fluttering around inside her rib cage. Moselle made a great, snarling yawn. That had that little budgie back on its perch, chirping away, pecking gently at Moselle's finger as she fed it—

Moselle shook herself hard. She had better watch it. This stuff might be contagious. Get ahold of yourself, girl, or you're going to be settling down in Love Bug City yourself. That was what Moselle was thinking, but what she said was:

"I don't think that boy gets paid near enough."

Angela had got it under control, some, wiping her eyes. "Um. What? Oh why not."

Moselle took to pacing the room, as did the superintendent when he gave dictation, just before he sat down and wrote it all out himself.

"See, I've been taken in on the administering side of things of late and what I have noticed, one of them, is that the bachelor and the old maid don't get near the paycheck of the married person." Moselle halted and gave Angela Fulks, who had gone to looking on the befuddled side, a stern stare. "My point being he has got his Mama there and, who knows, some day he might just have a third mouth to feed."

Angela just sat there shaking her head. "Moselle, I'm afraid I don't have the faintest, the foggiest notion what you're talking about."

"Just as well. Top-drawer stuff." In her pacing Moselle had come upon the secretary's desk. She grabbed up the stack of excused slips. "You know, I could deliver all this for you. If you got to remain here at your post and so on."

Angela smiled. "Do you know, that would be very kind of you, Moselle. It's not so much that I have to stay here—" and here the front end of another laughing spree showed "—it's that Dwight has told me, *warned* me, that under no condition—" gurgle gasp and so on "—am I to come anywhere near his homeroom—while he's wearing—wearing—"

"Just spit it out, girl."

"—his *costume!*"

And here it looked like the secretary had been hit by the epilepsy. Angela let out a howl, threw herself back in her chair, pointed toward the door and squalled: "Oh no! Not you too!"

Now Moselle knew her sense of humor could sometimes be on the leaden side, but all there was in the door was a boy standing there in his costume for the eve's performance. Ducktail coat, stove-pipe hat, vest of many buttons, something like Mexican bullfighter's pedal pusher pants, silk stockings and some shoes with buckles. That's the way they dressed in the

old days, Moselle had learned since coming into administration, but now as the boy came into the room, Moselle saw that the boy wasn't so much a boy as he was Miss Blum dressed like a boy. Moselle felt she probably should join in the merriment—even Jack Cook had come out of his office to practice more jolly if not downright threatening *Ho ho hos!* and *Ha ha bas!*—but she just couldn't work it up. The problem was that Miss Blum made a good-looking, perhaps one could go so far as to say attractive, boy. Certainly a sight more presentable than the clodhoppers on the football team. But then, on the other hand, it was Christmastime, the time of good cheer, and Moselle let out a solid

“*Ha!*”

herself, got grip on the excused slips, and made for the typing room before more fun and frolic had to be produced.



“If you think that is weird, girl, the night is young.”

So would Moselle think in a few hours' time. But as for now, making hard for the typing room, Moselle considered the night was aging fast. The halls and classrooms had filled with people. Parents of the older students now coming to check out the progress of their delinquents, many of these, but not all. Some of the clutterers were theatergoers come early for the play: others the nostalgics loitering about to gaze up at their old senior year picture on the wall; while others, the more simple-minded types, had got out of the house and down to the school merely to celebrate the season, maybe have some not-so-hot chocolate and shot-put doughnuts prepared by the cafeteria ladies. Whatever form of mental deficiency these rubberneckers possessed, none were so dumb as not to move nimbly when they saw Moselle on the way. The crowd parted before her progress like the Red Sea stepped aside for Jonah and the Israelis, the old story.

First stop: Typing Room: the weird and weirder yet. Not that Jo Peters looked all that bad looking weird; in fact his tall coned hat—this with holes cut in it so that the electric bulb within sent rays of light all about the walls and ceiling—his short little Chinese jacket and bellbottom India trousers (all no doubt borrowed from Miss Abshire who was said to have hiked through such places), all this somehow made the typing teacher look, well, kinda cute actually, Moselle considered and let the little bird flit a couple turns around her rib cage before it was flung back on its perch. Next the two girls, the blonde one and the dark one, star typists demonstrating their skills to a crowd of parents and onlookers, they both were outfitted in these long, hooded robes, the sort the football benchwarmers wore when the

bench was a block of ice. The robes might very well have been lifted from the clubhouse, Moselle considered, as they were black, the team colors, with the tornadoes—the team mascot in a land where all the other mascot-type things, billy-goats and bears and mustang ponies and horny-toads and the like, had been killed off—cut from their backs. Next the two Hoopers, not let anywhere near a typewriter when school-tax payers were about, they were dressed identical, as you might expect, as well. Only, in most of those Christmases Moselle could recall, there had been only one Santa, not two, about at any given time or place, as the higher number might confuse the younger mind; and though the boys' plump figures saved some on pillow and padding expense, there were these glints to the eye that would have driven even the most hard-up, gift-grabbing runt to declare agnostacy on the Santy question; much as Moselle hadn't believed a minute of it long before she had learned the benefits of faking gullibility around this time of year.

Moselle, then, delivered the excused notes in the spirit of the season and hurried on.

Next stop: science wing. Here Moselle found some relief. Doc Baverder—displaying some of the class's cut-up cat experiments and other bottled things that would have been called ghoulish if they hadn't been called science—wore a dark stove-pipe hat and dark coat that reached his knees, but really if you chopped the pipe off the hat and basted a hem, the science teacher looked pretty much like he always did. Not in your flashy class of dressers, nothing close to Coach Mack and Jo Peters who were on those days when things got out of hand felt by the unstylish to be simply color blind. Note left under a jug of something Moselle preferred not to think about, back to the main building, up the south stairs, threw a couple elbows that would have got the flag on the gridiron and with breathing room established went through the rest of the slips, battling her way down to the north wing and Miss Abshire's sixth-grade homeroom.

There in the back row were the three urchins-to-be to be delivered backstage at 7:30. The three that were always being dragged kicking and screaming into Mrs. Rainborough's plays, now they sat sullen, sobbing and suspicious, respectively, all eyeing Moselle as if she were the firing squad handyperson who passed out blindfolds, as if she were a fourth to that sadistic trio—Jesus, Santa and old Charlie Dickens—who made their lives such a misery once a year. As Moselle found such suffering tonic for youth, she ignored it and went straight to the front of the class.

After busting up a confab between Miss Abshire and some parents and delivering the notes, Moselle hiked on down to Football Three, as Jack

Cook, during the fall, called Coach Mack's history class, there to receive the shock of her life. Or a solid second place, right after Dwight Cage's number one, when he told her he was busy the coming Saturday night and hoped to be busy every other Saturday night for the rest of his life. There at the door to Coach Mack's room stood a woman wearing a long old-timer's dress, one with hoops and billows and ribbons, and a flowered bonnet, with a dainty parasol hooked over her arm. And with this woman were two girls similarly outfitted. All ordinary enough on this night, except that the woman and the girls were using the voices of Coach Mack and his football captains to discuss quick kicks and quarterback sneaks, the such. Moselle delivered that note and was on her way quick, before she could believe her eyes, only to be greeted at the Ag class door by *another* woman and *three* girls, similarly dressed, all discussing harrows and hog feed in the voices of Mr. Marble and his future farmers.

And so it was with some interest and no little trepidation that Moselle approached the math one homeroom, the bailiwick of Dwight Cage. Nor were her hopes and forecasts to be disappointed. There at the blackboard doing some demonstration math problems stood another old-time woman, hoop skirt, bonnet, etc., this poor girl the ugliest woman ever born to any time. Namely, she looked exactly like Dwight Cage. Moselle marched right up to this hoaxer and stashed the note right between her private parts, the upper ones, if she had had any.

"So this is why you can't come out on a Saturday night. I feel better about it already," Moselle concluded and went on down toward the superintendent's office, considering they were going to be renaming this place any day now. Nut House High would do just fine.

And of course there in the superintendent's office, sitting in the superintendent's chair behind the superintendent's desk, would be a creature dug up from the grave. The man's hair was matted and filled with dirt. His face a waxen mask, pallid and gaunt. Eyes black holes. Teeth rotted or gone. A foul rag strapped the cadaver's jaw to his face lest it fall away. Clothes decayed, stiff with coffin dust, tattered by the gnawing rat, ventilated by the burrowing worm. And all this wrapped up by some chain. In short, none other than Llewellyn Rainborough looking a good deal livelier than he did on those days he was to present the account books to the school board.

As Moselle's dictatorial chair was occupied, Moselle put it on the corner of the superintendent's desk and studied this perch usurper: Now Moselle knew this gnarled, gnomish little man sitting where she usually napped was Mr. Scrooge. She had seen the play as often as everybody—given it a glance

anyway—and these Scrooges all looked pretty much the same, year in, year out, no matter who was playing the old skinflint. But this year this Scrooge, the harder Moselle peered, the more he looked like the real Scrooge. Not made up at all. Like he had just hopped in one of those time machines and warped over from however many centuries back it had been that Charlie Dickens had written him up. And when this old Scrooge took to cackling, not unlike old Mr. Bales who ran the courthouse square pawn shop, Moselle began to wonder if she wasn't the one had warped back to old London Town, it being all misty out tonight, some fog drifting through the office window. And now, as the old fellow hopped up from his chair, nimble as a cat, pointed a finger under her nose and croaked,

“And Moselle Minor! Now I suppose you'll be wanting Christmas Day off, is it!”

it was then that Moselle Minor was halfway out to the cafeteria and, she hoped, the modern and present day. Well in spirit anyway. It seemed that her sturdy legs were not following orders just now, thereby sticking the rest of her like glue to the desk. But then the modern and present world returned as suddenly as it had vanished. This in the form of a modern and present voice, that of Carrie Steen.

“Hello there, Moselle. Aren't you going to wish me a Merry Christmas and, with any luck, a Happy New Year?”

The only problem was that Carrie Steen was not in the superintendent's office, nor in Moselle's own, which the secretary checked out on her way out to the cafeteria, nor in the hallway outside the office, nor anywhere around the office near enough for Carrie Steen to throw her voice, Carrie Steen being one of those people able to say something on stage and make it sound like she was sitting right there by you in the back row.

Now Moselle got the joke long before or maybe just as she got out to the cafeteria—Scrooge Steen—but for some reason she didn't feel like hopping in that time machine to go back and double check. Instead Moselle figured she would better serve the safe and the sane if she remained on course to gather all the cafeteria ladies about her and give them fair warning, this about tonight being the night Carrie Steen was going to turn the world on its head.

“And wait till you see that Jo Peters!” And Moselle Minor added perhaps or more probably in haste: “He just keeps getting cute and cuter!”

And the cafeteria ladies lifted their eyes: and it was months before spring.



Tonight the town gathered together. There were other times and places they congregated—here in this auditorium for Mrs. Rainborough's yearly play and for graduation day, at the Ritz for a popular movie or on the street before the newspaper office on election night or around the courthouse square for the settlers' celebration or down in the canyon for the Easter pageant or at Jester Field fall Friday nights for the football games—but in one way or another these congregations were not the same as the coming together for the Christmas play. The drama coach's grand spring productions were ever new pieces and the concentration devoted to the fresh, and the understanding of it, diminished the conviviality brought on by custom and knowing what in the world was going on; to some the end-of-school graduation looked comfortably identical year after year, but then there was always that year when a son or daughter, niece, nephew, cousin or grandchild walked the stage and those who had been commonly bored before were now so involved in the magical blooming of youth that they had no awareness of the joined ennui of those about them, and the town was so divided; the movie theatre might be packed to the rafters but, the excitement notwithstanding, there was a loneliness in mere light and shadow being cast over a screen as if to portray life and those who left the Ritz after such gatherings left as individuals, feeling no part of any one thing; the settlers' celebration, people came and went, to and fro, day long, never all the town together, not all at once; the Easter pageant, there all were so scattered over rock and cactus and hillside that, though the story was as old as any known to them, no one knew who was where, quite often their own children, parents or spouses going astray; and the gathering for the election results to be chalked on the great board before the newspaper office, those very results more often divided the town than united it; and as for football, there was always the possibility of loss, under Coach Mack the probability of it, and the burning desire to avoid it that led many a loyal citizen to consider downright betrayal, a move away from friend, family and neighbor to seek out victory and union in another coach, another team, another town.

No, when those who thought about such things, that towns might be seen as communes, thought of all the times and places the town drew together they agreed that the Christmas celebration of old Charlie Dickens' classic in the school auditorium was the only time and place that the town became truly whole and indivisible.

Tonight there was one point on which all in town agreed. That if you wanted to get your customary seats in the auditorium you had better show up early. Before early. Word was going around—from beauty shop to junk

yard, from the feed and seed all the way out to the truck stop—that tonight's performance of the Christmas classic was going to be the same but different, different but the same. That everybody in town, those who had never before seen the play, those who had seen it again and again, that all who came to the auditorium this evening were going to see how one thing could be both one and the other. Both old and new. Something seemed destined to be regrettably lost or fortunately gained, whether tonight's production was different, the same, both or neither. That seemed agreed, or the confusion reached such an intensity that it passed for agreement, as these first-nighters approached the school and saw their wisdom in coming early and their foolishness in not coming before early. One hour and a quarter till curtain and still the parking slots in front of the school had all been taken. The parking area behind the school, a gravel patch bounded by the science wing, band hall, cafeteria, football clubhouse and the shop, was filled as well. These late arrivers found a space behind the football stands, now making their way through the bunched cars, the packed halls and into the crowded auditorium, there to find two of their four traditional seats had been occupied, with three and four being well-defended; but, this being the season for such, were able to go on to convince themselves that the production could be seen just as well, if not better, from vantages left or right, closer in or further back. And so the last paired couple to show settled in, the four reunited for the first time since this time last year and a breath or two before the house lights would dim and the curtain slowly rise, took to watching the crowd gathering about them. They studied, they analyzed, they critiqued. Those who were absent through death or illness and those missing due to elopement or abscondment. Those who had gained weight and those who should have lost. Those who had grown balder and those who had found themselves possessed of a topknot rug overnight. Those whose hair had gone from black to gray and those whose hair had gone from brown to blonde. Those who came with last year's partners and those who came with next year's. Those who this year came alone and those who last year had been alone and this year were not. Those who wore last year's outfits and those who had taken to dressing beyond their means. Those who looked without public reason older and sadder and those who looked with private cause younger and happier. Those who had got themselves pregnant and those who had made certain they were not. Those who had made a killing and come up in the world and those who had gone bankrupt and gone down. Those who thought they had grown wiser and wittier and those who did not know they were as foolish and fatuous as ever. And of course there were those who took all this Christmas nonsense to

heart and those who knew it was but a conspiracy of merchants. And on and on went some, observing and dissecting all, while others simply sat there beaming like idiots, noticing nothing, hearing not a word said, content to lose themselves in the gathering turmoil and confusion that they called excitement and joy.

And so the hour and a few minutes was passed in pleasure for all. But now, with the hour approaching, turmoil was checked and excitement muted, confusion became order and joy expectation. Silence, you see, had gained a hold on the crowd and, as those last few minutes passed, its power grew and grew till, as the very last minute came, its victory was complete. The only sound heard throughout the hall was that of the curtain rising and that was but a sigh. The moment when the united town would be swept as if by magic to another time, transported to another place, had arrived. Let the play begin.



The stage was dark. In years previous the stage had been lit throughout and old Scrooge's counting house and Scrooge himself and his poor clerk were all clearly presented and immediately Scrooge's nephew came popping through the door shouting *Merry Christmas, Uncle!* to which Scrooge replied *Bah! Humbug!* and the crowd roared its delight. But tonight the stage was dark and not a sound or word issued from it. But no, now there came something from that black pit—a small rasp, like someone or some thing scratching. On went the scratching, growing louder, just, and with it a light rose in a small place at the back of the stage, a light so dim in its beginning that it collected like fog in that one place far back in the dark. The light raised slowly, ever so slowly, till something, a figure, a man's figure, the man sitting at a high desk, could be seen. The figure appeared so gradually it seemed to be forming itself from the fog, that it was itself something that could be seen through, like the fog, like a ghost. But as the light raised and raised the figure grew solid: a real man, a live one, sitting on a high stool at the high desk and the scratching that had first come from the dark, that was the man's quill pen moving, ever moving, over the papers spread over the desk and the viewers went back in their seats and sighs of relief and relaxation spread through the hall. Nothing to worry about, no need to fear. But poor little Bob Cratchit slaving at his desk on Christmas Eve and this year's Bob Cratchit, the word was whispered through the crowd, now everyone but those in the seats far back under the balcony overhang could see that old Scrooge's slaving clerk was Doc Bavender, the science teacher, with a shawl thrown over his shoulders, on his hands fingerless gloves and some funny

little eyeglasses perched on the tip of his nose. But before those seated near the front could applaud the appearance of one of the school's favorite teachers, one of the town's kindest men, a flash of light struck another part of the stage and the hands that had been poised to clap were gripping armrests or the seats in front or the hands of those sitting near, and the lungs that had been well-filled for a great laugh, now the air that had been collected for merriment came rushing out in a great, single gasp. For there, sitting under this sudden, searing cone of light, was old Scrooge and this not the Scrooge of former years, old so-and-so, the cashier from the bank, or that lanky farmer who spent more time drinking coffee than tilling his land, or any other townsperson or teacher that anyone knew. No, and the crowd had gasped, this small, bald, hunched, sneering old man was not a player or actor of any sort. This year's Scrooge was the *real* Scrooge: a small, bald, hunched, sneering old man who had come to the town from a time long past, from a great city far away. And with a snap, a spasm, with no other part of his body or his face moving, the old man's eyes jerked up and he looked out into the hall, his gaze reaching deep into the darkest corner under the balcony overhang, and there came from him a fiendish, mirthless cackle that brought all to the edge of their seats and all gasped as one.

Now came a bang from the back of the stage and with it another spot that showed the door that had banged open with the entry of old Scrooge's insufferably jolly nephew. And beyond the door, through its frosted glass, could be seen an old-time street lamp shrouded in fog and the voice of a boy crying out something for sale rose from the mists and the rattle and clip-clop of a carriage came from a distance, passed the door, and faded as the carriage went on along the cobbled street and a song rose and fell in the same fashion, a group of revelers wandering old London on Christmas Eve singing carols. This new nephew was not real as Scrooge was real—he was in fact rather obviously an actor, one acting his little heart out, the New Yorky husband of this year's director, no doubt grabbing this plummy role due to the family connection. In time the nephew had done with his strutting and indicating how jolly he was indeed, in a New Yorky sort of way, and arrived at old Scrooge's desk and cried out, with Scrooge but feet away:

“A merry Christmas, uncle! God save you!”

And now the viewers waited with great expectation for the most famous, best loved line yet penned in the language. But this new, real Scrooge did not shake his fist and match the nearby nephew's greeting, shout for shout, as played in days of yore, but rather a diabolical, heartless smile twisted this Scrooge's face and, still peering deep into the dark hall, the line, the immortal words of old Scrooge came out in a hiss as cold and menacing as the grave.

“Bah!” spoke Scrooge with frigid, fearful malice. “Humbug!”

Next came the two benevolent gentlemen to solicit from old Scrooge a donation, that the poor of the great city might pass as merry a Christmas as the rich. Usually these fellows were framed along the lines of the nephew in spirit, cheerful and kind, usually seen to be on the portly side in body, but tonight the two proved tall, thin, gray, dour gentlemen looking an awfully lot like Mrs. Archer, the school’s cheerless librarian, and Mrs. Archer’s equally somber student assistant librarian, but that rumor—that women might be playing men—was tossed back well before it reached the balcony overhang. Men or women playing men, Scrooge soon sent them packing empty-handed, as had been done year after year.

Now back to work for Scrooge and his poor clerk, Doc Bavender hard at his writing and figures and now the grandfather clock against the wall chimed the hour. Closing time and Scrooge made a slow scowl, grumped once, twice, called to his clerk who extinguished his candle and appeared, shivering and supplicant, before his master. Some rather fine grousing about Christmas and highway robbery and the clerk, grudgingly given all of that festive day, the morrow, off, went, shivering and smiling, on his way.

Here the curtain usually plumped down, so that the stage might be reset for the next scene, this being in old Scrooge’s bedchamber. But tonight no curtain fell. Rather the lights of the counting house grew dimmer and dimmer, till there was nothing to be seen but old Scrooge seated at his desk, Scrooge growing grayer and grayer as the light fell, till there was nothing to be seen on stage but Scrooge’s ghostly visage and then nothing of that but his ghostly, twisted smile and then even that was gone and there was nothing but dark.

And from that dark came a Christmas carol sung by a single voice, that of a woman, the woman’s voice as pure and clear and strong as any tone made by horn or bow:

*God rest you merry, gentlemen*

*May nothing you dismay,*

sang the woman and there were few who did not lose themselves in the beauty of the song, and what furniture moving was accomplished in the dark was little noticed.

The mystery of the silent set change and all else was certainly forgot when a gray, dusty light raised on old Scrooge, tiny as a child in his great bed, himself all fitted out for a long winter’s eve, in sleeping gown and nightcap. But Scrooge was not asleep. He lay waiting and he was worried. You see, in entering his great, gloomy old house Scrooge had thought, he could have sworn, he had seen the face of his long-dead partner, old Marley,

hanging there on the front door, where there should have been a knocker. Worry and wait, worry and wait—but not for long. Now there rose a sound from the bowels of Scrooge's house, a sound that this hall had not known before. A howl, an immense cry of misery and regret and sadness. A cry from the dead. Doors banged, shutters flew, the chandelier shivered and the cry drew nearer, and nearer, and with it came the clank and clamor of dragged chain. Scrooge leapt from his bed quick as a cat, quicker than any old man had ever leapt, locked and relocked the doors, shut the shutters and bolted them tight, and still the ghost of old Marley came into the room, passing through a wall that looked solid as stone. Quicker than ever Scrooge was back in bed, covers drawn up to his nose, shaking and trembling and pleading for mercy, and still the ghost advanced. This: none other than Superintendent Rainborough all got up in ghostly gear, chains wrapped around him here and there, his face sallow and rotted from years of the grave, or years of trying to make heads or tails of the school's finances, a soiled cloth wound from jaw to the crown of his head. There followed some talk about spectral things, then the ghost Marley got down to business—and this point never went over all that well with the merchants in the audience—this being to warn old Scrooge that if he didn't stop putting money and such first and last in his life, then he would end up like poor Marley, his ghost doomed to wander the night of eternity, his only companions cash boxes and safes and keys and padlocks, his only reading matter notices of eviction and IOUs and bills of forced sale and such. If Scrooge dug in his heels—and pretty successfully, the merchants thought—against this anti-capitalist line, the ghost of Marley turned to reinforcements. Three more ghosts would come that night to pay call on Scrooge in his chambers, one at the stroke of midnight, one at one hour past, the last an hour after that.

This warning issued, the lights dimmed and the ghost of Marley faded away, drifting back through the wall through which he had entered. *Bah! Humbug!* doors locked and locked again, back in bed quick as a child, pull the covers up to nose and now the light about went down and down till it gathered on his eyes, open, fearful, expectant, then dark fell over all, over Ebenezer Scrooge and his piercing eyes and then he closed them.

Somewhere a clock tolled the midnight hour, a great clock atop a steeple or a tower. With the ninth, tenth, eleventh stroke there was still darkness everywhere in the hall, but as the clock sounded the midnight hour, on the twelfth stroke, a light snapped on and shown down on old Scrooge's bed. And there the old fellow was, his blanket pulled up over his head. This brought a laugh from all, a laugh of amusement and no little relief. Till now the play had been so dark, so sinister and threatening, so *real* that the

viewers laughed gladly at old Scrooge under his blanket and then laughed gladly at having laughed. And now they laughed again, let go and really laughed as they had laughed in years gone by, as Jo Peters skipped onto the stage. They applauded that and they laughed again, a great roar, as Scrooge peeked out from under his blanket, looked at Jo Peters, looked at the audience, and looked back at Jo Peters hopping around, as if to say—*this* is a ghost? Yes. The Ghost of Christmas Past. Jo Peters—wearing something like a dunce cap, this punctured here and there so that the light under the cap winked and shone out in narrow streams, like the lights of a whirling merry-go-round, and some sort of funny little suit, a dress almost, all decorated with spangles and beads and flowers, and carrying a holly branch or some sort of branch that served as one—thus got up the typing teacher hopped about the stage more like a thing half-moron, half-rabbit than shade or specter, to arrive, in time, at old Scrooge's bedside. Now all were ahowl with mirth and appreciation and Jo Peters blushed and grinned and twisted his fingers together and, when the laughter had subsided, could not for the life of him remember a single line he had been instructed to deliver. And the laughter, far greater and more joyful than before, was renewed.

Well, somehow Scrooge got Jo Peters through all he was supposed to say and couldn't, for the life of him, remember, and the bed and Scrooge's chamber vanished to darkness and there, on another part of the stage, a spot showed down on old Scrooge in his youth. Old Scrooge as a young man. Except that this young Scrooge, some hated to say it but said it anyway, was such a pretty, smooth-faced, finely built young man that he looked more like a young woman dressed as a young man than any young man they had ever seen in these parts, except maybe for that one preacher's son, the one who—but such skepticism or worry-warting, as the believers had come to call such, was soon shushed and silenced and all joined old Scrooge and the Ghost of Christmas Past in watching the pretty young Scrooge, a book under his arm, stroll through the countryside. With the distant sound of birds chirping, cows lowing, somewhere a dog barked, the burbling of a nearby brook, and voices of children rising in play, there were very few viewers indeed who did not imagine that this was not simply an exceptionally pretty young man strolling a country path in old England, rather than the local teacher Miss Blum got up as a man walking around in circles on an ill-lit stage in a town so small and insignificant that, some said, it would be gone and forgotten by century's end. Young Scrooge walked about for a time, the youth obviously vexed by thought, till he came to another area of the stage—this suddenly lit to reveal a young woman seated on a patch of

grass or perhaps a heavy green blanket. The young woman wore a wide-skirted dress and bonnet of the period, was occupied reading a book that had POEMS writ large on the back and, as she was illuminated and young Scrooge drew near, turned a bright red. Now if young Scrooge was a bit on the pretty or delicate side for a man, this unfortunate creature was well over on the strapping and ugly for a woman. From the width of her shoulders and the bulge of her biceps one might have seen her, the flouncy dress notwithstanding, a linebacker. A sad conversation ensued. It seemed that young Scrooge had decided to throw over this hefty maiden in order to pursue his career in accounting, turning back on love, face toward money, leaving his beloved looking about as miserable, or at least uncomfortable, as possible, some of her fellow Ag boys in the crowd hooting cruelly at her abandonment.

The light rose once more and old Scrooge, back in bed, fearful of the appearance of the second spirit, the Ghost of Christmas Present—who came in a flash, in the form of Principal Cook swaggering onstage. As Jack Cook was the night's first holdover to appear—he had boomed out the role for many years now—the crowd greeted his appearance with applause, that some few things do stay the same. Jack Cook grinned widely and raised a fist to his old football buddies in the hall, he had scored a touchdown. Such amusement followed that even old Scrooge, in theory terrified of the phantom, was seen to smile.

Now came the crowd's favorite moment in the play—but for the finale of course—Scrooge and Jack Cook paying an invisible visit to the home of Scrooge's clerk, Bob Cratchit. Those who had followed the Christmas play over the years wondered—now that another part of the stage had by the miracle of spotlight and noiseless scene shifting become the Cratchit's bare but tidy kitchen—that Doc Bavender had never before been their Bob Cratchit. The poor, goodhearted man, so cold and weary and still filled with the season's cheer—as Doc Bavender came onstage, blowing on his frozen, aching fingers, brushing snow from a jacket too light for the time of year, a smile lighting his drawn face as he was greeted by his loving family, now many in the audience thought they would never again be satisfied with a lesser Little Bob. But then even the cleverest casting director must nod from time to time. The females of the family, Mrs. Cratchit, her daughters, maybe a younger sister, proved hulking, homely women who clomped about growling their lines in bass—the Cratchit's poorly kitchen might easily have been taken for some fat stock arena. And as for Mrs. Cratchit herself, the poor woman possessed Dwight Cage's singular features, what more need be said. As if to make amends, the director had cast obvious boys

as the Cratchit sons. But then again, though Tiny Tim proved the smallest of the boys, and that was right, but then he wasn't the right sort of small, rather plump actually, and his skin was brown and sleek, not the starched pallor one would expect of a dying child, and the crutch he waved about, again as in the great tradition, this device was more often manipulated like a tommy gun than as support for failing legs. But then this plump, brown, slightly threatening child did from time to time drop smirk and smile and there came a haunted look over him and his eyes went dead from his hopeless prospects, and that look of doom and pain and helplessness seemed exactly right for a child facing his final Christmas.

The customary scene followed. Bob Cratchit came home from work to be greeted joyfully by his family—perhaps a touch too joyfully by his wife who leered and winked and flexed her fingers, could not wait to get her hands on Little Bob—then broke the good news. He wouldn't have to go in to work tomorrow, and there were cheers all around, and though he hadn't been able to afford the turkey he had dreamed of, and there were hisses for that, he had brought home a nice goose for Christmas Day, and though there came more cheers they fell off some when Bob displayed a bird little larger than a pullet. Still, the family came around, if at length, and raised a cup of punch and drank the old skinflint's health, the toast greeted by an ample tide of hissing from the crowd, and the lights fell.

Darkness. Then a dim light and Scrooge was back in bed, more fearful and atremble than ever, as now he waited for the final spirit, the Ghost of Christmas Future. And all in the audience waited fearfully with him, for now the clock tolled the hour and another ghost rose from the fog, this accomplished by hazy lights and some kind of steam machine, the haunting figure floating through the mist toward old Scrooge. As usual, the ghost wore a black hooded robe, its face never seen, and said not a word, content to point with an icy finger to what Scrooge had in store for him, none of this much different from former years, except that this year's faceless, voiceless Ghost of Christmas Future moved about like a flash. One moment this ghost would be here, pointing his long finger at a scene to be played, then the light on him would be doused and in an instant the ghost would be seen in a pool of light way over on the other side of the stage, then in another instant be seen back where he had been in the first place. Even the most technically-minded present could not for the life of them figure out how this actor got from one side of the stage to the other in a heartbeat, not without flapping tennis shoes noticeably. But at length these non-believers said the heck with trying to figure out technique and sat back and enjoyed the immensely believable make-believe, this their conceit of the evening

and a pleasing conundrum, one that would have them coming back year after year.

After four ghosts and what must have been a long night, old Scrooge was finally convinced. He woke the following morning, bright sunshine flooding through his window, a new man. He hopped out of bed, for he had been made young again, and dashed to the window. This he threw open and breathed deep the morning's clear cold air. To someone passing along the street he called out:

"Hello there! Hello! I say, what's today, fine fellow!"

"Today? Why Christmas Day!" came the reply.

"Christmas Day! Of course! Of course! Well then, a Merry Christmas to you, sir!" cried out old Scrooge and danced about his bedchamber, turned then from the window to come down to the footlights—there to address his orders for other purchases wanted for the Christmas meal and gifts for everyone, these directed to the audience as if they were the various clerks and merchants accepting the orders. This done, two of the burly young women walked onto the stage and simply took the window away—perhaps a revolt among Ag boys forced to wear long dresses and silly bonnets? Scrooge's great bed was hauled off stage in a like manner, while others—the New Yorky nephew, Doc Bavender, Jack Cook and even Superintendent Rainborough, even he was among the insurgents now—came and carried other bits of scenery away. With the stage thus made bare, the aforementioned vandals commenced to set up a makeshift long table—this several saw horses, a long piece of plywood to be set on them—camp chairs erected all around, tablecloths arranged over that, a dozen candles set in fine sticks, a stack of plates, another of saucers, two leaning towers of cups and glasses, silverware spread among all these—all these and more were brought onstage and positioned properly and some in the hall began to see that what had never before been seen in the Dickens' classic, that this was no mistake or stagehand revolt at all. The drama was not so much over, as it was only beginning. The feigned Christmas repast for the Cratchit family and friends would be a real Christmas feast for all the cast. That which was play and that life would be connected and by their joining both enriched. The finish of one thing would be but the birth of another. All was whole and never-ending.

And so these astute predictions soon proved correct. The table and all accouterments made ready, now the food, real food, and drink, real drink, were brought on. Mrs. Grundy, head cafeteria lady, carried in the glowing bronzed turkey. A line of assistant cafeteria girls followed with the rest—pies and puddings and potatoes, sweet and simple spud, and salads and

vegetables of every color and taste and fresh baked bread, both corn and white, and gravies and sauces and mounds of fresh butter and a slab of cranberry sauce as big as a breadbox—and not a dish was the painted cardboard of years gone by. And the glasses and cups around the table, nor would the celebrants be sipping nothing but air from these this year. Jack Cook, heaving in a vast tureen of punch, would see to that. Now that the meal was being portioned about the table and the cast and the cafeteria ladies were gathering to view their work and who sat where, Scrooge, still forward before the footlights, signaled to the rear of the auditorium and the Hooper twins, no mistaking their rotund forms and twinkling eyes behind the Santa caps and whiskers and red uniforms, came down the hall's two aisles. From their bulging sacks the boys took bits of candy and tossed them left and right, as they came along, to the children of all ages in the crowd and for the smaller children yet, those who had only come to the school for such fetes as these, there were tiny gifts wrapped in bright paper and tied with bows.

This done, now a silence fell, for Scrooge had gone through a second transformation. The crouched, grinning little man stood straight and simply smiled at the audience and spoke, not in his crabby, wheezing voice, but in the clear, strong tones of a beautiful young woman, she, everyone now knew, the director of this year's play. After these few words that told of the joy that Scrooge had brought to all and that he would never be forgotten in London Town or anywhere else in the world, not so long as there were Christmases, and that of course Tiny Tim would not die, this to a great cheer, then after the cheering had subsided the young woman began to sing. And it was a carol she sang in a pure soprano, at first alone, alone for those haunting words *Silent night, Holy night*, then the cast behind her and then those in the audience joined in, till well before the song's end all present, from the boldest ruffian in the top rear seats in the balcony to the shyest cafeteria girl at the back of the stage, were singing with her.

All now knew the end was near. The singing done Scrooge stepped to one side, bowed and gestured toward those onstage and the cast, and Mrs. Grundy as well, bowed to the applause they so deserved. And so the curtain closed on the cast and the cafeteria ladies all gathered around the table, leaving Scrooge or the young woman who had played him alone before the footlights. Her clear powerful voice reached without strain to the darkest, most distant corner of the hall.

"From all of us to all of you, a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year and," the woman added as she opened the curtains to join her cast, "let

there be peace on earth.” And then, if those who had the Dickens work well memorized had thought the greatest line in our tongue had been forgot, the curtain quickly rose on all seated around the Christmas table, all passing dishes and plates here and there, then it was not Tiny Tim alone who cried out, but all the cast who turned to the hall and, massed as one, raised glass, fork or crutch, and delivered his immortal words:

“And God Bless Us All, Every One!”

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And so this Christmas evening both skeptic and believer were well pleased and as united as they would ever be. “The same but *different*,” maintained the crabby and the crusty. “Different but the *same*,” responded the lively and the gentle. And thus our divided playgoers found themselves so near to agreement, and so near to one another after all these years of separation, that for the drive home they naturally divided, the skeptics in the back seat chatting happily of bowling and budgets, while the believers sat up front and spoke quietly of stars and of the sea.

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Jack Cook and Doc Bavender took their cigars and cups of punch, enlivened, away from the pleasant chaos of the backstage meal and its festivities and out onto the stage-door steps. The night was mild, very mild for this time of year and the men sat comfortably outdoors. If there would be no white Christmas this season, a ground fog had spread over the earth and its pale, shifting cover provided some of the mystery Christmas celebrants usually sought out in snow.

The auditorium extended back from the school’s main building, as did the newer science wing, and the enclosure formed between the two sheltered the men from any breeze or chill that might have risen from the fog. Beyond this enclosure lay an open area bounded by the band hall and cafeteria, which shared an old wartime barracks that had been brought in and refitted for these purposes, this before the school board thought the district could afford the funds that eventually went into building the science wing and the new cinder-block clubhouse and the industrial-arts shop, these also set around this open area. In the mornings and late afternoons great yellow school buses gathered here in this space to deliver and to take away those children who lived in the country. For such functions as tonight’s Christmas play and football games and graduation and the production of Mrs. Rainborough’s annual drama, this open space provided parking for motorists who had arrived too late to find places in front of the school, so that as the principal and the science teacher sat at the stage door smoking

and talking, those people returning to their cars called out to the two men, congratulating and chiding them for their performances, all pleased with the night's production, that some one thing could be both different and the same. As the men smoked and sipped punch and talked, the parking area emptied and by the end of their time on the stage-door steps they were alone and, but for a light coming from the cafeteria, the area behind the school was dark.

To begin the men congratulated and chided one another on their performances and agreed that tonight's play had been remarkable, something both old and new, and that the young woman who had directed the play was a very clever young woman indeed, perhaps, as Jack Cook thought, a bit too clever, a touch too remarkable for such a small town as this. If Doc Bavender grew silent, Jack Cook had not brought his friend out away from the others for that:

"She won't stay here. You do know that, don't you, Doc? Even if Dorothea did retire and she was given the job, she wouldn't last long. She's too good and she's too ambitious. You do know that, don't you, Doc?"

"Do you have to be good or ambitious to leave this town, Jack?"

"No. But these qualities sometimes do make it tough not to." Jack Cook blew smoke and looked toward the science wing. "Doc, if you go and get yourself into a fix, or do something crazy, really crazy, and lose all this, you're going to miss it. As much as you'd miss your little life itself."

Bavender said nothing.

Jack Cook made a sound of disgust. "You haven't got that crap out of your head yet?"

Bavender said nothing.

Jack Cook raised his hands and slapped them down on his knees. "All right, dummy, too bad for you. I'm in one of my philosophical moods tonight and you have asked for it." Bavender laughed. Cook had majored in history in college, with a minor in philosophy, of which he was mighty proud. In such philosophical moods he would entertain and instruct Bavender and Marie Blum by striding about his rooms reading from his unfinished doctoral dissertation—a history of oil pipelines in the state—in such tones that this recitation of valves and pipes and nozzles and the ever necessary procurement of rights-of-way might have been a grand treatise on metaphysics. To their further amusement he would reply with perfectly straight face: he could not imagine how they could be rolling about with laughter: the grand design of his thought was there: all his wisdom flowing serenely through a vast system of interconnected shining silver pipes. Now there was little mock to his seriousness:

“Do you know what alive is, stupid? No, you don’t know what alive is because you are alive. You, Miss Blum, a few others, many of whom seem to live in this town and teach at this school, are not like the rest of us. We, and I am talking about the vast majority of humankind, aren’t alive. Not really alive. We all merely pass through life mimicking life. We, myself, your friend Miss Steen, all the others, feed on you, pal. We need you. We have to have you to be. To not not be. Without you around to study we wouldn’t know how to do it. How to go about looking alive when we’re not. Without you around,” Jack Cook touched his friend’s knee, “we would have to face the truth and what we fucking are. The walking, talking, living dead. Without you and my friend Miss Blum and little Jo Peters and Lew and Dotty, to name but a few, we would be blind and we wouldn’t even know how to fake seeing. We would be dead and we wouldn’t know how to fake living. Now,” said Jack Cook and reached back and breathed deep, “is that all perfectly clear? Good. Then no more of this shit about not being. Right?”

Bavender waited a moment. “I think you’re wrong about yourself. And I think you’re wrong about Carrie.”

“No, I’m not. We’re birds of a feather. I see me in her, she sees herself in me. She sees me feeding on M.B. And I see her feeding on you. Why do you think we can’t stand the sight of each other? She’s having a meal and when she’s stuffed and learned her lesson and can look alive a little while longer—then she’ll be on her way.”

“And what about you, Jack? Are you going to devour Marie and be on your way?”

Jack Cook came close. “Doc, I’ve been gone a long, long time. I left my dear, beloved Miss Blum long, long ago. That’s how I know what’s going to happen to you.”

Bavender said nothing.

Jack Cook pushed back. “You know if you had to have your little fling, you would’ve been better off, it would have been a hell of a lot less dangerous for everyone, if you had fucked one of the girls.”

Bavender said nothing.

“No?”

Bavender said nothing.

Jack Cook shrugged. “That’s not what some people around here are thinking. Think already.”

Bavender said nothing.

“Ah, fuck it.” Jack Cook relit his cigar, blew smoke, and tossed away what little was left of it. “All right. You’ve had some philosophy, now a little

history. The world we grew up in, Doc, we've had a sheltered existence. The first war, the depression, the second war, you know how we like to go on at these kids nowadays, how hard we had it, how easy they've got it—well nothing could be further from the truth. You know my theory of history and if you've forgotten it, you're getting it again. Somebody's always out to get you. Well, all these people who wanted to get us, Doc, all they wanted was our bodies. Work for nothing, die for something. Hunger and combat. It was all pretty simple, straightforward. But now, these times are changing. Now our bodies aren't enough. Now they want our hearts and they want our minds. These are going to be bad times, Doc, and they are going to be different times. What you once thought was yours and yours alone—what you believed in and what you thought—are no longer going to be yours and yours alone. They're going to want all that too." Jack Cook stretched his arms as if to rise, for they all were due soon in Eastertown. "I once did a good little paper for a class in colonial history. The witch-hunts. And do you know I learned the most amusing fact," Jack Cook said and stood. "They not only went after the witches, they went after the wizards as well. And," and Cook leaned down to Bavender, "my good friend, the people they went after happened to be the finest, most decent, most loved people in their murderous little town."

Jack Cook straightened suddenly and made a great roar—the Ghost of Christmas Present—to greet Mrs. Grundy and her cafeteria girls coming out the stage door. All were carrying pots, plates, dishes, glasses, cutlery and what hadn't been consumed at the backstage feast; several stage-hands laden with folding chairs came after the ladies. As they passed by, Jack Cook gave Mrs. Grundy's cheek a kiss and her rear a pat, while Mrs. Grundy sent out a friendly side kick in reply and pressed on before her convoy, calling out over her shoulder:

"Eastertown bird's almost done, Jack Cook! Be quick about it!"

"And their goose is almost cooked," the principal replied and patted the little cafeteria girls as they went by, they offering the other hip and singing out:

"Jack be nimble!  
Jack be quick!  
Jack jumped over  
The candlestick!"

Mrs. Grundy and her bearers gone, Cook turned to Bavender:

"You and Scrooge coming on to Eastertown?"

"Yes."

"And Tiny Tim?"

"If I can find him. He and his little friends shot off somewhere after the curtain. If I can find him—they get on quite well, you know."

"Do they? That's good." The two men had moved into the courtyard formed by the auditorium and the science wing, moving toward the fire door that would let them into the main building. "We don't really hate each other. I didn't really mean that, Doc."

Bavender said nothing, then: "I didn't think you did."

They came to the fire door. The door had been unlocked for the evening, but the principal rested his hand on the knob as if it would not open. He did not say what he had planned to say, Bavender thought, for his quiet tone little matched his words.

"Let's get together and have a drink over the holidays, Doc. Like the old days. Just me and you." They entered the building and went along toward the main hall and the customary uproar rising from the typing room. The men stopped here, at the wide corridor that ran the length of the building. Down in the north wing children could be seen darting here and there, from room to room, playing tag or hide-and-seek or some other game.

The principal spoke again in the tone that did not quite match his words. "Do you know, my idea was always to run this place something like the army. Along those lines anyway. Discipline, rigor, obedience and authority. And now I wonder what it would be like," he said and turned away from the raucous typing room, away from the milling children, moving toward the quiet of his office, "to let them run free."

■ ■ ■

He went through the building looking for his son and the woman as well. He went through the building looking for the woman and his son as well. He went through the building looking for neither. The science wing, there was no need to go there. The wing was locked and dark now and even had it not been, he would only have found himself there and he was not looking for himself, not there. First Jo Peters' room and the uproar there. Dozens of small children, those who were not allowed beyond the north wing, had on this one night of freedom dashed and darted from here to there, from one forbidden room to the next, to find themselves here, each seated behind his or her own typewriter, each pecking and poking away on these marvelously adult machines. All chattered away, crying out with delight when their own names, the names of their brothers and sisters, their mothers and fathers and aunts and uncles appeared on the paper Jo Peters had made them roll into their machines time after time till they got it right. Across the hall the nurse's office, Nurse Snell crouched like a football

lineman behind her desk, white cap pulled down tight as a helmet, waiting for the whistle and the charge of accident and illness, from fainting to the fits, and her daily combat with them. To turn there, away from the south stairs, to go toward the center of the building. The superintendent's office, his secretary gone, she ever gone, the superintendent and his wife back in his own room. The superintendent, still pale as death, was seen to be speaking on the phone, he was always speaking on the phone, his wife beside him, she with her hands to her face, her eyes covered, as if she were crying or had been or was struggling not to. The trophy case at the very heart of the building, so many cups and plaques and figurines in sporting gear, so much tin and brass trying to pass for gold and silver and bronze and failing miserably, so many victories remembered and defeats forgotten. The auditorium that had filled, so slowly, to bursting had now emptied as quick as a sneeze. The janitor pushed his broom up the aisle, and now, at the door to the hall, he reached to turn off the lights and with each switch struck the hall went dark here, there, till all light was gone and the janitor closed the door and pushed his broom on. Opposite the auditorium and the trophy case stood the four doors that were the building's main entrance and beyond them the flagpole, its chain, moved by a breeze perhaps, perhaps the earth's turning, rasping against the steel pole, a sound of emptiness, loss as the flag would not be flown again for weeks, till the holidays were done. The principal's office, his secretary gone, and she was so rarely ever gone, and back in the principal's own room were Jack Cook and his beloved Marie Blum, the two still in costume for there was yet another Christmas to celebrate, Christmas in Eastertown. The two stood in the room, this lit only by the light that fell in from the hall, neither touching nor speaking, merely standing as if both were waiting for the other to reach out or to speak. Along then toward the north wing. To the right the Ag homeroom, opposite where the history of football, some said, was taught in the fall. Mr. Marble and Coach Mack and their minions and charges had shed their dresses and bonnets and they walked about with swaggers more pronounced and spoke in voices gruffer than ever before. Into the north wing, where the lower grades were assembled to be taught or merely assembled to give their parents a few hours peace every day, save the interminable weekends, from September to June. Miss Abshire, of the so many very, very good teachers at the school by far the best, came from her sixth-grade room. She wore a sensible winter coat and sensible winter shoes though the temperature was mild for the time of year and a briefcase bulging with papers and work hung by a strap over her shoulder. As Miss Abshire locked her door and turned toward the north entrance, for she rarely used the

main doors, rarely went anywhere beyond the north wing, she looked back to the man watching her. Her look toward the man was sad, distressed, as if to say—*your son, his work, his drawings, something must be done*—and with that look she turned and went on, slumped from the weight of her burden, toward the door at the far end of the north wing.

The man went up the north stairs, the stairs and the hall and the rooms in the floor above dark and emptied of parents and their children. Light fell from the two study hall doors, but few had stayed back to celebrate the seniors' Christmas party, almost all having gone home or off to other parties somewhere in town. During the war and those years just after, this long hall would have been packed at this hour, as in those years there were no other parties being thrown in town and no television to go home to; but now only those remained who had no other party to go to and no television at home to sit before. Mrs. Archer was closing the door to the library and she and her student assistant and the few other students who read and loved and sometimes even took books home with them were set to leave. A small group of students and parents had gathered around the punch bowl, but they were showing little interest in it; and those whose duty it was had begun to take down the Christmas decorations and pack them away for next year. There was no one here still in costume—but for one of the girls in the black hooded robe of the Ghost of Christmas Future. The hood was still pulled over the girl's head so that the man could not see which girl it was or if it was either of them, and the man, not wanting to see or be seen by either girl or anyone else who might be wearing the robe, turned away from the study hall door. Across the hall were the doors to the balcony, where young lovers came to smooch, as they would have said during the war and the years just after, and those teachers and parents who had to have a smoke or they would have a fit came to smoke. The auditorium and the balcony above it were dark now and the man thought there was no one, neither lover nor smoker, there. But as his eyes grew used to the dark he saw the woman's figure, she still fitted out in the wig and dress and make-up of a sour little old man, sitting in the balcony's first row, near the control panel for the lights that her clever husband had installed and worked so cleverly for the night's production. The man, still in his costume as well, went down and sat by the woman who now lit another cigaret—the floor under her seat littered with butts—and commented on the man and his costume:

“Has anyone told you you look like an idiot in that hat?”

The man tilted the tall hat forward at a rakish angle, for he liked the hat and the long-tail coat as well. “And you, it could be said that you look, and sound, like a sour little old man.”

The woman drew on the cigaret. "I could easily stay like this, you know. I wouldn't mind being a nasty old man the rest of my life." The woman dropped the cigaret to the floor, ground it out and lit another. "Don't you simply loathe the part when he becomes so happy and sentimental and goes around making such merry over all those fools."

"Ah well, Merry Christmas, then" said the man.

"And a Happy fucking New Year," returned the woman. She was quiet a moment, then: "I suppose you've come to fetch me to go over to this miserable little burg's second Christmas. Our black Christmas."

"If we're going."

"Of course we're going. We have to go. We're the stars of the show." The woman looked away. "I don't want to go. I hate going there. Why do we always have to go there? Why can't they come here, like everybody else? They could sit here in the balcony—couldn't they? They sit in the balcony at the Ritz. They go to the movie theatre and sit away from all the rest of us and, to the best of my knowledge, not one of us who are allowed to sit on the main floor has yet to perish from the experience."

"I don't think they want to come here. I think they prefer staying where they are, at least for now."

"Bullshit. Just bullshit. They're afraid to come here. They should be made to come. They should be made to be free."

The man smiled, for such a mood and such talk was not new to the woman. "I suppose there's a certain sort of freedom in that."

"You're so full of shit. Such a load of shit from the little goody two-shoes who wants their children to come here to study."

The man smiled but made no reply.

"Oh come on, Doc. Defend yourself. Say you're not full of shit. Say you're not full of hooley, beans, baloney—you can't even say *shit*. You talk like a little old woman. Can't you say they can't come here because they're *niggers*. It's just another word. Why are you so afraid of it? And *fuck*. Can't you say that we *fuck*? That's what we do, you know. Fuck. We don't make love. We don't cuddle or snuggle or bundle or anything else that a little old woman might say. We *fuck*, Doc. You know that. Why can't you *say* it?"

"Because it's not true. Not for me anyway."

The woman made a sound of disgust. "Oh what do you know about it? The great lover. If it weren't for that brat of yours, I'd think I was the only woman you've ever had. And from the talk going around this evil, nasty little town, I think I might be anyway. Your so-called son notwithstanding."

The man made no response. And the woman grew angry when he might have.

“You don’t rise to anything, do you? I can’t get through to you with anything. Isn’t there *something* I could say or think or do that would get under your skin? Get *inside* you. *Is* there anything in there, Doc? Is that it? Is it just empty, hollow, a *vacuum* in there,” and the woman struck the man’s chest, “where everyone else has a heart?” In touching the man the woman’s anger faded. She lit another cigaret and drew on it and blew smoke and put a hand to her forehead, as if to shade her eyes in the dark. “I’m sorry. Sorry. Yes. Sorry.” The woman laughed without mirth and put her hand lightly to the man’s arm and took it away. “I’m always like this after a performance. Always. Always. I hate it afterwards. Everything I’ve done. The play. The other actors. The director. The lighting. The idiots who have come to swallow my crap. I hate everything and everyone when the play is done, I think,” the woman said, “because I love it too much while it is being played.” The woman moved the back of her hand to her mouth, she might’ve been about to yawn. “That and the fact that I’m simply a foul-tempered little bitch this time of the month. Now, that is some good news for us, isn’t it?” said the woman and yawned and went on. “I was rather touched by one thing tonight though. Did you see, at the curtain call? I didn’t even think she was in the auditorium. No, no. That’s not right. I knew she was there, I *knew* all along. She would be sitting there in the back row, where she always sat during our performances. You never could see her, but you knew she was there. She never came out from that cave under the balcony. Never applauded. Never made any comment, but to point out where we could, we *should* have been better. But tonight she came out from her lair. She came halfway down the aisle, beating her hands together—that was nice. That was different. That was all I ever wanted when I was here and I was her star. Her approval. And now I have it,” the woman finished, listless, weary. “Dotty Rainbow applauding me. I am still such a silly girl. All I ever wanted, such a small, simple thing.” The woman yawned. When she had been angry she had looked like the old man she had been made up to play. Now that she had grown tired or bored or indifferent she looked like a woman made up to play the old man. “Did you catch the other demonstration? Your cronies stamping out. The Cafe Anti-Commies, Kirk calls them. Your friend Loren and his friends. The ones who are out to get us, Kirk and me. Me and you. When old Scrooge went on, there at the end, so unpatriotically as to plead that there might be peace on earth, they departed en masse. In a great huff. Ho hum.”

“Well, they did come.”

“Yes. And they did stay on till the end. One might have expected them to show for the national anthem, the pledge of allegiance—if there’s one or the

other being performed in town, they'll be there—and then take a hike. Such silly little men, with their wars and their flags and their secret meetings and their plottings and counter-plottings. Don't you think they're silly little men, Doc? Or do you think they're dangerous? Kirk thinks they're dangerous. I prefer *silly*. So silly to sit all the way through such a silly little production of such a silly little play. Maybe they thought there'd be another anthem or pledge at the end. Oh, a prayer! Of course. How could I have forgotten that.”

The man said that it was not a silly play and it was not a silly production of it.

The woman put her hand to the control panel. “All Kirk. So very very good at lighting and sound and make-up—and then there are his grand dreams of being a director in the movies. Ah well.” The woman moved a knob or switch and a spotlight fell on the bare stage at the bottom of the hall. The luminous tape that had led the stage-hands through their blind set changes showed on the boards. The woman moved the knob or switch back to where it had been and the stage and the hall, but for the patterned glow of the tape, went dark. “He is going on to Hollywood, you know. He's thinking about it. An old friend has offered him a job. Not lighting. Whatever's just under lighting, whatever it's called. But after this first movie, or the next, it might work into lighting—so his friend, says. And from there, why, who knows? Cameraman, directing—so Kirk says. The world his oyster. All I have to do is say the word and he'll take the job. What do you think, my dear? Should I say the word?”

The man said it seemed a rare opportunity for her husband. And for her.

The woman scoffed. “But then you see I won't be going with him. Not immediately anyway. The shooting starts in the spring some time, a couple of months. We've talked it all over, Kirk and I. I'll stay on here for a while, till the shooting and the lighting and whatever it is that is done just under the lighting is done, then I'll join him. No need to sit all alone in an L.A. apartment when I can be here, among all my old high-school chums and so on. Best to wait till he gets a second job—so says Kirk. So—I'll be joining him in May or June, about the time your school lets out. That's what we've been talking about anyway. And you still think I should say the word? It has to be said soon—so says Kirk's friend.”

“Yes. I do,” said the man.

“Whether I go immediately or stay on for awhile or stay forever?” The woman touched another knob or switch and another part of the stage below was lighted and then, as before, went dark. “I could, you know. Stay and stay and stay. It would be so—no, not convenient, not easy—it would

be so *right* for everyone. Kirk could be where he wants to be, doing what he wants to do. And I could be here, *we* could be here, doing what *we* want to do." The woman moved a hand so that the man would not speak, not yet. "It is possible. I saw tonight that it is so very possible. I could be happy here, doing what I did tonight. Dorothea, you know, she won't be here forever. There's talk going around, and I believe it, that if she wins first place at state this year, she'll step down. Take her trophy and hand the reins over to a younger director. And why shouldn't she? Win. With the two girls, with the right play, she should win. She is so very good and it is possible she might want to end her career on top. With a victory. And then there's Lew, there's talk going around about that as well. That he wants to retire. Soon. If not next year, then the year after. They've bought some land in the mountains, where they ran the internment camp during the war. They've always loved it there, in the mountains, and they'll retire and build a cabin there. That's the talk going around. That soon, if not next year then the year after, there will be a new superintendent and a new drama coach and we could stay here, Doc, and we could be happy here. You the superintendent, me the drama coach. And we would be happy. It is just possible," the woman concluded, her words slowing, losing energy, like a clock or a toy or something wound up that was now running down.

"I think you should say the word, whether you leave or stay, for however long."

The woman leaned forward, peering down toward the dark stage. "Yes, you're right. I will. My Christmas gift to Kirk. He will be so pleased." She leaned back in her seat and said nothing.

The man spoke. "I think it's time for us to go, if we're going to go."

"Yes. Of course. Let's do it. Go," said the woman without energy or interest, something in her winding down.

The man moved to rise. "I'll meet you at the car then. I want to go back through the building. See if my son's still here. It won't take long."

The woman waved a hand, without interest or energy. "He's gone. I saw him going, just after the play. He left with his grandparents. The banker and his wife."

The man spoke carefully, trying so very hard to sound as if he were speaking without energy or interest. "I see. Ah well. It's all for the best, I suppose. It's late. He should be home in bed, even if it is Christmas."

The woman had leaned forward again, to look down toward the dark stage. "Yes. He should be home in bed. Even if it is Christmas." Then: "I keep thinking I hear something. That there's someone down there. One of

the girls watching us. One of the witch-hunters listening. One of the ghosts waiting. They are watching us, you know, watching everything we do. Listening to everything we say. Waiting.” The woman’s hand went to the control panel. A spot flashed on the mark where one of the ghosts would have been had this been the play, then another spot flashed on the mark where the other ghost would have stood, so that it would seem that the ghost had crossed the stage, without sound, in an instant; but the stage was bare and there were no ghosts there, no one watching or listening or waiting in the dark.

The woman extinguished the lights and went back in her seat. She spoke in a quiet voice, into the dark. “You know you are going to have to do something about the one girl. She’s so much like me at seventeen. You’re not going to be able to let this one ride like you let everything else ride. You’re going to have to do something at least this once. You can’t let it go on and on. Not at seventeen.”

“Yes. I know,” the man said. “Something.” Then: “I did get a Christmas kiss tonight. Backstage, during one of the set changes. When it was dark. Of course with the hood on, in the dark, it could have been the other one. It could have been any of you.”

The woman fluttered her lips. “Surely by now you can taste the difference.”

The man smiled. “Now, you know you all taste the same.”

In a sudden move the woman transformed herself. Her face twisted, her body shriveled and shrank, her shoulders hunched, her back humped. “*Bab! Humbug!*” she hissed in the cracked voice of old Scrooge and they laughed and rose and left the school, the woman staying in character till they reached the car and there she became a woman again.



Eastertown, itself a shunned part of the town, was divided, though in a different manner than the whole. Rather than east and west, downtown and the highway businesses, the better residential neighborhoods and those that had fallen, Eastertown was sundered into the gully and the highground: they knew no other names. On the highground could be found Eastertown’s church and parsonage and the school and the teacher-age, as some called it. Here the man who posed a preacher while occupying the parsonage and the Johnsons, who taught at and administered the school, lived. There were few who considered themselves of this class. The church deacons and their families and the choir director and his wife and others who attended church regularly and the three women who were considered so trustworthy that they might clean and cook for the better

families on the west side, they had made homes here on the highground as well. In the gully were found those who did not work much nor had much truck with the church and the school and the Johnsons and the preacher and those cleaning women who had taken up highfalutin ways. These folks were content to sit and rock on the porch day long and whittle and strum a guitar and sing tunes not sung in the church and tell tales not heard at the school. These men and women gambled with dice and cards and were free with women and men they should not have known. They drank cheap wine and cheaper whiskey and fought and carried on after they had fought as if they had never fought, all collecting as night fell or the sun came up to continue these pastimes or start them anew at Tony's, which was to the gully what the church and the school were to the highground.

The western parts of town were well treed, these stately, densely foliated, well-watered and -tended groves of many varieties; the trees of the south side—which, before the town spread west, had been its best neighborhood—showed much of their former grandeur but had suffered from time and neglect; the north side had been razed of all vegetation that might hinder the ginning of cotton or the commerce in lumber or pipes or sheet metal or machinery; and the east side was now so old and poor that only a derelict scrub oak survived here and there, most streets and the vacant lots between them given over to tangled shrub and weed; but along the gully, which made the border of Eastertown, there stood trees that in their shape and fullness and reach equaled even those regal willows and cottonwoods and black pines and mimosa that dominated the grounds of Banker Glassmoyer's mansion; and so Tony's small house was to be found nestled in an arbor that hid and protected it even during those fall and winter months when all leaves fell to the ground. So close to the gully was Tony's house that it had been built on pilings to save it from the floods of spring and summer. Even then the gully was known to grow so big from the runoff that came down from the distant mountains that he and his family were regularly advised to quit the gully for highground till the water fell. Once, so said the old-timers, during the flood of '06 or '16 or '26, everything built along the gully had been swept away, but that deluge had struck long ago and now the residents of Eastertown had returned to live on the banks of the gully, their houses like Tony's hidden among that jungle of trees that made the gully still, some said, the most pleasant place in town.

The city fathers had passed edicts that prohibited the legal sale of alcoholic beverage, and certainly the collecting together publicly to consume such, so that Tony had come to be the town's bootlegger and his house its

sole bar and, on busy weekends, nightspot. Tony had torn down the wall separating kitchen and living room and in its stead he put in a counter, a feature which, with little irony lost on Tony, had become standard in so many of the fine houses built since the war. There were tables and chairs, some stuffed, some straight, placed around the living room. A jukebox sat in one corner and a pin-ball machine in another; the mechanisms that received coins had been removed from these devices, for they would have attracted the censure of those authorities who collected tax on their operation, and one played a song or a game and, the honor system usually in force, dropped a nickel, dime or quarter in the cigar box on the counter. The room's floor was waxed and polished for dancing. If the living room might have been a rumpus room in any of the better houses in town, Tony's kitchen was fitted out like no kitchen found anywhere. There were stove and sink and cupboards and a pantry, nothing unusual, but then this kitchen housed three refrigerators as well and two soft-drink boxes, these filled with beer and wine, while in the cupboards there were stored little but glasses and mugs and shot jiggers and the pantry was stocked well with whiskey and gin and vodka and on the stove there simmered a great pot of beans and fatback and chilies that Tony sold for little profit or simply gave away to sober a drunk who looked about to take to breaking windows or chairs or such. On the walls of this unusual house were tacked and taped and hung prints of the works of the old masters, for Tony in his travels through Italy, as he called his wartime spent there, had grown fond of great art and her masterpieces, though it was believed he had not known the leisure to be seeing many of these. And too he felt to have the usual bar signs about, those advertising beer and wine and whiskey, might have been pushing the sheriff a step. As for the latter's live-and-let-live attitude, some said the law officer was on the take, he had to be, while others thought it was simpler still: old Hat was simply on the booze himself. Only a few understood that it was the travels the sheriff's own son had made through Italy, and from which he did not return, that dimmed his vision when his patrol car crept by Tony's on a rowdy Saturday night. For his part Tony made rules and followed them strictly; that is, till this year, till Miss Steen had come home. Previously Tony might sell beer by the case and spirits by the bottle to those who lived beyond the gully, up on the flat, as the old-timers called the western parts of the town, but these good people were not encouraged to come to his place to drink by the can or the shot; and now that had changed. As well he had forbidden sales of any sort to anyone underage, refusing service or purchase to anyone he knew to be a student, no matter what birth date their altered I.D.s might show; and now that had changed

as well. First Miss Steen and her husband had come to sit at a table and chat; and then Jack Cook and Miss Blum had come for a case or a bottle and Tony had invited them in and bought them drinks and the men had swapped war stories, or Tony had smiled at Jack Cook's island-hopping tales; and then Doc Bavender had come, first alone, then with Miss Steen, to talk to Tony about Eastertown, its past and its future. Then the two girls had followed. First they had come to buy bottles and cases for Miss Steen and her gatherings, then they had come with Miss Steen and her husband, then they had come with Miss Steen or her husband, now always just the one or the other, now that Miss Steen and her husband no longer came together. And so Tony had broken his rules, that regimen that had kept the sheriff on his side of the gully, and had served them all well; and though he knew that this was wrong, that it was dangerous, that, as his woman warned him, he could be jailed or run out of town, Tony did not care and continued to break his rules and to welcome his new friends and court the fall his woman said would surely come to him and made haste in its coming. Tony's woman Eula was a woman who knew the ways of the Lord and the ways of Man and the vengeance they brought down upon those who cast aside their laws; but Tony did not listen or he listened and smiled and went on following the ways that would lead to his end.

But tonight, the night before Christmas Eve, these intruders, these invaders, these infidels with their foreign ways, would first go to the church on the highground, there to present gifts for the children and a festive meal for the adults of Eastertown—an intrusion, an invasion, an infidelity that was sanctioned by all—before they came down the slope, singing and laughing, to the gully and Tony's. So it was for a time that Tony's woman Eula saw their establishment much as it had been before Miss Steen had come to destroy it all.

A white man and his woman and the man's two children, a girl and a smaller boy, were there tonight, but that was not unusual. Their presence broke no rules. The man and the woman and the children were poor, as poor as anyone in Eastertown, and they did not live in the town but came from afar. Eula and Tony had ever welcomed those not native to the town and those who were as poor or poorer than they—this especially so so near Christmas, a time of taking in and sheltering and succoring wandering strangers—and Eula felt at ease with these white strangers. That their presence was no threat to her or her man and their place. Also there were the regulars, those who lived in the gully and did not much go to the church or the school or any other place on the highground. Among these were Tony's two closest friends, men that Eula did not mind, though they were not

native to Eastertown, as were she and her man. First, Dago. A stocky hard man who worked on the railroad, now tearing out track that with the coming of the highways would not be used again. This friend was called Dago for his time spent fighting in Italy, that was where he had first known Tony. After the war Dago had taken Tony back to the great city in the North where he had been born and raised, as Tony had been born and raised in Eastertown, a city that before the war Dago had known only, as Tony had known nothing of the world beyond Eastertown. Dago had been a prize-fighter once and after the war he worked as a bouncer in the clubs where Tony played the guitar and sang the old blues, the country blues that had come into fashion for a brief time after the war. After a time the clubs turned away from the old songs Tony knew and his old way of picking the guitar and Tony left the city in the North and came home and Dago had come with him. Only for a while, Dago had said, only for a time. Only to see the cotton fields and the old ways of their people Tony sang of, that was the only reason Dago had come down to a place like Eastertown, that was what he said. But he had stayed on, and then got on with the railroad through another man who had come down from the North, and now Dago stayed on, day by day, week by week, year by year, working on the railroad and listening to Tony sing and play the guitar in the way his grandfather had taught him. Flower, so called because he did not always smell like one, was a tall, lean, powerful man, stronger, much stronger, than Dago, who had fought barefisted in the streets in his youth, a man so quiet and shy and gentle that only Tony and Dago and those who worked with Flower on the new highway being built knew much of his strength. Flower had been born and raised in a town in the south of the state, a town not much larger and not much different than this town, and had passed the years of the war in prison, for Flower had once killed a man who had not believed that such a quiet, shy, gentle boy could be so strong. Flower had first come to Eastertown as the white man and his woman and his children had come tonight. He had been drifting, wandering in those days and had come on Tony's place and had stayed on and had been given a job on the new highway because of his strength and now he just stayed on, not like Dago, not threatening every day to leave Eastertown and the old ways that were still practiced in the town. Flower had stayed on because he had no other place to wander or drift to. That was what he meant when he said he liked it here.

These were Tony's friends, and Eula's too, and now came another. The sound of children drifted down to Eula. Children laughing and singing and chattering as they came down the slope from the highground and into the

trees of the gully. These were Eula's children, she had four now, and their friends who considered coming down to Tony's and the gully a great outing. Now that the celebration at the church was done they were being led home by Buena, the school teacher and wife of Albert Johnson. Like Tony's friends Buena was not native to Eastertown; she had met Albert Johnson, who was, at a university for their people in the south of the state and had fallen in love with Albert Johnson and his warmth and kindness and his ambition to teach and elevate their people's children; and so after their graduation she had come with her new husband to where he had been born. Buena had been born high, her father a successful businessman among his own people and her mother a great beauty among any, and had been a society girl herself, a belle, to hear Albert Johnson tell, when she had first met the man she would marry. And she still carried herself and the beauty she had received from her mother with dignity and pride, though she was not a proud woman like Eula, but shy and quiet, as she had been even as a society girl, a belle, so said Albert Johnson. Buena was tall and slender and kept her hair cut short and her skin was brown and brilliant as polished mahogany; while her friend Eula possessed a rump and great breasts and twisted her long hair into braids that were wound about her head like a crown; Eula's skin was black and bright and her tongue was sharp and her nature forward, unforgiving and, to hear Tony tell, sometimes a touch bossy.

Tonight, the night before Christmas Eve, it was Buena bringing the children from the church down to Tony's for a celebration few young ones in these parts would know. Buena came well up on the porch, so far that she might look in the front door, but then, at the sight of the white people inside, her face closed and she withdrew into the dark. Eula, who stood down to no one of any color, position or gender, did not know why a woman of Buena's high class and good breeding and fine education would so fear these people, but it was known that even when the town school's science teacher, himself a kind and understanding man, came to talk of mingling the students and the teachers of Eastertown with those of the town, that Albert Johnson's wife Buena could so little bear to be in the same room with such talk and ideas that she went out of the house and walked about till the white man was gone.

Eula's children and a number of their friends burst into the room with no such caution. Soon they were displaying the gifts they had got from the church and telling of the funny people, all dressed up like no one they had ever seen, and soon after that were sharing these gifts and telling these tales to the children of the white man, heedless of their color. The white man

himself was of a like mind. He had come into Tony's with his woman and his children and sat at a table and drank beer as if there was no difference of any sort among them; and so, in time, did his quiet, shy children respond to Eula's gay girls and the one little boy frolicking about them. The white man's woman was quiet as well—she had said scarcely a word since their coming in—as like Buena Johnson she did not care to be here among people whose skin was another color than her own. But then, Eula noted, the white woman did not seem to much care for those whose skin was the same color as her own. Now that the town's teachers and those students who had brought gifts and a fine meal and their play-acting and costumes to the church came bursting into Tony's bearing more gifts and fine things to eat, all in their costumes still and their faces painted and their talk strange to this time and place, now the white woman, alone among all in the room, sat and said nothing and did not smile or laugh. But Eula knew the white woman had cause for her silence and her not caring for any of them and what she had come to know was the Christmas story that had come to Eastertown, the white woman who had come to be known by the black woman called Eula.

The woman was not the man's wife, nor was she the mother of any of his children. There were but two children now, but in the beginning there had been many more, six, maybe seven. The man had gone to the house of his wife, this in the south of the state, and while she was away, away with another man, the man related, he had stolen his children from her. Thus their odyssey had begun. The man had driven north through the state, driving at night mostly, depositing his children for safe-keeping among friends and his relatives, those who would hide them till he went over the state line to a place he would make his fortune, he said, and then return for them. The journey had not been easy. Not for the man or the woman or the children. At every place they stopped, arriving in the dark of night, there was some argument or trouble from the friends and relatives who would keep the children till the man returned. Most argued money, they had mouths of their own to feed, and some the danger of it, they wanted no more trouble with the law than they had now, and a few thought that what the man was doing was wrong, stealing a woman's children from her, even if she was away with another man. The state was large and they had driven night after night and at each place they stopped, leaving a boy here, a girl there, there were these arguments and those from the past and there was too much drinking and too many guns, too many mouths and not enough food, so that when the man came to the last of his friends and relatives, there were still two children that needed hiding, a girl and a smaller boy.

These the man had kept to the last as they were the youngest and his favorites. The last three days, then, with Christmas coming on, had been passed without much purpose but to head north and west, toward the state line and the mountains beyond where the man would make or find his fortune. At first the man thought to keep the girl and the smaller boy, as they were his favorites, but the woman did not care for that. She did not want children about her and if she had she wanted them to be her own children, now off with the man who had been her husband. The man understood that, so he related to Tony. And the man knew more, that drink was driving him down, that drink was taking the food from the mouths of the girl and the boy, and that he could not care even for these two till he had crossed into the mountains and made or found money. And so the man commenced a labor he knew was bound for failure, trying to find strangers in the strange towns they came to who might take the girl and the boy and keep and feed them till he returned. But the places the man stopped, before fine houses with fine cars sitting in the drive, the people who lived there, people who had made or found more money than they could ever use and could feed an extra mouth or two, they all closed their doors on the man or thought the man was trying to sell them his children and threatened to call the law or set loose the dogs on him. And that was how the man and the woman and the children had come to Eastertown. The man had come to Tony's place and asked Tony for a drink and a bowl of beans for the children and had asked Tony for a loan to pay for the drink and the food; and after the second drink, after several drinks, the man had asked Tony and his woman to take the children in with them, till he could go over into the mountains and make or find or steal or in any other way get some money and come back for them.

These were the things the man had said to Tony and as he said them and drank more and grew less happy for it, Eula had watched the woman and had seen that the woman's distrust and dislike of them, that her silence, her sitting there without a word or smile when all the revelers from the church had come in laden with gifts and good things to eat, that it was not the woman's nature but her pride that led her, on this, the night before Christmas Eve, to refuse every gift, every good thing to eat that was offered her. Eula knew that pride as she knew her own, that such pride comes to some women, no matter the color of their skin, and she let the woman be and offered her nothing, not even on this, the night before Christmas Eve.



The sheriff's car came along slow through the fog, nosing down the road that ran along the far side of the gully, to pull up behind the old car driven by the man who had stolen his children. The man, well into a bottle of whiskey, quaked when the patrol car's headlights played over his car and its plates, but the patrol car's lights shut off and the sheriff got out and he went on by the old car and stood in the fog at the foot of the bridge Tony had strung over the gully. Tony and Jack Cook had been out on the porch—to talk private and serious, as they had been talking private and serious all evening, none of their usual jokes and tall tales of war and the army—and the two men went off the porch and crossed the bridge to the other side of the gully.

Now it was Eula who knew what was going on, Eula coming out on the porch, trying to hear the words of the three men across the gully. They had finally pushed it too far, Eula knew, even for the night before Christmas Eve. White people inside the house, white people who lived in the town, and maybe under all that makeup and those costumes there was a student or two there as well. Now it was Tony and her with him who would be paying for breaking his own rules and the laws laid down by God and Man.

But then as the three men talked the sheriff turned his back to Eula and Tony's place and Eastertown and looked west and as he spoke made all his gestures toward the town. Eula waited for the sheriff to turn and make his gestures toward her and Tony's place and Eastertown, but he did not. Now all three men turned toward the town. Doc Bavender came out on the porch and asked *Trouble?* and Eula shook her head and Bavender went down off the porch and crossed the bridge over the gully and joined the three men there, the sheriff now leaning against the old car driven by the man who had stolen his children, and Eula went back inside.

Miss Steen, who Eula saw as their destruction, if not tonight, the night before Christmas Eve, then soon, soon, now this fair angel bearing their end had begun an extraordinary transformation. When Miss Steen had first come into the bar she had been a little old man. So much like one in looks and talk and stance and gesture that Eula had had to look twice to see that it was only someone got up to play a little old man for the Christmas drama. If then Miss Steen had held the children entranced by her costume and make-up and acting, now the children stood transfixed as Miss Steen transformed herself again. She ripped off the wig that had made her bald and took off the old-time glasses perched on the tip of her nose and took a jar of cream and some tissues from her pocket and spread the cream over the old man's face and wiped it off with the tissues and she took out all the pins that held her hair tight to the skull and shook her hair out and took the

old-time cravat from around her neck and undid the buttons to the high collar shirt and straightened her back and sat erect at the table and she smiled gently at the children and spoke to them in a voice that was young and that of a woman. The children, the youngest of them, reached out to touch her, to see that if she had been real before, a real little old man, how could she be real now, a real young woman? And now, for an instant, Miss Steen's back hunched and her fingers came at the children like claws and her face twisted and her eyes danced with malice and from her came a hiss and a cackle and a little old man cried out *Bab! Humbug!* And some children screamed with delight and mock fear, the older ones, and went back chattering to their games and gifts, while others thought it wise to dart to the safety of their mother's skirt, the younger ones, for the time being.

The three men who had gone out to talk to the sheriff returned to the bar. Led by Eula, all but the children at their games and the man who had stolen his children, his head on the table, asleep, his woman stroking his hair, and Dago and Flower locked in arm wrestling, the stocky prize-fighter losing every time, and Miss Blum, she sitting the entire evening lost in thought, looking so sad as she was given to from time to time—all but these now gathered around the men to hear the cause of the sheriff coming so near Eastertown. *Nothing, nothing. No trouble. Nothing to do with us. Nothing to do with Tony's place. Nothing to do with Eastertown,* the men said and they made ready to leave, to close down Tony's place anyway.

While Jack Cook and Doc Bavender organized their party for leaving, Tony went about his friends, telling them to drink up, waking the sleeping white man, shooing Eula's children back to their room and into their beds, Tony closing down his place the earliest Eula had ever known him close. Once Tony had made the rounds, moving as if he were in a trance, his thoughts so far away he went about as if he did not know what he was doing, he went out and stood on the porch and his woman Eula joined him there. They stood above the fog that gathered along the gully and reached up to them and spread over toward the town, the mist that gathered up their friends and guests as they left and made them like specters, their movements without sound, their forms disappearing into it without movement.

There on the porch Eula questioned her man. "What was it the sheriff said out there that has turned you into a puzzle, boy? I say he said something about us."

"No, woman. There was nothing said about us. Just some boys over in town, breaking windows and knocking out street lights. Hat was wanting to see if we had had trouble over here."

"Now were these boys black?"

“No ma’am. These boys were toughs from the eastside, Hat figured. That’s what those who saw them said. White boys dressed poor.”

“Well then we have the Lord to thank for that. Be they colored and there’d be no end to it.”

Tony shook his head, thinking of things a long way away or thinking about the past or maybe the future, places and times that did not usually concern Tony.

“Hat was saying: some of those boys from the eastside are headed for trouble. All growing up hard and poor, not like the way white boys are mostly growing up these days. Following along in another’s footsteps, going bad. That was what Hat was saying. How these eastside boys go from breaking windows to killing, it don’t take them long. That boy we had from here and we had him in the jail here for a time, he started out like that, Hat was saying. Breaking things that did not need to be broken. Breaking them but to see them break. And now, Hat was saying, that boy is going to die. Hat got the word just tonight. That jury over in the town where they tried that boy, they have sentenced him to die.”

Eula came toward her man, that he might see her strong bright black face. “Now neither I nor the Lord’s word sees a wrong in that, killing a killer.”

“No ma’am, I don’t suppose there is a wrong in that. But it does seem they might have chosen another time to pass judgment on the boy. Some time after Christmas, they might have waited that long.”

“Those folks on the jury, the judge and the lawyers and the sheriffs and all, they wanted to be home with their families before the tree or back in their churches worshipping the birth of the Son, not locked up in some room there in the courthouse, having their Christmas there, like they was killers themselves.”

“Yes ma’am. I suppose they did want to get it done and get home.”

Eula looked into the dark where her man stood. Tony was a light-skinned man, so light that at times, in a certain light, he could have passed. Could have had that white father his friends were ever making jokes over, those jokes Eula did not care for. Now Eula could see Tony’s face in the shadows but not the look on it. Not to see the faint smile that played in his eyes when he was making a joke over a thing that was sad or a thing that was troubling him. Nor did his words or his tone of voice ever mean much to her, not without that look about his eyes to guide her understanding, so that now, as people had begun to come out the front door, to leave Tony’s and make their way down into the fog, toward home or where they were drawn to go, now Eula was not sure of his meaning. If he meant what he said or if he meant it different or if what he said meant anything at all.

Dago and Flower had come out and gone down off the porch, moving toward the little house they shared on down the gully. After them came others and soon these were followed by the people from the town, they seemed teachers and students from the school mostly, but under their dress and the paint, Eula was not sure who had come tonight and who had not. Now came the four she did know, the two men and their two women. Tony might laugh and cry out that Eula would not stop talking down the good man among these four and his Miss Steen, but Eula would not stop talking such sense to nonsense. She knew what was right in some men and what was wrong in others. There were some men, you could take Dago and Tony, and find it natural that they had a woman other than their wife or first woman, but then in the others, to have another woman was unnatural, like having a cat that barked like a dog. So it was, Eula figured, with this good man among the four. He should not now be going over the gully bridge with his Miss Steen, now going arm-in-arm into the fog, going toward downtown where he kept a place where they bedded. Tony could discuss the matter, that the man had no wife to be true to, he had no marriage to hold together, his wife was gone and the marriage to her had fallen in pieces all around him, but Eula could not agree to this reasoning. Never. It was the nature of some men to be true, even if they had nothing to hold on to, and to see them going against this nature was wrong, like having a dog that climbed like a cat.

Tony had gone off the porch and he walked out to the white people standing there in the fog over the gully. Tony and the big man now talked as they had talked all evening, among themselves, serious and quiet. Now Miss Blum stood away from them, not looking at the men or anything, her face turned down as if she were watching water and fish pass down the gully. The men finished their talking and Tony, a slight man, thin and supple as a boy, bade farewell to the big man in a voice as light as a boy's and the big man stood straight and made that a salute, but tonight the men did not laugh at such clowning. Now the military salute seemed a solemn thing and Tony returned the gesture, a thing he had not done much before, and the men did not laugh or say things about their armies and their wars, but turned their backs to one another and went away, the big man taking Miss Blum under his arm and crossing the bridge toward town. Tony came back to the porch, approaching his woman with hesitation, like a child who has done wrong and knows he must now confess it.

"Now you can come up here and tell me, boy. I know what it is. The Lord has showed me and that vision is war and that war is the Lord's judgment upon mankind. Come up and tell me, honey boy, when is it you are going to go off."

Tony came up on the porch and stood by his woman. He looked out through the bare-branched trees toward the town, though the fog stood so thick on the ground he could see none of it, not even the courthouse dome that rose over the town. But for the poor white man's car all others that had been parked on the road over the gully were gone; and back inside the white woman was waking her man and drawing his girl and the boy away from their games with Eula's children so that they could be gone as well.

"I don't know that I will be going, lady. There is a chance I will not."

"And if they take a white man to get himself shot dead, why in the world will they not take you?"

"They don't know where I live, that might be one cause."

"Puh. You have lived here all your life. They know where you are."

"No ma'am. When the war came and I joined up I was living there in the North. And when the war was done and I came home I came home to Dago's place, there in the North. They know no other place to find me. And if it seems they might find me here, then just maybe I'll go on over to some other place where they cannot. But all this may never come about. They may not want me. They may not want any of us."

"And you say they don't want the big man?"

"Only for the summer. Only for training and some exercises. They told him they did not need him till summer, and then only for training."

"And what if their war breaks out?"

Tony responded in a voice quiet as a boy's, a boy who had seen too much and grown old. "Yes ma'am. What if their war breaks out."

The white woman had waked her man and collected his children and they came out on the porch and went down toward the bridge over the gully. Eula's children gathered at the door and the window, for they were forbidden out on the porch after dark when it was not summertime, and her three girls and the one boy called out *good-bye! good-bye!* and *Merry Christmas! Happy New Year!* and the oldest girl called out *And don't forget to write!* to the white children and they, the girl and the boy and the man as well, returned the farewells, the girl calling out *And don't forget to answer!* so that as the white people arranged themselves in the old car, all were calling out *Merry Christmas!* and other things and waving good-bye. All but for the two women. Maybe there was a look between the white woman, with her man and his girl and the boy packing themselves into the car, and Eula, her man beside her on the porch, her children at the door and the window; but if there was that exchange it was no more a farewell than the look you would give to a face in the mirror.



The banker Glassmoyer received the sheriff's call not much before midnight. The ring woke his wife, if she had been asleep at all, and she was there at the head of the stairs when the banker came out of his study.

The banker had called the sheriff earlier in the evening, concerning his grandson. After the Christmas play the banker had not been certain whether the boy was to be with his father for the night or was to come home with him and his wife. After the play the banker had come upon the boy and his friends outside the school building. The boy had said he would be staying with his father tonight, in the office downtown where his father now lived, and then the boy and his two friends, still dressed in their ragged costumes, had run off into the night, away from the school. Glassmoyer had searched the school for his son-in-law but had not found him. He and his wife had then driven downtown, only to find the office the boy's father called home dark and locked. The banker recalled that the members of the cast would be at the church in Eastertown about now, but his wife did not think it would be wise for them to go there and they drove home. The banker put his wife to bed in her room on the second floor and told her the boy was with his father, with the play's cast, in Eastertown, and, that poorly told and little believed, came to his study downstairs and made as if to work at his papers. When time enough had passed that his wife's sleeping tablet had taken effect, if she had taken it, he called the sheriff. Neither the sheriff nor his deputy was in his office and the banker's call was passed to the operator. The banker did not have to say much. He or his wife had made the call so often the operator understood and the sheriff would. He then sat at his desk, looking distractedly through the papers, till the sheriff's call came, not much before midnight.

The banker hung up the phone and locked his papers away. As he was coming from his study he found his wife there at the top of the stairs. He locked the door and came to the foot of the stairs.

"He's all right. He's fine. I won't be long."

"That's what you said the first time. That's what you said the last time. That's what you say every time."

The banker turned away. "If Juanita's awake he may want something to eat."

"Of course she's awake. Everyone's awake, night after night. Who can sleep with this going to happen every night."

Glassmoyer stopped at the end of the hall. Beyond lay the main room, long as most houses in town, dark but for the winking, colored lights on

the Christmas tree, the largest Christmas tree in town, surely. The banker turned back. His wife had come down the stairs a way. She stopped when he turned back.

“Why don’t you go back to bed. I’ll bring him in, if he’s awake. Just lie down, even if you can’t sleep.”

The banker’s wife sat on the stairs. She wept, without tears, her weeping sounding like a language the banker did not understand, something that with study he might understand but the study had never been made. “Where is his father, that’s what I would like to know! Where is his mother! Where are they!”

Glassmoyer crossed the main room, leaving it dark but for the Christmas tree lights. French windows looked out to the rear of the house and the grounds and the garage there. The garage had been built to store three cars, the largest garage in town, and above the garage was an apartment where Juanita, the nurse or maid or companion to his wife, had come to live since his wife had taken ill, from nerves, from worry, from loss. Tonight the banker had left his car in the drive in front of the house and he had left the gate open, so that he would not wake Juanita when he went out; but the lights in the apartment above the garage were on and as he went out the side door and went to his car, he saw that Juanita, in a robe with a jacket over that, her long braids hanging down, had come from her apartment and was crossing the back lawn toward the main house. The nurse slept as little, worried as much about the boy as his wife; she almost slept as little, worried almost as much about the boy as had the banker himself.

With Juanita inside the house, the banker went to his car and drove downtown.



The four major streets of the town, those that met and intersected at the bank corner, the southwest corner of the courthouse square, were named for what one might eventually come upon if one followed the directions in which the streets had been laid out: California, Atlantic, Gulf and Canadian. As the banker came east along California Street, into that block just west of the bank corner, he slowed the car. Still he did not see the damage done along this block—store-front windows broken, street lights darkened—till he came to its end. The window of the office where his son-in-law lived and, as his wife had it, bedded his woman had been broken, a square of cardboard fitted over the shattered pane. Across the street Loren, the cafe owner, and several friends were out on the sidewalk sweeping broken glass into the street; it looked as if one of the men carried a gun rather

than a broom. At the bank corner, the southwest corner of the square, Glassmoyer saw that the bank's broad plate window had been cracked, as had the face of the bank clock; the street light that stood on that corner had been darkened as well. As the banker circled the courthouse square, to come to the jail and the sheriff's office, he noted there was little damage to any of the stores or street lights beyond the bank corner and that one block of California Street and none at all on the east side of the square.

The sheriff sat on the back stairs of the courthouse, those that led into his office and from there into the jail, as if it were summertime, when the sheriff brought out his office chair and sat and smoked his pipe and hoped to catch the breeze when it came from the east. Tonight the sheriff sat on the bare steps and wore a jacket against the breeze that had taken to lifting the fog that had been closing around the town. The sheriff knocked out his pipe and rose when the banker's car pulled into the parking area behind the courthouse; he walked out and held the door back as the banker got out of his car. The banker and the sheriff had known one another since they were boys and when there were just the two of them together the banker was called by his first name, Van, the name that had been passed on to his grandson, and the sheriff was known by his nickname, Hat, for the sheriff had worn the hat long before he had pinned a badge to it. The sheriff closed the car door.

"Did you come along California Street coming here, Van?"

"Yes. I'm afraid I did."

"Well now. Probably looks worse than it is. Most of the damage done right around that one block there. Nothing much harmed any place else. I would've got in touch sooner, but I figured it was the work of that Hubbard boy and those eastside toughs that hang around him. Went looking in all the wrong places. Found the boys over on the west side. Near Doc's old place. They had been breaking some windows over there too. There was three of them, to the best of our knowledge. The only one we got was your boy. Doc's boy. Got an idea where I might find the other two, but I thought I'd let that rest awhile. Till we had a talk."

The sheriff stopped Glassmoyer before the steps that led up to the courthouse rear entrance, that which led to the sheriff's office and on through that into the jail. "Van, I think we may have been making a mistake here, letting this shoplifting and stealing and these assorted minor acts go. Some people around town are starting to get . . . well, let's say they are not happy with it. Your boy, your grandson is a good boy. I know that. We all do. And me and you both know how hard losing a brother has been on the boy. We both been through that ourselves. I know, my brother Jack, it took him the

longest time to get over it. Anyway, the boy is getting some strange notions in his head. Nothing you can't deal with now, but Van, you got to be careful. I've seen some of these strange notions grow up."

They had climbed the steps and the sheriff put his hand to the door, more, it seemed to the banker, to keep it shut than open it. "Like the main reason I didn't bring him home to you was that I simply couldn't get him out of his cell." The sheriff smiled and pulled back the door. "Seems he's taken this idea in his head he belongs here. Maybe the pair of us can talk him out. Let's see."

The men went along a short hall to the sheriff's office. There a light on the phone console blinked red—another call from the operator—and the sheriff waved Glassmoyer on: he would first deal with that. At the rear of the sheriff's suite of offices stood an iron door, this leading to the jail, the only part of the old courthouse that had not burned in the fire—when, right at the end or was it there just after the war? Glassmoyer passed through the iron door and went along a narrow dark passage, as most of the corridors and hallways and passages had been in the old courthouse. He tried to remember if he had ever been here to the jail. Yes, he had been here once, when he was a boy. The old courthouse and the jail were that old, the first stone building his father had raised in this town, raised before he had built the bank or his own big house out west of the town. Glassmoyer had come down this corridor with his father—but his memory stopped there. There was no image in his mind, whom his father had come to see in the jail, and as the banker now came to the cells, for there were two of them, he wondered if his mind had not been playing with his memory. That maybe he had never been here at all.

The cell area was a single large room divided by the standing bars that made the cells. The boy sat on the cot in the larger of the two cells, the cell that had a window looking down on the courthouse square; the boy was reading a magazine or looking at the pictures in one; he did not look up when the banker pushed back the barred door and came into the cell. The banker sat on the stool that had like the cot been bolted to the floor. Now that he had come near, Glassmoyer saw that it was a travel magazine the boy was reading, this stamped property of the city library, and he thought for an instant of this cruelty, that the men penned here would be shown glossy photographs of places they had never been nor ever would; but then he thought again; that such pictures of such distant places, beaches and mountains and jungles and great cities, might free the minds of these men for a few moments; that that freedom might be all some would ever know again.

Now that the banker had come into the cell, the boy put the magazine aside. The boy was still dressed in the costume for the night's play, a shabby jacket and torn and patched knee trousers, and his face still carried the pale make-up, the dark circles about the eyes, that showed the boy he had played was ill and would not live. The boy did not speak or look at his grandfather.

Glassmoyer did not reach out to touch the boy, as he longed to do. "I've come to take you home."

The boy would not look at him. "I live here now. I'm a criminal. This is my home."

The boy sat and watched his grandfather as the old man covered his face with his hands and did not move them till the sheriff came into the cell. The sheriff went about as if the boy's grandfather was not there. He crouched down, sitting on his heels, before the boy and tipped his big hat back on his head. The crown of his forehead, where the hat normally rested, showed white as the belly of a snake or a frog. The rest of the sheriff's face was brown and looked dusty and soft and was wrinkled around the eyes, from smiling or squinting against the sun.

"Afraid I got bad news for you," the sheriff told the boy, speaking as if the boy's grandfather was not there. "You know who that was on the phone? Well, I'll tell you. That was the district attorney over in the hub city and he tells me, and this is the bad news, that you're going to have to be moving out. We got another tenant moving in. Tomorrow morning. Now ain't it a bit of luck that your grandpa is down here," said the sheriff, still speaking as if the boy's grandfather were somewhere else, "and he's been telling me he's willing to take you home with him. Just for the time being."

The boy did not look at his grandfather. The sheriff had something hidden in his hand and the boy looked at that. The sheriff's hands were brown and dusty and wrinkled like his face.

"But I'm a criminal. I want to stay here."

The sheriff turned his hand this way and that, the hand that held something the boy could not see. "Yes sir. That's a fact. You have been bad and we're going to have to do something about that. Now I've already talked to some of the merchants involved, your grandpa among them, and they don't see much point in your cluttering up my jail when they tell me they got a schoolhouse on down the road that can do the job just as well," said the sheriff and the boy smiled. "So. The punishment is going to be for you, and your friends, to go around and make some apologies, that first. Then after that, for a couple hours after school, maybe Saturday mornings, you and your little friends can go around to these establishments and help out here and there. Sweep out. Run an errand. Meanwhile, your grandpa is going to be knocking

a nickel to a dime off your allowance every week and that will go towards paying for the broken window glass. Now. That just about settles that.”

The boy pointed beyond the sheriff, to the second cell, smaller and without a window. “If somebody is coming to stay here, why can’t I stay over there?”

The sheriff shook his head. “Afraid I can’t accommodate that. That’s my special cell. reserved for people passing through and they don’t have the money to hole up at the hotel and it’s too cold to sleep out on a park bench. That’s where I put them up for the night and give them a little breakfast before they go on their way to wherever it is they’re going.”

“Is it a man or a boy who’s going to take over this cell?”

“Well now that’s a tough question. He’s a man and he’s also a boy. A boy who was made a man too early, I figure, and it never took right.”

“Did he kill someone?”

“Now we don’t know what this boy did or did not do. Not for sure. Not yet anyway. That’s why they’re bringing him here. There’s going to be a trial and there’s going to be a judge and a jury, and on the jury there’s going to be twelve people and they’ll decide if this boy killed someone, as some people seem to think, or maybe he didn’t. Then after that the judge takes over and he’ll decide what happens next and that all depends on what the jury says.” The sheriff reached forward and touched the boy’s knee. “You know, son, when somebody kills somebody else that don’t always make them a killer. Now listen to this. If you became a soldier in the army you might be made a hero for killing another man, if he was a foreign soldier and he was trying to kill you. And then there’s self-defense. If somebody was trying to kill you, you have the right to protect yourself. And in protecting yourself, if you killed the man trying to kill you, that would not make you a killer at all. And then there’s just pure old accident. Let me tell you a story. When I was your age one of my brothers killed another one of my brothers. Out while they were hunting. Now I’ll tell you, if I know one thing in this world, I know that my brother Jack was no killer. I knew that then when it happened and my other brothers and our daddy and our mamma and everybody else in town knew it too. Jack loved that boy more than he loved his own life. It took Jack awhile but he finally came round and saw he wasn’t a killer. That it was just an accident.”

The boy had not looked at the sheriff or his grandfather for some time and still did not. “You mean it might have looked like he pushed him, but he was just trying to get away.”

“Now that’s exactly what I mean,” said the sheriff and stood and in doing so he opened his hand and seemed surprised that something was there. “Now

I will be boiled and baked if I didn't almost forget. Old St. Nick was making the rounds and since he didn't know exactly where you would be come Christmas morning, he said he'd leave just this one thing here at the jail, just in case." The sheriff crouched down to the boy. The gift was one of the sheriff's badges wrapped in foil from the jail kitchen, the boy could see that in its outline and the pin clasp on the back hadn't been wrapped at all, so that now the sheriff could pin the badge on the boy's jacket and pretend nobody knew what it was. "Now if you're a good boy, tonight and tomorrow, I think old St. Nick has left you something to go with that at your grandpa's house."

The boy turned the badge and pressed down the foil so that it would stay wrapped. "It's a gun. I asked him for a gun."

The sheriff stood and looked to the banker. He laughed. "Well now I had in mind something more along the lines of something," and the sheriff tipped his big hat down low on his forehead, "that you might well put on your head."

The boy stood. "No. It's a gun. I wrote the letter myself. I'm not too young. I know that. My grandfather had a gun when he was my age." This the boy said as he and the sheriff and then the banker came out of the cell and went down the hall toward the sheriff's office. "But I won't shoot you," the boy explained and the sheriff laughed. "I won't shoot anybody. I'll just shoot some rabbits if we get hungry, like my grandfather did when he was a boy. But my grandfather never shot anything else. He never shot any wolves, not one, because of old Two Toe, the old lobo wolf. Has my grandfather ever told you about old Two Toe, the wolf?"

"Can't say that he has," said the sheriff, now that they had come to his office the sheriff watching the red light on the telephone console flash.

"Some bad men came once to where my grandfather and his father lived and they put out some traps. Old Two Toe got his paw caught in one of the traps, but he was brave and wanted to get back to his wife and his children and not leave them alone and he chewed off the three toes caught in the trap. Old Two Toe walked with a little limp the rest of his life, my grandfather said, but when he got well he could still run as fast as he ever could. Having just two toes made him run faster than ever," said the boy and ran out of the sheriff's office.

Glassmoyer watched from the window till he saw that the boy would not run away again, that he had climbed in the banker's car, under the wheel, and would steer them home; then he turned to the sheriff who had lifted the phone and was listening as the operator gave him a message, the sheriff not looking pleased with what he was being told. In time he put down the receiver and looked less pleased still.

“Damn, Van, if sometimes this ain’t a hard business. Don’t know if you heard, but they sentenced Pee Wee Jones today and now his old mother is out there at the home place having a fit. Just won’t stop howling, the daughters say. Making all sorts of threats. Mainly against herself, but not always,” the sheriff said and went to the gun case and took his pistol and scabbard and belt off a peg. “And some of the brothers are talking bad talk too,” the sheriff said and put on the gun belt and buckled it. “And that goddamn hub city district attorney is determined to bring that new boy, seems like he killed a waitress over in the bus station over in hub city, we got him shipping in here tomorrow morning. That is an actual fact,” said the sheriff as he and the banker left the office and went down the short hall to the exit. “Christmas Eve and this new boy is a suicide threat and I’m going to be sitting there holding his hand all weekend.” They had come to the door and the sheriff put his hand to the knob, as before, as if he were pressing the knob to keep the door shut rather than pulling to open it. “You want me to do anything about those other two boys?”

“No. I’ll handle it. I’ll handle everything from here on in. Thanks and, Hat—there is one more thing,” said the banker as they came out of the building and stood on the rear steps. “The new jury panel, they’re going to be drawing that up between now and the first of the year. Have a word with Horace. Keep me and my wife off of it.”

“That’s already been done, Van,” said the sheriff and went down the steps toward his patrol car. “No need to say a word. Merry Christmas,” said the sheriff and he got into his car. “And Van, don’t give him that goddamn gun. Not this year.”

“No. Not this year,” the banker said as the patrol car pulled out of the lot. “No need to say a word.”



The drive that led to the garage at the rear of the grounds passed through an arch made in the house. The bulk of the house sat to the right of the arch; the kitchen and pantry and breakfast nook and the dining room and the main room and the bedrooms and all their bathrooms and closets as large as bathrooms were here. To the left of the arch and connected to the bulk of the house by a second-story corridor over the arch was another, smaller living area. This the elder Glassmoyer, the banker’s father, had designed for his three sons and was still so used, that the banker’s grandsons would have a private place when they came to stay. The boy liked steering the car through the arch to the garage at the back of the grounds; it was as if he were entering a castle. And so were the walled, elegantly treed grounds

and the rest of the house—with its vast rooms and sudden small places, narrow corridors found under stairs, hidden pantries, the cozy breakfast nook, wide cool bathrooms with white tile floors, the tile pieces cut in eight-sided bits no larger than a fingernail, the attic rooms snuggled under the gables, the blazing chandeliers of the main room, the broad winding staircase that led to the rooms above, the cramped steep steps that led back down ever so secretly to the dark dungeon of the kitchen—a magical place for the boy. A place out of a fairy tale, a place of princes and dragons and fair maidens longing to be freed by the one from the other. A place that charmed the boy's grandfather no less than it did the boy, as he saw it through the boy's eyes; no less than it had charmed the old man when as a boy his father had first brought them, him and his brothers, here from their home place on the gully, that now so long ago.

The women, Juanita and the boy's grandmother, were waiting outside for the boy. As Glassmoyer steered the car into the garage and went back through the arch to shut the front gate, the boy was taken inside by the women and given exactly what he wanted to eat and was scolded and embraced in turns by the women, with one woman ever at the one, the second ever at the other, till quick as a wink they exchanged roles, never to find themselves in agreement, the scolding soft and forgiving, the embraces with a hold hard as stone. At length the women joined in saying that the boy did not have to eat if he did not want to eat, and further gave in and agreed, with complaint and concern, that the boy might sleep curled up under the Christmas tree, where the boy had slept every night since the tree had been put up. Glassmoyer got down the boy's sleeping bag and spread it out in the corner behind the tree and the women got the boy into pajamas he did not much like, these covering him from hooded head to stockinged toe, and then Juanita went out across the back lawn to her apartment above the garage and the boy's grandmother climbed the curved stairs to her room on the second floor. Glassmoyer turned off the lights in the main room but for those strung on the Christmas tree, then he came and sat with the boy on a rug soft and thick as mattress and told the boy, as he had told him every night since the tree had gone up, of the village underneath the tree.

The village was their town when the banker had been a boy, when the town was just being built, first starting out, as the old-timers said. Or so it had been in Glassmoyer's imaginings when he had first begun collecting the toy houses and model buildings and so it had remained after that, though he knew there had not been one replica, one good copy, of any of the town's buildings in the original collection. His father had made the first

building, a log cabin, from discarded matchsticks, his father having clipped off the match heads for the primer powder for the cartridges he reloaded. His father had used a pine tar of some kind to fix the matchsticks together and the stained miniature cabin still carried that odor, if one put one's face close to it and closed one's eyes and remembered. The year following, the elder Glassmoyer had left the gully and gone up on the flat and with other men had begun to make this small town large and in doing so he had made money. In making a real town and making money, he no longer had the time for reloading cartridges that could be bought or making children's toys that could be bought, so that next Christmas the boy made these things himself. The boy had gone up onto the flat and collected bits of wood from the building going on there. On the blocks of wood that were cubes or near it, he had fixed with glue pieces of wood that had been cut wedges, these to form roofs. Some of the houses had sported chimneys and some porches and one, the most special, the banker recalled, had been fitted out with a pile of steps and a spike of wood on its roof that had been called a steeple, a bell tower, a clock dome, variously, as the church, the school and the courthouse came to be built full-size up on the flat. That year as a boy Glassmoyer had so very carefully painted these wood-block houses, one color for the roof, another for the walls, the chimney another, others for the doors and the windows. He had given these primitive efforts as presents to his younger brothers and friends at school, so that now, so many years later, he had only the one house left: the one that had been first called the church, then the school house, then the courthouse, this before the great stone courthouse had been built up on the flat and the boy had seen that his model was not like a courthouse at all.

Glassmoyer could not remember how long afterward it had been, if not the following year, then not long after, that he had become a man, or his father had so designated him; one morning his father had told him to put away such childish things and he had gone up onto the flat with his father to build a real town there, leaving his younger brother Lee, second in line, to take over the making of these small houses and making them into a village to be placed beneath that year's Christmas tree. The elder Glassmoyer, his eldest son now a man and his assistant and heir, now that he had made a real town and was making money, with his success their father indulged such toy making, at least at Christmastime. On those nights there before Christmas they would all gather round the tree and admire the work of Lee and Bennie, the youngest boy and his assistant, for Lee proved good at such detailed work and his houses and buildings were actual replicas, or close enough, of the buildings that their father and his heir had made up on the

flat. In time word of Lee's fine modeling got around. An old black man who tended some of the land their father had bought with his money, he came down to the gully and saw Lee's work. Impressed, he took the boy back up to his shack on the highground, near where Eastertown church now sat, and showed Lee his own work, his models those of machines and other things far more complex than mere buildings, and together the old black man and Lee began to make a model of the town out back of the garden behind the old man's shack. The crowning jewel of this enterprise had been the courthouse the old man and Lee had made. They went about collecting bits and chips of stone from the blocks that were making the new courthouse, to refashion these, to size and sculpt and shape and shave them, and so raised their own tiny courthouse in that time that it took their father and his heir and assistant and the men who worked under them to raise the large, real structure. People came from all over the county and the surrounding country to see the big courthouse go up and the elder Glassmoyer would tell these visitors, speaking with pride, *Now go see the small courthouse being built by my son*. And so on Sundays people would come and walk around the small town behind the old man's shack, calling out the names of the businesses and commercial establishments they recognized, marveling at the model courthouse, it complete with clock and wind vane and, perhaps most extraordinary, the brick streets the old man and Lee had put around the courthouse square, these bricks small as the smallest nail on a girl's hand.

The model town had ended, it had been destroyed, with Lee's death. It had not taken long for the elder Glassmoyer to see that his second son was the builder, his first son the thinker, the buyer, the counter—the *banker*, his father had called him even then—and soon Lee came with them up on the flat, to turn his models into vast things. By this time the stone courthouse and the square and all the buildings about the square were done and their father turned his money and ambition and vision to the west of town. He bought a section of land there and began to lay out streets in a grid on it, ridiculing the paths and lanes that previously had led direct from one homestead to the other. In setting out these streets in blocks their father set aside one block that he would not rent or sell and all one summer he and his boys planted trees there and other shrubs and vines not native to the land; then the second summer he began to build the house that would be the grandest, finest house the town would ever know. The house was to be built from the memory their father had of the great houses of his youth, there in a country of ancient trees and winding rivers and forests and gentle hills and land as black as a boot and rich as

syrup—so this country was described as a dream to his sons who knew or remembered nothing but the gully and the highground and the flat that rose beyond the gully. It was the second summer at building the great house that Lee was killed, that he received the blow that in six months' time would see him dead.

Glassmoyer saw the morning as clearly now, so many years on, perhaps more clearly still than he had seen it then. It had seemed like such a small thing. The two older boys, Van and Lee, were given work inside the house, while the men on the crew worked outside, and they had brought little Bennie with them, the woman hired to care for the boy during the day down sick. Van and Lee were doing some work on the stair, the oldest boy above, the second son below, and Bennie had crawled up the stairs, hand and foot, to Van. At the top of the stairs Bennie stood and in doing so he looked to be about to topple backward. Van reached out and caught the boy and in doing so he let slip the long railing board in his hand. The board slithered down the stairs and struck Lee, his eyes down, looking to his work, on the temple, that weak part of the skull there before the ear, and in six months' time Lee was dead.

During that time all could see that the boy was dying, all but their father. He slept in the boy's room, he brought him his meals, nursed him during his fevers, teased and told stories and made other entertainments during those high spells, those spells when it did seem that their father was right, that Lee, in laughing at his father's jokes and joking himself, in understanding all that was said to him and eating some and sleeping only so much—surely it had seemed during those times that the boy would recover and survive. But then one morning Lee slept, as he so often did after a fever, and he slept through the afternoon and, though he woke briefly during the early evening and smiled and spoke to their father and Van and Bennie gathered round, he slept on through the night and on through the next day and did not wake that evening or ever again. Their father raged at the death of his brightest, quickest, kindest, most favored son. For days he went on a tear of destruction that was only stopped by the town's sheriff and three of their father's friends.

It was some time after Lee's funeral, after his father had recovered from his rage and dropped into sorrow, that Glassmoyer learned that among those things destroyed during their father's rage had been the model town built by Lee and the old black man out behind the old man's shack on up toward the highground. The old man had collected the shattered remains of the models and placed them in a sack, all but the stones and tiny bricks that had made the courthouse and the streets around the courthouse, and

Glassmoyer took the sack home with him and hid it away and had come to forget it till months later, not long before Christmas, it seemed, he had come upon his father kneeling where he had hidden the sack. And so that Christmas Glassmoyer and his father and little Bennie, less help than hindrance in such matters, had fitted the toy buildings and houses back together as best they could and glued them tight and filled in the breaks with a wood plaster their father made from sawdust and repainted the models and when all this was done they had for the first of many Christmases to come set out the town underneath the Christmas tree, with Bennie making snow for the houses' roofs and the yards and streets around them from the cotton he had taken from their father's new gin.

Such were the banker's memories as he spoke to the boy of the small town set out beneath the Christmas tree. Yes, this was what he remembered: their father, who since his son's death had not spoken to the two boys beyond giving orders and had not touched them at all, now he sat on the floor beneath the tree and took the two boys in his arms as if to ask their forgiveness, as now Glassmoyer took his boy, his grandson, in his arms and, though the boy was fast asleep, asked for his.

■ ■ ■

The banker sat on his wife's bed. Her back was to him. The room was dark. Bars of moonlight fell through the venetian blinds. Two sleeping tablets, one for the banker, one for his wife, lay on the night table. The banker touched his wife.

"I've put away the gun. For another year."

"Thank God for that." The woman spoke without turning and did not speak again. The banker thought there was nothing left to say between them and moved to take his tablet away and leave her. Feeling his move, his wife said: "Something has got to be done. This can't go on and on and on. It's not getting any better. It's getting worse. Time. Time. That's all I ever hear. Give it time. Well, I won't," said the woman, turning. "Something must be done and *now*. *Soon*."

"All right. But after the holidays. I don't know what, but I'll start some action then. I'll see the lawyer if you like."

"Good." Then there fell a silence between them; then the woman said: "I wasn't going to tell you. But now, after tonight—I've heard from his mother. I've heard *about* her. She's working as a waitress, Van, my God, a waitress in some casino over the state line. And she's still with that—horrible woman. Something has to be done about that as well."

"One thing at a time, Rachel."

“It can’t be too soon. Did you see it tonight? Did you not see it? He was the only child in his class with no work up. It’s not that he hasn’t been doing any work. I spoke to his teacher. It’s that his work—she couldn’t put it on the wall. And Juanita has shown me some things, drawings he’s done here. A Christmas tree. How very nice. How very normal. Except that when you look close—all the ornaments are *hanged men*. Well now, an amusing cartoon in some New York magazine, but it’s not funny *here*. And Juanita pointed this out—I hadn’t even noticed. These drawings are the work of a child *half* his age. Van, it’s chilling. It’s frightening. Sometimes he’s like a boy of five, six. Then the next moment, the look in his eyes, he looks a thousands years old. Van, I’ve taken some of these drawings to the city. To the doctor, the child specialist, and he says these are cries for help. And what help are we giving him! Sitting and waiting for time to make things better,” the woman said and laughed bitterly. “Waiting for his father to grow tired of bedding that so-called actress—and all the others.”

The banker waited. “Rachel, tonight was not his father’s fault. The boy told us he was going to be with his father tonight and he told his father he would be with us. He’s a—”

“Oh yes yes yes!” The woman flung out her words. “He’s a *good* man. *Time* will bring him back to us. And on and on and on. Well, he is *not* a good man. A good man does *good things*. A good man doesn’t just sit and watch his son go mad and kill himself—that’s what the doctor said! Children kill themselves the same as do adults!” The woman stopped and breathed hard against crying, for once she had begun, at times it felt she would never stop. When that had passed she spoke in a quiet voice, a voice made brittle by the force it took to keep the quiet. “I’m sorry. I know. I know he is a good man and that he will come back to us and he will make the boy well again, that he is the only one of us who can help the boy now. Even the doctor knew that. He hasn’t even met Bavender and he knew that. And my God, sometimes even the doctor was sounding like you. Time does heal so much, yes yes yes, I know you’re so right. I know you’re all right. But Van, sometimes the waiting, Van, I am so frightened. Will you help me in some way? Will you let me pray? Will you pray with me?”

And though Glassmoyer believed in none of it, he went to his knees beside the bed, as he had knelt before sleep as a boy, and as his wife bowed her head and prayed to a God that was not there, he found himself repeating the words of her prayer—God bless us, God help us, God save us, God spare us the boy.

In time the woman’s prayer was done and she sat back in bed. Glassmoyer covered her and gave her a sleeping tablet and when she had taken

that he pretended to drink down his and sat on his wife's bed till she had fallen asleep. He then went down to his study and put the sleeping tablet in the drawer with the others he had collected and locked the drawer. Next he took down the gun from the closet—the old single-shot .410 that had been his as a boy—and stripped the colored wrapping paper from it and cleaned the gun though it did not need it and oiled it and wrapped it in the felt blanket made sweet by the oil and put the gun away. For next year, or the year after that. That done, he went to his desk and took out the papers he had been reading and reading again these last few weeks, since the boy's father had spoken to him of writing a history of the town. *The Gully Papers*, he called them. His father's journals of their life there where Eastertown now stood, kept before his father had gone up onto the flat to build a town and grow rich and had stopped making such records. Glassmoyer worked on these papers, recalling those long-ago events, those that were within his recall, till near dawn. He then slept for a time, sitting at his desk, till he heard Juanita stirring in the kitchen.

That woke him, and he rose and locked away his papers and locked the study door and turned and went along the bright hall to join her.

**A**ssistant District Attorney Douglas Usher had some time on his hands. Time to kill. Maybe he would write some letters. He hadn't written a letter since—maybe he had never written a letter he hadn't been made or paid to write. Maybe he would write a letter just for the hell of it. *Time to kill. Just for the hell of it.* Already this writing a letter, just the idea of it, was sharpening his wit. And the hotel stationery and the hotel envelopes lay there on the table, right there in front of him. Eschewing the old hotel ink barrel pen—this town, it could have been quill and open pot—Douglas Usher drew the paper to him and snapped to extension his new ballpoint. Now who first? Ha ha ha. Who first indeed.

Dear Marilyn,

You frigid cow. You spoiled and selfish bitch.

Tch tch. Down, Doug boy, down. Writing, cross-examination, the wooing of little lady—wasn't all the good stuff always left between the lines? Hadn't the Judge—whose eye of which his satchel-ass daughter was the apple—hasn't Daddy droned that into you and droned again? Yes. A new start, that was what this young assistant district attorney needed and, after sketching cartoon of what might have been a cold cow, Doug Usher crumpled that sheet of cheap hotel paper and drew a fresh blank to him.

My dearest Marilyn,

We're waiting now and while we wait it rains. Actually it has been raining all week, all during the trial, jury selection, raining a deluge since I got here, with the street intersections standing knee-deep even then, with the heavens showing all the signs of going on to pour down rain and more rain long after I have gone and our man sent to his fate. Which is what I hope to be tonight—gone and sent to my, a surely more auspicious, fate—or, at worst, the latest, tomorrow morning. Gone to my fate and by your warm and welcoming side long before you read this. If you ever read this. You know how forgetful I am about small things. Birthdays, anniversaries, the payment

of parking tickets, the mailing of letters. But not forgetful of the large things! Not forgetful of you!

Leave that in? Really, really too good to take out. And the stupid cow will never get it anyway. And what if she does? Leave, old boy, and press on.

The trial. I'll wait till I see you to tell you of that. Except to say that I feel good about it. About my part in it. Very good. But then as your Father has told me and told me again—Never Count On Anything. Particularly when you're dealing with Murder. Particularly when you're dealing with the Unfaithful Woman. I know you don't like such talk, but Dad is right on the matter. Some people simply like to see such women Get It In The Neck. Murdered, that is. Simple as that. You just never know. But then we do have some strong minds on the jury and maybe they'll see Justice through. One woman in particular is very strong, reminds me a lot of another strong-willed woman, you know who. Just wish she were Foreman, but then women aren't made such around here. I wish I knew about the Foreman we do have. He's a good, honest man, one of the best in town, everyone agrees to that, but there's something—I want to say there's something soft about him but that's not right. Just something *uncertain*. I don't know. We'll see. Maybe he'll pull through. Though I fear he is the cause of the delay. *Guilty* should have been in hours and hours ago. Oh well. As your Father has told me and told me again—Only Time Will Tell.

The town. Why I sat down to write you in the first place. No, not you. Not a letter to anyone. Maybe to me. Just me. I happen to be a native of this town, I could be. You know how I was passed from aunt to granny to cousin when I was a kid—an orphan in all but name—well one of the great aunts happened to have lived in this town. I don't know whether I had forgot or blocked it out of my mind or what, but on one of those lonely rainy nights this week I passed some time in the local library here in the courthouse building and came across a local history of the town. Well not much of a history, not a history at all in fact, just some old photographs and newspaper clippings of the people who had settled this place, and there was my great aunt as a young woman or a young woman bearing my great aunt's name (the year I passed with the old battle-ax I felt surely she had never been young or a woman at all). Anyway there can't be that many Ursula Ushers in this world and I went to the County Clerk's office and learned that this Ursula Usher (You You Horse Shoe! the eastside toughs used to taunt) had died a spinster sometime back before the war. I went back in my mind and the only memory of my great aunt dying was my going to a room filled with flowers and the next moment being on a train alone, off to the next aunt or cousin or

what. Well, this Miss Usher's death would have put me about six and that was right and I dug out the old highschool yearbook for that year and dug back into the back of the book where the lower grade photos were placed and sure enough—First grade, D. Usher. And this poor waif's bespectacled misery, the fat brat (a judge's daughter!) would never know anything like it. Next day lunch hour I went to the address where Aunt U was said to have lived. The old East Side, Eastertown, they called it. The old homestead, a vacant lot now, all or most all the fine old houses on the eastside gone now and even then, back then, that year I was with Aunt U, I recall even then how she spoke of the neighborhood falling, how in her youth anybody who was anybody had lived on the eastside, Eastertown, that was how it had come to be called when all the good folks died or went away or moved on to the west of the town, and so this afternoon, waiting for the jury to return, in all this rain, I drove out to the old east side, Eastertown—

And Doug Usher stopped his letter here. But rather than crumpling the sheets to balls, tearing them to shreds and burning them to bits, the young assistant district attorney carefully folded the paper and tucked it into his briefcase. There to be referred to at a later date, tomorrow morning, say, when he had lost his case, had been sacked by the Chief, a man very, very close to the Judge. A young assistant district attorney who had once been an orphan in all but name, a young man now out on the street, penniless, wifeless, homeless and hopeless, a young man who now, seeking the end of it all, would eschew blowing his brain's out, leaping off a bridge and other such normal means of ending it all, a young man who to see the end of it all would merely have to take out this letter and begin again, *Dear Marilyn, You frigid cow*. Yes, indeed, considered Doug Usher as he fastened the briefcase latch, that end was simply too succinct, too savory, too swift not to be made use of.

The hotel lobby had grown dark. Or it had been dark all day, all week, darkened by rain, and now night falling only made it darker, ever so slightly darker. Doug Usher rose from the desk in the corner of the lobby—had anyone ever before sat at that desk, in this dark and darkening lobby, and actually written a letter to his wife?—and went to the window. Through the rain Doug Usher could see water. The intersection nearby stood a pond making a lake, water standing waist deep, maybe over your head if you were short enough, in the streets. His first night here, when the sheriff had ridden him to the hotel, Doug Usher had asked the sheriff, maybe the deputy, *Sewers clogged?* and this bumpkin, nosing his old patrol car down through the lake, had said, *Sewers? Don't need 'em. When it rains the water stands.*

*When it stops raining the water runs off.* And indeed the water stood and the water did run off. The following afternoon, late, toward night, Doug Usher was raised by sirens and he went out in the jalopy he had rented for a week, no matter how long the trial went on, and followed the sirens' music east, into the east side of town where Doug Usher thought he had once lived as a boy and never had. He went down into the east side of town as far as the paved roads ran and there was met by a running lake, a river of water running off, running off into some gully or canyon nearby or some great hole in the ground, wherever it was all this water was due to run off to when it stopped raining. Through the dark of the rain, the darkening of the late afternoon, he saw lights there on the far side of this running river, there toward the east, there where the sirens sang. There were buildings there on that far side and they were being swept away by all this water running off, to be taken away from the town and its east side and dumped somewhere, in some big hole in the ground, and the lights and sirens there were the sheriff and deputies and their cars and highway patrolmen and theirs and ambulances and maybe a fire truck, they had all come to the east side of this town, where Doug Usher had never lived nor would, to save, to succor, to salvage the people and their houses as the standing water rose and rose about them and then, if it ever stopped raining, would run off, taking them all, the east side of the town, maybe the entire town off to that great hole in the ground, if it ever stopped raining.

Doug Usher leaned his face close to the lobby window, he pressed his cheek against the glass. There he could just see the hotel's neon sign, what letters that were not burned out, and beyond the nearby intersection's street light, and farther down the block he could just make out the red light over the fire station barn but not the water tower that stood over the fire station and not the town's name written on the water tower made dark by coming night and the rain. Doug Usher could not remember the name written on the water tower, the town's name, and even after the name came to him he did not think he remembered how to spell it, not correctly. Startled, a bit, that his brain, like the hotel's neon sign, might have taken to missing some letters, short-circuited by the rain, he returned to the desk in the corner of the lobby. Surely the town's name, correctly spelled, would be on the hotel's stationery. He sat at the desk and drew a sheet of paper to him. Yes. There it was, the town's name, though Doug Usher could not get it out of his head that the name on the water tower, the name on the city limits sign, that they had been spelled differently than this. An extra letter or maybe one less. Doug Usher spent some time rewriting the town's name—adding a letter here, taking one away there—till he thought there

may be no one correct way to spell the name. Maybe they were all right and all wrong, Doug Usher considered and drew another, fresh sheet of stationery to him.

Ferdo,

You lucky bum. You remember when the Chief decided to take on the Big (Money) Murder and leave the two Little (or No Money) Murders to his two up-and-coming superstar asst. d.a.s? How everybody around the office said that old Ferd Coggin had drawn the short stick. OK. Old Ferd had got three for the price of one, but these three—who were they? Three gypsy cabdrivers that's who. Two winos and some drifter who had sobered up/settled down for couple weeks/driving cab till they rolled on down the road/slid back into the bottle. Three nothings and nobodies who might as well not have existed in the first place, so far as hub city public opinion was concerned, as only city hubbers who ever call cab are said wino and hobo theyselves, everybody anybody owning own car and staying in of an eve. And the killer. Ferd got the short end of that un too. Some nice local boy. Well not hub city but close, from one of those perfect lil towns that ring hub city like spokes. And all the perfect lil cityzens of this lil town, why they don't drink and they don't chase round and the boys that grow up there, going to that perfect lil school, them boys wouldn't harm a fly. And if by any chance one of these local boys, well let's say he came over to hub city and blew brains out three cabbies, why then he must only needed the sixtythreebucksfortyfivecents, more hisn by right than these three wanderin wino cabbies.

Doug Usher's hand stopped. He smiled. Not bad. The very words of Ferd Coggin, if he recalled. The day the Chief assigned Ferd the Taxi Cab Murders. Even if Ferdo did claw hisself a Conviction, the Jury would never give him *Death*. Sure. Everyone around the office agreed. The Chief, when made these assignments, had had it in for old Ferd Coggin, while the Chief, when making assignments, he had had it up for fair-haired boy Doug the Digger Usher. Now what Murder did the Digger find in his stocking? Doug Usher smiled again. The writing hand had moved and was writing again.

A good un, the Digger's murder was. A furriner, a Kraut, mebbe Nazi even, atheist too, Red mebbe, one of them eggheads interlectalls that had sneaked into our fair land set to rape pillage murder like he had rape pillage murder our fighting doboys cept now this Hun had set to murderin the fair daughters of our land, well just one anyway, apple of Daddy's eye, who just happen to be working her way through college when she was fendin and defendin this Teutonic Casanova. Yessir. The Chief had smiled on the Digger handing him this plum.

And then, what everybody around the office was saying, Why when the Chief made his third and final run at running for Lt gov, why then his logical temporary d.a. appt would be his one and only youngerish sooper star none other than Digger Usher. Yessir. That was it. While one Ferd star was falling into eclipse another Digger one was on the rise. Yew bet Yessir. The night the chief had made assignments there was one asst da buying drinks another cryin in his beer. Well I can write to you tonight, old pal, to tell you that tonight the shoe is on the other foot. You want a picture of the Digger tonight. One young hapless helpless hopeless asst d.a. sitting in the lobby of this forlorn abandoned deserted old hotel in this forlorn abandoned deserted little town wishing above all things, that he would give just about anything if tonight he had that beer to cry into—

Doug Usher lifted his head and listened. Somewhere a telephone had taken to ringing. Not here, not in the lobby, not at the front desk, there was never anyone at the front desk, not unless one stood before it and shouted and banged about—no, this telephone was ringing somewhere in the rear of the hotel, in one of the back rooms, the manager's office, the room where the manager slept and did his hotel running anyway, what running there was to do. While Doug Usher listened to the phone ringing and after it had stopped ringing, while Doug Usher sat listening to the manager speaking on the phone, while Doug Usher sat waiting for the manager to put down the phone and come shuffling along the hall, to peer into the lobby and, seeing him there, the only man ever to sit at this desk in this hotel lobby and write a letter there, while Doug Usher sat waiting for the hotel manager to come and tell him the sheriff had called, the jury was coming in, a verdict, after an entire day, the hours now of quibbling and questioning and quaking, now they had finally made up their feeble minds, while Doug Usher sat waiting for what it now seemed would never come, this verdict, now he thought out and did not write the rest of his letter to his dear colleague and competitor Ferd the Ferdinand Coggin.

No. It hadn't turned out like that, not like everyone in the office, from the Chief to the lowest pool typist, had thought. Take the three four cabbies that had been murdered so that, it would seem, poor old Ferd Coggin might have employment. Yeah, let's start with The Victims, those three four nobodies and nothings, the deaths of whom not a single Hub City Hubber gave a toss for. Well in looking over these three wandering gypsy wino cabbie victims, the cops came up with this one very interesting ID. Turned out, see, that one of these hobos turned out to be grandson of one of the most powerful men in the state. Right. Now you get it. And this patrician nitwit,

instead of being off at Harvard or Yale or somewhere he belonged, he had taken it into his tiny mind to run away from home, from granddaddy and Harvard and Yale and all of granddaddy's money and power and in so running away from home this cluck had taken to hitching here and there, working here and there, sleeping in this ditch, that flophouse, and during this great disappearing act this, this *scion* had ended up in some wino hotel in this very hub city, in that murderous district down around the bus station, and to make a living, pay his wino hotel rent, this beautiful blond boy—he could have been a scholar, a doctor, his mother wept, he read Latin, he wrote Greek—had taken to driving cab and one bitterly cold, snowing, sleeting, howling night had had his brains blown out for the twenty-six dollars he had carried in his jeans. Had had his brains blown out for the sheer pleasure, the kick, the joy that killing had given his killer.

Oh yes—or was it no?—that hadn't turned out either, had it? The Killer. The church-going, psalms-singing, triple threat honor student who wouldn't hurt a fly, the good son and better brother, born in these parts, reared in one of those small towns that ring hub city, *this very* small town in fact, one of those small town boys who helps Mom out with the chores while he waves the flag and spoons down apple pie, the boy who had all but killed those three wandering wino cabbies in self-defense turned out, Doug Usher would tell you, to be one of the most natural murderers anyone in the office had ever seen. Calm, cool, calculating, this local boy killed each cabbie and then took his money, all of it, bills and change, and counted it all out, down to the last cent, and made an entry of the amount in a ledger, as if it had all been honest earnings for a good night's work. And so—so much for the eclipsed star of Ferdinand Ewell Jenkins Coggin III. Hub County's next, its youngest-ever-in-history, d.a., there he was waltzing in in three short days' time with verdict: guilty; sentence: death, all of which had so much pleased the most powerful granddad in the state and all, all those other most powerful granddads in the state as well.

And then there was Douglas "The Digger" Usher and his star, his rising star, a star that before this blinking trial had gone looking big and bright as a moon, as for that declining, sinking, drowning young assistant d.a., he who would no doubt be entering private practice soon, say Monday morning if he lucky, now this young man drew the cheap hotel stationery to him to write but before pen struck paper,

Dear Chief,

You rotten stinker. You knew what you were landing me with all along, didn't you? This trial. This chip shot, this lay-in, this piece of

cake. Oh yes, everybody at the office got a good laugh at that, didn't they? The Luck of the Digger. Nazi Storm Trooper Continues Rape and Pillage. Local Co-Ed Succumbs to Kraut Killer. Everybody at the office had a good laugh writing headlines for the local rag and old silly, simple, gullible Digger went along and had his laugh too. The easiest conviction: Murder/sentence: Death the Chief had ever let anybody else try, that's what everybody at the office had said and they had laughed and you, you rotten, double-crossing scoundrel, you laughed too, didn't you? The last laugh, that's what you were all having at the time, but good old dumb Dig, he didn't have a clue that that last laugh was the last laugh on him and his marriage and his career—have I left anything out? His reason and his sanity, yes, let's don't forget them.

Shall we start with the Nazi storm trooper? The Kraut killer. The Gestapo gangster. The Aryan asshole. Etc etc. Yes, let's. Well now, this killer you had handed the Digger on a platter, let's picture him. What would he be there in court. Tall, blond of course, his once athletic figure perhaps now a bit debauched but still there would be the dueling scar, the flashing arrogance in his icy blue eyes, the sneer of contempt that curled his cruel lips, his haughty accent (let's make it Brit, not to forget monocle and ivory cigaret holder), his wild maniacal laugh that such country bumpkins as we might bring ourselves to sit in judgment of such a Super Man as he. Etc etc.

Doug Usher lifted pen from paper and went back in his chair and saw in his mind what he had in fact seen in the courtroom. A boy. A boy who should have been a man but was not. This boy-man German, that was right, a German, a boy, but that was all, the only thing they, everyone at the office, and their imagination had got right. Doug Usher's killer then. Thin, small, quiet, frightened, timid; wore glasses; he wept; coloring, skin, hair, was that of ash, grey, white; a voice so small, so distant he could scarcely be heard; no arrogance in speech or any gesture; accent foreign but it did not hail from the high teutonic halls of treacherous Oxford aristos; he did not seem particularly bright, was neither cruel nor haughty nor on and on; rather he looked a gentle man, he looked to be kind, he looked to be good, a good man, this man boy, in fact, all in all, he looked like a man who would not harm a fly. And oh yes, not forget the last nail in the coffin, in the containing of this young assistant d.a.'s career and its success, his happiness and fortune. You see, this sad, maybe tragic, yes let's call him tragic, this tragic figure had been and still was, even now, still bitterly, foolishly, terribly, helplessly and hopelessly in love with the young woman he had killed. Had Doug Usher recently or maybe simply just now said or thought something

about the last nail in his coffin? If so, Doug Usher had said/thought wrong. The last nail in his coffin, let's go ahead and toss the body in there along with success, happiness, fame and fortune, that last nail was the girl who had been killed. The girl herself. Doug Usher drew a sheet of paper to him and wrote or thought to write for before pen struck paper, if one could imagine a shadow gathering in this gloomy hotel lobby, then one or something like one, something darker than the usual dark at least, fell across the empty page of Doug Usher's fuming thought. Doug Usher made a theatrical flinch, near a leap. Nothing really serious, but some form of protest at the creeping old hotel manager who was for ever creeping up on Doug Usher. Creeping usually done, if not now, here in the lobby, then when Doug Usher was at the phone in the hall. Doug Usher calling Marilyn or wishing really it was little Mary Coggin he was calling, calling Mary in some other role than that of one of her husband's closest colleagues, calling her on that evening that he knew well was the shy, quiet, smiling Mary's husband's night out playing poker, his night out with the boys, and that quiet, shy chat, only a minute, less, during which Mary told Doug what he already knew—Ferdinand not in. Yes, that was it. The extent of his great romance with Mary Coggin. And no doubt as far as it would ever go. Doug Usher calling Mary Coggin every Tuesday night, Doug Usher laughing at his memory, his lack of one, how every Tuesday night he kept forgetting—Ferdo's night out with the boys—Doug Usher laughing while he listened, he had never listened so hard in his life as he listened to Mary Coggin smile on the phone.

Doug Usher turned over the blank sheet of hotel stationery. He turned it over anyway and studied severely the creeping old hotel manager, he who would cast shadow among shadows, he named Doyle or Lloyd, it seemed to change from day to day. Doug Usher turned over the blank sheet of hotel stationery and addressed let's call him Doyle today:

"Well any news, Doyle?"

The old man looked to the lobby window. "Still raining."

Doug Usher could not wait for the day he was counsel for the defense. The day he could put Doyle on the stand and watch some slaving prosecutor try to drag the time of day out of Doyle.

"What I meant to say is: is there any news from the courthouse?"

"The courthouse?"

"Yes. The courthouse. It is a large building just over there. Takes up a whole block to itself. Inside this large building are large rooms. They are called courtrooms. In one of these rooms sits a man behind a high desk. The man wears a black robe. He wields a gavel and shouts *Out of order!* and *Objection denied!* from time to time. He is called the judge. To his left sit

twelve thoroughly confused, bored and sleepy citizens. They wake up and listen from time to time. Usually there after the judge has banged his gavel and shouted. These twelve hold in their hands a man's life. They will decide whether to kill this man or let him live. They are called the jury. Before the judge and the jury, on the floor lower than they, are placed two tables. At one table is the man who will live or die. He is called the defendant. Sitting beside the defendant is another man, an old man. He is one of the most incompetent, ill-educated, inexact and uncertain lawyers in the history of jurisprudence. He is called the attorney for the defense. At the second table sits a second man, a young man. He is one of the best and brightest and most brilliant and . . ." and it went on from there, till Doug Usher was able to bring himself to say, not this, not what he was thinking, but rather something simple. Something Doyle might comprehend. Such as:

"What I mean to say is: has the sheriff called with any news from the courthouse?"

Doyle studied Doug Usher. "Yep and nope."

Doug Usher went still. "Doyle. Please. Think. Has the sheriff called or has the sheriff not called?"

"I mean, yep, the sheriff has called and nope, not from the courthouse."

Doug Usher breathed deep. "All right. One more time. Has the sheriff called with any news about the trial?"

"The trial?"

Doug Usher was reading the headline in tomorrow's Hub City Herald and doing so agreeably—PROMISING YOUNG PROSECUTOR STRANGLES DOYLE WITNESS FOR THE DEFENSE—when the phone rang in the back of the hotel. Doyle cocked his head. Doyle listened.

"Yes, Doyle. It is the ringing of a fucking telephone." What Doug Usher actually said was: nothing.

"Loose boys. Boys outta the house and outta bounds. Their grannies been calling the sheriff. The sheriff been calling me. We spot em we gotta run em in."

As Doyle shuffled and poked off down the hall toward the ringing phone, Doug Usher considered he had some time on his hands. Fifteen to twenty minutes for Doyle to shuffle back to the ringing phone then oh maybe a quick ten to come back to tell Doug Usher the news. The jury had come in and they had decided whether a man would live or die. And a second man, a promising young prosecutor, he would die or live as well, according to how the first young man's fate went. At any rate, they certainly were a mated pair, these two young men, one or the other of them was going to get it in the neck.

Or maybe it was only some little eastside thugs out stealing hubcaps or breaking street lights or maybe it was simply the sheriff calling Doyle to pass on the latest news to Doyle: "Still rainin, Doyle." Whatever, weather, truancy, the end of it all, Doug Usher freed his mind from all such concern and gave his attention over to yet another letter he would never finish, never stamp, never send. No, not right. It could very well be the letter he would indeed finish, stamp and send—if it turned out his own life were to be finished, stamped and sent.

Dear Mary,

I know this is the last thing in the world you could have ever dreamed to happen, to receive a letter from me. A man who amounts to little more than a stranger. But I had to tell someone about them, about their love, and I find the only way I can tell anyone of them and their love is by writing you. If past practice is any guide I will never finish this letter and certainly never mail it even if I ever do, but it must be begun. I must in some way think, believe that some day you may, just possibly, know of my love for you. And your love, that someday you will know of your love for me.

Something is not right. Something is wrong, profoundly wrong, and that something has been eating away at me, eating at me all this week, all my career and the training for it, eating away at my very soul. Tonight, this evening, this afternoon, since the jury was sequestered at noon, for six, seven, maybe eight hours now, I have been sitting in my room in this hotel or in the lobby of this hotel and while I have sat I have been thinking one thing. A single sole solitary thing. Wishing, wishing. And what I have been wishing for, this one thing, wishing with every fiber of my being, what that one thing I have been wishing is that a man will die. A man who should not die. A man who should live.

And so tonight I have made the final decision, finally, and I will tell you just how final it is. I have written them. The Big Three. My wife, Marilyn, Ferd, your husband, and the Chief—and that's about as final as you can get. And I have written them—and am writing this—*before* the verdict has come in. Either way, guilty or innocent, I am done with it. Done with sitting in this hotel lobby wishing that a man will die. Oh yes. The next time I sit in this hotel lobby or one like it I will have done everything within my power to see that a man will live. Not die. Yes. I am about to sacrifice my brilliant career to become, yes, how low legally can you get, a public defender, how high! Maybe I could even take over here and become this miserable little town's lonely little lawyer, this town sure needs another one, an incompetent, lonely and lost and love-smitten lawyer.

Doug Usher found himself sitting back, away from his desk. How long he had been away from the letter, the letter he would never write and never send, he did not know. The phone had stopped ringing. There was silence from there, then the sound of a man talking, then silence again beneath the rain falling. His mind at some time had gone off the letter he was writing, the letter he was thinking. Gone off the man and the woman on the jury, their love, what he had imagined this week to be their love and the ending of it, a love that would end before it began, a love that had never begun. Yes, at some point his mind had gone off that and had gone back to what the sheriff had said, the sheriff had called to say. A boy had gone missing, a runaway boy, an eastside boy, an orphan boy, had run away from home, the home his aunt had made for him, his aunt now calling, calling out to Doug Usher. A boy has gone missing, a boy has run away from home, have you seen him there, is he there with you hiding, there with you in the hotel, hiding, to be out of the drumming, driving rain?

He had seen the boy during the trial. First he had come to the courtroom with a class, with a teacher, and had sat quietly with the rest of the class and had watched the judge and had watched the jury and had watched the accused, the condemned, the doomed man on trial, and he had watched old Herder, defense, as he rose to speak and had watched Doug Usher, prosecution, as he replied without rising. And then, when the witnesses came, when friends, relatives, co-workers, those who had known the young woman who had been killed or had known the young man who had killed her, and those who had known neither the young woman or the young man, bystanders who had simply seen the young man kill the young woman or had been near when the young man had killed the young woman or had merely heard tell of the young man killing the woman and thought now that they had been near and had seen the young man kill the woman he loved—now that all these witnesses came to take an oath to tell the truth, what they had seen or heard or simply been near, it was then that the deputy sheriff had come and whispered a word to the teacher of this wandering, lost, out-of-place class and she and the class and the boy in it had risen and left the courtroom. Then the next day or the day after the boy had returned, not alone but with two other boys but not with the teacher and not with the class. If there were three of them that second day, then the third day only the boy came, alone. Now the boy came every day of the trial, sitting in the rear near the door, watching the trial and all in the courtroom with such concentration that Doug Usher and old Herder and the deputy sheriff who came to act as bailiff when he was not out fighting the flood and the judge who shooed the boy away when the bailiff was gone

and the questioning and testimony grew too rough, all these and some others took to calling this boy the Little Lawyer, he so carefully followed the proceedings, he *studied* them, with such care, far more carefully, they all noted, than the man who would be doomed or freed. That was the boy who this morning, the final morning of the trial, had not come to the courtroom. Who, Doug Usher now imagined, was now a runaway, hiding from his aunt, hiding from the sheriff and his deputy and the judge and his teacher and them all, hiding there with Doug Usher in that dark, darkening hotel lobby, hiding there to keep safe from the driving, drumming rain.

Doug Usher now returned his attention to the letter he would never write and never send and saw that for that time his mind had been gone, he did not know how long, that his hand had been pushing the pen across the page. A hand not writing words of love to Mary Coggin or words of anything to anyone. Rather a hand that had been pushing the pen in jagged, meaningless lines across the page. Mountains, the teeth of a saw or of a shark, the lines went up and down across the page, the graph of a bumpy stock market, the chart of one suffering fever and chills. What had he wanted to write, to tell Mary Coggin, anyone, someone? About the man and the woman on the jury, about their affair, their love? No. Not them, not really. Had he not been told of that as gossip, during jury selection, he would never have known of their love, their affair. He would not have noticed it. During those six days of trial they had not, so far as Doug Usher knew, spoken or touched or even looked at one another. The man, the foreman of the jury, sitting on the front row seat left, the woman back row seat right. What would he write of them—the man's wife ill in a sanitarium, the woman's husband fled for California—that would not be but gossip? That he had never seen two people, no matter the gossip, who had looked less in love, less likely to have shared a bed—no, that was not what he wanted to tell when he sat down in this dark, darkening hotel lobby and pulled a sheet of cheap paper to him. His hand was moving, moving again, driving pen across the page, searching for what was not there. The ranges of mountains, the teeth of sharks or of a saw, now they clashed over the page, there were too many of them, overlapping, riding on top of one another, so that diamond boxes formed, strings of Xs formed, XXX, one after another. No, that was not it. If there was no future, nor was there a past. Not for him, not for anyone, not in this town. You see, even if he had lived in this town as a boy he would not have remembered it. You see, he had lived in so many of these towns as a boy, going from this aunt to that cousin, to granny this and uncle that, there had been so many of these towns that one had grown to look like another in his memory. Oh he remembered all of them, but only

so far as to remember that they had all been the same, the same town, and so what he remembered of this town he remembered of them all and so he remembered nothing. He remembered as well the distances between the towns, the journey by bus or train or sometimes in a car, as he was sent from one town on to the next, from aunt to cousin to aunt again, but he remembered these journeys no more clearly, no more distinctly, than he had remembered the towns. Now as his hand moved, moved the pen to make Xs and diamond boxes, mountain upon mountain, teeth ripping teeth, he saw these journeys the same as he saw the towns at their start and the towns at their end. A boy sitting in those front seats behind the driver, sometimes sitting in the seat directly behind the driver so that the road was blocked from view, sometimes sitting in the seat across the aisle that the road could be seen, he would be sitting in one or other, *never* allowed back in the dark cave of the bus, and looking at the back of the driver's head or looking out to the endless road, the bus would come to the next town and he would be taken off the bus, and the driver and all those on the bus, even the grumpy woman who had given up her front seat and moved to the dark cave in the back of the bus, even she would press her face against the window glass and wave with the driver and all those on that side of the bus as the bus pulled away, all their waving hands moving together, tick tick tick, like the ticking of a clock as the bus pulled away.

Such were the letters, the dreams Doug Usher wrote now, as he waited for the sheriff, the deputy, someone, anyone from the courthouse to call or come for him. Letters of their future and of his past, if only he had had a past to remember, if only there had been a future to share. Letters that went on for pages, page after page of jagged lines, lines that made the ranges of mountains, the teeth of a shark, lines that as they crowded on to one another made Xs and these made diamond boxes. The Xs made by one who could not write his name, the diamond boxes on the back of a deadly snake.



The two yummy girls at this lost school on this lost plain in this lost land he had come to, here to beat his drum and chase commies and be insulted by yummy girls, these two wisecracking yummys called him *Igor* and would not stop, no matter how he howled. His name was Lufkin. Not his real name. His real name was something that he himself had never got quite right, not twice in a row. Lufkin was the name of a town he had come upon, or whose name he had seen on a sign post, not long after he had come to this country. So it was that the next time someone asked him his name, instead of replying with half the alphabet and no vowels, he had replied:

“Lufkin.” And as this someone, it had been a cop, had nodded and smiled, that had become his name, his new American name. If his old, real name had had the sound of sinking your boot in a muddy ditch, this new name was someone skipping nimbly over the mire. “*Loof-kin! Loof-kin!*” he had sang out that night he spent with the cop. But even then, with all that practice, sometimes he forgot and went back to the old name. Like when he first met the two girls, his excitement had been such that he had blurted out his old mudsucking name. That was when the girls started calling him Igor. Even if he had corrected himself immediately—“I, Loof-kin, have come to destroy the peril of Communism!”—they went on and on, these yummy girls, calling him Igor and wouldn’t stop, no matter how he sang out the name that soared over the ditch.

Not that Lufkin cared what these two yummy girls called him. They could call him Igor, they could call him Boot Sucking in a Muddy Ditch, they could call him anything, these two yummy girls.

Lufkin’s battle against the peril of Communism got off to a rocky start. Lufkin had learned about Communism on his father’s knee and at the first church assembly Lufkin had performed at, he had roared out his father’s manifesto. *All Communists are Russians!* the manifesto’s first sentence, had drawn a great cheer from the assembled. But then the corollary, the second and last of his father’s bellow, *All Russians are Communists!*, that had drawn some backtalk. Like this girl had risen and asked him about Anastasia. Anastasia! What the mudsuck did Anastasia have to do with the perils of Communism! What kind of mudsuck pinko was calling the Crown Princess a Red! The evening ended badly, only two of the assembled staying afterwards to shake Lufkin’s hand. That night Lufkin brooded over a new battle cry, but came up dry. Luck for Lufkin that he soon met Hal, a good man with words and the only friend Lufkin would ever make in this country, the friend who had given Lufkin his drum, who had gotten Lufkin off the church circuit and into the much more lucrative highschool racket. Hal had explained it all, more or less.

“Szdrcvsk,” said Hal, stretched out over the motel bed. “Americans love Communism. Americans love Communists. They love Communist America and they love American Communists. Without them, what would there be to hate? And you better start loving them too, Cdzvlsk, or you’re going to be out of a job.”

And Hal had penned a new speech to that effect and the next night, when Lufkin delivered his opening lines—“My friends and neighbors, there are Communists stalking America, American Commies stalking commie America!” rather than ropes and white hoods and burning torches sent for,

a low growling cheer rose from the assembled. It seemed that these strange Americans rather liked the idea that there were Communists in this very town and Communists who belonged to this very church and Communists in this very room tonight, and then proceeded to go berserk when told a Communist could be sitting right next to each and every one of them, they screamed and tore at their clothes and hair and spoke in tongues that a Commie might be sharing their bed, table, their family Bible, that in fact there were Commies near everywhere you looked—particularly in government, schools and down at the local movie house.

“Probably Nell Head. The old woman who runs the popcorn machine.”

One of the yummy girls, in another room, at another time. The current room, the present time. It was not a large room, a classroom maybe, as there were chairs and desks put about, in a schoolhouse maybe or maybe a penitentiary, that’s what Lufkin had figured when the three of them had dragged him into the place. Just like the madhouse near old Gdzdskpt. But Lufkin and the two yummy girls in the room. One of these girls held pad and pen in hand and had been writing down every word Lufkin howled. This girl was blonde. The second yummy was dark. While Lufkin had been howling—his life story, once he had found a Commie in old Hrzgvlkgn and then he had come to America and found more Commies, all scripted by Hal—this dark girl had filed her nails and that done had painted them and now seemed to be going back to filing again. It had been she who had identified the movie palace Commie. It was also she, the dark one, who stopped her filing and raised her head and looked at Lufkin for the first time since his arrival, she who had made the oddest smile when the second blonde girl put down her pen and pad and raised her cool blue eyes to Lufkin, the first she had looked at Lufkin as well, and smiled a touch oddly herself and confessed:

“Actually, so far as I know, I am the only Communist in this town.”

Lufkin simply could not get enough of these girls. He had never seen such girls. They were everywhere in this country. In every hall or auditorium or church basement he had visited. They were all different and they were all the same. They were all perfect. There were not girls like these in old Brgvslktbd. The girls there were not perfect. Those girls were flawed. Some of them vigorously so. Take Hnkrskvt Pldzsklp. No, these girls were clean and smooth and white or near enough and if they shaved, it was their legs and under their arms and still, even so, with the exception of the fat girl in the church choir who sang bass, not a single moustache among them, and certainly nothing like Rtzxplk Mndv’s full beard. No, what hair these girls sported was on the head and the soft bristle swiped over their eyes and the golden down that glowed along their arms. Otherwise these girls

were bald. Clean, smooth and white, probably even down in that private place, the private place where the girls back in old Svksvklvs produced such bramble, thicket and briar that one tended to lose one's sense of purpose and, at times, direction. Here that dark, dank, fetid, fecund pocket was the same as all the rest of the girl—clean, cool and well-lighted. Yes, this was true and Lufkin knew it to be true. Though his old buddies back in Flddwhlsk would have said he had slipped a gear—or splintered a spoke—the townspeople all around, the mothers and fathers of these yumyum girls went to a great deal of trouble and expense to expose in public their girls' private places. This display occurred one night a week, when all the citizens of these small towns gathered together in stadiums built around playing grounds and great floodlights high above these grounds flashed on and there, under these towered lights, before the rapt and worshipful gaze of parent and townsfolk would be arranged a dozen or so of these girls, all of them wearing shortyshort white skirts and hightop white boots and not much else that Lufkin ever noticed. All grew solemn and silent as the town looked down on these scanty-clad girls and then a whistle blew and in unison these dozen or so girls reared back, raised white-booted foot overhead and all the townspeople, mom and dad among them, roared approval. That their girls' private places shone white, clean and hairless throughout the night.

Lufkin could not tear his eyes off them, the dark girl's white plastic crotch giving him steady gaze, while the blonde girl's legs-meet-there winked and blinked only when she crossed and recrossed such legs in taking note of whatever it was that Lufkin was howling. Something about there being a Commie in this town and this one girl fessing it was she. Lufkin could not recall that happening before.

*"What!"*

Both girls yawned. Not a tooth missing. In old Pgslnplt the girls had teeth like—

"Igor, you can come to now." The dark girl snapping finger.

*"What!"*

"He wouldn't know a Communist if one came up to him on the street and bit him on the ass." Blonde girl pointing finger.

*"What!"*

The girls yawned. "Igor, sit!"

These girls weren't getting their sleep. They yawned like baby birds in the nest.

"Well, what are we going to do with him the rest of the day? We can't let him run loose on the street."

“Right. Igor, what time’s your bus, Igor?”

“When next bus leave. When next bus leave?”

The dark girl studied Lufkin. “I can’t do it. I would go stark raving mad.”

The blonde girl smiled. “That’s all right. I’ll take him under my wing.”

“Sit, Igor!”

“You’re going to need a leash. Muzzle. Some handcuffs, a whip. Make it a straitjacket.” The dark yummy shifted on the chair. “My ass is black and blue and I was only standing next to him during the pledge of allegiance. The prayer?” The girl shuddered. “Sit, Igor! And can you possibly stop saluting? Igor, you’re not supposed to salute during the prayer.”

“I don’t think so. Do you not think so?”

The blonde yummy smiled at Igor. “I’m actually looking forward to it. I’ll take him to the trial.” The blonde girl leaned toward Lufkin. “We’re going to kill a man today, in this town.”

“*What!*”

The dark girl yawned. “You’ll be a jibbering idiot by nightfall. Sit, Igor! I’m telling you, it’s all he ever thinks about.”

The blonde girl smiled at Lufkin. “Me too. Death and fucking.”

“*What!*”

“Sit, Igor!”

“Do you know how we’ll kill him, Igor? With kindness.”

“*What!*”

The dark girl raised her face to the ceiling. She spoke as if someone were up there.

“*Help!*”

When actually it was at the door where someone was. An old woman. The same old woman who had met Lufkin at the bus station and had driven him and his cases to the school. Because of this woman Lufkin could not truthfully say there were no similarities between this country and his own. This old woman and Lufkin’s mother were quite similar. Raving lunatics. Both chatted with figures from the underworld and foresaw the future. Lufkin had seen this look when Mother beat oxen, the way this woman drove her car to the school. But in truth Lufkin had seen this look, eyes shining, in everyone at the school as they had all charged out and dragged Lufkin and his cases into the school. During that brief struggle the old woman had told Lufkin of her strange vision. By nightfall, this very night, one of these two yummies would have become an old woman, while the other would die and return a ghost.

Lufkin studied these two yummy girls. Dead and old by night? Lufkin did not think so. But still, as his friend Hal had advised: *in these little towns you must not be late for the bus.*

The woman now charged into the room as Mother went after the oxen. Crashing through all the desks and chairs till she found one and fell upon it. She too looked to the ceiling as if someone were there.

“If there’s ever been a worse assembly, I’ve never seen it. Snow White and the Four Dwarfs? The Chinese twins who juggled flaming cats? Nothing, nothing has ever matched that . . .” and the woman’s eyes fell to the case Lufkin held tight in his lap. “Is that, is that *it*? We’ve had calls from the deaf couple who live across town. Bandmaster Kantor speaks of early retirement. And poor Mrs. Yates, the choir director, is being treated for what the doctor says can only be described as shell shock.”

The conversation went on in this light vein for some time, the three ladies praising Lufkin’s new act in the bantering fashion common to this country, a peculiarly barbed affection showered upon Lufkin’s drum, it still locked in its case and where it would remain, the sheriff had joshed, if Lufkin chose not to be run out of this town on a rail. Hal had predicted as much, that the drum would be a hit. That the drum was precisely what Lufkin’s *You Gotta Red in the Bed?* act needed. Hal, the best, the *only* friend Lufkin had made in this country, had in the three short days it took Hal to die sold Lufkin the drum and more or less taught him how to play it. Hal and Lufkin had been colleagues or they had hired on with the same booking agency, the outfit that secured appointments and dates for Hal and Lufkin and a variety of other acts, the decimated dwarfs and the Chink jugglers whose cats did not always make it through their burning hoops, not to forget the tap dancer who did card tricks and read minds without missing a beat and the grey couple who sold senior rings and weather-proof asphalt shingling. Naturally Lufkin did not normally get to catch any of these acts, as they had moved on to another stage, another motel room by the time Lufkin had rolled into town. So it was mere chance, the chance that Hal was dying and couldn’t move on, couldn’t even move out of his motel room, that led Lufkin to meet the only friend he had known in this friendless country. The motel had been booked solid and Lufkin was only too happy to share Hal’s room, paying up what Hal owed and his own rate too, that rainy weekend it took Hal to die. They had hit it off immediately, Lufkin thought. First foot through the door and Hal had sold him the drum. Shortly Hal had put Lufkin in his will so that Lufkin could pick up the tab for the weekend’s whiskey and cigarets. Then, in the end, when Hal could no longer speak, he signaled that he had forgot and he sold Lufkin the drum-

sticks at discount. So the weekend of friendship passed. Lufkin lighting cigarettes for Hal and, near the finish, holding them to Hal's mouth. Same for the booze. Lufkin poured and those last hours, when Hal could no longer swallow, lifted Hal's head and dripped whiskey down Hal's throat. In between, after the one two-minute drum lesson, Hal explained how music should fit into Lufkin's act. Namely, that every time Lufkin opened his mouth the drum was to be beaten, and beaten with especial vigor, Hal pointed out, to emphasize the dire peril, Hal had said and strangled awhile, of hearing a single, solitary word Lufkin might say, and Hal went on to collapse, almost as if in a laughing fit.

After that, when Hal could no longer laugh, he could barely even smile, Hal had told Lufkin the story of his life.

It had been a miserable life, Hal's life before he had come to this country. Lufkin was never sure what exact country Hal had come from—near the end, what with the delirium, it seemed Hal wasn't sure himself—but by that end Lufkin had come to think of Hal's homeland as a vast, limitless plain. And over this plain were scattered small towns, each the same as the one before, each possessing a school and a motel and a bus station, each of these the same as those to be found in the town before, each to be the same as would be found in the town next. And as Hal wandered over this plain, from town to town, from school to motel to bus station, the people in these towns, all of them, would come to see Hal and Hal was glad to see them and that they had come to see him. But that was the nightmare of this country Hal called home. All the people who came to see Hal were strangers; they did not know Hal nor did they care to. They did not welcome him into their homes. Though they came to see Hal at the school or the church or some other public place and for that hour or so they seemed to be Hal's friends, they laughed and smiled and applauded when Hal spoke, after that hour or so their friendship ceased. They did not smile or laugh or even speak as they drove Hal back to the motel or on to the bus station, so that Hal might go on to the next identical town, there to be so cruelly greeted as a friend and then after that brief time, so cruelly turned away. As Hal spoke of the horror of his life before he had come to this country, yellow, wasting rain tapping *rat-a-tat-tat* against the window pane, Lufkin thought that if only Hal had had his drum then, when he had been a youth in his homeland. With his drum Hal, when he came to one of these identical towns and its people came all to see Hal, then Hal could have played out a *rat-a-tat-tat*, a burrrrrrrring roll, a *bang! bang! bang!* and then all the people in the town would have stayed Hal's friends forever. They would have introduced Hal to their daughters and Hal could have stopped and stayed

and lived the rest of his life in that one town, and never would he have been driven away, to go on and on and on, never to find a place he could call home.

Such were Lufkin's thoughts as he sat in another school in another town, before him beckoning another motel, another bus station, all identical, all the same, what Lufkin thought with the girls and the woman speaking furiously of growing old and dying, all this to be accomplished before nightfall. Yes, the rain tapped soft and yellow against the pane, it played a burrrrring *rat-a-tat-tat* against the glass, as Lufkin held onto the drum, tight, with all his life, that he would never sell it or give it away or have them take it from him. With the drum, then and only then, Lufkin knew, would he be happy in this empty and friendless land. Yes, that was it, Lufkin figured as the old woman—crying out “You must decide among yourselves! I can't take it anymore! One dead! One old! By nightfall!”—had stamped out of the room in tears, leaving the two yummys facing one another, each smiling as though she might eat out the other's tongue.

And so it went on for a time, the girls standing toe to toe, spitting like cats, debating premature death and early aging, all by nightfall, for so long a time that Lufkin looked to the window, the rain black and slaked against the glass, beyond an endless road, another town, another school, another bus station, another motel, all identical, all the same, waiting at its end.

The girls stood quiet now, they stood looking at Lufkin. The dark girl spoke:

“I think you're crazy. Absolutely out of your head.”

The blonde girl shook that head. “It's got to happen sometime. It's got to be someone.”

“But *bim*?”

The blonde yummy, grown so quiet now, she had come so close to Lufkin that she might have reached out and touched his pocked cheek.

“Come, Igor. It's time to go. Time to go the hotel. Motel hotel motel. Whatever, why not let the afternoon decide what night shall bring—okey dokey?”

“*What!*”

And the girl sniffled and there seemed to be a tear in her eye as she sprang to the door that led to the hall that led to the stairs that led to the door that led to the rain that led to the car that took them into the rain, the girl laughing wild as she spun the car through the rain, spinning it again and again and laughing angry as she spun around and around the town till the car slammed into a curb and there a sign had been raised above them, the sign Lufkin had gone out and looked up into, there in the rain after Hal

had died, the sign blinking in bright red, the sign winking crimson *motel hotel motel* in the rain, the girl pointing toward it, in any case.

“Igor, what’s your real name? You probably don’t even have a real name, do you?”

“I do not think so. Do you think so?”

“Ah what the hell. Why not?” said the girl, slamming the car into the curb before the motel or hotel in this case.

■ ■ ■

Miss Abshire thought that she may have been the one who had caused the tragedy, or if not caused it, then pointed and hastened it along its way. Of course the seeds of death had been sown long before the trial came to town, but still Miss Abshire felt that had she not taken the class to the courtroom, and had not subsequently allowed her students to stage an enactment of the proceedings, then the boy’s death might have been postponed; and that postponement might have gone on, so that in time the boy’s mind might have healed, his guilt dissipated, and his execution, as the boys came to call what surely, surely, had been an accident, could have been avoided altogether.

It was not unusual for Miss Abshire to take her charges away from the classroom and the school, field trips, she called them, and she thought that observing the procedures of a court of criminal justice, their early stages only of course, might be quite as edifying as witnessing the monstrous workings of a cotton gin or enduring the hellish stink of the abattoir. She had spoken to the judge and the sheriff and she had spoken to both attorneys and all had agreed: if the class came during the trial’s early stages, before there was evidence of or testimony made to the murder, then, if the children were orderly and did not stay long, none could see any problems with such a visit, save that the danger that the experience might, the judge laughed, one day hence turn one of the youngsters into a lawyer.

But even the first day’s proceedings, the selection of the jury, were not innocent enough. The questions the attorneys offered the prospective jurors—*you read or heard of the happenings at the bub city bus station back there in September; still got any hard feelings toward the German race?*—seemed harmless enough till the attorney for the prosecution came to his final question, a question he would put to each and every juror, relentlessly, till it tolled like death bell: *you have any objection, moral, religious or otherwise to capital punishment?*

“What’s that, this capital punishment?” the cleverer students whispered to Miss Abshire. “Had the juror any objection,” these students translated to

those less clever, “to the state, with cold, calculated, inhuman malice, putting a man to death?”

Maybe the day at court did not approach the hysteria engendered by the bloodied men hitting mama cows over the head with ball bats or the nightmares brought on by brooding on how flat you would come out if you slipped and fell into a shrieking, pounding cotton press, but it was not long, as this whispered translation was passed on, retranslated and vivified, before those last students—them who got the details, what this chair you plugged into a socket did to the eyeballs, oh! how they jumped in the head, sizzled and smoked and whirled around!—went to going pale and some wept and that one little boy who was for ever worrying he was going to swallow his tongue, he simply flopped over; and Miss Abshire was forced to herd her little charges back to school long before things really got going.

As for the class’s enactment of the trial, that followed the Abshire tradition as well. Though the event to be dramatized in class usually proved to be historical or nearly so—*The Constitutional Convention* a standby, as was *The Last Supper*, this to placate the religious community for the banishment of prayer in an Abshire classroom, *The Death of Socrates*, Miss Abshire feeling that the eleven-year-old mind must be stretched—Miss Abshire, under pressure from those clever students who knew that electricity did more than make a bulb burn bright, did not see why new ground should not be broken. After all there was scarcely a collective human endeavor that was more dramatic, instructive and ultimately terrifying than a trial, a murder trial, a trial that itself might produce a second murder, a murder executed by the state.

It was this aspect of the drama the children sought to produce—the possibility that one murder might lead to another—that troubled Miss Abshire but not enough. Not until it was too late. At first, in their preliminary discussions of the project, Miss Abshire, following the enthusiasms of her clever students, concentrated her concern solely on the first murder, believing it only a matter of changing the crime to something gentler. Embezzlement, robbery, tax fraud—Miss Abshire had underestimated, and vastly so, her charges’ thirst for blood. Murder—*the king of crimes!*—and nothing short of it would do. What Miss Abshire saw now and saw too late was that this first lust for death, the crime, would lead mercilessly to the second, punishment. And this lack of foresight, for that Miss Abshire could only blame herself. She should have seen from the very beginning there was trouble afoot. When the children gathered to choose who among them might play what role, it was a jolly time. Judge, jury foreman, the perjuring witness—such greater fun to parcel out than old Ben Franklin, Mary

Magdalene and the goody Plato—all the usual high times till it came time to handing out the principal role. George Washington, Jesus, brave Socrates, Miss Abshire simply had not seen that the role generally assigned by the class to their most popular playmate, that this child most favored by all would now be a murderer. And that this murderer would be played by the boy who had killed his brother.

Then Miss Abshire began to see in outline the horror of what they would be playing. That that which they would be playing here in the classroom and that which they were living in the courtroom in the courthouse would lead to a second death. A death to come later, a death offstage, a death never seen. And that they both, the man who had killed his beloved and the boy who had killed his brother—and this the true horror—that both longed to die themselves. This end Miss Abshire moved to stop, and thought she had by stopping the play, but alas she had moved too late, all too late. That night at the end of the week, when the sirens reached her through the rain and she dressed and went out with so many others through the rain to gather at the pit filled with water, then she knew she had stopped nothing, she had not stopped it in time.

■ ■ ■

If Van would be the murderer, the killer—the *defendant*, teacher had pleaded—then what parts were his friends to play? Nothing went as planned. He had wanted their trio at the heart of the drama. If one would play he who had killed, *the defendant*, then the second would play he who would convict, *the jury foreman*, the last he who would condemn, *the judge*; but then these roles were taken up by cleverer children, as were the two attorneys, the one who argued guilt, the other innocence; and the sleepy, loafing Tiny made as natural a bailiff as the jittery Red could be counted on to crack up fine under cross-examination . . . And so it was that even before Van's planned trial by class 6-C had begun that he been forced to abandon that small stage and led his two friends toward the deadly game their trio might play outside of school, flying saucers and men from Mars pushed back on the schedule. He and Tiny and Red would deal with these creatures, save the town from them, later. This week, the week the trial was in town, there would be matters of crime and punishment to play out. Murder and execution.

The trial, the real-life one, confused Van that first day, when he first entered the courtroom with the class and saw his father there on the witness stand. He did not think his father had ever killed anyone or if so he had kept awfully quiet about it, never telling Van or anyone else, so far as Van

knew. His father could have killed someone when he was gone away from Van and his mother and his brother, like during the war when he had left them and gone off to build a bomb for the war, or he could have killed someone long before he had known any of them, before Van and his brother had been born even, before he had met Van's mother and married her, before he had come to live in this town. That was probably it, Van decided that first day of his father's trial. He had killed someone long, long ago. He had killed someone when he was a boy.

That night Van had intended to ask his father who he had killed as a boy—his brother, a friend, one of his parents maybe, maybe his own father—but his father did not come to his grandfather's house that night, as he had come almost every night since Van had come to live here, to read him a story and put him to bed and to laugh quietly at the things Van said, even when they were scarcely funny. But if his father had've come, if the sheriff had not made him stay, not in the jail as the jail was full, but in the hotel till his trial was over, if Van's father had come to tell him stories and put him to bed, then Van could have told his father it was all right, that he understood. He would have told his father that he knew it was an accident, that he knew he hadn't meant to shoot his brother or drop that board on his head or to push him off the roof, which was how Van and his grandfather and the sheriff had killed their brothers; that he knew that his father had thought the gun was empty or that the board had simply slipped from his hand or that he hadn't meant to push his brother to his death, that he had only been trying to run away. This Van would have told his father and then the following day, the second day of the trial, Van would have come up on the witness stand and would have told the judge that however it was that his father had killed his brother, that it had been an accident, and then maybe his grandfather and maybe the sheriff would come and testify, and the judge would believe them and he would let Van's father go from where they were keeping him in the hotel, so that night Van's father would come and tell stories and laugh at Van's jokes, as usual.

This was what Van thought that first night of the trial, before he had gone back to the courthouse the second day and had learned the truth. It was then, by learning the truth, that Van came to hate his father and wish that he were dead.

Rain had set the boys free the second day of the trial. All the country children who could get over the mud roads and through the high water had come to school, but word reached the authorities late morning that floods made by melted snow had taken to rushing down from the mountains and that these waters were spilling into that which had already fallen and was

falling still and would soon have every river, creek, lake, canyon and pit overflowing their banks; so that the authorities, recalling that time before that rising water had trapped the country children in school, those who could not be roomed out around town bedded down in the gym, recalling that nightmare the authorities acted promptly and by lunchtime the big yellow buses were gathering behind the school and soon after the country children, who in fact had rather been looking forward to another night in the gym, were rushed away. The authorities went on to think reasonably and act fairly. If one group of children was given a half-day holiday, then all would go home, as would their teachers and, of course, the authorities themselves. By early afternoon the school was dark and locked and the boys were free to pursue their play, their new game.

That there would be now a new game pleased both Tiny and Red. Tiny had suffered particularly under last week's game: polio and life in an iron lung, all four limbs gone and tossed into a torpedo tube, and so he was quick to grasp and latch onto the new game, any game so long as it was not the polio game. Red found much the same relief in the new game. With the rain and water standing or running everywhere, the old game, the game Red feared, the cramps and drowning game was right there at his doorstep every morning you stepped out of the house—yes, now that Van had returned to power he had saved Red as well from that, the most fearful of games, by deeming it was now time to put away these childish things, still limbs and swallowing water, and take up a new game, a serious game, an adult game, a real-life game. The game the adults had taken to playing this week. The game of crime and punishment, of trial and execution, the game of murder and revenge. If Tiny and Red did not entirely understand the new game, when Van promised that neither crutches nor grappling hooks would be involved, the two boys welcomed the new game, anything better than being stuffed into a shiny steel tube for life or sinking into the goo at the bottom.

Death, a lot of people and a Bible getting together at the courthouse, a second death. Such was how Van explained the new game. First to Tiny, who if he had a vague idea what *murder* was, completely fell apart when faced with such matters as *confession* and *conviction*. One can imagine the boy's disappointment when Van pointed out that the first death, the murder, an event the Ritz dealt with fully every Saturday matinee, would be, if not entirely make-believe, then completely forgot or, at least, not reenacted. 'Twas the Bible and getting people together at the courthouse to commit the second murder, that was what counted in this game.

It was the principle, Van explained in other terms, that every act must have its consequence. Simply a matter of one thing necessarily following

another. Take teacher's friendly admonishment to Tiny himself: if you continue to breathe through your mouth, you will grow a face like a rabbit. If this confused the matter—*will there be the ears as well*, Tiny wondered—Van's dragging out the old Bible did little to quiet the concerned boy. A tooth for a tooth, an eye for an eye—not unlike the polio doctors coming to perform experiments that week that Tiny had stayed abed, certain his flesh had been frozen dead and numb forever. Judge, jury and executioner wobbling under the demands made by the new game, Van turned to Red. With this jerky, jumpy boy Van put all his cards on the table. Dudley was dead. Van, his brother had killed Dud, pushing him off a roof. Agreed? Fine. So, what with death and guilt already accounted for, all that was left was the last meal, a burger at the drugstore, charge it to Pop, then, reverting to one of their finest and most frightening games, Red and Tiny would march Van up to the top of the water tower and pitch him off. However, the water tower bit cracked the executioners, the condemned suffering as well. If Tiny and Red had never gone up two rungs of the water tower ladder, Van had made it only three and, after a spell of communal hysteria, the boys looked about for lower killing grounds, other games.

But then after the second day of the trial, the day school had been let out at noon, the day the boys had walked not home but down to the courthouse, by the end of that day the game had changed and nothing had ever been less simple or old or well-worn or tried-and-true than this new game. It was this new game that came to strike fear in the heart of Red, and perhaps finally to enter Tiny's mind, a fear far worse than a death by drowning or a life without movement or being pitched off the water tower. In this new game, as they came to know it over the week, one of them would die, one would judge and another be executioner. And no one, not till the very end, with one paralyzed, another drowning and the third to kill, would the three boys know which among them would be playing which role.



There was something dream-like to their lives that week. They could have been children; they could have been prisoners themselves; they could have been lovers at a tryst; they could have, very nearly, not existed at all. The twelve of them were taken from their homes and loved ones and billeted in the hotel, the men sharing quarters, the two women each given a room to herself. They breakfasted and had their evening meals at Loren's Cafe; lunch, usually sandwiches and the like, was usually brought over from the drugstore and served at their conference room in the courthouse. With the exception of their all parading down to the Ritz for a movie one

evening—they twelve and the deputy sheriff acting as bailiff sequestered in the balcony—they went nowhere but cafe, courthouse and hotel during the week.

Save, of course, for the trip made to the hub city one morning, to view the scene of the crime. It was then they felt most like children. A large yellow school bus took them to hub city and brought them home again. The sheriff and the judge and the attorneys and the court clerk, they might well have been teachers and concerned parents, attending them on the bus, shepherding them closely while they nosed around the scene of the crime, making quite sure that not one of them read a newspaper, not so much as a headline, nor spoke to or were spoken to by strangers. The officers of the court, some of them, took such responsibilities seriously and the twelve found themselves lined up here, herded there, barked at now and patted, in a manner of speaking, on the head then. All very much like a grade-school outing, a field trip—today, children we shall be going to the place where, it is alleged, the man shot the woman. Nor was their work, if one could call it work at all, much more demanding than a child's lessons. Less actually, as even the youngest student finds him- or herself thrown into the bramble of the alphabet and ordered to learn the way out.

In fact, though no one said so in so many words, it would seem that their work that week consisted of *not* thinking. Not till the very end of the week anyway, and even then their deliberations would be of the most stunted sort. During this final fit of reasoning they were not to use any materials in their minds but those that had been stored there during the week. There were even a few items that the judge ordered them to forget, which would seem to make those very items, the younger woman, the wit amongst, them observed, the *last* thing they would not remember. That which they *were* to remember presented itself as a series of contradictions—a cast of characters trailing into the courtroom, each seemingly determined to swear to the exact opposite of what the previous witness had sworn to, that they were to endure a week of people in effect calling one another liars and form no opinion as to which was true and what false till Saturday night; it was this, said the woman and wit, that gave one's serving on a jury so much the feel of being slapped into a madhouse.

And the men on the jury had laughed, as they laughed at most of the woman's wit, for they found it pleasant to have a woman, certainly one so young and attractive, among them, and certainly her wit and wry malice had spiced the most tedious week any of them had ever spent, that is, since they had been children, tedious till there at the very end, when at the very last moment they would come together and think and, remembering this

and forgetting that, decide whether a man might live or whether he must die. It was then that they came to long for the tedium of childhood and yearned for some amusement, some light-hearted diversion, and looked toward the attractive young woman for it, only to learn that her wit had fled.

A man had shot a woman. This much everyone knew, even those who were supposed to know nothing. The man had taken up a pistol and walked into the hub city bus station and shot the woman there. This the jurors knew before they were impaneled, all but for those two among them who really did it seemed, know nothing or knew so little that the distinction was not worth mention. Beyond this the jurors knew nothing, or knew so little that they might claim to know nothing else and came to believe such claims themselves. The man who had killed, he was a foreigner—a few among them in the know knew that or had heard of it. And yes, the woman slain had been a student at the hub city college and maybe this foreigner had been a professor there. Maybe the foreigner had taught the woman in one of his classes. Probably. This long-haired foreign professor and his student were lovers, in any case. Or if not, then the kraut egghead had wanted to take the girl, as the woman was very young, for his lover and she had refused his greasy advances and that was why the old goat had shot this virgin, or a young, attractive girl who was so very near one that the distinction was not worth mention. A young, pretty, basically good girl, in any case, a girl who worked so hard at her studies that she went to classes at night. Gunned down in cold blood by a rejected rapist ten, maybe twelve years her senior. A funny-talking traitor, infiltrator and spy who had fought against this country in the last war and had got it there, his taste for rape, pillage and murder! Etc!

Aside from a few knowing all this, and a lot of other things so outrageous even their inventors couldn't swallow them, the ten men and two women good and true knew only that a man had shot a woman. Not till they had been filled in by those in the know. Then they stamped guilty on their tickets then and there and were not to be seen seeing, hearing or considering much of anything at all the rest of the week. They formed the early nucleus of the *convict and kill* lobby, a force that at the end would sweep away all opposition to it but that one.

Yes, strange to some that that one was made foreman of the jury. Stranger still to others, and of these there were many more, that he had been allowed on the jury at all. That he and his woman were to be serving on it together, this scarlet pair cooped up there in the same hotel, presuming to sit in judgment on a crime of passion. If passion be crime, why then

those two might be hauled into the dock. So thought many around town and went on to speak of it from the bank corner on out to the highway Y, from the dives of the eastside gully up to the gates of the preacher's mansion. But such good advice and hard wisdom had no effect on the proper running of things. The judge's hands were tied. So said his wife who knew as much on the subject as anyone, and now knew more, as the judge had explained to his wife, in telling her to keep it shut, the problem and his dilemma with great care. The affair between the jury foreman and the pushy little bitch who would have been forewoman if she had had her way about it, this liaison did not exist. Not legally. Legally, the judge explained with great care: he himself knew nothing of it, nor did the sheriff, nor the district attorney or the counsel for the defense or anyone else who had any sort of official business with the court. If Doc Bavender and Miss Steen had been Mr. and Mrs. Bavender, why then the judge or one or the other counsel might have found legal reason to disqualify one or the other of the Bavenders from service. So too had they been engaged or even dating or had simply worked in the same office and had lunch together every Friday, the boss and his secretary, say—there might have been found grounds there to claim that such a couple, one of them just might have had some influence over the other, that the rights of the defense or the prosecution or both just might have been jeopardized. But as their relationship was not in any way on public record, the judge explained, why then he, a public official, was to act as if it did not exist at all.

“And do you know something, Marge, so far as what we really do know, there might not be anything at all between those two. Nothing beyond friendship. And now let me tell you, Marge—while I am asking you to keep it shut, for this one week, till we give this poor boy as fair a trial as he'll find in this land and then get him and all the rest of them out of our little town—Marge, if the law said it was not legal that two friends serve on the same jury, why then we'd never collect twelve souls for a panel, as just about everybody in this town is friends with everybody else. Now wouldn't you say that is so, Marge?”

The judge's wife supposed so. And even if she herself did not swallow the judge's line of reasoning—no more than she ever kept it shut, not for any man—she found that in repeating her husband's argument, especially that bit about everybody in town liking everybody else, that all she spoke of on the matter were so bowled over by the judge and his wisdom, both legal and common, that she herself more or less dropped the matter and kept it pretty well shut, except for Thursday, as there was the beauty parlor and the bridge club after that.

Had Doc Bavender known of such talk, of that from the judge or that from his wife, he would have been amused. Lovebirds? A smile there. That week at the hotel was the first week since he and Miss Steen had become lovers that they had not been lovers. That week spent together at the hotel, that some saw as a tryst, as a week that saw their secret passion indulged, even paid for, by the state, a week that proved the flaunting, the very glorification of their affair—that week was in fact the week during which Bavender and Miss Steen, that they both decided they would make an end of all that, their being lovers. And that their two minds might become so like one that the jury would be robbed of that twelfth open mind and free voice—at that Bavender would have laughed and laughed out loud. No two people had ever so disagreed, had ever been so divided, debating, arguing, yea even bickering over any, every and all matters, as had he and Miss Steen that week. If she said *black*, he said *white*; if he said *hot*, she said *cold*; and—if she said *guilty*, he said *innocent*; and finally, when he finally had come over to join the others, then, when he said *death*, she stood back and alone said *life*.

Yes, Bavender would have smiled at such talk and he would have laughed and his smile would have been bitter and his laughter, that display of amusement and joy and general well-being, that would have rung out a cry of anger.

The twelve jurors were selected and sworn and given instruction, advice and no little warning that what they would learn this week must be learned solely in the courtroom. When all that was done, the bailiff led the twelve away and put them into a room there in the courthouse. Their conference room, the bailiff said, and when that official had closed the door on them and left them to themselves, and there was no judge or bailiff or lawyer or witness to tell them what to do or what to think, then the twelve sat down around a long table and for the first and last time that week, the last till the very end, they conferred and thought and acted on their own. They elected Doc Bavender their foreman. It would have taken an observer new to this town to find this choice unusual. Judge Hale understood it. Mr. Herder, counsel for the defense, understood it. As did the sheriff and the bailiff and those local people who came to the trial. They all would have understood well that this small, quiet, this basically good man—he was only going through a difficult patch—would have been chosen the jury's leader, this man who in no way looked to be such a leader of men. While the young district attorney sent over from the hub city, the newspaper reporter from that same metropolis, anyone who knew anything about the world and nothing about the town, they would have made no such mistake. They would have spotted the proper foreman for this or any other jury or any other body of men (and a couple of women) right away.

Merce Haygood.

The captain, some called him but not to his face. After Banker Glassmoyer the richest man in town; maybe sometimes, depending on the markets, when cattle was up and insurance was down, not even the banker could match Merce Haygood's fortune, if you melted everything down. And to call Merce Haygood the captain, that was no joke, not like calling Major Bales, who ran the pawnshop, major, or Colonel Weeb, sacker and toter emeritus down at Jester's, colonel. Merce Haygood had fought in the first war, back when the cavalry still rode horses, and his captaincy in that war had been earned and real, not some joke made on a colonel who never made it beyond private and a major who had never been in the army or fought anyone. Merce Haygood had fought well, with enough bravery and skill that he had won medals to go with his battlefield promotions, and so it was thought odd by some that those first few years right after the war that Merce had not come home to strut the street wearing all his medals, that he had not even been wearing his uniform when the welcoming committee and the brass band met the train, and that Merce had refused to say a word to the local paper or anyone else about the war, not a single word but for that one time that someone had overheard a chance remark Merce had made to someone, probably Banker Glassmoyer for they were best friends, "Insane, Van. Insane. You'll never know how insane it was."

Merce Haygood did not have much to call property and less that looked like cash when he came home from that war, but there was something about the young man, Old Man Glassmoyer, the banker's father, somehow took it into his head that that boy of his that had been killed by accident, killed so young, that if that boy had gone on and grown up, then he might have made a man who looked and talked and thought and acted something like Merce Haygood. Thinking that, Old Glassmoyer had made young Merce something of a stepson, which explained the close friendship that grew between Merce and young Van Glassmoyer, and the old man had seen that Merce held onto his plot of land—maybe a quarter, not more—during the hard times and that when times got better saw that Merce farmed the Glassmoyer land and ran cattle over their pastures and by doing so, over the years Merce Haygood came to own his own farms and buy up his own pastureland, so that by the time of old Glassmoyer's death young Merce stood the second richest man in town. And he became as well a city father, a term he and young Van smiled over, and sat on the city council and on the board of the bank and was president, over all these years, of the school board, for if there was nothing in this world that Merce hated as he hated war, there was nothing he held in higher regard than books and learning

and the classrooms and labs in which to do the learning, and there were no men and women that he so respected as those that taught such learning, and no particular man and teacher he so cared for as he did Doc Bavender and so looked to as a leader, a man of knowledge and wisdom, a man who struggled daily against ignorance and insanity.

“See, Merce Haygood once had a son and Doc Bavender was that boy’s favored teacher,” so explained the bailiff that the hub city newsman and the young district attorney might find some sense in the jury, in their selecting their foreman, casting two votes for the woman, two for the second richest man in town and eight for this small quiet man who taught biology and things over at the local school. “That boy loved bugs—bugs above all else—above all that, bugs in a bottle. That’s how Doc Bavender got them eight votes. Bugs in a bottle. Simple as that,” said the bailiff, eye cocked toward the low table that sat before the judge’s rearing pew. On this low table sat a phone and on the phone’s base there was a small light, a dome of plastic no larger than a thimble head, and that light now glowed red. A self-important man was the bailiff, a deputy sheriff. As the sheriff was a large man, large in all aspects, so was the deputy small, in every measurement but girth. If the sheriff was called Hat by all the local people, the hub city newsman, a man with no little wit, had taken to calling his deputy Cap. The newsman yawned as the deputy-now-bailiff rose and went to the phone that surely would carry to them the message that all were ready to commence.

“Bugs in a bottle,” said the newsman in taking himself away from the prosecutor’s table to the front row seats, six of them, that had been reserved for the press. “Bats in the belfry,” said the newsman to absolutely no one at all, as not even the local editor had proved such a fool, had so much time on his hands, that he would show up early for a proceeding so insignificant, so utterly lacking any and all significance as this.

“Simple as that,” said the newsman and took to writing a poem, a shopping list, ransom note, note to be cast into the sea in a bottle, a confession, a commandment, as the players in this small drama now trooped onstage.

It was when this drama’s hero, its villain, the defendant, the accused, it was when the killer was led into the courtroom that everything changed. *Everything*. Before it had all seemed so simple. Now, there seemed nothing in the world that was simple, not in this small world, nor would ever be again. Even Bavender, one of the few in town who had known nothing of the murder till it was announced its trial would be coming to town and had listened to little of the talk of it since, even Bavender saw when the man in shackles was led into the courtroom that this week, this trial, the finding of a man guilty of murder and so condemning him to death, that nothing would

prove to be what he had thought it might. Bavender knew well enough that if a lawyer were defending a liar, say, then he would have him appear in court all but wearing a Boy Scout uniform; but he knew as well that old Herder had not heard of such modern deceptions and had he had he would not have been up to their concoction. The man who came led shackled into the courtroom, the boy who looked so very nearly like a man, the man who looked so like a boy, Bavender knew on first sight, and the others of the jury came in time to agree, that whatever this man had done or not done, that that first day the man had come into court he had looked to be exactly what he was. A man who had never killed. A man who could never kill. And no lawyer's coaching had made it seem so.

Manfred, they called him in the jury room. He had another name, a surname by which he was known in court and in the press and about town, when he was not known as the killer, but none on the jury ever said it. It was the woman who had first called the man by his first or Christian name, and the following day others did so, so that by the time their final deliberations came there was not one among them who did not call the man they would see die Manfred. The man had become that week, you see, like a friend to them. A man they liked and trusted and valued. A man they had known as long as they could remember. A man who in that week of being called murderer, foreigner, sadistic despoiler of local feminine virtue had in that week come to be loved by them as if he were one of them, one of their own.

The man was thirty years old. They had heard his birth date said in court and had read it in those police reports they were allowed to see. But the man was too young for thirty, he was a boy. He was too old for thirty, he was an old man, many years older than that. When he smiled he was a boy, and when he wept, as well, and when he listened so intently to the witnesses, to the lawyers, to what the judge had to say to them, he seemed so young then as well. Then there were other times, when his mind drifted away, when his thoughts left the courtroom and the trial he was enduring and he dreamed of his homeland perhaps, perhaps thought of the girl he had loved and killed, there were these times that the man looked to be so very old. It was then the man looked like a boy who had aged in a breath. The man was neither large nor small; his build was slight, though, and he stood with a stoop and sat hunched over that which he wrote or the Bible he brought to the courtroom, the book's German print large, jagged, black and twisted, the man clutching the sacred book to him like a child, like some ballast that might save him from the flood, when he came to and left the courtroom. The man's features were sharp, worn sharp by wind and work, one felt, much the same face one had seen on the farms about here

during the hard times; he wore steel-rimmed spectacles, one lens taped to the frame; and his hair was cut short and was skewed in tufts and cowlicks as if he had slept hard, hours without moving, and no amount of brushing would train it down. He spoke with a foreign accent, but this tilt to his speech, the halting, searching grammar, the odd way he had with some words, as if he suffered from a lisp, as if he were ever so slightly tonguetied—none of any of this was in any way like those movies and the cruel foreigners in them that had come to the Ritz during the war and for a short time after. No, there was none of that icy arrogance, none of that superman in this man; not in the way he talked or stood or walked or held himself or looked when he looked at the jurors and, so rarely, smiled.

Yes, it was when the man smiled, a shy, small, tentative smile, the smile of the new boy his first day at school and he so wanted to be your friend and you his, it was when the man smiled that one could not believe that he could kill or harm anyone in any way, save himself of course. For, since he had killed the girl, the man now thought of nothing but that, of killing himself. Merely to do what the jurors and the judge and the lawyers and all the officers of the court and all the townspeople who had gathered to gossip and gawk would do for him.

They came to know the girl as well as the man, perhaps better, they felt, in some strange way, as they would never come to think they had never known her at all, not as in the end they would come to think they had never known the man. As with the man, the town knew of the girl long before the trial came to town. And when the trial did come, then would they learn that what they had learned of the girl before would prove as useless and of as little accuracy, as cock-eyed and downright dead wrong, as some on the jury had it, as what the town's gossips and tongue-waggers and their grapevine had told them of the man.

To start, the girl was no more a native belle of good repute than the man proved a foreign monster. Nor was the girl an honor student at the college, so poor she had to work days that she might study nights: rather a former student who had been sent to college by a father mild and middleclass and there at college the girl had played and had flunked out again and again, till her father had quit his hopes and the college barred her. That her father refused to have her back meant nothing to the girl; she would not, she boasted, have been dragged through his open door. Rather, she stayed on in the hub city, finding jobs here and there—waitress, carhop, usherette—so that she might hang around the campus and college, take a few classes, usually at night, or sit in on them, as when the dean banned her, there had been some problem in one of the men's dorms, something that went

beyond poor grades. Still, the girl knew the dress and manners and ways of college and when she found an understanding professor or one still interested or one miserably ignorant of her past, she could buy a book or two and dress co-ed and come along to class—night was better—and pretend she still belonged.

Of the understanding, interested and ignorant, Manfred proved some of all but principally, decidedly, the latter. To start, he was no professor at all, not a real one, but a graduate student who taught some of the department's beginning courses, those usually offered at undesirable hours, early in the morning, Saturdays, at night, and thus supplemented his meager fellowship; and to finish, though thirty years of age and a man, one would have thought, of the world, surely, Manfred knew nothing of women. The girl, he testified, was his first love. His one and only love. The girl mocked Manfred and his love—so testified the girl's frank and forward roommate—but by this time the girl's reputation had reached such that even the interested and the understanding were turning her from their classrooms and the shy, awkward, sexually untutored German assistant looked her best, her only bet.

"It's only for a term," the girl was said to have said. "And he's not getting anywhere near Baby Jane."

And so the sexual side of this one-sided love affair never progressed beyond kissing—there did not even seem to be the usual fondling—and there was not even much of that. A peck or two, the roommate said and said she believed it, and that was that. And with that testimony the jurors' image of the girl changed anew. Her reputation—bad, a bad girl—cracked and crumbled and fell to bits. The interested, those who had been willing to talk to the police, all testified to a man that their own affairs with the girl had not amounted to much more. The girl was a tease. Even the sophomore football stud who doggedly boasted of his triumphs, when the cops hauled him into the station for closer questioning, muttered of manual manipulation and heartily agreed with all the others: for all they all knew she might have been a virgin. She did not, as one who spoke the tongue of the young put it, put out. The girl simply wanted to be thought bad. She looked bad. She dressed bad. She talked bad. And she acted bad—till you got her off on her own. Then: nothing. A peck or two. A simple kiss and that was it. A simple kiss and the girl was dead. Not a fuck, not even a fondle would see the girl killed and the man condemned to death, but a kiss.

Some on the jury wondered at this, that surely there was more involved than a buss, a smack, a peck or two, but there were others among them who knew men's minds more closely. That a kiss could drive a man mad, drive him to kill, as surely as a fondle, a fondle as surely as a fuck. And that once

dead a virgin is as dead as a tease, a tease as dead as a slut, and once dead a slut is as dead as a tease, a tease as dead as a girl who had only kissed another boy before she had died.

They were probably well divided even before they came together—some for murder, some for madness, that one for accident, the other innocence—but it was the letter that brought such division to the surface. The girl had been true to her word when she had told her roommate: the affair would last only the term. With the term ending and summer's approach, the students at the college, most went off somewhere, home, a job, to travel, and the girl, keeping up her charade of study, went with them. Only those working toward advanced degrees, students whose work was there in the hub city, those like Manfred who had no home or whose home was so far distant it could not easily be traveled to stayed on for summer school. No one knew where the girl went off to, as her father had turned her out, but she told Manfred she would be passing time in one of the mountain resorts over the state line and those letters she wrote seemed to bear this out, though the frank roommate who received many such speculated that the tales written in these letters—the villa, the beach, the moonlit boat rides across the lake, the parties and servants and the men and boys, ever the love affairs—were excessive if not simply imagined and if the girl did pass the summer in such a place, she surely did so occupied as she would have been had she stayed in the hub: waiting tables and changing linen and scrubbing floors.

Manfred received no such letters—an occasional picture postcard, a few tidily penned words, these as empty of passion and sense as were they perfectly legible, and no return address—not till the end of summer and the college and the city were then filling with students returning from their vacations and summer jobs. The letter Manfred received was no doubt the same or similar to that the girl had written her roommate and others, filled with nonsense and fantasy, and announced her imminent return to hub city and, of course, to school. In Manfred's version the few sentences that concerned the jurors ran thus: the girl would not mind seeing Manfred again, but he must be aware that things had changed. That, in her own words,

“I have been a naughty girl over the summer, I fear. You see, I have kissed another boy. Was I wrong? Can you forgive and forget. I can but not that kiss! That was a kiss never to forget!”

And it went on, tediously, vacuously, endlessly, it would seem while reading it, though it covered only the front of one sheet of paper and half of the back. It was this letter that Manfred read and read again and yet again, hundreds, thousands of times, so Manfred testified, then tore to pieces. Then, the letter destroyed, one would have thought, Manfred laid these pieces out

on a table and then, as if it were a jigsaw puzzle, slowly, carefully, with great deliberation, fitted the pieces back together. Once these pieces were all in place, Manfred took bits of cellophane tape and slowly and carefully and with great deliberation fixed the letter back whole again. He taped first one side, then the other, so that he might read the letter again and again and again. Some thought this tearing up of the letter and laying it out again and piecing it back together and taping these pieces together again, all this done with cool care and detachment, that such was the act of a cool and careful man, a sane man; while others thought, because of its very coolness and care, that the reconstruction of this letter was the workings of a mind snapped, a man gone mad.

Then there was the matter of the gun. If, as the word going round had it, the weapon had been Manfred's service revolver, the pistol that had sent so many of our boys to their graves, and that Manfred had grabbed up the Luger or whatever and dashed down to the bus station and shot the girl dead, then surely that might have been seen as the act of a madman, a man driven wild by jealousy, rage, whatever. But in fact Manfred had no such weapon handy. He had rather gone down to the pawnshop, itself not two blocks from the bus station, and bought the gun there, and then, even then, instead of making a crazed beeline to kill the girl, Manfred had turned away and gone off for the weekend. And during that weekend, for those three long days, before returning to the bus station to kill the girl, Manfred had been observed on each of those three days at a wasteland outside the city, at a garbage dump there, there setting up bottles and cans and shooting at them. Three days spent practicing to shoot the gun, teaching himself to hit very small targets indeed, before he had returned, at his leisure, had sauntered, so said the assistant district, down to the bus station, there to kill the girl in an act of premeditated murder, to kill in cold blood, so said the young d.a., a girl who had simply kissed another boy.

Surely that settled it. Surely the purchase of the gun, this purchase made so near the scene of the crime, the three days of practice, the stroll, the *amble* down to the bus station, there to kill—surely this would be sufficient to see a man swing, to see him fry and die. But no. During the testimony and counter-testimony there arose a question that left the minds of some, and some of these were on the jury, uncertain. That cast that shadow of a doubt beyond which, the judge had instructed, a verdict of guilty must be found, that sunlit area, observed the bitchy young woman on the jury, in which a man must be found worthy to die.

A niggling point first but still troubling: that the fact arose that Manfred had no service revolver because he had never served in any organization

that had need to employ them. And the three days spent practicing—the ravaging storm trooper who had slain so many before and done so so pitilessly could surely have shot the girl without all that plinking. The hunnish youth had spent his boyish days much as the boys here now spent theirs, marching about with wooden sticks when yet another war movie came to the Ritz. In fact, the first and only gun Manfred had ever owned, the only gun he had ever *touched*, was that he had bought at the pawnshop.

Of course such niggling, tiresome questions—these most often posed by the pushy young woman who saw herself in the role of the devil's advocate, the phrase itself saying much of the young woman's argument, so said those who were ready to get on with the frying and dying—prompted larger questions, that not even the young woman had answer for or had to do some hard scratching to turn one up. Such as: if this kraut had never shot, never touched a gun, then why the gun just then, why did the boy rush down and buy the gun but three days before he killed the girl?

To this this sassy young woman—well, she had this habit of not so much answering questions but asking questions right back. Such as: Indeed! Why did this boy buy this gun, this boy who, according to the pawnshop clerk, was so ignorant of such matters he did not even know that guns needed bullets, that the clerk, when the boy said he had no more money left, no more money for these things called bullets, that the pawnshop clerk, out of the goodness of his heart, gave him a box free.

It went on. The fry-and-die faction thinking they had this young woman treed and then there she was on top of their back, clawing like a coon, with every good and solid and reasonable question posed, some sass of sophistry or plain silliness shot right back. Take something straightforward, something as simply irrefutable as the boy's practicing of shooting the gun. Go on, make a cityslicker endrun around that. And then this cityslicker sister—with no little aid from old Herder who, shuffling here and there, never talking much above a whisper, was maybe not so dumb as he looked—did just that. You remember all those witnesses who remembered Manfred going about the dump, setting up bottles and cans here and there and knocking them down or blowing them to bits with bullets shot from the gun? Well it seemed that all who remembered these acts seemed to have remembered them in hindsight, only after Manfred had been charged with murder and his picture and a picture of the gun appeared on the front page of the *Hub City Hallelujah*.

Now of those few whose memories went back beyond the murder and the newspaper headlines announcing it, this young woman and old Herder dragged out the old man who ran that old highway motel that stood oppo-

site the dump, this old man's memory went back farthest of all these. So far as the fry-and-die crowd was concerned, it went back, this old so-and-so's remembering, a lot farther than was called for. Like: remembering that Manfred used to come out to the dump all the time, long before he had allegedly (a word the fryers would come to loathe) come out to the dump to practice shooting the girl. Not every day but more often than once a week the Hun had come and wandered about the dump, bag in hand, collecting things and putting these things into the bag. One day not long after Manfred had first started coming to the dump, the old man at the highway motel, remembering the lean days of the depression when meals were scarce, thinking that Manfred was some poor hobo, some wanderer left over from those hard times, thinking that Manfred was scavenging the dump for food or clothes or things he might barter or sell to the pawnshop for such, went out to Manfred and offered him food and clothing and a place to sleep, one of the motel rooms, till summertime and the motel filled up, if Manfred could sweep up and do a few odd jobs around the place, some of the heavy lifting the old man was not up to. It was then, this old blowhard testified, that Manfred opened his bag and showed the old man that there was nothing there but these old bottles that Manfred took from the dump and took them home and there washed them and polished them and added them to the collection of bottles that filled the bookcases in his room and overflowing these sat about in stacks, pyramids of bottles running up all the walls, till Manfred could buy or build more shelves.

Now was this old motel manager—had the look of somebody who might have been a hobo himself not that far back—saying that there had been no gunfire that day, the Sunday before the girl's death? No, there had been gunfire that day, the old troublemaker finally admitted, but that had not been Manfred shooting up the bottles that Manfred had allegedly been seen placing around, bottles that, in this old fool's unasked-for opinion, Manfred would not have dreamed of shooting up. It went like this, this malarkey.

Hearing gunfire the old man had gone out to the dump and had come upon Manfred running away from the dump, running out toward the highway that led back into town. Someone had given Manfred a box that Manfred had not wanted—so the old man said Manfred had told him—and Manfred, not wanting the box, had taken it out to the dump and tossed it onto a fire and the box had exploded and Manfred was running away from the explosions as a boy in Germany he had run away from the explosions and the fires that had come over his town, making the entire town nothing so much as a vast dump, with nothing that was not broken in the town but

those few bottles that Manfred found from time to time and put in a bag and took home to his mother. Not a dry eye in the house or certainly some that should have been dry and had gone a little misty—so it was then that driest of all the hardliners, the dry, droll young assistant d.a., when he suggested to Manfred, judge and all that maybe they should move on to the killing now.

The killing then and for once the talking backtalking young woman on the jury held her fire.

The bus station was packed that Monday morning. Students returning to college, other students, those who lived in the hub city, going off to go to school somewhere else. And people coming in from summer vacation and those who had taken theirs by staying home and sending their children away, they were coming home that morning or had come down to welcome the little ones in. And there was the threat of war and boys were joining the services and the services were shipping them here and there for training and assignments and some reservists, those with needed occupations and skills, were being called back in by the army, navy and air force, and so the bus station and the cafe in the station were packed with soldiers and sailors and airmen as well. The cafe manager knew the girl would be returning in the fall and he might have wanted some notice of it, but when she waltzed into the cafe the night before, what with these war and vacation crowds coming and going, he had been only too glad to put her back to work, starting first thing the following morning. No one learned, not for sure, whether Manfred knew the girl would be at work at the cafe that morning; his rush in coming down to the station (this the amble, the stroll, the young d.a. had suggested), his weeping and running through traffic and crossing against lights, and the bag he carried and the pistol in that bag, it gave some jurors to believe he knew and knew well the girl would be there behind the counter; but then no one came up with the answer to the question—*how* did he know?—even Manfred himself came up blank on that examination. In any case, nothing physical, no letter or postcard or any sort of message from the girl or anyone was ever found on Manfred or in his room and Manfred's roommate testified that Manfred made no mention of the girl or her return that morning or any other time during the long weekend before her death; and so that crucial point was never decided on by the jurors, not for sure, and the confusion this caused in the jurors' minds, like the confusion that fatal morning inside the bus station and the bus station cafe, almost saved Manfred.

Manfred didn't shoot the girl right away and that, some argued, pointed to calculation, to premeditation. But others pointed out that though a real

madman, the sort you see in movies, the sort you send to the asylum rather than the chair, might have come into the bus station guns blazing, lips afoam, eyes wheeling like a circus ride, Manfred was ever a gentleman and a gentle soul and even flying from the pit of madness he would have waited patiently for a place at the counter and then seated waited till he had placed his order before blowing the girl away. And so patiently did Manfred wait for a stool at the counter—this a good thirty, forty minutes, some said, those waiting for stools packed two, three deep behind the seated diners—and then once seated Manfred waited another time, before the girl could find time to take his order, and then waited for that order to come and then waited for the check and then waited for the change and then when that came spent yet more time spreading some of those coins out on the counter for a tip, all this taking up another good thirty to forty minutes, before he shot the girl.

Now it was that confusion, some real confusion, gripped the bus station cafe, and the minds of the jurors equally, for, not only did it take some time for the witnesses and the authorities who came onto the scene to understand that it was Manfred who had shot the girl, it took a considerable spell before that, couple minutes anyway, for those diners at the counter and the waitresses and the cooks and busboys behind the counter to understand that the girl had been shot at all, by anyone.

You see, Manfred was an epileptic and he had suffered one such seizure already at the bus station cafe and the waitresses behind the counter and those regulars sitting at the stools, when they saw the girl drop flat on her face behind the counter and Manfred throw himself forward over it, weeping and jabbering some mad tongue, looking for all to see as if he were trying to climb over the counter, it was then that those waitresses and the regulars in the know figured Manfred was at another one of his fits and the girl flat on her face there behind the counter, she was hiding from the sight of it, as she had told one and all that nothing had ever so frightened her in her life as seeing that one fit of Manfred's spread over that selfsame counter, his body bucked by convulsion, mouth afoam, eyes rolling up back down and round and around. So that fateful morning, while everyone was trying to subdue Manfred, get a pencil between his teeth, make sure he wouldn't swallow his tongue or bite it off, it was during all this that no one paid much attention to the girl hiding or, some figured when she went on not moving a muscle, fainted behind the counter.

If this seemed stretched to some jurors, it was pointed out during their day trip over to the scene of the crime that the floor behind the counter was made of pallets of slatted boards, this being easier on the working foot

than solid concrete or linoleum, and so the blood flowing from the girl's heart spread sight unseen under the floor slats; and it was not till one of the cooks turned the girl over and saw the blood, not pumping much now, but seeping from the hole in her blouse, that anyone understood that she was not fainted or hiding but was injured and injured bad, and another short time for one of the waitresses to open the girl's blouse and see the bullet hole seeping blood now and understand the girl had been shot and that she was dying.

Now confusion became chaos, incomprehension the dark brow of bedlam. And all wrapped neatly in a bag, a paper bag, the brown paper bag, some said, that would take Manfred that last step but one to the gallows, the chair, the ditch dug under the pitted wall.

The brown bag was nothing new. If any of the waitresses had been up to noticing a thing in that post-holiday madhouse they would have merely noted that the strange little German fellow was carrying his lunch bag as usual and would have called out to cookie: "Two burgers, make 'em walk, make 'em talk," before Manfred had got slid into his stool and had the two rare ground beef sandwiches wrapped and tucked into the paper bag before Manfred finished his usual breakfast, two sticky doughnuts and coffee, black, sugar. If the waitresses had noticed anything out of the ordinary that mad morning it would have been that the paper bag was one larger than Manfred usually brought, and it was not empty, not flattened and folded but carried something in it, and when the two burgers came Manfred did not put them inside the bag but left them to sit and congeal on the counter, as that morning he left as well his coffee to grow cold, the doughnuts to draw flies. At first Manfred held the bag in his lap—so noted the man sitting next to Manfred, a regular, one of the few in the cafe that morning, the jurors thought, who seemed to have noticed anything before he had suddenly, clearly remembered what he had noticed. When the girl came to take Manfred's order, came with the coffee and the sugar, came with the two doughnuts, then finally came with the burgers and the bill, each time the girl came up to the counter, there just opposite Manfred, Manfred put the paper bag on the counter and moved it toward the girl, almost, the regular sitting next stool thought, as if he were offering her whatever it was that was inside the bag. Manfred's two hands were always on the bag, the man remembered that. And so far as he could further remember he couldn't remember either of Manfred's hands being inside the bag. And the man was sure, oh he was so very, very close to being sure, that Manfred's hands, neither of them were inside the bag when the shot rang out.

But then, as the clever prosecuting attorney pointed out, the shot never really rang out, did it? The next-stool regular was forced to agree. There was so much noise, customers calling orders to the waitresses, waitresses calling orders to cookie, cookie calling damnation down on them all, the jukebox in the corner wailing, that angry baby in the corner yowling, everyone came back into town laughing and talking and telling everyone who had stayed in town about their times in the mountains or down by the seaside, everyone who had stayed in town telling everyone who had gone off what had happened in town since they had been gone, and there was that bunch of sailors coming off leave, they had taken to wailing along with the jukebox, or was it howling in tune to the crabby baby, and above all this there was that loud-speaker and the voice booming down from it, some gravel-mouth the bus station hired because he had never uttered two complete words understood, he was mumbling out something that was probably what bus was leaving and when and naming all the towns that bus might stop at in getting where it was going, or maybe old slug-tongue was coughing up and choking out over the speaker some news about the bus that had just come groaning and wheezing into the station and naming all the towns that bus had ever been to in its getting here—with all this cacophony and craziness, when you couldn't even hear yourself think, that was how the regular sitting next to Manfred put it, what the man sitting next to Manfred had actually heard was not so much a shot ringing out as a *pop!*

The prosecuting attorney leaned in close to the witness. “A *pop!*”

“Yessir. A *pop!*”

“Not a shot, but a pop? Now can you tell us the difference between a shot and a *pop!*”

“Yessir, I can do that. The sound I heard was like, well, it was just like what I had thought had happened. That little Manfred there, he was sweet on this gal waiting on him, and I thought he was doing a tease on her. Blowing up a paper bag and when she came up, giving it a good slap—*pop!*—to give that gal of his a friendly sort of scare. And sure enough, when I heard the pop, I looked down and there was the hole tore in the paper bag just like it had just gone *pop!*”

The prosecuting attorney smiled. “And did you not see anything inside the torn bag? Did you see anything through the tear in the bag? Did you not see a gun inside the bag? Did you not see little Manfred's hand wrapped around the butt handle of that gun? Little Manfred's trigger finger twitching on the trigger!”

“Nosir. Can't say I noticed much of anything about the time of the *pop!* Soon as it popped, the girl hit the deck, little Manfred started having himself

one of his fits and what had already looked pretty much like a nuthouse, why it wasn't just the girl hitting the deck and little Manfred foaming and raving, a lot of other folks were jumping up and hollering and flopping over, thinking, I would say, the Ruskies had just landed and they were diving for cover."

The prosecuting attorney smiled at the witness. "The Ruskies had landed?"

"That's what the morning paper had said that morning. Had a long piece on it. Like when the Ruskies landed they would be headed straight for newspapers and bus stations and the like. Strike at communication and transportation centers first. Way the Ruskies always do, so said the paper that morning. Watch yourself around the bus depot. You see anybody fiddling with a newspaper rack, turn 'em in."

In time even the bailiff—a serious man who knew that courthouses and jails and deputy cars, the infrastructure of law and order, would be right up there at the top of the Commie hit list—even in time the bailiff might smile as the courtroom was allowed some amusement at the old man's testimony; but there were those in the courtroom, many on the jury among them, who found the paper bag and its *pop!* no laughing matter. Those who saw that the paper bag and the cool consideration of so hiding a weapon in such, that that might be the knot tied in the hangman's noose, the switch thrown to light up the chair, the blindfold slipped over little Manfred's brow.

But like so much that was said and heard and pondered over and argued about this week, what looked like one thing to one person might look like an entirely different matter to the next. Take the gun in the bag. Maybe the gun had not been placed in the bag to hide it, but rather to carry it. The pawnshop clerk who had placed the gun in the bag three days ago—had the clerk been plotting to kill Manfred when he put the gun in the bag? So speculated the fast-talking yet still quite clever young woman on the jury. And Manfred taking the gun in the bag with him to the bus station—wasn't the pawn shop only a block away? And what time did the pawn shop open that morning? An hour after the girl had been shot. Couldn't it be possible that Manfred, waiting for the pawnshop to open, had dropped in for coffee and doughnuts while he waited for the pawnshop to open? Wasn't he indeed waiting for the pawnshop to open so that he might return the gun and get his money back for a weapon he had absolutely no use for? Was not that possible? argued the young woman. And the bullet in the gun's chamber, the single bullet in the gun, the bullet that had killed the girl—hadn't Manfred in destroying all the other bullets the clerk had given him,

throwing all those bullets into the fire at the dump, hadn't Manfred simply forgotten that the clerk, in showing Manfred how to load the gun, hadn't he put but a single bullet into the weapon's chamber and had forgotten to take out that single bullet when he sold the gun to Manfred? And the gestures Manfred had made while sitting there at the counter that morning, his pushing the bag toward the girl when she approached him—could not that possibly have some other meaning to it, couldn't there be some other explanation, other than that by pushing a bag toward the girl that Manfred sought to kill her with the gun inside the bag?

And on and on, such doubts were cast, doubts to take seed in the jurors' minds, till these doubts would grow to flower and fruit that they might rise to cast a shadow tall and dark over these deliberations; that there then be no light anywhere by which to see, see how reasonably, legally, morally a man must die.

And so the arguments went as the trial drew near its end. Each detail and fact and opinion and guess or glance, all that was known or thought known or believed to be concerning the crime, that which had happened before the murder, the killing, the death, what maybe hadn't afterwards, it all was so scrutinized by the twelve, to be swallowed whole by those who thought all murderers should swing or fry or pitch lifeless in a ditch, to be labored over endlessly, tediously, absurdly by them who seemed to figure such should be given a free ride—the waitress don't bring your coffee hot, strong and black, blow her away.

But then all these arguments and counter-arguments, all the pros and cons, all the did-he's? and didn't-she's?, it all meant nothing in the end. But another waste of breath. Judge, jury and counsel could have sat deaf, dumb and blind throughout the proceedings and Manfred's fate—whether he fly free as a bird or see his doom sealed—would have been decided the same. And that judge, jury and petitioner, that would have been Manfred himself and the strange tongue he spoke. That tongue that no one for the longest time could make heads or tails of, that puzzle lingo that would by the end say he must die. A confession, sure, but a confession with a difference. A confession the killer would make without saying a word. A confession made for him, a confession made not by another person but a confession made by a woman who knew not the meaning of the words she spoke, a confession that came not from the woman (as she was two months dead) but from a machine. After that machine was played and this dead woman who knew not what she said had confessed for Manfred, after all that there was not one person in the courtroom, not even in amongst the Doubting Thomases in the jury box, who did not know that it was curtains for Manfred. That he

would swing or sizzle or slump lifeless as a rag doll in the pit at the foot of the wall, however it was that they killed killers in these parts.

■ ■ ■

1. "They were here, in this very room, all week long, night after night, fucking their brains out."

"Good idea. What time's the bus?"

The girl sat on the bed. The bed was hard. Like there was a board just underneath the spread. There was a chair in the room. Igor sat on that. A dressing table stood against the wall. Its mirror looked across the room, toward the foot of the bed. The mirror was fastened by pins to its waist so that it could be tilted up or down. The mirror was now tilted so that the girl sitting on the bed could see all of herself. If she had been standing she could have seen her feet only and maybe up to her hips, maybe up to her breasts. Anyway her head and shoulders would not have showed had she been standing. On the dressing table there were, or had been when they had come into the room, a water pitcher and two glasses. These had sat on a lace doily. The pitcher still sat on the doily, but when they had come into the room the girl had poured some whiskey from the flask in her purse and some water from the pitcher into one of the glasses and had taken that glass with her when she crossed the room to stand by the window and look down onto the street and out into the rain.

*Tap tap tap* the rain had played against the window glass, played there like a soft quiet gentle drum. No man had ever played a drum, nor would, so softly quietly gently. When the girl turned from the rain *tap tap tapping* at the window pane she saw that Igor had taken up the second glass and poured water into it and had taken the glass of water with him when he went to sit in the only chair in the room.

This chair sat in a corner. Next to the chair, between the chair and the bed, there crouched a nightstand. On the nightstand were, or had been, a lamp, an ash tray and a Bible. The ashtray and the lamp still sat on the nightstand, but Igor had taken the Bible off the table and opened it. Igor was not reading the Bible as the boy they would kill today read the Bible. Igor flipped through the pages without interest, as if he were looking for pictures.

The boy, Manfred, had read his Bible with great care. Sitting at the long table with his lawyer, Manfred had for this entire week, each time the girl had gone into the courtroom and that had been every chance she had got, been reading his Bible, poring over its text so closely that it had seemed to the girl that Manfred had been searching for some meaning there. The

answers to the questions that were being posed to those who mounted the witness stand, questions that Manfred himself would like to have put to the witnesses, questions that, if answered properly, would tell him in time why he was here, what he was doing here.

In contrast Igor sought nothing from the Bible in his hands. Manfred's Bible was in German; perhaps, the girl thought, if Igor had held a Bible printed in his own language, then maybe Igor would be reading it, looking there for the answer to the question that burned through his mind and bowel and loin. Namely: when was it that this crazy girl would stop talking, talking crazy, and stand and raise her skirt and then strip away the bright shining white shield from her crotch so that Igor, after all these years in this crazy country, would finally see what the girls in this crazy country had there. Namely: the same or similar bright red holes there between their legs as did the girls in his own country or something entirely new. Nothing, maybe.

It would be so simple, the girl knew, to answer that burning question. She had done it thousands and thousands of times: dressed, undressed, dressed again. And then it would be over, wouldn't it? Her own question would be answered and if she received the answer she expected, why then there would be an entirely different girl, a woman not a girl, sitting on this flat hard bed in this lonely hotel in this forgotten town in this rain, the rain that tapped gently, quietly at the window, a softer, sweeter drumming than any man had ever made.

The girl turned away from this, the rain, the window, the tapping at its glass. In the wall opposite this, opposite the window and the rain tapping against its glass, was the room's door. And beyond the door the hall. To the left the hall led nowhere, a long way down to a window marked FIRE EXIT. But if one went right, the hall led to the stairs and the stairs descended to the lobby and there in the lobby were placed about chairs and low tables and a writing desk, where once, in years gone by, when there had been guests who came to this hotel, before the new motel had gone up out on the highway, before that highway had been carved out west and south of town, back when traffic turned and came downtown and made all its connections and crossings at the courthouse square, back in those days when guests had come to stay in this hotel and these guests had not wanted to sit and wait in their rooms, waiting for the rain to stop, waiting for a lover, a beloved to arrive, back then these guests had come down to the lobby and had sat in these chairs and there had been magazines spread over the low tables and the guests had read these while they waited and some, those guests who were separated from a lover, a beloved, they would sit at the

writing desk and draw hotel stationery to them and take up the old inkstand and the pen and the pot of ink fixed in the stand and they would write home or wherever on the hotel paper and slip the letter into a hotel envelope.

Beyond all this could be found the registration desk and on that sat a small bell and laid open over it the registration journal. One would raise the small bell and the old hotel manager would come tottering from his office in the back and, if you were the girl coming to stay the weekend in the hotel, as she had stayed here so many weekends since her lover had been taken from her, the old hotel manager would shake his head and take your five dollars and turn the registration book so that the girl could write *Mrs.* and the name of her lover next and the old hotel manager would study that name as if he were reading it, as if he could read, and he would then fold the five dollars into his pocket and take down a key from the warren of letter boxes on the wall behind the desk and, if you were the girl and this was not the first, if this was the second or third time or any time beyond that first time you had come to the hotel for the weekend, why then the old manager would let you find your own way across the lobby, up the stairs, down along the hall to your room. You would unlock the door to the room and go into the room and close the door. As you closed the door you would read the warnings and instructions printed on notices and signs on the back of the door—how to proceed from the room to the nearest fire escape in case of fire, the hour to check out the following morning if you didn't want to be charged for an extra day—and then you would turn and cross the room to the water pitcher and two glasses and there mix a drink and go on then across the room to the window and stand there and sip at the drink and smoke a cigaret and watch the rain sweeping along the street that ran the block or so over to the courthouse square.

You would stand there at the window for a time, waiting for your lover who never came, and then you would turn from the window and go to the bed and sit there and sitting there on the bed stiff as a plank you would look to the mirror and the dressing table that stood across from the foot of the bed and there to the left of them would be the window and the rain tapping against its glass and to the right would be the door in the wall and the notices and warnings tacked and taped to the back of the door.

But what you felt closing in about you now, drawing nearer, so near its breath hissed in your ear, was the fourth wall, the wall to your back, the wall that reared over the head of the bed. The girl could not see the wall behind her, the fourth wall of the room, or she could only see the bits of it that crowded around the head and face and shoulders of the girl there in the mirror. A picture hung on that wall. It must be hanging directly behind her head

for something square framed the girl's face in the mirror. If the girl moved her head, this frame behind her, the frame so small, the corners of it made it look as if the girl had horns or the pointed ears of a bat growing from her head. All around the picture was but wall, so the girl had thought the first weekend she had come to this room, to wait for the lover who never came.

That first weekend the girl had come here she had lain out on the bed backwards, her head at its foot, her feet at its head, and had looked at nothing but the picture. It was only later, the second or third time she had come to this room, that the girl had looked at the wall around the picture. She had seen then that the wall had been covered with wallpaper and that this must have been done so many years ago. The wallpaper was old and stained and it bulged out toward the girl, swelling and distending from the rain that had for so many years seeped down into the wall, this damp warping the wall itself, bloating it, engorging it, so that the wall looked like the belly of a heavy man, and the paper over the wall looked like the man's yellow, faded shirt, and the stains on the paper that had come from the rain and the damp seeping down inside the wall, these stains were the man's sweat fouling his shirt as he heaved himself over her, they were her blood clinging to his shirt as he lifted himself from her.

The girl did not mind the man heaving himself onto her and dragging himself off, week after week, as after that first time the girl had seen the wall around the picture for what it was, a heavy, sweated, heaving man, she had not looked at the wall again, only the picture, no matter the wall's meaty sweat fouling her, her blood clinging to his shirt.

The picture was that of a boy, a drawing of a boy, and that was all she thought of now, as the wall heaved onto her. The boy's face had been drawn with only a few lines, and that was right, for the picture was only a girl's dream of a boy, and the boy's face was round and flat and without color and without expression to it, and that was right for the picture was only a girl's dream of a boy, and the boy's face was the face of a boy who was dead, and that was right for the boy was not yet alive, and the boy's eyes were flat and dead and without color or hope, and that was right for when the boy would be alive he would never be free. They would never let him leave this room and go be with the girl and be her boy. They would never let him run free of this room, to run with the girl through the streets and the rain. The boy was doomed to stay in this room forever, trapped, a prisoner, doomed to death by the life they would not let him have.

But the girl did not mind if the boy was not alive nor ever would be. He was only a picture on a wall in a room in a hotel in a town, all dead or lonely or forgotten, he was only a dream that the girl did not mind dreaming, not

if she was dreaming of the boy when again and again and again the sweated, meaty, bloodied man reared out from the wall and came onto her.

2. “Yes, we were here, in this very room night after night, week after week, before we decided we must run away.”

Igor let the Bible drop. “Good idea. When’s a bus?”

The girl smiled and spoke softly, gently, through tears now. “Sit, Igor,” she said softly as all that was on Igor’s mind was this running away, a good idea, catch a bus. And more softly still:

“You see, we were only children really, our last year in highschool, and there was the war darkening the horizon and we knew we must flee, that if not, the boy would be slaughtered in some foreign war and I, I must flee as well. This town, the past, the deaths.” The girl smiled. “There were seven of them, see, or maybe only six, and all were blamed on me. I was in the car that night, driving it and driving it fast, the night we all went over the cliff. She, my other mother, she told me—don’t you drive fast, girl. You listen to yo mammy. Speak quiet. Drive slow. And kerry a big stikkk! But the car sped off, the car crammed with all their bodies—they would be true bodies quick enough, mangled corpses—how I drove the car that night, *faster, faster, faster!* all cried out, driving it through the rain—it was raining, raining, raining that night too, there had never been such rain, rain, rain, it would never stop,” said the girl and yawned and turned from the rain pat pat patting against the window glass.

“My boy died that night, see. In that mangled wreckage, their bodies strewn all along the highway—and nobody prayed. Twisted forms, but softly, softly yanked apart, lying so sweetly in the grass, like sleeping children except their backs wuz broke and limbs bent double and heads rollin about,” the girl smiled as now Igor leaned forward, elbows on his knees, bony face pushed forward, watching listening, waiting, like a sub about to be sent into the game or—*when will this be over?*

“I was throwed free of the car, see. Landed in a muddy field or maybe a soggy stack and when I rose I walked about, all up and down the highway, identifying the bodies, marking each point of death so that they would know where to plant the memorial crosses later. And then I came to my lover’s body and I knelt there by him in the fog and pelting rain and he was so perfeck laid out, he coulda been a child asleep, so peaceful was he lying there, except for this one detail. There was this problem with his head, see. It jest kept rolling around, rolling this way and that, jest rolling along and then it took to rolling down the hill, *humpetybumpetybump* went his head as it rolled all the way back into town.”

“How far town?”

“Six miles or so.”

“Six miles. OK.”

The girl smiled. “That was why we had to flee the following year. Sure they blamed the deaths on me, but couldn’t pin the rap, as I was left unscathed, unscarred, not a blem, not a bruise, still all, all of me perfectly white,” purred the girl and caressed her face and hands and came and stood over Igor and hissed so that Igor, for the first time since coming to this country, went back, away from one of these lunatic girls.

“Unmarked!” the girl hissed. “But for the ragged, red scar left on my soul!” And the girl reared back and cackled wildly, madly, much in the same fashion as she had cackled in reading *Lady McB* in drama class, as she would be cackling and rolling her eyes and pulling her hair no matter what old and soppy Dotty Rainbow would have her playing this year. It all ended with a yawn. “So we hopped a bus and ran away to New York.”

Igor studied the teeth before the mouth clamped shut. All there, all white. Well if this bus was definitely heading in the right direction, there was still that one point that had to be cleared up.

“What happen to the head?”

“Oh we ran it down and soaked it in a pail overnight and dragged it and the bod into home ec class—*The Steaming Seamsters!*—the next day and had it sewed back on. Of course these quidnunc homemakers got it all wrong and got the head on jest backerds, but we fixed all that when we got to New York.”

“OK.”

“See, no one knew us there and we jest put his clothes on backerds—to match the head—and told them it was his *feets* they had sewed on wrong. They all believe us, so it was but another waste of time. I mean, they dint give a shit about the head either.”

Igor had taken to gazing toward the Bible, that big fat floppy sloppy book spread open on the bed, spread open like a big fat floppy sloppy woman. “They gotta point.”

The girl hissed like gas escaping into the chamber. Igor pressed back into his chair. “It was then that tragedy struck!”

“Lotta tragedy.”

“Oh yes indeedy.” The girl spoke softly. “The war had struck, see, and I betrayed my boy. Simply *could not take it*, him watching me when his back was turned, and became a Commie. Strange but true. Cashiered smalltown smalltime and married a bigcity playboy. Then went buxom blonde boxoffice bonanza—or maybe Broadway broad—and it broke mah lil boy’s hort. So he joined the army or the navy. That was when tragedy struck.”

“Number three.”

“One must not count on one’s fingers, Igor, nor move lips when you read.”  
 “OK.”

“Hortbroke, mah boy’s ship was bombed by the German and he drown. That is, if he was in the navy. Army, he was captured by the Japs, escaped from his jungle dungeon and was et by cannibals.”

“Number three yet?”

3. “Call it two-and-a-half.” The girl reached out her hand. “I’m only touching you because I must lead you to his body,” said the girl and grabbed Igor’s raw and fetid paw from where he had it well stashed, between chair seat and his, and lugged him up, Igor looking longingly at the bed, the girl imagined as she hauled Igor out of the room.

Or maybe it was only Bible browsing Igor wanted to return to, Igor *flipflipflipping* through the Good Book as if it had a bus schedule in it somewhere, the girl imagined as she pounded and pushed and pummeled Igor on down the hall, down the stairs, across the hotel lobby, some old coot actually sitting there at the writing desk actually writing letters, the girl imagined, and out into the drumming, drumming, drumming rain, all the while the girl recounting the tragedy that had been, the tragedy that would be, the girl talking tragedy, the girl talking crazy, never did these crazy girls stop talking, the girl imagined Igor imagining as she flung him into her icy white car and they thundered and stormed, sped fast as flash lightning, the block over to the courthouse square.

“They’ve just now found his body, only now, after all these years,” said the girl wheeling her sleek white car, an icy shining shield there between her legs, under the trees that hung over the courthouse jail, the girl swigging at the bottle, drinking down her whiskey like pop, taking her medicine like a good girl, anything to get it over with. “But see, the problem is he’s come back fish shit or cannibal turd and all they got to go by, aside from his dog tags, is his baby blue eyes lookin up from the soup, and now they’re having his burial today, having sent his tags and big blue ones home for the service. And now they won’t ask me to the praying, his scarlet woman. That’s why I’m out here weeping today, Igor, oh Igor,” said the girl, now out of the car, the car stopped under a great tree, a great building just there, a lone high window in the building, the lone high window barred, a long weeping man standing at the barred window, the man looking down at the girl standing in the rain, standing under the barred window, rain pouring like tears all down her face, but rain, it was but rain yet, for this girl, not tears yet.

“That’s why we’re here, Igor. The murdering bastards will be plantin and prayin today. This is their church.”

Igor stood with the girl in the rain, head ticcing this way, that, didn't want to miss that bus. "Pretty big church."

"Pretty big God," the girl whispered or maybe she had yowled against the thundering roll that came over the heavens, the lightning that seared the sky. "They've got him up in that window." The girl turned the anti-Commie drum-banger toward the jail window, toward the man who stood there and wept, as he had stood there and wept all this last week, weeping for the girl every day she had come, and the others too, there had been others who had come, day and night, to this place, to stand in vigil under the jail window, stand huddled under their umbrellas, holding dripping candles under their umbrellas, praying to themselves, weeping among themselves, under the rain.

"See, they're going to kill him today. She, and him." The girl turned to Igor. She turned to him cold and hard and stared cold and hard into his eyes. "All of them, all twelve, murderers."

The girl came close. "See, Igor, you can't bury a dead man. Not if he's alive. You've got to kill him first. Come on, Igor." The girl slapped an arm under his. "My bouncing baby boy. My lost and missing boy. I'll show you to your execution chamber. We'll view your body. The preacher will be coming soon. He'll tie the knot," said the girl and turned toward a man coming toward them through the rain.

4. The man wore a big hat and had guns strapped to his body.

"Pretty funny preacher." This was Igor thinking, not speaking. Igor had had experience with these men in big hats with little guns strapped all over them and he had learned it quick, as Hal had advised, when they're around you think a lot and don't talk much. Igor went and stood behind the girl.

The sheriff came up to the girl and what he took to be a boy standing in the rain, there under the jail window. All the sheriff saw were two bodies standing in the rain. "I thought I told you people to do your vigil or your demonstrating around on the front steps. This area back here is forbidden, I think I told you that." The sheriff looked close at the girl, at what he thought was a boy. He looked close at the girl. "Ah it's you again. Thought you were part of the Jones tribe, Pee Wee's people. Well, the same goes for you, miss. I'm about to lose my patience here. Even if we didn't have all this other stuff going on—" and the sheriff moved his hand as if there were something small, an insect, a floating raindrop, something so small that it was near invisible floating before him, "—this area has always been out-of-bounds, off-limits, when we got a guest in the jail."

"A murderer. You're hiding a murderer inside there. Twelve of them."

The sheriff blew air, thin through his lips. "Miss. That boy Manfred needs some peace and quiet, as much as any man has ever needed it. Now, I'm going to give you to the count of three and then I'm calling your daddy. One."

"My name is Manfred. His name is Manfred. You are Manfred. We are all little Manfreds."

The sheriff's big hat tilted back, his old hard eyes raised to the jail window above, raised to the rain, he raised them to the heavens, then the hat and the hard old eyes came down and latched onto the girl. "Two. Three. Scat."

5. "They call it murder but we know it's death," said the girl as once again they had come out of the rain and into her car, the car swirling, twisting, twirling wildly through the rain, the windows so clouded by steam they might have been on a twisting, whirling ride at the fair, they might have been anywhere.

"We been up there at it all week," said the girl, swirling the car round and around, the big building swirling round and around, the girl driving the car through the rain, through the mist, circle after circle after squared circle around the big building, till it seemed that all the buildings in this town were this building, big and dark and square, so that it seemed that it was the big building itself making these ragged, jugged circles around the car, that it was the big building itself circling, swirling, twirling around them.

"Shacked up. Banging our brains out. Murdering poor little Manfred, our baby boy. Just the two of us. Well OK. There were ten other Little Murderers, but they only watched, these Ten Little Murderer Boys," the girl laughed and laughed bitterly. "Snow White and the Twelve Murderers. It takes Twelve to Tango! Tea for Twelve, Twelve for Tea! Twelve's a Crowd! *YaaaHababaHaaaaa!*" cried out the girl as would cry out the kind old granny lady this year if Dotty Rainbow thought this girl was going to play a kind old granny lady this year! "*Yaaaaa! Haaa! Hababaaaaa!* Off with their heads!"

"How bouta bus!"

The girl smiled now and slowed the car and reached across and took Igor's clawing hands from the silver instruments that lined the door, those curled levers and things that allowed one in and out the car. The car went so slow now through the rain that Igor opened his eyes and in doing so he looked out and saw that the car had stopped. They were not moving, not at all, it was only the rain moving past them, swirling about them.

The car had nosed in toward a curb, a sidewalk, another big building back of that. A great clock had grown from the sidewalk and stood high over the car, staring down, its face blank, without pity or any other expression, the

numbers that made a frieze about its pieface, the two spiked hands that grew from its belly told Igor nothing. There was so much rain, it could have been night, it could have been day. The building that backed the sidewalk was but a wall, till one looked up through the rain and saw that there, high in the wall, there were windows there. The girl had leaned forward, twisting her head around the steering wheel and was now looking there, up toward the windows cut high in the wall, looking for another man trapped in the window there but there was no man there and now the girl turned from there and talked. She talked and talked, like the rain that never ceased to fall, never ceased to talk, and now the girl had ceased her talk and she opened the door and dragged Igor out of the car and tossed him and his drum and its case out onto the sidewalk and the two of them and the silent, soggy drum stood under the tall, dead clock, rain beating down on them all.

And now the girl stood away from Igor and the sippy drum and the tall, limbless clock, it could have been a bus stop, it could have been a lost and lonely traveler waiting for a bus, waiting in the rain for a bus that would never come and the girl turned and walked away from the lost and loveless wanderer and crossed the street in the rain, toward more windows there in another wall, these windows low and lighted, these windows with people sitting before them, these windows steamed from the munching and gulping, the sipping and chewing of food and drink that happened behind them, all these sippers and munchers looked out at the fuzzy steamed girl as she crossed the street toward them, leaving her lover to weep for her as he waited weeping in the rain for a bus that would never come or if it came would never go on its way again.

■ ■ ■

Tiny woke like a snake. A fat, lolling, yawning serpent. The brown boy sat crouched at the foot of the bed and watched. How did he wake, the brown boy sitting at the foot of the bed? Like a burrowing creature, the brown boy imagined. Something warm and snug in a hole or in a cave burrowed in a dead tree, a fallen log. *Blink* his eyes would open and nothing else about him move. The eyes would snap open and he would stay so very still and when he was full awake and all about him safe, he would smile. And the third boy, Red, he woke like a turkey, some chicken on its roost dreaming of the fox creeping closer, closer, *now into the henhouse!* All squawks and wings flapping and feathers flying and no fox anywhere about. The brown boy sat against the wall, covered with mud and blood, the rifle between his legs, and watched Tiny wake. He could have slept forever, that was how Tiny woke. And why not? It was so dark it could

have been night, this dark, rainblack morning that they would play their game. Their last game. Finish it.

Yawning, stretching, blowing, scratching, *yaaaaawning*, Tiny woke and raised to one elbow and looked to the boy at the foot of the bed, the boy muddied and bloody, the rifle between his knees, and Tiny blinked and yawned again. OK, maybe Tiny knew that Van hadn't exactly escaped from Devil's Island, cut one guard's throat, pitched another to the gators while he, escapee, had slogged the moat, then swam through shark and ray and giant squirming squid, searchlights sweeping, grappling hooks dragging, tower rifles firing again and again, their bullets singing off the gale-stirred Hellespont; but that in fact Van had, as usual, slipped out of his grandfather's house, his bedroom window there, rolled around some in the swampy rose bed, scooted through the dog hole worn in the hedge—imagining well that the redder mud might be blood—and walked the empty early street to Tiny's house, only blocks away; for all the guarding gossip neighbors knew or cared, just another crazy kid out in the rain, they'd face blizzard on Saturday morning, kids' morning, to be free, out on their own, away from Mom n Pop n Baby Sis; and that stick in the boy's hand, Gramps sure did a good job there, these guards and guardians, these snoops on youth, would smile and let the curtain fall to, the old feller carving out that piece of wood, it damn near looks like the real thing, damn near looks like a real gun.

OK, maybe Tiny was simply the most realistic, the most literal-minded kid ever made, never would he see yapping spaniel as charging rhino, some farmer's melon patch the jungles of the Amazon, or the old caliche pit out south of town, now filled with rain, that old deep hole in the ground strewn with abandoned cars and iceboxes and bedsprings and all the furniture to fit out a house and bikes and trikes beyond salvation and other pointless, twisted sheets of metal and rods and pipes and mesh fence rolls unrolled and torn and strung about—maybe Tiny would never, not now, this Saturday morning, see that as their Lost City of Atlantis, but the gun, surely not even Tiny would yawn as the boy raised this instrument of death and aimed it straight between two blinks and a yawn, surely even Tiny would not blink, not yawn in the face of his death, blink, yawn and *belch*.

“Scuse.”

Van lowered the very real, extremely loaded rifle, without hope. Actually there was that one last hope, the one game Tiny did understand. The polio game, life in an iron lung. But if Van started that one now—a leg asleep and he would never get the bewildered boy out of the house. A couple minutes of that leg asleep and Tiny would be laid up for weeks.

Van lowered the rifle. Time for that game later. Same for Red, when they crossed over the street and rescued him from the dungeon cell, and the one game that got under Red's skin, that got into his brain and ticked there till it exploded—*real!* The cramps-and-sinking-to-the-bottom game. Wait for later for that one too, least till they got Red unshackled and out of the house. Otherwise Red would be in there for weeks, shrieking at the sight of a shallow bath—at least one so soon after supper—he would cramp up and shrieking and flopping about sink to the bottom and gurgle drown in a couple inches water.

Van lowered the rifle and waited for those games—polio and drowning cramps—another day. They had another game to play today, a much better game than those. They had Van's game to play today. *Trial. Sentence. Execution.* That was the game they would play today. Then next week, the two who survived today, they could go back to sleepy legs and gurgle drowning and maybe saving the town and all in it from four-eyed Martian invaders. Whatever else had showed up at the Ritz meantime.

There came a great howling from down in the house. Voices raised in fierce debate, a woman's first, crying out some injustice, the man's surly roar in reply. Feet were stamped, a crash of something overturned and shattered, the sharp clap of—was it palm smacking jaw or merely playbook snapped shut? The boys, all yawning and scratching now, seemed to consider the latter more likely, as Saturdays were the mornings Mrs. Rainborough rose early, to leave hard-work hubbie snoozing late, to creep downstairs and act out, and act out *all* the parts, sound effects to boot, of whatever play or drama she would be inflicting this year. To the boys' trained ears it seemed she might be dramatizing one of their own boyish games—last season's most popular, torture, confession and witch off to the pyre—and they roused themselves and pitched in and the one got the other dressed and themselves out of the house the back way pronto, lest they be called down for walk-on, stand-in, understudy or such.

No problem freeing jailed Red this morning, granny down in the back after the week's long struggle to bail out the submerged storm cellar in case tornado followed on the heels of flood. There was Red standing there under the front portico, shivering as if he had been at his post for hours, Red turned an ear—a call, a whimper from laid-out granny would have saved him that morning, but there came nothing—and turned back and hunched and thin, shaking and sappy, came off the porch and joined the boys and went quickly with them in search of today's game. They went quickly then past Van's deserted and wrecked house, in search of these

other, greater games to play today. Games that now, this morning, this afternoon, tonight would become real, for now that the rifle had come out, that had changed everything.

Now, with the rifle out, with death, the real death it presented, there would be no more firing rocks at abandoned houses and making it poor little thugs from over the tracks doing so, no more saving the town from saucers and aliens. No more tossing the weakling off the water tower, him splatting like egg on the fire station runway, no more holding the dogpaddler under, the cramps and drowning and grappling hooks tearing through blue bloated drowned flesh, no more polio and life in an iron lung, spoon-fed healthy things by Dottie Rainbow till you were old and gray, no more murder, war and revenge, even the classic hunt, capture, torture and escape, the hunt to begin anew, next Saturday, you could dread it all week long. No, all these and others paled now that the gun was out and their game today would end with death, real death, a death that would not be made right come next Saturday. A death and its game that would never end.

All described carefully, quietly and in great detail by Van, his two listeners quailing and quaking and quivering; this done, the trio hurried off through the rain to where the game would begin. How such began every Saturday morning. Drugstore for malts to start, the five-n-dime, comics, and slouch on over to Leonard's Cafe for burgers and breakfast, charge 'em to Pop.



Inside the cafe was steamy and warm. The people sitting at the windows—those who had watched the girl abandon the geek and his drum across the street, he standing alone and foreign and lost under the bust bank clock—these were seated at booths before the windows, drinking their coffee, eating a meal. The windows by their booths, their glass was frosted damp with steam, as had been the glass inside the girl's car, and the people sitting there had made small circles in the steamed glass so that they might see the girl leave her lover, the boy who would never be her lover, her first lover, and cross the street and come into the cafe. Now the diners and sippers sitting at the front booths, they turned now, having done with gazing through their peepholes polished on the steamed glass, to gaze at the girl and her lover, the boy who was not there but would be soon, as they came into the cafe.

*Red whore!* yes, they were so saying as the girl and the boy came into the cafe or maybe they were talking pancakes *Need more!* or, sure, maybe they were farmers up to their elbows in silos *Seed door!* or maybe old vets going over the last war, the war before that, *Bleed gore!*

Sure that was it, the girl decided as she dragged the airy, actually invisible boy into the cafe, just a bunch of hungry patriotic farming old soldiers, that had to be it. Same for the rest of the cafe—the cafe packed, all the booths, all the tables, all the chairs, people who couldn't get home, country people trapped in town a week now by the rains, the roads made mire by the rain out where they lived, out way way off pavement, now all packed into the cafe this afternoon, waiting for food, for a coffee, a doughnut, for war, for sun and dry, waiting for the rain to stop, for the roads out their way to heal and stiffen up and take some driving on—all these and all the other people packed in the cafe, they looked up from gobbling and slurping, looked around and down from standing there waiting to pay or sit, as the girl and her boy, he would be one day, as she dragged him through their crowd toward the empty tables, two of them placed end to end, at the back of the cafe.

Sure, that's what all these good people were thinking as they gasped and drew back, as they recoiled in fear and gaped in horror, letting the girl and Igor pass, she called him Manfred now, she called him boy baby baby boy just now, letting the girl and no one there, not yet, not ever, pass through.

*Breakout!*

That's what they were thinking, the girl thought, and why shouldn't they, the girl thought as she looked back at the not-all-there boy, this play boy being dragged along, coming along reluctantly, unwillingly, as if cuffs linked their hands, as if he were being led to the chair, being led to her bed, led into her life a howling brat. This gaunt, haunted, lonely, imaginary stranger, eyes black from longing for his homeland, his death, his birth, hair burr cut and that skewed and twisted from so many nights of bus sleep, the jailhouse cot, the unmarked grave in a foreign land, his suit grey and chalky, the suit they put you in in that grave, that cradle, that pen—sure why shouldn't these good people think this boy they couldn't see was their killer, their boy coming home dead from his killing, all those bus stops in the rain?

Sure, the girl thought, dragging this boy no boy at all back to the empty tables put head to head, the boy looking to none like the boy to blow his honey away, the boy sitting there in his cell, in his grave, at the foot of the rest of his life and no way to get out, tears seeping from his gentle eyes, his delicate hands turning the knot, the filmy Bible pages, the hairs on his loving mother's head, one by one by one.

*What empty table?*

It should've been. Empty. Two tables set end to end, small paper tents set between salt and ketchup reserving them for the twelve killers coming for their last supper, the twelve condemned to their last meal, the real murderers,

to be murdered, in this town—but there, where there should have been twelve blank chairs, make it thirteen, can't forget the bailiff, there there were three of the baker's dozen filled by something.

*But what?*

So short were these chair-fillers that one could see only the tops of their pointed heads. Well only one was pointed. The second was round. While the third brat's headtop was flat, very flat, flat as the table, so flat it looked to be only more table, another piece of it, that was growing hair. So short were these table trespassers that these variously shaped bits of fur were all the girl and her invisible boy saw as they came up on the table, those and six grubby little hands that snaked up from under, spider-like, to snare drink or burger and draw these down for sip or munch below.

The girl flung her not entirely visible boy into an authentically empty chair and herself took another. The table-jumping little fellows explained their posture, poor to perfectly awful, with precision and vigor. Like, if they didn't ride low that old battleaxe waitress, the one who shaved and shouted and spat, would have them skinning spuds and diving pearls, this burly, brassy waitress talking a talk the three brats understood, damn near a cuff a word. So it was that the girl and her proper and polite boy made themselves low too. All was quiet this low, under the table, but for the slurp and munch of lunch or snack.

"The breakout's still on. Midnight. Just before they throw the switch and hit the juice. Goddit, Blaggie?"

If these kids did not think the girl entirely nuts, it was that they went to the movies.

"Goddit, Moll."

"Whose da mug wiff youse, Babe? The pencil-head geek."

"Surely you cannot have forgotten so soon, dear. My dead, dying, yet unborn little drummer boy. He's waiting for a bus."

One of the children commenced to weep.

"His ears is still bleeding," explained another, this malady product of the cuffing waitress, the girl imagined.

"How bout that bus? Whatta we say!"

"God bless us everyone!"

Such banter—memories of what played at the Ritz last week, medical or health problems, musical criticism, namely the drum, the matter of time tables and, as ever, the longing for days gone by, the simple, sun-lit world of Charlie Dickens—went on for a time, till one of the boys disappeared from sitting all but under the table, being lifted up as if by a great suction, coming to the topside of the table much as a cork bobs to water's surface.

When all three boys were gone from under the table, such surfacing courtesy of iron waitress grip and claw, with nothing left there but their kicking little feet, the girl and her good boy no boy at all joined them table topside.

There to be confronted by a brawny, scowling woman of fifty or so, she decked out in the starched white uniform of a nurse or a waitress. A waitress, the lifting waitress, the girl thought. Probably the cuffing one too.

“You know these three?”

“They’re two to three of my dear son’s best little friends.”

“I oughta knock their heads together.”

“Oh no. Such sweet boys. Two out of three anyway.”

“Two’s allya need,” said the waitress grabbing the collars of that number and lifting the boys within. “I got to moveya.”

“Oh dear. Not again. Where to now?”

“Lemme outta here! Gimme outta here!”

Had her pretend boy been real, Igor say, it would have been known that this cry that came from one of the boys only seemed to be one of the collared boys protesting imminent strangulation—that in fact these words were Hal’s last words. Igor would have understood that, Igor now long gone, a hitcher in the rain. These would have been the last words Igor could make much of before Hal took to strangling and, there so near the very end, sang out a single note, an extended, horrifying vowel howl from hades heaven hell, and went on only a few moments later to expire, silent, stinking and damp.

But as Igor was nowhere in sight, and the girl and all the others had their own problems to deal with, these last words were lost to meaning.

The waitress came in close to the girl. There rose a peculiar odor from the former, whatever had been slipped into her buttermilk, that curdled brew, now dried, forming much of her moustache.

“Gotchya a fresh table soon as it’s bussed. Can’t be sitting here. See,” and the waitress twisted her head and spoke low, “*they’re coming.*”

Low the words might have been spoke, but sharp ears at the next table picked them up *they’re coming* and passed them on *they’re coming* and those at the next table over, they and the tables all around them, soon all the tables and booths in the cafe, those diners occupying them, were passing them on *they’re coming* till soon all insignificance and chatter had stopped and throughout the cafe there sang a single whispered chant, it rang like prayer *they’re coming*. And then someone seated at one of the forward window booths, his eye pressed to the peephole rubbed in the steamed glass, he half rose and in doing so cried out in warning.

“*They’re coming!*”

And so they were, saw the girl and the boy not with her and the boys that were, they now huddled in the booth they had been herded to, one of the booths by the front windows, where one might rub a hole in the steam collected on the glass and see out of the cafe, to the bank building and the barbershop across the street and beyond that to the courthouse, its bulk rising into the rain.

They came from around behind the courthouse, from the back entrance, the entrance to the jail and to the sheriff's office: this sly exit made, the girl knew, to avoid the vigil, the demonstration at the courthouse steps, this small gathering of candles, weeping and umbrellas made to save or to mourn the local boy, the town's own killer, who might die that night in some other town not this town. The twelve came then from the rear of the courthouse and across the courthouse square through the rain toward the bank and the bank corner. They came over the street that ran down the center of the town, the street that set the bank and the barbershop and the movie theatre off to the north of town while it set the cafe and the market and the drugstore off to the south. As they came over the street, hurrying through the rain toward the cafe, the girl counted the twelve and saw they were thirteen.

The girl smiled as she imagined: *oh my, how nice!* The twelve killers, the twelve Judases are bringing little Manfred, their only Jesus, so that he might share his last supper with them. But no, the girl scowled as she saw that the thirteenth was but the bailiff, the deputy sheriff of the town, a man not much like the sheriff, smaller to start, a toad to the sheriff's bull, he wore a cap to the sheriff's broad-brim hat, his voice a pipe of importance to the sheriff's soft, deep rumble of authority:

"The jury's coming in to eat now and they won't be no talking to them nor no talking that they might hear and understand and they won't be no flashing of newspapers and they headlines nor the playing of the radio but for music understood!"

This piped the bailiff as a herald might announce the arrival of a sovereign and as he cried out the diners in the cafe, the royal court, his loyal subjects, fell silent and turned their heads down to their plates and their cups, even if there was nothing on or in them, and they turned their faces away from the twelve as if in shame as the twelve came silent, their heads down, faces turned away as if in shame as they came into the cafe, single file, a man leading the file, a small warm man who wore a plastic-covered hat to keep the rain off, and the woman who brought up the rear, an elegant, proud young woman who folded her umbrella and shook out her thick hair as if that which was dry were wet—and thus led and followed up, now the

twelve went wordless, without looking here or there, to the rear of the room where their long table, two tables set head to head, waited.

And the three real little boys turned to watch—all but one, one kept his eyes fixed hard on the plate set on the table, the boy not turning to watch, turning the plate around and around and around and watching that—no, only two of the three little boys turned look out toward the long table at the back of the room. There where the twelve had taken to sitting now, the small warm man at the head of the table, the elegant young woman at its foot; but now as the girl explained and explained and explained the young woman had risen from her place at the one end of the table and gone to the other, where the man with plastic on his hat sat, and there the woman knelt by the man, on one knee by his feet, and there she talked up into the man's face. Oh she so talked—so earnestly, endlessly, eagerly, it seemed—and the man said not a word, it seemed, in reply no matter how hard the woman talked. He only listened, it seemed, and as the woman talked the man took a cigar from his jacket pocket, the cigar wrapped like his hat in plastic, and the man began slowly, as the woman talked, to unwrap the plastic from the cigar and now that the woman had done her talking and gone back to the foot of the table and her place there, now the man put the cigar in his mouth and looked down the length of the table toward the woman and his mouth moved and the cigar in it bobbed as if the man had finally spoken to the woman. And then, having spoken to the woman, it seemed, the man turned his head and he looked up the length of the cafe, to the booths by the windows at the front of the room and his eyes went over the booths there till his search came to their booth, where the girl and the boys, three real and one not, sat and the man's look stopped there and his mouth moved and the cigar in it jiggled as if he were speaking to the only boy of the four there not watching, the boy sitting there, eyes fixed on the plate he turned around and around, and what the man said to the boy was, so it seemed to all those watching, was:

*Please look at me. Just look at me.*

And the boy turned his plate faster and faster on the table, till it whirled about like a wheeling ride at the fair, till the plate whirled about so fast that like a ship sent from space it whirled off the table and into the air and there it stopped for a moment, it seemed, and then it fell to the floor and shattered.

“*Liar! Liar! Liar!*” shouted the boy at the shattered plate and he leapt up and ran out of the cafe and into the rain and the two other boys, his real little friends, soon followed.

The girl rubbed a peephole in the steam on the glass and watched the boys rush out into the rain and she smiled. And she turned her smile, as sad

as any Igor, say, had ever seen, on Manfred now, now he was the boy about to die. And the girl smiling said,

“It has to be done, you know. Come along now.”

And they went out, holding hands, and stood in the rain.



If the first highschool girl, the one they had just escaped, might be considered candidate for the loony bin, this second qualified as death camp commander. How this blackhair bitch in her red car had ever found them, the boys never knew. No. Three seconds they had that one worked out. Black bitch red car out looking for white car blonde bitch. For what reasons the boys never knew. No. They knew well and soon what sent this one high-school bitch out looking for the other and thus to find three innocent youngsters as well, Miss Blum who taught some French or something, she might have called them *lagniappe*. And that which had sent black bitch red car out in the rain, what that? What they had been at all morning. Had been at all their lives, schools, their *larnin* notwithstanding. Right. Play. And this play, simply the most dread of mankind's leisuretime tortures, that play known as:

Play Practice.

And the play to be practiced? All the boys knew was that there were no fiends about the world as fiendish as these fiendish playwrights, they who had never been known to write one of their miserable plays without at least *one boy in it*. And so, in collaring the blonde bitch, the dark bitch had collared these three small thespians as well. Oh well, the boys considered as they were hauled off yet again, you had to look on the bright side. Like Russian roulette. Only one of three would get the part, these maniacal playwrights having yet to grasp the concept of twins, triplets, quints, every chamber in the dramatic art of theatre loaded and deadly.

They thought they had escaped the blonde when they had darted from the cafe. They had been safely playing their games of innocence around the four sides of the courthouse—mourning a boy who tonight would die, jeering a killer weeping in his cell, cheering as the sheriff and his wailing dome-light squadie as he went out to catch more killers in the rain, maybe catch them themselves, three killers in the rain, sticks for guns, guns like sticks—when they saw the white car, the blonde moll they thought they had shook at the wheel. The white car there where it had always been, been there all this week, there under the spreading trees on the north side of the square, there where the girl had parked her white car all this week, to be there under the jail window, that she might look up at the killer there and talk up to him and sing out and call his name through the rain.

As the boys had only now observed the sheriff squealing his squadie off somewhere, some wreck on the highway, somebody drowned maybe, and as the boys were soaked and mudlogged after only minutes of Injun attack from courthouse shrubs, and as now a light flashed from within the girl's car, probably firing up the peace pipe, lighting the fuse, that game, now seeing that light flare within the girl's car the boys saw it for what it was. Really was. Shipwreck. Howling hurricane. Schooner breaking on the rocks. Waves beating mercilessly at captain, first mate and cabin boy, the only three survivors, driving them, ever driving them back, back, toward the razor-ragged rocks on the shore—but then! In the gloom and lash and howl of storm there appeared—ahoy, matey! See ye thar! A light, cap, a bleedin light! A lighthouse, mateys! and the boys made for it, that shelter made by the great trees and white car within its close, probably the only dry or least wet place in town.

They were unceremoniously tossed in the back, they three, as the invisible geek had shotgun up front. As they had already met this vaporous clown at the cafe the boys knew the game and fit right in. They suggested the girl drive them out on the highway. There to the death spot. Eight little crosses for the eight highschool drunkards who had eaten it on that steep canyon slope back in ought six. The idea being, offered the boys, that they could have their own car crash out there and the ambulance could come and take them all to the hospital, this fine with the boys, this miserable day coming on like night, splint and traction, toss in the iron lung, the only safe place in town. Unfortunately the girl took this suggested game as a *real* game, the let's all die on the highway and nobody prayed game, and the car whirled off like a spinning top through the rain and gloom and coming gore, play or the way this girl drove maybe not.

This invisible fellow hanging out with this girl changed around a lot. Like identities. When the boys had come upon the car sitting neath the spreading oak sitting neath the jail window, the phantom, seeing all three to the back, half the front seat empty, had been Manfred, the kraut killer. On the way out to the canyon death spot, the eight crosses by a ditch, when the girl had stopped to pick up the hitcher who was not there (and for seating arrangements seemed to perch in Manfred's lap), that had been the pencil-head drummer, Igor. There were others unnamed. The girl's highschool heartthrob, they had gone to New York, he, jilted for an older man, had gone off to get himself killed in a foreign war and they were just now finding enough of this guy to box up, call it a body and ship home. Another, some old guy, some guy like a father, an uncle, he and the girl were up to something out of a Greek play, old dad banging sis and

they not exactly sure who they were, San Quentin quail and an oldster who couldn't cut the mustard anymore, that's all. But most often in this car now piled with people, dead empty front seat, was a boy. Not a boy like the boys crouched in the back, hanging on for dear life, this car something that had escaped from a roller coaster. No, this boy, aside from being invisible, it seemed this poor kid hadn't even been born yet. Like he was inside the girl's tummy. Like maybe he hadn't even got that far yet, he was still trapped up inside this raving girl's head. Whatever it was they had decided to come to figure about cellophane man, the girl seemed to agree.

She smiled at the very idea—whatever that idea had been other than escape, adulthood, the Foreign Legion—and deciding to celebrate beforehand headed the white car out to the drive-in, maybe the last meal, Last Supper, before heading out to the car crash on the highway, maybe that would be the game of the day, little game to it with this girl and covert copilot at the wheel.

“Breakfast, lunch or supper?” the girl inquired and then they made it out to the drive-in, the car crash site, the filling caliche pit, the death corner at the school and other local tourist attractions, and so it was that the three boys and the girl made it out of and back to town and the parking spot where all had begun, there under the spreading tree, there under the jail cell window, lickeytesplit quick as a flash in no time at all and this proved literally the case, as the girl in the white car decided to pass out before going anywhere. And so, where little people often go to escape the big bad world standing all about—the boys themselves rolled up into a comradely ball and took a nap. And so it was that they were somewhat surprised when another presence sprang into the car and grabbed their necks, she more terrifying than any jail or noose, this the black bitch locking the boys in the back, dumping the blonde over to shotgun, slipping herself behind the white car's wheel, to leave her own red number behind, whatever this devil girl had in mind, even in waking to this nightmare, even now they did not dream on this afternoon like night exactly and precisely what hell still gaped before them.

Play Practice.

But soon and very soon the boys would come to know terror as only a boy can, dressed in someone else's clothes, paint and grease on face and hair, then to be kicked out onto a lighted platform to be greeted by howling laughter, this from the couple thousand geeks what made this town. There to stand and steam and shake and then, that moment of true, lasting and never-ending terror, then as silence fell, all escape routes cut off by

leering heavies in the wings, then it was that said boy *would not even be able to remember his own name*.

Play practice.

■ ■ ■

Nina left a tragic scene—no, not the play to be practiced tonight, but rather the drama of the blonde bitch being laid out back there in the back row, under the balcony's overhang, Mrs. Rainborough hamming away at doting on the virgin slut as if dead simply drunk were typhoid, the pox, polio head to toe—and returned to the stage, praying for vengeance, deliverance, justice and a miracle, say polio, the real thing.

But as Nina mounted the lighted platform, she did so with a fatalism that might well have been called a sinking heart. The blonde bitch, icy virgin, crutches, wheelchair, even from an iron lung Jay would get the part. The romantic lead. The girl who studies, marries, mothers and housewives, dies young and then, even dead, she still gets to come back onstage and get all the good lines. And the second female part, that which Nina seemed headed for the second year running? This disturbingly saintly little twit's distractingly levelheaded, commonsensical *mother*. An old old woman—*not again, never again, this Nina swore.*

But now, tonight, it had happened again, when the blonde girl had come in drunk, passed out, out on her feet, face white chilled stone, eyes black as coon's, that was when Nina knew that her cause was a lost cause. It was this ghost thing, see, that was what was killing Nina, her chances, as tonight, back there passed out under the balcony overhang, who back there in the gloom being nursed by Dottie Rainbow, who tonight looked ever more ghostly than this pale, thin, disheveled, shivering, moaning, black-eyed girl, and, and this even Nina admitted, who looked even more beautiful thus ghastly, and all done without aid of make-up or the like. Make-up, oh yes, this year's make-up would be slapped on in reverse. Pack away white face and charcoal pen to make healthy girl, Nina, say, look unhealthy, and trot out rouge and lipstick and pancake and amber powder to make a pallid, passed-out, legless girl snoring back under the balcony overhang, make zombie look for that short time, at a distance, up upon a stage, a healthy girl, vigorous young woman and energetic mother and wife. And then wipe and hose down and swish it all comes off *et voila* there's a ghost. While Nina, a healthy, vigorous, dark, sexy, lively, eager girl—once again paint and paste and powder could ever hide the dark, dancing flash of life in her dark and dancing eyes and make her once again, *not again!* this doddering old gran.

The girl had no idea how long it had been, how long she had been standing here on the stage, some players wandering here and there, a group gathered in the front row gossiping, some gathered in the rear of the auditorium about the patient and the tending doctor, a few others sitting low in the balcony, the lighting crew and pals having a forbidden smoke, but now all that was done and now the play, the practice of it, was to begin.

The stage was bare, it was scarcely like a stage at all, no backing curtain, just the building's raw brick wall, no side curtains, players would walk on and off stage and pretend a door, as they would pretend all else in this stripped bare play. There would be no props but chairs, even the tables, the cups and plates and knives and forks that rested on them, these that the players would take up to eat and drink, the napkins too, it all was to be imagined but for the chairs. There were, say, a dozen chairs, ordinary folding chairs from the cafeteria, sitting center stage toward the rear, the chairs' backs turned to the audience, so that the players who sat in the chairs, their backs would be to the audience as well and when these seated players spoke to one another they would turn their heads so that the audience might better hear and see who it was that was speaking. Other than that these seated players moved not. This was the cemetery, you see, the scene that would be played tonight, and these seated players were the dead. What they were waiting for, sitting around cemetery instead of being off in heaven or other places, the girl had not a clue. As this scene opened the dead sat around like passengers in a busted down bus chatting back and forth without a great deal of animation, like they were talking to each other only to make the time pass while the mechanic fitted the new fan belt or whatever; though this droning, the girl imagined, was probably written into the text to let the audience in on the secret, like there was something seriously wrong with these people, like they were dead. The worst actors in the class got these dead people roles, usually seniors who for four long years had never got to say a word onstage; though it seemed to the girl these poor players might have been better suited playing the live, as most of these wouldn't be saying anything at all, there standing around the heroine's fresh grave. That was this scene, the scene that would be played tonight. The funeral and burial of young wife and young mother Mary—if only life were arranged so, the girl observed, getting rid of such goody-two-shoes early on. The burial part of this scene would occur stage left, toward the rear. A group of townspeople gathered around no grave or headstone or even any flowers, all pretend. To follow the screaming illogic of this mindless play, all these living people were dressed out in dark clothes, long black coats, hats that covered their faces, silent, and generally carrying on more dead than the dead. And umbrellas.

The girl had forgotten that. If you got to sit at a table that wasn't there, drink and eat air out of invisible cups and plates etc, by some perversion of consistency all these gloomy live people got to carry real umbrellas against no rain at all, just pretend. During the funeral service the deadies yakked away, generally explaining to the audience what the hell was going on over with the dumb livies. Like when hubby Gordon knelt to put invisible flowers on his wife's imaginary grave, one of the dead would crack,

"Why lookit thet. Thet swait Gordie, he's done brung flours to lil Mary's grave."

The girl turned from the scene that would be played tonight, to face the race, contest, the battle and war engaged and fought to see who this year might be the dead young wife and who the granny mother who lingers on forever. The girl turned and looked to the back of the auditorium and her enemies gathered there. The blonde bitch had been revived. Polio, stroke, heart failure, all cured and gone, the drama coach now dragging the suffering girl off her stretcher (see: Alamo), and now dragging the girl down the aisle that, near comatose and collapse, she might read for the part of the strapping healthy young mother and wife who happened to have maybe fifty percent of the play's lines—but no, tonight, those young and happy and healthy lines by girl going on young woman, they weren't to be read, were they?

No, tonight the scene to be played, the girl considered as her arch rival now came within the footlights reflection, tonight's scene, this thin, weary, ashen white figure, hair near silver, eyes black holes, all about the girl now coming upon the stage pale and ill, and now the house lights dimmed, now the balcony spot picked out this girl and she alone, and now the dead had turned their chairs to the audience, the mourners, clad in black, umbrellas caped over them, only the light from the candles they carried playing over them, now as they and some choir members offstage began to sing a hymn, a haunting, melancholy refrain, its words speaking of death and calling it life, eternal life, now that the second girl had taken on a rare white dress, its cloth fine as film, and came thus clad onto center stage, came there on silent bare feet, the soft glowing white spot following her there, now that the young mother and wife came to be the focus of all in the great dark hall, now that she did look about her and see the dead waiting for her to come join them, to come away from the dark hushed mourners and their candlelight and song, and now the girl who would be this year's lead yet fucking again said the first of her dead lines, and she had near as many of these as live ones, now calling out *bello there* to the dead, her voice hushed to a whisper as if not to wake the living, now it was, upon seeing that this living cadaver being dragged upon the stage, nothing less than perfect for this

year's leading role, not to mention perfect as well for the scene to be played tonight—it was then that Nina called it quits.

Packed it in.

Raised white flag.

Turned tail and run.

Or surrendered. Simply surrendered.

Or maybe, maybe even better, Nina smiled, maybe that was when she:

*Gave up the ghost!*

And started shopping around for granny dresses that might, with some nipping and tucking, show something of her fine young figure—before they brought out the cotton padding of course.



The boys didn't know what was going on. First. Some maniacal writer had put not one but *three* boys in his play, so there was no hope of escape. There was some good news though, among their shared suffering. Of the three boys to be played, two didn't have much to say. A newspaper boy and a soda jerk. These two also would play the baseball players who dropped by to get Gordie (hero), dump the dame (heroine) and come play ball, but there wasn't much to that but shouting *Aw Gordie come play ball* and *sissy* and the like. The paperboy part, as Red actually was an actual real-life paperboy, the drama coach had a shoo-in for that part.

Red settled, that left Tiny and Van to vie for soda jerk. If the only line Tiny had ever remembered was "God bless us everyone!" then a religious soda jerk it would be. As the final, lead role, this kid did have some things to say and all agreed that Van, the remaining boy, was who you wanted when things needed saying, and Mrs. Rainborough had her Billy, son of Gordie and Mary when they grow up and get married and get jobs and settle down, though an embittered Van could see that nobody in this play town ever thought of anything to say that really needed saying as there was nothing in this play and its play town that was not perfect.

What the blonde girl had already complained about to the drama coach, that this play town was like no real town she had ever seen, to go on to suggest they liven things up. Make it more like a real town, maybe even make it like their own town, like put some weird in it. And the dark girl would take this up and offer the latest gossip and Mrs. Rainborough, the drama coach, would know a fainting moment and the matter of reality was dropped. Even so Van, on this night that the final apportioning of these parts was to be made, was not displeased. Billy, the good little son, even if

he never used real-life words and there was not a laugh in the house, good little Billy was on stage, so far as much talking went, but that one scene, the scene they would be playing tonight, and he didn't really have any more lines than the paperboy or the soda jerk and, more to the point, this kid didn't see a single ghost, not even if it was his mother. Nothing at all, Van figured, donning a black raincoat and grabbing up a playbook, like that misery last year. Last year's kid had wandered around the stage for hours, had more lines than most of the adults, seeing every ghost that popped on stage and then having to try to convince all the grownups that he was really seeing Daddy's ghost hanging around out there in the rose garden, etc. Yeah, this year's kid, ghosts went right by him, and if the blonde chick didn't start in on a rewrite, nobody seeing nobody they couldn't see in real life, they would have this deathly drama over with before it started.

But now came the tough part, the part Van didn't understand till he was well into the play, he didn't recognize where he and his character were until it was too late. This due to this play having no furniture or scenery or painted backdrops or the like that normal plays have. To start—Van all suited up in black raincoat, with a lot of others so dressed, the big ones carrying umbrellas and some pen flashlights to see by, the stage dark and bare, nothing on it but some folding chairs—Van had no idea the terrible place he had come to, a place he could never go again, not alive. That was what he had sworn, there after Dud's death. Never again would he go into burial ground, a city made for the dead, and now he had been tricked, had mistaken that place of grief and yowling misery and hell to be but a dim-lit, bare stage, Van and a group of the other black-clad people creeping across the stage, six of this bunch lugging along make believe, like they were carrying some furniture, something heavy, on their shoulders and there was nothing there. And the rain, if the umbrellas were real, the rain was nowhere around, unless you stepped outside the stage door. It was all unreal, playmaking, a game. Not the real thing.

But now, the stage dark or near so, they all dressed in black and shuffling along, something went wrong. There were some people sitting in the chairs but they didn't much seem to give a hang about this gathering, not like they had chattered away and gossiped and giggled waiting for the wedding scene there at the start. Now these gathered people sat there looking bored—the drama coach injecting some realism in this play?—but, then again this different from the wedding, this black-clad, shuffling crowd went right past where the church front door would be, going on to cross all the way over the stage and stand there in the corner, all circled around, not so much talk-

ing, not words, just making murmur you couldn't quite make out. Some of these people hugged Van and patted him on the head and made motions like they had handkerchiefs in hand and were blowing nose, patting at their eyes. Then the six carriers, carrying nothing, they made much of taking this nothing from their shoulders and then, as if this nothing was on rope, they made to be lowering it into a hole, something. Then a man came forward and made the strangest of the night's pantomimes. He raised foot and pushed down, lifted with both hands and then swung them toward the center of the circle, like he had shovel and was digging something or like he was filling in a hole that had already been dug.

It was then that Van understood. That something real came back to him. A thing he had put out of his mind, he had thought, forever, and now it had come back.

All dressed in black, so many of them weeping, all but Van, all but his father, they followed along behind those six men carrying the long black box of death, they went over a field that had closed graves over it and headstones marking these graves, toward a group of men, some with Bibles, some with shovels, all with hats off and looking out solemnly toward the coming mourners and the coffin carrying the boy's battered body. And now the coffin was lowered into the grave and the men with Bibles spoke low words and there came singing, as now onstage all the players about Van had taken to singing plaintive, a hymn, and then the men with shovels took to covering the coffin and filling the hole as the players had done onstage, and now as then Van looked to his hands and there were flowers there, even now when his hands were empty, and when he made to escape, now as he had then, they held him in their arms, his father and his grandfather, and they would not let him run from death, the death he had made, and he knelt to the grave and placed the flowers there where there was no headstone and Van wept now, as then, for the first time since his brother had died.

And then from somewhere off behind him, from over from those sitting in the chairs, there came a woman's voice, a voice he seemed to know, so sad, so lonely her voice, and she said,

"Look there now. Isn't that sweet of him. The boy's brought flowers to his mother's grave."

Mother? What did they mean *mother*? It was his brother's grave. Brother. *Brother!* But they didn't listen, no one did. These people were mad. It was all over anyway. *Mother brother father son*. The game, another game to be played. If only he could escape, make his breakout, his getaway. Him and his little pals, trapped, imprisoned by a play.



The two men sat in the dark, the judge and the doctor, there in the judge's chambers in the new courthouse building. These rooms were to be found on the topmost floor, midway along the building's south side, at a point just back of the courtroom. As one went along toward the southwest corner of the building, the bank corner, there a legal library was housed, and attached a small room or large closet with the facilities of a hotel room, save that there was a couch that served as bed. It was here the juror, the jury foreman, reposed now that the doctor's examination was done. At the other corner this side, that looking out south and east, that long room served as the jury room. Here the eleven other impaneled citizens sat, smoked, played cards, read (still no newspapers) and otherwise waited for their twelfth member to crack, cry out *yea!* to the crime that had been committed and then they could all go home. The judge's chambers did not share this view eastward. Though the judge and the doctor knew that the shantytown down in the gully was being washed away, or would be come light, they were spared the spectacle of fire engines, police cars, emergency lights flashed around, the rescue workers, both pro and volunteer, attempting to save what they might of this poor part of town called Eastertown. The two men sat in the dark and did not much mind doing so, maybe they preferred it to being in a lighted place and that was just as well, as the electrical power had gone out all over town and all lay dark but for candle, coal-oil lamp and the emergency lights of the fire department, police and the hospital. A relay station outside of town had gone down, on over on the far side of the canyon, and as that bridge had flooded no electrical workers from the town could get out to make repairs and all waited in the dark for help to arrive from the hub city, a good fifty miles away. The phone lines had gone down as well and so on this flooded night the town felt itself a place cut off from all the world, a place one could not escape from, nor could rescuers reach them. Only the police radio down in the sheriff's office kept up their hope, that they were not a town lost in this world, nothing about them but the black void of space.

One of the radio's channels was being kept open tonight, this linking the town to the governor's office in the capital downstate. You see, a local boy, one of the Jones boys, was to die in the state prison tonight at midnight, by the state's execution of sentence, for having killed however so many cab drivers in the hub city, and if there was to be a reprise or stay of execution, the word would come to those who much cared, say the Jones family gathered in vigil on the courthouse steps, that the boy would die as scheduled or live, if only a short time longer.

Among those who cared very much about the Jones boy dying or not were the judge and the jurors and lawyers for defense and prosecution, these in the town's own trial now concluding or would soon. You see, the juror now lying in the closet off the legal library would not release his *yea* or *nay* that another boy might die till he knew the *yea* or *nay* from the governor's office. If the governor ordered a stay to the Jones boy, then the twelfth juror, their foreman, would join the others in condemning Manfred, the German boy who had shot a waitress, his girlfriend, his beloved. While if the Jones boy fried up a midnight snack—so said the colorfully crude deputy sheriff—then Doc Bavender would not crack and the boy the eleven others would like to see killed would live, if only a short time longer.

Such was the word the doctor had now brought the judge, why it was that they none should be set free till midnight. Stalling, dithering, just like a woman, he couldn't make up his mind (Deputy Cap), having a heart attack or faking it and on and on went the courthouse talk, while these three, judge, doctor, juror, now knew that it was to be a simple trade off. One life, one death. One dies, the other would live. If only for a time.

It was the judge who was having a heart attack or should have been, with such blood pressure and two under his belt, the third would be the charm. The doctor put away the blood pressure apparatus and said instead all was fine. To have reported figures oh near double what they should be, that the judge was but a hop, skip and jump from shuffling off this mortal coil, such would be spoken of Monday morning, when this trial was done. *Shuffle off this mortal coil*—from the judge's own collection of quotes, phrases and bons mots that the townspeople, the doctor oft included, could make neither heads nor tails of. Urbane, witty, traveled (brought a French wife home from the war), cultured far beyond his bons mots, cynical, sly, speculative (the track in the mountains over the state line, the great markets of stock, bond, currency, metals and commodities of New York), decent, normal, and as about as high-strung a patient the doctor had ever known—the judge was but much the same as the tall, rawboned, street fighting tough turned to the arts of healing and caring for those who would not heal, both, the two of them, local boys. Known to one another all their knowing lives.

The doctor put away the pump, the gauge, the flat rubber tubing and spoke of no tobacco, a reasonable amount of alcohol, the afternoon nap, laid out, feet and head on the law library couch's plane, give the heart that rest, weight loss and some mild form of exercise, such as walking the eight blocks from home to courthouse.

The judge observed the former operation, the folding and coiling and packing away the blood pressure apparatus, with great care and listened not to a word of the wisdom said.

“It’s the woman on the jury. That’s the problem. Should I say just *the* woman? No. Though Mrs. Jarrett votes hard as any man, and is surely as stupid, it comes down to a matter of essential differences. We just aren’t the same, you know. Think, feel, see, and on and on—all different between the two. All twelve of the one, all twelve the other—a body that might seem to have a head. A mind. But the mixture. It has been messy.” The judge pulled on his pipe, its coal the only light in the room, that pale dark from the window as lifeless as a square of paint drawn on a cell wall, as if that might serve as window to the world beyond. It did not seem the rain and the dark it brought would ever end. But then maybe true night had come. After a week of rain and dark neither man knew, or did not think it a matter worth puzzling. “She was the one who started it, you know. Not him. She walked in here with innocent on the brain. *She* was the hold-out. *He* was going along with the rest of them. Well, to a point. You been following any of this, Aubrey?”

The doctor had not.

“OK. The district attorney. Not the kid with us, but the hub city fatso who thinks he might make governor, lieutenant governor, anything to get him out of hub city, he specified in the pretrial wrangling—first degree murder and that only. No second degree, no manslaughter, no death caused by accident. Maybe that’s had Doc on the guilty side to start. Maybe it had nothing to do with her. Maybe he thought he could go guilty and ease down from first degree, maybe he thought there was some way to ease Manfred past death. I know it wasn’t long after—after he had asked for a clarification, was there any way they could avoid the death penalty—that he went over to innocent. Straight innocent. And Miss Steen went over to guilty. What came first, that is the question, Aubrey. Who led, who followed. I don’t know. I’ve got this bad feeling. Whatever he does, she does the opposite. Almost like they were married.”

The judge waited. The doctor said nothing.

“You do know about that, Aubrey. Surely.”

The doctor, who made it his business not to know about that and all the others, these conditions, acts and situations that did not need knowing about by him, did indeed know about this.

The judge exhaled breath. He held his breath often, when speaking or listening, waiting to speak, and the doctor had spoken to him of it. *Breathe, Sam.* And the judge had held his breath till all such nonsense, a doctor

telling him the healthy way to go about breathing, was done. The judge drew in a deep breath.

“She came in here looking for a victim. She came in here to cause trouble. She came in here to be a minority of one. She came in here to upset the applecart. These steaming liberals—” here the doctor listening, not unusually considered a steaming liberal, at best, by his friend, thought to smile, an act he perhaps should perform more regularly, for reasons salutary, if not carrying it quite so far as steady aspiration and all that other good advice he had handed down to the judge “—they came looking for trouble.”

The judge breathed, once, while the doctor smiled, a bit.

The lecture would not be delivered tonight, maybe, as it had been delivered only a couple days ago. And a week before that, and a month before that, and—many times during this last year had the judge warned the doctor of the nation’s, the state’s, the town’s changing political moods. The coming war, the bloating anti-communism to whip up the people to send their sons to this war, the suspicion of all new and foreign and federal, the return to the flag and the Constitution and the Bible, draping the one over everything, waving it at the drop of a hat, while preaching the second and you can cut out that commie Bill of Rights, and not to forget the tom-tom of that holy book’s thumping, that dread music as the natives pranced about the pyres fed by all other books, all but that One—yes, the admonishment, warning, lecture on the coming days when a not particularly steaming or any other sort of heated liberal, a doctor, say, who had chosen to heal the wrong sort in a vicious, bitter foreign war, his only crime, that day that he too might be struck down. A civil war, brother against brother, town against farm, south against north, east west, all against all, the vicious, bitter war that would be, could be, now coming to this land, state and town; the war that would reach out and take any citizen and toss him on the pyre, no matter his standing, his service to the community, all would go and be burnt for their thinking, be they doctor, teacher, maybe even a judge or two if he didn’t start hanging more and freeing less—all this and more had been delivered by the judge over the last year, his admonishment, his warning, his lecturing and hectoring to his fine healing friend, that none would be spared when the massed torches and flags and uniforms and stepped marches and hate-filled ravings filled the night across the land. Maybe even, just maybe these dire times might be reaching the shores of this small town, a forgotten place, an island left be till now, no matter the rising, protective sea thrown down by this rain, if it rained forever, forty days and forty nights, even then, the judge had spoken, they would scarce be safe from the evil land rising about them and its fire.

Such were the memories, in any case, the doctor had kept from the judge's warnings, a man wise and liberal enough himself to heed such crowded wisdom and so survive. In time the doctor turned from such musings and smiled, a bit, as the judge huffed and puffed concerning other matters at hand. The question, it seemed, was who went first, the man or the woman, when they switched from guilt to innocence, innocence to guilt. The doctor smiled, a bit, for it was nothing new, the judge concerning himself with matters that lay beyond the reach of law, beyond the grasp of science, and going on to ferret out these irrelevant and unknowable facts or fancies with a high seriousness. In this the doctor thought, and said as much at times, the judge a philosopher and the judge had never disagreed. In this case, however, the judge had decided to deal with brass tacks. At first anyway.

"Forget all this causal stuff for the time being, Aubrey," so said the judge, a rather canny philosopher, at least to the doctor's thinking, ever accusing or at least implying that it was the doctor who had brought up the judge's nonsense in the first place. "Maybe they switched horses in midstream. In a heartbeat, the same heartbeat that headed them off from where they had come. Spontaneous combustion. Mental telepathy. Single-minded twins. Mm. Not bad, that one. Might be pretty close there. Yip and yap, whatever the hell. Eternally spiraling, black and white. Ever locked in embrace, can't stand the sight of one another. Not bad at all," the judge said, puff puff. "I put it at Wednesday. The Big Switch. When the matter of the woman came up. The dead girl. The waitress. The so-called beloved that twenty-four carat fool shot. The Woman's Question. That's when Miss Steen went over. I like the irony of it anyway. That Miss Steen would grab onto the rights of this woman to live—or that out of the question, the necessity that her killer should die—just there when the defense started giving a true picture of the dead waitress. And I mean warts and all. Old Herder for the defense—not much of a lawyer, but maybe that was effective. How he built us a picture of girl who, well if being a liar, cheat, thief, tease, slut—no *slut* too strong, maybe *tease* too weak, somewhere in between. Nothing anyway, maybe not even nasty, just a petty sexual tormentor quite capable of driving a man mad—at least some poor foreign boy, not that bright, never a bad beat to his heart, driving him to distraction. Oh yes, old Herder did his job there. Stumbling, forgetful, repetitive, anxious, unsure, apologetic—everything in the book counsel for the defense should not be, and no master with oil and brush has ever painted a finer, truer portrait of what was in fact a fat, slovenly, near sluttish, almost nasty, cleverly stupid pricktease. That was when our Miss Steen flipflopped. Innocent to guilt. Rejected the ideal, embraced the actual, the real. Myself, I like that. A mind I can understand.

One I can deal with, if not particularly care for. A mind you can make deals with. Work with. Come to terms with. A mind that will show up for a meeting of the minds. Work something out. Agree to terms. Cut a deal. My kind of mind, Miss Steen. Not a bad body either, put a few pounds on. And now we come to another sort of mind, my old old friend, our old old friend who's causing all this fuss. And whose fine mind is heading him toward bad, bad times, and maybe just carry other old old friends down with him if they don't watch their step. I don't know if it's that you honestly and really don't see or that you see and so wanting not to know that you walk around as if blind, but in the end the difference will not be much. When they come for you, oh and they will come, Aubrey, they'll come for us all, we scofflaws, if we don't start watching our step, if it's not already too late to begin. Remember those four, Aubrey? The breaklaw, the scofflaw, the outlaw, those who thought they stood above the law, another who laughed and thumbed his nose, the one who thought he might live within the law and like some secret burrowing thing turn the law away from him, the man who thought he lived above the law, they had so much need for him and his healing that they would never come for him, and then there was the last among them, he who simply knew nothing of laws, was blind and deaf and unfeeling toward them and did not consider they would ever come for him because he did not consider they would ever come for anyone. Do you remember them, Aubrey? These four. The Saturday Afternoon Philosophical Society. They are coming for us now, Doctor Mister Aubrey, my old old dear friend. And now class," concluded the judge with a puff, for a small light had lit on a console on his desk, "such bullshit brings us to our conclusion of today's study. Bullshit? Or was it horseshit? Entirely different matters, you see. Listen. Speak. Think. *Feel*. Now Mister Doctor Aubrey, you shall repeat after me. Bullshit."

"Bullshit."

"Very good. Now. Horseshit."

"Horseshit."

"Excellent. Now the two. Don't be frightened. It's there. It's in you. With feeling. With thought. With song, with meaning. *Bullshit. Horseshit.*"

"*Bullshit. Horseshit.*"

"Feel the differences? Oh such subtle nuances of meaning. Again! *Bullshit! Horseshit!*"

And so it was that they who had caused the amber light on the console on the judge's desk to light—the judge's clerk and the deputy sheriff acting as court bailiff—came in upon a discussion of philosophical matters. A meeting of minds. The joys of words commonly understood and so shared.

Puff puff.



It was there before the war. The European war had well begun but had yet to spread itself around the globe. They met Saturday afternoons, the four of them. Played bridge and listened to a game on the radio, college football, professional baseball, whatever the season, and if there was no sporting season just then, why it was the opera from New York. And then sometimes it was opera no matter the season, if it was Verdi. That's how bolshie they got, playing bridge, that's the woman's game, instead of manly poker, so said Maw Harbish, the power behind the all-powerful 1929 Study Club, the only opry she ever knew man listen to was the Grand Ole. And cook too, all by themselves. Yes, every Saturday afternoon while bidding no trump, with Sam Hale, the judge, giving some radio tenor something to shoot at, Jack Cook, a man well named, went about when dummy stewing up a pot of pinto beans, fatback, your onion, garlic and secret spices, to be topped by the holy jalapeño, so that by rubber three or fourth quarter, there was heated fragrance spread throughout Jack Cook's bachelor digs and maybe on out into the street, for word surely got around, as Maw Harbish had it, that Jack Cook, he can take a pinto bean and make it a dish to set before a king. These were their foursome, their backfield, their stringless quartet—Jack Cook, Sam Hale, Doc Bavender and the doctor, John Aubrey, called Aubrey, a name you never remembered whether it was first or last. Oh much was talked of, close to everything, in earnest debate, wisecrack, reminiscence and theory, much of their trades or followings, school, law, medicine, science and beyond to all concerns of the town and the state in which it rested and the great nation that harbored that and all the great nations of world that lay beyond these shores, stood over her borders, and in such talk, of politics, history, economics and all else that made such distant people war. Yes, in those days of peace there was much talk of war, as the war in Europe came on, fattening on itself and its death and destruction, yes, soon all talk turned to that war, as it grew ever near their nation's border, waited for them off her shores. And such talk came to turn in on these four men and the four wars that stood waiting for them, politely still, as this was peace, in attendance like a servant, cap in hand, a butler, gamekeeper, a vicious servant who from field or dining hall would soon come for his four masters, fang and claw bared, come for his master's throat.

Jack Cook went first. He volunteered. He wanted it—or as he laughed later, he had thought he wanted it—but even then, after he had come to know what he thought he had wanted and had not wanted it at all—even

then, particularly now that it was over, Jack Cook laughed, he had wanted it still, but not, Jack Cook laughed, ever again.

Next to go came a surprise. Now all knew how it was that some college prof had come to Doc Bavender and taken him off to work on some project in some hush-hush hideaway high in the mountains and that was how his war started. But even later, when Bavender came back home on leave, he did not think he was a man at war. Even now that he knew some of this project, this device, weapon, bomb that would kill more in an instant than Jack Cook's machinegun would cut down in four years, even then Bavender did not really know these masters he served, what war he was making and would not know it till much later, so much later, till there near the end when it would be too late to stop, far too late to stop.

It did not seem that those two remaining, Sam Hale and John Aubrey, judge and doctor, would be so called or drawn away, but one day the judge received a call, not the *salutations* of conscription, but a call from an office, there was simply no higher authority in the land than those who called Sam Hale away. Some article he had written for the law review his last year in school, something on international law, and he was taken away to Washington, then London, back to Washington to clerk and advise so many wise men who had set themselves to thinking of how to make the world into a new state, a state that circled the world, a state of peace, the state that would end all wars and poverty and most misery too. A united nations, when war was done it might be so called, and Sam Hale's war was imagining that, when there would be no war.

John Aubrey alone did not go off to fight, or to heal. That would be his battle, to save life and mind and then mend best he could that of life and mind that was left. He volunteered. He waited. Came word at last, an interview, not local but down in the state's capital. Such trouble made over a small-town sawbones—still he imagined only an army man behind a desk, perhaps a physician himself, their talk of such matters of medicine as they knew. No, he did not think of the long table set crosswise at the bottom of the long room and the string of men, uniformed and not, who had come there to ask Mister Doctor Aubrey of everything under the sun, everything but that which he did and knew best, the art of healing, curing's science. No, these men spoke of the war in Spain, the small civil war that would be playground and practice field for the larger war, the many wars, so many wars all round the globe they now called one; and when John Aubrey spoke to these men and said oh so nearly truly that that side for which he healed and saved, it might have been the other, as Doctor Pitt, the town's second physician, might have cured and mended not the enemy but those of John

Aubrey's side, curing and mending the men falling and dying in Aubrey's trenches quite as easily as he did for those falling and dying beyond a field of wire and rubble and devastation called, oh so correctly, no-man's-land. And so it was that John Aubrey was sent home and there he waited for the others' return, waited for the peace that would come for them, the peace that would, as the war had regularized their lives, now it would be their minds and thinking that would be taken from them and put in uniform and marched about all around and all in step, all crying out in unison their fealty to these new masters, the lords of peace, and all they thought and knew would be that, life a single, simple thing, all the same.

Such were the doctor's thoughts and memories as the judge spoke of the four. And in so speaking, as was the judge's bent toward philosophy, he spoke of these men by speaking of their minds and how their minds had come to deal with their new peace; and how they might remain what they were, different from one another, each in his own turn, and so be different from all others in the town and far beyond; this difference done while keeping in step with their new peace, that iron grip closing of the minds of their new world, nation, state and town. How indeed, the judge posed, were they to live in such a peace and stay free men?

"It's easy to see how Jack Cook goes about it. Hiding. Fighting. Escaping. Thumbing his nose. Staying who he is or so he thinks. He makes it a joke. A role played by a master emcee. A man, yes, onstage, but a man who stands off to one side. Part of the thing yet apart. Smiling at the fools and their foolish comedies, a wink to the audience, a wry comment, a crack, a joke the players never hear, and the crowd below roars at our jester, beating their hands at his wit, and so he shall be saved, so he thinks, the man who stands safe, he thinks, off to one side of the new laws that the town and the land about it have made.

"The man of education is then followed by a man of law. A man of the old laws a man who thinks he might work within, hidden from the new. Harking back to such relics as, oh, the Constitution, and by so doing put some human face on this brave new world. A certain sympathy for the rights of the condemned—oh I meant to say the *accused*, surely I did—a leniency in meting out punishment; and so this fool, as much fool as the jester on his stage, will think he may make a life within this beast, as if all within that foul belly have not been first devoured.

"Ah, on to the man of medicine, shall we? The man who will stand to one side, the man that shall work within—yes, let us now come to the man who shall live above their laws. The man who thinks that his law, that of healing and saving, that they cannot strike this law down, and him with it.

Ha. Perhaps this shall be the greatest fool of them all. He who thinks that the mob yelping at his ankles are but harmless curs, that they will never grow to a size that may come for his throat, he who does not dream, there in the safety of his healing, his saving, that these things crawling at his feet, that they may some day bring him to his knees, bring him down to them, as there shall be no standing, not by philosopher, physician, priest or poet, above these laws.

“To move on, then, to the last of these four. To stand aside, work within, tower above—now we come to the greatest fool of all these fools. The man of science. The man who knows of no laws, not those made by man, the man who knows but one law, that of nature, and that he shall live away from these vermin called men and their fetters called laws and do so safely, as by his study of nature and her laws he has come to a world, that brave new world of knowing but for no other reason than the beauty and the truth there is in knowing and living in harmony and peace with these natural laws. Oh yes, my dear boy, the old Greek cried out, ‘Blessed is the man who has laid hold of the knowledge that comes from the enquiry into Nature. He stirreth up no evil for the citizens nor gives himself to unjust acts, but surveys the ageless order of immortal Nature, of what it is composed and how and why. In the heart of such as he the study of base acts can find no lodging.’ And so how are those rulers and their new laws to bring such a man down? A man who knows no law but nature and study? By bringing down nature and the study of it with it. He’s already gone, Aubrey, our dear sweet simple friend in the next room. All their hounding of him, their treeing him, their felling that tree that the hounds might tear him one limb from another—that is but Doc Bavender’s execution. They came for him years ago, when you, I, Jack were roaming the world scot-free. And by what means did they take him by the throat and bring him down? By taking nature from him and the study and his knowledge of it. The very secret of life, its beginning, the birth of light. They took and made that birth and its study a vast machine of death and dark. To take the man who studies but the ageless order of nature, they had simply to turn his study into a thing that shall destroy nature itself.

“And so it is, my dear Mister Doctor Aubrey, that we four little Indians shall go tumbling down. One two three four. Like pins in a row. Ah but enough of this,” concluded the judge and he puffed, for a small light had lit on the console on his desk, a light that showed that they who would come for them were coming, and turned to deeper matters of philosophy. “Shall we partake of a drop of Kentucky cough medicine and pursue instead of such philosophy? The language of it. Now. Bullshit. Now. Horseshit. Weigh these

fine words carefully, Scholar Aubrey. Taste each word. Listen. Think. Feel. Speak. What have we been about all our lives? Bullshit? Or. Horseshit?”

As so it was that those coming for them came upon what the judge assured all the courthouse cronies was but a discussion of philosophical matters.

Bullshit. Horseshit.

Puff puff.



The deputy didn't know if he liked it or not. His new name. What everybody had started calling him. *Cap.* Sure. Captain. Maybe. Maybe not. He had never served. Anyway, they called old man Weeb, that sticky ball of bone and blubber, the Colonel. And what had he been? Private. Nothing lower. No, the deputy knew what was what and what was going on, and on and on, the courthouse crowd crowing. *Cap.* The sheriff: *Hat.* And then the deputy *Cap.* A large headgear for a large man. Small headgear . . . you got the idea, the courthouse cronies cackling.

Still, the deputy had liked this new job a lot, the responsibility he had shouldered all week long, when the sheriff had first handed it down to him. Bailiff. Head bailiff. Well there was but the one bailiff, him, but still. Even if there weren't any deputy bailiffs to push around—as some sheriffs often pushed around their loyal assistants, for no reason but to throw their weight around and maybe just for sheer spite—there was the jury and the courtroom crowd to lord it over. Be boss of. Well the deputy/head bailiff had been disappointed in these two sets of charges. Like both jury and courtroom gawkers seemed intent on going around doing or not doing whatever came into their heads. The jury in particular: downright willful down to the last man—or woman, in this case. The deputy did not know how it was that he longed for the days when men bossed and women were the bossed, as he had never seen much of either of them; his own mother had bossed around him, his father, grandfather, uncles, buddies and any man who might be passing on the street with such a consistency and thoroughness that, as his much bossed grandfather once sighed, verily took the breath away; all the deputy knew was that if you were going to be longing for the many ways things had never been nor probably would, why then, if you were a deputy just made head bailiff, you would long with heart and soul for a jury that Carrie Steen had no part of.

It was like they were right back in highschool. Back when Carrie Steen thought she ruled the roost and pretty much did but for that last year, their senior year, the last part of it. After she had killed all her friends in the car

crash and had to limp around and weep and pretend it all an accident and otherwise keep her trap shut and the bossing to a minimum. Yep. Had to keep it zipped and sympathy high. Just a touch of bossy and she might get hauled in for murder, as some around town were saying she should have been. Yep. Change highschool to courthouse and that was all that had changed. Take the very first day the deputy had been in charge. There after the jury had been selected and Judge Hale had given them their instructions, the deputy led them back to their jury room, the first time the twelve had been on their own and alone. And the deputy, he had thought these newcomers might welcome some breaking in to courthouse ways, especially if this done by a courthouse old-timer, and he had hung around for a while and well sort of brought these rookies up to date on the case. Sketched in a portrait of the murderer, this foreign Red rapist, made some telling legal points, like you go and believe everything this new young hot-shot d.a. said, and proceed on to ignore Old Herder, he hadn't won a case in forty years; and from there went on to put the fidgety twelve at their ease, had in fact gone so far as to suggest a verdict—*guilty*—that way they wouldn't have to worry their pretty little heads (*wink* and *leer* toward Miss Steen and that other woman on the panel) about a thing, just pop it out and everybody could get back to his or her (*wink leer*) knitting.

It was after a time of this, a very short time actually, like ten seconds, make it five, that Carrie Steen gave the deputy that old highschool smile, like something carved in ice, and said:

“Go away. And bring some ashtrays.”

Well that imitation of Mother Cap pretty much did the deputy in, so far as having authority over this crew. Treated him like some kind of servant actually. All right. So the jury considered the jury room their palace, bailiffs footmen, the deputy thought beyond these confines he might have a few things done right, that is, his way. Well you would have thought the twelve headstrong know-it-alls might listen to some advice. But no, they sat where they wanted to in the jury box, chose some screwball science teacher their foreman instead of Mr. Haygood, a known leader in the community, and, and this probably the telling blow, when the deputy had thought to put a little military bearing in their comings and goings, from courthouse to Loren's Cafe or the City Hotel—what with the war coming on, why not have them march along in single file, all in step, no talking in the ranks—why in the world then did they go and stroll along in a bunch with some straggling back alone, gossiping and joking and chatting, calling out howdies to friends in the street, and in every other way you could think of acting more like schoolchildren let out on summer vacation, than twelve attendants to the

state's solemn legal wrath. They whom the state had set loose to strike down this infiltrating murderous foreign spy and see him made dead and the state and her powers once more served.

But that wasn't the worst of it, not the half of it, errand boy to a gang of overgrown spoiled brats did not begin to match the insult and injury rained down on the deputy's head. He had heard it that first day on bailiff duty. One of the courthouse codgers loitering around the new automatic soda pop box.

"Well this oughta keep him outta Hat's hair for a week."

And so that prophecy had come to be and was known as truth. And it got worse as the week aged, Deputy Cap trapped inside the courthouse, Loren's Cafe and the hotel (they even made him check into a room and sleep there, when he thought he might be out in his squaddie doing overtime patrolling), while out there, outside, in the real world, what with the rain and the rising waters, and the power outages and the ever-present threat of looting, burglaries and other crimes that followed upon natural disasters, there as Monday wasted into Tuesday, Tuesday Wednesday, as this pointless, purposeless trial droned on and on, there came word to the imprisoned deputy that as Thursday, Friday and now Saturday came, that near half the town's male population had been appointed deputies, TDY, twenty or so ex-soldiers and the like doing half-ass what a single professional deputy might do professionally, if only he were freed from—well, one of the courthouse cutups put it succinctly:

"They say babysitters are getting fifty cents an hour and run of the ice-box, Cap. But you got to be a girl and at least twelve and no steadies over to study."

And so it came to pass that liberation came to Deputy Cap this dead dull rain black as night Saturday afternoon. Talk about nothing doing at the courthouse. During the trial at least you got to doze away to lawyers going on and on, witnesses lying through their teeth or not remembering their own names, the day's excitement being the judge hammering his desk and crying out "Overruled!" "Sustained!" or "Would somebody get the bailiff's attention!"—and now even that sleepy sideshow was done but not quite yet done. Some juror, probably the woolly head science teacher, holding out, the courtroom stood dark and empty as a summertime school. The courthouse too. But for the jurors and judge cloistered upstairs, the Kraut killer padlocked away and some candlestick protesters out on the front steps, nobody around but the loyal, faithful, *real and true full-time* deputy standing guard over this citadel to law and order and the civilization such conduct breeds. Namely, Deputy Cap felt like the last man left alive on earth,

that black Saturday afternoon that the call came over the sheriff's radio, the call that would set him free.

*Three boys missing! Three boys missing!* came the crackled garbled call and Deputy Cap set face against his enemies and very seriously considered sending himself into action.

OK. But not straight to the front lines. Like—who's to mind the store? Deputy Cap had a look around the darkened courthouse. Nobody. Nothing. Not here on the ground floor anyway. Well there was your gang of commie demonstrators out front, some labor union probably, pointing candles and brandishing umbrellas, some old woman among them howling away, like it was the end of the world and tonight, all that rain, rain and nothing but rain, maybe it was. No, not on his life was Deputy Cap going to face that old woman again, not tonight anyway—that's what Deputy Cap figured, going around all the ground floor offices and opening doors with his skeleton key and having a look around for any subversive material, making an extra special search of the town library and the tax collector, books and taxes being what was bringing the country and its way of government down.

That done, now to search out and find his replacement, probably old Weeb the only one around, and, that done, to go on out and search and hunt down the three lost boys in particular and otherwise generally ensure the populace that the town be in safe hands. Now that was it, maybe he could go out in all this rain and dark and sorrow and do something for the safety of his country, town and courthouse. Like tail this town's one known Commie who wasn't named Carrie Steen, now that would be making sure that the town and the country and courthouse would sleep in peace, not that the courthouse wasn't pretty sleepy already, and so it was that Deputy Cap donned said cap and slicker, grabbed big long flashlight and went out into the dark and rain and sorrow in search of infiltration and foreigners and disloyalty and insubordination.



The doctor was amused. And this on the day gone night he had thought he would not know such. The deputy's injecting his two-bits into the Saturday afternoon discussion—more of a *sheepdip* and *cowpatty* man himself—had been some of it, but really it was later that the deputy had given Aubrey hope for oh something like a laugh before this day this night was done. The deputy, you see, after the philosophical debate had ended, it was then that the deputy had taken it into his head to follow the doctor, to *tail* the arch-conspirator, wherever this evening's pleasures and practices might lead. And

John Aubrey smiled and did not much care if he ever shook his, what? Oh yes, his *shadow* on this day, this week, year and dark time that had known none.

He had not thought to come here. He had in fact thought against it. As he had thought he would not see the Jones family tonight. That he would turn there where the stairs came down from the judge's chambers and go direct out the courthouse rear door, his car was parked there, wasn't it, there in the official lot behind the courthouse, and not see or be seen by the doomed boy's family and their misery. But he had turned toward the front entrance, hadn't he, and had gone out and tended to such misery that was beyond his cure. Then he had gone toward the rear of the building and in passing the sheriff's office found Manfred there, out of his cell, this morning's deputy jailer had forgotten the lock up after breakfast, and after Manfred had gotten the dead radio working again—Manfred's specialty in the army, the *American* army, the young man had made specific—he saw that this to-be-doomed boy was safely locked in his cell. And now, coming from the courthouse's rear looking to the east, he took his car from the lot and there at the street, one arm ran west, one east, he thought he would turn the machine west, toward the better parts of town, where his rounds lay, the hospital, some sort of problem at the highschool, where he lived now, where his wife lay *in extremis*, waiting, waiting for his call, waiting for the pain to be washed away, for his sleep to call—and there at the street he had turned not west, had he, but had gone east, into the east side of town, the gully and Eastertown beyond, as if it were there his calls would be paid.

He left the car back and walked down to the water's edge. The street ran due east from the courthouse, the only hardened street going over the gully and into Eastertown. Here, where he stood, the street was brick, as once had been all the hardened streets about the courthouse square and the town center. Concrete had come with the technique of making such both supple and strong and now, with ever newer techniques, asphalt covered most of the streets out in the newer, better parts of town, as was the black tar being spread over the old concrete, cracked and crumbling, and those streets whose bricks were likewise coming to pieces. This street was one of those, its brick yellow and poorly made and simply old, perhaps the last in town that had not been paved with asphalt. He stood at the water's edge and looked across to Eastertown. There was no bridge to take the yellow street over to Eastertown, but a causeway that took little storm to flood it and now, under this week-long rain, it seemed it would never stop, even that raised roadway had been washed away. He saw the men working there now, laying some temporary track over the gully, some steel structure being devised by these men who had learned this craft during the war and were

perhaps now practicing it, that it might be used in war again. A truck and a great crane on it stood over this work, a floodlight from the crane casting a searing white light over the men and the steel they worked at and the water about them. Now a pair of these men, they were called ceebees during the war, now they made their way from the tangle of steel and water swirling about it and the screaming white light played over them all and made their way up to the doctor at the water's edge.

The two ceebees laughed coming upon the doctor standing in the rain. They had seen so much, these men, they could laugh when they came upon a man standing in the rain. The two ceebees came up laughing.

"She's blowing out, Mr. Aubrey. They say a cold front's coming in from the north. Cold and dry. So we got to hurry and get our little tinkertoy up before it snows." The men laughed.

The doctor looked at his feet. The water that had been lapping at his toes now lapped at yellow brick a foot below them.

The men turned and went away from the water's edge, making back up to the doctor's car and some others, cars and pickups, parked on higher ground.

"You know something, Mr. Aubrey. Something ought to be done. About building a permanent bridge over the gully. Make Eastertown a real part of this town. Bring what so many of us call *those* people and us together. Don't leave them crouching like beasts over on the other side of the gully and we're over here, crouched behind our walls of privilege like a besieged army. That's what you're thinking tonight, Mr. Aubrey, we know. You don't have to worry, we've known all along. And you know another thing, Mr. Aubrey, or maybe you don't know—but we don't mind you thinking what so many of us call those *bad* thoughts. Crazy notions like Eastertown being tied to us by a bridge, and our lives, them and us, being fastened by other bridges, so many bridges that in time there won't be anything left to bridge over. And then where would the ceebees be? Out of work, I reckon," the men laughed, coming upon Mr. Aubrey standing alone hearing this in the rain. "But maybe that's the kind of work we wouldn't miss all that much. Building bridges when the need for them is gone. You're not the only one who thinks like that, Mr. Aubrey. There are others. Don't ever let the flag-wavers and Bible bashers kid you, Mr. Aubrey. You're not out there all on your own."

The men and the doctor with them had stopped by their cars and trucks parked on the high ground and had turned now to look back to the east and the gully and Eastertown beyond. The work on laying out the temporary military bridge was still going on, but now more men seemed to be leaving that work, for, though it still rained, it did not seem to be raining so hard;

and though you had to stand at the water's edge, with your feet just there and the water pulling back, to see it, the water was pulling back and by dawn you would see the water's drop clear and the bridge they had put across the gully would be used easy and then in a couple days maybe there wouldn't be need for it at all, cars would be splashing through the low creek then, the bridge not much used then, only by those crossing on foot, so many of those who lived in Eastertown having no cars or trucks to wade them over.

The men laughed coming up to their trucks. Now what is this, Mr. Aubrey, standing out in the rain like a lost boy. We know all about that, the lost boy. The boy who'll die tonight, that's you. Could've been. You're remembering that, now standing there in the rain, looking over to Eastertown. How many years ago, we don't know, but it's you, that boy. That night. That night another boy was to die and it could've been you. Oh it so easily could have been. It was there for the taking. Just break a glass, pick up a gun—and it *is* you. That's what you're thinking tonight. Remember. Deputy Cap on your tail. Eastertown being swept away by water. It was another deputy, that one, think they called him Hat, and he was on your tail that night. Following you. Watching. Waiting. To make the pinch. The nab, the grab. And all you had to do was break—but no. You didn't even have to break the glass that night. It wasn't a flood that night, it was a storm. A tornado. Half the town was down. The eastside, Eastertown. All the good folks out west, where it was nice and rich and white and new, they had put in a good word down at the First Church and the lord of calamity and perdition had listened, he heard. But here, your house, the eastside, looking out over the gully where *they* lived—and oh they were so like you, weren't they, but for some pigmentation or look of face here and there. Oh there sprang your hatred that night. To break a glass—no, just reach in and pick up the gun, just there. You saw their hatred that night, it was in their eyes. Eyes white and burning red with their hatred of you, those fine white rich nice folks from the west part of town. Saw you standing there before the glass the storm had broke, standing, looking, reaching down to the gun, just there. And what you saw in their eyes was the hatred you saw looking over the gully, there in Eastertown. Say it. *Think* it then. Remember that. Nigger. White nigger. And you reached down for the gun, a boy was going to die that night, like the Jones boy will die tonight, and Manfred too, and you reached down to take up that murder and they were watching, their hatred of you, and you took your hand back and it was bare. And you turned and walked away into another life and after all these how many years who knows, now you've come back. To think. To remember. A boy will die

tonight. A lost boy. A bad boy. A boy who broke the glass and reached in his hand and killed. And killed and killed and killed.

The men came laughing up toward the doctor standing in the rain.

“Mister Aubrey what in the world are you doing out here? A night that’d do a duck in. Looking for business?” The men laughed. They had built and fought and fought again across the Pacific. They could laugh at good news too. “Not a thing going on this side. And Doctor Pitts is over yonder taking care of what little there is to do. Anyway, these people are resilient, you might say. Used to it. They see it coming and they know how to step back. Except for a couple houses down in the gully, they’ll be good as new come dawn.” The men laughed. “We did have that one scare though. There was a boy missing. A boy lost. It did not look good. Nobody could find him anywhere. But it turned out,” the men laughed, “that this lost boy, a boy missing, was home in bed sleeping. Of course,” the men laughed, “that home just happened to be one of the houses down by the gully. Got washed downstream maybe two three hundred yards. Got caught up on that bench over there or it would’ve been down in the canyon. Somebody went over and checked it out. Still in bed, that boy, and if you can remember, Mr. Aubrey, how it was to sleep like a kid,” the men laughed, “I’ll be damned if that lost boy still wasn’t asleep. Now you can remember that, how it was to sleep and be found when you were a boy.”

And the men laughed and got the doctor into his dry car and sent him off, rounds to make, calls to pay, always had, probably always would.



If you were the doctor and had come up to your car and you had noticed someone crouched there at its rear (and the doctor had not), you would have thought—what? An eastside tough unscrewing a license plate, popping hubcaps, sugaring the tank, scrawling WASH ME on a dusty window, fixing a flat that’s not flat, tying a string of honeymoon cans to the bumper—whatever you noticed and whatever you thought, whatever this croucher was up to, you would have known Deputy Cap by the shape of him.

Is he small or is he large? Generally the bottom part is large, the top small. Not a triangle but close. Fat feet, duck bottom, proud pot, not bad tits, near no shoulder and army things that had not known an uprolled sleeve beyond first grade, with pencil point head upon which dangles the famous Cap, cinched down tight as she’ll go, and the ears, a storming elephant knows no such jughandles, the flapping trumpets that keep that billed PURINA CHOW from going to the basement.

No, the doctor shall not call out to the laughing men to arrest that lurker on this night that half the town has been made officers of the law, the other half be the huns of disorder, for you see he's just a boy lurking there behind the doctor's car. Stealing hubcaps, scratching WASH ME on a trunk that hasn't seen dust in weeks, sweetening a dead empty tank—he's just a boy lurking there behind a car. That's what the doctor sees if he sees anything and he probably doesn't. A bad boy. A lost boy. He's tailing the doctor tonight—there writing down his license number so he won't forget. Tailing a boy on the street tonight, these boys without houses, he's come out to find them, this man of law, to bring them in, take them home, fling all in cells, see one fry before the night is done. Midnight. Tonight. The doctor has not forgotten, you see, all the other boys, bad boys, sleeping boys, lost boys, all, oh so many are their number, these boys that shall fry and die tonight. Midnight. He's a deputy, see, of waddle wide and narrow mind, and so was the doctor, so were they all, men of law and order mid this chaos of lawlessness and disorder, tonight out to collar these boys, lost boys, bring them home, haul them in.

It wasn't that Deputy Cap didn't have a plan in tailing the doctor tonight, it's that he forgot it. The idea that he would report the doctor's nocturnal ramblings to the Red Watch Society down at Loren's—in one ear and out the other. And why not? No more there to tell of than the busy buzzy flight of a bumblebee. The doctor took off and he went everywhere, all over town. Well he didn't get over to Eastertown, not tonight, the gully flooded, but you had the feeling he wouldn't have minded. If Deputy Cap ever felt that roaming squared blocks could be going in circles, tonight was the night.

Now Deputy Cap was not the sharpest pathfinder in the best of times, say noon, cloudless, mid-June. He could leave the courthouse and be near lost in minutes. No sense of direction (well there was up and there was down but these were of little interest to a squaddie) and a certain lack of concentration. Daydreaming, in a brown study, woolgatherer were but a few of the ways Mother Cap put it. The deputy did have the sides of the courthouse memorized: front and back west and east, jail north, what was left south, so that when he set out he knew where he was setting out from. But the courthouse had a habit of soon disappearing and with that landmark out of the rearview, where Deputy Cap was, well as Mother Cap put it, *your guess is as good as mine*. But the sheriff proved helpful. Like drawing verbal maps that were more confusing than being lost. Like when the squaddie needed gas:

“Just drive around till you see a big red sign that reads GAS. Or drive around till you don't see a big red sign that says GAS.”

But tonight the helpful sheriff was out helping other people, lost drivers and the like, so what with all this dark and cloud and rain, the deputy kept his eye on the doctor's car and where the doctor's car went, he went too. Though the way the doctor had taken to wandering tonight—like he was trying to find his way back from the filling station—the deputy wondered if maybe tonight the doctor himself was lost or maybe he was looking for something that wasn't there—like the filling station, last week it had been right around here.

But if the doctor's head was in the clouds (all he had to do was stand up) so far as knowing where he was going, likewise he took no notice of his tail, particularly there when he stopped and the squaddie near plowed into him. The doctor had stopped, see, and then for awhile the doctor wasn't looking back or forward or any way out of his car, he seemed occupied being bent down over the seat like he was checking things out in his bag, and the deputy took the opportunity to shut down the squaddie lights and hunker down himself, nothing to be seen but the peak of a pointed peak cap. Shortly the doctor raised and opened the door and got out without his hat, the car door still open, rain pouring in through the open door. Preoccupied, the deputy imagined, for the doctor now stood there doing little but looking toward a house, a lighted window in the house's second floor. Then it was that the deputy saw this was not one of the doctor's usual stops—somebody had called and wanted to get well pronto or not long after daybreak anyway—but that this house the doctor was staring out was his own house and that lighted window was the doctor's wife's room, a sickroom, as the doctor's wife had not been feeling too good of late, not up to snuff. The deputy made such identification by the portico there at the side of the house, the side where the driveway ran and there where a side door was to be found so that when it was raining or the sun blazing you could pull your car up under the little roofed porch and be out of the damp and away from the heat. And now the doctor had parked his car on the street and was standing in the rain, looking up at the window as if he didn't have a clue what was going on in that lighted room, when he had never known anything so thoroughly and so well in his life. Knew what the deputy and everybody in town knew and that was that the doctor's wife was not well, *really* not well, and that his wife, being not well, got out of bed only twice a day. Once early to go down to the kitchen and have breakfast coffee with the doctor and then later, late in the day, more often than not late at night, when the doctor came in hot and dusty or cold and freezing or soaked to the bone and he wanted to wash off the dust or warm up the bones or just get wet and then get dry, it was then, when the doctor went in and took a shower, that the wife would get

out of bed and when he was done would get a big dry towel out of the cupboard and go into the bathroom and towel down the doctor, to make him warm as well as dry.

The deputy wasn't sure he should be watching this. The doctor had reached in his car and got his hat and his bag and he had closed the car door and gone over to the drive and gone under the portico and into the house there at the side door and now, leaving his bag and hat and raincoat somewhere downstairs, had come up the stairs and come into his wife's bedroom, just now coming to be seen through the window, and as he was taking off his tie and shirt and shoes and trousers and socks, leaving the rest in place as he was a gentleman, even before his wife, during all this you could see the doctor was talking to his wife. Maybe telling her of the day's work, its adventures, maybe the weather and the like.

If the deputy felt unease watching this man and wife in private (many had spoken of their love, the one for the other, the other for the one), now his mind took a turn and he felt no better. What his mind was telling him was what he had known from the very beginning, that he wasn't Red Watch material. He just didn't have it in him, snooping and prying and watching into other people's lives, Commies or not. And then there was that time when somebody at the Society had said something about someone not there and that thing said was terrible and bad and the deputy had known for a fact that the thing said was not true, the very opposite of the truth, a straight-out lie—it was then that the deputy knew for sure that he didn't care at all about making up things about people and spreading them around as truth. Yes, it was then that the deputy's stomach took a turn, and the deputy hadn't felt well at all and he had told his mind they would both keep quiet and look the other way and they had.

The deputy hunkered down in the seat, where he couldn't see and couldn't be seen, and took to sipping at the brown bottle of beer he had brought along in a brown bag, and some time passed, and then he looked up to see that two men had come out the house side entrance and were framed by the hall light seen through the door not yet shut. One of the men was wearing a big hat and there was the sheriff's car forward, there on the other side of the doctor's car, parked nose to nose to the doctor's car. The sheriff had come into the street from the other direction and hadn't seen the squaddie tucked behind the doctor's sedan.

The deputy relaxed some and in relaxing saw that something was wrong. The two men, the sheriff and the doctor, were coming out of, not going into the house, as he had thought, just waking. Next: the doctor had forgotten his hat again and he hadn't closed the door behind him and he hadn't

turned off the hall light and there was something wrong, maybe even sad, in that. The sheriff went back and reached in and took the doctor's hat from a peg and turned off the hall light and then closed the door behind him and handed the hat to the forgetful doctor and though all that was right, there was something sad in that as well. The two men then went quick not sad down the drive to their cars, jumped in, got engines started, lights on and, after a one-eighty by the sheriff, both cars went off squealing and as soon as you thought you had seen it were gone into the night. Then somewhere in the distance the sheriff's siren went on and then from somewhere else another siren cried out and that was the fire truck, making its call of danger and alarm from far across town.

The deputy started the squaddie and went after the sirens. If the sheriff's car and the doctor's car were nowhere in sight, there were cars everywhere else, all sweeping down the streets and all sweeping in the same direction and the deputy joined them and that once leaping, sinking, jumping and panicked heart, now it pounded. Something was up, something was wrong, and it was their job, all these people in all these cars, to set it right and to get there quick in doing so.

In time Deputy Cap came to where all the cars were going, half the cars in town looked to be here. It could have been the football field, but it wasn't. The sky overhead was lighted all around and all the cars that had come here had gathered in a great oval and had kept their lights on so that they might shine out onto the field—all this like football but it was not. First, the grounds the deputy had come to, they were bare. No structures of any kind anywhere. At the football stadium there would have been the great dark school building lurking, as ever, in the background. And no clubhouse and band hall and cafeteria and other auxiliary buildings scattered here and there. And there were no stadium seats facing each other across the field, home high and wide, visitors short and low, and no running track around the field and no chain-link fence around the field.

Whatever was there was this. Cars parked in a great oval, their headlight shining on its center. Great lights on high stanchions but these were not tall telephone poles they had at the stadium, but cranes and things like that. The lights burned searing bright, but there were not so many of them as at the football field. Then out in the center of the lighted field something was going on and there was a mystery to it. In the center of the oval, there under the lights, a number of vehicles were moving around, only three or four of them and they were boats and what the oval was, that was a body of water. And then a chill came over the deputy and he knew where this was. He had been here before.

The boy was waked in the middle of the night or it seemed like it. It was raining still, it seemed it had ever been, and dark, so dark. He did not remember much at the beginning, only Mother getting him dressed. If the boy thought anything, he thought they were going back to see grandpa, it was a long way to grandpa's and Mother liked to get started early, to see if they could make the journey in a day, save the motel bill. Now Mother put him into his slick raincoat and hat and shoved galoshes on his feet as if he were going to walk to school, but they only went out to the car. Mother wore a rain suit as well, the kind that men wore, with pants, and the knee-high boots that men wore, and she carried an umbrella as well. The boy slept in the car and when he woke a second time he didn't know where he was or what was going on. Mother only said *a boy's gone missing* and got him out of the car and took him to where the man remembering this stood now, though then the boy had not been here before and did not know what this was. Then was the same as now. The cars circled the pit were older and the lights that shone out on the water were not so bright and the boats were smaller then and only one had a motor while now all the boats had motors, the oars were only used now when the men in the boats wanted to stop the boats and stay in one place. People ringed the circle of water, that was the same, and some knelt at the water's edge and clawed at the water and reached into it and wept and cried out and a few went to leap into the water and had to be pulled back, away from the water, and held tight by friends or members of the family, though they usually were not held tight long. Soon they were held only so that they would not fall and when their legs returned to them those who held them and others walked them to a car and put them inside, usually in the back, and those who had brought them here remained. Sometimes they got in the back with the sobbing person and sometimes they squatted on the floorboard with the door open and spoke to the sobbing person in the back. Mother went to the front of the people circled about the water. She had forgotten the boy and did not drag him along as she did in town, scolding his awkward ways, but the boy followed Mother to the water's edge and stood a step behind her, the position Mother preferred he take in town, when Mother came upon an old friend on the street and wanted to have a chat. Now a woman came up to Mother and they commenced to chat, as it happened so often in town, the women speaking low so that the boy couldn't hear or talking of matters the boy did not understand even if he could have heard. Soon, again as in town, the boy grew bored not hearing, not understanding, and he turned to watch the boats crossing back and forth across the middle of the water. While one man rowed, two men at the front or sometimes the back of the boat threw great

objects in the water. Ropes or cables were attached to these great things and these ropes and cables that had been attached to winches that stood high on frames that stood high in the boat, high as the men could reach. And when these things had been thrown into the water the men would wait for a time, their hands on the ropes or cables, and when these went slack, when the object had hit bottom, the men signaled or called to the man at the oars and he would row for a time. Till the men signaled or called out and the man rowing stopped rowing and the men, both working at the winch wheel, winched these things back up to the boat and it was then the boy saw what these things were. They were giant hooks, three-clawed hooks, and the boy thought the men might be fishing, though a fish that might take these hooks into its mouth, it would have to be a whale or big as one. The boy did not know how long he watched the men fish for these great fish as he may have dozed on his feet, he was so warm and dry and cozy in the raincoat and hat that Mother had bought especially for this storm. Asleep or no, he was startled when the great cry rose all around him. This cry came from all the people standing around the water, all crying out as one, so that it seemed to be a single cry coming from a single beast and this beast was crying out in misery and in pain. Now people came to be nearer the water's edge and they stood in front of the boy, so that what he saw could only be seen between and around them. And even when he could see what the men had caught on their hooks and had winched high to the top of the winch frames, even then the boy did not know what it was the men had caught. It looked like a thing made of mud and it had legs and arms, or something like them, and maybe a head, and so the boy thought it was a man who had been caught, as this thing looked like no fish the boy had ever seen. In time the boy thought it was a fish that looked like a man, as the carnival that came through town often had men who looked like chickens and dogs and other animals. To be sure the boy tugged at the sleeve of the woman standing in front of him and said, *Is it a fish?* And the woman turned and looked down at the boy and she put her fist to her mouth and said, *Oh no, my poor dear*, and she put her hand over the boy's eyes and she turned the boy and led him out of the crowd and away from the water, much as now the man remembering turned and went away from the water, now knowing well what the men would snag and pull up from the water.

In turning away from the water the deputy saw these things. Now, as a man, he knew so many of the people circled at the water's edge and he knew the men in the boats, the sheriff had climbed into a boat and was working the winch with another man, and he knew most of those standing away

from the water. One of these was the doctor, his shoulders slumped, eyes to the ground, as if he were very tired or, like the deputy, did not care to see what would be drawn from the water. The woman there kneeling at the water and digging her hands into it as if something had fallen in and she wanted it back, that was the drama coach. And the man there with her, he who held on to her so that she might not fall or plunge into the water, that was her husband, the superintendent. Of the three boys gone missing, one was their son. Another woman knelt there at the water, an older woman, with silver hair, and she probed into the water with a broom stick, though she did so methodically, without the frantic digging of the first woman. This was the grandmother of the second boy missing. Now a long black car had come onto the field, the longest car in town, and had stopped some distance back from the water. This was the banker's car and the banker got out from behind the wheel and a woman got out from the other door. The banker was the third boy's grandfather and the woman was a servant who lived in a cottage on the banker's grounds. The banker had not told his wife of the missing boy. He and the servant would go home later and tell the woman that the boy had been found, that his body had been found. The father of this boy was not here and neither had he been told of his missing son. This father was a juror at the courthouse and the sheriff would not go there till the verdict was in. Only then would he go to the courthouse and tell the man his son had been found, his body had been found.

In opening the car's doors an interior light had come on and the deputy had seen in the back two boys and a woman in white, a nurse, sitting between them. When the doors closed they could no longer be seen. The banker and the servant did not go to the water's edge. Rather a man came away from there and went to them. When the banker and the servant saw the man approaching, they stopped, as if they had not much cared to go nearer the water. The banker spoke to the man and he pointed to his car behind them. Then the man and the servant broke away from the banker and went quickly to the water, leaving the banker alone but for a moment, for a second man soon joined him. This may have been the town's preacher for he knelt before the banker. But the banker did not kneel with the man, he merely put out a hand to the man's shoulders, as if he were consoling him or perhaps it was done merely for support, that he might stand steady on this wet ground. Meanwhile the man who had come from the water's edge had returned there and he knelt by the drama coach there and spoke to her and he pointed back to the banker's car and he and her husband raised the woman from the water. The woman looked back to the dark car and she put her hands to her face and covered her eyes and now she broke

away from the man and ran back toward the car. Likewise the servant went to the old woman with the broom and spoke to her and the old woman rose without assistance but from the broom and she and the servant walked back to the car, the old woman carrying the broom as if it were a rifle or some other weapon, not a broom. The interior light had come on again and the two boys and the nurse could be seen, as could the drama coach and her husband; and now the old woman with the broom and the servant had arrived, and the drama coach and her husband and the old woman saw, for certain, that their boys were alive.

The deputy turned from this and in doing so saw that the banker still stood by the kneeling man, his hand on his shoulder, and now another man joined them, one of the men who had been operating the blazing lights, and the deputy turned away from this as well. He did not have to look to see, for he had been here before and had seen it then. What the men would be bringing up from the water.

■ ■ ■

“Mother? What do you mean *mother*? It’s my brother’s grave. Brother. *Brother!*”

One of the big fatties, maybe he played Dad, he was supposed to be comforting this kid and he had this arm lock on him and wouldn’t let go. And there was the other fatty there on the other side, ready to pounce. They growled like this was conversation, first one, the next then:

“Keep it shut, kid. *Mother*. Look in the book.”

The penlight played over the booklet in the boy’s hand. *Mother*. He had bumped her off too.

*Mother*. *Brother*. *Father*. The whole gang.

Sure. Now he knew. Remembered. Understood. Why they had brought him to this place this dark and rainy night. The grave opening under him.

*Mother*.

*Brother*.

*Father*.

*Boy*.

Now he knew and would break away from the hole, their grave, and he would run out into the dark and rainy night and make his getaway.

That would be the game to play tonight. Killer boy. Killer on the run. Get out the dogs. Track ’im down, boys. Shoot to kill. He’s killed before.

*Mother*.

*Brother*.

*Father*.

He'll kill again. Show him the mercy he showed them. Hunt him down and shoot him like a dawg.

Good game. But for one thing. He had to escape, really escape, first. The flanking fatties were hanging on for dear life. Dear death. That was it. The prison yard. Midnight. Guards standing all around, all stood about like ghosts in their blackhooded capes, flashlights lowered to the ground. Searchlight high in the tower above. Guards patrolling. Searchlight sweeping the yard. Another light there, in the big building above. The warden's office. Warden pacing the floor. Smoke after smoke tossed to the floor, butts burning scars on wax and wood. Look to the clock. Look to the phone. The governor's call. Clemency? Give the kid another chance? He's only twelve, man, maybe ten. Mother. Brother. Father. A triple threat. Give it 'im in the neck, Chief. Stand him over the pit. Turn him now. Phone's ringing. Warden puts his hand out. Take off the blindfold. He wants it like that. Wants to see it coming. The slug, the noose, the axe, the juice, the gas, the needle, the cross, the pyre, the plank, maybe just a stone, a rock, one after another after another.

Yeah, that was it. The night's game. The last game. But you got to escape first. Really escape. And then it happened. All went black.

Not that it hadn't been dark onstage and in the auditorium before it went black. It's that before it went black you mistook dark for black and then when it really went black, you saw, or didn't, that black and dark were not the same thing. Close but not that close. First, the lights in the hall back of the auditorium, there was enough there that you knew something was there at the two doors that let out of the auditorium and into the hall and that was it. A couple gold-brown smudges. And there were some flashlights around. One about twenty rows back in the auditorium, that was the drama coach or her assistant following the drama in a play booklet, seeing the actors got most of it right, the drama coach calling out when someone, not always one of the fatties, didn't act something right. A second flashlight up in the balcony: the lighting crew keeping up with their board of switches and knobs and making sure the cigaret lighters and beer openers they had smuggled into the balcony didn't get dropped and kicked off in the dark. And there was a third flashlight in the wings, the prompter, she never got a part, cueing the actors when they needed it. And that was probably less often than you would imagine, as tonight the players who wanted their play booklets, and that everybody but the two really good girls, got to tuck them in their pockets or gowns or whatever and make ready reference.

Now these were all regular flashlights, something you'd have for an emergency, like tonight when the electricity went out all over town, as it had just

done; but there were other sorts, smaller lights, penlights, and there were many of these and all onstage. The New York sparky who had married Girl Steen and had dropped into town on his way to Hollywood, had showed the drama coach this trick. How to fix plastic attachments over the penlights so that when held upright before a stage mourner's face they looked like candles. This guy who really knew what he was doing, so long as it had something to do with juice, had fixed the penlight switches so that but a touch and the light flickered very much like candle in the breeze.

And there was a small bright white spot in the balcony, used only when Jay, tonight the dead young mother's ghost, would come forward to make a speech. This was much needed, as in this production there weren't any footlights, just the dark. But when the dark went black you noticed there had been another light there onstage, one so subtle you only saw it now that it was gone. This again the work of the smart sparky, no telling how many years, how many productions he had known on Broadway, and there behind a drop curtain, there stage left, just back of the stage grave, where the funeral would be played, the sparky had set up a bank of fluorescent lights and these were of very low wattage, so dim you really couldn't use them for anything but for stage effects such as this. The sparky had gone on to take a spray can of silver paint to the long tubes and had done such a job of this that when you set the lights up in tiers there behind the drop curtain all you saw was the faintest glow and you wouldn't have seen even that unless you were another lighting nut. What the ordinary spectator saw were the black outlines of the mourning players there at the stage graveside. And now even this, the most delicate of lights, was gone and you saw it now that it was.

But then all these lights, the stage flashlights' narrow beams, the hooded penlights as candles, the sparkies' lights in the balcony, the drama coach's cueing light, none, not one of these would be bright or quick enough to spot anything small and greasy and terrified of not remembering his lines and so it was, with nobody being able to see beyond his nose anywhere in the vast hangar of the auditorium, that and maybe there being few to none around who really cared if they escaped or not, it was then that the boys did just that. Escaped. With the coming of the black.

Van, the only kid of the three allowed a stage candle, prised the plastic cap off the penlight and the boys made their way up the aisles to see what game could be conjured up in the dark and, but for fellow hoodlums, empty school. They stopped there at the foot of the north stairs, breathing, Red and Tiny atremble. Now Van held the pencil-beam light under his face, the shadows cast upwards, he could have been witch, witch doctor, wizard, warlock, werewolf, slathering, drooling, leering Big Bad Wolf come to gobble

up a couple knee-knocking Little Red Riding Hoods. The light went off, the face disappeared, and from the black a cackling howl grew.

“*Nyahababanyanyahababa!*” from the cackler, straight from that sewer phantom who haunted the opera upstairs, there at the Ritz couple weeks back, now particularly effective as this black school stood more sewery than any operatic phantom had ever seen.

The voice dropped to a purr, the purr sent knee-knockers longing for cackle’s return, such was its evil. “Now we know what the game will be,” purred the leader. “The Return to the Scene of the Crime. Like in that trial this week. Manfred plugs honeypot. You put the twelve little judges on a big yellow bus and tail it on over to Hub City, to the bus station cafe, there where the plugging happened. The cops had the cafe closed that morning, cleared for the return to the scene of the crime. There the stool where Manfred sat. There the counter. There on the other side the dying waitress stood. Would be soon. All twelve went and looked at the stool. The kid d.a., he said they could sit there to get the feel of how the plugging went. But nobody sits. Nobody but the woman, the young one. There she sat, *there*, right at the scene of the crime and she raised her pointy finger and she reached it out and *blooey*, the dying sweetie dropped dead. And little Manfred, he dropped too, fainted dead away, he knew what had happened, see, he knew he had done it, see. That happens when you return to the scene of the crime. The truth comes out. Let’s ride, vigilantes!”

And the penlight went on and the quakers and the shiverers went quickly after their leader as he went up the north stairs. *The roof! The roof! They were making for the roof!* And if the loosey goosey kid didn’t know why, the skinny pencilhead did. *Dud’s Death*. That’s the crime that had happened there and now, tonight, on this darkest of nights, not a light in town, not that you could see from here, that was the scene of it and they were returning to it, there, their henchleader promised, they were to do it again, over and over again. One boy pushing, one boy falling.

The boys came up to the roof through the trap door there at the back of the balcony, where you only had to reach up and touch the auditorium ceiling. All up and out into the night, they crouched in the small cabin there on the roof, where the ladder from the trap door had taken them, where they had cowered and quaked the night the brother and his fiendish friends had been below, searching for them in the dark. Safe here till the one boy happened to remember the only play line he had ever remembered and ever would and he had bawled it out.

But tonight elephant gut, that boy, had joined chicken heart, the other one, in trembling and moaning, and now, these two remembering the crime

they had come to replay, now the one boy simply bellowed, while the second could only cry, so frightened he could not even cry out, not for help, not for anything.

So it was that at length the leading boy had to drag the two tremblers and quakers across the roof, over to the ledge, the scene of the crime. But when he got them there something came over the boy, the real boy playing such game. Something went bad. There was the ledge the brother had gone off and there was the tall thin tree he had grabbed at and missed and here was the spot, the exact place the killer, the kid who had only wanted to save the falling boy had stood. Where he had stood and reached out and his brother was there and then he was not. And now that Van had come back here he knew there would never be another Dud, not ever again, and he knew there would never be another kid brother, the killer, they said, and he had only been trying to save. And Van knew that he did not want to be here, he knew what had happened then and he knew what would happen again and he let go of the play-like and he turned and he ran away from that place and his two little friends were only too pleased to follow.

Back down through the dark dark building, flashlight beams here and there, all in the distance, and that was a game. There had been that good one, that teenager at the Ritz last year, getting himself locked inside the school one night and a gorilla had escaped from the zoo and had come over to break into the school and chase the teenager around and jump out of closets at him. But then one of the real-life drugstore fatties jumped out from behind a stairwell and that was enough gorilla for the trio and the gang gathered together at the hideout, a first-grade room down near the south door, and considered the action.

Their leader presented yet another game, with this logic: "Look at it this way. Dud's Death—sure, but for this one hang-up. Dud's not dead, see. Dud's alive and he's only asleeping and we got to get out to the graveyard and dig him up and set him free. Maybe give him some mouth-to-mouth if it's not all caked over with dirt and coily worms and gaggy maggots too."

One howled. He moaned. While the second took up a wastepaper basket and spoke into it, more or less.

So Digging Up Dud would never work out, though a fine game it would have been. No, after a verse of worms crawl in, worms crawl out, the worms play pinochle on your snout,—with some vivid Ritz recollection of the walking dead, mummies from Egypt, zombies too, it was up and out into the rain. To search out who would die tonight, who would be saved and live. That game.

But nothing worked, not till there at the very end. Everything come up with, they all flopped. Climb up the water tower and toss somebody off—not one of the three had ever got higher than rung two. They could go down to the gully and swim out to a house floating by, two out of three making it, and save the boy who was still sleeping in his bed, it could've been Tiny, the way this kid slept. But when they got down to the gully one of the emergency men said there had been a real boy out floating off in a real house and the real saving had already been done. The one boy's rifle had possibilities. Take it out and forget it was loaded and someone would not be coming back. But then the rifle had been confiscated. Hidden till Christmas, till you got to twenty-one, and they needed a game for now. Tonight.

It went the same with all the other games. Manfred, break him out of his cell and make for the hideout and the gun battle during the breakout, one of the gang would be gunned down and you'd light him a last cigaret and be on your way. Good but flawed. See, Manfred simply did not want to be broke out, not out of the jail or anywhere. That morning or two that the deputy had forgot to lock Manfred's barred door, the boy man had only gone so far as the sheriff's office to get the big two-way short wave working right and then had strolled right back to his cell and closed the door.

Now rose another courthouse possibility. There was the vigil, the country family that the cab killer belonged to, they were out on the courthouse front steps, with candles and umbrellas and raincoats and old country galoshes and that one camp chair for granny—they could join that. But tonight nothing worked out. One of the family, that one girl who had gone off downstate and made herself a lawyer, she eyed these three boys with great care and interest and her older brothers, long and lean and lanky farmhands, they never said much, now they didn't say anything, just came and made a circle around the boys and that game was over and it hadn't even started, they hadn't even got there.

After that the games to play, what would they play, grew poor. Tied to the railroad tracks? Years since a train had come through town. Steal a car—more of the same. Not even all three at work could they drive a car, probably couldn't even get the thing started—a stumbling block. And the penultimate game, the game as old as electricity, that would not be played, not tonight. There was no electricity, see, not anywhere in town, and breaking street lights, no point in it you didn't have the pop and fireworks sizzle. Ringing doorbells and making a run for it, the same—no juice and knocking just didn't get it. And there wouldn't be any phones either, would there?

No phoning up that shy country kid and doing that cheerleader voice, telling this blushing hick if he had a dress suit he could take her to the prom come Saturday night. However many strikes that was, they were out.

And the last game, a real game, that game was too real, for a game. Hooking up with Hub and Abernathy and their gang, a real gang, and getting sworn in as members and then, with Hub and Abernathy taking over all outlaw activities at midnight tonight, the hour their former mentor and leader would fry and die, then they would become real hoodlums and criminals. And killers too. With Hub and Abernathy in charge they would be killing cabbies and assorted others and it wouldn't be the game you played walking home from the Ritz. There you made a pistol with hand and pointy finger and you aimed and *blooey* your buddy would hit the deck and after faking dead a little—but no, if you got hooked up with Hub and Abernathy tonight, whoever you gunned down now, come midnight, none of these floppers would be getting up and walking away. They would be down and dead forever and not even Van, no, not one of the boys wanted to play out that game.

It was all over then. No game tonight. Time to haul it down and pack it in. Time to go home. But then it was then that Van remembered, that he understood the night was saved, that there would be a game, a good game, the best game the boys had ever played. Home. They were going home. That was the game they would play. The last game. The last and best they would ever play together.

Home. His real home, his true home, now he remembered. Water was his home, when it was summer and there was water there in the pool at the club and there was water in the springs and its pools farther down the canyon and there was water in the lake at the resort his grandfather went off to the hottest month of the year and water in the rushing creeks far up in the mountains, where his father went to fish, and that one time there had been the sea and all the family had gathered in a fine old hotel on the beach and all he had to do was walk out the front entrance and there lay a thick bank of sand and beyond it, all the water there was in the world, all the water he would ever need.

He would swim these months it was warm and there was water and he was freed to do nothing but swim. This after he had done his morning chores, sometimes it would be the predawn paper route, sometimes he would take an important key and go down to his grandfather's bank and sweep up and empty wastepaper baskets and there was always his grandfather's grand oak desk, the old man liked it very much when he came in and found the desk dusted and waxed and polished. He thought he liked the water at the club

best. It was only slightly warmed there on the surface and there at the bottom, there at its deepest, there under the high board, there where the sun never reached, there it was always cool, very cool, and the shadows deep underwater lay blue so blue you could hide in them and your friends, searching for you above, had no idea where you had gone. He could stay underwater so long, could hold his breath, he didn't know, for such a long time, minute after minute, sometimes it felt like hours, sometimes it felt like he could stay underwater forever. Sometimes he was a seal and he would flop and frolic on the surface and sometimes it was a great swordfish and he had taken a fisherman's bait and he leapt into the air, belly to the sun, and would fall only to leap again, fighting the line. And at times he became a great whale and he would swim on his back and spout like a whale and dive and come up and spout again. And then there were times he turned a fighting fish. Sometimes a shark, sometimes a hooded ray, sometimes a fat albacore, and then there was a fish that lived so deep in the sea that he had never seen sun and had no eyes to see it or anything, and it was then that he knew he could stay underwater forever and never see anything or anyone there in the dark. That was the home he made for now. Water, there in the water.

The two others liked this game, they were crazy about it. They had never heard such a good idea in their lives. Home. Warm. Dry. Bath. Jammies. Something hot and tasty to eat. And to bed, the sheets warm and thick and smooth as custard, and to sleep and if there were to be dreams, then they would be sweet.

And Van let them think so. That that was the home they were making for, Red beating his palms together, Tiny trying a hop, skip and jump, giving it a try. It would get them there, going to Van's home, and there they could escape and go on to their own warm and dry homes, homes found within houses, and leave Van behind, for Van was going down into his home alone and he would be staying there forever and ever, never to come up to air to breathe and never the sun and the stars to see anymore.

The caliche pit. You usually didn't swim there in the summer. The summers were usually dry and if it did rain, these storms were brief and the pit never filled—as it had filled and filled to the brim tonight—and that water was soon absorbed by the parched earth of the pit. Still, during the dry summers some kids, waterlogged from the pool at the club or the new city pool just north of town, would go down into the dry pit and play there and Van was often one of these, after an afternoon at one of the two pools.

People used the pit as a dump. Not for garbage, or not much of it, but for things that were old or no longer worked or were worked out or simply

things that people didn't care if they ever saw again. It was here that the idea of a home, a true home, took seed in Van's mind, though nothing would flower till this cold and rainy black night. Furniture, there was all sorts of that. Chairs and sofas, leaking springs and stuffing, missing legs and arms; mattresses that were nothing but the springs, and bedsteads and frames that swayed or had collapsed like an old horse; tables that never had four legs, one always lost, and the sun and rain had stripped all varnish or paint as well; lamps, nothing but the base, the shade a couple wire circles, the cloth rotted and blown away; and refrigerators and old ice boxes, what you used before the refrigerator came, and some old folks and some out in the country still did; and stoves too, usually old cast-iron things gone to rust and ruin, and some of the newer white jobs that had failed somewhere; old washing machines, three number 2 tubs and a wringer, you still didn't want to catch a finger in that; a flotilla of bathtubs, they were beached everywhere, something usually cracked or caved in, their water-holding days done. And there too old cars, once had been, you know these by a steering wheel, maybe a running wheel still attached to its axle; bicycles, tricycles, wagons, scooters, some a grown man or woman had known as boy or girl years back; old tires collected down at one end, car, truck, bike, tractor, wagon, all blown out and busted; one old motorcycle, its bulbous tank shined silver, maybe somebody came and shined it, all other metals raw and rusted; and finally an old house, or maybe it was a shack or maybe it had been a garage, collapsed flat, you could walk out on the roof and try to make the weathercock turn, its days of telling how the wind blew were done.

Now all was water and the water made it home and he would go there now and they all would be there tonight. His father had finished his duties at the courthouse and he sat in an easy chair and smoked a cigar and smiled at the boy's wit and then went back to his newspaper, maybe he was working the crossword, he had always liked that; and Olive would be home from the mountains, back from the sanitarium or maybe it had been waiting tables, and she would be talking on the phone and it was all gossip and good and naughty stories and she would laugh and beat a hand against knee and tell the boy to go away, he wasn't to listen to this; and there old Dud would be, and this the best of all, see, he hadn't really died that night, he had caught hold of the tree just there, it was so close, or maybe he hadn't even fallen at all, maybe his kid brother had reached out and grabbed him and pulled him to safety, and Dud was there as usual and as usual he stood there in front of a mirror combing his hair or picking at a spot on his face or maybe he would be sitting at his desk and he would be writing something there, he would be writing in his diary, of all the games they had played there at home.

Yes, that was the home he would go to now and he would swim down to his father and his mother and his brother and they would be so glad to see him and they wanted someone to save them and he was the only one who knew how. It wasn't that they didn't like their new home, they liked it very much, but there was work and school and gardening and other things to do away from home and the boy would take hold of them and swimming mightily he would take them to the surface and they would be saved, one by one. His father first because he didn't know how to swim, had never learned as a boy. Then Olive next, if you could get her off the phone. And Dud last but not least, not at all, see, Dud was a powerful swimmer, faster even than the boy, and now all you really had to do was get his attention, get him away from looking at himself in the mirror, and the two of them would swim up to the surface together and everybody there would be so glad to see them and some would say the boy saved Dud and some that Dud had saved his kid brother and the boys would smile and say they had saved each other. It was what brothers did, take care of each other and be sure the other was all right.

Tonight he had no problem getting his two friends to come to his new home. The pit was not that far from the school, where they started out, and as it was in the general direction of their homes found in houses, so warm and dry and cheery in there, the two others, when the boy spoke of going home, they thought they were going there to be warm and dry and happy. No, it was not till there at the very end that the two others understood that they were not going home at all. It was not till they had crossed the empty field and come upon the pit and had seen it filled with water that they knew this was not home and that this was not right, that this was wrong. And even then, standing at the water's edge, they did not understand their leader's talk of home, that his family was waiting for him there. And now as Van, and he didn't even take off his shoes, he didn't even strip, as Van made one of his good dives into the water, near as good as he made from the board at the pool, with Van sliding like a fish into the water and disappearing, going to the bottom as he always went to the bottom of the pool, still they did not understand what was happening. And they waited and they waited and they waited, for they knew well how long Van could stay under at the pool and they waited and waited for Van to come up. But he wouldn't come up. Not now, not tonight, not from this pit he called his home. And one of the boys called out their friend's name and the other reached an arm into the water and he cried out the boy's name as well, but there came no answer from across the water and no boy could be touched and got hold of and pulled from the water. And the boys were crying now

and they were running, running as hard as they had ever run, and as they ran they went to house after house, all dark and empty, and they would run on to the next crying out,

*help help a boy's gone under and he won't come up! oh please please come and help! someone anyone! please help! oh he won't come up!*

■ ■ ■

The man sat at the table by the window and drew a sheet of paper to him. The man sat in the dark. The electricity had been returned all over town and still the man did not turn on a light. The storm had passed, passed so quick you could not believe it had ever been, and with the storm's passing all in town had looked up amazed. Stars and a blazing moon stood overhead, the moon full and so bright that the man could sit by the window and see what he would write or what he would only think to write by moonlight.

*TO:* Nobody.

*FROM:* No one.

*CONCERNING:* Nothing.

No, it concerns something. It concerns many things.

I am victor. There is that. It was tougher, much tougher than I ever imagined. I thought I could waltz in the first day and all would be over. Only to look about me mid-week and see all was lost. Odd to feel such, as at no time during the week did we slip below 11-1. Oh we were 10-2 once but that only lasted a quarterhour or so. When the couple flipfopped. A couple. I did not know this in the beginning, that they were a couple, the man and the woman, but in time the hub city outsider knew what all in town knew. A couple. And so when she held out for *innocent*, he hung in there with *guilty*. And when she switched, he switched. Ah yes. A couple indeed. Don't know what made him give in and come march in line with the eleven, maybe we'll never know. There was another trial tonight, maybe that was it. Oh not a trial but a trial's conclusion. At last the execution of the punishment a trial had ordered. A boy, a local boy, was to die tonight—or maybe it should be *is*, for I fear the reprieve the boy's family has been calling for will not come. That the call from the governor will never come. Or maybe the boy is already gone. The boy was scheduled to die at midnight and I do not know the time. It could be that now, tomorrow, the day the boy will never know. In any case, as things wound down tonight, 11-1, it did occur that the *one* might be waiting for news of the other trial, its everlasting conclusion or the postponement of the execution or perhaps even the alteration of that conclusion. From *death* to *life*—and then the *one* would change *innocent* to *guilty* and, 12-0, we could all go home. But that is surmise and

shaky surmise at that. To my knowledge no word had come from downstate when the hold-out changed his tune. He came over and she stayed put and we have won our *guilty* and feel in our victory we have lost.

If Manfred shall die, then it is a dead woman who shall see him killed. The voice of a dead woman. A dead woman speaking a language she did not know. A machine speaking the woman's words. The most bizarre conclusion to a murder trial I have ever known or heard tell or read of. Manfred wanted to make confession of a crime he had yet to commit. He would kill the girl and then kill himself. A suicide pact with murder. What put this idea in his head was never made clear. Something the girl had written him during the summer, something she had said before leaving or upon returning. No, wrong. Whatever the girl had said had nothing to do with Manfred killing her and then himself. Maybe wrong again. *I'm dying for one of your kisses*—maybe something like that, something out of a pop song. I don't know. No one does, nor most probably ever will. Next Manfred got it into his busy head to leave a record of his and his beloved's departure. An explanation of their sad fate, put some poetry into this tragic tale, along those lines. By this time Manfred was so misery wracked he could not write English or at least not legibly, nor could he speak much to be understood but by those who had a burning desire to understand and there were few, if any, of these around. He would confess in German then. Manfred was by now banned by, or certainly not welcome at, the college German department. He had failed his Ph.D. orals earlier in the year. And his teaching first-year German had so deteriorated that even beginning German students began to protest and he was relieved of that post and essentially asked not to come back. The department would not even let him use one of its tape recorders, or his call asking that favor was never returned, so he turned to an ad in the college newspaper. A woman advertising dictation services—from beginning to polished transcript—who claimed most *European languages available*. Well English turned out to be the only European language the woman knew, but she was, she told Manfred, so adept at phonetic transcription she would have no problem with Manfred's German, she had done German before. The woman proved true to her word. Manfred came to her office in her home, said what he had to say in German, the woman made a phonetic transcript of this, then recorded this on tape and then she died. This, all this, the recording, the woman's death, occurred only days before Manfred shot his beloved and by then, it seems, he had forgotten about the tape. It was only happenstance that brought the tape to us. The woman's brothers, while clearing up her paperwork and generally ordering things, this shortly after the funeral, had come

upon both phonetic transcript and the woman's tape of it. Manfred had paid the woman in advance and there was his check for it and his address on the check and the brothers shipped transcript and tape off to Manfred, these arriving at Manfred's apartment only a day or so after Manfred's arrest. Here we got lucky. Our investigators had already been through Manfred's papers, taking whatever seemed necessary to their investigation, and Manfred's roommate, not exactly enamored of having his place turned upside down and wanting all of Manfred out of his life, when tape and transcript arrived he called Sgt. Maston and this was where we got really lucky. Sgt. Maston had learned German during the war (POW) and though he could make nothing of the phonetic transcript, when he rolled the woman's tape he knew we had come upon a gold mine. A confession. Well a gold mine that threatened to play out before the first pick hit rock. Even after consulting a German native at the college, and he had transcribed both script and tape into both English and German and everything we needed was there, even then I did not think these documents would be admissible in court—and still don't. But things were looking so tough that Friday that I arranged that we retake the stand—we had not in fact rested our case, but even that might have been found objectionable by a competent defense atty—and over came the German professor with his English and German translations of the woman's tape. And then a stroke of genius came to this atty, the sort that only fools can know. I did not put the German professor on the stand, not right away. Rather I put the dead woman on the stand. I played her tape in the language she had never known. Well this performance had a power this attorney has never before witnessed. The woman's ghostly voice spoke out in the tongue she did not know and then the German professor came to testify and he spoke in the tongue he did know, following the woman's phonetic script, and next he delivered his own translation in English. And old Herder sat there on his hands and I could not believe his silence, how lucky could the Digger be this time, and there near the end Manfred took to babbling away in German and he came away from the defense table and took the witness chair and the judge, looking hard at silent Herder, probably figuring these dramatics would all be appealed anyway, let Manfred be sworn in, but when Manfred started to testify in his native German, the judge stopped that. But then he did allow the German professor to translate when Manfred lapsed into German, when he was breaking down, he would go back to his native tongue, but then there was no translation needed of this and it was during these breakdowns that we all saw that Manfred was doomed, his goose cooked.

The appeal. Can't remember if I mentioned speaking to old Herder about it—no, I did not. But if I did not say outright I would resign

from the office and take up private practice and that this appeal would be my first case for the defense—if I did not say as much I thought it hard enough that it may very well come to pass. That one day I indeed may become the counsel for the defense. At any rate, Herder and I did speak of the practice of law in this town and in so doing Herder came near offering me a partnership and I did smile; I need Herder as partner as I need another—but no. Perhaps I could use another hole somewhere, perhaps I do need a partner who knows this town. Yes, that could be it. It certainly could.

And now in thinking this out it shall be I who approaches him. Actually doing it. Resigning, moving home, putting up a shingle. Maybe even finally facing myself and my marriage. Yes, maybe that will be it. Who knows, may even run for district judge in time. The current judge, good man, good judge, Judge Hale is said to be considering retirement soon, health problems, the ticker. And to become a judge, that was my idea upon entering law school, wasn't it, but such notions got lost in the tangle of cash and ambition, didn't they? Ah but these things are for another time. The future. Not now, not for tonight. Tonight there are other things on the mind. In the mind.

This town has known a tragedy tonight. No. We have known three or shall. Manfred also may die in time, considering the state of the state, who knows; the Jones boy, the cab killer, one of the cabbies a scion, for sure, perhaps he is gone now, but if not now, soon; and a small boy drowned, I think I maybe have mentioned him, the boy who came to the trial, the jury foreman's son.

You knew something was wrong, something had happened, but had no idea what. The holdout, the jury foreman, had come over to *guilty* and we were settled 12-0. If this good man had not wanted two boys to die tonight, now he would see three. The courtroom lights were on full and this was harsh after the time of dark. The town's electricity had gone out and now it had been returned, and all stood garish as the jury filed in. There came a brief consultation with Judge Hale and, though nothing was said of course, we knew we had our man and that Herder had lost his, it was there in the judge, and after those few words Herder and I returned to our chairs. I do not think I looked at Manfred now. No, I did not. Nor did I look at the jury. I looked forward, I looked at the judge, at nothing. It was now that the sheriff came in, still in his weather gear and that was unusual, for all such was usually left in the closet by the rear door. The judge saw this as well and he waited as the sheriff came to him. The sheriff spoke briefly to the judge and the judge replied and the sheriff stood off to one side. He had not looked toward the jury during this time, nor had the judge. Now the judge addressed the jury and we all faced them as well. The man who had finally come to *guilty* sat in chair one, first

row, far left seat. The woman had taken chair twelve, back row, far right. Have I told what the man looked like? Small to medium build, dark complexion and hair, mustached and hornrim glasses, tweed jacket and tie—the professor. He looked at the judge and nothing else as the judge gave final instructions to the jury. His face showed nothing but, perhaps, a trace of weariness. The woman sat with her head down, you could not see her face, but it had been before tonight a handsome face, pretty but bearing such intelligence and spirit that this observer, at least, could not have called it that, merely pretty.

To move quickly now. The foreman rose and read the verdict, *guilty*, and what, an exhalation of breath came from the crowd, a massed sigh, but no, not that at all. Something deeper, sadder, something lost, something had been lost, and all knew so. Herder turned and embraced Manfred and Manfred embraced Herder. Perhaps Manfred, perhaps both were weeping, I do not know. The judge told the foreman, still standing, he could be seated and went on to conclude the court's business, date of sentencing and so on, and that done, he thanked the jury and they were dismissed. Neither the man nor the woman moved. By the movement of the woman's shoulders she was weeping and the man removed his glasses and put fingers to his eyes and did not open them till the glasses were back in place. Now the sheriff returned and spoke to the judge and the judge said nothing, he turned and looked over toward the jury, then turned away, now an exhausted and aged man. The sheriff crossed the room and went to the jury foreman and took him away from the jury box and led him to a place behind the box and there spoke to the man, telling him there had been an accident, his son was dead. Something was wrong, something had happened, the two men speaking there in the corner, but we did not know that. Attention turned to the crowd behind me. The deputy, who had acted as bailiff during the week, he had come among these townfolk and he spoke to them as he went along and as he did, those who had heard his words, their cries of melancholy came toward the front of the court.

*A boy has died tonight. Doc Bavender's boy has died tonight. Drowned. Drowned out at the old pit.*

That word now spread throughout the courtroom and the sheriff was moving the foreman through those gathered around, moving these people back, and they were out the door and gone, many, many of the people gathered here following them. Left back: this observer, the judge, the court clerk, Manfred and Herder, neither of whom, it seemed, had understood the sudden rush to be off and away from them, and a few members of the jury had stayed back, all now standing, now speaking of the tragedy, now moving away. All but for the young woman and she

remained seated. She had raised her head and she looked at Manfred and Herder and she looked at me and she looked at the judge. Her face—I cannot explain what was there. It was not hard, it was not soft. Nor angry, sad or sorry. Blank. Not even that. She no longer wept, though her face showed signs of her having wept, there was nothing there beyond that. The deputy had come and handcuffed Manfred and he called out to the judge, could he shut down the courtroom lights, and the judge lifted a hand and in taking the prisoner out of the courtroom the deputy hit the switches and all lights went out and we were left in the dark.

No, not entirely in the dark. Sometime before, the rain and the storm had passed and now moonlight, a searing white light, fell through the windows. Some said the clearing had come so quick, it had been like a crack of lightning, a blast of thunder. Dark and rain one moment, next the open sky and stars all about and an angry moon standing over us all. It was by this light I saw that the judge had risen to return to his chambers, his clerks already gone; that Herder had packed up as well and was coming toward me, that we might leave the building together; and that the young woman still sat in her chair, chair twelve, face in dark shadows, as the moonlight fell full on her back.

It was then that I gathered my papers and things and left that place. Time, as old Herder said, time to go home. Yes. Now that this is done and the pen laid aside and what has been written, if anything has, has been put with the other papers, it is time to leave now, time to go away. Yes, that would be it. Time to go home.

**D**onnie Wind woke. But where. A woman in the bed. But who. Donnie Wind closed his eyes. Here. Home. Her. High school Harriet. The bitch who had sneered at Donnie Wind in highschool and would never sneer again. Or, if she had not exactly left off the sneering now, not entirely, then she would be leaving it off pretty soon. Like when Donnie Wind hit the big time. If ever.

No, not fair. Not entirely. Carrie Steen had not sneered at him *always*, only about  $7\frac{5}{8}$  of the time. But then Donnie Wind had little use for fairness this morning. Little use for the stuff since coming here, home, what two, three days ago, it seemed like centuries, this half week back home. Here. Why had he left sunny California, golden L.A., dazzling Hollywood, the beaches, the hills and canyons, the villas and their pools, the stars, the movies and their star-studded, floodlit openings at the Chinese, and the award, the big one, the Oscar, and moonstruck waltzes on the top of some big tall building, the waltz supplied by some big wide band—why had Donnie Wind left all that, that was the question Donnie Wind had posed himself the last three four days. Why in the world had he come back here, his miserable, lost, unknown, little, above all small and not to forget wretched hometown?

Donnie Wind had not a clue. Well not true, not entirely. All those things Donnie Wind had left to come home, he hadn't exactly left all of them. Only some. Like the Oscars and the openings at the Chinese—it could be fairly said that Donnie Wind had been there but like standing out on the sidewalk in front of these celebrations with maybe couple hundred other gawkers, this was as close as he ever got to the movies. To being big in the movies. Sure Donnie Wind had been to the beaches and had driven up the canyons and into the hills and from there had looked down into the villas, their pools sparkling aquamarine in the groves below, and he had been to the Hollywood parties, a lot of these, well some, not too big, not so small, but when Donnie Wind looked truth in the face, as he did this exceedingly hungover morning, when he had attended such functions and hung out in

such places, when a real Hollywood star happened to pop in for a minute, somebody usually handed him a tray of canapés and keep it off the carpet.

So, if Donnie Wind was leaving these places and events, it could be said he was leaving places he had never been. But not true, again not entirely. Donnie Wind was in truth leaving the movies for Donnie Wind was in fact in the movies. OK, not as a star. But he had been before camera and had got on the screen, if briefly, and that was what counted. Getting up in that dazzling square in that dark and generally near empty hall. You could always move up from there. It had happened before—all the stars said it had happened to them—and what had happened before could always happen again. Maybe.

The movies Donnie Wind had been in? These were called B-pictures and things worse than that. And a lot of the time these pictures were awful and a lot of time were worse than that. But then these pictures were being shot all over Hollywood—two to three weeks a shoot, a month for a masterpiece—and they were being screened all over the country. This because the theatres got the things near free and could fill in the second spot on a double feature and, if no riots occurred during the screening and people did not storm the box office demanding their money back, double your profits. There were all sorts of these pictures, *genre cinema*, some little French guy at a party one night called them and Donnie Wind did not much care to think about it, as most everything the French guy said that night sounded pretty bad. *Westerns*, of course, a thundering herd of westerns; lot of *haunted house flicks*, as old creaky houses abounded and you didn't have to build a set or even paint them and you shot at night and saved on the electric bill and most of these haunted house directors and actors simply liked it dark; *vampires* were big and *all sorts of other monsters* Donnie Wind didn't much care to think about, as the one monster pic he had ever auditioned for, the monster had been a big blob of something, bubblegum came to mind, and this blobby monster blobbed over its victims and they were never seen again, which is near what became of Donnie Wind in audition, the junkie who operated the blob machine slow to shut the thing off; *space travel movies*, these particularly popular with the pros, as one had once told Donnie Wind, you get out in the desert and it could be the Moon, it could be Mars; and then there were the *reverse space travel movies*, aliens invading Earth, and Donnie Wind thought these would be about right, as he liked the big ears and bulging eyes and the high-collared capes and the tights and the boots with horn-curved toes and not to forget all the sequins everywhere and maybe best the thick pomade make-up, you never knew what skin affliction you would suffer next.

But Donnie Wind never made an alien or cowpuncher or scared teenager or eight-eyed ogler, what Donnie Wind got was to go back to highschool—not as he had now come back to his real highschool, lying in bed with Carrie Steen, but in that masterpiece of B-movie junk, *high-school basketball scandal* flicks, there had been so many they should've been given Roman numerals. The plots were simple and always the same. This gambler or mobster or sharpie would come into this little town and he would go watch all the basketball games, leer at the cheerleaders, maybe ogle the short-trouser players but not overmuch, that done, he would entice and charm and lure the best player—the star always had a flaw, certain weakness in his character—away from his teammates and his highschool cheerleader honey and his pure and preachy family; and there the gambler would bribe the jumpshooter to toss the game. The kid would take the money (maybe drugs in the sequel, the producers were thinking it over) and would go on to miss shot after shot, game after game, and he would go off his food and lose interest in the cheerleader and skip church and otherwise go to pieces till somebody noble, a priest, a coach, some uncle who had been around, one of these would have a word with the lad who would break down in a heartbeat and confess and be forgiven, no hard-time for these B-pic point shavers. Next shot the hero would leap off the bench, last game of the season, dash on court and make every shot and, the clock ticking down, the final high arching shot would win the game, *swish*, the kid would be carried off court on his teammates' shoulders, the cheerleader blowing kisses, she would get her mitts on the kid later, and the old priest or whatever would smile and give the kid a wink and the kid would smile and wink back. Then, there as THE END came onscreen the camera would pan the stands and there where the bribster usually sat, that seat was empty, the villain stealing off like a thief in the night, off to bribe and debauch another small American town.

But then this didn't quite work out as expected. When he went to the audition, instead of a script tossed in lap Donnie Wind found basketball shoes, socks, shorts and skimpy jersey flying at him. And the casting director grinning evilly: "Get suited up, Wind." And Donnie Wind's heart sank, it broke. See Donnie Wind had never played basketball in his life. He had never played any sport of any kind, not even croquet. And his build, he should have thought about that from the very first. To be kind, where a basketball player would be lean, legs and arms, Donnie Wind was not; and where a basketball player might be muscled, chest and neck, Donnie Wind was not. All the basketball actors and cheerleading actresses gathered at the studio court and were well entertained. Donnie Wind couldn't hit the backboard from the foul line, he couldn't dribble, not even using both hands, and

running the length of the court, he turned straight to the sidelines, show over. But it was then, all having a good *bar-bar*, that Donnie Wind reached out and found inspiration. After the workout the director, a kindly, understanding man so long as you remembered your lines, came up and patted Donnie Wind on the back. “Wind, for a basketball player or any kind of highschooler for that matter, you’re going to have to change your build. Right now you’d have a tough time making the sniveling bribster. My suggestion is you start working out. Lift some weights. Jog. Swim. Go out to one of these muscles beaches, they got it all there. A year of that and you’ll come back fit and, well maybe tanned would be asking too much, but . . . what the hell, kid, hit the beach. Surf’s up.”

That was the moment of truth in Donnie Wind’s life, that which would irrevocably alter Donnie Wind’s life. The beach. And if it didn’t exactly work out as Donnie Wind had imagined, the beach did indeed change his life. Some anyway. Gave him the idea to make this idiotic journey back home anyway.

Carrie Steen had been the bane of his existence in highschool. Worse than that. Tormentor. Torturer. Teaser.

Donnie Wind rolled over in bed and looked at this meanie there beside him. And in so doing he left off all those Hollywood highschools and went back to the real thing. And he left off Hollywood sports for the real thing too. But he didn’t stay with the real highschool sport long. Like he knew then and now he could have stayed in highschool well into his eighties and never made the varsity. Like he couldn’t even carry the water bucket, not without spilling half of it. No, Donnie Wind back in those highschool days, his own highschool days, he had turned back on turf, cinder and hardwood and looked to other extracurricular activities.

High school then. Start with the band. Talk about a bad idea. Just watching the band out on the football field, practicing for Friday night’s game, he knew he was in trouble. Blowing and walking at the same time—maybe you could fake the one, but the other probably had to be there. This was only a workout he was seeing and still there were stragglers, little guys in the back row falling out. The band leader they had back in those days, he had something of the Hollywood casting director in him too. Like being a sadistic fiend out to get Donnie Wind. Like when Donnie Wind asked for something light to lug around, this maniac tossed him a tuba. That first Friday night Donnie Wind fell so far behind, the band got so far ahead, they turned in the far end zone and met him coming back. He gave it a good try. Whirled on his heel and made for the clubhouse, but they caught him on the fifteen. And those vicious twirlers with their steel sticks, no football player had ever

received such punishment and they had helmets. The band leader smiled—that casting director again—he was enjoying this. The second game—the bass drum. Now Donnie Wind liked this. Now he had two sticks of his own. But these were no match for the twirlers, six of them, and a couple of the girls had swings you wouldn't see outside the majors. When a couple trombonists and a petite flutist weighed in—Donnie Wind looked around for other activities.

Chorus. That didn't work out any better. One yodel and the chorus director banished him from the stage, to sit in the back of the auditorium, and then, with her back to the back of the auditorium, she forgot all about him. But then that banishment turned out to be the beginning of another career, his real career, the career he pursued now. The stage. The movies. The dazzling world of drama. It all happened during a nap. It was during the second week of snoozing in the back row, there under the balcony overhang, that Donnie Wind woke up. And he woke to an entirely different world. Gone were the massed singers, now onstage had appeared a collection of individuals and they were strutting here, creeping there, all declaiming and crying out to one another about just about everything under the sun and some wept and some laughed and some rolled their eyes while others pulled at their hair and some stamped and some sighed and some skipped about and on and on and Donnie Wind had never seen such a wild and wacky and wonderful world in his life.

Now this turned out no ordinary dream but a real dream he had waked to. A fantasy world you could reach out and touch. The making the masses believe things that had never been, never would. In practical terms the dream Donnie Wind had waked to was but the class following chorus, this play practice, Dorothea Rainborough and her thespians walking around the stage hollering. When the drama coach came to the back row to see how things looked from a distance, that was when she came on Donnie Wind coming to, grabbed the boy and dragged him down the aisle and had him doing things backstage. And that was when, then and there, a star was born. Would be. Any day now.

Well, it was a couple months before anyone got around to looking at Donnie Wind and some time later that someone got around to speaking to him, other than ordering him to stand there, not there, and then finally, right around Christmas a player introduced himself to Donnie Wind. The player shook his hand, told him his own name and asked Donnie Wind's and Donnie Wind said his name and it was there that his troubles with Carrie Steen began. His name. Donnie Wind. The troubles that had followed him out to Hollywood and would probably follow him around the world if he ever got that far. And Carrie Steen had started it all.

Donnie Wind, Wind was his real name and it was pronounced like moving air, not the cranking of a clock, and he had had it forever and most everybody was used to it. When Carrie Steen first noticed him and started coming out with “Let’s go see Gone with the Wind (clock cranking) tonight” or “Don’t forget to wind (moving air) your watches”, everybody laughed a couple times and not much more and Carrie Steen dropped such inversions and reversions and moved on to other torments and teases. But not out in Hollywood. Everyone out in Hollywood thought Wind was this fake Hollywood name Donnie Wind had made up and they made him pay for it. And that sharp-tongue casting director was the worst of them. He would look level across the canteen lunch table, all the crew was there. “Donnie Wind? No, no, if you’re going to move up in the business you’re going to need a change of image. Now let’s see. Shorty Mesa. Sandy Dune. Or maybe—Harry Butte.” And everyone around the table roared with a lot more laughter than seemed called for. It went on and on and it didn’t get any better. Coming upon the director and the starlet in the hall: “Did you know we just passed Wind?” And that was one of the kinder ones. It got so that Donnie Wind seriously considered Mesa or Dune or Butte—till not long after, as if by miracle, it was that his real name, moving air, changed his life. Got him on a bus to come back home to torment Carrie Steen anyway.

“Wind, what a lovely name,” said Todt, the muscle builder there at the beach Donnie Wind had come to to build said muscle, maybe the tan was asking too much, and Todt had reached down and stroked Donnie Wind’s cheek and tousled his hair, like he was a little boy or maybe a girl, and Donnie’s Wind’s heart went *thumpety thump* and Donnie Wind started going to the beach more and more and the studio less and less. And things really started looking up or he pulled up the diving craft of his career—after six months he got invited to a party anyway.

And the weights. Todt had a shack at the beach and it was filled with barbells and things and Todt would rent these things to people like Donnie Wind, people who wanted to muscle up, and with his favorites, such as Donnie Wind, he would offer expert advice and be there to give a helping hand. Like when you did one bench press too many and the barbell fell across your throat and you were going fast, Todt would come over and pick it up with two fingers and stroke your cheek and tousle your hair and smile and go off with one of the bikini beach bunnies who lifted too and Donnie Wind was off his feed that night. But some changes did come to his physical life. Like some mornings it took him thirty minutes to get out of bed. After the barbell attack, Donnie Wind tapered off the athletics and went to working on his tan. He turned yellow the first afternoon and it would not

go away. One bad morning, bleach bottle empty, he taped his eyes back and went down to the studio to try out for some Chinamen parts. But while there trying to sweet talk the recalcitrant gate guard the tape on one eye came unstuck and the lid on that eye, its muscles unworked, that lid dropped like a guillotine and a studio exec's wife coming through the gate flopped over sideways and that pretty much ended that.

But it was then, down in the dumps, that the Wind shifted, as Donnie Wind like to think, and Wind's luck changed. See, after six months of being throttled by gymnastic equipment, you turned off the light you glowed in the dark, Todt took his first look at the new Donnie Wind and smiled at the basketball scandal gangster outfit he had forgot to take back to the studio and stroked his cheek and lifted the Panama to tousle the well-lubricated ducks, these from gangster days too, and invited Donnie Wind over to his beach apartment.

"Some of the fellas getting together," Todt smiled. "Come just as you are."

Kirk was the star of the fellas party that night and when Todt had said *fellas* he had not been kidding. There was not a woman in sight. This disappointed Donnie Wind but not for long, as Kirk was into lighting and anyone who knew anything knew that lighting, though you had never heard of it before coming to Hollywood, was a thing prized by everybody, big directors even, big star in particular, proper lighting could keep them hamming it up another ten years, maybe more. Kirk had been a star lighting man on Broadway back in New York and now he had come to California to be a star lighting man in Hollywood. Everyone listened closely to everything Kirk said and Donnie Wind listened too, though most of what Kirk said seemed to be gossip rather than anything to do with lighting, funny tales about Broadway and all the funny fellas there and even Donnie Wind got the joke about some of the tales, all the fellas laughing wildly at every fancy name Kirk dropped, the one Donnie Wind got about that time some famous English actress had forgotten to wear underwear and when the cast was taking bows she forgot again and bowed not her head but stuck up her behind to the audience and Donnie Wind got that one, he supposed, and laughed so hard and long anyway that by the time he caught breath Kirk had shifted to other matters, one of which would interest Donnie Wind very much, oh yes, very much indeed, as in—Carrie Steen, that heart-pounding interest.

See, now that Donnie Wind had come to, Kirk was going on about all these lost little towns scattered all over the country, all these little lost places sounded exactly as little and lost as the place Donnie Wind had escaped. In fact, this one lost little place Kirk had stopped at in coming from New York to Hollywood to become a famous lighter, the way Kirk

told it this little town could have been Donnie Wind's miserable hometown. And then a strange fear crept over Donnie Wind: that this little town was in fact the exact, the *very* little town that Donnie Wind had crept out of. It was Kirk's mention of his wife that did it, that made fear creep up his backbone. Kirk told how his wife—the *missus*, he called her and the fellas laughed—had been born and raised in this little town and had left and gone off to New York as soon as humanly possible and now after her rise on Broadway and her burning desire to go on to Hollywood to find great success there, how just this last fall she had wanted to stop by the burg on their way out west, maybe to lord it over all those she had left in her dust, though Kirk didn't say the exact words. So instead of taking an airplane from New York to L.A., Kirk had bought his wife a new car and they drove overland toward Kirk's wife's old hometown. It was sometime after arriving at this small town, of speaking of it, that Kirk's caustic cracks softened and the sycophantic shrieks had dropped to a chuckle here, murmur there, and then there was silence as Kirk spoke of the small town where they had come and where they had thought they might, maybe, stay. Cut off their journey to L.A. and put down roots and take up jobs and occupations locally and be happy there, the closest they'd ever come to Hollywood would be what they'd see down at the Ritz. And Broadway, Kirk had smiled, what they'd know of the Great White Way would be what the local drama coach served up down at the local school—it was then that Donnie Wind knew that though there were Ritzes scattered all over the country, every little town had one or a Rialto or a Palace, that there was one and only one Dotty Rainbow and that Kirk had taken him back to his old hometown, and this wife, this was none other than Donnie Wind's oh yes highschool archenemy, nemesis, goad and goat-getter, Carrie Steen.

At some point Donnie Wind took a deep breath and spoke across the baby grand where Kirk and the fellas had gathered, that the little hometown Kirk had come to, that this was in fact his hometown. And when the fellas all laughed and Kirk had smiled, all Donnie Wind had to say was two words, a name, and the way Kirk looked, not good, that maybe that chill of fear had now crept up Kirk's spine.

"Carrie Steen," Donnie Wind had said and Kirk left the fellas and came around the piano and there spoke to Donnie Wind very seriously indeed.

They had left New York because Kirk had received a once-in-a-lifetime job offer in Hollywood and, though Kirk would have been perfectly happy to have turned it down to stay in New York, his wife would not hear of it. Lighting for one of the grandest studios in town, in the world really, and working with all the great actors and technicians and the like, and better

than that to team up permanently with the grandest cameraman anywhere (they called him a *cinematographer*), that it had been this cameraman who had specifically asked that Kirk come join him, he had seen Kirk's work on Broadway and had seen none better, not anywhere—up against all this, and that if Carrie Steen told you to do something you did it, Kirk had taken the job. And this uprooting, Kirk said, had been hard on Carrie Steen, much harder than it had been on Kirk. Carrie Steen had not moved to the top, as had Kirk. Kirk had been a Broadway baby, mother a star of sorts, father a star of sorts, and had gotten a good head start, mainly by relying on his parents' advice—*stay behind the scenes, kid, get behind the lights, kid, never in front of them*; but Carrie Steen's start had been slow (as Donnie Wind knew well, Kirk had smiled) and then once in New York, even then there had been a tragedy that had knocked her back. Seems, Kirk said and he did not smile, Carrie Steen had come to New York with a local boy, he had wanted to become an actor too, and it was not long before Carrie Steen saw the boy was holding her back and she dropped him for some second-rate actor who did at least get parts and the local boy had joined the army and he had gone off to war and got himself killed and that death, Kirk said, not smiling at all, had stunned her and her career. Kirk was not sure if even now, years later, she was entirely over it. But then there after the war's end, couple years after it, Carrie had begun to make her move. To start she met Kirk and they fell in love, or he did, and he was already established in the business and knew, it seemed at times, everybody. If he couldn't get her a part, he knew them that could. From lineless walk-on to the maid who kept saying "Yes, mum," to fourth female on up to the verge of stardom, understudy to a star, an actress so well into drink and bad boys that some work at number one seemed a cinch. But there were promises greater than that. A young playwright, very young, it looked like his first production was only months and a couple hundred grand away, this young man met Carrie at the automat and knew her face, though he got the play wrong, and he suggested she join this acting class, he knew the director who ran it, he thought he could get her in. At first mention Carrie was insulted, she needed lessons, it was that bad, but the young writer laughed, really laughed, and she met him in some warehouse district that night and she walked into one of the most famous acting schools in the world. After a couple weeks Carrie got her chance—Kirk thought it was a comic thing, though Carrie never said as much, he thought it was Carrie Steen doing Dotty Rainbow doing Lady Macbeth and the class rolled about (well they were already sitting on the floor, Kirk smiled) and Carrie Steen was on her way. She had been discovered, if only by a handful of young actors, among this handful were those who would

win Oscars and rave reviews from every paper in New York and London, places that still cared about the stage; but more important than this, Carrie Steen's true talent had been discovered. Comedienne. But this proved a mixed blessing, Kirk said, as the acting school director had warned Carrie. Acting with wit and intelligence. Looks that were striking rather than pretty. And a voice, whether the words were spoken or sung, that could have an audience mesmerized or, Kirk smiled, rolling. And the acting school director, if he had been smiling, he stopped. He walked Carrie out to a park and in walking about it he spoke and he did not do so happily. Musicals. She could get into a musical tonight. But, the director said, he wasn't sure. Wasn't sure it was musicals Carrie and her career wanted. Sure, the fame, glamour and all the money, it was hers for the taking, but he wasn't sure. A serious actress, a dramatic actress, an actress who could range from the Greeks to Gene O'Neil, above all, an actress who could not only play a role with intelligence but with a wisdom beyond her years, a wit that was not always unkind. "The sort of acting we knew before the war. Why we even placed some intelligence out in Hollywood back then. Let's just say it's a style of acting that's gone out of fashion. What you're so very good at, it's going to be very hard to sell," the director said and he had not looked happy in saying it. He would try to get her into something in New York but he didn't know what. Live TV was doing strong stuff these days and smaller theatres were opening off Broadway and he would look around. "And," he said, "if you don't hear from me, *you* call me. And I mean that. I might have something going in the fall. There's a part—let's just see." And he did not pat Carrie Steen lean flank, as he only patted the cute little buns of the girls who didn't stand a chance. And then not long thereafter Kirk heard from Hollywood, out of the blue, and was offered a job, a new job, something he had never done before but knew he could do and do well and make tons of money as well, Kirk smiled; he would learn to light for motion pictures and he would live in sunny southern California. And Carrie Steen said he had to go and that she would come with him and she would find parts in the movies Kirk would light and she would become a star and Carrie Steen looked at her face, a lean, intelligent face, in the mirror and then she looked at the plump, thoughtless, smiling, ever smiling faces on the cover of every movie magazine on the stand, and looking there and looking here, she did not think so. But in two days' time the New York director called Carrie, he had heard about Kirk's good luck. "Go," he said. "There a first-rate playhouse in Pasadena. A lot of movie people step down to play there. A lot of good people from New York, good people from London play there. And not everyone's after the almighty buck. A lot of good writers come there. A

lot of different and dangerous things are put on. You'll get bigger roles, and maybe even better, you'll get bigger roles here. Go. Come back. I may have something for you in the fall, maybe the spring. Something big. Something good."

And so it was that Kirk told of their trip home—his and Carrie's, his too, for in that short time there Kirk had come to think of Carrie's home as his as well. The past. The present. The future. New York. Hometown. Hollywood.

But during Kirk telling of this epic voyage west, something gnawed at Donnie Wind. Like Kirk, with this great Hollywood job waiting, what was he doing stopping off in this hole of a hometown with his failed wife and staying on for months and months? And when Kirk came out and said it, that he and Carrie had actually thought about letting these months and months drag out into years and years, these adding up to the rest of their lives spent in this miserable hometown—it was then that Donnie Wind felt the solid ground of looking down on a flop and a failure shift under him. Kirk setting up a photography shop and taking class pictures and lighting highschool productions? And Carrie Steen taking over for Dotty Rainbow when she retired and maybe doing some summer playhouse things till then? Donnie Wind did not like the feel of this at all. And the way Kirk said *Dotty Rainbow*, that did not come out right either. Back in highschool, when someone said the drama coach's foreshortened name, it was said laced with ridicule, spiced with malice. But not Kirk's *Dotty Rainbow*. It came out affection. And when he went on to speak of the comic drama coach—manish walking shoes, you moved up to spindly legs, little pot belly, blouse ever untucked, gaudy jewelry, make-up that had missed, earrings a macaw could have swung on, hair bun a collapsing dirigible, half dozen yellow pencils sticking out, quills on a charging porcupine—it was then Donnie Wind had to admit it. Kirk spoke of Dorothea Rainborough with respect and when one of the younger fellas sniggered he received a look that stopped it quick.

And he went on to elaborate and expand. How Carrie Steen adored the drama coach, what she had done to bring the world of the theatre to a small town, and further, the fine training that Carrie and had received in high-school (Donnie Wind recalled something closer to a year-long cat fight), how Dorothea Rainborough's professionalism had so well prepared the young actress for the rigors of Broadway. And it went on from there, on and on, this encomium to an entire cast of characters, from the burly principal to the doughty cafeteria ladies, from the old wounded vet at the cafe to the patrician banker in his long black car, on and on, till at one point, though Donnie Wind knew all the names, Donnie Wind began to wonder if there might be duplicate little towns out there in the middle of nowhere

and Kirk had run onto the good one and Donnie Wind had been strapped with the loser.

In any case, this epic tale of a grand journey—New York/Hometown/Hollywood—by evening's end Donnie understood, or thought it did, that it all had been offered with a specific purpose in mind. Like getting Donnie Wind to go back to his little hometown, for a specific purpose, and soon.

Kirk was a touch vague about that, this journey and why it must be taken, you might say he simply beat about the bush. To start anyway:

“Look. I don’t know. There came a time that this idea of Carrie and me settling down in your town, that this was just talk. A dream. Child’s play. Yes, that would be it. Children putting blankets over chairs and playing house. And this job I had been offered, it had been postponed and now it was unpostponed and even if I had wanted to stay, Carrie wouldn’t have let me. I would go on on my own and Carrie would join me later. She had some,” and here a strange, strained look came to Kirk’s face, a look that Donnie Wind did not understand that night and wasn’t sure he did now, his third morning back home, lying in bed with Kirk’s wife, “business, some matters, a matter,” and Kirk, the smoothest of talkers, now stumbled and the parts of his face that had been strained, they now went red, “that she had to clean up. I mean clear up. Conclude.” And Kirk looked around as if for help. “You know—*end*. Now there was nothing, never ever ever, permanent in our separation. At least I don’t think so. Or at least not with me. And not with her either. No no no, not at all. Temporary, that was it. Just a break. Give it a rest. Every marriage—and on this we both agree—could use a breather now and then. And Carrie said she would join me here. She would do nothing to harm my career. And I promised that if she wanted to stay home, why then my career could go hang. I’d be back to her in a heartbeat and set up the small-town life we had spoken of when we had first come home. It was a tearful parting, I’ll tell you. Not a dry eye in the house. Well actually maybe there was one of us doing most of the wet eye and the other not much, if any at all, but that’s the way things have been with us,” said Kirk and dabbed at an eye. “Me the emotional one, Carrie cool and rational, no matter how deeply she feels inside. Well now this *business*, this *matter*, I guess you might even go on and call it this *affair*,” and Kirk laughed and did not mean it at all, “has been concluded. Ended. Solved and dissolved. Whatever. And she has called. Only the other day. Or the other night. Or I called her. Whatever. And she’s coming out. She’s leaving there. And we’re going to be together again. As it was always meant to be.” And here Kirk looked off into the distance, even if there wasn’t any distance there.

It went on from there, Donnie Wind not paying much attention. How Carrie liked to drive but she didn't like driving alone, she liked someone with her in the car. And Donnie Wind could help her pack and he could see his old auntie or granny or whatever and he could visit Dotty Rainbow and tell his former drama coach of his rise . . . and on it went till there at evening's end, near morning, Donnie Wind found a hundred buck bill in his pocket and in two days' time further found himself on a bus headed east. Away from the golden coast, across the barren desert, over the snow-clad mountains, out onto the spacious plain, making for home.



She met him at the bus station. There, as the bus pulled into the great dark station hangar, Donnie Wind could not believe his eyes, there was Carrie Steen, she who once could not bear the sight of him, there she was waving and waving like she meant it and she was smiling as if she meant it and there were tears in her eyes. The tears of a sweetheart, a wife, a sister, she was weeping she was so glad to see him. But then when he got up close, when his bag had been unloaded and they got out to the car, he saw that the tears in Carrie Steen's eyes were not the tears of a sweetheart or any of that. No, these tears were wrong, they were not right. These were tears of pain, of sorrow, of grief. Though Donnie Wind did not know the word for these tears, had he, he would have said these tears were the tears of a broken heart.

Donnie Wind rolled over in bed. The third morning of the third day that would not be leading into the third night. Or not a night spent sleeping here. That had been planned. The opening night of Dotty Rainbow's annual masterpiece, that would be performed tonight, and Carrie Steen and Donnie Wind would be leaving town just after that, with any luck never to return. There were storms in the mountains they must cross tonight, snow storms, and everyone had advised—best leave this morning, no later than noon anyway, but Carrie Steen would have none of it. She would be seeing Dorothea's latest production, a revival of *Hometown*, the classic, and there were other matters and affairs and things she must attend to, this the last day she would ever spend in her old hometown. This not much, if Donnie Wind recalled right, like the hometown in *Hometown*, in fact nothing like it at all. And that, Donnie Wind admitted, he was looking forward to seeing. The make-believe, fantasy hometown of *Hometown* after two days and two nights and one early morning of the gritty, hard-edge real thing.

Donnie Wind rolled over in bed. Day one and day two, night one and night two—Donnie Wind either remembered too much or not enough. Shoes. He had not taken his shoes off since arriving and, what with the

three-day bus trip, Donnie Wind felt he was going for a record. *Donnie Wind of Culver City California Has Now Gone Three Months Without Seeing His Socks*. Donnie Wind pulled back the sheet. Shoes. In fact, now that Donnie Wind looked, all of him was still dressed. Same as last night, the night before, days two and one. Another record in the making.

Donnie Wind rolled over. The woman was still beside him. Hard to tell, sheet over her, but there was something about the woman that looked undressed. Yep, sure enough. There draped over the chair by the bed were a dress and a slip and some shoes under the chair. And there were some lady's dainties there under the chair as well. Donnie Wind tried to remember that part and couldn't and went on to find not remembering unlikely, as Donnie Wind had never had much to do with lady's dainties. Nothing at all actually. The lady there in bed beside him had probably got boiling hot during the night and all sticky and sweating had ripped everything off, so she would be cool and could go back to sleep. Except that, so far as Donnie Wind remembered, this room, a hotel room, had been freezing last night. Maybe the management had turned up the heat last night, Donnie Wind thought, and after thinking that Donnie Wind grew tired of thinking and stopped thinking about all that and everything else for that matter.

That done, Donnie Wind rolled over in bed.

Day one. Arrival. The first morning. Carrie Steen's face. Donnie Wind remembered that and found pleasure in it. But beyond that there was something not right, something wrong, something in Carrie Steen's face that Donnie Wind found dangerous, something that frightened him, though he knew not what. He had looked at Carrie Steen's new face and he had been afraid for her and afraid for himself, maybe afraid for everybody. It was much the same face Carrie Steen had had in highschool—then everyone had said Carrie had a face beyond her years—but it was not the same face, not at all. There was something different there, something new, and there was something that was gone. It was a large face but not grotesquely so. The drama coach had said, how treasured Carrie's face was. A large face, an actor's face. You could sit in the back row and still see Carrie Steen's face, she could've been standing right in front of you. And the voice the same. Back row and Carrie Steen said *hello there* and you checked under the seat beside you. Maybe Carrie Steen had sharp looks, like she was some wolf or something and was going to take a bite out of you, but then she smiled and all fears were gone. But there were many smiles, one that Donnie Wind remembered in particular. A smile that curled like those knives sheiks sliced you up with and whatever Donnie Wind had been going on about stopped.

Tallish but not tall, not as tall as she looked. Lean and lank but her legs and arms were well rounded, not muscled, hardly skin and bone. Skin. Tawny. Browned, like leather, old leather that had been cared for and there was that glow to it, but there was nothing bright or hard to it. Donnie Wind had never actually touched Carrie Steen, except maybe when she was touching him, hauling him here, shoving him there, but he imagined Carrie Steen's skin, particularly the skin of her arms, was covered with a fine down that you could only really see in the summer; Carrie worked as lifeguard at the pool and then the down, the brown skin darker and darker, when Carrie Steen moved her arms and legs the down seemed to change color, from brown to tan to light, these shades flashing as she moved about. Green eyes, if fire were green, like those demonstrations Doc Bavender used to do, tossing all sorts of powder and things into a flame and the flame made the colors of the rainbow and one of these colors was green. Hair: bronzed but of many hues, no black, no blonde, but all those browns and deep reds in between. Hair: pulled back and fixed behind her head—more than ever a gleaming ancient helmet, a warrior standing before Troy—but then the next day she would come to school hair to her shoulders, reaching toward her back, and this mane as she shook it out curled like snakes writhing in a pit and Donnie Wind found himself struck still by these curling, clashing, thrashing tendrils and quite often they came for Donnie Wind till they were right in his face and Donnie Wind gasped for breath, or maybe sighed, and in a flash there was that face again, that face in his face, and that smile that could draw and quarter and those eyes that could sear or freeze and now came that rich husky voice that reached everywhere it went and there was not a shout to it, more a purr, a tigress's purr, and Carrie Steen would say something and maybe it was insulting, maybe not, Donnie Wind neither remembered nor cared to.

Yes, that was the face and other things that Donnie Wind remembered from highschool and if that face and so on were all there, they were not there, not like they had been. And, though Donnie Wind liked the change, and surely did not want to go back to highschool days, there was something here now, Carrie Steen at the wheel, passing cigarets and a small bottle of whiskey to him, wind blowing through her hair, her browned arm hanging out the window, one hand steering, Carrie laughing and telling stories and actually listening to what Donnie Wind had to say and actually laughing at that—it was during this drive home from the bus station that Donnie Wind knew that faces and so on and maybe everything had changed and Donnie Wind felt a profound disturbance in this. That the old ways were gone and the new had come and the old would never return and the new

never leave—it was like walking out on a bright shining road and then the earth rumbled and reared open underfoot.

But Donnie Wind had not gone to Hollywood for nothing and it was not long till he understood the change, the many changes that had come over Carrie Steen. Carrie Steen was in love, or was very fond of someone, and this someone was not her husband Kirk. For awhile, there during the ride home, the whiskey going to his head, cigarets getting him giddy, that Donnie Wind thought that the someone Carrie Steen loved or liked a lot was Donnie Wind himself. But then when he had leaned over, a little peck on the cheek, he had got that old cracking box to the ear, right out of high-school, and there at the wheel was the new laughing Carrie Steen, and Donnie Wind took himself out of the running for Carrie Steen's affection, or reined it in anyway. Donnie Wind went through the list of possible competitors, from Coach Mack at the top to the side splitters, Llewellyn Rainborough and Jo Peters, to name but two. No, none of these worked out and that took Donnie Wind to the bottom of the list, the foot of the class, the least likely seducer in the history of smacking and snatching. Yep. Doc Bavender, the shy, mild-mannered, good and goody science teacher. Donnie Wind thought to have a good laugh there, one from the belly, but he thought again.

Donnie Wind rolled over in bed. Doc Bavender, he had scarcely noticed the mousy prof that first day and first night, but now he was going to have to keep an eye on the egghead, this last day and last night. Maybe this small, quiet man was no joke, not one at all.

What happened that first day and first night. Things started happening before Carrie Steen and Donnie Wind got back into town. The cheek pat, ear box having been mentioned, the first notable event occurred there in the canyon, where the hub city highway drops off the plain and goes down down down before hitting bottom, to grind back up to the flat. Donnie Wind might have blocked out a good number of the old highschool days but not this particular day, or night. And there were tears heavy in Carrie Steen's eyes as she nosed the car over the canyon rimrock and began their descent to the bottom and the site of the greatest tragedy ever to strike this little town and its school.

That night so many years ago, his and Carrie Steen's highschool days, began poorly, then went quick to awful, then worse. The drama team and many of their parents and other citizens had gathered in the hub city for the year's big drama contest—the best production, best director, best actress and actor for miles and miles around. And then there was the red ribbon, second place. By count in the school's trophy case Dorothea Rainborough

had made ten reds in a row, though only nine were on display, as, it was said, Dorothea had ripped one red to tiny bits before they could get it out of her hands. This, the eleventh year running and Dorothea had done it again. Or rather Hazy Hazeltine had done it again. First. The blue. Not again. And with no little irony the play that had put Hazy on top was none other than the great classic that Dorothea would be staging tonight. *Hometown*. There had been pandemonium and chaos that night. Five judges were to view the dramas and report their placements. Five judges: no ties. But one ballot for winner was to be declared invalid. Looked like it had been soaked in water (turned out these were tears) and when the ballot had dried the crisis deepened. This lachrymose judge had written for first, not Hazy's *Hometown* but *Homecoming*, no play by that name displayed tonight. Dorothea Rainborough had drawn out an out-of-date rule book: Rule Whatever: the winner's play's correct name must be entered on the ballot. Any but the slightest error would invalidate. The chief judge ignored Dorothea and the cobwebbed rule book and had an assistant search out the errant judge. She was found, still weeping, in the women's room, brought out and she wrote out a second, correct, ballot. *Hometown*. Hazy had won *again*. Dorothea followed with a fit. It went on for quite a time, after all had been pushed out of the theatre and had regathered in the parking lot. Donnie Wind did not remember a great deal of this. A lot of people not suited to fisticuffs—women and thespians—exchanging what could only loosely be called blows. Though there was the explosive kick Dorothea delivered to Hazy's back end, that one boomed. After that everybody decided to go home. Now it was that true confusion rose to reign. Of the seven players who had come over in the drama coach's ample sedan, four of these now jumped ship and jumped into the male lead's underslung speedster. Now instead of six in the senior's death car, there were ten. And Dorothea noticed none of it. The packed death car laid rubber and was gone. Left back the large sedan: Dorothea, two little girls who had played two little girls in the night's play, and Donnie Wind, freshman. Soon the two little girls, cuddling in the back, dropped off and not long after Donnie Wind did too. And he did not pull out of it till they came to the canyon, where the hub city highway left the flat and went down down down to the bottom. But they did not have to make the very bottom, the pit, fog pooled thick and heavy over it, to know there was something terrible waiting for them, something terribly wrong waiting below.

Carrie Steen was much the same, that night so long ago and now, this homecoming afternoon so many years later, now so many years later they had stopped to return to the site of the tragedy. That night so long ago

Dorothea and Donnie Wind and the two sleeping little girls, they had come down through the fog to the canyon's pit and they had come upon parts and bits of things, parts of an automobile, bits of large dolls that they knew only minutes ago had been people, real and live.

Dorothea did not stop the car, the little ones in the back did not wake, nor did Donnie Wind much care to look about as they passed through the carnage and the wreckage. Their headlights picked her up as they began the ascent to flee this hellish place. She was walking down the center of the highway and you could not see much of her but that her head was down and she had lost no part of her and had her shoes off. She was walking barefoot, as now this afternoon years later she had tossed shoes aside and gone barefoot into the field to pick wildflowers and place them before the crosses, each marking where a teen had died. Barefoot, she had always gone barefoot, anywhere, everywhere. In class, onstage, downtown, in a cafe, the courthouse, even in a fancy restaurant and theatre over in hub city—if Carrie Steen grew weary of shoes she took them off and tied the laces or buckled the straps and hung them over her shoulder.

Barefoot, that was how they came upon her that terrible night Dorothea did not stop and take her into town. Even one of the little girls, now waked, had said, "Aren't you going to give her a lift?" No, the drama coach kept the car going, going past the walking girl, muttering something Donnie Wind did not remember or had not understood, it came out so low and growling and desperate it might have been the sound of an animal trained to mimic talk, sounds that were words, words without meaning. And there, looking back, Donnie Wind and the little girls saw the girl walking after them, the girl's head raised now, her eyes hard on the car that would not stop, eyes that in the red glare of the car's taillights showed red as well, the eyes of a thing coming from hell, coming for them.

That was how Donnie Wind remembered that night, as now, still barefoot, barefoot again, Carrie Steen wandered over the field where so many had died, the crosses marking these deaths here, there, here again, Carrie Steen now picking flowers and placing them as bouquets before the nine crosses scattered here and there.

Roll over in bed and on to the second stop in this ritual that would occupy his three days and two nights and one evening in his little hometown.

The second outing or event in coming home with Carrie Steen, the cemetery. How, why, Donnie Wind knew nothing but that he had not really much cared for these dead places, not since that day his mother gave him flower money and he had to go out alone and put the flowers on Dad's grave and had been lost for days, weeks, months, it felt like it.

“Weepy weepy weepy,” Mother had said whenever it was little Donnie Wind had made it home. “You got to have a screw loose to weep over that old man.” And Donnie Wind didn’t know what to say, so he wept some more.

Now Donnie Wind went back to that miserable place—dragged along more like it, the two draggy and pushy highschool girls having joined their party, the hard dark one, the dreamy blonde, nowadays Carrie Steen’s best friends—and in getting there he saw that it was something of an occasion, people milling about here and there, not a lone lost boy in sight. The occasion seemed military and what with war coming on that made sense, though Donnie Wind had always thought you buried soldiers during and after wars, seldom before. Anyway, even if it wasn’t the Fourth—bareleg twirlers prancing, horses walking around shitting wherever they pleased, fireworks—there was much of that hallowed holiday to it. The noise first, there as they came through the cemetery gates: a military band playing some military tunes and marches and these things carried. In time their party came to where all this was happening, on and around a platform at the rear of the cemetery, all bright yellow planks, just now slapped together and put up. The band took up one side, maybe only a dozen hornblowers and drumbangers to it, though you wouldn’t know it listening. There on the other side a like number of men, like the band members dressed out military, sat stiff and straight, not tooting or banging on anything. Flags stood or hung or were draped all around. The national flag, the state flag and many of these, one confederate flag, some wanting it put up, some wanting it taken down, sometimes a scuffle involved, the county flag, this more of banner telling the year the county had been founded and the year it was now, and there was the town flag which was the sheriff’s posse flag doing the duty, the sheriff’s posse a gang of old-timers who, but for the sheriff, had nothing to do with being a sheriff or a posse, their annual duty to ride some rented horses there at the Old-Timers’ parade, this coming up in a couple months, right after the election, the same day school was out. There were other flags, patriotic flags, veterans’ flags, quasi-military flags—American Legion, VFW, DAR, the Scouts, Boy, Girl and Cub, and the Brownies being some of these. Next came the businessmen’s flags, Elks, Moose, Lions, Kiwanis, Rotary, the Lodge Masonic, the Chamber of Commerce and its offshoot, the JayCees, and to bring this naming of the flags to an end: the 1929 Study Club flag, this the most powerful rich old women’s club in town, not to forget the Friends of the Library flag, this a small hand flag carried by a small girl who, having grown weary of marching back and forth, had now plopped down on the steps leading up to the platform, content to let the breeze do her flag waving for her.

Attention was now drawn to a long large object placed on the ground before the platform and band and military dignitaries. As their group—they were now Donnie Wind and Carrie Steen and the highschool girls and somehow Doc Bavender, not a fan of war or its back-home bluster, had joined them and there was Jack Cook, a veteran and if he wore civvies, all knew he belonged, and Marie Blum and the two plump twins who mixed sodas and fried burgers at the drugstore and there were assorted others—as this group came into the crowd gathered before the platform, all saw that the long large object was a coffin and a national flag had been laid over it and that two soldiers flanked it and they stood to attention, black rifles at their sides, their eyes blank, unblinking, these soldiers stared out over the crowd, seeing nothing. Now that they had come into the crowd there could be seen that a row of chairs made the crowd's front and dignitaries from town and school sat there. Among them Donnie Wind knew the Rainboroughs and the sheriff and the mayor and other notables and then there making the center of this row of the famous and rich and powerful sat ten men who did not look like any of the others. These men were young, mid-to late-twenties, maybe one who might be thirty, but they did not look young, not in their eyes, they were old when you looked into their eyes. These men wore khaki uniforms and there were insignia and signs of rank and many medals and some insignia pinned to their shirts or stitched to the sleeves of their shirts. Some of these men sat forward in their chairs, elbows on knees, and some sat back, backs straight, and one held a Bible and one a black wreath and one, like the soldiers flanking the coffin, looked off at nothing and there was another who, upon seeing Jack Cook, gave him a small salute, two fingers to his brow, and had the same returned, and all these men wore black bands on their left arms but for the one man who had no left arm and his black band had been pinned to an empty sleeve. These were the boys, Donnie Wind would learn, the boys from this town, boys who had gone to school here, who had gone off to fight in the last war and had survived and now had come here, one coming all the way from a state up near the northern border, to honor one of their number who had not survived the war. Whose body after all these years had been found and identified and now had been brought here to be laid to rest in peace, at long last to rest in peace in the small cemetery that looked out west toward his small hometown.

Now chaos broke out. Well it waxed and it waned. First one of the platform military men—the shortest and plumpest among them, face bright cherry—jumped to his feet and marched across the platform to a lectern, maybe six feet away. There he delivered a rousing speech that called for

war, and many in the crowd stood and cheered at the speech's end, popping their hands together at a desperate pace. Next rose the good preacher and came to the lectern, but one of the kinder military men led the confused man back to his seat—*everything in good order, padre, you're last, you'll have your word at the graveside*. There next came a time of calm and quiet and sadness. One of the khaki-clad soldiers, those seated down front, not another of the platform-raised military men, he stood and went to the steps that led up to the platform, but he did not mount them. Rather he turned there and at the same level as the crowd spoke to them, though he spoke so low that few beyond the front rows heard his address. By his looks this returned soldier had returned to the farm or ranch he had left to make war, at least his face showed that coloring, a dark burned red till you got to the forehead, there where cap or hat shaded, and that was a still white. By the trinkets on his collar the man had been an officer, that person going on: that this farm boy or ranch boy had been best friends with the boy now brought home and they had gone off to war together, only to be separated there, this man going here to become an officer, his friend there to be a soldier without much rank, and the officer the one man had made, it was not till the war was done and he had come home that he learned his friend was dead.

The soldier returned to sit with his comrades and others rose to speak out and the band jumped up and played some catchy tunes and other plump little men came to the lectern, these fellows dressed out in uniforms not anything like the military men or the khaki-clad soldiers wore, little short jackets and funny little caps, neither insignia nor medal among them. Now Donnie Wind jumped as there came gunfire from the soldiers flanking the casket and now they raised their rifles to the skies and fired them again and now they did so again and now again and again till they had fired six times. The salute done, the khaki-clad soldiers came to the coffin and five stood one side and five the other and the band came down from the platform and the military men followed and all the dignitaries and friends and the family came next in line and when that was settled the band played a tune not catchy at all, a dirge, a dead march, someone said, and the ten soldiers, friends and comrades in arms to the man they would carry, they reached to the handles at the base of the casket and raised it and, one of the armed soldiers before, the other after, by their measured step they went forward and the casket was moved off and all who were there fell in line and went after the slow march, toward the open grave where their friend, comrade, son and brother would be laid to rest in peace till the end of time, so the words would be said.

Donnie Wind got lost during this exodus, but he wasn't the only one. He found himself at the tail end of the procession, there where you could see everyone who was headed toward the grave, and saw that his friends were not there. Gone. But he only had to stop and turn to see what had happened to his friends and he had not the slightest idea why. They had broken off from the main group and were moving away in another direction and were not doing so together. Strung out over a good hundred yards and going off. Last in this littered line were Jack Cook and Marie Blum and they were standing back, looking out toward those who had gone off in the wrong direction, looking as if they might go after them and bring them back to the pack, now looking as if they would not interfere, not now, if these others were to wander off lost, then they would go search them out then, but not now.

Now they turned away and returned to the procession and went to the soldier's grave.

Donnie Wind let the final procession go on, till no one was looking, then, with the leader of these wanderers about to disappear into a forest of granite, then Donnie Wind went after them, to understand the mystery of their wandering off. But carefully, with caution, that he might not be found out.

Nearest him in this extended line were the two highschool girls and they too seemed observers of this trek, not participants. Ahead of them went Carrie Steen and she was barefoot, shoes slung over shoulder, and she went after the leaders and she watched them closely as well. Next beyond her was a tall, distinguished man, grey at the temples, and Donnie Wind knew this to be the town's banker, as the man had not changed greatly since Donnie Wind's youth, only a slight stoop had come to his shoulders, his head bent, the attitude of a weary man or in a graveyard perhaps he was sad. Beyond all these, he who had first broken off and proved the group's leader, there was Doc Bavender. No matter the distance you knew him by his hat, glasses, an Indian brown face and his compact figure and though you could not see the cigar in mouth or hand, there was the smoke coming from it. It looked now that Doc Bavender had stopped—and those following did so as well—and Donnie Wind went off through the headstones, and saw that Bavender had stopped before a grave and there was no grave there.

Donnie Wind came closer and saw more clearly. There were graves there, there were two, it was that there were no graves between the two, the prairie grass had not been disturbed by spade and pick and no headstones stood over the empty place. Bavender stood before the first mound of earth, this gray and worn down, old—the second grave beyond, its earth still fresh, piled like a mountain ridge and showing red. Bavender stood before the

first, the older grave, and he had his hat off now and there at the grave's foot he looked toward the headstone, he looked there with great concentration, as if he were trying to read the words there, who it was that had died, dates of birth and death and some inscription, and could not quite make them out and did not care to go closer. This was repeated at the second grave on, except before this second grave Bavender lowered his head and did not lift it to peer at the stone, as if the stone had not yet been carved and there were no words or figures on it, as if the stone were blank.

If Donnie Wind understood this imperfectly—mother, father, uncle, aunt, gramps and granny, sis and brother?—now he understood Bavender's movements not at all. Bavender had come onto that flat swatch of grass that lay between the two graves and he stood looking over the good ten yards where graves might have been and he looked out toward where the headstones might someday be and they were not there, not yet. Now Donnie Wind saw that the area between the two graves was wide, too wide for a single grave, that the grassy plot might some day cover two graves and it was then that Donnie Wind's stomach clinched and his vision dimmed. The two graves, placed like children's beds, one across the room from the other, these might indeed be children's graves, children who had died so young and early, and the two vacant plots, these would be for the children's mother and their father and they would one day be buried there between their children, now side by side, now reunited once again, come back together in death, they all.

And Donnie Wind did not feel well, nor could he see much, and he turned away from what he had seen and went back to where the cars had been left and the others were there now as well, Carrie Steen and the two girls and now Jack Cook and Marie Blum came up and all were there but Bavender and the older man, the banker, he had stayed back at the grave site with his son, he had always thought of the science teacher as such.

Donnie Wind rolled over in bed. His heart pounded—once. The woman was not there in bed. A second thump and Donnie Wind raised and saw the woman's dress was where it had been, draped over a chair, and there were shoes under the chair and other things and she was not gone, not gone far anyway, and would be back, if only for her things. Donnie Wind went back in the bed and put the pillow over his face and wondered where his mind and memory might take him now.

To school of course. Everyone did it. Sometimes from as far away as foreign places, sometimes as near as that homestead out by the county line—wherever the returned student had come from, they made for the school. Coming upon it now Donnie Wind knew the school was at work. Cars out

front, doors open, you could see figures through the windows, usually one figure in one window, a standing teacher, and through the other windows showed the tops of scholarly heads, packed together like cobbles on a road, unless you looked down toward the lower grades, the scholars were shorter there, there was just the teacher showing, she could have been talking to herself, talking to an empty room. And the flag had been run up the pole—at school day's end or over the weekend or during Christmas or the summer vacation the flag was rung down, excepting things like the Fourth or if a president died and then it was there half-mast. That's where Donnie Wind stood now, by the flagpole, the flagpole halfway between the street and the school, right in the middle of the broad sidewalk that led from street to school in the mornings, school to street in the afternoon, school was out, time to go home. And now he stood here alone and did not think for the life of him that, ready to go in after all these years, that he could. He had turned to go away without making this ritual pilgrimage, when a great voice called out to him:

“Well are you going to stand there all day or come on in?”

Now Donnie Wind felt pretty sure that this voice was Jack Cook, the principal's office was right there, it looked out on the flagpole, but somehow Donnie Wind got a better idea that this was the school building doing the talking, like it was a haunted house and you did what it said if you knew what was good for you, did as you were told much as you did when Jack Cook was doing the telling, and, knowing that, and there were the big front doors yawning open before him, then Donnie Wind took a deep breath and closed his eyes and dived in the haunted school, it really had been a rough night, last night, whatever, whenever.

He did not think he had ever seen the building like this. So calm and peaceful and quiet. If there were sounds here and there—a class chanting some poem or pledge in unison, laughter as teacher had cracked a joke or a student had got an answer so wrong it had come out a joke, and there was the tappity-tap-tap, *ping!*, slam of returned carriage, tappity-tap-tap from Jo Peters's typing class—these came to Donnie Wind soothing and distant, nothing there that would disturb the quiet and calm of the empty halls.

He stood before the trophy case for a time. Not back to the case, looking out the front doors, like the football players and Ag boys had gathered before first bell, to observe students such as Donnie Wind hurrying in, late, late again, there to laugh at these slugabeds and slowpokes and calling out their names and other terms of ridicule; no, Donnie Wind looked inward, at the case itself and what it held now—all these trophies and medals and old footballs with the old year inked on them and retired jerseys, that one

halfback who had made all-state and played college ball, and an antique helmet, but a padded leather cap with earflaps really, and all these and other things that Donnie Wind could not remember ever seeing, now he looked in on them so intently he might have been studying them, that therein lay the answer to a very important question and that question might be popped very soon, like next hour, and he had only this brief time to be sure he would get it right.

Then in time his gaze withdrew and he came to look at the glass of the case's doors and this glass acted as a mirror and in this mirror was reflected a man, a man he knew not, not at all the boy he had seen as himself, the boy coming back to school and his memories of it, and though Donnie Wind had never known of this, had only heard people tell, it was with a sore heart that he turned from this man he did not know and went to search out the boy he did. The boy he had once been.

But it was not his picture he had come searching for, no, and he then went down into the wing that housed the lower grades, where the antique pictures were hung. He knew he had not come to see himself and his class, and now he looked up to the wall and it was Carrie Steen's senior class he was looking up at and there were all those gold stars spread over the picture and each gold star by your picture, it meant you had died in highschool and these gold stars were those who had perished in the great car crash. Donnie Wind, you see, knew he was one of the last people on earth to see these smiling seniors alive, and he studied each gold-star portrait and tried to remember the boy or the girl as he or she had been that night. But no, these boys and girls had no connection with the gang of laughing screamers who had piled into a single car and gone off cheering and jeering to their doom. And Carrie Steen, she had no gold star beside her picture, for she had not died with the others, you see, and in her picture, she was not smiling like the others who had died, because, some said, she had never got over it, living when the others had died.

And so Donnie Wind turned now and went back up the hall, the way he had come, and he came upon the trophy case, the very center of the school, and the broad front doors were just there and beyond the flag pole and the flag hanging there and he went out of this hallowed and hated place, it had been that for everyone who had ever come here, no returned student had ever been excepted.

Donnie Wind rolled over in bed. The woman was still gone and now her dress was gone too, but the shoes and other things still rested on the floor under the chair and he knew that even if Carrie Steen liked barefoot and did not much care for the constriction of underclothes, she would be

back for them and him, for they had a date tonight. Tonight they were leaving town. And even if she didn't come back, he knew where they would meet tonight. At the school, in the auditorium, there on the very last row in the back.

Donnie Wind covered face with pillow. He knew where he was going now, that bad night or evening or maybe it had been morning, when he had known the truth about them and this place, but he had first to get there, he and Carrie Steen.

Carrie Steen knew of a lost town, only a few miles outside of town, not far off the highway, going up toward the badlands. Carrie Steen knew this. There had been another town before their town, this town established back in another century, and this small town, and it had been very small, only three or four houses, had not made it much longer than a year. And nothing had been left back of this town and Carrie Steen drove off on the dirt roads searching it out, where it had been, searching for something that was not there and they had not found it, gone from the face of the earth. Same for the Indian massacre, the massacre of the Indians, the massacre of their ponies by the white soldiers—Carrie knew of this as well. That somewhere up in the badlands oh so long ago the Indians had surrendered to the white soldiers and the white soldiers had gathered the Indian ponies, hundreds of them, and had circled them and it had taken the white soldiers most of one day to shoot the ponies and their carcasses had been left to rot and be taken by scavengers, the bones scattered to the wind, and they drove up into the badlands and did not find a single bone there, all the ponies and that left of them gone.

Now Carrie took the car back the way they had come into town, the way they would be leaving tonight, back onto the highway that led to the hub city. And while driving Carrie spoke of the town that was gone and how it had come to be gone and she spoke of the Indian ponies and how it had taken a hundred soldiers most of one morning to kill them all and then she spoke of where they were going now, down into the canyon, the pit of the canyon where that night so long ago nine youths had died and she spoke of them and that night as if Donnie Wind knew nothing of the matter, as if they had not been here before, only days before. But there where the highway went off the flat and dropped into the canyon Carrie Steen stopped the car and looked over to Donnie Wind and she smiled and there was no smile to it.

“But we've been here before, haven't we? You and I and Dotty Rainbow, haven't we?”

Donnie Wind rolled over in bed and in so doing went now to the last place he would be going in his memory. That bad night or evil morning or

deadly evening that Donnie Wind first knew and knew for sure that Carrie Steen had a lover and that lover was the mild, kind science teacher, Doc Bavender, they called him that. Yes. Now Donnie Wind rolled over in bed and went to that.

They came back to town, downtown, that block that runs between the bank and the barbershop and, to the south, over the street, Loren's Cafe and Bull's market and other shops. Getting here Donnie Wind had napped and when he woke the car had stopped and it had been stopped in the middle of the street and left there and Carrie Steen was not behind the wheel or anywhere else in the car. Then he looked behind and saw the girls' two cars, one sharp red, the other white as fresh milk, parked there, nose to the curb, and the girls were inside the red car and Carrie Steen was outside it, leaning against the next car over, and she was smoking a cigaret, the girls at it too, and laughing and telling the girls some tale, the girls laughing too. Now Carrie Steen spied Donnie Wind spying and she laughed more and tossed down her cigaret and leaned in and spoke to the dark girl behind the wheel and pointed toward Donnie Wind and the dark girl got out of the red car and she and Carrie Steen came toward where Donnie Wind was hiding out. Wished he were, as there showed some menace in the approach of Carrie Steen and the dark girl. Next things got strange. Carrie Steen and the dark girl opened the car's front doors, one to each door, no escape, the dark girl moved quick and reached in and dragged Donnie Wind out of the car, saying mysteriously,

“Get the lead out, Wind. We're the babysitters now.”

While as enigmatically Carrie Steen turned from the car and the action there and looked across the street to the bank building. Not so much the bank building as toward the barbershop found in its wall and not so much the barbershop as the windows there on the second floor, one window in particular, there above the barbershop, the window that carried the words INSURANCE and REAL ESTATE, though some of the letters were missing. Then reaching back, still watching the window, she tapped the car horn, a morse code message, *dot dot dash dot*, and she tapped it out again. During this Donnie Wind found himself in the red car's back seat and now the red car came to life and like those big whirling wheels at the fair what was up was down, what down up, and Donnie Wind went under. Then the car screeched to a stop—there was only a red light and the sheriff's car there—and Donnie Wind took the opportunity of this sweet moment of inertia to look back out of the rear window, to where they had started. And what he saw there, what he saw was a man's figure come down the stairs there by the bank clock and the figure, though seen in silhouette and not

entirely clearly, wore a fedora hat with all brims turned up and some glasses that could have been horn rim and a tweed jacket and tie and the sensible walking shoes and there was the cigar in the small man's teeth, and now this figure crossed the street quickly, moving to Carrie Steen. She stood there by the car's open door and her hands were held out, not much but enough, and she was smiling and the small man came to her and took her hands and Carrie Steen gently tugged the man to her and, though she didn't really need it, she stood on tiptoe and put her face to the man's and whispered in his ear and in withdrawing from the man, a touch, it looked very much indeed that her lips had brushed the man's face. And it was then that Donnie Wind knew what would grow ever more certain during the rest of his stay, the rest of his life, that Carrie Steen had a lover and that this lover was Doc Bavender, they called him that, and that he would not be going to California with her, she would be leaving him back or he would not be going on and this was their farewell. You could see it in their eyes. It was a love without hope, a love that would never live, and this was the end of it.



Dorothea Rainborough's annual production was to be played that night, opening night, in the auditorium at the school and they had arranged to meet there. Tonight they would meet at their hometown, only it would be a hometown up there on a stage and it would not be a real hometown but for those few hours and then it would be more real than any hometown in the world, as real as the hometown they would be leaving tonight, never to see it again. Yes, it had all been arranged, it would all work out. They would meet those few hours at their hometown and then they would rise and turn their backs to it and walk away.

They wanted to sit in the back row, these three, but they did not want to sit together. Not Carrie Steen anyway, nor Doc Bavender, and maybe Donnie Wind preferred that these last few hours in his hometown, maybe the last hours he would ever spend here, that they be passed there alone and on his own.

The auditorium's two aisles made three back rows and Doc Bavender would take the left, Carrie Steen right, and Donnie Wind would sit between them, in the longer center back row. They came early and the back rows were empty then and they had their choice of seats and took them and soon were pleased at coming early, as a group arrived and, ignoring all the better seats forward, took up the rest of the back row seats and some in the row forward. Donnie Wind was seated the center seat in the row so he sat untouched as these folks filed in from both aisles. No problem there,

though a fellow next over did lean out and give Donnie Wind a glare, like maybe these seats were reserved. As all these newcomers, both men and women, wore short blue jackets and funny little caps, blue as well and trimmed with gold braid, and there were pinned on their chests buttons and badges and ribbons and things, all red, white and blue but for the braid, Donnie Wind wondered if this was indeed some sort of club and maybe he was sitting where he shouldn't be. Carrie Steen and Doc Bavender seemed to be having similar problems with similarly dressed club members, some of these acting in very rude terms to both Carrie Steen and Doc Bavender. But then Carrie Steen was always one to give as good as she got. Like, when a glaring old woman took Carrie Steen's seat and wouldn't get up, Carrie grabbed the old girl's collar and hoisted her up and took her by her dress seat and walked her to the row in front. Then Carrie Steen returned to her seat and she smiled at all the people down the row and wiggled her fingers in a little wave and all the people turned and looked straight ahead, as if maybe Carrie Steen hadn't meant those gestures to be so friendly as they might seem.

This group came outfitted for trouble, maybe even a war by the looks of it. Most notable was a large national flag, gold-fringed, and small state and local and club flags, these gold-fringed too. There were two Bibles in the crowd, that he could see, and a number of what looked to be hymnals. One woman carried a scroll of paper tied with a ribbon and the way she held it, sort of up and out of the way, it could've been that old whiskers come down from the mountains bearing commandments. Musical instruments. Couple bugles and a trumpet and a fife and a small drum that had the oddest twist to its circle, like it had been left out in the rain and then left to dry and warp like no drum Donnie Wind had ever seen.

All this observed and the house rapidly filling, the house lights dimming, Donnie Wind napped.

He woke to an uproar. All the people in the back row, all but Carrie Steen and Donnie Wind and Doc Bavender, had got themselves out into the aisle and arranged themselves in marching pairs and had got their instruments fired up and those who weren't counting cadence had taken to singing hymns and at a signal from the fellow with the baton the two marching groups, one to each aisle, all hollering and tooting they marched down to the front of the auditorium and made a formation before the stage, this looking out. Now that the shouting and bugling had calmed some the woman with the scroll unscrolled it and she looked straight at the Rainboroughs and commenced to read it in a voice that did not carry, not to the back row anyway. As the Rainboroughs' backs were to Donnie Wind, what he saw was

that Mr. Rainborough sat slumped, head to his chest, as if he were very tired and would as soon have stayed home tonight; while Mrs. Rainborough, who sat erect, head held high, now her back looked straighter, head held higher than ever, she seemed to be listening intently to the scroll woman's words, as if the woman were a freshman reading for a part she just might get, a small part.

Donnie Wind looked one way down the aisle and there sat Doc Baverder, leaned forward, head down, as if he were reading something there on the floor, his face showing that concentration. While Carrie Steen, like the drama coach she sat high and proud and her green eyes blazed anger and maybe they glistened too and these would have been tears of anger as well. At this point the scroll woman handed the scroll to a bossy man, looked it anyway, and he went to the Rainboroughs and held out the scroll to Mr. Rainborough. The superintendent did not even look at the scroll. He just reached out and took it, and the same for the man's offered hand: Mr. Rainborough took the hand and shook it without looking. It was over quickly. Some applause, a couple boos, and the group turned as one and marched out of the auditorium, not so much tooting and singing now, and was gone.

But all that was soon forgot. Now darkness came and came swift as falling sword. Not total darkness, just close. The stage curtain down front still glowed a velvet purple, but that was a long way away and Donnie Wind felt very much like a small furred animal crouched safely in his den, watching out toward the wildly-colored and briskly played drama of the world beyond.

Not a great deal of action now that the curtain was raised. In fact there wasn't any at all. A bare dark stage and that was it. Still all sat forward for they knew something was up. Even when this old stage manager came tottering out—they had pulled the curtain early or he hadn't set his alarm—and took to putting chairs here and there, whistling to himself and maybe talking too, muttering under his breath, stopping now and then to see how he had done setting up the chairs, going back to straighten one here, scoot another over an inch or so, standing back to view his work anew, scratching his head, like all this was a great work of art and he was a great artist who had to get every detail just right. In time the old fellow seemed satisfied with what little he had done and he brushed his hands and went out away from the stage and stood there by the proscenium, so that he was as much offstage as on. He took out a pipe and stuffed it carefully and lit it, or maybe it was only a stage pipe, the glow in the bowl a small red light, and that done the most extraordinary thing happened. The little old man took to talking and not talking like an actor would talk, overloud and overlong, grimacing here and gesturing there—no, this was plain talk the old

man did, like he had come upon you on the street and he was telling you the latest news or wondering about the weather, talking the way real people talked out in the real world and what the old fellow was telling you was about a hometown, his hometown, yours too, our hometown, even if you had never been there.

It was all make-believe, or most of it, there wasn't much more than some chairs and some side stairs both sides and some actors and everything else was faked, or just not there, things like houses and such, all had to be imagined and these things imagined were ever so more real than what some carpenters and decorators had built onstage, compared to what you imagined all that was but a set on a stage. And the old fellow who stood there and by his talking he took you on a tour of his hometown, you didn't take a step, you didn't move a muscle.

Now the lights came up, some, not much, there downstage and now came a gawky paperboy delivering papers door-to-door, only there weren't any papers. Just the arm moving like he was throwing and the *plop* of the paper banging the front porch, next the milkman came along, carrying zero but the bottles still tinkled as he walked along.

Now the viewers, even those in the back row got it. There was going to be nothing there but chairs and a couple tables and actors. And there you were. Stage lights went up and there were two tables, one stage right, one stage left, and two men sat at these tables, one man to a table, and two women were walking here and there behind them, gesturing in the oddest way, like paperboy and milkman, hands empty. The men sat sipping and there was no coffee, not even cups, and held their hands off the table and were looking at something as if there were something held between their hands and there wasn't and both men moved their heads from left to right and back, like maybe they were reading invisible newspapers; and all the strange gesticulations that came from the women, they were whipping up breakfasts you couldn't see—one woman flipped a flapjack that wasn't there, not even the flipper. You wanted a couple over easy, bacon crisp, French toast, you could have it or anything you wanted right there in your head.

And the strangest thing to it, some in the audience swore they could smell bacon frying and could smell it burning and sure enough the absent-minded wife made as if to grab the skillet off the fire quick and sure enough when she served her husband—the grumpy one, the other fellow took his ham how it came and took it with a smile—he glowered at the plate and said, “Crisp again,” and all could have told him so.

It went on like that. The two tables, the two couples, they were two houses sitting side by side. This all knew, or most, when the two men finished their

breakfasts and walked out their front doors and greeted each other as if there were walls between them and they hadn't seen the neighbor since last night. Two houses then and it got easier, seeing things that weren't there. Like when the rear stage lights went up and there were two step ladders placed there and on these ladders, up near the top rung, sat a boy on one ladder, a girl on the other, it didn't take long to understand that these were two-story houses and these children were preparing for school, there in their bedrooms, the girl brushing her hair and the boy tossing a baseball up and making a catch, no brush, no comb, no ball, no mitt, the boy chattering away to the girl, the girl pretty much ignoring him, more interested in the work she saw in the mirror, all this going on through their open bedroom windows, the two houses set up pretty close due to stage restrictions.

Now things moved fast. After a quick passage the boy and the girl were back on their step ladders, the windows still open, and the moms were cooking, the dads eating yet another breakfast, but now things had changed. Sure, the girl was at the mirror still, but now the boy was at a mirror too, it looked like he was tying a tie or trying to, and more had changed than that. This was not tomorrow or the next week or even a year later. No, time had passed and the old folks downstairs had greyed a little and they walked with greater care and the boy's voice had gone lower and baseball and mitt had been forgot. But it was in the girl that you saw most clearly the change that had come, for the girl had become a young woman, one of the most beautiful women most had ever seen and when you looked hard, most, or some anyway, saw this young woman was the dreamy blonde who went around town in the white car. And you looked again at the young woman's mother and there it was again: the dark girl in the red car.

And it was there that our viewer knew an unease. Like he really didn't much want all these people growing up and older. Like he wanted them back the way they had been at the start, parents not young but not old, the girl a mirror-gazing girl, the boy tossing a ball around. Some felt something dire and dangerous in this sudden change and in this they were soon proved right. Dead right. As not long after this wedding day, the girl gone to young woman gone to young mother, now she took ill and went on to die. And all this coming so quick, that when the beautiful young woman came back onstage you didn't at first understand this was not the young woman but the young woman's ghost you were seeing. She hadn't got better and pulled through it after all.

It was there that she left, when the young woman died and the stage went dark but for spots and the young woman came in dressed all in white, this signifying she was now a ghost. Just before the stage went dark Donnie

Wind had looked over and Carrie Steen was still there and Doc Bavender was there too, and now that the stage was dark, all but the young woman and she glowed white in the black, now Donnie Wind looked again and, if Doc Bavender was still there, Carrie Steen was not. Ladies room, nicotine fit, this viewer figured and went back to the play with such concentration that it was near the end that he looked again and saw Doc Bavender still there and that Carrie Steen was not. Then it was that he knew she was gone and gone for good, gone forever, and she had left them both behind, Donnie Wind and Doc Bavender, and the oddest warmth came to Donnie Wind. He didn't really mind at all, being left behind, nor did Doc Bavender by the looks of it. Like Donnie Wind, Doc Bavender was leaned forward, watching, listening as if his life depending on it, not noticing, not caring if Carrie Steen was gone and would never be back. It was like that with Donnie Wind as well, leaning forward, watching, listening for all he was worth, for now there was the stage before him and there was the funeral and the young woman's little boy placing flowers that weren't flowers on her grave and now all took to singing a hymn as they moved away from the grave, leaving the young mother there to stay back with the dead.

Yes, it was that life he went to now. A life that was brighter, darker, sadder, happier, quicker and longer, a life that was so much larger than his own, it meant so much more. Our viewer then set his mind free and it flew toward the stage and he was free there as well, as free as he ever had been and, maybe, ever would be. Till the next night's curtain was rung up anyway.

She had come up into the mountains, their foothills anyway, and the late storm all in town had predicted had come in and as the road beneath the car went steep and steeper, so did the snow fall heavier. She lit a cigaret. She stubbed it out. She looked to the flask there on the seat and left it there. She twisted the radio knob. There was nothing but static and she twisted the radio off. She was weeping again when she had thought she was done with it and would never weep again. Or maybe it was only the cold. She could not get the heater to work and it had grown very cold. Maybe that was it. Eyes weeping at the bitter cold. She did not think of much for a time or maybe she thought of so many things and they all got so scrambled and confused that it might as well have been not thinking at all. But as the road grew steeper, much steeper, and the snow came at her heavier than ever, for a time she thought only of that. Of seeing the road before her headlights, of seeing anything through the blinding snow, anything at all. Now the road went steeper still and there through the snow's mist rose a sign—mountain pass, so many feet, so many miles ahead—and looking ahead she saw the faintest light, a color in such white and black, a fine necklace of crimson curling up toward the pass and she knew these to be taillights of a string of cars, the cars moving so slowly they were near locked together or they were cars stopped just under the pass. That was it, the woman thought and beat at the wheel helplessly, without hope. The pass was closed and all were being turned back, to return to where they had begun, and the woman could never go back. She could not live if she had to go back.

There had been an accident, the woman saw, as she saw ambulances and patrol cars and a large crane there on the side of the road and there were floodlights fixed to the crane and they shone down into the gorge where the car had plummeted off the road and the emergency men wore yellow slickers and the medical people white and the highway patrolmen wore fur-lined jackets and caps and boots and looked like friendly bears coming to beg at a tourist's window. They leaned down to speak to each driver, to speak of the difficulty and danger ahead, before sending each car on its way

up toward the pass. And now they came to the next car and the next, till now the happy bears had come to the woman's car and leaned down and she rolled down the window and knew a happiness rare to her, nothing could harm her now. In a short time she would be going up to the pass and once over the pass she would be going down down down and there would be no snow there and in time night would fade and dawn come over the mountains and there would be nothing there to keep her back, to keep her from going on and on and on.

The first cop, he was shorter than the second cop and was smiling, as the second cop was not, he leaned down and smiled at the woman. "New York plates. You're a long way from home, pilgrim."

"It's my husband's car, he's from New York. Actually it's my car, a gift from my husband. He doesn't drive, you see. He grew up in New York and everyone there takes a cab or the subway and he never learned."

The cop smiled. The second cop was playing his flashlight beam over the things in the car's back seat and now had come to play the beam over the front seat and the woman as well.

"Not knowing how to drive a car," the first cop smiled. "On a night like this that doesn't sound like such a bad idea."

The second cop was not amused. He played the flashlight beam over the woman's hands. They were shaking and she had gripped the wheel hard to make them stop. "Is your husband still in New York?"

"No. He's ahead in California. I'm going there to meet him now. He's in Hollywood and he works in the movies. He does the lighting in the movies and he is very good at it. He left Broadway to go to Hollywood last fall and now I am going there to meet him. I am an actress. Or was. In New York."

"So you two didn't leave New York together—last fall."

"Yes, we did. Oh I see. We had not planned to go straight from New York to Hollywood. We—no, I was the one, I wanted to go back to my small hometown, I am not from New York, and when we got there we liked it so much that our stay lengthened. But then the people in Hollywood were after my husband to come out and get down to work. They needed him for a very special picture. And the money was so good and, to tell the truth, I think he might have been growing a touch bored with small-town life, being from New York, and so we agreed. He would go on and leave me back, to finish up some unfinished business, and go on alone, on his own. And now that business has been finished and I am going to California to meet my husband and we will live there. And maybe I will get work there too. As an actress. Anything."

Now the tall, serious cop had turned off his flashlight, he no longer put the beam on the woman's eyes and her legs, and his voice had lost its hard edge. When he spoke to the woman she knew that it was interest his voice showed now.

"Where is this hometown of yours? I grew up in a small town down out of these hills."

"Yes, it is down out of the mountains. Out on the plain. In the next state back. Not far from here. I've been driving—three hours, I think."

The tall cop looked more interested still. "Three hours—now that's just about where my hometown would be. Maybe we grew up in the same little town. What's the name of your hometown?"

The woman smiled and the cops seemed to like that. "Some of us call it Eastertown."

The tall cop shook his head. "Eastertown. Now that's a new one on me. And I thought I knew every little town to be found out on that plain."

"It really is a very small place. And so out-of-the-way. Sometimes you wonder if it exists at all, it is so small."

The tall cop took to looking serious again and his eyes went to the flask on the seat, but now a third cop had come up and the tall, serious cop was drawn away to confer with him.

The short happy cop came back to the window. He looked serious now. He looked to the two cops standing away and he looked to the crane, its floodlights showing down into the gorge, not to the bottom, the gorge was too deep for that. The cop shook his head.

"Looks like they're about ready to bring the body up. Or the first body. We're not sure how many were in the car. There could have been two. Two women. Or maybe just the one."

"Two? That's terrible. Do you know how it happened?"

"Went off the road. Coming downhill. Going east. Toward where you came from. Going back down onto the plain. It had started snowing some and she just took it off the road. No curve or anything. You can see that. She came down the hill ninety miles an hour and took it off the road. Almost like it was on purpose. And if that's a guess, it's an educated one. We know this car and we know this woman. The first emergency guy winched down, his description sounded like her car. She's been in trouble with the law since she came over here."

"Where did she come from?"

"From the next state back. Where you come from. Think she comes from a wealthy family. Least her car, before she started banging it up, was

new and about as good as money could buy. A fine little convertible coupe. She came over to that sanitarium we got higher on up. Up near the ski resort. Drying out, I guess. Resting up. She had a friend with here, a lady friend, or she met the girl here, up at the resort. The girl was waiting tables there at the ski lodge and while the woman was in the sanitarium, she took over the car and started all the wild driving. Driving all out and drunk and maybe even some drugs were involved. The girl didn't have a valid license and she had a record in the next state back, where you come from, and we took the keys away and impounded the car and that was that. For a time. When the woman had done her time in the sanitarium, she checked herself out and paid some fines and hauling and storage expenses and got her car back. And then this woman with some money and some class, she went and got a job waitressing there at the ski lodge, there where her friend worked, and I guess she and the girl got an apartment up on the hill, and these don't come free, and commenced to live, well, some said commenced to live as man and wife. About that—I don't know nor much care to. Then the drinking and the driving reckless started up again and the drugs, well there were a number of drugstore burglaries, just drugs taken, and if the woman and the girl weren't top of the list of suspects—you'd be surprised how many drug users we have around here, checkouts from the sanitarium, the rich folks who come to ski, they come as far away as California and they bring their drugs with them or buy them from one another here—well if not number one, these two women were well on their way there. Then one night last week the car was seen parked in the alley behind a drugstore and when the old night watchman saw the back door glass broken, well he didn't find anybody inside, but when he came back out into the alley the car was gone. He remembered the plate numbers, a plate from the next state back, where you come from. Some of our men checked out the apartment and the women were gone, rent in arrears, and the restaurant where they worked there at the lodge, they were gone from there too, pay checks not picked up, just gone and the hunt was on. Nothing big to it much, not till they were stopped by one of our officers and while he was running a radio check, they took off and by the time he got back in and got turned around, they were gone. And then the hunt was on and it was big enough and now it's got bigger still. Now there's been a bank robbed. A man and a woman. But one of the tellers thought it could have been two women, one of the women dressed as a man. And you look at the girl's mug shot, it wouldn't have taken much to make her a man. Just a haircut. Then there was a filling station held up and now it was two men, though the pump jockey thought one of the men might have been a woman and there were other

holdups and break-ins—the holdups quiet, nothing near as big as the bank job. In fact, there was this grocery store break-in and all that was taken was some bologna and bread and a bottle of mayonnaise and a box of chocolate bars.” The cop shook his head. “Like maybe they were playing jokes with us. Or, like one detective said, maybe there was some division between them now. One wanted to go on and keep it up, while the other wanted to quit and go away. And maybe that was what was going on tonight. The car was spotted in a town up over the pass and the officer pursued for a while, but he left off and radioed ahead for a roadblock. Just one person in the car as far as he could tell. The car was headed east, coming towards us now, and it had taken to snowing, and some of us thought maybe it was the woman, she had taken off without the girl, and she was headed east. Trying to make the pass before the storm closed her down. Maybe trying to get back to her hometown and get a lawyer and try to get herself out of trouble. Who knows? Anyway we pursued but with the snow, easy. We wanted to set up a roadblock up at the pass, but we were too late for that. So we called the highway patrol the next state over and they set up a roadblock there at the state line. But,” the cop shook his head, “she never made it. This stretch’s not a place you’d expect anybody to go off the road. But then she must’ve been moving at a pretty good clip coming downhill. And then there was the snow. Wet and slick. Can turn an innocent lane deadly. The second woman, we just don’t know. She may have been in the car when the first officer stopped the woman, maybe in the back seat taking a nap. Well we’ll know soon enough.” The cop looked toward the crane, its winch now at work. “They’re bringing something up now.” The cop stood away from the car. He looked back down the hill. “Well ma’am, looks like you’re the last one coming up tonight. Unless we get a late drunk. Best be on your way if you’re going. You shouldn’t have any trouble once you’re over the pass and they’ve got the pass plowed. Just take it slow and easy,” the cop smiled. “And maybe I’ll see you in the movies some day.”

“You never can tell. I’m very good at acting.”

The cop nodded. “You know, the highway boys in the next state, they had something on the woman. Not much, but they had the name of her hometown. What’s the name of the town you say you come from?”

“Eastertown, some of us call it that.”

“No, that’s not it. Right on the tip of my tongue. Ah well, thought you might’ve known this woman.”

“No. We’ve never met. And I feel as if I’ve known her all my life. And I have no idea who she is or who she was or who she might have gone on to be.”

“You’re right. It’s a big world,” said the cop but he wasn’t listening to the woman, he was moving away to the crowd that had gathered around the crane.

The woman lit a cigaret. Her hands were steady now. She put off the brake and took the car out into the middle of the road, skirting the crowd at the crane, and drove on up into the snow and the night and the pass that had been plowed.

**G**ood Friday  
*an extraordinary school board meeting*

It was an extraordinary meeting, called to consider the matter of Leo “Doc” Bavender. Whether or not to terminate his contract and, if terminated, when. Van Glassmoyer, chairman of the board, was not in attendance. Bavender was his son-in-law and the banker felt his judgment might be prejudiced. For termination, some would have thought, but most knew that Bavender was the banker’s favorite and that the banker would have argued hard for the teacher’s retention. This absence pleased the anti-Bavender gang, for Glassmoyer was the richest man in town and not a few of their number had loans, and some of them of considerable size, taken out from the bank, and at least one of these long overdue. The board had no vice-chairman and Maw Harbish, called by some the board’s talking woman, volunteered for the position without having to be asked. Among those present were Merce Haygood, rancher and farmer, retired, called landowner now, by himself anyway, the town’s second richest man and friend to Bavender; and Superintendent Llewellyn Rainborough, not looking pleased, looking terribly unhappy in fact, though you didn’t know what part of that was losing one of the best and best-liked teacher ever to come to the school and what part was seeing such a decent man get himself into this fix and the superintendent powerless to get him out.

Maw Harbish had arrived first in the windowless room there at the rear of the bank and had taken the chair at the long table’s head and Superintendent Rainborough had taken the chair at the foot, traditionally the school’s superintendent sat there, down the table from the board’s chairman. Maw Harbish looked as if she might have liked to have had a gavel, like Judge Hale, but there were those in attendance who thought she did just fine without it.

“You want to vote first? You want to talk first? Let’s vote first.”

Merce Haygood. "We'll talk first." And a lot of those around the table looked to the landowner as if he were the one sitting at the table's head.

Maw Harbish wasted little time fixing that. She opened a briefcase that looked new and drew out some papers and slapped them on the table.

"We got lists of signatures here calling for resignation and we got others out being circulated and there's one that gone missing. Seems like it fell into the wrong hands and it was set alight or torn to tiny bits."

There was a laugh, maybe a hoot, Maw Harbish hadn't been quick enough to spot it.

"If anybody here hasn't signed, this is the newest one and there's plenty of room at the bottom. Pass it around"

Looked like everybody had already signed, as the petition to fire went around pretty quick, till it got to the hooter, probably, the fellow always making cracks, and he took out his cigarette lighter and got it going and got it pretty near the petition, he was reading the small print.

During this time a timid soul spoke out, so soft that Maw Harbish, whose children had advised an aid, had to shout it out, *speak up or shut up*, and the timid soul spoke again, still softly but not so soft as before.

"Why isn't Doc Bavender here himself? I think Doc Bavender should be here himself."

Maw Harbish could hoot back. "This ain't a trial and there's nothing in the rule book that says the accused has any right to be here when *we* and not any democratic process decide to give him the boot. You're finished."

The superintendent spoke the length of the table, maybe it was sad. "Actually a teacher who's contract is threatened to be terminated does have the right to be present at the hearing to terminate and I spoke to him and said he would be welcome here, that many of us think he should be here, but he declined. He said he did not want to be here and that he would not be here. And he said he would make no defense in his behalf and would not encourage anyone else to do so. He offered to write out his resignation there on the spot, but I said I would not be accepting it, even if he did write it. Not now. Not yet."

Now Merce Haygood spoke for the first time. His voice was quiet, but it was not soft. "And this so-called meeting is not an official termination hearing. It is a meeting to decide if there should be a termination hearing and if so, when and where."

Ma Harbish. "And where did you come up with that courthouse hoo, Merce Haygood?"

"Van Glassmoyer and I have spoken to a lawyer and he has advised that this is not a legal termination hearing, that charges for termination must be

made public and that the public has a right to attend. Those who are interested and I think they might make quite a crowd.”

“Stuff and feathers. What loophole mechanic thought that up.”

“Mr. Herder. He has been the school’s legal adviser for as long as memory serves and knows well the rights of the school and those who teach there.”

“Next you’re going to be telling us the brats got a right to hide behind that constitution.”

“Actually they do, but their parents would be their legal representatives.”

Superintendent Rainborough spoke the length of the table. “I think all this may be pointless anyway. I don’t know, I have this feeling that he is ready to walk away. Walk away from our school and our children and our town, walk away from it all.”

Ma Harbish was not up to the idea of a philandering Red getting away without being fired, but someone else opened his mouth.

“And there are the tragedies to consider. Seems like we ought to consider that.”

Now Merce Haygood spoke again and he so hated what he was saying, what he was saying was true and right and he so hated saying it. “No. The tragedies do not enter into any of this. They are no business of ours, not so long as we are gathered as school board members.”

Another spoke back to the point. “I think there is something we should address immediately, one thing. Whether this threatened termination be immediate or at the end of Doc’s contract or the end of the year.”

Superintendent Rainborough spoke to the speaker. “All of our teachers are on one-year contracts. So—the end of the contract and the end of the school year would be the same day.”

“Old-Timers’ Day,” said Merce Haygood, enigmatically.

“All right. Hands or paper?”

A murmur went around the table. Hands it would be.

“All right. All for immediate first. Then for end of school year.”

Merce Haygood smiled some. “I feel that those who want to see Doc Bavender serve out this school term should vote first.” And Merce Haygood raised his hand and a good number did likewise, more than half of those present. And for immediate—Maw Harbish only, and the old fellow who was always dozing off when Maw Harbish was up, he raised a hand but he did it so quick, jerked it up, jerked it back, he could have caught a fly.

“I feel he’s just going to walk away anyway,” said the superintendent, but his voice, quiet anyway, had lost energy and only those seated near heard.

One of those was the timid head clerk at the bank:

“He closed out his accounts with us yesterday. Both of them. Checking and savings,” she said and all listened to that. Taking it all out of the bank meant something. You were moving or going off on a trip or just walking away.

No one ruled for a time, everybody talking, not loud but all at once. Maw Harbish came back.

“Let’s keep it down. All right. Let’s air out the charges. Do we start with the New York floozy or the drugged and duped highschool girl or the communist conspiracy?”

“And he didn’t go to church either. Always out on the golf course,” said another wisenheimer, they were everywhere. “Drinking and betting and cheating on the score card or on Sunday mornings not keeping score at all.”

“I know just how you feel,” said a fellow, not so much a wit as a touch slow. “Once I made a hole-in-one and there was nobody there and now not even my own wife believes it.”

All laughed, even Maw Harbish showed teeth.

“All right. Let’s start with the dalliances. The married woman. The older woman. They paraded it. They flaunted it. I personally saw them holding hands.”

“That’s right. It was raining and he helped her jump a mud puddle. Or maybe she was helping him. When she shook hands she really gripped it.”

The slow fellow again. Just how slow was he?

“All right. All right. Well as this lady of the night has left town, gone back to California and is unavailable for questioning—”

“She has not gone back to California. She was going there from New York to meet her husband.”

What did that mean? And now the superintendent chipped in.

“She once told my wife that she loved him very much. She said it was the first time in her life she had ever been in love.”

Silence. No one said a word. No one but the slow fellow.

“You know, the last year of his life he lived in this very building. It used to be Ben Hickey’s insurance office. He sold real estate too. I think that office might be right overhead from where we’re sitting.”

Maw Harbish didn’t know what it was the slow fellow said, but whatever it was it made all go solemn and now Merce Haygood leaned down to the slow fellow and spoke in his ear and the slow fellow covered his eyes and said,

“Oh no. I didn’t mean to say that. I didn’t mean that.” And the man on the other side patted the slow fellow’s back and said that it was fine.

Now the superintendent stood and you saw how tall he was. Usually he kept his seat, he wasn’t the boss here, here he was the servant. But he didn’t

sound like servant now. He sounded unhappy and it was the unhappy that came with tears or brought them.

“I can’t take anymore of this. I can’t take it anymore. I’m not well. And I’ve got to help my wife with the Easter service, the sunrise service. And Jack Cook’s leaving too. Oh Dwight Cage will do fine. We can keep things going till the end of term anyway. But next year, if they’re both gone, I don’t know. None of this matters anyway. There’s no point in it. Let’s stop all this. Please. He’s made an appointment to see me Monday. Monday after school. And I know what he wants. What he wants us to do. He wants us to leave him be. He wants us to let him go, let him go away. And I will. We all will. Merce, Monday after I’ve spoken to him, I’d like to speak to you and Van. Not the full board. That’s not necessary now. I’ll just be wanting a word. Please forgive me.”

And with that the superintendent left the room and all about the table had risen and were leaving the room as well, all but the slow fellow and the old boy who napped, he was napping now, but the slow fellow had to have someone to tell it to.

“That’s what that meant. It’s Easter, going to be, and I had forgot it. Didn’t understand what the preacher was saying. Found it a mystery. The preacher saying the fellow we’re going to fire would make a good Jesus. Maybe he’ll be this year’s Savior come Easter sunrise, coming out of his tomb and standing way, way up there on the hill, you can just see him up there against the sky.”

Two board members came and one took the slow fellow by the arm and the other woke the napper and an extraordinary school board meeting was done, even if it had not been properly adjourned.

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### *fat boy (fat no more)’s last morning*

She sometimes thought it was all his idea, had been from the first. She had seen the letter from the draft board, the letter calling him back to service and, when war started, on to war. But somebody said that didn’t mean anything. You could go down to the draft board and volunteer for the draft. A lot of kids were doing that these days. Kids who were messing up in school, kids who wanted to get it over with now, didn’t want to wait till twenty-two when their names would legally come up, and kids who simply wanted to go into the service but not bad enough they wanted to volunteer on the up and up and get a three, four year stretch, they could volunteer for

the draft and only do two. That was what had happened, she knew it now. He had gone down to the draft board when nobody was looking and told them he wanted to go back into the service and, when it started up, on to the war. And then one day he would find the letter in the mailbox and he would show it around, show it to her, and show surprise, doing ever so well the surprise, and could blame it on the draft board and the service and the coming war, when it was exactly what he wanted in the first place. To get away from her and the school and the town and get back to the service and, when it came along, get back into war.

She said she wouldn't be going over to the hub city, wouldn't be going to take him to the bus station today, the last time she would ever see him alive, she felt it, she knew it, his so-called pacifist friend could drive him over. She was staying home alone. But she knew that was only a threat, a lie. There was the sitting in the bus station or walking about the small park a block away or whatever, waiting for the bus—there was that to look forward to, wasn't there? And the bus coming in and all the other dupes gathering around it, hugging and kissing and shaking hands of the wives and sweethearts and mothers and grandmothers and maybe there would be one dupe old enough to have children and they would be young, a little girl or a little boy, maybe one just a babe in arms, these arms the dupe's young wife's arms and she would be fighting off the tears and the older kid would ask, *Daddy, why is mommy crying?* and daddy dupe would kneel to the little guy, maybe his mother would raise him not to be a dupe, and he would say, *Because I'm a dupe going into the service and off to war; now you take good care of Mommy while I'm gone, OK?* and the kid would salute like his dad and now the wife and mother could not hold it back, she broke down and cried and cried—yes, that would be such fun, wouldn't it? And the bus pulling out of the station and all the men on the bus, let's call them fools now, waving and grinning—maybe a couple solemn, with the bus pulling out of the station they saw what a terrible mistake this was—and some of these fools were saluting to all the women and the couple kiddies and couple oldsters, too old to be drafted anyway, staying home anyway, so many of these waving and blowing kisses in return and the little ones returning the salutes and so few of these were smiling, none at all but for the one little girl and she was laughing as dad made a funny face at the window, pressing his nose against the glass and holding out his ears and crossing his eyes, but the wife would not laugh at the face they all used to laugh at, she might try but she couldn't, no laughing matter this going off to war, not for those staying back.

And now the best of all, it's been saved till last, the one that will really get you in the gut, and that is—going back home alone and he's not there in the

car with you and when you pull the car in the drive he won't be coming out to carry the groceries in and inside the house will be dark and cold and quiet, there won't be the master chef back in the kitchen, none of the fragrance and warmth of that, no opera on the radio or maybe a baseball game and you feel you'll never cook again or light a fire or eat or turn a radio dial, not till he's back again, if he ever comes back. Yes, that will be close, very close to not driving him to the bus station—one of his buddies can do that—but as good as that got, nothing could ever match the sheer misery, the horror of staying at home, staying home alone.

He had been preparing for this for months, it seemed like, over a month anyway. She couldn't remember when his new regimen started. It seemed like it had started before the draft letter came and it could have, as he had received a call from somebody, not the draft board or the army but an old pal in the army, they had fought their way across France and deep into Germany and not lost any part of themselves; well the pal had lost a couple fingers on the beach and the pal hadn't told anyone about it and when the wound went bad and he did, the army doctor had wrapped up the hand and given him a shot, nothing to worry about, nothing to keep you from fighting across France and deep into Germany—yes, that was it, she remembered now. It was the old army pal who called and had told him that the army would be coming for him. The army wasn't interested in the pal now, things had changed in the army now, the two fingers gone that hadn't kept him from fighting in the last war, now those missing fingers would be keeping him home, and oh how she wished he had lost something there on the beach, not much, two fingers would be enough if they were the fingers that would keep him home now; but he had lost nothing on the beach and the army was still interested in him, the pal had called to say, he had all ten pinkies left and some military skill the army desperately needed now. He had fought in the war and he could teach the kids who hadn't all about it. And he had been what? A non-commissioned officer, a sergeant, a master sergeant, a first sergeant, a sergeant major, she couldn't remember. Only that when the army pal visited that once he had them all laughing, back when they were so foolish to think there would never be another war, the pal told of his ten-fingered friend's great talent. How he could get a thousand new recruits out on the parade ground and he didn't have to shout, didn't say a word, the pal said, all he had to do was walk along the line of stiff-standing recruits and look at them, the pal laughed, and every man and boy in this thousand were far more afraid of him than any enemy they might face.

Yes, that was the skill the army wanted back. One look from him and going off to die seemed a better deal.

The change started with running. Or maybe eating or not eating so much or not eating things that made you fat. She couldn't remember what had come first, but first noticed was the running and she liked to think that was what had started it all. Before he had gone home late, long after all were gone but himself and the janitor and Marie Blum when she stayed with him, so often he did not go home at all, staying there at the school the night, sleeping or not sleeping in the office he knew as his real home. But then the change came and he did not stay in his office after school was done and he went home when all else went home. The second or third day of this she drove out to his place, an old farm house out east of town, not that far out, maybe a mile, two, east of Eastertown. His car was there in the drive and the house was open, it was always open, never locked, but now the front door had been left open and the back door as well, and the radio was on and a pot was on low heat on the stove and this was soup that did not really need stirring but she stirred it anyway. This done, she went to the rear kitchen door and saw the tiny figure far out in the pasture and this was a man running and she went out the back door and sat on the stoop and watched the figure grow larger and larger and she knew something had changed, that something was wrong, something not right.

Perhaps she only imagined this later, after the draft board letter and all that, but now she knew she had known it that first afternoon, when he had come huffing in, walking the last bit, to shower without singing, to fall asleep in the easy chair without eating. When she had covered him without waking him and had turned the fire under the soup off and had turned off all but the bathroom light and gone quietly out of the house and had gone away, it was then, she knew it had been, that she knew he would be leaving her and he would be going away and that she would lose him.

The eating changed but not so much. Saucers instead of plates, cups instead of bowls and gone were things fried and she knew he missed these things fried, particularly the great breakfasts he had got to know in England before he and his pal and so many others had crossed the Channel to make war, English breakfasts, he said, a working man's breakfast, eggs fried and ham and bacon and sausage and grated potatoes fried and baked beans, nothing was perfect, he said, you couldn't have it all fried, and sliced tomatoes and thick country toast well buttered and make that French toast at times—all that gone. And though he ate on saucers and sipped soup from cups and turned away from things fried and things buttered, after his running had not so tired him his appetite returned and he ate well but not like before, those great spattery greasy breakfasts, there might be a return to

them, after the running, the sidesaddle hops and the sit-ups and the pushups and the army and the war were done.

The pushup, she smiled now. She had joined him in his exercises and had gotten good marks in most, good for a girl, well some trouble after the third sit-up, but it was the pushup that defeated her. Not one, not a single one was ever completed or ever would be and during the time devoted to pushups, the man doing many of his with one arm, first one arm, then the other, it was then she sat back and watched these impossible athletic efforts being done, one after another after another, and she smiled now at that. How every afternoon he would coax her on her belly, arms under her shoulders, and offer encouragement. Just one, give it a try, Blum, *push*, and after a time of that, she now smiled remembering, he had thrown up his hands, had admitted defeat and she had wept then, maybe it had been the first time, during a break from the pushup, the cruelest and most grueling exercise ever known, that she had sorrowed.

She could smile at the pushup wars now, this last morning, radio on and there had been singing in the shower this morning and last night he had passed the entire night in bed, not passing the early morning hours sleeping on a blanket on the floor. And there he was now in the kitchen and yes, back to the old days, this one last morning anyway, and he was frying up the grandest breakfast England or anywhere had seen. There would be waffles and maple syrup and molasses and apple sauce and melted butter on them as well and rich cream in his coffee and he was talking away as he cooked, cracking jokes to Doc Bavender who would be going to the bus station with them this morning, going as much as companion to her. And so good it would be to have a companion there at the last moment, he had gone into the bus now and would not be coming out, not now, not ever, so good then to have a companion on the long ride home—yes, it would be so good to have his best friend there to see him off and see her home and it was so good to have him here now, for what the man called, fat boy's last breakfast, fat boy fat no more, and have Doc Bavender to smile at all his cracks and all his army jokes, smiling at jokes she did not get at all.

Yes, it was so good that his oldest and closest friend was here this morning and that he could smile at the man's army cracks, even if, like the woman, he did not entirely get them. And now that the man, stirring and whipping and flipping at stove, counter and sink, moved on to other army jokes and cracks, Shit-on-a-Shingle, Deuce-and-a-Half, PX Bully, Slick-Sleeve Private and on and on, now even the woman could smile as well, even if she didn't understand a word, even if she thought a smile was the last

thing she would ever know on this, fat boy (fat no more)'s last morning at home.



### *Kyle at the bus station*

Kyle didn't care where he sat at the bus station cafe. Counter over table—you never knew what crazy might come up and sit across the table from you, while at the counter the crazy might be there right beside you and still you got away from having to look at him—but other than that preference, whatever stool came free at the counter was fine with Kyle, but for those stools toward the street end of the counter, there near the doors to the street. That's where the crazies came into the cafe, looking for table or stool, looking to upset your breakfast or lunch, depending on what time Kyle got up and dressed and got down to the cafe, trotting out their crazy jabber, their theories and beliefs and histories and philosophies and yarns and on and on about just about everything under the sun.

At first Kyle thought the fellow was a crazy, he had drawn another one, he attracted them as honey draws flies. The fellow came and stood right behind Kyle and there was a free stool right there, right beside him. But the fellow stood there—no wild theories about the Bible, say, how the old translation had got everything wrong, got everything standing on its head—didn't say a word about anything in fact, till Kyle got the idea that this fellow was waiting to sit at this particular stool. A lot of the bus station old-timers did that, liked to sit at a regular stool and would wait to get it and, thinking that, Kyle moved plate and cup and silverware and things over to the empty stool and sure enough the fellow behind him took the stool Kyle had vacated and then he spoke, thanked him but in the strangest way.

"Thank you," the man said. "This is where he sat when he killed her. This very stool. They drove us over here in a big yellow bus and showed it to us."

By now Kyle had nipped back to the crazy theory, but he didn't stay there long. First, this little fellow didn't look crazy, and when he spoke, though Kyle didn't understand a word of it, the fellow spoke as sane and quiet and sure as any speaking Kyle remembered hearing. Dapper. That's what his grandmother would have said and she would have been right. A dapper little fellow with his snappy brown hat, short brim turned up all around, and horn-rim glasses, like profs wear, skin brown as an Indian, hair that black too and neatly trimmed, same for the neat moustache, black and trimmed. Tweed jacket that looked soft from wear but not wrinkled and

that's how the small man wanted it, trousers as well, these were pressed but they looked to be easy wearing. Shirt wasn't white, like everybody who wasn't in the bottom of a ditch wore, and the tie, that wasn't one of those narrow shiny jobs some of his class had taken to wearing but was cut wide and not too long and was the same sort material as the jacket. Funny shoes, sturdy, grandmother would have said, not high tops but not the low quarters now in fashion and, though Kyle didn't do much walking these days, the leg, if he had he would've thought these would have made good walking shoes and he would have asked the man where he had got them. Argyle socks, grandmother had traveled and knew such words, socks with a diamond pattern to them. And the man's jacket had oval patches on the elbows and Kyle had seen these in one of those glossy magazine ads, a fellow with a couple dogs and shotgun and a string of dead ducks over his shoulder and in the background marsh, cattails growing around. But Kyle couldn't see this fellow as a hunter, the way he talked and looked, quiet and gentle, you couldn't see him taking any pleasure in killing birds or anything else. And on his pinky: a solid ring, brass darkened with age and a good-size stone in it, pretty big to have been real, dark red, and on the collar around the stone was a date, 19 thirtysomething, and he couldn't read the rest, what looked like old Latin, was there too.

It was by all this that Kyle knew the man was educated, maybe he was a prof somewhere, and Kyle missed his grandmother, he always did, she would have spoken to the man of her travels and this would have interested the man and this talk would have enchanted Kyle, like when he was little, his grandmother telling tales of her globetrotting days, taking Kyle all over the world, and using words, you didn't know what they meant but you said them over and over in bed that night and when you woke the next morning you remembered them and went around the house singing them out till it drove Mama batty, a word Mama often used, when she was around Kyle. And the man's manners, these weren't flashy, no raised pinkie or anything, just the neat way he sipped at his coffee, no slopping and slurping like Dad did, driving Mama batty. And maybe best of all, the way the fellow handled his cigar, first clipped off the end with clipper designed for that and he carefully removed the paper band and wet down the cigar, again neat as he took his coffee, no slobbering to it, and he lit the thing with an old lighter, silver polished down to show some dark metal under there, and the man lit the cigar and he never puffed the smoke in your face and he didn't chew the cigar till he was halfway to the end, like Dad did, driving Mama batty. And maybe the classiest touch of all, when the man put the cigar down in the ashtray, he was very observant and if the smoke drifted

over to Kyle or the fellow on the other side, the man moved the ashtray so the smoke didn't get into anyone's eyes, a gentleman all around.

Kyle had known about the killing here sometime last fall and though Kyle hadn't been here when the killing was done, he had heard those who had been in the cafe that morning talk enough about it that he had come to consider himself something of an expert on the matter. But however much it was that Kyle knew, that was nothing compared to what the small dapper man knew. At times it seemed the man knew everything about it. At times he knew as much about it as the killer did. Kyle didn't go so far as seeing the little guy as the killer—he would've had to break out of somewhere for that—and too Kyle couldn't see the man killing or having anything killed, like he was one of those swamis who wouldn't step on an ant. But there was something about the way the man spoke of that deadly morning, the man going so far as taking the killer's stool after Kyle had vacated, that it seemed the man was imagining himself as the killer. That he was putting himself into the killer's shoes and he was seeing everything the killer saw, doing everything the killer did, down to ordering the sticky bun the killer ordered that morning, and generally making himself into the killer, all right up there in his head.

Now, what the small man said now, how he said it, it took Kyle back to his boyhood, taking Granny's words to bed and instead of saying his prayers as Mama had directed, when she had gone off, Little Kyle had taken out these words and said them over and over and had gone off to sleep hypnotized, enchanted—that was how Kyle felt this morning, listening to the small man speak so quietly of such a terrible thing, not even that terror could keep Kyle from being a boy and being hypnotized and enchanted and drifting toward sleep.

But that ended and it ended quick. A great shadow fell over Kyle and the small man next to him. Kyle wasn't about to look back to see what thing had made this shadow, maybe it would just go away, but the small man turned on his stool and, looking back and up, he smiled at this shadow-casting monster. And when Kyle did turn stool, look back, up, what Kyle saw was pretty much what he had expected: the biggest, hardest, toughest, meanest man Kyle had ever seen. This taking Kyle back to his army days, that first morning all the recruits had gotten off the bus, all still in civvies, and there was this big man in uniform and there were chevrons and bars on the sleeves and this big man had grinned like it would break bone and he had come up to Kyle and his flat grey eyes had come close and the grin came with it and now at the bus station Kyle knew this big man was that big man and, even though this big man was still in civvies himself, Kyle knew

enough that when the small man introduced Kyle, he knew enough to take the man's hand and say,

“Morning, Top.”

And the big man grinned hard and looked hard at Kyle and then the grin and the look, you wouldn't say they softened, not exactly, but something changed as the big man looked Kyle over and Kyle saw that his pants' leg had pulled up and a bit of the white plastic leg was showing and the man now looked differently at Kyle and said,

“And how's life been treating you, soldier?”

Kyle didn't know how it happened, but without word or gesture he became part of their party—the big man and the small man and the slender, sad woman. And all acted like they had known Kyle a long time. The way Kyle walked these days, to move the plastic leg forward, Kyle had to make a swing of his hips and swing the leg out and then forward, and his new friends gave him room for that as they went out into the bus station loading zone, and they made no comment on the plastic leg and the strange walk and didn't look at it either, they went along as if leg and walk were normal, nothing you would gawk at or sympathize over.

They went through the broad glass doors and came into a hellish scene. Kyle never came here, the bus loading dock, stuck to the cafe, so it could get noisy and smoky inside, it was nothing like the stench and haze and roar, it was like war out here in the bus hangar. And the loud box overhead, announcing all the buses arriving, those headed out, this in the cafe, and you couldn't understand a word mumblemouth said, but here, back here, all these destinations and arrivals and all their times, it came spitting out a devilish crackle and cackle. Now that they had come into this smoke and howl, buses coming, buses going, exhausts spewing, gears grinding, diesels laboring, Kyle saw it was a single bus that interested the party and the bus was not doing anything, not pulling in, not pulling out. This was a bus parked calm and quiet, over against the far wall of the depot loading/unloading hall, and this bus was empty, no driver, luggage handlers or passengers in or around it and this was a bus Kyle knew well, he had been on one before. This was the bus that was waiting to take you off to the army and training and then on to the stench and shriek of war, there had been nothing like it, not even out here in the bus hangar.

These things happened.

There was a group of men—all young or nearly so, like the big man all dressed in civvies and carrying AWOL bags, you carried what was left of your civilian life in it or on your back—and they stood off to one side of the bus, all but a few looking uncertain, a couple afraid; all but for a couple

of men not that much older than these boys and these men had that look to them the big man did. Hard. Cool. They had been here before. The big man gave a sign to one of the men, hard and lean and browned, like he had never left the army or the war at all, and this man nodded back to the big man and took a clipboard from his bag and took to calling names from a list there. As each boy's name was called the boy stiffened and he saluted the corporal, probably, and the corporal growled at that, *no salutes*, he worked for a living, and the boy and his bag double-timed to a spot the corporal pointed out and there the boy stood straight and stiff and the corporal growled again, *stand at ease, son*, and the boy looked around for help and none forthcoming stood a little straight and some still and the corporal shook his head and moved on to call out the next name, till he got to a man who knew how to stand at ease and that you didn't salute an enlisted man and all the other boys took to standing like that and looking worried, if you didn't salute someone like this corporal, who did you salute?

During all this, this side of the depot hall, this happened.

The big man and the slim, sad woman had been embracing and now they had done with it and the woman held on to the man as he stepped away, just a touch. She didn't cling and she was weeping now but there was not much in it, no bawling or howling, some tears flowing from her eyes and she made no effort to stanch them or clear them off her face. She stood before the man, not so much reaching out to the man, as that one hand had stayed still in the air, where it had been before the man pulled back. She tried to smile and she tried to keep looking at the man but she couldn't and she bowed her head and you imagined now her tears fell to the ground. The big man had come to the small prof fellow now and the small prof had his glasses off and his handkerchief out and he held the handkerchief to one eye and then the other and that was it. If this man going misty did not strike you as unmanly, the bear hug the big man delivered on the small man, there was nothing remotely unmanly to that, and if the small man's feet didn't come off the ground, you knew they would have if the big had wanted them to. The big man stood back and reached out to the small man and you thought that would be a handshake but it was the big man taking a cigar from the prof's fingers. The big man took a puff on the cigar and handed it back to the prof, like a fellow who has stopped smoking and wants one last taste, something to remind him of the way things had been. Now the men shook hands and the big man spoke low and though he didn't look over to the woman you knew he was telling the prof, *take care of the old girl*, something like that.

Now the big man moved quickly. He went back to the woman and lifted her off her feet with a hug and her face tilted back and he gave her a mighty smack on the lips and some of the boys waiting to be put on the bus cheered and if the big man didn't look over at the boys he grinned. The big man picked up his AWOL bag and as he was moving off he looked back and he was looking back to Kyle, like they knew something that few people did and then the big man made a salute to Kyle. Not the sharp salute the top sergeant would be making to the green second looie, but something different, a farewell, one warrior to another, and Kyle returned the salute, two men who weren't supposed to salute anyone but superiors saluting one another.

It went quickly now, only one hitch and that wasn't much. The corporal had all the boys all lined up by now and when the big man came up and these boys saw the big man face to face, a couple of them stood to attention and the corporal growled and these two or three went back to standing at ease. The big man paid the boys and how they stood no mind whatsoever, they might not have been there, he was studying the list of names on the clipboard. The corporal came up and pointed to one of the names and the big man looked across the hall and sure enough there was a boy sleeping on a bench there. The big man didn't yell or bawl out, his voice just carried, and when that voice got to the sleeping boy he woke up quick. The boy jumped up and ran a couple steps, then ran back for his bag and then ran across the depot and took his place in line. You might have thought this recruit was going to know his first ass chewing but it never happened. The big man didn't even look hard at the boy. He looked at the boy as if he might have been his own son, or maybe even it could've been himself as a recruit, and then he straightened the boy's jacket collar, it had been twisted from sleeping, and he looked at the boy standing rod straight and the top sergeant shook his head and smiled, a bit, and he handed the clipboard back to the corporal and stood back and watched the boys as the corporal called their names and got them loading on the bus. Then the corporal got onto the bus, then the top sergeant followed and the door closed and the bus pulled out of the station.

There were others there on the platform to wave their boys off to war and Kyle touched a knuckle to an eye and looked to the small man and the slender, sad woman, but they were not there. They had said goodbye and once was enough.



*the rocket's ready but take care*

FROM: Ted Ealey, Shop

TO: Doc Bavender, Science Wing

It's all done, Doc, and you can pick it up at the Shop Monday morning or I can have one of the boys run it over.

I've made some changes and I hope you don't mind. That design you gave me, that looked more like bomb than rocket. Not much but it ought to make the thing safer. I've flanged out the tail of the rocket. Keeping the pipe straight like you had, that would've been just too dangerous. And I know you're using slow-burning powder but that don't mean a thing if it's put under pressure. We saw that in the Pacific. The English ships used quick powder, I mean it would go without being put in a casing and they lost so many of their craft from loose powder explosions. We used a slow powder and outside a casing it would less likely explode than just burn. But you pack slow powder in a casing and tamp her down tight and I'll tell you, it'll fire a shell out good as the English fast powder.

Same goes for the fuse. Slow burning.

And I've taken the liberty of fixing the rocket to a roller skate. To lean the rocket on a stake and have it shoot up in the air, that's just too dangerous. There's that sidewalk that runs there between the science wing and the auditorium, you could run your rocket along there. This is strongly advised, Doc. No *boom!* to the moon stuff. Just have it shoot down the sidewalk a ways. Or you could point it overland toward the football clubhouse. That old cinderblock survived Coach Mack's cleat kicking that season we started out 0 and seven, it'll handle anything.

And I guess I don't have to tell you this, but you and your students should be well back from the rocket after it's lit. Probably should go back inside the building but I guess you couldn't see much from there. I'd suggest thirty yards at least and take care that fuse is long enough so you'll have plenty of time to get back to where your students are. And maybe you all should be sitting or kneeling. No standing up.

I know I know. Cluck cluck cluck. But there during the War I saw too many of those Brit ships go up and you might say, go up like fireworks but there was no firework ever made like it. It was a terrible thing to see. So don't pack your powder into the rocket tight. Loose will do fine.

signed/Ted



*Easter Eve and Easter Sunrise*

The annual Easter pageant, offered down in the canyon, had but one tradition and that was that, if the story never wavered, the playing of it was ever new. This year's production would prove no exception. Dorothea Rainborough had produced the pageant before, being one of many, but this year that would be achieved by her drama students, led by her brightest stars, Jay Turner and Nina Bennett. A committee was formed, the two girls, the Hooper Twins and that quiet country boy, a freshman and a walk-on who had walked on and done such fine work playing the Stage Manager in Dorothea's masterpiece, *Hometown*. First, they studied the text and agreed that Luke and Jesus' birth and youth would be skipped. They pressed on to John and thought that the death and arising of Lazarus would be act I scene I.

Now to cast the play and this was much influenced by Carrie Steen's *Christmas Carol*, men playing women, girls playing boys, little coming out as one might expect. Jesus, to begin. This role would be played by a woman and not even Nina denied that Jay Turner would make a lovely son of God. This given over to her arch-rival, Nina grabbed Judas Iscariot and none would deny that the dark girl would do fine betraying everyone in sight. Doc Bavender, and other teachers, had either asked or had been invited to join the troupe and word had reached the committee that the science teacher had initially sought to play the treacherous disciple, but a production three or four years before had risked such casting against type—Jack Cook a deliciously jovial Herod—and so denied Judas, Doc accepted Simon Peter. If he could not betray his master, he then would deny him. The casting went on. The walk-on cowboy freshman would make a fine Lazarus, all that time among cow patty, he could rise from the dead in street or corral clothes. The Hooper twins would play Mary and Mary Magdalene and Martha variously and fill in as scribes and Pharisees and end the evening's play as Roman soldiers casting lots for Jesus' robe. Various other students and teachers took other roles—minor disciples, money changers in the temple, those Jesus healed, these latter would be the superintendent and the drama coach, in a certain light they could look if not in need of medical attention, then a long rest—and two outsiders were invited in. Of the town's two preachers, one Herod, the other Pontius Pilate.

Other first timers. A lighting system left back by the New York sparkie before he headed west and there was a sound system this clever fellow had devised as well. Small mikes would be attached to the major players' garments

so that this year little shouting would be called for and if some did become entangled in the mike cables, the stumble would be well worth catching every word of yet another of this Jesus' parables, she said the words so well. And to end its preparations the committee introduced a final twist. There would be a narrator broadcasting off in the bushes, he—or maybe it was a she, hard to tell—intoning such classic lines as, *Jesus wept*. The committee kept the narrator's identity a secret and there followed much speculation in the Easter throng. Many were suspected—Banker Glassmoyer, the sheriff, Judge Hale, Mr. Aubrey, while some wondered if Carrie Steen might have left it all behind on tape—but none of these or others were ever really favored. All on the canyon hillside that evening thought this detached voice, that it had a strange power to it. That it came not from man but to all as would the voice of God the Lord as He spoke with great pain and heartache of his son's worldly death.

Automobiles and such were left up at the religious retreat, a large parking lot there, and those who would come to the Easter pageant walked down into the canyon, the natural arena where the death and resurrection of Christ would be celebrated. Late afternoon became evening, the time of year had never known one finer. Though a storm had formed to the southwest, a sand storm from the great deserts there, it would not be striking till late Sunday night, Monday morning, and the calm before this storm made a dying light, a blue in the air that one felt one might reach out and touch and see one's hand stained by it, as if light were paint on canvas that had not quite dried. Most came well before nightfall, for that was when the pageant would begin and there was much to be accomplished before that. Some had brought tents, most of these small, pup tents the men who had been in the army called them, and they must be erected and the picnic or campout meal prepared. Some brought portable stoves if there were burgers or dogs or marshmallows to toast, but most chose to gather their grills and straightened clothes hangers around a large pit in the center of this tight valley. As with every year men from the church and merchant boosters had come early and laid coals in the pit and in time had them bright red, now going a dusted gray, then and only then, the fire makers told the hungry children, would it be time to burn their wieners. When all were done eating, the children among them ran about and played tag and kicked at an inflated rubber ball and there were games of hide-and-seek and kick-the-can and there were other sports to be pursued till dusk came and crickets took to singing and an old bullfrog croaked and bats and nighthawks woke to feed and all went back to their families and sat down to fine desserts and the old folks

who had done the churning sipped at coffee and when all this had been done, one looked up and saw stars had come to the sky and a scimitar moon hung there and, but for the candles flickering over the meadow, flashlight beams probing here and there, it was dark.

Night fallen, now came the hour the mystery play, as some called it, must begin.

A voice spoke out from the dark. Lazarus had died and Jesus had loved Lazarus as he had loved his own father and Jesus was sought out and brought to Lazarus's house and there, the voice uttering these immortal words,

*Jesus wept.*

Then came light. A spotlight, light soft and making a circle, and within this lighted circle stood Jesus and some sighed at the beauty of Jesus, not that this Jesus was a girl, not entirely, but that this Jesus—hair falling near white down his back, face, arms, throat and shoulders white as that—that this might be Jesus returned to earth, to the ways of man, to lead his flock, those who had believed, to the kingdom of eternal life and there all would be seen thus, in a soft and glowing light and there would be no darkness anywhere about them.

Now Jesus spoke.

*Lazarus, come forth.*

And a second spot showed a place high on the canyon wall and all knew there to be a cave there and that was Lazarus' grave, as it would be Jesus' sepulcher in time, and Lazarus was brought forth and he was bound, all of him, with grave clothes, his face as well, and Jesus said,

*Loose him and let him go.*

And others came and took the grave clothes from the risen man and all saw that he was alive and that he had arisen and Jesus went up the canyon to Lazarus and knelt before the man, made old by many years on earth, and Jesus anointed his feet and wiped the feet of Lazarus with his hair.

Darkness came, but there was not much of it. A spot showed another place farther down the hill, near its bottom, and a table was there and Jesus and his disciples sat at the table, all facing out as it has been painted, and all knew this to be the Last Supper. Jesus sat at the center of the table and there at the left of the table was Judas Iscariot, a second player who might have been a girl but the player had been made to look evil and his expression and his speech were evil as well and all knew this to be Judas Iscariot. And Jesus spoke down the table to him.

*Verily, verily, I say unto you, that one of you shall betray me.*

And Judas turned his face into his cloak.

Now came Simon Peter and all knew this to be the favored science teacher, but it was not as it had been before, when the teacher had played Jesus and some had laughed and many smiled. Now there was but silence as Peter spoke.

*Lord, dost thou wash my feet? Thou shall never wash my feet.*

*If I wash thee not, thou hast no part of me.*

*Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head.*

And Jesus washed Peter's feet as he had Lazarus's, cleaning them with his hair. Again Jesus spoke down the table.

*Ye are not all clean. One of you shall betray me.*

And Judas turned away. And Jesus rose and Peter, who had come close to him and had laid his head on his shoulder, spoke to him.

*Lord, whither goest thou?*

Jesus answered him. *Whither I go, thou canst not follow me now, but thou shall follow me afterwards.*

Peter spoke. *Lord, why cannot I follow thee now?*

*I say unto thee, the cock shall not crow till thou has denied me thrice.* And again Jesus spoke down the table. *If he would hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you.*

And Jesus went away from the table and Judas went away from the table and the disciples there as well and there was darkness.

Now a spot shone on another place. And there was Judas and with him were soldiers from Rome and priests from the synagogue and Pharisees from the temple and these gave Judas a pouch and this pouch held thirty pieces of silver and Judas took this and he went away as does a beaten cur and he could look no man in the eye for he had betrayed the son of God, he who would save every man who believed, for this small treasure.

Jesus came into the light and this light was dim for it was nighttime and the soldiers and the priests and the Pharisees approached him bearing lanterns and torches and weapons and Jesus spoke to them.

*Who seek ye?*

*Jesus of Nazareth,* came the reply.

*I am he.*

And the band that approached Jesus went backwards and fell to the ground and Peter who had come with Jesus drew out his sword and smote one of the fallen men and Jesus admonished his favored disciple.

*Put thy sword into the sheath. The cup which my father hath given me, shall I not drink it?*

And the soldiers and their captain and the officers of the Jews came and took Jesus and bound him and led him away.

And Peter followed those who had taken his master, but when Jesus was taken into the palace of the high priest, Peter would not enter but stood without. And a woman who kept the door said to Peter,

*Art not thou one of this man's disciples?*

And Peter in denying Jesus said, *I am not.*

Within the palace the high priest came and questioned Jesus, asking of his disciples and of his doctrines.

Jesus answered him. *I have spoken openly to the world and in secret I have said nothing. Ask not me what I have said but ask those who have heard me.*

One of the soldiers came and struck Jesus with the palm of his hand for mocking the high priest.

Without Peter stood with the soldiers before a fire and one of the soldiers knew him and asked was not he one of Jesus' disciples and Peter denied his master again and next one of the servants of the high priest, a kinsman of the man Peter had smote with his sword, said to Peter, *Did I not see thee in the garden with him?* And Peter denied the Lord his master a third time and the cock crew.

Now Jesus was taken before Pontius Pilate and this was farther up the hill, for Pilate would sit on a throne. With Jesus before him, Pilate castigated the Jews.

*Talk ye of him and judge him according to your law.*

But the Jews countered that it was not within their law to kill any man, but Pilate knew well the laws of the Israelites and knew of their custom, that Rome would release one man to them at the Passover, and the Jews cried out, *Not this man, but Barabbas*, and Barabbas, a thief, was released to them.

Again Jesus was brought to Pilate and Pilate scourged him and his soldiers platted a crown of thorns and put it on his head and put him in a purple robe and cried out, *Hail, the King of the Jews!* and they laughed and struck him with their hands. Again Pilate found no fault in Jesus and he would not see him killed, even when the high priests cried out, *Crucify him, crucify him!* and the Jews cried out that if Pilate released this man, he was no friend of Caesar, for Jesus would make himself a king that would speak against Caesar.

Hearing this again did Pilate have Jesus brought to him and being questioned closely Jesus replied,

*My kingdom is not of this world. If I be a king, I am no king among men.* And he spoke further. *I am not enemy to Caesar. Give unto Caesar that which is Caesar's.*

Pilate turned to the Jews. *Behold your king!*

And they cried out, *Away with him, away with him! Crucify him!*

*Shall I crucify your king?*

And the chief among the priests answered, *We have no king but Caesar.* And they delivered him to be crucified and soldiers came and they took Jesus and led him away.

They came to a hill beyond Jerusalem that was called Golgotha for coming to it it seemed a great skull and there was a mound here that had been made to look as such. Many were crucified here and three crosses had been stood on the hill and Jesus was crucified with two thieves, Jesus in the center, the others flanking. Pilate had ordered that on Jesus' cross be written THE KING OF THE JEWS in three languages, Hebrew and Greek and Latin. Priests came from the city and they wanted the cross to bear Jesus, that which said he was the king of the Jews, but Pilate answered,

*What I have written I have written.*

The soldiers who had crucified Jesus took his clothes but for cloth that covered his loin and torso. Jesus' coat had been woven without seam and they chose not to rend the coat but to cast lots for the vestment and these things the soldiers did.

When Jesus saw his disciples and his mother among them, he cried out, *Woman, behold thy son!*

And his mother was taken to her home by a disciple.

Jesus said, *I thirst* and was given vinegar to drink and he drank and said, *It is finished.*

The priests mocked Jesus. *Save thyself and come down from the cross.*

But Jesus who had saved others would not save himself and they mocked him further.

The sixth hour gave way to dark and at the ninth hour Jesus cried out, *My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?* and with that cry he gave up the ghost. And when the centurion who commanded the soldiers saw this he said, *Truly this man was the son of God.* And they came to break their legs and take them and they did this with the two thieves, but when they came to Jesus the centurion said, *He is dead. Break not his legs.* But one of the soldiers pierced his side and blood flowed forth and it looked to be blood of man. Jesus' body was taken down and the centurion gave over the body to Joseph. And they wrapped his body and took it up high on the canyon wall, to the cave there and they took him into it and came away, rolling a stone to the cave's mouth.

Now all the players had gathered high on the hillside and the lights were dimmed and candles were lit and as they came down the hillside each player was given a candle and they came winding down the hillside, a necklace of

candlelight. When the players came down to the encampment, they went among the throng there and to each child they gave a lighted candle and these candles were set into the ground so that the small valley they had come to glittered with these small lights. One by one these candles burned down till the encampment was dark and soon all were asleep but for the few men who would guard the encampment.

Dawn came and all were awake, for the pageant would be finished before there was breakfast. Those who had taken Jesus up the hillside now went up again and they saw that the rock had been rolled away from the cave and that was as it had ever been done. And they went into the cave and found Jesus gone and that was as it had ever been done and they came out crying, *Jesus is gone!* and this was as it had been and the players went about crying *Jesus is gone!* But now this had gone on overlong and some thought these were no lines to a play and the players returned to the cave and came out with nothing. One boy climbed up the canyon wall, to the steepest part there at the top, and he climbed this and went out onto the plain that stood over the canyon and there was seen against the horizon and he looked all about the plain beyond and all about the canyon below and he saw nothing anywhere. Now the players came down into the encampment and they went about there calling out and now some knew that this was no play and that Jesus was gone from the play and Simon Peter, who would recognize Jesus on the shores of the sea, he was gone as well. And those players who went about crying out that Jesus was gone and could not be found and Peter was gone and was not to be found as well, now their cries for Jesus to arise, for Peter to return, these carried a fear to them, as if say, Jesus would never arise, Peter would never be found on the shores by the sea—there to bid farewell to a risen master and build his church. These players were not to found in any place this Sabbath day.



### *Easter Monday*

The wall of dust and sand from the deserts to the southwest came over the town during the night, some said just before midnight, some said after. The town woke then to a morning that was not night, not dark, not black, but a morning that knew some of these, night, dark and black. The color: brown. Some said a rotted orange. A gourd that had been left in the field and now had broken open. What light there was clung to the dust. There was no wind, the storm had settled here, and a fine haze stood in the air.

There seemed to be no sky. Or what sky there was hung just there. A thing, you thought you could reach out and touch it, but there was nothing there. If you walked out today, breathing soon came with difficulty. But those who went inside, as we have come into the school, found the fouled, stagnant air there as well. It seemed to seep through the tightest window, this fine, suspended dust. And light, there was no sun and that light made by man, street lights, automobile headlights, the school's hall lights, the lights in the classrooms—all were so dimmed that the bulb filaments showed in outline. There had been talk of closing the school today, but there was no danger in this storm, it was not one of those black storms that came out of the north and rolled down the plain, choking, or threatening to, all in its path. Still, the school might not have opened, for the sound of it. There was no sound or what there was was not much, all hushed. Even the mechanical symphony that came from the typing class, keys pounded, end-of-line bells, carriages being returned—seemed to sound from a place far away, somewhere beyond the north door wall. And even if Jack Cook had been there to bark, barking just to hear himself bark, so said his secretary, and Marie Blum senior English teacher did not disagree, it might have come out a peep. The sporting year had gone from football to basketball and had arrived at track and field, but when the school day's last period came, when such athletics were practiced, Coach Mack stuck head out the clubhouse door and told his runners and jumpers and vaulters and hurlers and putters to keep their warm-ups on and that time was spent watching old football movies, the games of last fall, the fall before. The band director cancelled band practice as well, at least for the huffers and puffers, the tooters and wailers. Today only the bangers and thumpers worked out and the band director was pleased by this, as the heavy air diminished their smashing and crashing and not once during the hour did he find urge to squeeze a snare drummer's head to a point. Mrs. Galloway, chorus director, kept her charges at their bellowing and baying, but with sound so diminished this came as but a sigh, a rustle to those passing along the hall before the auditorium. Mrs. Rainborough shut her thespians down. The year's greatest event, the drama tournament to be held in the hub city, that which would at long last see Hazy Hazeltine brought down, would commence in three days' time and the drama coach wanted her players fresh for that final assault.

And it went on, the various ways the storm affected the school, its administrators, teachers and students. Even those who thought a mere cloud of dust would never move their purpose off track, even they knew the change this cloud had brought, a change that reached into the spirit, a change that said the world was not right and would not be made right again till the sky

returned to blue and lamps were lit only at night and one might breathe free and the air was clear and there came a sweet taste with it and if you spoke to a friend passing the other side of the street, he smiled and spoke as well. That time would return, when it did not seem that all the world and life in it had been put into an earth of dust and sand and had been buried there.

Such was the case with Marie Blum, senior English teacher. She had gone through the day as if nothing had changed, as if nothing were wrong, when she knew well that something had changed, something was not right. Sitting there at her desk, her free period, the final period of the day, her favored time of the day, correcting papers, reading, perhaps a student would drop by, this time of peace before going home had gone off and she felt foul for it. But then, she considered, the storm was not that which had brought this malaise to her. Perhaps it was the student who had come, the girl, her brightest student, perhaps the brightest she had ever known. Perhaps it was the change that this girl, this young woman, she would now be called, had brought to an hour that had once been tranquil, the day's most treasured.

■ ■ ■

The girl had become a woman now, a full woman, and the teacher did not know whether to believe her or wish she did not.

—And it was such a small thing, near insignificant, this rite of passage. Over and done with before it happened, it seemed. I kept thinking it was me, and still think it may have been, but now I think it was him as well. A thing he wanted to have got done and have it over with. And during this I thought that as well. Like a final exam. Something you study and study and study for and then when it comes, you only want to get it out of the way as soon as possible and then you will be free. One does envy animals. Dogs, cats, a stallion mounting a mare. If only sexual, there is that physical passion to their brute rutting.

—Jay. Please.

—Oh yes yes. I know. I may be free to fuck like a woman, but to talk as a woman talks, that won't come till graduation, will it? I used to wonder at that. Why it was called commencement. It seemed an ending of things. But now I know well it is but a beginning. When I can take my scroll up on the stage and curtsy before the mass of adoring parents and friends and say, I am now free to fuck and talk like a woman.

—Jay! Really. I don't know. I have a headache. No. I think I want to be alone. Yes. Please.

—Shall we change the subject? I did come to speak to you of other matters as well.

—Yes, yes. That will be fine. Change the subject. Please.

—I wanted to speak to you of my senior paper. To discuss it with you. To ask your opinion, though the decision on what to write, what not, shall be mine.

—Yes, of course. But I thought you had already written the paper. Months ago.

—Oh that. George Eliot as a Man. I found it—I don't know. Incomplete. George Eliot was very much a woman and I was not a woman, if I was not even a woman—is *was* right there?

—*Was* is fine.

—If I was not even a woman, how in the world could I write of a woman who would be a man. I shall come back to it later. Perhaps next year, in college.

—I would still very much like to read it.

—No. Not now. Not till it's done right. If it ever is I shall mail you a copy.

—I would like that very much. And then what shall this new paper confront?

—*Hamlet*.

The senior teacher taught *Hamlet* every year, as the junior teacher taught *King Lear*, the sophomores read *Othello* and the freshmen struggled through *Macbeth*. The teacher approached this shift to *Hamlet* with caution. —And do you have an idea in mind?

—Yes. Hamlet's madness.

—I was afraid of that. (This rather thought than said.) —I see. And can you tell me more?

—Yes. I have been reading as much as we have around here on the matter. There are many schools of thought—Hamlet was only feigning madness, that he was mad from the start. Hallucinating. It explains his father's ghost, a specter that none but Hamlet can see.

—Yes. It would explain that. Or could.

—But I liked another essay in this ancient tome—that Hamlet began by pretending madness and through this pretence became madness indeed.

—Yes. I know that essay.

—Yes, I know you do. Your bookplate is in the book. You donated it to the school.

—Yes, perhaps I did. I had forgotten.

—Yes, I know—it's been done, it's been done. But I have been reading and rereading and reading the play again and I think there might be that single moment, when in drawing a breath, that Hamlet's madness is feigned

and then with the next the madness was no pretence. The prince was sane. The prince is mad. Of course this one moment may not exist. The more I read the less easy I feel. It seems possible that this change was a gradual change. A process. That he went from pretence to madness for a short time, back to pretence, back to madness—that it was an evolution rather than a catastrophic event. I have spoken to Doc about this. He says that though both gradual and sudden change exist in the natural world, and that both have made our world what it is, it seems that a slow, slow, ever so slow change has brought greater change to the world than the greatest disasters. Disasters seem to be primarily religious affairs. And that may very well be the paper I come to write in the end. You wouldn't mind my writing that paper, would you?

—Of course not. I would be very pleased to see it.

—Thank you. And I shall be writing a paper for Doc as well.

—Really? I didn't know he asked for papers.

—He doesn't. I'm just doing it. For him. It comes from one of his ideas.

On the Second Law of Thermodynamics.

—Really! I'm afraid you're going to have to tell me about that. I haven't a clue.

—Entropy. In layman's terms, there is a finite amount of matter in the universe. This matter can neither be diminished nor increased. But there is movement to this matter. It is ever moving and this movement shall see this finite body of matter be distributed equally throughout the universe. There shall be no small, warm collections of matter as we know now. All shall be cold and dust.

—I see. A despairing view of the future, I think.

—Merely accurate and true. But the paper does not stop there. It has a second, non-despairing half.

—I wouldn't mind hearing that at all.

—It is life. You and I and everything living in the universe, and I mean any fire in the deepest hole in the sky, we are the living and we are a concentration, and not the dispersion, of matter. Our struggle against entropy shall ever be thus, all shall be dispersed, but we must revere this brief struggle, this life. Doc is no atheist, as some of those who will see him leave think. Rather he worships the god of being alive and that is why I did not understand, not at first, how the altar he has built could be an altar to suicide.

The teacher said nothing. She looked at her hands folded on the desk. She looked at nothing. She had once knelt before that altar. She said nothing and the girl went on.

—He has said to me, imagine a life without suicide. A life you had to stay in till sweet entropy decided to wear you down and split you asunder and scatter you about. A life without death, a death that you can make your own, that would be hell, he said.

The girl had lit a cigaret. The teacher said nothing. Maybe she didn't notice. But she did. It was that she did not care. The girl smoked and went on. She was standing now and walked as she spoke. The teacher sat still at her desk and said nothing.

—Sometimes you get the feeling he's read a touch too much Socrates.

—You too. (The teacher did not say this, it was only thought.)

—I think he's thinking of killing himself, you know.

—Oh no please no don't don't don't. (The teacher did not speak, it was only thought.)

—We came here last night, the night before. He stood me at the flag-pole and he had me lean my head to it, put my ear to it and listen. Listen ever so carefully. And there was a sound there, so quiet you might have felt it. The flag chain gently moving against the steel pole, the pole against the chain. And the night was still and the sound came not from moving air. No, he said, that sound comes from all about us, all that seems so still, all circling and spinning, around and around and around. It is by that, he said, that we know we are bound to a water-clad rock tumbling into the void. By that and the setting of the sun. And by dawn, I said. By that as well. Yes, he said. By that as well. That is what he said.

The teacher said nothing. Nothing.

The girl drew herself up. —I shall bear his child in any case. That has been decided. We have spoken of marriage, but, well I am too young for it till the summertime, and anyway we are married already in the eyes of God. If only there were a God. Is that right? *Were?*

—*Were* is fine.

The girl had gone to the window, to stub out the cigaret and drop the butt. In looking out she saw a class gathered below, in that enclosure made by the rear of the auditorium, the science wing and the back of the main building. The girl turned back from that and she moved quickly.

—Oh I had almost forgotten! Doc's physics class. He's built a rocket and will shoot it to the moon. Oh wouldn't that be so fine. To build a rocket and fly to the moon and you wouldn't stop there, you would go on and on till you reached the stars and there would be nothing but that. Night and the stars all around.

—Yes. That would be fine.

But the girl had gone and she had gone quickly. The teacher sat and looked at a book on one of the armrest chairs. The girl had left it or some

other student had. The teacher would leave it there, on the armrest chair, for the girl or some other student to find. The armrest chairs in this room were bolted to the floor, as were all the classroom chairs in the main building. Nailed or bolted or screwed to the floor. All but for one of the first-grade rooms. That one room had chairs that could be moved about. And Doc Bavender's science wing. During its construction he had asked that the chairs not be fixed to the floor and now students came to the science wing and the pleasure of sitting in armrest chairs that could be moved about. Perhaps she would do that next year, the teacher thought. She would go to Jack Cook or Dwight Cage or whoever would be principal and she would tell him to have her chairs freed, that her students might move them where they wanted, even if only to a rear window to look out to the sky and the silver clouds in it, listening little to what the teacher said.

The explosion did not sound much. Loud but it was flat. There seemed to be no threat or danger in it, but the teacher knew there was. The cries that came from below, these were small things, like the cries of kittens. There seemed to be no pain or fear to them, but the teacher knew there was. The teacher did not go to the window. She would rise and go out into the hall and go down the stairs and go to the offices below, those that were found flanking the front doors. She would go there to find that someone had already come to report the blast. Go there to learn that the man, her favored teacher, was dead and the girl, her brightest student, was gravely wounded. Yes, there would be that to do and the teacher rose and went out the door and into the hall.

■ ■ ■

Doc Bavender went back to the house, to spend his last night and morning there. He spent this night as he had the last night he had passed here, before he had left the house to go live downtown, in what had once been an office in the bank building, above the barbershop, the window looking across to the cafe. He sat at the kitchen table as before, an overhead light over the table, and he had written out the boy's last letter, as he had before, so many times. But this night was not like that. Before he had written out the boy's words many times, as ever the same, and seeing that these were the boy's words and not his, he had burned each and every letter, till he could no longer write and then he sat and smoked and in time fell asleep, thinking that surely this would be the night that the bulb would burn out and he would wake to dark and this writing of the boy's letter would be done, that the time to write his own letter had come. No, this night he had written the boy's letter but once and had burned that and had written no

more. He thought of writing his own this last night here, but he could not. He had not—what? He had not earned his letter, as had the boy, he deserved no such farewell, and he had spent the rest of the waking night bringing his accounts up-to-date, insurance policies, reading the will, canceling magazine and newspaper subscriptions, writing checks for bills—these were the things he deserved to leave back, and they would be the only letter he had earned to write.

He did not wake to the black as he had hoped. No, there was some dark to the day and the bulb above the table had been diminished, but that came from the storm that had moved in during the night. Dust had formed a fine haze about the light, its filament showing in outline, but the light had not gone out. There would be no dark to it. He smiled at the brutally strong little bulb and would leave it on. It would draw those who came to gather his papers to the table here in the kitchen, where they had been finished and stacked and left. Surely the light would not have quit before that.

He rose to leave the house but stopped. Last evening he had come into the house through the front door, an entrance rarely used when they had lived here; he could not come in through the side door, the door that let into the boys' room, the entrance preferred by them all, the great trees there at the side of the house standing over that entrance, standing watch, it would seem, sheltering. But this morning he knew he must go that favored way, through the boys' room, to the door there at the side of the house. But entering that room did not prove painful or perhaps it gave more pain than he had ever imagined and that was not like pain at all. The boys' grandparents had come and had taken the boys' things out of the room—from the closet, pants, jackets, shirts, shoes, ties, caps and hats and belts, from the dressers shorts and T-shirts and socks, the older boy's mirror bureau, that had gone entire, the photographs and other memorabilia that had hung on the walls, these were gone as well, the chairs and beds and been left back but the sheets and blankets and pillows were gone, the throw rugs were gone and on and on—so that the pain of finding these things in place, as if the boys might come into the room this evening, was replaced with an empty room, as if the boys had never been here, and that was not like pain at all.

He went on out through the side door and stood under the great trees that sheltered that side of the house. He would walk to the school this morning as he had walked most mornings since he had taught here, when the weather was fit for walking and sometimes when it was not. The storm had come in during the night and the breath it took to walk did not come easy but he walked anyway. He did not know the time but he would be coming early and that was fine. He had a key to the science wing and during that

time before the first students arrived, he would complete the construction of the rocket, which was what he did and then he hid it away.

He did not remember much of the day after that. Classes came, they went, he did not teach them. Or he did not teach the proper things to be taught. Biology, physics, chemistry for the beginners, the second year for the advanced—all were put away and the students were free to pass their time as they chose, so long as they remained in the classroom. The wing-arm chairs in the science wing were not bolted to the floor, as were the chairs in the main building, and some chose to pull these chairs in circles, there to chat and joke and look only a touch worried that they had not been told to study during this free hour. Others took their chairs away and sat in pairs or trios and some sat alone, away from the rest, and they looked out the windows as if there were blue sky there and clouds and birds and wild-colored insects drifted by, when there was only the lifeless dust and dark brought by the storm. The curious students went to the lab in the back of the room and there concocted potions and powders that flamed when heated or sizzled and crackled for no apparent reason at all. A small explosion was set off and all laughed at the black smoke of that and Bavender smiled as well.

As the day progressed he took those who cared to be outside the classroom and they went about and their field trips, as one of the clever students called them, were accomplished. But no, these were only remembered, these days outside would not occur till the last day before spring finals, and he went to them in his mind only. Visits to the cafeteria and Mrs. Grundy shooed them away, while the student athletic managers welcomed them to the clubhouse, the curious girls in particular, they had never seen inside this forbidden place, this male bastion. If the band director thought they had something loose, coming to hear his players attack another Souza, then Mr. Ealey back in the shop was pleased by their interest and they went through the many rooms of whirling saws and hammers pounding red-hot steel, they might have been medieval dungeons of torture. And sometimes they would simply go out to the running track and go along it, picking up pebbles and tossing them off the running surface till enough of that had been done.

And so the day was passed, thinking of such and so much more, and Bavender thought little of that which must be accomplished at its end and it came as a surprise then when a group of students came into the classroom and they asked, *Is the rocket ready? Is it done?* And Bavender remembered the time of day, the final hour of the school day, and he said, *Yes, the rocket is done, it is ready*, and he took the rocket from where it had been stored and carrying it, the class following, he went out into that courtyard formed by the rear of the auditorium, the science wing across from that, the main

building making the back, with the fourth boundary open, looking out toward the band hall and the cafeteria and the shop and clubhouse. This open space was where the rocket would be shot off and all in this firing range had been told to stay inside the band hall or cafeteria or wherever and all those warned readily agreed to comply, but for the young coronetist who hung his head out the window behind the brass section till the band director brought him and his chair back into place.

The class was gathered in the rear of the courtyard, there near the main building, and he pointed out the white line one of the football managers had drawn there and he warned that no student was to step over this line, that he would be going alone to position forward from this and would be firing off the rocket alone, that if harm came it would come to him only. That done, he spoke of the rocket and other rockets that had come before and those that would come in time. He spoke of the rockets developed during the war, these enemy rockets, and they had been designed as weapons of mass destruction and they had been rudimentary affairs. That during the war they might have crossed a narrow channel and their payloads had been ordinary explosives and he spoke of the rockets that would come, rockets that would cross oceans, rockets that would strike targets halfway around the world and the explosives these rockets would carry would be nuclear bombs, the bombs he had helped build during the war, and the destruction made by these long-range rockets and their nuclear warheads would be beyond description, beyond imagining, and he did not speak long on these future rockets and their explosives, as he thought they might one day come to destroy the earth, waste an entire planet, their planet, and he did not think his students should consider that prospect now, maybe later, when they were older and out of school and they might seek to curtail these rockets and their deadly bombs.

Rather he spoke of another future for the rocket. He spoke of rockets shooting artificial satellites into the sky, metal orbs that would circle the earth and, when asked why this would be done, he spoke of telephone systems beaming long-distance calls to these satellites, that they would reach to foreign places and sound as clear as a call from next door, and he spoke of beaming television signals to those same rockets, that you might watch programs from around the world. He went on then to speak of rockets in the far distant future. Of rockets that would make a journey to the moon a thing as simple as driving to the corner store. Of rockets that one day would take us to the stars and the students warmed to this notion, as a space travel movie had played at the Ritz last week. And a clever student asked, Just how many centuries would this journey take, as, if he was over a hundred and

seventeen starting home, he thought he'd just as soon stay at home, and the class laughed and Bavender laughed too, as he was their favored teacher and he liked this class as well and such banter was offered in a guise that amused all, even the science teacher with his head in the clouds.

He had finished now and as he took up the rocket to take it to a place away from the students, he saw that a student had come from the main building, from the rear door there, and he did not see who this student might be, thinking only—a tardy student—and he went on down the sidewalk that ran from the main building's rear door, alongside the auditorium and out past the band hall and the cafeteria. He came to a place along the sidewalk, this near the auditorium's stage door, and he placed the rocket there and turned it away from all these buildings, turning it toward the football field and the track that ran around it, a good two hundred yards to the stadium bleachers and these and the field and the track were empty and the rocket would cause no injury flying there. The rocket had been attached to a roller skate, if it did not become airborne, and he tightened these wound wires and he tapped the powder within the rocket down tight as well and he saw that the fuse was fixed snug in the powder. But in seeing that the rocket was ready to ignite he saw he had forgotten his lighter and he turned back to the students and motioned to the youth who smoked and he brought his lighter to the man and then, when he saw the boy was returned to the others, all safely back, he turned to the rocket and snapped open the lighter and held the flame to the fuse and his hand and his will had never been so steady as they were now.

He did not know when she came to him. The sparks made by the fuse, these were stars and he flew into them and there was night all about and nothing there but that, the night and the stars and the rocket that would take him to them. He felt her presence behind him, perhaps she touched his shoulder, as he was kneeling and she standing, and now he did not need to turn to know it was the girl who had come from the group and had come to him, and now he turned to her, foolishly, fatally, and she was smiling and it seemed she spoke, but he heard nothing but the fear that pounded through him. And he turned away from the girl and there were stars and the night again and he reached to them, reached out to the stars, that he might touch them, that he might extinguish them. That he might save the girl and himself if need be. But as he touched the stars and sought to put them out and return all to light, he knew it was too late for that and in this he was correct. He reached out and the stars and their night were gone and there was but black there and then there was not even that.

**I**n the last moments of his life he returned to the wartime. He had many times since, as that time amused, entertained and informed his students about those years, when he had helped, if only in the smallest way, to build the first atomic bomb. And this last day, in remembering and speaking to his students, he began, for the first time, at the beginning. How a small man from a small college got the job. His superior there, head of the department, a man who was not small, nor were his degrees, nor was the college small when the greatest scientists in the land came to speak of various matters—these men and their great degrees would see him work on the greatest scientific and technical project the world had ever known, to design and construct a bomb that might one day blow the earth and all mankind and all other living things on it to kingdom come. He received his draft notice and, though he spoke of this to no one, the second day of his induction process he was separated from the others and was given orders and the following day was on a military flight to the nation's capital. There followed a grueling week—interviews, interrogations, some seemed, his background, beliefs, scientific and otherwise, all that might have been questioned was, and for no reason that he could see at the end of the week he received new orders and found himself on another military flight, this making for the remote mountain range that stood between the great desert to the west and the great plains to the east. The Sangre de Cristo Mountains and in time he would come to understand, the Blood of Christ Mountains, indeed he would understand. He was landed in the largest city of that state of desert and mountain and plain and put aboard another plane, a much smaller plane that bore no military markings or colorings and whose pilots, neither did they wear uniforms, and they flew north, up into the mountains to the north. A panorama of electrical storms had spread from northeast to northwest and the pilots left off their banter and grew quiet and they watched the sky before and above with great care. And that was how he came to one of the most closely held military bases in the world, landing in a driving hailstorm, he and the co-pilot leaping out to grab a wing each, so that the plane and the pilot in it might not be blown away.

Did he speak of this or only remember it—he did not know. But he did speak to the students of some of it, tell them the tales he had told many times before. Told of this vast secret compound and the elite of the world's scientists—physicists, chemists, mathematicians, engineers, astronomers and even the one astrologer, so one wit suggested and as months went into years some wondered just how much wit there was in it—that had gathered here. And he spoke of these great thinkers with an intimacy that intrigued his students. The lab to which he was attached was located in a large building shaped much like an ancient desert fortress and perhaps had once been: the offices and labs there made four walls and there was a courtyard in the center of them. And how the small fry such as he would look out the lab windows to see two men walking the courtyard paths, hour after hour, talking and talking and talking. One of these men was tall and lean and leathery and he wore a black straight-brimmed Indian hat and he wore a soft shirt and soft pants of leather and there was an Indian bead throat piece about his neck and there was a single turquoise and silver ring on his finger and the boots he wore were soft and Indian as well and he wore these outside the trouser legs and they were fringed and there was a single image, a symbol burned into the leather of one boot, and one of the lab team who had known this country before the war said this was a totem to drive off evil spirits and there were already some among them who thought this guardian symbol well-advised. If the tall man could have been an Indian and was not—eyes so pale, a blue near gray—the second man was a foreigner, no doubt about that. He looked much like a monkey and moved like one. Small torso, gnarled, twisted arms, he did not hop when he walked, not exactly, but one moment he was there beside the tall man, the next he would be before the tall man, talking talking talking, walking backwards if the tall man had not stopped to listen, moving his arms and hands about, they might have been snakes, they writhed and darted and coiled as he talked and talked and talked. Small round cap of burr-cropped hair, black-frame glasses, lens so small you might have been looking down the barrels of double-barrel twelve gauge. He wore an army fatigue jacket that was not new (no badges or patches or anything that might have indicated rank and unit on it) and army trousers as well, those that had bin pockets stitched to the leg sides, and on his feet were found heavy sandals, no matter the weather, and there were thick grey alpine socks and these were pulled up over the army trouser cuffs and the trousers were held to his waist by a rope that had been fashioned into a belt, a clasp had been fixed to it.

The tall man was the center's scientific director (a barking army general commanded the entire affair) and he had a reputation of mystery. A brilliant

scientist who had never done major work, a man who had lived and worked in Europe many years and read and wrote and spoke many of that continent's languages and, it was rumored, stood to the left in politics, maybe a socialist, maybe a communist, and was known as a brilliant administrator as well, particularly among scientists. The barking general was heard to say that if the tall man had not been there to ride herd over this gang of squabbling eggheads, the device that would end the war and have an Age named after it would never have been built. The monkey man, an Italian, he had been the physicist who proved that this new bomb, the splitting of the atom, could go from drawing board to a military weapon of a power the world had never seen. The splitting of an atom was not enough, many many atoms must be split, those split splitting other atoms, these splitting others, till there came about a chain reaction, these atoms splitting and splitting all within a fraction of a fraction of a second, at the speed of light, and therein lay the greatest weapon warring man had ever known.

He had spoken to his students of this chain reaction. How so many of the small fry such as he feared that this chain reaction would never stop. How, if all the world was atoms, then this chain reaction would split them all and the bomb would become the earth itself, a ball of fire, a small star circling a larger one. And the religious among the small fry gathered nightly to pray, that they would be bringing the holocaust spoken of in their book's final chapter, when fire would come to destroy the earth and all on it. And in speaking of such fears and their naivete, the man had smiled at such nonsense and some of the quicker students had smiled as well and some, perhaps they had read of the fiery doom in the book of revelation, did not.

And there were other tales to tell. The explosive expert, he and the director would go out into the desert and the game they played was a form of golf. The director would point to a small rock at his feet and he wanted it sent flying as a club would send a ball flying to that cactus there, that was the flag stick, say forty yards distant. And the explosives man would form a soft clay explosive in a certain way and he would attach it to the rock in a certain way and stand behind the rock and aim it this way or that, as a golfer aligns his shot, and he would lick and raise a finger to test the wind, and the director would smile, and stoop to light the fuse and the rock would go flying off to land at the foot of the cactus forty yards away, not much more to it than a tap in, as a golfer would say.

And there were so many such tales that amused his students—the nuclear chemist's identical twin daughters who rode identical motorcycles and the final year of the war they would come of age and leave school and one girl would marry a cowboy and the other an Indian and there would be but one

wedding for the two couples and as for the honeymoon, the four would celebrate this together as well, half the time, they joked, at the bunkhouse, half the time back at the tipi; the army pilot who came home one day to find one of the world's finest mechanical physicists there under the kitchen sink, working with a wrench and cable to unplug a drain, the wife had seen him walking in front of the house and he was wearing a handyman's coveralls and the wife called him in to do a job that the scientist was doing well and by the looks of him was enjoying every minute of it—and on and on went these tales and he told them all. All but that one tale, the tale of their trip, and that tale had been left unsaid and maybe that was it, he thought, that was why he had returned to an untold tale the last moments of his life. That in thinking it he might finally be telling it.

There would be four of them. The Rainboroughs, Bavender and the boy, no longer a boy now, a man, and he was called Danny, a childhood name and still he did not care to be called any other, not Dan or Daniel or any of that.

Bavender was still there at the secret center in the mountains. He had suffered a minor accident in the lab, a vial of liquid radium had cracked and he had been contaminated and though, after a week of nausea, he had come to feel as well as he had before the accident, still he had been kept at the hospital at the center, there to be further treated and, he sometimes felt, to be studied. It was this, his transfer from the lab's tight security to the relaxed world of the hospital, that made such a long trip as this possible. Before he had been restricted to the bi-monthly journeys to the ancient Pueblo town that was set in the foothills just below the center.

The Rainboroughs had been assigned to another government camp, though this camp proved an entirely different matter. When the Japanese had attacked a naval and air base in the Pacific islands, back on the mainland those who came from or who had origins in this eastern empire were taken from their farms and businesses and homes and relocated to fenced camps for the duration of the war. There were many of these and administrators and teachers, posts the army could not readily supply, were sought out. Llewellyn Rainborough, and his wife as well, thought these camps brutal and unnecessary and looked for ways to ease the inmates' deprivation and hardship. Through an old college chum who had since gone to Congress they applied for these positions and were promptly accepted to them, Mr. Rainborough having studied Oriental history in school and learned a few words in those languages. Mr. Rainborough would administer the camp and Mrs. Rainborough would instruct the detainees in English. This camp was in the state next north of the bomb center and, though not in the mountains,

mountains ringed the vast valley where the camp would be constructed. The Rainboroughs spent a good deal of time going into the mountains, Mr. Rainborough being an adept fisherman. As well nearby the camp there was a desert area that might have been found in the Sahara, there were rolling waves of dunes and, as Mrs. Rainborough had accompanied her husband into the mountains, now he came with her and they walked over these dunes, Mrs. Rainborough studying what flora and fauna that could be found in the sand, as in college she had studied not drama or English or any of that, but botany. They soon had much free time on their hands, for these efficient people they would detain could well administer themselves and all under forty spoke excellent English. And so it was that they thought to take a longer journey and contacted Bavender to join them and he was granted that leave. Bavender in turn contacted the boy Danny and the Rainboroughs were pleased, for this dark, quiet, slight, shy young man had been among their favorites at the school in those years before the war.

Arranging a furlough for Danny proved a difficult task. When drafted after the war's outbreak, Danny had objected not so much to this war but to all wars and he did so as a matter of personal conscience. In those early days refusing to go to war and kill other human beings was considered a criminal matter and Danny spent near a year in prison for it. But in time government policy eased toward conscientious objectors and Danny had so impressed those who ran the stockade that housed such, that it was agreed that he be transferred to a work camp in the desert that lay to the south of the bomb camp, near the international border. Letters from Bavender and the Rainboroughs had eased this transfer, as did their letters open the gates so that Danny might be freed to their custody to accompany them on this trip. It was not until their rendezvous that Bavender learned of the construction project on which Danny labored. The work was being accomplished on an artillery training range and Bavender knew that the prototype for the bomb was to be tested there. It was an irony to Bavender that Danny did not understand or did not seem to understand the labor he was at—a small city of shell buildings, bunkers, trenches and a high tower in the center of these things, the tower on which the prototype bomb would be exploded—and Bavender made no mention of the character of the boy's work. Not early in the trip anyway. Bavender considered it a further irony that their Eastern enemies connected them all. One would build the bomb, the other see it tested, that would kill and maim so many of the Japanese the couple administered and educated. It was this connection that was gradually revealed during the trip and made this brief time together one as much heartache and sorrow as anything else.

But it did not begin so. They rendezvoused in the Pueblo capital in the foothills below Bavender's camp. He had come to know this intricate adobe city during his time in the mountains and the Rainboroughs had known the city before the war, while Danny would love the place before stepping off the bus, what he saw from the windows told him that, and the choice to gather here proved an immense success. The restaurant was an adobe pueblo as old as the town. The Rainboroughs had known it since before the war and now it had become a favored place among the bomb center people, both military and scientific. Its walls stood three feet thick and there were bullet holes in one wall and Danny thought the building had been a fort or part of one once and the others enjoyed their own speculations. On the menu were exotic local dishes and others from south of the border, tamales wrapped in com husks a specialty, stewed beans spiced with peppers, rice and a puffed bun that looked that it might be sweet but was not, this favored by Mr. Rainborough and no one questioned the wisdom of his taste. And not to forget a dark bottled beer poured out in iced mugs. All enjoyed this, even the Rainboroughs who were thought not to drink, and Danny drank beer and this was a change in the boy as well. But then all had changed in other ways. Both Rainboroughs were leaner and tanned. Mrs Rainborough worked in the camp's fine gardens, the finest she had ever seen, as many of the prisoners had owned farms and truck farms before they had been taken off them and sold cheap to those who considered themselves native to this land; while Mr. Rainborough passed many hours crawling about the wild streams in the mountains, in search of the good trout to be found there. Tanned and lean, that would be true of Danny as well, but more, his labor in the desert had given him muscle, a man's body that had not diminished his boyish innocence, its charm. And Bavender, catching sight of himself in a mirror, saw a man who had been ill and thought that the radiation poisoning may have been more serious, and perhaps longer lasting, than he had suspected. It was this poisoning that brought the four to consider and speak of their wartime work or, as with Bavender, not. It was a fellow from the lab who came to their table and pointed up the mystery—exactly what was Doc Bavender up to these days. Beer bottle in hand, the lab worker came to Bavender and spoke of his illness, was he well, would he be returning to the lab, what was it like, being poisoned by radium? And Bavender led the man away from the table and told him that those at the table were not from the center and in so doing attracted the attention of one of the many security agents who worked these civilian towns near the secret camp. Bavender had seen the agent before and the agent knew Bavender and he knew the lab fellow who drank and he knew the two military

policemen who had come into the restaurant and he looked to them and they came to Bavender and the lab fellow who had taken to waving his beer bottle around. Their papers were checked and Bavender's leave and his top secret clearance were noted and it seemed this would end with the lab man not finishing his beer and being given a lift back to the camp, when one MP saw the security man looking toward the table Bavender had left. Bavender and the MP returned to the table and the MP checked the papers there. The Rainboroughs proved fine, anyone who ran a concentration camp was OK with the military cop, but Danny was studied more closely. Bavender did not know exactly, maybe Danny's papers carried he was an objector or had been detained as one or worked in a labor gang of objectors, whatever, something there gave the MP to studying Danny and his papers overlong and then he asked to see Bavender's papers a second time. It was then that the others at the table saw that Bavender's papers were not like their own, words and phrases had been blacked out and Danny had seen TOP SECRET above the heading and from there the trip took on a different character. Their military occupations, all were different, but one was more different than that. And once, there at the great canyon they would come to in time, Bavender had thought he had seen that night's security agent in a crowd, but Bavender had lost sight of the man in the crowd and if he would never be certain, fear now came to the trip, fear for the others and himself as well.

But this would come in time. The meal was done in high spirits, a strolling guitar band serenading all, and much of the night was spent exchanging talk of their town and Bavender imagined all slept as well as he. They rose to a desert dawn, the mountains and cliffs all around a deep rusted red, the shrubs and trees there dark green, and the morning sky, that went, as they headed west, from a violet to the pale blue of the turquoise to be found in these mountains.

The Rainboroughs suggested an itinerary, as they had vacationed in this region for years, and the others made suggestions as well. West, they would make for the setting sun and the beaches of California if there was time and there wouldn't be, as Danny's leave was shorter and more restricted than the others'. Still, it was Danny who spoke most often of running along the sand of the Pacific, the country ended just there, even if he knew he would not see it this time, maybe never, for during the trip the boy would speak to his former science teacher of the end he was making for himself. But, California or no, there was plenty to interest between here and there. The Rainboroughs wanted to revisit the ancient cliff dwelling to be found on a high mesa to the west and slightly north of where they would leave the main

highway. The second night passed there, it was as if the modern world was gone, that one had gone back centuries in time, and no one thought that a bad thing to know, this country long before their civilization had arrived. Next, the grand canyon west of there, said to be one of the seven wonders of the world and no one wanted to miss that. And the man of science and technology, he chose to detour only slightly to view the great desert dam, once called after a rock, now some called it after a failed president who had not failed in initiating the project. And Danny's choice, he had heard of a desert, a valley called death, a desert within a desert, its elevation hundreds of feet below sea level, and he chose to go there, to a place called death, and as the Rainboroughs had brought tent and sleeping bags and camp stoves and the like along, there would be no problem passing a night where no habitation existed, though it might, Mr. Rainborough suggested, be wise to break camp early the following morning, as 120 degrees was considered a mild day in this low lying waste.

They left the transcontinental highway near midday and went north and west, climbing toward the high plateau and the lost civilization that had once made its cities in the wind-carved cliffs there. They made this park as night was coming and saw little of the cliff dwellings till the following morning. That day was given over to tourist matters. The park had been closed after the war began—as so many parks were, the theory being, the boy suggested, that one must not take one's mind off war during a war, one's mind must never return to ancient, gone civilizations, one must never consider that like men all civilizations are born and all shall die and be buried or the wind blow them away—and now, with the war in Europe concluded or near it, the park had been reopened with the warming weather and tourists such as they were returning and they were joined by many others as they walked the paths and roads that connected the cliff dwellings and toured the museums at the park headquarters and ate and drank on the sun-warmed deck of the inn at the main lodge. The Rainboroughs had suggested they take cabins away from the lodge and this was right, as it was there one found the true loneliness of the place, a cabin high on the mesa wall, the wind coming down from the high ground to moan among the trees. Bavender and Danny walked away from the cabin and the others that second night and looking out over the valley to a cliff dwelling, its form just seen, the wind thrashing the trees, there was no sound but that, they knew well the loneliness their guides had spoke of. It was as if not only this ancient civilization was gone but that all civilizations were gone or had never been and they were the last two of their kind left on earth and the valley and the dwellings beyond stood there empty and alone. The boy spoke

as they turned back to their companions in the house. One felt one's own self going as had all the others and one was not there, the boy said, one did not exist and never had and never would, and Bavender first saw, in outline, the end the boy would make for himself.

In such a memory one can easily move to the future and Bavender went to the time after the war, when they all had come home. Bavender and the Rainboroughs returned to the school and, though their lives would never again be the same, they might go about as if the war and their being away had never been. Danny returned to his prewar job as well, but the outcome proved different. The Rainboroughs and Bavender had changed during the war—they had learned much of life and the world, and the former had grown fit, the latter had been physically diminished by the poisoning—but none had changed so much as the boy. The boy had become a man, in size and strength and the leaning of his face (his eyes had not changed, they were still the eyes of a child, there was that innocence and wonder to them) and his mind had broadened and sharpened and what he had known before held no interest for him now and his return to clerk at the bank had not lasted a month. Banker Glassmoyer accepted Danny's resignation with reluctance and regret, for he had liked the young man as well as anyone. Danny left the town and went over to the hub city. With the skills and power he had developed during the war he had no trouble finding a construction job. Houses and offices and shops and great department stores and showrooms for all the bright new cars, all these and more were rising in the hub city and he went to work wherever he chose and when. The freedom of this work pleased him and that it occupied little or a quiet place in his mind, that pleased him as well. He signed up for a special vet's night class at the local college and this would feed a hunger that only books and ideas and debate would sate. The prof described the course as Great Books, but the prof was an easy man, a vet himself, and his students were given the run of the library and Danny read philosophy, from the first till the very end. Bavender went to the hub city with his wife and boys quite often—a large movie theatre had opened there and it played releases the Ritz would never see, or not until next year, and new restaurants were opening and shops and stores, the city fathers had to build new streets to hold them—and he would see Danny when he could. They passed hours together, Danny speaking of the books he had read, the ideas he had come to know, the debates held in the college coffee shop with other vets and students, Bavender often so enjoying these talks that he was late fetching his wife from shopping, the kiddies from the picture show. Then there came a time that Bavender could not find Danny at his boarding house. Still kept his room there, the land-

lady said, but he had got a new job, night work, and he wasn't seen around much, sleeping days and taking few meals at the house. In time Bavender learned that Danny had left construction and had taken to working in a large veterans' hospital there in the city. He began pushing broom, then made orderly, and then in that time before his death became a nurse to these men whose bodies and minds had been torn and mutilated by war. It was during this time that Danny first spoke to Bavender of what he had made joke of before. How his life would end. That he would end it himself. Bavender fought the young man in this. He talked and talked and talked against it and then, when Danny had ceased counter argument, when he had grown silent and listened only, when Bavender thought his arguments had held and the young man's life had been saved, it was then that Danny took up his service revolver and walked down to the loading dock of a local mortuary, as he did not want this violence to disturb the boarding house, and put a bullet in his brain. This occurred at dawn and the mortician had been waked by the sound of it—he never knew if it was the revolver's report or the body striking the side of the building—and the police came and found all of Danny's important papers on him—checkbook, ration ID, an insurance policy, a photo of a friend snapped in a bus station, the friend in uniform, the like—and among all these was a letter that bore no salutation or valediction. This letter was printed in the local newspaper with the story of the young man's death and it was this letter that Bavender had written over and over again and could not keep it. He burned every letter he wrote for he knew the letter was not his. He had not earned it. He was not worthy of it. Danny had ended his own life because death was right. Bavender would end his life because life was wrong. These would be two very different deaths. They would never be the same.

They left the high mesa and the cliff dwelling to be found there and returned south, to rejoin the coast-to-coast highway. They went west again, into the next state over, and found the country there much as that they had come from. Or so they thought at first. As they went the country left back the desert and rose beneath them and they came onto another high plateau, but this land seemed higher than what they had left. The air was chilled and the woods here were deep, their trees tall and evergreen, and the grounds of these high woods were matted with fallen needles, so soft underfoot it might have been a fine carpet but that no carpet ever woven had been so thick and soft underfoot and no perfume had come near matching the sweet air made by these great trees. They left the main road now and went north and, as night was falling, the Rainboroughs suggested they pass the night short of the great canyon and the following morning they saw how

right it was to come to this place by first light. Bavender had not thought much of the canyon—he had seen the pictures—but that it would be a very wide and very deep hole. But now, first light coming to the flat land high above the gorge, that gorge was lost in shadow and there was no light anywhere below them and the dark was not black but a deep blue that warmed and softened as the sunlight came over it.

The boy went to the very edge of the precipice and Mrs. Rainborough did not much like that and Bavender went with him and there the boy looked out across the canyon, the rising sun had started a rim of fiery light there, and he looked down and said the canyon could have been a sea. And he stayed there as the sun rose, he would not come away, and as light came down into the canyon and the shadow weakened and fell away but from the very bottom, the river at the gorge's pit, he said then that it was as if a sea were drying, as if its water were being drained from it. And when the sun stood high overhead, and the boy stood there at the precipice still, he would not come away, then the boy said the sea was gone now and there was its ancient floor and all was dry and dead there. All the creatures who had lived there had been taken away and there was but a sea of space there, there was nothing there, and the boy lifted his arms as if he might dive into nothing. Then he dropped his arms and looked hard into the gorge. He had seen a bird circling there, far below, and the boy raised his face to the sun. He had seen the sky below his feet and the sky was buried there and all was turned on its head. The water was gone from the sea and the sky stood at his feet and he thought he must fly there, he must swim there, and the boy laughed to the sun and Bavender took the boy's arm and led him away from the edge he so longed to cross.

Next: the dam. Bavender thought the creation of man would suffer from what an ancient people and an ancient river had made, but in this he was wrong. Not only the man of science, all found the dam a thing of wonder. If one had thought of a wall of concrete, high and wide, standing overhead, a looming fortress wall that must be scaled to find battle at its crest, it was not this dam. This dam lay below and its wall curled down narrow and deep to a lake far beneath it. This graceful scroll to water seemed a thing made for its beauty, a work of art, rather than a massive temple to the power and productivity of man the builder—so thought the man of science, in any case. It was Danny who wanted to go into the guts of this device, not Bavender; he might have stayed in the sun that warmed him and the great wall, the lake that had been born only years ago reaching blue into the distant mist. There were elevators to take them down and there were military guards at their doors and their papers were checked and the men were patted down

and Mrs. Rainborough's purse searched. This done, they were allowed into the elevator and others came and they were patted down, purses looked into, and when enough people had come into the elevator, one of the military guards stepped inside and pressed a button that closed the door and pressed another and the carriage went down quick, down down down, so that Danny wondered if he had ever been in a building so tall and he did not think he had and the guard at the door smiled: beyond the greatest cities there was no deeper shaft nor swifter carriage descent.

They came to the bottom and the doors pulled back and two military guards greeted them there. No pat-downs or purse searches now; one guard counted them on a hand counter as they came out of the elevator, while the second looked close into every face. This guard's eyes flicked when Danny passed, but no examination of papers or the like occurred and they went out onto a long curved catwalk and there at the far end of this stood a third military guard and a submachine gun hung from a strap to his shoulder and a guard dog sat at his feet and they watched the group come onto the walkway and stop when a civilian guide there told them to. Another group of visitors stood there and the guide led them to the elevator and they were click-click-click counted and the doors closed and they were gone. The guide returned and, all looking over the catwalk railing, looking down into the turbine chamber and the massive waterway there, he spoke of the dam: the history of its building and the facts and figures of that and he went on to speak of the dam's operation and gave those numbers as well. This interested Bavender much and the others of their party less so. Danny went away from the guide's lecture, looking down at the turbines, and the guide and the guards watched this and Danny came back to those standing about the guide and still the guards watched him. The guide spoke of this: great valves had been built in the lake side of the dam wall and when these were opened rivers came rushing through the wall and down into the turbines here and these turbines turned to generate enough electricity to light a large middle-western city for a day and a night. Danny listened to this closely and asked the guide if there were screens placed over these intake valves, to save fish that might be drawn into the turbines, and the guide smiled, there were indeed screens to keep fish and swimmers from lighting a large middle-western city for a day and a night and the group laughed. The guide pointed to the doors behind the armed guard and the group saw the red sign DANGER/NO ADMITTANCE there and the guide smiled and said the guard and his submachine and the dog were not there to protect visitors from electrical machinery but to protect electrical machinery from visitors and all laughed, all but Danny. He stood gazing down into the turbine chamber,

as when they had regained the top of the dam he stood gazing down into the lake as if, Bavender thought, he were a fish or a swimmer who had gone through the screens about the valves and now he swam with the fish in the river rushing toward the turbines' maw and, thinking this, Danny looked to Bavender and smiled: it would be like being swallowed up by a modern leviathan to be cast up three days later as enough electricity to light a large middle-western city for a day and a night. Danny smiled and turned to the water below. Yes, that would be some purpose to one's life. To have brought brief light to the dark and to have left no trace of one's existence.

They went northwest from the dam, to make for the desert called death, and came upon a scene that was unknown even to the well-traveled Rainboroughs. The dusty desert village known to the Rainborough before the war, now it was gone and a thriving town had grown up, as years later the thriving town would make a mecca to greed and gambling and entertainment, a Sodom and Gomorrah as broad and vile as those ancient times had known. Mr. Rainborough regained balance and quickly explained the dusty sleepy village that was gone and the dusty thriving town that had come. The railroad and the war, he said and riding into the town Bavender saw that was right. Before the war there was freight shipped to L.A., freight shipped back east, and there was a daily passenger train, a sleek streamliner a quarter mile long, holidays longer, and this sleepy village was a desert stop of these trains, that they might be watered and fueled. But there was not much to this, not much that had to do with the town. A bar for the railroad men and the few passengers who left their air-conditioned coaches and ducked right back in and that was it. But now, as they came to the center of the town and could see through it, dozens of troop trains could be seen in the yards beyond, these hauling fresh troops to the seaports of California, taking the boys who had done their time to homes back east. The streets they went through were crowded with these soldiers, vets and recruits, the recruits asking what is war like, what will it be like? and the vets saying little, you'll find out; and there were bars and cafes and hotels and a couple of casinos, not the great gaming palaces that would come later, still you could lose couple years back pay in couple hours, quicker than that if you worked at it. The car worked slow through the crowd, but the one crossing light, you crossed where you wanted, and made it into a back street. The car was left there and the four went back to the main street and the crowd there and if you weren't in uniform you were watched there, the vets trying to remember what it had been like, what it would be like, the recruits, some proud they were not like that now, others fearful, longing to be there again, places called home, places where all were different, if only some wore belts

and some braces, and some were women and some children and some were old and not all were men or would be soon.

They came to a cafe and went in and it was a bar too. Bavender and the Rainboroughs took a booth now being cleaned and Danny went to the bar and had a beer and nothing to eat. There were soldiers at the bar and a few girls from the hotel across the street and an old man at one end of the bar and an old woman at the other end and everywhere else in the cafe were soldiers, maybe a couple railroad men coming in and out, taking something bagged back to the train. For that age when the old men who make your country's wars figure you are ready to fight, late teens, early twenties, Danny alone was not in uniform. Bavender thought this might mean trouble but there was none, not at first anyway. And even then, when it came it was not the trouble he had expected, maybe it was something worse. Danny's looks were the looks of a soldier. Laboring in the desert had made him hard and he was dark anyway and now he was near black, the black of a plains Indian, and his face had been carved by wind and his hands made large and calloused from his work and the recruits knew he was not one of them, not just come from an office or shop or classroom. And some of the vets thought he might be one of theirs, come back from the war they had been fighting, but when they came close and saw his eyes they saw he had not seen what they had seen and they did not know what to make of him and went away. But some of the younger men, off to places that made eyes hard and wary and close, came and sat near Danny, three or four of them, and they and Danny began to talk. Bavender knew well how Danny talked, he said what he thought and what he believed, with no care who he was talking to or how what he said might be received. It was Danny talking and talking and talking, that was when Bavender thought the trouble would begin, with Danny talking and talking of war, this war, all wars, that they must not be fought, old men sending young men out to fight for them and these young men, if they did not kill other young men, then they might be killed by another man as young as they; it was then the trouble would begin, Bavender thought and he was right, though it was not the trouble he had foreseen. First one young soldier turned from Danny and stood and walked away and he did not look back. And others left as well. There was nothing much in their leaving, they rose and walked to the far end of the bar where their comrades had gathered and if they looked back at Danny they did so but once and turned their backs and did not look at Danny again. One young soldier was left now and as Danny talked this youth listened, he listened as hard as Danny talked. This young soldier was turned that Bavender saw his face and Bavender saw the fear and hope and belief there and that this young

soldier knew that Danny was right, that this war he was going off to fight was wrong. That all wars were wrong and must not be fought; that if young men like Danny, if there were more and more of them, if there were more young men who thought like Danny and would be branded a criminal, near a traitor, for it, if more young men laid down their arms and would not kill other young men, then, just maybe, all wars would end; and if young men then went off to foreign places they would go as friends, to learn of other cultures and their ways and learn, maybe, a word or two of their foreign tongues. But in time this young soldier withdrew from Danny. Maybe the other soldiers called out his name, whatever, by what reason the young soldier went back from Danny and looked back to his comrades and he rose and looked at Danny as if he were going to offer his hand but one of his comrades called out and he turned and went away from Danny.

They were done and it was time to go and Bavender went to the bar for Danny. He thought he might see the loneliest young man on earth, a young man cast from his tribe to wander the wilderness without friend or wife or parent or child, but as Danny turned and rose this was not the man he saw. Danny rose and he smiled at Bavender and he took Bavender's hand and he held it, as some shake hands by grip, and that done, Danny quiet now, they left the cafe and went back to the car to find the Rainboroughs there and they went on toward the desert that lay beneath a sea that was not there, and Bavender knew then that Danny was lost to him, he was lost to them all. The boy, the young man now, had chosen the end he had made for himself and he was at peace with this and nothing on earth and in this life would ever trouble him again.

They came into the desert called death at the right time, the hour the Rainboroughs had carefully calculated, the sun gone down but there would be plenty of light, maybe three hours before true night, to find a place that suited them and make their camp there, and though the desert air was not cool, their guides said with night the air would be chilled and their tent must be pitched soon, the warm sand that lay under their sleeping bags would be welcome then and in this their guides were right.

They smiled at the names of places and things now, that with a sun overhead these names would have been precisely right. Dante's View, Hellgate, Devil's Playground, Funeral Peak. Cauldron Wells and Stovepipe Wells, Badwater Basin and Weary's Castle and Last Chance Mountain and Anger Point and Dry Lake Flats and they drove through these places or saw signs that led to them. It was a sign that decided the night's campground. *Lowest elevation in the country* and Danny laughed, that would be about right. The pit, the bottom, the end, he laughed and no one else did. They went off the

road and found a sheltered place, that they would be out of the desert winds if they came in the night, and the four pitched the tent. The Rainboroughs then shooed Bavender and Danny away from the campsite. The tent pitched, setting up the camp stove and camp chairs and a camp table, building a small fire in a pit the wind had carved in the rock floor, the preparation for the evening's food and drink—these chores would be done as well by two as four or better and the boys were sent off into the desert. And they were *not* to bring back wood for the fire, Mrs. Rainborough scolded, this valley at the bottom of the earth was a sacred place and all must be left as it had been found. The charcoal they had brought would be fine.

They talked as they went into the desert, talked as they had not during the trip, really talked. Danny talked out his ideas, ideas that had come from observation beyond his book learning, ideas that were not secure in his mind, as he felt an idea, a real idea, must have both sources and in this Bavender agreed. He spoke of the war's end, how he longed for its end, this a selfish longing, he smiled, as with the war ending he would be returned to books and libraries and stores that sold books and he would read and read and read and he would look about him and into himself and then he would talk to others who had come to know ideas that were found in books and ideas that were found in the world and within one's self, and then he would write. Letters to Bavender and to the Rainboroughs and one girl he had known in school, she too had longed to know the world and the books of ideas, and he would write a boy there in the labor camp, he too longed for these things the boy and the girl and their teachers longed for. He would write letters to all these and then finally he would come to write letters to himself and there would be many of these and in time he would not write letters to others and he would write only to himself. And these letters written, he would read them and he would put a flame to the letter last written and destroy it and it would be in no place in the world but within his mind. And the next night the same, he smiled. He would write and read and destroy another letter and he would do this every night till he came to write a single letter, but this one, and he would write this letter night after night and read it and destroy it till a night would come and in its dark he would see he would no longer write this last letter, for there was no need for it. The end had come, he said and smiled, and it would be time to lay aside such follies and leave them back.

Now Bavender spoke and he did not know where his speech would lead him or so he thought at the beginning. He spoke of the center and the device they would create there and their fear of it. There were a dozen of them, at best no more than twenty, and they met Wednesday night and were

small fry, no important scientist or personage among them, and for the most part they were religious or knew some belief. Much talk of the bomb had been going around, its nature, how and why it would function, and there was little real understanding among these believing people, how this bomb would be different from all other bombs ever made, how it worked and why. The splitting of an atom and then others had been remembered, but this was the first time he had spoken of it to another. An atom would be split and this split atom would split others and now these would split others and this splitting of atoms would go on and on, all this in a fraction of a second, till a massive explosion was made by all these atoms splitting others, these splitting others, and what distressed the small fry was: like, when exactly would this splitting decide to stop? If the universe was made all of atoms, why then, they worried and wondered, would not this splitting of atoms, this chain reaction, go on and on till all the universe's atoms were split and all the universe was a fiery hell? The Bible had spoken of such an end, some who knew that book told this, that the earth and all on it would end in fire. And maybe this bomb is that end, they feared and prayed that this bomb would never work and that God would put an end to this devilish work and save all who believed in Him and His Son and his heavenly return to earth. And they formed a circle and joined hands and lowered their heads and prayed in silence and Bavender, who believed in none of this, did the same as all the others, but that his prayer was thought.

I have never been a religious person. It simply never occurred to me. I think my mother may have been a believer but in secret. It was not that my father forbade such, but that my mother knew he thought nothing of God and all that, and that speaking of such matters would have been like speaking a foreign language to him. A thing he did not understand nor cared to. But noise. And so our family lived. Does God exist or does He not? A foreigner wanting to sell you things you did not want. Those who wanted nothing but to waste your time. Oh two sisters and a brother took up church and religion from friends at school, but they did not bring these things home with them. And the devices they went to to get to Sunday morning church—only once did my father note the great number of Saturday nights these three spent over with friends in town and my mother smiled and so did those others of us who understood. And so this attitude, or lack of one, went on through my years of education, and I met few in college who considered such things seriously if they considered them at all, and so, well one might say this non-believer found it strange to be at these Wednesday night meetings, to be standing in a circle, hands joined, heads bowed, and thinking while the others prayed, thinking that he did not know what prayer was or

how to go about doing it, and this God prayed to, he had only the vaguest idea what such a thing might be. By the talk of the people at these meetings, it seemed that this God might be a king who did not exist, or existed only in their minds. And then I came to think this God existed in their hearts. And then I came to think this God existed in their soul. Yes, that was the change that came to me. That though I did not know a word for this thing, that all my life I had believed that Man has something different to him than other animals, that Man is more than a very very clever animal indeed, and that this difference was what these circled people called souls. And that night when I should have been praying but was thinking, it was then that I thought of souls and thought I had one and that all, or most, human beings do and that I was very pleased indeed to have a soul. And now I did not feel so very different from the others in the circle and that in believing in this single thing I had become part of a greater body that believed in many things.

The boy had turned away during the last of this and he stayed silent, his back to Bavender after the man was done. And when he spoke, he spoke off, as if speaking to someone standing beyond sight in the dark.

No. We are alone. There is nothing there. There are no others there. Not friend, not enemy. There there is nothing but you for you and him for him and her for her and me for me. And then there is not even that. We are gone. We have not existed.

Now the boy turned to Bavender. He had clasped his arms to his side, for the night air had grown chill. He spoke to Bavender.

Hold me. Please hold me.

And Bavender stopped. He hesitated. And the boy stepped back.

No. It's not that. It's not that at all.

And he turned and went ahead of Bavender, making toward the fire, so distant it might have been a star fallen to earth, and Bavender went after him.

But now the boy was gone and Bavender could not see him anywhere about him. And he went on toward the fire and the man and woman about it, to see if the boy was there but he could see he was not. And now the man and the woman were gone and the tent and the fire and all else was gone as well and the stars were gone from above and the sliced moon was gone and the earth beneath it, that was gone as well. All was gone and there was nothing but black left and himself in it and the memory was done. And then there was not even that, even that was gone.

**T**here were three celebrations to be made during this one night and the following day and the night following that. The election would occupy attention and concern the first night, this being the end of spring and time for early balloting.

Most knew that the old ways of reporting elections were coming to an end, but few understood that this election would be that end. Of course radio was strong, but only the aged and ill and cheerless stayed back home in the kitchen when there could be a night on the town, the first of the weekend. The daily newspaper in the hub city printed all the results, but these would arrive the next morning and often not till the morning after that. As for television, there were only three sets in town and those who had seen them work told of watching ghosts groping through an arctic blizzard, whatever language being spoken a furred buzz. To most the only way to know the vote count as it came in was to gather before the long blackboard set up before the town's weekly newspaper office, all the race figures, both local and statewide, being chalked in, these soon to be erased and larger, later numbers to be chalked on the board. These figures were often cheered or booed by the throng gathered before the board, but win or lose most always this baying was done in good spirits. They were, after all, out of the house at night and standing in the middle of the street, events that had not come to pass since the night the old courthouse burned down. Now some who had voted against the grain did not join in the two-sided chorus and could be spotted by their long faces and shut mouths, and the winners would call out to them, not taunts or jeers but cracks and these good spirited, usually, though this provided little relief to the long face, the shut mouth, victory being victory, defeat defeat.

Mr. Wise owned the town's weekly and was editor and copy editor and reporter and printer and distributor to boot. A stout, quiet girl with a moustache helped with the heavy lifting and broom pushing, as Mr. Wise's back was going out, though some thought it repaired itself the closer the publisher

came to the golf course. Summers and long holidays and busy weekends a pretty niece came in to serve the shop at the front of the establishment, this a stationers that offered bulk items, say reams of paper, the drug store and the five and dime chose not to handle. The paper appeared every Saturday, even if Friday had been Christmas or the country club links quarterfinals, Mr. Wise rarely advancing to these, and ranged from four to ten pages and Mr. Wise was praised for the variation. If it was worth printing, it went in no matter the cost; if not it stayed out no matter the advertisers' complaints. For years Mr. Wise gave over a half page—a full page for homecoming and graduation and those rare fall weekends the hometown scratched out a win—to the local highschool. But recently the kids had voted to start up their own paper and, even if rough mimeograph rather than smooth type, they were pleased with the editorial control they exercised and the expanded columns they could write and print. Still, Mr. Wise carried at least one story about the school and of course the cafeteria menu for the week. It was said he missed dealing with the youngsters, some of whom he encouraged to pursue lives in journalism; a few went on to obey that encouragement and the publisher was pleased indeed when these cub reporters mailed him stories, and some had by-lines, from all over the state; and there was that lad who went on to one of the largest newspapers back east and if Mr. Wise received fewer and fewer clippings from the boy after that, he knew well in making such a leap even the wisest would forget in time the springboard that carried them so high. As solace Mr. Wise imagined the big city cocktail parties the young man frequented, the names there famous throughout the world, and Mr. Wise would smile with the great reporters and editors there as the young man spoke with warmth and kindness of the weekly newspaper in his hometown and of the warm and kind old fellow who published, wrote, edited and printed it and pushed broom as well if the stout quiet girl had gone down in the back, hers could go out too, all that heavy lifting.

All thought, and no doubt with good reason, that Mr. Wise could have gone on to higher places, bigger newspapers, as big as the state capital's anyway, if he had chosen to; but it was a small town weekly he wanted to write and run and when he saw the ad in the classifieds (for Mr. Wise was not a local boy) he answered the *for sale* sign with loans from parents and a friend and came to this town he had never heard of and set up shop. His first edition—numbered 1139 as the paper had been established long ago, back with the beginning of the town—he framed and hung on the wall and there it was still, now thirty years later.

Mr. Wise did two things in coming to town. He brought with him new ideas and he studied hard and followed when he could the ways and thinking

of those native to this place. He was a man of liberal disposition and like principles and propounded the latter in the paper but only in the editorial column and then gingerly. And these editorials were not solely given over to politics, far from it. These seven-hundred word essays could range from the doings in the nation's capital and sometimes to those around the world to very intimate and local matters indeed. A stray dog might be taken in and he observed this and after that column, the angel of mercy, an elderly woman and quite poor, had not to worry about chowchow for the mutt or forking out for the vet's services. He was probably most active on the national scene during the hard times, the decade before the war. Scarcely a week passed he did not write some support for the administration that sought to put the laid-off back to work, see the down-and-out were taken in and that the dispossessed found legal redress that did not dispossess them further. But he was at his best roasting the politicians and their lobbyist lords down in the state capital and he fought hard that the local district sent only the best to represent the several counties that made it. As for the satiric attacks on the porkbarrel and pomposity reigning in the domed hall downstate, he seemed to win an award for best editorial (weekly) every time the chance came. A national observer once put it that Mr. Wise wrote not unlike an old Irish dean who vented so splendidly his wrath against ignorance and stupidity way back when. This magazine article too had been framed and put on the wall and when those who did not know much of this old dean but that he had written a famous children's book queried the editor, Mr. Wise replied,

"He was a thinker who thought horses had more beautiful souls than men," and the interlocutor was left to puzzle and scratch his head.

As for local news and views Mr. Wise printed near everything that crossed his desk—after some light editing and careful cutting—but when something came in that crossed his principles, something he found wrong and unfair and malicious, then that was balled and shot into file 13. But even if he returned the Red Watch Society's latest salvo (the attack on Doc Bavender, say) with a big red BULL written over it, that same edition still carried the time and place of the Society's next meeting, right along with such notices for the Jaycees and Kiwanis and the like.

The editorials, the comments and reporting done were fine, better than fine, but the best work made by Mr. Wise, all but those who did not care to think on such matters agreed, were his obituaries. These were hardly the brief, ill-informed notices you would find in most small newspapers, but rather they read close to essays, to condensed biographies that in speaking of death brought the dead back to life. A bed-ridden old woman was a pretty

girl again and a crazed old man returned his intelligence. But this last year had been a noxious year for such revival for a family had died, not in a single catastrophe, car crash or house aflame, but serially and two were children and the man and the woman were still young as parents go and the man, at the fourth and last funeral, Dr. Moore, the intelligent, eloquent preacher who had come to this town, this good man had said that this small, quiet, kind man might have been called the soul of this town and Mr. Wise and many others could not disagree. The boys received brief notices, Mr. Wise would leave them be in death as his own parents had left him be in growing up, to join their adult world when he cared to. The woman's notice was closer to the usual, a longer remembrance that was perhaps kinder than she deserved, as if he were writing for her father, the banker who had once given the paper and its editor a leg up when direly needed. But then at the end, the fourth death, some felt Mr. Wise had grown sick of it, death when there was still time for life, sick of writing of death as if that remembrance might return life, and so in that edition there was but a photograph of the man and this was black-bordered and there was the man's name and the first name was the nickname he was known by and there were the years of his birth and of his death, and all in town agreed: no words could heal their mourning of this loss. The editor framed the photograph and hung it on the wall right above the box of bright yellow pencils and the man would be remembered as long as children treasured long yellow pencils, as the editor had as a child, the fragrance they made at the sharpener, close your eyes and you were deep in the forest and you had found the small tree that would center your yuletide celebration and your father would put aside his axe and you would go with him and your mother and your brother and all would put faces into the tree and breathe its fragrance, that it would stay alive in memory long after it had been cut and felled.

Election night then. The big board was set up outside the newspaper plant and this was raised that all in the crowd would see and a walkway ran along its base and two volunteers (and these changed during the night) went along and chalked up the figures given them. These were delivered by a boy hired for the night and they were provided by Mr. Wise who manned the teletype—the state's newspapers all pitched in so that this service might be provided election night. The stout quiet girl was given the night off, for she would be coming in at dawn to wrap up the work Mr. Wise had done throughout the night. And so reading out the ticker tape, the boy running the figures out to the board, the erasing the old, the chalking in the new, went on well into the night. The boy was the first to be sent off and then as the crowd dwindled and the tickered results diminished the chalkers gave

over chalk to Mr. Wise and the editor ran the operation for a time, for he knew that even when all had quit the board and gone, that there would be those who would return with first light and find figures that even the hub city daily could not boast, not till Monday morning anyway. But in time Mr. Wise would close that operation down and he would turn his labor to setting up the special election edition. This was one of his favored times of the year, for there was nothing to the paper but the vote count—articles, ads, sports, obits, who got married, who engaged, grain prices and the like could wait till next week—and Mr. Wise might turn his mind over to figures and the offices being run for and the towns and counties and districts about the region and the capital downstate and how they went, and the names of the many men and some women who had put their names forth to represent their towns and counties and districts across the state, and in this concentration on so much so little, his mind relaxed and the work went easy and well, for Mr. Wise had known a love of numbers that near matched his love of words. The print set and inked then Mr. Wise gave the boards over to the press and Mr. Wise had the night's first smoke and put his feet up and listened to the music of the machine, only a robin in the spring could make such song. The first and last pages done, these sheets were flopped and the interior of the edition was begun and as each four page sheet was done, these were laid out and others printed and laid over them till the edition was done. Next another machine folded the papers and that done, another machine stamped names and addresses and mail permit on the front pages and now these folded and franked papers were stacked in boxes, ready for shipping out when the stout quiet girl came in and now the stout quiet girl had come in, and was early at that, and Mr. Wise smiled, that as usual the plate glass at the front was glazed with first light and the stout quiet girl smiled at Mr. Wise, as ever thinking she had come in in the middle of the night.



Near noon music came to the courthouse square, and this but the starter, the main course, that would come near nightfall and true dark. This was usual: the ample plank dance floor had been set up on the south side of the square, there where it was sunny and the grass thick, and lights for the dark had been strung over it and when those lights came on there would be many sorts of music there. Square dancers would be first, come evening. There would be so many children among them and so many who hadn't been children for a long time, these squares and their dancing would find themselves done before bedtime, for the children and those who had once been. That

done, the thick crowd that had gathered around the square dance had grown thicker still and the music went on. Now this year, and some said they hoped it the last, a group of skinny teenagers had come from the hub city and they wore black suits with pegged cuffs and jackets that flapped like flags and not one of these boys had seen sun for some time, nor a barbershop either, and though they brought on guitars and fiddles like the old-time bands, these were hooked up to loudspeakers and no cat fight had ever done better and the words they yowled, count yourself lucky you didn't understand a word. The real old-time music followed and was danced by those old enough to know the steps and of these those young enough to execute them. The schottische, put your little foot, and about every reel ole Virginny had ever known. The elaborate delicate dances were watched with fascination by the teens, their new form of dance being to wiggle something here, shake it there, little rhyme and no reason to it. Those of a certain maturity tucked, a younger set came in and would finish the eve or the eve them. Most of these were from the country or on this night wore ten-gallon hats and pointy-toe boots and pearl-snap shirts and tooled belts anyway. And the good fiddlin'/git-box tunes they offered, they had come from the country too and were held onto tight long after so many country people had been flushed from farm to big city, there the ponies they rode great machines, their fields factories, and still they wouldn't give it up, the slow dancing a cowboy might practice, the quicker steps, only a cowgirl could get her partner through to the end.

That would be the end to the evening's music, but to turn back to the beginning, that morning coming up on noon, this music went further back than any of the rest and was kept alive like some things are stashed in museums, though no museum had ever kept anything so alive as did the jigs and polkas and waltzes of the old-fiddlers contest. And these old fellows and a couple ladies too and some who weren't old, they hadn't remembered the tunes, just learned them, but you closed your eyes and you couldn't tell twenty-two from eighty-four. But the most favored by the crowd and fiddlers was a boy, maybe ten, and he came out and fiddled and if it knew not a touch of symphony, there was something like the flight of an old bumblebee to it and the lad was cheered and the old fiddlers came and tousled his hair, he'd be a good one in time, when he learned that the fiddle was properly played stuck into upper arm, not tucked under chin.

Now once the old music was done, then eating came, this followed by the day's premier event, what everyone from babe in arms to granny in her pusher had come to see and hear and be near was the Old-Timers parade.



The striders and strollers, the riders and rollers were marshaled there back of the courthouse, so that first turn would send them straight into the town's longest straight street, the crowd gathered as far as eye could see. First came the flags, four of them, they would be marched by boys from the local reserves, their unit would be called up any day now, they had that look to them, real soldiers soon.

Next the marching band, this from the local highschool, then on back near the end would be found the Shriners' bagpipe outfit.

Now came the dignitaries and their long new cars and at the head of the caravan came the mayor and his car was the longest and newest of them all and it was a convertible, the top down, and the mayor sat behind the wheel and if he would steer, two pretty young secretaries from the courthouse were sitting on the new, long car's back hood, waving and smiling at the crowd like beauty queens and the mayor waved and grinned too, like maybe some of the applause was, as he was the town's first citizen, meant to cheer his steering, the pretty girls waving and smiling at such an idea.

Now came the Sheriff's Posse and now it was as the parade had begun that the sheriff saw something was wrong, maybe something bad wrong. Back at the beginning, back where the Posse and all the rest of the parade had been marshaled, the sheriff thought this year would be no different from all the rest. No, his concern would come only after the parade had begun and the Posse following the mayor following band following flags had turned the corner into the long street that would make the parade's route. It was only then that the sheriff would see that Van Glassmoyer was not there with the Posse but was gone and that was what was wrong, maybe bad wrong. At the marshalling everything had looked fine. Van Glassmoyer was not riding up near the front, up near the sheriff, his old friend, this year the banker had taken a position near the back of the Posse and the sheriff had thought nothing of that. The banker was that sort, you gave him the choice, he'd be there in the back, the pigtail, he called it. No, that was not much to think of, nor was the banker packing a saddle gun. For years now the banker had not brought rifle or pistol to the parade, but the sheriff saw the gun was the little single-shot .22 Glassmoyer had had since a boy, the gun had been thought lost there after the death of his grandson but now had been returned and the sheriff thought the small rifle was but that, some memory of the boy, maybe a memory of the boy he had been, and he turned his mind to organizing this year's Posse, as usual in need of it.

The sheriff would ride point, had always and would, long as he rode. But the matter of the guidon and which rider carried the outfit's colors changed every year and as this year three merchants had fallen into debate, who would be this year's lead rider, and as it looked to the sheriff that this discussion might not be ended by next year's parade, the sheriff took it upon himself to settle the matter, for now anyway. And in riding down the line, it was then the sheriff saw the newcomer who had joined the parade, an old-timer, a real one, the hobo cowboy the sheriff had seen camping this morning on the shaded side of the courthouse. Debate making toward squabble, the sheriff then rode back and gave over the guidon to the old cowboy and they went together back to the Posse's head. And the bundle of fur that had made the sleeping cowboy's pillow that morning, now that pup nuzzled near hidden under the old fellow's faded denim jacket. All settled, the sheriff gave nod to the band major and the music came up and the flags went off and the band after them and the Posse followed and the parade had begun. And in turning that corner, making down that block that knew many businesses and shops, it was looking in one of the broad plate-glass windows there and seeing the Posse's entire length in reflection, it was then the sheriff knew that Van Glassmoyer was not with them and the sheriff handed off his flag to a merchant and left the parade, fearing that something had gone wrong, something bad.

The sheriff knew which way his friend had gone. A man told him: Banker Glassmoyer had broken away from the parade and had gone east, toward the old train station and the gully and Eastertown beyond. But the sheriff knew Glassmoyer would not be bound for the gully or for Eastertown and after he had made it over the tracks and around the station, he set his horse on a course that had as much south as east in it, across that lost land that would connect the gully to a ravine and that ravine would lead down sharp at first, then slowly ease and broaden till you were well off the plain, making for the canyon not more than five miles below, though it would seem, coming into the full canyon, you had come to a foreign land, all about had changed so.

They had come this way often when they were boys, Hat then called Bill and some old-timers still said that and Van called Kid because he looked even younger than he was and for his size and city upbringing could still handle his fists. Sometimes the boys rode down into the canyon, sometimes they hiked. Hat's home place, a ranch northeast of town, if the boys were spending time there, they would saddle up and ride. And then when they started from the Glassmoyer big house there in town, they would put on

army packs and walk. And as it was with so many youths, and maybe still is, it was the ranch kid, so many hours working on the back of a horse, who looked forward to the hike; and the town boy, too young to drive a car and you walked everywhere, all over town, he would go to about any length to climb on a horse and let it do the walking. Walking or riding they went the way Hat, and Van before him, went today, so many years later. The gully went first south and a touch east leaving Eastertown and it had deepened from years of draining water off the flat, but it was still easy riding for five miles or so. It was there the flat ended and the gully waters had cut through that tough rimrock and the ground went down steep and rugged now and it narrowed and you dismounted and eased your horses down. This descent seemed longer than it was, but the boys learned quick you let the ravine, this chute, be as long as it liked. One day a horse rolled that steep stretch, then later, walking, one of the boys followed suit, rolling to the bottom. You came into the canyon abrupt. Went into a grove of trees and through that you stepped out onto the canyon floor. But then that arrival through the trees proved little surprise. There was a spring there at the base of the canyon wall and it roared like some jungle beast and the boys called it that, Tiger Springs, though most old-timers who had come this way before the town was settled settled for Hollerin Wells. But those were the old days, when there was good rain and more than that up on the flat. That dry decade before the second war had changed things and over the years the spring diminished and this day, the boys old men, getting that way, would have said the waters coming from the canyon wall, those that told you were near down the steep, purred like a pussy.

The boys camped out. During the summer sometimes three or four days, till someone came looking for them or, more likely, their hunting and fishing skills had driven off every fish and bird in sight or maybe those skills had been enlarged in a boy's mind and after a couple nights on jerky they admitted a hot, home-cooked meal sounded fine. A good stretch of sand lay there where the spring fed out onto the canyon floor and a good creek curled over it and the boys would set up camp anywhere along there, till, maybe three miles on, the sand petered out and the ground went rugged and steep and gave down into a thicket of trees that might be explored but never slept in. The boys' favored campsite was there close to the spring, in some trees close under the canyon wall. Maybe they felt some safety in that. Now it had been a half century since wild Indians had come this way, but the way the boys saw it, the canyon darkening and campfire yarns to spin, those native to this land could pop up any time, maybe even tonight, and the backing canyon wall would prove fortress, the three miles of sand floor

before them, a stranger's approach could be noted long before his arrival. That is, if the arrival didn't come much after sundown. In those days the boys, try as they might, rarely made it up to watch the stars and old man moon come out bright, to see the sand glow in the dark, the creek go to a curling silver ribbon in the night. They rode down one last time, the boys older now, highschool just done, and now they stayed up to watch true night come and they talked and talked, talking of just about everything there was in the world, talking of the past and of their present lives and the future. It was that last one that pretty much ended these camping trips. No longer were they boys and would soon be men and if they rode or walked down into the canyon from time to time, it was to fish or hunt, there would be no sleeping under the stars to it. Now as men they had other places to pass the night and morning would bring further duties and the times they had brought bedrolls and camp gear and got away from the old folks and brothers and sisters and living in houses and chores and going to school and going to church and being on time, don't be late, all those things boys must be free of from time to time—those days were gone.

It was coming down the ravine, that one steep part, that the rifle shot came to the sheriff. It could've been anything, they could've been boys again, for that was the signal when one went off alone and got lost or found something worth seeing, a rifle shot and the other returned that and the lost was found, what found seen, and that was how it was played today. The rifle shot came and the sheriff took out his saddle gun and he shot that and he waited and it seemed like a long time but it wasn't and the second shot came and the sheriff shot after that and his friend fired a third shot and the sheriff eased his good horse down through the ravine, making for the sand-spread canyon floor.

The banker was there near their favored campsite, there under the canyon wall, looking out over the sand and the stream curling over it and there was the thicket on beyond that. The banker's tack had been stacked nearby and the grey mare, he had never known a finer animal, she was out about a hundred yards, turned back toward her rider, pawing the ground like a bull set to charge, going nowhere she didn't want to, no matter she'd been set free.

The banker shook his head. "Like some goddamn dog. And she was a handful as a filly."

"Just stuck with somebody, I reckon."

The banker smiled and raised the rifle but he did not fire again. Rather he turned to the tack and slipped the rifle into its scabbard. He raised and looked out toward the horse. The horse had taken to nodding her head to

go along with the pawing. The banker shook his head and came over to the sheriff. He patted his friend's shirt pockets.

"Got a smoke, old man?"

The sheriff laughed as much as he ever did. "Now I think I gave that up years back."

The banker smiled. "Now I remember. Me too. Seems like it was a bet and still nobody's won." The banker looked around him. "Still wouldn't mind having one today. Think it was here I had my first tailor-made. This friend of mine brought along a pack. Think he'd been at it for weeks by then." The banker turned back to the horse. "Shoo. Scat. Go on." The horse went to standing stock still, head lowered a bit, as if she'd forgotten her glasses, couldn't make out who this old cuss was. The banker turned back to his friend. "I guess we'd better be going."

"That'd be fine."

"Just leave the tack here, I guess."

"I'll send one of the boys down for it."

"Maybe they could camp out like we used to camp out."

"I think the boys I got in mind have other things in mind."

The banker smiled toward the horse and the horse shook her head hard. "She'll come on in after us. Like a pup." The banker went to the sheriff's horse. "You mind if we ride double going back in?"

"Don't mind at all."

"We can walk her that steep part. We could walk all the way back up to the flat."

"Let's see how it goes. She climbs pretty good."

The banker patted the horse's neck. "Yes, I remember that."

The sheriff swung up to the saddle and he let the stirrup go free and the banker swung up behind him. The banker had gone so thin, it was like he was a boy again, riding double out at the ranch, the first time the banker had ever been on a horse that somebody wasn't leading. The banker remembered that as well. That's how it had been as boys. So close they were always thinking the same thing or pretty often anyway.

The sheriff turned the horse and they went back through the grove of trees, there where the trail came down from the ravine. Through that they went up and the sheriff said,

"Now you don't go showing off. You hang on now."

"Yes sir." And the banker put his arms around his friend's back and put his face into his back. The sheriff could feel him talking. "You're going to miss your parade."

"There'll be plenty left. We'll make the pigtail."

The sheriff could feel his friend's smile. "The pigtail. Bet you don't remember that. How we used to split times. I'd come out to the ranch and then next time you'd come into town. And that time, maybe it was the first time, we were still little anyway, I came out to the ranch and next morning we went to church. And that was a new one for me, neither Pop or Mama caring for the place, and after church and Sunday dinner at the deacon's the kids all went out and played baseball. What was the name of that community out there anyway?"

"Mount Bethel."

"Yes. That's right. And what was there out there anyway? The church, the parsonage, the deacon's house and there was that one-room school-house and the teacherage and what else was there anyway?"

"There was the little store."

"Yes, that's right. One of the best places on earth. All the things you'd ever want all in that little store. And the gas pump. Bet you don't remember that. Pop got tired of running low taking me out, bringing me back, and he bought the store a gas pump and put it on loan, a note he never called in, and oh it was a marvel to see in those days. Modern. It was like a rocket craft from outer space had landed. Tall bright red thing and there was a glass globe, a dome there on the top, and you hand pumped what gas you wanted up into the dome and it was marked by gallons and you pumped in what you wanted, Pop always went for five gallons, oh did he ever hate to run out of gas, and then there was a hose and a nozzle that passed the gas into the tank and those were the days when all but one of the stations in town poured from a can into a funnel. You remember that?"

"Certainly do."

"Mount Bethel, yes. And there was church Sunday mornings and Sunday school too and chicken at the deacon's and you could eat it with your fingers, oh how Pop hated Mama's city ways, me and my brother having to chase a skittery drumstick around the plate with knife and fork. And then after that all the kids would go out over behind the school and there was a baseball diamond there or there were base paths worn into the grass and a flat place that was no mound at all worn into the center of the diamond and there was what once had been a backstop but there were just a couple posts there by then. What wire had been there had blown off or been hauled away by somebody who thought all that wire was going to waste, just so some lazy kids didn't have to run after a ball. You remember that?"

"Yes, I do."

"And that's how we started out there, as pigtails. You remember that?"

"I do."

“And these pigtailed were the littlest kids and that first day that was you and me and as you had seniority, being from around Mount Bethel, you were first pigtail and me being the rookie, I was second pigtail. And that didn’t take much doing as you were already getting good at handling skinners, that’s what they were called out at Mount Bethel. Maybe some foul ball would get over your head and I got to run and run and run and how did I ever run after that ball, had to get to it before it made the cow-pasture fence, there was that mean old cow out there who simply hated the sight of little kids.”

“Oh yes, I do remember her.”

“And then there came that day, think it might’ve been the finest day of my life, when you were promoted. Somebody didn’t show up and you were tossed a big glove and put out into the field and I got the little pigtail glove, and that was about all it was, you could pick cotton with it, and there I was—first pigtail and some little kid littler than me, he was put back at second pigtail and the first ball the catcher missed, I got it and I didn’t toss it back to the catcher, like the catcher said I was to do. No, I hauled back and threw it right over the catcher’s head, all the way back to the pitcher, first bounce anyway. And some of the older kids, the ones who ran the game, they gave me a look and the pitcher said, Good arm, kid, and I knew my pigtail days wouldn’t be lasting forever. Right field coming up. Remember that?”

The sheriff smiled. “Yep. Now the steep bit’s coming up. Hang on tight.”

The banker tightened his arms around his friend’s chest and put his face into his back.

“I will,” he said and they went on up toward the steep, you could just see it coming up.



Moselle was sitting outside, out back, there on the stage door steps at the rear side of the auditorium. Moselle had slipped out of the graduation ceremony to smoke a cigaret, she told herself that, a nicotine fit, these slangy new kids called it, but she knew it was more than that. It was that building on farther back from the main building, the near half made the band hall and the far half, that was the cafeteria and kitchen. The cafeteria, that was why Moselle had left the ceremony. Every year a different member of faculty or staff was honored at graduation—teacher, bus driver, girls’ basketball coach and so on—and this year the honored were the cafeteria ladies and girls. The honor was initially offered to Mrs. Grundy, cafeteria head lady, but the old girl wouldn’t hear of it. You honored one cafeteria lady, you honored them all, and that was it, sitting out in the auditorium, all

the cafeteria ladies lined up on the stage, all in their civvies, as Mrs. Grundy put it, maybe one girl had worn a white blouse but the rest, a riot of color. And sitting out there with the fed and looking up toward those who did the feeding—that was when Moselle had never felt so left out, so lonely in her life and she took her exile out back to the stage door steps and called it that, dying for a smoke.

She wasn't alone out there, in that space made by the auditorium rear and the science wing across the way, these wings abutting the main building's backside. There was a car there, a long black car, all washed and waxed. A car Moselle had never seen before. Not around school, not anywhere in town, this one longer and blacker than Banker Glassmoyer's even. The car had been backed into this near enclosed area, ready for a quick getaway maybe and that made sense. The ceremony concluded the back of the school, the front and all around it were clotted with kids, the graduated in gown and mortarboard figuring they were grownups and maybe they were, and adoring parents and friends and other family, the former breathing a sigh of relief—they had got the little rascals this far, now they were on their own. The car was parked back toward the main building so that Moselle saw into it through the windshield. There was no one in the front seat. You could just see three people sitting in the back and here the mystery car was solved, some of it. The woman to the right, dressed all in white, that would be the nurse. The woman to the left was probably a friend, somebody older, like she had already graduated and could sit it out. Could be that Steen girl, she had come back for the final funeral and then had decided to stay on till graduation, in some way helping the injured girl with her studies and things like that. Or maybe she was here as friend and companion, maybe she'd be driving the girl back to California, get her away from this town and its painful memories, give her heart and head time to heal. And the woman sitting in the middle, that was that injured girl and Moselle knew this for sure, by her headgear. It looked like some kind of turban that had slipped off line, coming down to cover an ear and an eye on that one side. And that was the bandage of course and that was where the blast got the girl, ear and eye, on that one side. The ear was going to be fine. The blast had near torn it from the side of her head, but the docs had tacked it back on and the bust eardrum, that would grow back good as new, pretty close. But the eye, she hadn't lost it but it wasn't in good shape and she'd never see much out of it, shadows, if that, and the docs said they might have to go ahead and take it out. Maybe that was the reason the girl was off to California, to see some fancy eye docs, though the hub city eye docs were supposed to be as good as you'd find. The blast had been a tragedy in so many ways—even the kids

who had stayed back behind the line, where they were supposed to be, were still going to the clinic to have needle steel shrapnel picked out, these small sores breaking out like measles—but the hardest hit was the end of the girl's acting career. As some sharp tongue put it, you had this heroine and when the real eye moved the glassy one stayed put—cross-eyed or wall-eyed, it wouldn't do. But everybody was looking on the bright side, giving it a shot. The Steen girl started it. If the girl couldn't act, then maybe she could direct. And Miss Blum picked that up first bounce: maybe she could write, become a famous playwright or novelist or poet, whatever. Moselle liked that idea. You know, writers were always going around trying to be different: growing a beard or letting their hair go long and not bathing enough and their clothes, they looked like they had been slept in and maybe they had, and this black eye patch, this was Moselle's way of looking at it, that might just do the trick. Tie one of those on and the girl could stay clean and dress right, and her hair done at the beauty parlor, nails polished, the works, and the patch would tell it all. Another mystery writer.

The right rear car door had been opened now and the Steen girl was leaning out and listening and what she was listening to was that part of the ceremony when the diplomas were handed out. Super Lew called a name and you hopped up and ran up the stairs and onto the stage and you got your diploma and there was some applause—and this was where Moselle remembered how heartless school could be, sometimes simply cruel. Some of the kids got roars, some got near nothing. Moselle knew about that. Name called out, cross the stage, diploma, for some reason you switched the mortarboard tassel from one side to another, while somebody in the front row muttered, *Now there goes a miracle*—Moselle did all that. And now there came applause, pattipat pattipat, and you never felt so low, when so many were flying high. But Moselle's time was coming and soon. Moselle had hardly headed down the steps when back in the back of the auditorium Uncle Elmer that cowboy uncle stood up and waved his big hat and lifted his bottle and he let out a whoop to raise the roof, *Yee haw! Ride 'em, cow-girl!* And there came an ovation, you wouldn't call it a roar of laughter, not exactly, that not even the most popular girl in the class could match.

That was what Carrie Steen was doing now. She was leaning out the door and listening to the names being called, then lean back in and tell the injured girl who had just graduated and girl would applaud, applauding all the same, pretty close. After a while Moselle could see that sometimes Carrie Steen was having some trouble making out some of the names, she had been away from school so long she knew only a few, and as Moselle was sitting right there by the door and she heard every name plain, why she

started calling out the names to Carrie Steen and Carrie Steen smiled and waved thanks and she passed on the name to the injured girl.

Now came the loudest and longest ovation of the day, that was the entire graduating class rising and facing the audience. After that Moselle knew what to expect, as Super Lew had written out a list of the ceremony's events, like it was this great meal and there were many dishes. Time now to honor the three brightest students in the senior class, best grades anyway, and these were Valedictorian and Salutatorian and Honor Boy, Super Lew going on to explain this Greek longer than necessary, first, second and third would have done it. Honor Boy was third place and this was the boy with the best grades and this was fair, even if sometimes the top boy wasn't anywhere near third place, sometimes the girls made the top ten spots, but the beat-out girls never complained, they applauded the Honor Boy even if he had taken third ribbon by finishing eighth.

And it was here, the top boy named and applauded, that Moselle's memory took her for a detour, one that might settle her future or at least posed the question: what would the fall bring, the new school year? Round two with Super Lew or back to the cafeteria? And the unsettled sadness that had come to Moselle was just that. She didn't belong anywhere now. Back to the serving line and all would look on with suspicion, what had she got up to in the front office to gain this demotion? She *asked* to come back to dolloping gravy? Right. And look at the airs she's put in that short year inside. And that would be that for the cafeteria. Where she belonged she no longer belonged. Back with Super Lew? She had already been offered the outer office come fall, but there was something in it, nothing the superintendent said, nothing in the way he said it, just the usual vagueness, still Moselle could feel it. They both did. Your executive sort of life wasn't her sort of life. And so where she didn't belong that was where everyone would say she didn't belong. But now a memory came to Moselle and this memory opened a door to her. The possibility of a third and new future, a career and job she had never dreamed of. And this third door, maybe it was open only a crack, but by memory's end Moselle thought she might, that it was just possible she might dart through that crack and find herself in a new and dazzling world.

The memory then. What set it off.

There had been two ovations and now came the third and last, Valedictorian, and this vast roar was for the injured girl who had won it. There in the car Carrie Steen gave the girl a hug and hopped out and came running to the stage door steps, as she would be accepting the award for the injured girl, that had all been worked out. And in running up the steps Carrie Steen

had smiled at Moselle and patted her on the shoulder. And in a brief time Carrie Steen had said what she had to say for the injured girl and there came a second ovation and you knew all were standing and hollering and clapping now, not even the class ovation came close to it, the injured girl was a hero to the class, the school, the town, as much of a hero as any of them would ever know. And it was then, Carrie Steen running back down the steps, that she did it again. Gave Moselle's shoulder a pat, like they were teammates and Carrie Steen was the captain and Moselle, there slumped on the bench, had screwed something up, fumbled or something, and there was the captain, not saying a word, just the pat, *Shake it off, kid. We'll get 'em next year*, and that was it. Teammates.

And Moselle's memory went back to being teammates in highschool, girls' basketball and softball and then there was that year she ran track with the boys, in practice anyway, and Moselle went back to that and another captain giving her that little pat on the shoulder and Moselle went back to that.

It had probably started with summer softball. Moselle was already known from spring girls' softball and though the girls didn't go on to play in the summer, like the boys did, she went out to the games anyway and cheered the hometown on. Then one night one of the fellas didn't show and the manager, not much older than the players, came over and asked Moselle if she could handle right field and she grabbed up glove and cap and was on her way. Threw out two runners at home and one at third that night. And after the game the opposing manager complained, no girls, particularly not girls who threw like that, and not to forget the two doubles and a single, and Moselle's career playing with the boys and men ended. But it seemed Coach Mack had been in the bleachers and had put this away for next spring, when that night had been long forgotten by all but Coach Mack and Moselle. Sixth and last period, Moselle was there in the gym shooting baskets with the girls and the boys' track team manager had come in and a few words with the girls' basketball coach and Moselle found herself out on the football field and the track around it and there was the team's biggest and broadest and best boy, more like a man, and team captain as well and he smiled and handed Moselle a shot put, the captain's best event, and Moselle got inside the circle and took a couple hops like the boys did and the twelve-pound ball went up and up and out there and Moselle would not be playing pattipat girls' basketball that spring. Now both Coach Mack and Moselle knew that Moselle could never be a member of the team, even after qualifying third in the shot put, but still the coach decreed Moselle an honorary member of the team and allowed she would be suiting up for the upcoming track meet in the town there over the county line and she would

be riding on the team bus to get there as well. It was there, the team bus pulling up behind the clubhouse, that things went wrong. Word had got to the opposing coaches, a girl suited up and riding on the team bus, and the meet director came out to Coach Mack and read him the rules. No girls in uniform on the field. If the girl had civvies, she could pay a quarter and watch from the stands. No civvies: back on the bus. By now, never so lonely, so unhappy in her life, Moselle was looking forward to the bus. It was a brisk spring day and the bus was warm and it sat up high and there was a good view of the events, save for the pole vault down at the far end of the field, and Moselle sat warm and high and got lonelier and sadder, she had never felt so low in her life. But then, as Gran would have said, the memory had its silver lining. The track meet had concluded. And our boys, they hadn't done as well as expected, they decided to stay in warm-ups on the way back home and that's how they came onto the bus, spikes clicking on the corridor, the warmth and rich smell of sweat, the talk of what went wrong in the relay, they were robbed in the hurdles, they'd get 'em next meet, coming up in two short weeks. Moselle wasn't sitting at the very back of the bus, that was left open for the team captain and seniors and stars, but she wasn't sitting right up front either. More like halfway. And as all the boys came onto the bus, those who were going to the back, when they passed Moselle it seemed that every last one of them gave Moselle a pat on the shoulder, *we'll get 'em next time, kid*, and then the two best putters on the team, they came back and they gave Moselle the high sign, like she had won an event, and again there was that pat on the shoulder and Moselle was one of the team and it was with that memory, the captain's shoulder pat, the pat from Carrie Steen, that Moselle's memory returned to the *here* of this school and the *now* of graduation and then there would be the *then* of next year, next September and starting up another year. Yes, that would be it, Moselle, knew. Next year and she and they all of them would be teammates all over again for that one more year. Teammates. And with that future memory settled, now it was that Moselle came back to the present and the music being played there.

It came from the band hall and it was a single horn, trumpet, and this was being blown sad and sweet by that ranch kid, the one who had made such a fine old gent in Mrs. Rainborough's classic, the kid who wrote poetry too, it was said, and suited up for varsity basketball as a freshman and, some said, would be a cinch starter his sophomore year—now it had been learned that the kid could play not only guitar, fiddle and mandolin, what you'd expect out of a ranch kid, but could blow this golden horn as sweet and sad (and hot and howling) as any around had ever heard. What the kid was doing

blowing low and quiet out in the band hall was warming up for the main performance that would be coming in the auditorium.

This, the ending of this year, had all been worked out and that hadn't been easy, it hadn't looked like at the start anyway. All the tragedies this year, there had to be some marking of them, some way of saying *we're sorry you're gone, we miss you like crazy*, along those lines, what seniors wrote in one another's yearbooks but with a touch more dignity. First it was agreed: no speeches. Nothing said. Next out: any photographs of the two boys and mother and father nor would there be a photograph of the injured girl before she was injured. But what would happen up there on the stage, it was here the regular commencement planners stepped aside, themselves understanding that who chose what must be chosen by the lone survivor, the injured girl. Some said she started out wanting a minute's silence, but that, but she reflected and thought a song to be sung or better just played would be it, no words to match their grief, and then she thought of the ranch kid, he had brought his trumpet to Dorothea's play practice one day and had entertained all playing sweet and low, hot and tangy. That's what the ranch kid told the girl, he could play it hot, he could play it cold, he could play it three days old, which probably meant he could play just about anything any way you wanted it and this turned out to be right.

It was the kid himself who came up with what to play. An uncle had been in the army and when the kid had been starting out on the horn, the uncle taught him some army bugle songs, maybe they were more like calls, charge, retreat, all that, but the kid said they could be played like songs. And the kid thought what would be best played on a solemn occasion was what the bugler played there on the parade ground when it was lights out, all soldiers but the guards in bed, time to go to sleep. And the boy played a sad version of that the tune was sad anyway, and the injured girl said that was it and that call was called *taps*. But the girl didn't want to end with such sadness, did the kid know a happier tune, and he did and he played it and it was bright and bouncy and quick and full of energy, and that was the call soldiers liked least of all as it was telling them time to drag their weary bones out of bunk and face a new day and this call was called *veille*. The girl liked the two calls very much, one to say it was day's end, the other to promise a day beginning. And then, the girl said, all would remember not only the death in life but the life there as well.

Now it was time to play these memorials and the kid came out of the band hall with his trumpet and before going into the auditorium he went over to the long black car and squatted there by the rear door and by the way the injured girl leaned over you knew they were exchanging a few words.

Now the band director came to the door and the kid stood and patted goodbye on the car roof and went inside and there was a still, Moselle did not think she had ever known such a quiet, and then the kid started playing low and sad and Moselle who had shed maybe half dozen tears in her life, most due to breakage, now a sad tear, maybe some hurt to it as well, came to her eye, as there was Carrie Steen holding the girl as a mother would hold an unhappy child. And Moselle knew they wanted this time alone and she went in and stood in the wings and if there were other tears in the hall Moselle couldn't see them, as hers were raining down.

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Jo Peters stood out by the flagpole, where he always stood when they were inside big boy's office, necking or whatever, and there they were at it again, you could see them in silhouette, the man and the woman, and they were standing there close, holding on to one another, maybe not smooching at all, maybe not even talking, just standing there holding on to one another, holding on tight. Jo Peters didn't know what was on the evening's agenda, not exactly, but he had a pretty good idea. It was going to be like their traditional postgraduation evening, a drive west, the three of them, usually over to hub city for a movie, a good restaurant meal, maybe some dancing at one of the clubs, maybe Jo Peters skipped the slow dances, no matter how often big boy asked him, but you should have seen that bug jitter. Marie Blum liked that too, while sourpuss sat out the quick numbers, puffing a cigar and smiling at his swinging friends. But this traditional drive west, Jo Peters had this feeling there was going to be more to it than that. Actually he was near certain this evening would not be like the others and Jo Peters would not be sorry to see some of those traditions go past. Like that time on the way to the hub city big boy decreed they would take their shirts off, all of them, and biggie had ripped his shirt off, Miss Blum holding the wheel, and then Miss Blum took her blouse off and even if the dainties under it were left in place, Jo Peters went a red that would have stopped a rushing locomotive, and then, and only under duress, like fatty telling Jo Peters if he didn't take his shirt off he was going to stop the car and take off Jo Peters' pants as well. Then and only then did Jo Peters join the near naked crew and that big semi they met, cab way up in the air and looking down, there was that truck near going off the road in passing and three blasts from the air horn, as if the trucker thought going shirtless, two boys and a girl, was well, a *hoot*.

No, there were some traditions Jo Peters didn't mind seeing dead and buried and now, this night, he felt the entire hub city tradition would be

booted out the window. He had seen the ring, you see. And he had been told to pack a suitcase and to put a jacket and tie in it and a warm sweater too and, this time of year, a jumper for the cold, that meant one thing. Right through hub city—well a stop for a beer and an enchilada at the couple's favorite Mexican food joint—then on west and once over the state line they'd stop at the first justice-of-the-peace sign they came on. Hitched there, the best man working to hold it back, then on up, up, up high into the mountains, to the ski resort there, they kept it open summers too, boating and camping and horseback riding and the like, and that would be the honeymoon. Then, after champagne and oysters, and these not prairie, and caviar and it tasted a lot better than it looked and then with big night-night snacks for fatso (nearer a slimso now), Jo Peters was left by a fire that did feel good, there to contemplate a future, the future. Up here with Mother? An idea. But better maybe a threesome or a duo if Mother didn't make it through the winter. Twosome, threesome, Jo Peters didn't mind, only: not that lonesome old onesome. That cafeteria girl who had switched to the head office, she had been stopping by Jo Peters' typing room to chat now and then and they had talked about the coming school year and maybe next fall they'd take in a football game, maybe Homecoming and that got Jo Peters to thinking about just that: coming home to a home. Well all of that a long, long way off, a distant possibility and maybe further away than that, but still if fat boy, a sworn bachelor, he'd never wed, well if the huge meanie could tie the knot, then anyone could, and if the former cafeteria girl could never replace the lovely Miss Blum, then nobody could, could they? And that girl had that background in cafeteria ways and could probably cook and Jo Peters could teach her how to type, or give it a try, as Superintendent Rainborough said it sometimes took the girl well into the afternoon to finish a letter and even then he often had to polish it off himself, the poor girl having been taken by nervous attack. Hm. Food for thought, even if you didn't get a Blum pudding dessert (Jo Peters could still crack one, if barely) and Jo Peters turned from that, the future, to the past, the recent past, to this afternoon in fact and their celebration of commencement, the beginning, as this ending of the school year was properly called.



There were quiet groupings on the school's front lawn, some gathering as much as an hour before the ceremony's opening. To start you wouldn't have thought there was any pattern to it. Well not entirely true. Among the dozen or so groupings there were always those to be graduated in their gowns and mortarboards, these black, the school colors, after the shade of

a local bitter storm that made it into town at least yearly. Others: older folks, parents, the like, and youngsters, not ready for the wearing of the black, these from kiddies to juniors, their at-bat next year. The size of the groups varied: some only three or four, some approaching fifteen, maybe that one over twenty. The largest groups were football players and Ag boys and rowdy sophomores and as the early gathering went these were merged and if this had been any other gathering someone would have brought a football and melee would have followed; but there was no ball today and there would be no game, even the unruliest sophomore knew that, this was a ceremony that knew dignity as well as joy. Other boys made smaller circles—the eggheads from science and math, those few who had made thespians or sang in the chorus and there was some crossing here, as an occasional linebacker or pork breeder hollered bass and could remember his lines; and there were those groupings of boys who knew no such distinction, loners and losers, so it would seem this last school day, and some of them would go out in life and make a mark on the world that no Friday night hero would ever know; and then there came the very few who read books and had learned to type and some of these unfortunates would make writers and sit in their dark rooms thinking, could have made a farmer, could've made a hand, anything but this.

The girls had their own premier group and this was much smaller than the boys, strictly seven in fact, and they called themselves the gang and came from better families and those who did not possessed the beauty and poise of those who did. Today these seven spoke of the near future and of going off to college and some were bound for the best and the others would do fine with the good and then every year or so there would be a girl, if smart not moneyed, if rich not bright in books, who would be going nowhere, but her loss would be diminished by marriage, a good one, and too, know it or not, this was the gang's last gathering, never again a full house, as on those college holidays some came home and some not and those who did, they were members of larger gangs now, these called sororities and, sorority girls or not, none sat around reminiscing about high-school days, not after college freshman year anyway. The girls' smaller, less prestigious circles much matched the boys and that listing may be left off to go to small, special gatherings and these were often family meetings and to enter but one now, there was the family whose eldest son had done evil and met a cruel end for it and now that their youngest girl would be graduated today they gathered for the first time since the night their boy had been put to death and this girl had the looks of turning out as good as the older boy had known bad.

The school's yearbook had been issued last week and what crossing that occurred from group to group was often those who had not got their books signed properly and fully and now they went about, book and pen in hand, gathering *don't forget to cross your t's and dot your i's or mind your p's and q's or see ya! love ya! miss ya! whatta a gal! whatta a guy!* and other profundities. This traditional pre-ceremony gathering would end in tradition and this would be the school's principal coming to the broad front doors. In the past this would have been Jack Cook and he said nothing, made no gesture, rang no bell or other school yard call, he just came and stood at the door and for once that year he smiled, a bit, and he would be quickly seen and the groupings would not overlook this and they would break apart and come to the front of the building and all gathered there, and this had been practiced the day before, then the filing of the seniors into front rows of the auditorium would commence. And as tradition as well there always seemed a latecomer, running up the street and the class laughed and applauded as this fellow yawned and rubbed his eyes, caught napping again, and Principal Cook standing there in the rear of the auditorium would smile, just.

The grads seated the hall behind them filled and if all seats were taken, and the school knew few years when they were not, those left standing marshaled in the hall and peered over or under one another at the proceedings, the wife promising they'd come earlier next year, the husband swearing they'd not come at all. Now the crowd hushed and the dignitaries came onto the stage and took their chairs there and that done, the class president rose and faced the audience and led the pledge to the flag and there followed a prayer and this year the class had decreed this would be a time of silence and following this quiet the commencement began.

All went quickly now and went as it ever did, last up the boy who came and played on the horn, these calls honoring those who had died during the year and the one girl who had been injured. And though this girl was not to be found in the hall, word had it her presence would be known, that she had written a message to the class and this would be read by number two girl in the class. These valedictorian addresses were had every year, honoring the faculty and staff, that was usual, but this address would be like no other that had gone before and its charm and wit and good humor had all laughing and cheering and applauding, all in fine spirits as later all would be silent for the trumpet's call.

Who would lead off and that would be Mr. Oldham algebra II instructor and in dictating mental arithmetic Mr. Oldham could gabble like a gobbler and still couldn't talk pluses and minuses, division and multiplication as fast as Little Leon, the coming math genius, could do the figures. All laughed and

applauded and what those in some circles would call the faculty roast was on. It was rumored the coaches taught a class here and there but none had ever been seen at it and it was thought the coaches suffered from a certain lack of income, particularly there in the fall when their wives sent them out in skimpy trousers, barely enough material there to cover the knees. And it went on around and Jo Peters got his—when you said hello to him in the hall his face went a red that would stop traffic and the class roared approval and stood and called out for the typing teacher and Jo Peters was lifted to his feet and right on time his face took on a ruby glow, no speeding driver would have missed it. And there was Miss Blum, the meanie who wouldn't let you spell paid as *payed*, and Mr. Ealey in the shop, you lost a finger to the buzz saw, it'd cost you ten demerits, and Mrs. Lowry junior English, she could spot an unread-book book report from across the room, and Miss Frost sophomore English, now you knew how to say *Merry Christmas* in Hawaiian and *very well* in French and *hello* in German and *good-bye* in Japanese and too some sophomores went on to be heard speaking a few words of English, a language Miss Frost felt truly foreign to them and Mr. Evans freshman English, he had come to school and first day on the job, one look at his youthful charges and postcards were still coming in from Montevideo, life quiet and cool in the banana boat boiler room. And even Doc Bavender was not let off the hook. If you didn't want to cut up the cat, just fall over dead faint and you'd be over in the corner doing your homework, polishing your nails, day dreaming, whatever was called for—and this was greeted in the spirit it was offered, better than any elegy could be. And on through so many others to come to near the end and there were the Rainboroughs and the roast turned gentle here, with the Rainborough boy there in his wheelchair, his first public outing since his little friend's death. Polio, they had thought at first, but the docs said no in time, that the paralysis came from the mind, from the shock of the boy's death, and there was the third boy, the pale skinny kid, pushing the chair about and opening doors for his friend and so were the words about the Rainboroughs kind and thoughtful. And word going around there might be more to it than the boy, that this might be the Rainboroughs' last year, the next would be for sure. What with the drama coach's victory over Hazy Hazeltine, at long last, that she would step down a winner, reins given over to younger folks, that they would retire to a plot of land up in a high mountain valley where they had served during the war, build an adobe place and one take up gardening, the other would pursue the wily trout. And now to end and this had to be Jack Cook and it was: how after the iron rule of Acting Principal Dwight Cage, the old softie would be welcomed back with open arms, and Jack Cook

looked like he always did, you get up real close and you never knew what look was on his face, maybe a smile, maybe not. And the true end, Dwight Cage stood and made a fist and cocked the arm as if to make muscle and the house near came down, as it was known no easier fellow had ever occupied that office of authority, that instead of a bad boy getting his paddling, rather there were offered the barnyard oinks and crows, the calls and growls of the wood, the entertainment once offered to his freshman math class, a severe punishment surely, maintained the principal's secretary Angela Fulks, soon to be Mrs. Cage.

The ceremony ended, now the scene on the school's front lawn and this was a different affair, entirely. Everyone was everywhere. Solemnity and gravitas had disappeared, looked like they never existed. It started with the sailing of the mortarboards and if you didn't sail your mortarboard someone snatched it off and sailed it for you and if a sailed mortarboard struck or came near it was thought aimed and taken up and sailed back at the sailer. Such was done by seniors only, if some sophomore tried to join in, he quickly thought again, and now some went about to retrieve their mortarboards, any one would do, it was headed straight for the closet shelf, and some went off bare-headed, a statement of sorts, never want to think of this place again, and so began the evening's swift exodus. Coach Mack and Mr. Marble of Ag had severely instructed the boys: no drinking till you are out of here officially and many a thirst would now be served and that venue would be downtown or over at the rodeo grounds or in Eastertown or making the drag, out to the Y one way, back to the courthouse the other, and all this was done by an advance guard and done promptly, with some lower students and not a few parents with them. And so it was closed. Some lingered, some touched an eye, they might be missing the old place, some spoke quietly to a teacher, and one or two walked off away from the rest and looked off, away from all this, and there would be no knowing what was on their minds.

So it was that in time the grounds were cleared, the building, the parking lots as well, and sunset had come and evening stood all around and all were gone but for a lone figure standing by the flagpole—chain brushing against pole, pole moving against chain, what that good science teacher had said was but the planet whirling ever turning through space and it didn't move a hair on your head—the man now turning to look toward the building as if it had not quite emptied, someone had stayed back, and he waited there by the pole so that he and those inside might leave this place together and not be back till it was time to gather together again and start up another year, some called it that.