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Standing Liberty and Other Stories

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STANDING LIBERTY AND OTHER STORIES

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The Department of English

by

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Acknowledgements

Walter Lippmann believed that the best teachers have a natural recognition of their pupils' shortcomings: "The particular quality of the ignorance of each individual is a unique combination which can be dealt with successfully only by those whose general understanding is quickened by intuitive sympathy. The great journalist has this flair. The great orator has it. It is a sense of the audience, an awareness of the dim attitudes of those who are listening."

Jim Wilcox has this flair, too. And I thank him for his careful reading of these pieces and the valuable advice he was so generous of giving. *Somnium narrare vigilantis est.*

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Abstract

This miscellany represents the pick of the vignettes, tales, and anecdotes the author has gathered and spun out over the past few years. Personal experience, with the exception of a few inessential details, is not represented. The influence of ragtime music, which played with relentless syncopation in the author's head as he composed with pencil and yellow pad, may be discernable to those who take the trouble to read the sentences aloud.

COLORS

"Mr. Donahoe! Mr. Donahoe! A moment of your time is requested. Will you please to come with me to Director Jiang's office?"

Peter Donahoe shrugged and followed Miss Gian down the freezing corridor of the Foreign Languages Preparatory Institute. October had barely arrived, and already snowflakes were adding a layer of dirty gray to the double windowpanes, intensifying their opaqueness. They passed two cleaning ladies chattering in the local dialect and moving their push brooms, a little faster now that Miss Gian was in the vicinity. Both were bundled in thick cotton jackets, and Donahoe noted the cloudy puffs that their breath formed in the cold institute air. One of the previous week's high points had been a protest to the head of the English Division:

"Dr. Hao, I find it difficult to teach a class of sixty shivering students."

"Mr. Donahoe—they are Chinese. It is nothing new to them. Our civilization has endured four thousand summers. And winters. The students can—ah—cope." Dr. Hao paused, pleased with his word choice. His English was slow and careful, but actually quite impressive. "I know it must be so very cold for you, so different from your . . . Texas?"

"Where we also have winters. Not quite as cold as China's, perhaps. But Dr. Hao, you are aware, sir—you yourself are an educator. The teacher must attempt to create an atmosphere conducive to learning. But where this is impossible due to physical conditions—"

"Ah, Mr. Donahoe, our esteemed foreign expert. Fresh from your training. So eager. So young. We do appreciate the fine work you are doing. But have you

considered? Are these theories of learning—ah—applicable to China?" Dr. Hao squeezed a few drops of lotion from a plastic bottle and rubbed them carefully into his hands. Donahoe had the impression that the man's nails were polished, although this was unlikely.

"But surely with the mountains of coal piled up outside, it would be possible," Donahoe said. "I would understand it if there were a shortage. This is the coal country of China, isn't it? If we could only put a stove into the classroom and get a little coal from the yard. It would be so easy to do."

Dr. Hao rose, signaling the interview's end. "November 15, Mr. Donahoe. We always ignite the heating November 15. Party directive, do you understand?" He bent his head and looked at Donahoe over his eyeglasses.

Now, approaching the director's office, Donahoe wondered about Dr. Hao's parting shot. Something about the way he had enunciated the words *party directive*. A faint hint of sarcasm? Or just the man's very formal and somewhat stilted English? He'd probably never know.

Miss Gian knocked softly and entered the large office, making a series of rapid bowing motions. Donahoe followed her in and bowed once, feeling somewhat awkward. He removed his rapidly fogging glasses. The warm air was a shocking pleasure. Even the faintly acrid aroma of coal smoke was somehow comforting. The stove was close to the director's desk, which was bare except for an ashtray and a few scattered pieces of newspaper. The stovepipe entered the wall behind Dr. Jiang's desk through a rough hole that looked as if it had been banged out with sledgehammers.

"Mis-ter Donahoe! How do you do? How do you do? Please!" Dr. Jiang gestured with his open palm toward a chair. He smiled apologetically and conferred with Miss Gian in Chinese.

"Our director is regretful," she said. "His training was to be Russian teacher. After 1956 Moscow Party Congress as you know the People's Republic lost good relation with the Soviet. China no longer needful of Russian language. Now our foreign experts come from U.S.A."

Dr. Jiang spat toward the open door of his stove. The resultant hiss confirmed his accuracy. "I am very sorry," he said haltingly. "Little little English only. But please." He offered Donahoe a *Xian* brand cigarette. Donahoe accepted it and held it at an upward angle to avoid an embarrassing tobacco spill onto the director's desk.

"Thanks, and please, take one of mine." He had, on the advice of previous foreign experts, smuggled four cartons of Marlboro into China. The risk had been small, and the benefits significant. Donahoe puffed very lightly on his *Xian* as Dr. Jiang launched into a monologue.

"The director asks that I translate," said Miss Gian. "He says, 'Mr. Donahoe, we are so happy to have you this year with our unit. We have good reports from the English colleagues. Your division leader, Dr. Hao, is very pleased.'"

Dr. Jiang paused and smiled. The director's teeth were very bad. But there was an alert friendliness about him, a warmth and sincerity that Dr. Hao did not have. He was in his fifties, estimated Donahoe. How had he gotten through the Cultural Revolution? Dr. Hao would have had no problems. He would have adjusted to the shifting winds and been adept at currying favor with the faction of the day. But Dr. Jiang might have stood

his ground. Had he been banished to the countryside as a result? He certainly looked weather beaten.

Donahoe smiled back at Dr. Jiang. He was tough, a survivor. But why had he asked to see him?

" 'But we have a small problem.' "

Uh oh. Here it comes. Don't rock the boat. The students are Chinese, and used to being cold. Freeze with them until November 15.

" 'It is a small green problem.' "

"I beg your pardon?"

Miss Gian clarified. "It is—ah—a small green composition problem."

"I see. I mean, I don't see. I don't really understand." Donahoe stubbed out his half-smoked *Xian*. Dr. Jiang was fiddling with his Marlboro, sniffing at it and turning it in his rough thick fingers. He hadn't lit it yet.

" 'We have had a petition from the student committee unit. You are correcting compositions with green pen. They wish for red. It is the normal way.' "

"They would prefer red?" Donahoe asked.

" 'It is the normal way. They find green—ah—confusing. And this also—they wish that you will in future be more strict in your assessment of error.' "

"More strict. I see."

" 'Yes. They are eager to know every error. In this way, learning correctly is very fast.' " Miss Gian and the director chuckled about something. Apparently an inside joke. Dr. Jiang lit his Marlboro, inhaled deeply and smiled as if in appreciation of American tobacco.

This time, Donahoe was the first to rise. "Thank you, Dr. Jiang. I will try to adjust."

The director smiled broadly and waved his cigarette. "My very pleasure, Mr. Donahoe!"

"Good morning, everybody!" It was early enough that it was still dark outside. The students rose as he entered the cold classroom, and they remained standing until he took his place beside his desk and motioned them to sit. All attempts to break them of this habit had been in vain, and Donahoe now accepted the daily homage to the authority of the teacher.

"How is everyone doing today?"

"Fine, sir!" they answered in chorus. It still sounded strange to be addressed as *sir* by an audience whose average age was almost his own. "What's new, Miss Wei?" Miss Wei was a front row regular who took copious notes and followed his every move with bright black eyes.

"Yes—ah, student committee unit, Mr. Donahoe. We had a meeting."

"And—what happened?"

"Normal meeting."

"Nothing exciting?"

"We did self-correction exercises. We criticized our faults."

"There were faults?" Donahoe asked and immediately regretted his tone. But the students didn't seem to notice anything amiss. "I see. Well, everybody, what would you like to do today?" As always, the class remained silent. He knew they found his

divergence from their conception of normal classroom procedure to be strange. They were not used to a teacher who did not order them around. He supposed, though, that foreign experts were granted some leeway, as long as they did not verge too near the truly idiosyncratic.

"How about some idiom practice? Does that sound like fun?" Actually this was a part of the normal classroom warmup. It served to break the ice before the heart of the two-hour lesson, the presentation, discussion, and writing of the daily composition topic. The students appeared to like this part of the class, and Donahoe enjoyed finding recently discussed idioms cropping up in unexpected places in the daily batch of essays.

"OK—how about this one?" He rubbed his hands and wrote *TO BE CALLED ON THE CARPET* in large letters on the board. The soft chalk released a shower of white dust. "Is anyone familiar with it? How about you, Mr. Guo?" Donahoe brushed off his shoulders and awaited the response.

Mr. Guo was one of his best students and also a student committee unit member. "Sir, what does *carpet* mean?"

"Mr. Guo, you must know what carpet means." Mr. Guo shook his head rapidly. "OK," Donahoe said, "Anyone else?"

Silence. Miss Wei probably knew, but she was waiting to give the others a chance. Donahoe realized that the students had probably never seen a western-style carpet before. It was likely that they didn't even exist here outside of the big hotels for foreigners. What was the word for the thick floor mats everyone had around here? *Quei ji*. His Chinese was very poor, but he'd bought several for his flat in faculty housing and had used the word while haggling.

"*Quei ji*, Donahoe said. "Sort of like a *quei ji*. A kind of rug. It goes on the floor. But a carpet is fuzzy, like a beard. Covers everything." He rubbed his face although it was clean-shaven.

"Beard on floor?" a voice exclaimed. There was some laughter from the back of the room.

Miss Wei wasn't laughing. Looking up from her dictionary, she addressed her fellow students in a short burst of Chinese. The laughter stopped.

"Miss Wei, I wish you wouldn't translate idioms. I thought we had agreed to speak only English in here."

"I wasn't translating, I was paraphrasing. And you said *quei ji*, Chinese word."

She had him there. "Well," he said, "now that everyone knows what the idiom means, who can use it in a sentence?"

A tall thin man in the middle rows raised his hand. "When I make violation, I am called on carpet to receive criticism from section leader."

"Very good—I see you understand." This was getting a bit close to home. Donahoe often wondered how much the students knew. So many undercurrents and subtleties. Who was teaching whom? He pushed on. "We have color idioms in English. Lots of them. Some of them you already know, blue, *I feel so blue today*, white, *I told a little white lie*, black, *I am the black sheep of my family*, you remember, we discussed and practiced all of them before." They had found the idea of the black sheep particularly intriguing. "Now let's try some new colors that we haven't talked about before." He wrote *GREEN* and *RED* on the board. "Does anyone know an idiom with green in it?"

The students stared at him in silence.

"What comes into your mind when you imagine the color green? For example, I think of nature, spring, everything coming to life—I feel happy, friendly, hopeful. Yes, Mr. Sheng?" Mr. Sheng could usually be counted on for a good answer.

"Sir, in Chinese when we say *I am green* it mean I am young, no experience, stupid, very stupid." Several students laughed. Mr. Sheng grinned and added, "Very very stupid" to a chorus of chuckles. Donahoe had never seen them so animated this early in the morning.

He frowned. "Yes, it can be something like that in English too, only maybe not so negative. Just imagine green leaves bursting forth in spring, the color of life—" The class seemed alert and even buoyant, but no one ventured a comment.

Donahoe gave up and pointed at the other word. "Anything come to mind?"

Smiles were everywhere now. "Red China," someone said, and there was even a bit of applause.

"Of course," Donahoe said. "But let's avoid politics." It was always safer. "*To see red* in English means something has happened to make you angry. I'm not sure exactly why we say that. Perhaps because of bullfighting—anyone know something about bullfighting?"

Mr. Guo raised his hand. "Sir, it is very different in Chinese. Red is our most beautiful color. We have a saying about it. Or idiom I mean. When I say, *I am seeing in red*, I am saying that I see it clearly. I can understand."

"When I can understand, I make progress," continued Miss Wei. "I can see my error clearly. Then, learning correctly is very fast." She boldly added something in Chinese. All of the students laughed. Miss Wei was certainly pretty when she smiled.

Donahoe shrugged and then looked closely at the cheerful faces in front of him. He smiled and joined the chorus of laughter. Inside, he too was beginning to see in red.

DELIVERY

There was no debate about the condition of the house. It was old and ramshackle, a humbled derelict among the newer and better-maintained structures that hemmed it in to the left and to the right. Without the untamed azaleas and silverberry bushes, which partially shielded the state of things from public view, the complaints would have been even more numerous. The eaves hadn't been attended to in at least a generation and were thick with dusty cobwebs ancient in terms of spiders. The old fishpond, where the children had once delighted in throwing scraps of bread and watching goldfish and painted carp thrash and churn, was reduced to a collection of puddles topped with oily sheens. A rusting can of bug spray stood tilting at one muddy edge.

Everyone was in agreement about the condition of the house. The conflict centered on the old woman who still and stubbornly occupied it. Her children—there were three of them—wanted their mother out of the house and into a retirement facility. The new brochure showed it to be clean and modern, staffed by smiling nurses in crisp white uniforms. There were administrators, too, sitting at polished desks, their hands folded sincerely atop the shining surfaces. An external view of the long, rectangular building revealed its setting in a trim green landscape of lawn and trees. Mirror-like windows returned the light of the sun. The facility was not inexpensive, but the children were more than willing to pay the price which would guarantee Mrs. Brockle's comfort and happiness in her golden years, until such time as it became necessary to lay her mortal remains next to what was left of her husband in the flat and brooding cemetery where cypress trees grew.

She was small, bent, and somewhat sallow, with bits of flesh hanging loosely here and there on her mottled arms. Most of her body moved slowly, but her eyes were alert and in constant motion, which made it hard to pin down their exact color. Her vision was remarkable for a woman seventy-seven years old. Her hair, what was left of it, was tightly bunned in daylight hours, greasy-gray showing through a black net holder. Mrs. Brockle's toes were gnarled, and the second toe on each foot, longer than the others, had come to a position of permanent rest atop its larger neighbor. Her feet were always bare in warmer weather and left mysterious marks behind when they padded through dusty areas. Visiting grandchildren would track her movements and giggle. She wore thick socks in the winter and slippers when she stepped off the porch to retrieve the morning newspaper from the encircling jungle. Shoes hadn't touched her feet in years.

Steven was Mrs. Brockle's firstborn, a physician, a specialist of internal medicine, expert in plumbing the mysteries of the human digestive tract. He was the only one who called her *Mother*, and it was hard to imagine him, even as a boy, calling her anything else. She took a measured pride in his career, but didn't always tell people what kind of doctor he was. She liked to joke that her only son was becoming even dearer to her heart now that her memory was going. But the truth was that her mind was just as sharp as her eyes, even if she was neglectful about certain day-to-day aspects of housekeeping. Or was it just that such things had receded in importance with the passage of time? Details of the distant past were more significant, for example that even early on Stevie had displayed a flair for medicine. As a boy he had nailed a living fish to the kitchen table and dissected it, the upward-looking eye growing cloudy as the day wore on and the afternoon sun glowed and faded through the white muslin curtains. Later, there would be

more ambitious experiments involving cats and other strays: the further honing of nascent skills.

His sisters, the twins, were much younger. Mary and Paulette had been born when Steven was already memorizing Latin lists of body parts in medical school. That his forty-two year old mother had given birth caused him an angry shock tempered only slightly with anatomical curiosity. The twins' arrival had been something of a neighborhood sensation, and it was hinted among certain gossips that the temporal proximity between the blessed events and the rapid decline, demise, and interment of Steven's father was no mere coincidence.

In any case, few could fail to note the contrast between the dour, somewhat austere elder brother and his younger sisters. Cold-blooded was what many felt he was at heart, and his pale blue eyes, thin, tightly drawn face, and the fact he'd never married did nothing to dispel this suspicion. His patients had confidence in his doctoring abilities but would never dream of exchanging any kind of bantering small talk with him. He had a way of looking past a person's face with an expression of *let's get this over with*. Mary and Paulette were different, green-eyed, ruddy of complexion, more expressive, mothers of boisterous children.

On this mild Friday, warm but with a hint of approaching fall coolness, the three had come, with new brochure in hand but no advance warning, to give their mother the final ultimatum. The siblings arrived simultaneously but in separate cars. They walked toward the house without speaking, in single file, Steven first. Ahead of them open windows gaped and curtains faded to a dingy yellow trembled with each breeze. The required forms had been filled out and the down payment had been made. Everything

was set. Mrs. Brockle was scheduled for delivery into the waiting arms of smiling nurses in crisp white uniforms at 8:00 sharp on Monday morning.

Steven sat impatiently, lightly drumming his skilled fingers on the scarred kitchen table. He hated family complications and was determined to resolve the matter quickly and leave the premises as soon as possible. But as usual, his mother was keeping him and his sisters waiting as she pattered and padded around somewhere in one of the back rooms. Looking around, he noted with finicky distaste the clutter and dusty disorder apparent everywhere. He rose and brushed off the sleeves of his dark suit coat. He never wore white outside the hospital.

Steven was surprised at just how bad the kitchen looked. His attention was caught by several open cans on the counter. He hooked one lightly with a curving finger and pulled it closer, noting the rusty ring it left behind as well as the growth that lightly fuzzed the half-eaten substance within. His thoughts veered away from private family matters and he started to feel better, wondering with real interest about the things people put inside of themselves, and food poisoning, and smoothly mottled gastro-intestinal tracts, and what his mother's might feel like under the gentle probe of his examining fingers. He went automatically to rinse his hands off, but paused just short of the sink.

Out on the porch, where it was cooler and fresher, he held a conference with his sisters, who had been rocking together silently on the long swing that they almost filled. "Been in the kitchen lately? It's pretty bad—what if one of those church ladies happened by? What does she do all day long anyway?" He wagged his long index finger, a habit they knew and hated. "You two've really let things slide around here."

Paulette slapped her cheap slip-ons down to the porch floorboards and stood up from the swing, which immediately sagged with her sister's solitary weight. "Damn it, Steve, what about you? Kitchen work is women's work, right? Can't stand to get your hands a little dirty? I thought that was all in your line." She was just short of thirty-five and her eyes, undershot by dark half-moons of tiny radiating wrinkles, looked out at her brother in both anxiety and anger. "And what's more, I *have* tried to clean things up. I have remonstrated with her, every time I come by, and she just shooes me off." She rubbed a tender spot on her ankle. "Am I her maid? Is that what you're thinking?"

Paulette had never really understood Steven, who had always seemed more like a faintly exotic relic from a distant family past than a close blood relative. Needless to say, he used his age and position to lord it over her every chance he got. The big-shot specialist in intestinal disorders. He forgot so easily what others went through every day. Or, never thought about it in the first place. Certainly, never a thought for what *she* faced at home: two small kids and one semi-absent, permanently underemployed husband. It had been hell just to get away today. "Why don't you bring some of your latex gloves along next time? You're closest to here, and God knows you have the time. And no family obligations. Damn it, the hospital is only five minutes away."

Steven turned and looked vaguely at his sister as if she were an annoying bug. "No, seven. When there's no traffic." He stepped off the porch and started to run water from an outside faucet over his hands, meticulously scrubbing every bit of skin up to his wrists. "And no family obligations you say?" he continued over the splashing sounds. "My patients are my family." He noted with irritation that his shoes were getting wet.

"Yeah," Paulette said. "One big happy family."

"Come on you two," Mary warned. Her voice was gentle and surprisingly deep, with a light huskiness that came from smoking. She was often the peacemaker in family quarrels. "Why stand around here pointing the finger at each other? What's done is done. Let's get things settled with Mama and move on from there. What about the rest of it?"

"As soon as Mother's in the home, " Steven replied, "we'll make the mental incompetency motion." Shaking off his dripping hands, he started to remount the porch.

"She's pretty good at fooling people. Not everyone would believe she's senile," Paulette said.

"For once you're right," Steven said, "and that's why we have to move so carefully. But fortunately in this county it's still the coroner who decides questions of mental health, and Dr. Bradford has assured me he'll look closely into the matter and do what's right." He didn't bother to mention that Chuck Bradford was also a silent partner in his new business venture. "And I still say it's in Mother's best interest. Anyone want to dispute that, I'll tell them to just come on out and look at this house here." He paused and tilted his head. His mother was nowhere in sight. "Once we've settled the incompetency issue, I'll assert power of attorney and the house will be razed. Construction on my new imaging clinic will begin by October. There's no zoning problem, either. I've arranged that already with the commission. And as per our spoken agreement, you and Paulette will receive your \$75,000 checks from me for relinquishing all claims to the property as soon as the house goes down."

Paulette began to feel better. This was the dream that had been keeping her going ever since Steven had first broached the idea a year or two before. Still, and not for the first time, she hesitated and asked, "But how much is the land really worth?"

He frowned and was briefly silent. It gave the appearance of careful consideration. "Real estate values are so volatile," he began, "and this lot might be hard to sell. It's big, but the irregular shape is a drawback. So is the slope in back." Steven examined his hands as he spoke. "Who knows if favorable economic conditions will continue? Don't forget too that what you think something is worth is not the same as market value, which is in a constant state of flux. You could always get it appraised—of course that would cost you—but I'd say \$150,000 tops. And in an economic downturn, no telling. You might not be able to get rid of it for years."

"It's a fair deal," Mary said to her sister, "even if it is complicated. Let's leave the details to Steve. We couldn't ask for anything more. What he's offering us is a guarantee. We can't lose on it." She smoothed her hair and thought of her three children and the college fund she could finally set up. At least Paulette had a husband, sort of. Mary had raised her kids alone. And Steve had said, quietly of course, that there might be a little more on the side for her, as soon as his new clinic was a going concern.

Something was moving in the house. They heard a light shuffling noise from the kitchen, a brief rattling of cans, and a low thump. Mrs. Brockle emerged upon the porch, and her voice sounded like an echo of the squeaking screen door. "Why, everyone's here at the same time. It's not my birthday, is it?" she said with a smile. "Come on in and sit down and I'll fix us some coffee." No one answered and she briefly surveyed the three solemn faces. She kept smiling nonetheless. "You know what I was just remembering?"

The day we moved in here. Me and Sam and Stevie here. It was this kind of weather. Why, back then, on a day like this with autumn in the air, I felt the whole world was opening up wide in front of me." She stopped and looked at the unchanged expressions on each of her children's faces. "Well, I'll stop rattling on. I know you'd like nothing better. And if you're all here at the same time, I have a fair idea what it's about." She turned and looked through the screen door into the kitchen. "And the answer, my dear children, is still no." Uncomfortable glances were exchanged all around. "Sam and I lived our lives here, and I don't plan to end mine anywhere else."

"But Mama, just look around you—take a real good look, and forget about how things *were*. See them as they *are*!" Mary said. "We want you to be comfortable, to feel good. How can you feel good in this old place? It's falling apart, and plus Steve's real worried about the kitchen. We can't none of us keep the place up like you used to." Her voice was sweet and reasonable, just the tone she used talking to her kids. "Now do us a favor and look at these pictures. That's all we ask. Just look at them. Nobody's forcing you. Look how clean and nice. Modern, too. And three hot meals a day—can you beat that?" She pressed the brochure into her mother's hands, where it shook just slightly. Mrs. Brockle frowned and glanced at the cover.

"I'm comfortable *here*. It's not as bad as you think." She turned a page so quickly the glossy paper snapped. "Why, this is the same place you were talking about before, Shady Bayous. They do keep their lawn up though," she said with a laugh. "Where does the bayou run, out back?"

"Mama, don't it look pretty now? " Paulette said. "This is the new brochure, it just came out. Everything's in color."

Mrs. Brockle looked closely at her daughter, shook her head almost imperceptibly, and said, "Come on in. I have something to show you." The screen door squeaked again and the three followed their mother as she shuffled into the kitchen toward the old, scarred table. "Now, you all showed me some pretty pictures. They were real nice, and I appreciate your thoughtfulness. So now I'm going to return the favor." There was a large, old-fashioned photo album on the table, with a cover of green plush, and a clasp on the side which she undid. "I had forgotten all about this. It turned up when I was going through those old boxes behind the davenport in Sam's study."

She had meant to say *in the den*, which was what the room used by her late husband for his genealogical studies and wine drinking had evolved into with the addition of a sofa and television in the years after his death. "I've been going through a lot of things lately," she said. "Sorting. Running through some old memories. Reviewing things, you know. Toting up a balance."

The children were silent. "Now, we can skip this part," she went on, turning over the heavy cardboard-like pages containing old studio portraits of unsmiling men and women, or stern-looking family groupings, all facing the camera seriously, all clothed in a heavy, dark, old-fashioned way. "I don't know half these folks—Sam's people. He was different though—one of a kind. Now how they produced a character like him, I'll never know."

Steven, Mary, and Paulette sat around the old kitchen table, fingering its scars and gazing unhappily at the black-and-white photographs their mother was uncovering for them. She looked so tiny as she bent over the album that it was hard to reconcile the size of her three children with the fact that they were her offspring. Her page turning was

slow and getting slower. Sometimes she paused and smiled and apparently said something to herself under her breath. Steven gradually realized, although now he could see only the edges, that the cover of the album looked familiar. He hadn't recognized it at first. It had been a long time. That thick, green plush cover—he knew without touching exactly how it would feel under his fingertips. It was a soft, childhood feeling. Something else was coming back to him too, a memory of watching his father in his workshop cutting wood, the fragrant sawdust spitting out from the saw as he told one of his tall tales.

"Here we are," Mrs. Brockle announced. The black-and-white photographs had given way to color pictures. But the color itself looked old. The shades and tones were somewhat fuzzy, the values just a little unnatural, almost garish. "This is it." Steven leaned forward. His mother's crooked finger rested under the image. Depicted was a rolling meadow dotted with wildflowers, with three large trees bringing up the back. The sky, which actually filled about two thirds of the picture, was an artificial blue-green, and there were two great white puffy clouds forever immobilized.

"He used to say he could see his face in one of these clouds," Steven said. "But I always had trouble finding it." Mary and Paulette looked puzzled. "My father I mean. But then he would hold my hand and help me trace it out."

"He would hold your hand?" Paulette asked. She was trying to imagine Steven as a little boy. "Was this a picnic place? It's beautiful."

"You don't recognize it, but you know it." Steven said. "It's where we are now, right here. But the trees are gone, gone to make room for the house."

"Sam felt bad about cutting them down," Mrs. Brockle said. "But he said we had to build in the highest driest place."

"He chose this land for his house," Steven continued. "He said he bought it with a little money and a big dream. He used the wood from the trees in the frame and floors. He liked to say the house would still be here when my own children came along. It meant a lot to him, I guess." Steven ran a fingernail along a table scar with a light scratching noise. "This table was his work too. About my having children though—he had to give up on that hope."

"The down payment was low," said Mrs. Brockle. "But this big piece of land, even sixty years ago, wasn't cheap. We did without for years, to be able to get the land and build the house. Oh we scrimped all right. We even slept here in a tent the summer of '35, when it was going up. But Sam always said it was worth it. Me—I wasn't so sure about it for a long time. Maybe Stevie remembers how bare this place was, before we could afford decent furniture. And then Sam away in the war and coming back bad hurt. That terrible injury. At first he wouldn't talk about it, not even to me. But it wasn't something that could stay hidden forever, not with us living together in the same house. By the time you girls came along though, he had gotten that state job and we were OK, moneywise. And he was smart enough—he was a careful man, always was—to have bought the life insurance. He always planned ahead. *Hope for the best, plan for the worst*—that's what he always said."

Mrs. Brockle looked steadily at her daughters. "Now I know you don't remember him. I know you've heard all the talk. But let me tell you one thing: he loved you girls. He was willing to make any sacrifice to have another child. And after he got sick the last

time—and he knew it was the last—he said the worst thing about going was he would miss you two growing up. He was going to miss giving you away the day you were married. He was going to miss seeing his grandchildren running through this house he built with his hands. He called you his little miracles. And there was something miraculous about it."

Steven continued to lean forward, making tracing motions with his skilled fingers on the picture. He wasn't really hearing what his mother was saying. He was finding his father's eyes and nose, and forehead, and chin, in the white puffy cloud on the right. He was trying to remember the sound of his father's voice. He knew what it would ask of him, but already he was pulling back. *Steve, Steve*, the whisper went, but it was too late. Now he was more himself, closer akin to his dark-suited ancestors and their unsmiling, serious faces. They were not the faces of people who tended to lose control of themselves. Maybe Mother would have to remain in the house a while longer. No doubt keeping him waiting was what she enjoyed. But not too much longer, he estimated. And when she was gone, laid to rest underneath the cypress trees, and the house and land were in his control—well then Mary and Paulette, his "sisters," would finally find out how much spoken agreements were really worth. He was looking forward to seeing their faces when he gave them the news. Let them thrash about, he thought. Scraps from his table would be all they'd ever get.

Mrs. Brockle stopped talking and closed and clasped the old photo album, smoothing its soft green plush with her old fingers in a movement of grace and love. There was a final picture centered neatly on the last page of the album, but no need to show it to them. She stood in the middle of that snapshot, in her prime, strong, smiling,

one arm on Sam's shoulder, and on the other side Paul Odom, their very best friend, then a young lawyer, now a respected judge. He still came to see her, every week or so, and he'd helped redraft her will a couple years back when she'd felt the premonition. The land was going to the city, which would plant trees and build a small park where the old house had been. With a playground for the grandchildren. For anybody's grandchildren. Yes, Paul was a true friend. And such nice green eyes, which hadn't changed with the years.

WITHIN HER, WITHOUT HER

Soon there would be frost. In a few days, in a month. Now she looked out windows at a wide expanse of glistening dewy lawn. Farther back, a line of trees glowed and held back momentarily the onset of the sun.

It would be bright today. She went from window to window, comparing minute changes of perspective, noting the appearance of the long shadows, the winking out of one last, high star. Or was it a planet?

He would have been still asleep at this hour. Sprawled out at odd angles maybe, one twisted cover overlapping an outstretched arm or leg, the peaceful expression on his face, the pale eyelids with their fine veins still shut, the eyelashes curving downward and out. She had always gone in there early on a morning like this, leaned ever so close to his sleeping face, and breathed in the sweet fragrance of his escaping breath. She had always checked him, in the late evenings too. Tottering a little by then, holding her own breath in, she had looked for the rhythmic rise and fall of his little chest and gently (but, at times, with lightly trembling hand) moved a cover or pillow a little farther away from his nose and mouth.

Her husband had always said, you worry too much, he's fine in there, it's impossible for a child to twist up in his bedclothes and suffocate, you'll wake him up, he'll smell your breath. And then he would go back to his newspaper, or his book, screening her out, looking annoyed if she tried to start a little bit of conversation, if she asked even a little question. And she would go back to the kitchen and open the cabinet.

And the amazing thing was, she had been so careful during the pregnancy. No caffeine, no alcohol, a well-balanced and nourishing diet—of course, she had never in her life touched tobacco.

That had been the happiest time of all. After the initial months, which had at times been difficult, she had felt serene, confident. How many hours had she lain on her back on the sofa, hands clasped over her great belly, listening to Bach and most especially to Mozart, listening with her child, alert to his every movement? Was he reacting to the music? Could he respond to it of his own accord, or was he affected by her emotional response? Was it somehow hormonal? Chemical? Her every cell seemed flushed with pleasure. Then her husband would come in and ask her to please turn it down.

She had loved the child growing within her, and she had loved him even more when he was born and became a real person to her, looking up at her in the hospital room with such serious eyes, even then. Before he had been just an idea, an idea she could feel within of course, but now she was face to face with this miraculous idea.

The first months had naturally been very difficult and exhausting, but with help from her husband she had managed. At some point though she had become aware of an alarming fact. Her husband was drawing back from her and their son. Had something happened inside the house? Outside? In his life? He said she was very imaginative, what he meant was that she was imagining things, but she knew she wasn't. Something had changed between them, there was a coldness, a wall, that hadn't been there before. And, although he continued to go through all the motions, and everyone said he was such a good father, she was convinced that he was faking it.

He was a very good actor.

That's what had started it all. His coldness, his rebuffs, her feelings of panic, mild at first but then desperate, her straining to comprehend what was happening to them. The pressure of childcare all day when he was gone, the endless routine, the future with no change in sight. A glass of wine in the evening had been what she needed, and that had been fine at first. But it had gone on from there. And now she was alone in this big house.

Look, you're getting the house, he'd said. But I'm sure you'll understand I can't leave Matthew alone with you. I'm his father, after all.

The sun was out now. She went from window to window, closing the blinds, and then turned to go to the kitchen.

THE RIVER CROSSING

It was the kind of day that doesn't happen anymore, at least not along the river, the kind of day that was only possible years ago, decades ago, a lifetime ago. The sky was a deep and darkening blue, and motionless cirrus wisps, some of them brushed to faint red by the lowering sun, adhered as lightly as combed cotton to the outermost reaches of vision. It was so clear from the top of the levee that the trees lining the opposite shore could be seen etched in leafy detail against western air.

It was the time when the river road was the only land connection between New Orleans and Baton Rouge, two hundred miles of gravel and dust, mud when it rained. At Plaquemine Point the coach stopped to release a passenger. The horses snorted with irritation and impatience as the woman's traveling bag was unstrapped and lowered; the changing station across from McMillan Plantation was two curves away and they knew it to a hungry certainty. Finally the bag was down and instructions and last words were exchanged in the deepening shadows thrown by the levee. The horses pulled forward with a jerk and were gone with the coach.

The woman took off her hat and a curl of dark red hair fell to one side. Her gloved hand brushed a film of dust from her black skirt, and she moved slowly up the dirt path toward the top of the levee, pausing now and then to put the heavy bag down and rest a bit. It had been a long journey, and she was tired. But Bill was going to be waiting for her on the other side, in Plaquemine, Louisiana, fresh shaved and clean and with that lotion she liked, and they were going to open the bag and see just how rich they were now and get the best room in the Grand Hotel and sleep the two of them together in a good bed for the very first time.

She was at the top of the levee. There was something surprising here that she hadn't seen from the road, a battered brown shack, its door hanging open and somewhat askew like the lolling tongue of an idiot. The path continued at a slant down the other side to the landing, where a group of men and women and several carts and horses were congregated. She could hear human voices and the noises of animals. A bit of a song and a cough were carried up on the cooling air, and toward the other side of the river the ferryboat was already straining upstream to cross and then loop down with the current. A plume of dark smoke rose and trailed behind it.

"Lord, what do we got here? You have brought us this far. And where do you go to now, Little Missie?" The voice from the shack startled her. It was hoarse but high and sharp too, with a snapping quality like a flag in the wind. A face framed in a jumble of long dirty hair, mostly twisted into greasy strands, blinked from the dark and stared at her from a window which held no pane.

"Now what's this you traipse by me on tippie-toes, Miss? No one pass here without they talk with Corp. You cannot go around or escape me. Now, little Missie? You hear? We talk?" The eyes were expectant, the blinking rapid. The face itself was white and bloaty, like the underside of a frog. There were different colors in the hair.

The man in the shack was not good to look at. The woman turned and peered out across the river. The ferry was still fighting its way upstream against water intent upon the Gulf of Mexico. She put her bag upon the ground and sat on it, listening to the voice and looking out across the river. Texas was where they were heading, and no one was going to know to ask where they had the money from.

"You know, Corp he the man here now. I be these many year at my post, on the river. Looking front and back. Everybody come by, you cannot go around. Front and back, back and front. General Beauregard he put me here, anybody can tell you that. Mr. Pretty Glance, that name mean, and he was a man to look good, back and forth, back and forth. People see him, he come in a room and they say *Now that one fine-looking man*. But mind me now, that past and this future, I'm the fortune man and I tell you what you want to know. Or don't want to know. Give me a dollar and I tell. I tell you if they be black clouds or white, or white on black, if it going to rain down or sun shine, the color or shape of river water."

The woman turned and spoke: "Why should I pay you a dollar for that?"

"Tell your past, tell your future." The voice was singsong, the rhythm an undercurrent of enticement. "Everybody come by and nobody go around. Little Miss, you come a ways now? You come down a long road? Lord, you have brought us this far."

"I don't think it's worth a dollar," she said and looked again at the river. The boat was slow. The current had to be strong here. Maybe Bill was in the barbershop now, listening to the razor slap-slapping against the strop. "You live in this?"

"General Pretty give me my house. I give him everything and he give me my house and memories. He used to come here all the time, every night. But for long time now I ain't seeing him much. And I be here all summer all winter. Two year ago the river freeze straight across. But I got to stay at my post. Orders. From Mr. Pretty."

"How can you live here all the time?"

"I drink river water at night. Folk bring me trotline fish. Where my dollar?"

"Where's my fortune?"

"Past or future?"

"First, my past."

The face in the window frowned and squinted and one hand started stroking and twisting the hair, almost like a woman would. "It true and Corp got his dollar. It not true and you pass and go on down there. Down to the bottom." The voice was a little screechy sounding, almost nervous.

"All right," said the woman.

"That our deal?"

"Our deal."

"This your past then—you from back East."

For the first time, the woman smiled a little. "Too easy, fortune man. I don't need no conjure boy to tell me that." She laughed at him.

The eyes widened and blinked furiously. "It true? And so you pay me my dollar. If a man come here, he pay. We agree, one dollar. Pretty Face he always pay, in silver too."

The woman pushed herself up from her bag and in doing so came closer to the angry eyes. "If a man comes? Maybe I'm not a man, and maybe you haven't earned your money yet." She was vaguely aware of something funny in her words. Bill had a nice way with his hands, but in the end she had been the one to take the knife and do the dirty work. It had surprised her, the smell of blood. But the heat, the burning heat and the richness of it like wine, they were always with her now. She reached inside a tiny leather

pouch which was hanging from her neck and took out a small coin which she waved at his face. It was not a dollar.

The face shrank into the shack at her approach. There was a sliding, metallic sound. "You ain't keeping to what you promised," came the voice. "Am I going to end up hating you? I don't want to hate you." There was a silence. "But all right," Corp said again once more from the darkness. "We go again. Your future is this, you going to meet someone down there." He reappeared in the window to point with a thick strand of hair toward the river sliding past below. He was twisting the hair and stroking it gently. He held it very softly in his hand.

The woman didn't like to look at Corp's face, but something about his eyes caught her attention. They were regarding her in a familiar, almost possessive way like they knew something she didn't. She didn't see them but for a second, but there was a sly jokiness in them.

"There is someone meeting you," he said again, with emphasis.

"I don't know that he'll be on this side," she replied. To avoid the eyes she looked at Corp's hair for a long moment. She twisted her head a bit as if to see better and then jerked backwards in a violent start, picked up her bag, and hurried down the path toward the landing. A sputtering wet shrieking came in yelping bursts from behind her. "Where my dollar, goddam you? Goddam you whore woman!"

The path was deeply rutted, and she tripped and stumbled and dropped the bag. She crouched and clutched it and scrambled to the side for better footing. But low bushy growths and sticker plants forced her back toward the middle way, where she kept falling down. The shrieking from above continued and seemed at times to be in front of her,

bouncing off the water, or even coming at her from inside her head. She felt confused, and in the middle of her fear the dismaying sensation of how dirty she was going to look to Bill fell over her like a net.

The path was longer than it had looked from the top. Finally she was at the bottom, but now the landing was empty, and the ferryboat was already twenty yards or more from the bank, hunting easy water as it labored upstream against the current. How had she missed its arrival and the loading of the passengers? She shouted and waved, and ran upstream along the water's edge. She saw people looking right at her but their eyes were blanks. They were not reacting. They were standing there on the receding ferryboat like stiff imitations of human beings.

An acrid smell rose from the mud her feet were kicking into, and the sound from above was getting louder and turning more and more into a deep bellow of rage. She took a series of short, choked breaths, afraid to turn around and look up. It wasn't coming closer, yet, but the sound alone was enough to make her forget about her bag and go into the water. Its coldness surprised her; for the first time, she looked back toward the top of the levee but could see nothing, not even the shack. But the voice kept booming in her ears and in her head, and she continued out into deeper water. Her shoes encountered sucking mud and soft plants that felt like velvet where they touched her ankles.

She went under about the same time as the sun did across the water, and its color filled her eyes before river water washed them clean. Her last thoughts were of red things; the weakening sun, the sight of splashing blood, and the thick strand of dark red she had seen braided into a man's hair.

FRIENDS

I.

He was sitting by himself on one of those little stone benches at the edge of the Union Terrace, the open-air eating area on the second floor of the student center. He was wearing sunglasses and a purple and gold windbreaker and a headband that didn't quite match the rest. It was a little too cool in the shade—he was almost shivering—but the sun was about to reach him. It had already caught a haphazard array of dirty ceramic cups and plates on a nearby table, bringing out a surprising poetry of color in the remnants of oily fried eggs and streaks of grits and butter.

Now he was actually starting to shiver. But he didn't want to move directly into the sun in case Jim Barnes or any of the other Louisiana State University cops came cruising through the Union on their morning coffee run. He could imagine it perfectly, plump cops in complicated uniforms with loops and little box things, walkie-talkies jiggling in rhythm as they trotted in and out going *squawk squawk*.

So he stayed in the unobtrusive shade. The thing was, he didn't want any of the cops to glance out through the plate glass windows and see him sunning himself there like a happy lizard, but especially not Barnes, who was sharp-eyed and, worst of all, not a total loser like the others. They had all warned him, at one time or another, to stay off campus. They had gotten to know him over the years and had taught him that as a non-student he had no rights at all. Barnes, in the most recent incident, had slowly shaken his head with a look that said, basically, *you fuckhead*, and then squeezed him on the shoulder, adding in a sharply sarcastic voice, "Hey, bud, next time we call the city police

and they'll take you downtown. You don't want to get booked, do you? And don't stare at the ground when I'm talking to you, Alan—I want to see your eyes!"

His eyes had been just what he didn't want Jim Barnes to see. That had been the time someone complained about his behavior on the third floor of the library. It was total bullshit, and the way the whole thing had gone down was unbelievable. He had been a little high, a little over the edge maybe, but nicely, with a mellow little Quaalude thing going. Two ludes—what a great name for a drug—and a quickly gulped beer from his backpack to set off the gradually intensifying whoosh. Goofing around near the windows in a sunny section, he was leafing through some old university yearbooks—*Gumbos* from his undergraduate years—and quietly giggling at a couple of things that really shouldn't have been there, that were quite hilarious given the context. It was shaping up as a wonderful afternoon, a long, daydreamy kind of day, dissolving into a pleasant forgetful nothingness. And then, trouble. Trouble in the form of reality which manifested itself in the shape of some dumb fraternity guy telling him to stop his wacko giggling and then reporting him. The guy went to the pay phone outside the men's room and called the cops. Arrest had been imminent, but Barnes had arrived five minutes later and made a phone call and smoothed things out. *Unfuckingbelievable*, the way people talked these days, the last days of the decade, the last days of 1979. An era was ending.

Here he was, Alan Cross, thirty-four years old and a graduate of this fine institute of higher learning. His B.A. was even *cum* something, and there had been honors all along the way. Well, most of the way. Kicking him off the fucking campus. Making a *persona non grata* out of him. Even if they didn't know the phrase, that's what they were

doing. As if he didn't have the right to a quiet giggle in a secluded corner of the library on a sunny afternoon. And who was he hurting?

This place was his home, he had grown up here, his dad was listed as Professor Emeritus in the campus directory, he had gone K through 12 before they even called it that over at the University Lab School on the east end of campus, where student teachers learned the tricks of the trade on captive student audiences.

He had played here as a kid—right here—before the Union even existed, waiting for his daddy to come pick him up. He had vomited once on an impressive Memorial Oak when all it faced was an open field of grass, bending low between two massive roots. He remembered wondering why his daddy was so late and if he was really coming before being wretchedly sick. But his father was a busy man.

The sun was on his legs now and it felt pretty good. By leaning forward he was able to dip his hands into the light and soon they were warm, so he took out his little bag of Drum and rolled himself a cigarette, a nice fat one. He was not your typical campus vagrant, he had showered in a dorm by the stadium on his way in, he was neat, and his damp hair was nicely combed down over the purple and gold shoulders of his windbreaker. "*Hey, what it is, Mr. LSU!*" a custodian had called to him earlier as he slid past Hodges ablaze in school colors. Nobody except a cop would take a second look at him now.

He was really hoping that the newspaper people would show up soon.

II.

"So who is this guy?" It was Liz of the Reveille, the student newspaper, who was asking the questions, Liz, who was tall, efficient, and managing editor.

"He is a guy with a story," said Russell, "a great big story that you're not going to believe. I mean it, Lizzie. It's front page stuff for the retrospective thing that Dale is planning."

Dale was editor-in-chief for the fall semester. Now that the sixties were almost ten years dead, he was planning to bring them back to life in a special Reveille edition entitled *Years of Change*.

"Front page stuff?"

"Absolutely. I'm talking top of the line here. I'm talking resonance. Campus wide, city wide. You've got to meet this guy, Liz."

"OK, Russ, take a deep breath and count to ten."

"I'm as calm as the day I was born. I admit he's a little on the weird side, but what the hell? Everything he says rings true. And everybody has at least one story, you just have to pull it out of them."

"You're quoting Dr. Kinder." Russell and Liz had met in Kinder's news-gathering class as sophomores. Every day that semester, his main goal in life had been to sit as close to her as possible.

"Listen, Liz, Alan—Alan Cross is his name—is a walking compendium of the cultural history of this school. He entered in the early sixties when they still shaved freshman heads and made them wear beanies to class. By the time he graduated, people were in tie-dyes and peace signs. Chimes Street was crawling with stoned laughing longhairs. Three headshops in the one block from Highland to McGoos competed for the space trade. They were growing pot by the bushel over by the Chemistry Building until

some grad student in botany noticed it and informed the authorities. Alan told me about it and I found the article in the archives. It really did happen. Confirmation, bingo. July, 1969. The same month as the moon landing. All over the world, people were getting high. And—he's got this other story."

"A true story? Guys like that are full of stories. Go to any bar on Chimes Street. They're a dime a dozen."

"I know, but this is too weird to be made up. Truth is stranger than fiction, Lizzie." It was another Kinder quote. "People are going to read my piece and go *wow*."

"Don't be so optimistic." She patted the top of his head, easy for a tall girl who had three inches of height on him. "Don't trust anybody. Except me, of course."

He could feel where her hand had been. "Look Liz, I've just got a great feeling about the whole thing. I'm excited."

Liz looked at him closely. There was a funny thing she did, a habit she had of raising her eyebrows in a way that was beautiful yet incredibly melancholy. "Are you sure about it, Russ?" The eyebrows stayed up for a few seconds. "Is there outside confirmation for the story?"

"I'm working on it. It's just, I've got a good feeling, and so far that's all I have. The guy is very convincing. He's a bozo, but not the kind to make something like this up. I'm going to confirm it and ride it for all it's worth. It might get picked up by the wire services. It might end up being exhibit number one in my clip file. That could come in handy when it comes time to send out résumés and portfolios."

"Don't get ahead of things, Russ. Follow the rules. Get confirmation for everything. And now give me a little preview: just what *is* the wonderful story?"

Russell lowered his voice: "It's an acid story, you know, LSD. Perfect for the sixties. But in this case, it's not only *about* acid, it's about what the acid is *on*." He started to smile—he couldn't help it—and changed his voice ever so slightly. "It's like, heavy, man."

"You sound like *you're* on something."

"Ha ha, very funny, but no, I'm not. No way, I'm no drug creep. The *story* is on something though. I mean, acid is on the story. Or the poem. Or whatever it is."

"What? What story? Yours? What poem?"

"See for yourself. The man is waiting. Let's go. What a loser."

III.

"But I thought you paid for stories." The voice sounded petulant, almost wounded.

"Alan—we don't pay for stories," Liz said. She had assumed command of the interview from word one. Her eyes were focused on the sunglasses. "And even if we had it in our budget—which we don't—it's not exactly ethical, is it?" She glared at Russell. The eyebrows were level, glowering.

The corners of Alan's mouth were tugging down. He bent over the table in obvious puzzlement, poking at an ancient burn mark. He looked up. "Ethical?" He took a large swallow of coffee and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Ethical?" he said again and turned toward Russell. "I don't get it. This is a good story."

A stray butterfly wing had somehow become glued to the edge of the table. Alan peeled it off and examined it before flicking it onto the floor. He licked his fingers.

"Pretty bitter," he said.

Russell pushed the stop button on his tape recorder and scanned the Tiger Lair. It was barely eight o'clock, but already the business of breakfast was in high gear. Fragments of conversation and the clatter of ceramic came at him from nearby tables. The usual clientele was in place, drinking coffee, wasting time. The perennial students, the somewhat dazed-looking professorial types. There was a kind of solemn music behind the background noise which sounded out of place, an announcement on TV or something. Something about the Middle East. Important things were underway in the wide world beyond the campus.

Alan spoke again: "What exactly do you mean by ethical?"

The three of them were at a corner table that Alan had chosen after they'd met him as arranged on the terrace outside. He had led them in, sitting down with his back to the wall. "Liz," Russell began, "I was thinking that maybe this time we could like maybe—" She gave him a look. "Maybe, like help Alan out a little bit. It's quite a story he has."

"It's a good story," said Alan.

"See you, Russell. Nice meeting you," Liz said to Alan's sunglasses. She pushed her chair back sharply and stood up.

Alan and Russell were quiet as they watched her depart. She stopped at another table, where some guy was smiling and waving at her. A tall guy with a fresh barbershop trim.

"Women!" said Alan. He finished his coffee with a slurp. "Women!" he said again. Taking off his sunglasses, he rubbed his eyes. "Shit!"

Russell was fiddling with his tape recorder. He pressed rewind and looked up. Alan's eyes were quite red. "We didn't talk about money the other night," Russell said.

"She your girlfriend?" Alan asked.

"I wish."

"Pretty girl. Cute. What's her name again? I can't forget those eyebrows."

Liz was vanishing around the corner where the coffee machines were, her friend in tow.

"Look," Russell said. He felt sick. "What are we going to do now?" He had envisioned working closely with Liz on the story, showing her he knew his stuff. "About the story, I mean. Because really, Alan, we never talked about money."

They had met three days before, on a cold blue Friday afternoon outside The Library, a bar on Chimes Street. Happy hour, and the kind of day Russell loved, Friday cold and with sun, perfect weather to stand and drink until it got dark and even colder, the week's anxieties dissolving into a pleasant awareness of future possibilities. His hands might be freezing, he might even be shivering a little, but from the inside the alcohol would be saying that it didn't matter and all was going to be OK.

Alan had been standing apart from a crowd of loud talkers, looking a little older than the rest, a little out of it, a little strange. But they'd struck up a conversation, and Russell had gone inside for a pitcher and two cups.

It got more and more interesting, and in the end they'd walked to Around The Corner, where Russell bought two hickory-smoked burgers with extra fries and another pitcher and listened to Alan mutter about being a vegetarian while he chewed beef with a mouth half open and a dash of ketchup on his chin.

Russell said, "What's your greatest sixties memory?" and Alan shook his head and said, "Oh, man," and launched into a complicated story from the year 1967 when he had been on the staff of the LSU literary magazine *Swamp*. Something had happened about

the spring issue involving trouble with the faculty advisor and a poem *the Man* had tried to censor. And LSD was also in the picture, in liquid form and very potent. And an eyedropper. "The famous eyedropper," Alan said more than once. Which had been acquired in a stoned late-night expedition to Rexall Drugs. Alan kept emphasizing that it was "real glass." And finally, the advisor temporarily sidelined, the new print run of *Swamp* had arrived, and with it the holy moment, the *impregnation* . . .

Alan uttered that word with such solemn conviction that the people at the next table were glancing uneasily over their shoulders.

More youngish professorial types were coming into the Tiger Lair now, a group of them, with beards, longish hair. Sixties refugees, at present aiming for tenure. Total jerks, in other words.

"You want another coffee?" Russell asked.

"No thanks. Nope."

"I'd still like to do the story, Alan."

"I was hoping for a hundred dollars."

"A hundred dollars? I can't do it, man. Twenty or thirty maybe, out of my own pocket. I could pay you in beer."

"You think that's all I'm interested in? You think I'm just an old alkie? Well, I'm not. Let me tell you what I am though. I'm two months behind on my rent, in a place that doesn't have hot water. I'm on food stamps. I got fired from my last two jobs. And I really thought you paid for stories. Honestly. I thought that was understood." Alan sighed and put his sunglasses on. "OK," he said finally. "I'll tell you what. Forget the money.

You're a nice guy. The story is yours for free. Listen. Tonight, get some beer, that Mexican stuff, the one with the two X's. Get as much as you can."

"Yeah? *Dos Equis*?"

"That's right. That's what he likes."

"Who's he?"

"Max, man. Max Grass. I told you about him."

"No, you didn't."

"Yes, I did. The poet. We were on *Swamp* together, before it folded. Max, the poet. The humanist. The man of letters."

"Max Grass? That his real name? Grass? You didn't mention him. It's a funny name."

"Yeah, it's a funny name, and Max is a funny guy. We were freshmen together, can you believe it, and after all this time, he's still around, over in St. Rose, across the river." Alan tilted his head and sunglasses upward. "So let's go pay Max a little visit. He and his old lady have a house out in the middle of cow fields."

"Cow fields?"

"Yeah, watch your step. And remember your tall friend was talking about confirmation? Well, you can confirm everything with Max. He's the one who wrote the poem. And impregnated it."

IV.

Max Grass embraced Alan on the porch. "Hello, brother, it's been quite a while." He looked at Russell over Alan's shoulders and then at the large paper grocery bag. "I don't know where you dug up this sorry little misfit," he said to Russell as he continued to

swing Alan in a muscular embrace, almost lifting him off the wooden porch floor, "but you have come with the appropriate offerings." Max put Alan down and called through the open door of his house: "Marta! Bring us some glasses, honey." He lurched toward Russell and hugged him too, the beer squeezed between their bodies. "What's your name, little guy? You a friend of Alan's? You give him this goofy jacket?"

Max Grass was big bordering on huge, and he smelled like lemon and curry. His beard was trimmed short and shot through with gray. "I'm Russell. Russell Broussard."

"You must be from around here with a name like that," Max said with a laugh. "And what have we here?" he continued, taking the bag. "Ah, the Mexican, it's what I was hoping for. Marta, look, the Mexican. Just like in the old days."

Marta emerged from the house with a tray and four glasses. "Hello," she said. She was slim, with a long braid of black hair stretching most of the way down her back. "Hello, Alan. Nice jacket."

"Hi, Marta, you still taking good care of old Max here?"

"When he lets me." She smiled at Russell, nodding her head in his direction. "But he lets me usually. These days. We live the quiet life. We both have jobs now." Russell could hear a slight accent in her words. Her smile was happy and natural, and it made her look very pretty. He wondered if Max had always been so fat. No, impossible.

"Alan, I'm glad you came," Marta said. "Max he likes so much to see you." She put the tray and glasses down on a rickety-looking wooden table.

"Marta is taking real good care of me and the kids," said Max. "You just missed them, we tucked them in ten minutes ago. Things are different these days. We're getting up there, bud."

"Have they really changed that much?" Alan asked. "Sometimes I think time is standing still." He took an open bottle from Marta and filled his glass. "Say, Max, Russell here wants to ask you about the good old days, that time with *Swamp*, you know, the poem you wrote, the one about the dolphin."

"The dolphin poem? How'd he find out about that?"

"I told him. He said he was interested in sixties stuff."

"What for?" Max turned to Russell. "What's the deal about the sixties? You some kind of nostalgia buff?"

"Yeah, well I'm interested in sixties stuff, plus, I'm a Reveille reporter, and we're doing a thing about the sixties. So like I'm on the lookout for good sixties stories, and Alan told me one about you and the magazine and your story. Or poem." He wanted to let Max or Alan bring up the LSD angle.

"What did he tell you? You're a reporter? A Reveille reporter? What did you tell him, Alan?"

"I don't know, Max, I just told him about the trouble we had that time. I told him about you know, about the eyedropper thing."

"The eyedropper?" Marta said. "What's he talking about, the eyedropper?"

"You told him about the eyedropper thing?" Max's voice was trembling. "The fucking eyedropper?" Max slammed down his beer on the table and some of the liquid sloshed down the sides of the glass. His face was definitely red.

"Come on, Max. We were drinking, I figured . . . hell, it's been over ten years. It's a good story. A very good story. I was drunk, I admit it."

"You were drunk, and you admit it. Great, Alan."

"I fucked up, I guess. Not the first time. I thought you might like it, Max. Seeing your name in print again. It's been so long, I thought it was OK. Plus, he was going to pay me for the story. Did I fuck up?" Alan took a big gulp of beer. "Tell me, Max, you didn't want me to talk about the eyedropper thing, is that it?"

"Wait, Alan, what are you saying?" Max said. "He was going to pay you? You were going to make money off of this? You were going to sell me out? Have you forgotten our agreement? And now you're asking me did you fuck up again? Jesus, Alan, you just can't stay out of trouble, can you?" Alan looked at Marta and shrugged.

"Look, man," Max said, turning to Russell, "no offense, but you can't write about the eyedropper thing."

"Hey, people!" Marta said suddenly. "Come on, everybody, now let's calm down and drink some more Mexican. Come on." She filled everyone's glasses. "Smile again, nothing bad has happened yet. I don't know why is Max so upset. I don't know what is the eyedropper thing. But Russell—your name is Russell, right? You can't write without our permission, right?"

Russell drank his beer and ran his tongue over his lower lip. "That's correct, technically. I can't, and I won't. Word of honor. Of course, I could do it off the record, with no names attributed. Then, strictly speaking, I wouldn't need your approval." Max was shaking his head. "But . . . but even then I wouldn't do it without your OK. It just wouldn't be ethical."

"You think Jim Barnes wouldn't like to read about the eyedropper thing?" Max said to Alan. "He was on our case about it for how long, remember?"

"Max, it's been twelve years," Alan said. "Twelve long years. Isn't there a statue of limitations or something?"

"It's *statute* of limitations. Jesus, Alan, this is not art class. This is life. Picture the headline: *LSD Advocate Found Teaching Civics To Local Schoolchildren*. I don't care how long it's been. I could lose my job. I *would* lose my job. There's no statute of limitations when it comes to your reputation."

V.

It was much later, and the moon had long since risen over fields to the east. Marta had said goodnight hours before, and the three friends had finished the beer and were almost through a bottle of bourbon Max had fetched from the kitchen. Now everything was free and easy, everything was OK. Everything was off the record, and it was all very funny. The moon had a yellow-faced smile.

"So this is the famous poem, the notorious poem," Max was saying. "And what did you want to know, Russell? If I wrote it in pencil? Or if this amazing historical document came drifting out of an inspired ballpoint?"

"I just wanted a copy so you could autograph it for me."

"I might let you have the carbon," Max said. "If you're nice. But you don't even know what a carbon is. Well, guys, here we go. We begin *in medias res* and I'm sure you scholars and gentlemen of leisure don't need me to translate that for you."

"Start your engines?" Alan asked.

"Yeah, Alan, right," Max said. "Vroom." He read:

And then, in the morning, yes
We dropped the tabs and our brains melted and mixed
And we became one and yes sizzle
Two human drops that meld in the lambent bucket

Turning in the resurgent deeps, going deeper, in farther, *ahhhh* . . .
Flipper! Hey buddy! Flipper! That you?
"I'll take mine sunny-side up!" said the miraculous fish.

And shimmering, the dolphin-dappled
Buddhahood of the Ultimate Flashlight Congress (UFC);
So kiss the sandal of One Who Knows
And experience *darshan* in the glade of eternity
The murmuring slippers resound and make merry on the turnpikes
With the blessed dolphin of nirvanahood.

Max Grass had a funny look on his face. He returned the paper to its manila folder. They were silent for a while. Birds were beginning their song of new morning.

"Wow," Alan said. "I didn't remember it was so good. A masterpiece. I guess it helps to hear the esteemed reader of authorship. It's not the same as staring at it on the page as the words shake."

"I think he's serious," Max said. "Alan, you are really drunk if you think that piece of shit is any good."

"No, really, it's brilliant. You're kidding with me, aren't you? Or am I fucking up again? The poem captures the moment. That feeling we used to have. The infinite was opening up in front of us. The bit about the shimmering. That's very good, just the way it was." Alan burped and began to declaim toward the cow pastures: "You were like a god to us, Max! Remember the house on Azalea Street? The mushrooms on the walls? And wow, look how pretty the moon is tonight!"

"Alan, brother, you are drunk," Max said and turned to Russell. "I was tripping and watching TV one morning instead of going to class. I felt I could become another species. I disappeared, became disembodied. I sensed an impending, ecstatic union." He

scratched his belly and yawned. "I scribbled the poem out of that experience. The writing is shit. But the experience seemed valid."

The mild light of early morning was becoming apparent. Alan stood up and stretched and yawned. "Well, Max, you always were the deep thinker." He crawled down the porch steps, mumbling something unintelligible. Once on the ground, he righted himself and looked around as if to determine where he was. He turned toward the porch. "Max," he sang out. "Max! Tell him about the eyedropper. The glass eyedropper. It's cool, man." He headed toward the stand of trees where the birds were singing but stopped about halfway there to look at something on the ground. "It's cool," he called out. "And this time, I am not fucking up."

Max and Russell looked at each other. "It's OK, Max," said Russell. "Everything is off the record. This evening is off the record. Only me and the cows are listening now."

"It was, I guess," Max said, "in that issue of *Swamp* you know, the final one as it turned out, the one with the poem, me and Alan stayed up all night when the copies came from the printer. I had a little vial of liquid LSD, very pure stuff. I won't say where it was from, even to a good friend like you. But me and Alan did all 600 copies, and it took all night. He held each *Swamp* open, and I laid a drop or two of the acid on one word in the poem. The plan was to send copies to friends and then call them up and say, 'Hey! We want you lick a certain word in the dolphin poem!' "

Max was laughing. "What a great idea, we thought. Only the thing was, me and Alan were of course tripping our heads off that night too. And I mean hugely, through our fingertips. Somehow. We hadn't exactly planned it. What a night. We swore eternal

brotherhood and so on. But then, the next week, when the time came to send *Swamp* out, we couldn't remember which word we'd impregnated."

Alan was back from the trees, lurching on the lawn. "It was *flashlight*, I'm sure of it. What other word could you even consider dripping acid on? It just fits."

"No, it was closer to the bottom of the page," Max said. "I'm pretty sure now it was *nirvanahood*. But anyway—we kind of let the whole thing slide. It seemed kind of silly in the harsh light of day. Plus the heat was on, and we had to lie low for a while. Someone had seen us stealing the eyedropper. Those were days, all right. Of paranoia. And of Alan's friend Jim Barnes. It was all kind of silly."

"But I have to say this," Alan said. "To me it was never silly."

"No," Max said, "it was never silly to you."

"So now," Russell said, "if the library has *Swamp* . . ."

"Oh, they do," Alan said and laughed. "Two precious copies of the Fall 1967 issue, right where you'd expect at the end of the shelf. But if you go look, you'll see page 79 has a ragged, licked-over look." He tottered off to the side. "Well, boys, I'm off to stretch the old leggings again."

Max and Russell watched him vanish past the trees. "But you know something, Russell?" said Max. "Have you ever tripped? You ever drop LSU? I mean LSD?"

"No. Alcohol's my thing."

"Good for you. And now I will tell you something, and this is on the record. If you really want a story, write about this. The drug experience is never valid. It seems it is, but it's not. The poem is shit, and it reflects the experience. LSD lets you peep at paradise for an instant, but then the hole shuts. You can't stay there. You always come

down. Cast out of the garden. And that's a mystery. I mean a misery. A misery on earth, Russell. It used to drive me crazy. A misery on earth. That's what it is. Coming down. That's what I learned. And I never want to go through that again. Russell, I almost ended up killing myself. Before I met Marta."

Max paused, thinking. "LSD is too fucking serious, man. It's silliness that we need more of. And bourbon whiskey." He gently lobbed the empty bottle into the yard. "I'm high enough now, on this house and my life. My family. Nothing's bringing it down."

The growing light was revealing patches of fog over the ground. Alan was trilling in the distance. "Love, Russell, love—now that's a mystery, and it's a silly mystery, but it's real, and it's subtle in ways, but you don't come down. It's not flashy, but it's solid. You stay there. You stay in it, through the ups, through the downs. And you're always learning, from everything. It's like tilling a garden, you know? Always turning up new earth."

"You mean, your life with Marta."

"Cultivating my garden. With Marta. And with our kids, who will probably be up soon to laugh at their ridiculous, drunken daddy. I'm going to go brush my teeth now."

"I better go see what happened to Alan," said Russell.

"Go look after him," said Max. "He needs a friend. Bye now. Give me a hug before you go."

Russell cautiously drove to Baton Rouge with Alan snoring in the back seat. The sacrifices one made. But Liz was going to love the story. All he had to do was change a

few names. A possible headline came to mind: *University-Sponsored Magazine Used In Drug Dealing Ploy.*

He shivered and tasted the stink of stale bourbon and beer in his mouth. The risen sun was laying streaks of red on the bottoms of rough, low-moving clouds. The future of his clip file was looking pretty good.

SEASON OF LIGHT

He is looking past my head, the man is, perhaps at some scrap of newsprint or cut-out picture tacked to my office corkboard. The window is open; I can hear the wind as it rustles the curling edges of yellowed articles I thought worthy of keeping.

I think that he is looking at something on the corkboard, but I am not entirely sure, for I cannot see his eyes. They are concealed behind glasses which he did not remove upon entering. It is strange.

I have not seen this type of eyewear before. The lenses are neither clear nor dark, but throw a silvery reflection at me. I see the room, and in it my own face, dim, distorted, in curvature. I see shapes which must represent my lips. They are moving as I mouth some inanities about the weather, the wind, the turning of the seasons.

The man nods slightly. At first I am not sure if even this has occurred, but then I see my reflection sliding upwards. His body is very still, his legs uncrossed, feet in black shoes flat on the floor. He has said almost nothing since entering the office, and I am filling the uncomfortable silence with words.

The truth of the matter is, I do not know why the man has deigned to visit me on this day. I am a teacher in a poor school in a remote maritime province, far from my birthplace, the capital, center of our national life and culture. It is already past nine in the morning and my students await me, but I dare not leave until I have carried out my duty and given to the man that which he seeks. He is an inspector from the Ministry of Borderlands and Security. Of exactly which department, I am uncertain—and he has not bothered to inform me. I have (or had, I do not know which) an uncle who had

distinguished himself in that ministry at the time I left the mainland for good. But I do not mention this.

The present inspector wears a dark uniform and somber, matching tie. His tie clip is government issue, as is the badge which adorns his lapel, the badge which depicts the all-seeing eye, symbol of knowledge and emblem of the Front for National Salvation, our guiding light and inspiration these fourteen years.

Tie clips are necessary here. We lead a windy life on the edge of the island. However, no teacher in this school wears the eye badge. Only our headmaster enjoys that honor and privilege.

I stop my small talk and begin to speak of the good work the school is doing, of the difficulties we face, of the poor material—the island girls—we must work with. He listens, immobile, in silence. I speak of the several students who showed special promise, students who were removed to a school on the mainland, from where they may one day be lifted into the government service, into a life of diligence, an exalted life, a secure life. *Security*—that is what we all desire, what we all aspire to. It is one of the tenets of the Front. As a conscientious teacher, I take great care to impress this fact on my students' malleable minds.

Outside in the corridor two colleagues pass, whispering. They do not glance past the open door into my office. I am mildly surprised at this. Should I be alarmed?

I look at the inspector. He has raised his open palm. I become silent.

"I was wondering," he begins, "why you chose that particular picture for your office decor." His fingers shift until one points toward the corkboard. "Why that, of all possible pictures? Is it edifying?"

"Edifying?" I say with an inward flurry of fear and turn to the referent of his comment. It is a drawing pinned almost out of sight at the bottom of the corkboard, and its predominantly blue coloration makes it stand out against the backdrop of yellowing articles and black and white newspaper pictures. Depicted are the head and shoulders of a boy, perhaps a young man. His shoulders are bare and his eyes, whose whiteness contrasts strikingly with the blue of his skin, gaze out into the room under eyebrows which seem raised in surprise. His hair, parted in the middle, rises and falls to each side in gentle waves of white and blue.

I have spent many hours regarding this drawing, and I know that it is not the work of an accomplished artist. There is something unfocused about it, a gawky angularity in the line. But this suits somehow the characterization of the boy, who seems tentative, incomplete, unmolded. A darkness in the background lends a melancholy air to the whole.

What I can see of the inspector's face shows no emotion. He waits for me to speak, to commit myself in some way. I do not wish to answer without carefully considering my response, but I sense impatience on his part. "I do not know if it is *edifying*," I begin, "but it appeals to me, somehow." I am groping for the correct words, not entirely sure of what I should say. "It was a gift, a gift from a student. She drew it for me."

"At your request? For a commission, shall we say? A commission of some kind or other? And the payment thereto?"

The inspector's tone seems harsh, unduly so. What is he getting at? How much does he know?

"A commission?" I answer. "No, no, that is not what I mean. That is not what I mean at all. She drew it without my knowledge or encouragement. I did not know her well." Here I know that I am straying from strict veracity, not far, but there has been a departure. "She surprised me with it. It was a farewell present."

The inspector has withdrawn a leather-bound agenda book from an inside coat pocket. "There was no quid pro quo, if that is what you mean," I continue. Ignoring me, he opens the book and reads for several seconds before looking up.

"Her name?" he asks.

"Her name? It was . . . D'ardizzone."

"Yes," says the inspector. "D'ardizzone." It is as if he has uttered the name with a sigh. Or is it the natural sound of the syllables? He pauses and leans forward. In spite of the fact that I cannot see his eyes, I know that he is looking directly into mine. "Why do you say it *was*?"

"Why?" I answer. "Because it is all past. Because Miss D'ardizzone is no longer with us. She is one of those of whom I spoke before. She was awarded a scholarship for study on the mainland."

"It is past?" he says. "All past you say? But can you have forgotten? You, a teacher of children? *In our present struggle there is no past*," he intones. He has quoted to me one of the slogans of the Front. While I do not necessarily agree with this view, I recognize the prudence of remaining silent. Silence about the past is, I believe, one of my cardinal virtues. It has, perhaps, landed me in this remote place where I can experience the only luxury remaining to me: that of being alive.

"Have you had any form of contact with D'ardizzone since she left the island?"
the inspector says after a pause.

"No."

"Outside the parameters of pedagogy, did you have any form of contact with D'ardizzone before she left the island?"

"I did not."

"I will take the drawing with me," the inspector says. He rises, unpins it from the corkboard, and places it inside his leather-bound agenda book. He looks at me once more and leaves the office, closing the door with a surprising gentleness. I put my head upon the desk.

I am alone now, in my bare little room in the teachers' dormitory. It is evening, and the inspector is, I have been told, dining in the headmaster's house, where he will also be lodged for the night. I can see the house from my window, up the hill, awash in lights. If I were closer, I could probably see merry faces in the window and hear the clink of wine glasses. But I am here, and in the low, forlorn building where the teachers dwell, it is darker. Lights out at nine, thanks to the latest belt-tightening decreed by those who lead us from above and encourage—no, require—us to accept our privations with good cheer. It is quiet in the dark, and the only sound in the teachers' dormitory is the occasional clatter caused by faulty plumbing.

Outside, the chill wind of evening is blowing off the sea. The day's warmth still lingers in the stone walls of my room, for a few more minutes, for an hour at the most.

Then it will become very cold, and I will cover myself. For now I lie atop the blanket on my narrow bed—two could never share this space in comfort.

I am alone, but in my thoughts I am walking a hillside path with a girl. In the past six months, I have replayed the scene again and again in my mind's eye. The past, if it still exists, only lives and breathes in the narrow space inside my skull.

The girl and I walk the path between thornbushes with outstretched branches like skeleton hands. But this time the inspector is with us as well. He is following us on this journey up the hill, for I have ignored a primary stricture of the Front and have told an untruth to one who wears the badge. Now, on the hillside, he is coming up behind me. I do not believe I will be able to elude him.

Every so often, in times past, I would go rambling over the hills behind the school in the late afternoon to stretch my legs, to be alone with my thoughts, to let them range freely through my mind's little space. That warm day, she surprised me. I did not know her, for she had never been my student. It is true that I might have seen her, once or twice, outside my office, as she talked and laughed with her friends. I might have noticed her in the corridor. Or in the eating room, as she raised a bowl of porridge to her face and, drinking, looked over its edge toward the teachers' table. Her face was familiar, I thought. But here she was now, on the hill, waiting by a dry rectangle of stone that had been a watering station for cattle in days long gone by. Waiting—for me? I did not realize it, at first.

It is said that the island girls have wild hearts under the dark folds of their clothes. She smiled and wished me a good day. I looked at the wide sash of dyed wool that

encircled her waist, giving away its shape by constricting that which it hides. The smell of wild oregano was in the air, ground up by our feet on the hillside.

We sat on a corner of stone and talked of this and that. She sometimes looked toward the sea, as if she saw something beyond it. Her hair would fall over her ears and she would push it back. Slowly, slowly, her face moved closer to mine.

We kissed with lips and tongues, also, I have heard, the island way. I felt her breath—and mine—growing deeper and stronger. We went then to a flat place by grasses, shady under an ancient chestnut tree, but warmed by slow-moving shafts of sun.

I touched the wide encircling sash of wool. And hesitated. And then she laughed under the tree, and started to undo it herself.

"Don't you wish I were a boy?" she asked. The islanders joke that this is a preference of the mainlanders, and there is some truth in what they say. In particular as regards certain individuals regarded as unhealthy by the Front. But I looked around us and answered, "I wish only that we were alone on the island."

"We are," she replied.

That was the last time I saw her on the hill. I continued my walks, making them a daily habit well into the season of frosts, but no one was waiting for me ever again by the old watering station. The fallen leaves grew deep under the ancient chestnut tree that had seen much with its silent eyes.

The girl came into my office one cold day, laughing still and saying she had been chosen and was departing for the mainland. "On the mainland," she said mysteriously, "there are others."

"Others?" I asked.

"Others," she replied, looking at me with cool, level eyes. "Real people. Who do not bend."

How careless she was, how heedless. She started to go but turned to me again as if it were an afterthought. "Oh, but here, this is for you," she said, drawing out her gift from under her coat with a mittened hand. "I drew . . . a portrait." There were gaps between the phrases, as she considered what to say. "Of myself . . . as a boy." She looked down, turned, peered into the corridor, pushed her hair back. "I made it for you," she said finally and ran out of the office into a group of her fellows, laughing schoolgirls with wide sashes.

I could see her quick breaths exhaled into the cold air.

I would like to look into my inspector's eyes, but still his strange glasses glint out at me. He has placed the drawing and a small blue notebook on the wooden table of the conference room. The notebook has a humble look to it. It seems to be a collection of scraps of paper, not all regularly cut, bound together on one side by a hand not expert in the use of needle and thread. The cover is of heavier material, and tiny dried leaves or flowers appear to be pasted to its surface.

He picks up the notebook in a careless manner and flips through its pages in a way I find irritating. He tosses it to the middle of the table and touches the drawing.

"Who is the boy?" he says.

"I do not know," I reply. "There are no boys in this school."

"You do not know? Is it not you, Assistente?" For the first time, he has used my formal title. I venture to pick up the drawing and bring it close to my face. Is it the last time I shall see it?

"It does not look like me," I say.

"No," he admits. "It does not."

I must be mad. I reach for the notebook and touch the cover, running my fingers over it, slowly, slowly. I gently tug at the notebook and pull it over the tabletop toward me. I am in a kind of desperation to see what is inside. As I start to open it, the inspector's hand stops me and takes it out of my grasp. "I am sorry," he says, not unkindly. "Property of the State."

There is an elusive fragrance in the air. "Will you tell me what is in the notebook?" I ask. "Is there a name inside?"

"Let me speak to you in a general, in an abstract sense," he says. "On the mainland, shall we say, in the regular course of things, certain individuals are detained. From time to time, unfortunately, due most often to circumstances beyond official control, said individuals may expire. This sometimes occurs quite early in the course of interrogation. But even then, of course, all related matters must be thoroughly investigated."

I bend my head low to the table top.

"I will tell you further," the inspector adds, "on a personal note, that the Front has treated you well. And that there are those who say your sort have no place in the new world we are creating. But the Front found a safe haven for you, remember that. A perfect place for those with your inclinations—a girl's school." He places the drawing and

notebook in a briefcase he has lifted from the floor and snaps the lock. "There could hardly be a better place for you, Assistente."

"The island," I say. My voice is no more than a whisper. "A perfect place. "

"You have a safe life, a secure life."

"I am alive, yes. But I cannot leave this place."

"That is true. You can never leave. It is better for you."

We have been told by our leaders that the old names for the months, derived from the language of a despotic empire, are no longer to be used. While we await the new nomenclature, we employ numbers to describe the months. Here on the island which I shall never leave, First-month and Second-month follow hard upon the season of frosts. At this time of year, winter storms roar in suddenly from across the wide sea and deliver snow to the hillsides and gullies. The rocks beneath grow very cold. Sometimes the wetness freezes in their veins. The resulting cracks show clearly when the season changes and the snow melts and the water rushes out to the sea.

Later, dust fills the cracks. In a summer season, wild oregano may grow within.

A TENTATIVE HISTORY

There are also scattered reports from this time [before the 1791 slave uprising], in the form of letters and travelers' accounts, which refer to a "sacred" waterfall in the Morne-Rouge district [of Haiti]. This is undoubtedly the very same Saut d'Eau described by Bloch in his remarkable 1840 monograph on the survival of certain African religious beliefs among the Haitian peasantry. Bloch however does not mention—and was perhaps quite unaware—that the waterfall site had attracted an earlier generation of devotees drawn from the very highest circles of [white] Haitian society. That certain members of this elite should have made the difficult journey to a remote part of the island on a religious pilgrimage is in itself surprising when one considers the extent to which Enlightenment thinking had by then [ca. 1780] penetrated the educated classes of the overseas territories; what is nothing short of astonishing are the persistent suggestions in the reports that hint at some element of the waterfall ritual which is "unspeakable" or "impossible to express."

—From *Mysticisme et Mystique*, Henri Busch, Paris, 1857, Éditions Hêtre. Translation and bracketed notes by the present author.

I.

In the year 1789, in the same month the Parisian mob was to storm the Bastille and set at liberty its seven remaining prisoners, a man and his son were travelling on horseback in the Morne-Rouge district of Saint-Domingue, at that time the richest colony in the world.

The upcountry area they were traversing was beyond the last region of cultivation, and there was no road to speed their journey. Progress was slow as they followed a rising valley formed by a small river of exquisitely cold water. The rough track they were on sometimes disappeared under steep banks, forcing them to dismount. The father would then carry the boy on his shoulders as he led the reluctant horses out into the fast-moving stream. The wet stones underneath caused him to lose his footing once or twice, but each time his son's weight was just enough to help him plant himself firmly before the two of them could be swept downstream past the horses. The boy was ten and small for his age.

The father's name was Jean-Baptiste Lesage, and he was a native of Finistère in the west of France. Born to a poor farming family in a village perched atop a rocky elevation near the coast, he had grown up hearing the continuous roar of the Atlantic breakers. Much of his youth he had spent looking out over the sea, and finally at the age of twenty he had sailed over it to the West Indies, where the tropical sun soon transformed his fair skin to a permanent brown. But he had married well and now grew cacao and sugarcane on land he owned free and clear, a thousand-arpent plantation in the hills seventy leagues northeast of the capital. His wife was a native of Saint-Domingue, and their union had been early blessed with two daughters, Gabrielle and Jeanne, and, much later, a son, Paul.

"Paul, look up there," he said, pointing. "We shall soon be resting with friends. Are you feeling well? Are you feeling the fatigue?"

"I am fine, Papa," answered the boy. "I feel well today."

The valley ahead widened and became more level, and in front of them the river was pouring over a field of rounded stones which channeled the water into countless tiny streams.

"Here begin the *hautes terres*, Paul, the lands that belong to no man. Or to every man." The father dismounted and began to lead both horses on a steep and narrow path up a slope which began at a marked tree by the riverbank. "Hold on, son. And Paul, these men are friends. Do not be concerned if you find some things to be strange."

"Yes, Papa," said the boy. He was shielding his eyes from the sunlight and looking at the river, where mist was drifting over the divided water.

II.

The house was at the top of the rise. It was small and lightly constructed, the airy rooms resting on a rough wooden foundation set atop flat river stones. The roof was of thatched jungle palm. The back veranda, where Paul was resting, gave to a sharp downward sweep of land which merged far below into a series of green ridges. It surprised him, to see how high they were. In the farthest distance, along the horizon, he could just make out hazy squares and rectangles, marks of the cultivated region.

"I boiled coffee for you." The African named Ildem was standing by him and laughing. He had white teeth, very large, set in a wide, smiling mouth. "There is corn mush, too. With milk. Will you not have some? Our milk is very good. Of the best."

Paul took the bowl of coffee from the man's hands. Ildem was employing the *tutoiement* with him, the familiar form of speech, and it was very strange and interesting. "Then you are raising cattle so high in the uplands?" he asked.

The African laughed again. "We raise many things," he said, "but not cattle. It is goat's milk, warm and good."

Paul drank the coffee and ate a few spoonfuls of mush. He lay down on a little bench of wood, still looking down into the wide distance. It was sideways now, and the ridges reminded him of the heavy curtains with many folds in his mother's room. Bird songs came to his ears, halting and tentative, of a melody he had never heard before, and the low churning sounds of rushing water. It was very pleasant. He was not much fatigued, and his lungs were fairly clear. But before long he slept.

Paul awoke to cool airs playing over his face. It was mild afternoon and then it was dark, the fast passage into night of the tropics. He was covered with a blanket. The

voices of his father and other men came to him from inside the house. He could smell tobacco being burnt. It was a good smell.

"And what news do you bring us from below?" came the accented voice of the German. Paul knew his name to be Rainer. The tobacco smell was very good. He was becoming sleepy again.

"I have sent it on to Paris," said his father. "At last it is finished. And Dr. Lunardini has given every assurance that he will place it with a publishing house. The news will spread, giving birth to our future brethren."

"Who are they, those who come after?" wondered the German. "We are living in times of change. It wants a steady heart to see the beginnings, and to see it through to the end. It wants a quiet world, away from the billow and roll of life below."

"But still—it will out," said Paul's father. "Our news will out. It will find its way into the quiet places, the quiet hearts. There are those, and always shall be, who will be open. Of this I have no doubt."

"Jean-Baptiste, the boy is not well," said Ildem.

"He is very fatigued from the journey." Paul could hear the scuffing sound of his father's boots changing position on the floor. "He has had the drooping fever. And his lungs are still weak from it. They fill with the water, at night. He must cough it out." The voice was low and Paul strained to hear. "The coughing is bad at times, and then there is blood. I fear he is not long for this world, my little son."

Paul wondered what other world he was going to and whether his father would come with him.

Ildem spoke: "You have had a difficult journey, but he will not die. The Sumari will feign surprise when they see him, but that is their joking method of smoothing the way to knowledge. They know already that the two of you have come. He is very young, too young most likely to understand what will happen, but at least his body can become whole again. You and he must go up to the top of the valley tomorrow."

Ildem employed the *tutoiement* with his father, too. It was indeed strange. "Tomorrow."

"I had hoped to rest here for another day."

"Tomorrow," said Ildem. "Do not delay. To the valley top. To the curtains of green hanging vine. *Te henai pito.*" The last words were repeated by his father and the others, as if in a chorus.

Ildem's voice was strong and carried above the other voices. "*Te henai pito,*" he said again, and the others chanted the phrase once more. Paul thought of the man's face, and the smile, and the white teeth. He slept and dreamed he heard his father's voice saying, "Yes, master." It was very strange.

III.

Statement by Paul Desaucerie, dated 14 October 1862. The original, which is actually the second part of a long letter from Desaucerie to Dr. Martin de la Grange of New Orleans, is in the Louisiana State University Rare Book Collection (Folio 24e, "With Relation to Haiti"), Hill Memorial Library, Baton Rouge. Translation by the present author.

I also wish to record here certain facts or events to which I was a witness in my youth. In the year 1789, shortly after my tenth birthday, my father took me on a journey. We left the capital and traveled north on horseback for several days. There was a small plantation at which my father was welcomed as an old friend and where we replenished our supplies. Leaving the horses, we entered a wild and high area on foot and after a

difficult time came to a marvelously cool waterfall at the end of a narrow valley. There were strange people living in the valley, neither of the African nor the European race. My father communicated with them in a complex language of signs and gestures that I did not understand.

The strange people gave us to eat, of small berry clusters in the shape of a pyramid. The taste was bitter but not unpleasant and left a tingling sensation in my mouth and throat. We then drank deeply of sweet water from a spring burbling up by the side of the waterfall. The valley people were watching us, but I was very fatigued from our journey and fell asleep. It seemed I slept for a long time, but then I awoke to find myself under the waterfall with my father. He spoke to me eagerly as the cool water poured down, wetting our bare necks and backs. He shouted and held me and even shook me strongly by the shoulders, but I could not understand the words, as they were uttered in a tongue unknown to me. And the noise of the falling water was loud.

This next is however very strange, Martin. It is difficult to express in language what I witnessed. The words I could not understand were visible to me in the air (Yes! Sounds assumed visual form in space, violating every principle of natural science), in colored shapes, in an exotic alphabet of light, as if a cloud of fireflies were coming out of my father's mouth. The words—the letters—they—were jumping away from him and sparkling against the dark jungle foliage, moving up and away toward the sun. The valley people, I became aware, were still observing us closely by the side of the waterfall. They were seated on the ground, holding luxuriant branches in front of their faces and watching us through the leaves. My father turned toward them and uttered three times the phrase *te henai pito*. They shook the branches and repeated the phrase in a kind of chant

or song. I experienced a kind of falling sensation which was extremely pleasurable. It seemed as if I were sinking deeper and deeper into the water, but I was somehow in my element and could breathe. I filled my lungs with the cool water and experienced a kind of glory in it. I sank for what seemed years, and stars and twinkling lights rushed upwards, past me toward the glassy sky I was dimly aware of through the water and above the towering valley walls.

The next thing I knew, I was becoming awake to the sound of the waterfall and it was morning. I was lying on a grassy spot, breathing air, covered with a blanket. My clothes were dry. The valley people had vanished, and my father was gathering the cut branches and burning them. He told me it had been too early for me and that we should come again in two years. He said that he had been too hopeful, too eager, and that I was not yet ready. I asked him about the water breathing. He seemed very pleased that I remembered it and said, "You have tasted the tip of the human essence, which is the same as the divine essence. Our long journey begins in water. But it is only the first step."

We descended the valley. At the small plantation we retrieved the horses. My father conferred with the planter and several Africans. These last seemed not to be slaves, but on an equal footing with my father's friend. I was puzzled to see my father embrace each one as we took our leave. As we started to ride away, he requested that I neither question him again nor tell anyone what I had seen or heard or experienced on our journey. "In two years you will understand," he said.

In about a week we were home again. Maman and Gabrielle and Jeanne my sisters asked me about many things in my father's absence, but I kept my word to him and maintained my silence.

At the small plantation one of the Africans—I cannot recall his name, only that he was a fine man with perfect white teeth—had given me a small green stone which he said had a strong power. He told me it came from the valley waterfall, which he called *te henai pito*, the same words my father had used.

My father died the next year when, on the way to France to attend to business matters, his ship foundered on the Breton coast. Around the same time I began to experience the night frights and melancholia which have plagued me ever since. My mother remarried in 1795. I took the surname of my adoptive father Peter Desaucerie. He accompanied me to Paris in 1798 where we sought medical help for my condition. Upon our return to Saint-Domingue, we were overtaken by the events of the insurrection before we could reach our plantation. To our great sorrow, my mother and sisters were lost in the chaos. We returned to find the capital in flames, but luckily were able to recover the safe box from our city home by pretending to be Spaniards in league with the infamous Dessalines. That same night we, along with several other refugees, were picked up by the warship *Le Guerrier* commanded by General Picard, who brought us safely to the Louisiana territory.

Before we left Port-au-Prince, I retrieved the stone from the place I had hidden it in the garden.

IV.

"What?" The voice of Madame Lesage could be heard throughout the second floor of the plantation house in the hills. "You went again to the mountains. That much we can try to understand, although it is very hard. You hid it from us, but we have found you out, devil. You laid a clever plan, but contrary to your expectations, you were seen

crossing the Taine River. You deny this? But I have it on good authority from friends, whose greetings you rudely chose to ignore. You may recall it. No? But they have written me of it. And I have the document there." She pointed a long finger toward the secrétaire. Her gown, of flimsy material, hung from her arm.

"Husband, we have never understood why you would leave us behind every summer and go to your wild country of snakes and poisonous flowers and bands of marauding Africans. Yet we tried to accept it, although we lost much of our crop some years due to your lack of oversight. But this time: this time *you took the boy!* Our little son, and so desperately ill. Oh, you monster, that I cannot understand, how you would dare to undertake such a risky adventure. I question at times whether you have any human feelings at all. Or better still: I question whether you belong to the human race."

"Julie, open your eyes," said Lesage. "And lower your voice! Look at Paul—is he not much improved? Listen to his chest—is it not clear as a bell? Has he had a single coughing spell these last six weeks? Have you not noticed? No more pink-speckled cloths in the morning! Dr. Lebrun himself pronounced it a miracle."

"And worst of all, you lied to us. And I will not lower my voice! Damn you! Damn you! Let everyone hear—let the world hear! My words will out!" She thrust open the heavy hanging draperies and pulled the window up. "Damn you!" A startled black face looked up from the garden.

"You cannot silence me, dirty Finistère *paysan*," she went on. "Are you forgetting who I am? I, a Marmontel! And now a miserable Lesage. Father cleaned the dirt off your face, and called you his son, and this is the thanks we get in return. You lied to us. You

claimed you were taking Paul to the capital, and then you slipped off into the wilderness with him."

"We did go to Port-au-Prince. And it was only when the specialists said there was little or no hope did I take the boy to the mountains. Julie, my dear Julie, I was desperate—I did not want to see Paul die. And I am at the end of my patience with you and your mad outbursts," he said, seizing her wrists. "Call me what you like, but not so everyone can hear." He raised his hand and slapped her hard to one cheek. "You married my dirty face, you picked me out of the crowd of your suitors, don't you forget." He pushed her toward a chair and then went to close the window and pull the draperies back together.

"Oh God." She sat down, touching the place he had struck her. "Yes, I married you. The heart has its reasons, which reason does not know."

"Speak for yourself. Do not throw the words of fanatics at me. If I am changed, it is only for the better. Look at me, Julie."

"No! You cannot command me. Once you could have. But no more. When you came back the first time, from the mountains, you were a different man. Even then, I might have given you a second chance, but you steeled your cunning heart against me and your daughters, you began to sleep in your study instead of sharing my bed . . . and worst of all, you began to spout your dangerous doctrine, your lunacy that would have us all slaughtered like pigs if you were allowed to spread it about. You even said strange prayers over our son's cradle."

"That last is a lie and you know it. I came down from the mountain and I said but one thing: I said that we are free—that man is free, if he only knew it. This truth is

indisputable. And I have experienced it, in the flesh of this body, and I know it to be true. The mark is now on my soul, and it cannot be extinguished. And so I came with my doctrine, as you call it, and I passed this truth on quietly, only to you and our friends. And you—you retreated to this room, where you have spent most of your days. You received me once or twice. You allowed us to resume our old intimacy only seldom. But I did not cause this. I only talked quietly to you."

"Your quiet talk put quivering fear into me. And into our friends, who considered you mad, and rightfully so. For only madmen utter such nonsense in Saint-Domingue. Go to Paris, Jean-Baptiste, and spout your wisdom to the rabble in the streets. Give them your scribblings, and if they can read, they may cheer you and hoist you upon their shoulders. But as long as you are on this island, be silent, if you have any feeling left for us, for me, Gabrielle, Jeanne, and Paul. Or for Father—well, no, I know how you hate him. But never forget this: there are twenty or more savage Africans on the island to every Frenchman. If you open your mouth to these slaves, if you tell them they are free, if you remove their chains and tell them your folly, your foolish doctrine, that they need not fear anymore the lash of the master's whip—do this, husband, and they will cut us in return. And we will feel it then most severely, in the flesh of our bodies."

V.

Madame Lesage pulled the cord to ring the downstairs summon-bell. She touched the side of her face. A minute later Gusep appeared in the doorway. "Yes, Madame."

"Is Paul at his lessons still?"

"Yes, Madame."

"Bring him here."

"Yes, Madame."

"What do you want with the boy? Leave him to his studies." Paul's father was still in his wife's room, sitting on a hard little couch. He was bent forward, both hands cradling his head.

Paul entered. "Good morning, Papa, are you ill?" Gusep waited in the doorway.

"Paul!" came his mother's voice. "Where did your father take you in the summer?"

"But you know of this, mother, we have talked of it before. We went first to the capital and then traveled to the mountains."

"What did you see there? What did you do?"

The boy frowned. "Mother, do not ask me. I have given my word."

"So will you have secrets from me? From the mother who almost bled to death when she bore you? Who would gratefully give her life for you? Who could not sleep when your cough came aching through the long nights? No? You are silent now? Then I shall reveal your secrets, for I know something of your father's doings. He has let things slip out, you see. Will you not tell me now, Paul? There is still time for forgiveness, for reconciliation."

"Mother, I have given my word."

"Very well then. The truth is this: your father meets a band of escaped slaves. He lives with them, he takes part in their barbaric rites. Is it not so? He dances around the bonfires with them, hand in hand, sucks strange flesh, prays to strange gods. Have you, too, learned the dance, Paul? And what have you eaten, in the upcountry, in the land of snakes and poisonous flowers? Satiated, drowsy, your father comes down from the

mountain, bearing his message on the golden tablets of his vaporous imagination. Is it not so? He preaches that these blacks, these *Africans*, are our brothers. *Brothers!*" She turned toward the doorway. "Do you know of this, Gusep?"

"No, Madame."

"Do you wish to be our equal? To dine with us, to drink our wines? To address us with *tu*?"

"No, Madame."

"Look, Paul!" She took him by the hand and led him in front of Gusep. "Look at the brute. It hears, but it does not feel. It cannot feel. It is an animal. Look at the eyes. Look at the fear in them. The idea that there is a God in heaven cannot penetrate this dark soul."

"Julie," said Paul's father, rising from the couch. "This, an animal? And yet—it speaks? It speaks! I tell you, this is a man! And he would be freed tomorrow if it were I and not your damnable father who owned him."

"I can only thank God he had the wisdom to retain control of the slaves when he gave you the land as the wedding gift," replied Madame Lesage. "He saw something dangerous in you from the beginning. It escaped me at first."

Paul looked at Gusep. His eyes were red and staring ahead. He was raising each bare foot in turn, as if the floor were burning.

VI.

Statement by Paul Desaucerie, dated 14 October 1862. This is the third and final part of the letter from Desaucerie to Dr. de la Grange of New Orleans. Translation by the present author.

My stepfather and I came to a New Orleans in a state of uproar caused by the news that our government was considering selling the Louisiana colony to the United States. This was depressing; we had been through turmoil and upheaval enough, we thought, to last us till the end of our mortal days. The mere mention of the word "revolution" was enough to make us sick.

In addition, the city presented an unappealing prospect. Crowded and hot, low and dirty, full of foreigners of every race and tongue, noisy, with rampant disease, New Orleans was such a contrast to what we remembered of the palmy days of Saint-Domingue, its capital of clean streets and white, shimmering buildings, and our cool plantation home in the uplands, that we wept copious tears at the thought of how fortune had cast us down.

But at least we were still clinging to life, and we praised the Creator for that. We were physically strong and in excellent health, and had been able to escape with a large enough portion of our fortune to assure us of a good start in the new land.

We who were alive awaited news of our loved ones left behind in the ravaged homeland with a kind of desperation. Strange and contradictory reports were trickling in by the day and week. Every docking ship from the West Indies was besieged by refugees like ourselves, hungry for news.

But we generally stayed away from the river banks due to certain misunderstandings which arose between us and the other refugees. Finally, in March 1804, we received an answer in response to an inquiry we had placed with certain friends in Paris who had informal connections to high government circles. Our poor mother, our poor wife; our sisters, our daughters, we learned, had perished along with hundreds of

other innocents in the gruesome massacre carried out along the banks of the Taine River in early May, 1802, about the same time my stepfather and I had been retreating to the capital. A calvary unit under Colonel Girard, one of the last to leave the island, had discovered and counted the bodies—the torsos actually—before being forced to withdraw under the onslaught of Dessalines' forces. A painful detail we had to face was that the women and children had been savagely dismembered, their heads and limbs thrown into the river as a warning to the French forces downstream. We could only pray that our loved ones had been dead before their mutilation.

Our fate was settled. We could not return to Saint-Domingue, and the desire of settling in France, which might have been appealing under different circumstances, was tempered by the troubled conditions under the leadership of Bonaparte, who had by now lost our island homeland, sold the Louisiana colony, and was at present leading the armies of the nation across the frontiers of Europe into an unknown and chaotic future. We wanted a quiet place, where we could dwell in peace and tranquillity for the rest of our days.

We purchased horses and began to make weekly forays from the city into the surrounding countryside in search of good, well-drained land upon which to build a house. Although there were a few scattered settlements here and there, the land was for the most part of vast solitudes, wild and untouched by the hand of man, a strange world to those of us familiar with the careful cultivation and large humanity of the arable regions of Saint-Domingue. On the positive side, the land here was generally level and abundant in water. However, the few roads were hardly distinguishable from rough paths; they were difficult for horses and impossible for wagons. Flatboats and canoes were the most efficient modes of transport. The land gave every sign of great fertility, but

we detected many signs of ill health among the populace owing, we thought, to the swamp miasmas and excessive seasonal heat of the region.

Near a town better regulated than many, we discovered one afternoon near nightfall a high and wide hillock which seemed ideal for our purpose. We reckoned the site to be about 25 or 30 leagues to the southwest of New Orleans.

We camped on the flat summit, which was covered in thick fragrant grass, and were pleased by the cool airs we found as well as the lack of biting insects which had heretofore plagued us terribly. But it wasn't until the next morning, when I went to a nearby stream for water and happened to look at the hillock from the east, that I made a tremendous discovery that hit me with the force of a shock: the form or shape was familiar to me. I stared and stared and puzzled over this for some time before coming to the realization that the stone from the valley waterfall, the stone given to me in my boyhood by the African, was the same shape and color as the hill in front of me.

I took out the stone—I carried it always in a little leather pouch around my neck--and confirmed my discovery. It was positively uncanny. Even some grooves and other tiny imperfections on my stone were matched by similar features on a grander scale on the magical hill. The entire thing shook me in a way I find difficult to describe. It was simply confounding to what I thought I understood of science and natural law. I felt I was standing at the edge of a wide and unknown sea, straining to see into a distance which superceded rationality, eager to plumb its secrets and mysteries. I felt torn away from my usual cares, thrown back to the time I had traveled to the valley of the strange people with the father of my blood. A conviction, like a tiny seed dropped into fertile soil, began to grow in me. I saw with hope and clarity what my life's work might be.

You see, Martin, to that day I had kept my word to my true father and never breathed a word of what had happened at the valley waterfall. Now, I believed, the discovery of the stone-shaped hill was a sign releasing me from that promise. I wanted to tell my stepfather everything, hopeful that he would understand and help me to learn more about the waterfall, about my true father, about what we had been doing there that distant summer day when I was only a boy of ten.

I brought the water bucket to the hillock, almost trembling and slopping water over the edge in my excitement. My stepfather was trimming some branches for our morning kindling, and I said, "Father, this is the place." He dropped his knife and embraced me. It was rare that I called him "Father."

As we breakfasted, I told him the story of my boyhood visit to the waterfall. He was astounded and at first very skeptical about various details of my account, but when I took him down the hillock and asked him to compare it to the shape and color of the stone, I could see his doubts beginning to crumble. Gradually I won him over, and as I did, my own conviction that the entire thing was not a delusion grew stronger, since now another soul was beginning to believe in it, too.

And now, as it happened, my stepfather had his own surprises to reveal to me. He had always known, he told me—it had been common knowledge in their circle, in fact—that my father made it a custom to journey alone every year or two into the northern mountains of Saint-Domingue. But my story of the waterfall was a revelation to him, since my father had been very reticent about these expeditions, saying only that he was "hunting." But he would return each time with little game or none. My mother suffered these absences in silence, but once, years after my father's death, she told my stepfather

that my father's personality had changed from the year 1780, the first year he had gone into the mountains; she didn't know what had happened, but whatever it was, it had "ruined" him.

There was more. Shortly after his marriage to my mother, my stepfather had found a small portfolio containing various papers in my father's writing desk. My mother had glanced through it and asked him to burn it. He thought he had complied, but apparently he had not, for only the month before in New Orleans he had come across the portfolio when examining the set of documents (mainly land titles and papers relating to his own family history) he had carried out of Saint-Domingue on our escape.

Thus, there was much to think over for both of us as we explored the land around the hillock for the better part of a day and then rode into the nearby settlement, called New Toulouse. It was inhabited for the most part by the descendants of refugees from the Canadian exodus. There were also a number of French settlers (the town was founded by a Monsieur Depardieux of Toulouse) and a few Germans and Americans as well. We were impressed by the industry and cleverness of the inhabitants, who had ingeniously employed shells brought from a nearby lake to make raised roadways enclosed by wooden frames and flanked by ditches. Even in a heavy rain the water ran off quickly, and there was none of the mud and foul odor we had come to associate with New Orleans.

We located a lively fellow named Etienne Harquier, a lawyer born in the town but whose French was excellent, and persuaded him to act as our agent. He seemed impressed enough when we displayed our letters of credit from various New Orleans banks, but when we told him the tract of land we were interested in, he gave away his

feelings with a look of astonishment he apparently could not conceal. At first we were inclined to suspect that he was a true actor worthy of the stage and that this was but a sharp business tactic to raise the price we were to pay (and thus his commission). In the end, though, it turned out that we were deceived only by our own suspicions. Harquier's surprise had been unfeigned.

Martin, you know the much of the rest of the story. How my stepfather and I bought the land from the Indian named Bright Leaf, the last of his race. How we built our house upon its flat little summit. How we tried without success to reassemble my true father's papers (you will remember this well since in later years I queried you on several points regarding these "fragmentary memoirs" as we called them) into a coherent manuscript.

But this was in vain. There were only many scattered notations, citations from wise men of ages past, and diary entries on loose paper, all of which was in a jumbled state. Most frustrating of all was a note dated 1790 which stated that his manuscript was now complete and that he was readying himself for the voyage to France.

The realization that his work had perished with him prompted me—and I have never before told you of this—to attempt two times to return once more to the waterfall of my youth. In 1810 I traveled to Santo Domingo shortly after Spanish rule was restored in the eastern part of the island. My original plan was to hire a boat to take me to the northern coast near Cap-Haitien from whence I proposed to strike south across the mountains. But the Spanish authorities put a quick stop to my undertaking. In the end I hired three black cane cutters and paid them good money—half in advance—to seek out

the waterfall. One eventually returned with the dispiriting news that there were no strange people in the valley and that the waterfall had been reduced to a mere trickle.

I later wondered, however, if he had found the right place. For my sense of the location depended on memories over twenty years old. And the rivers that come down from the mountains are numerous.

And so once again, in 1829, years after the death of Peter Desaucerie my stepfather, I obtained Spanish travel documents in La Habana and on May 2 stepped onto the streets of Port-au-Prince for the first time in twenty-seven years.

I was extremely depressed by the conditions I found there, especially after visiting the site of our old city home. Nevertheless, I hired wagons and drivers and prepared for the long journey to the north. After two days of difficult travel, however, we began to hear reports of disorders in the district we were approaching, and my drivers insisted on turning back. I spent another month waiting in Port-au-Prince for conditions to settle before giving up and returning to Louisiana.

I came to believe that I was not meant to return to the waterfall. It was a bitter blow, made worse by the knowledge that my father's manuscript was lost to the world forever. My scientific experiments at least diverted my mind in the following years in this house on the hill. But now my peace is shattered as cruel civil war has begun too in these United States.

Two days ago, in a tree near the spot from where I first espied the remarkable shape of the hill, I found hanging the corpses of three young men. It was the smell that led me to them, and it was the smell too, that has almost deranged me, as it brought back

in vivid detail the scenes I witnessed as a young man as my stepfather and I approached the capital in the final days of the insurrection.

And so, curiously, I feel I am being driven back into my past one more time. I must leave this place, and I have nowhere to go but home. Last year, as you know, France and Haiti normalized relations. I obtained before the outbreak of the current hostilities a French passport with the proper endorsements. I know the Federal troops have occupied New Orleans and blockaded the river, but as a foreign national I feel confident that I shall be able to pass through the lines and escape one last time.

You will say I am mad, that I am far too old for this venture. True, but I have made my decision. My body is strong in spite of its eighty-three years. I am almost trembling with excitement. This time, I am confident, I will reach the waterfall. I wish you could accompany me, as you have in so many things, but it is of course impossible.

I shall not see you in the City, so this is farewell. You have been a true friend and a great help to all of us. I trust you will follow my instructions to burn the first part of this letter. The rest is of no consequence other than putting the final seal on our friendship.

Paul

VII.

It is an autumn evening, late in the year 1862. An old man sits musing on the veranda of a house set on the summit of a flat little hillock. He peers out into the distance, but his vision carries only as far as the forests which cover the level land below. Now and then, the glow of a firefly appears briefly in the darkness between branches and then vanishes.

The man is thinking of fire, for he has been burning old papers through the afternoon. Again and again, sitting on a little wooden bench on his veranda, he reads the contents of one last curling yellow page. The handwriting is small and crabbed. He must hold the paper close to the candle:

June 18 1780. Many new specimens inc. a thorny tree I believe never before described. But reaching to remove a leaf I fell into the mountain river & almost drowned. Plucked out by an African before the water filled my lungs. He took me up to a settlement at the head of the river beside a shining waterfall.

June 19. Ildem speaks the language of the River People. I had him explain my search for plants unknown to science. There is an unusual shrub with berry clusters. Ildem says they call the clusters "te" when green but "pito" when ripe.

Pito also means "God" in their tongue.

June 22. There have been many astonishments. I will not commit them to the page at present. I have been told other Europeans know of this place.

The old man allows the candle flame to ignite the paper and watches as the wind blows it into flaming fragments which spark off in pieces as they float down the hill.

VIII.

Everywhere around me—in every place I look—I see men and women, white, black, red, yellow—in chains, some visible, some concealed. I want to seize them and shake them, to shout in their faces, "Do you not know that with one word, you too can be free? These chains are as nothing! Nothing! See how lightly they fall away, how soundlessly, with one sparkling breath, as they did with me!"

—From *Une Tentative d'Histoire Vraie du Monde (An Attempt at a True History of the World)*, unpublished manuscript by Jean-Baptiste Lesage, now in the eighteenth century collection of the Musée national des Arts et Metiers, Paris, France. Translation by the present author. The last five words are underlined so strongly in the manuscript that the paper has been cut through.

THE VIOLENT LAND

The express to Rome was pulling out of Palermo Station only ten minutes late, and this unexpected brush with punctuality was throwing his usual travel routine off kilter. No time, this time, for the customary stopover in the crowded station bar for a coffee and a listen to the rolling hubbub of voices in Italian and Sicilian and all points between. None of the usual kiosk browsing today, the leisurely inspection of magazine pages in search of something interesting to while away the empty travel hours that lay ahead. Instead, upon making out the single phrase *parte per Roma sul binario otto* in a ragged loudspeaker communiqué, he picked up his bag and started a mad, skipping weave through the ice cream and sandwich vendors on platform eight. Flinging open the door of the last wagon, he heaved himself in just as the train's crawl lurched into a faster pace. A half-buttoned station official, silver whistle bouncing against his exposed undershirt, gave him an ironic salute as the long line of wagons edged out of the station. It passed through a tangle of houses and crumbling buildings so close to the tracks he could have leaned out and touched a wall or rotten windowsill. Here the railway line forced a narrow passage through the old city, laying bare the effects of time and neglect on ancient stone for every passenger to see. He had been advised to avoid the area at night.

Markus leaned against the corridor window and listened to his quick breaths. Under his coat, tie, and shirt he could already feel the clinging dampness. He flexed the muscles of his legs and wiped his forehead with a coatsleeve. When, he wondered, would he be able to get under the hot water of a shower and feel again clean? His recently shined shoes were now carrying a fine powdering of Palermo dust.

A shudder passed through the accelerating train as it rounded a long curve and entered the industrial zone to the east of the city. The space on both sides of the tracks was wider here. Markus glimpsed a bearded watchman napping on a narrow strip of afternoon shade. The landscape gradually became more like countryside, and the train began to pass grove after grove of dark-leaved lemon trees.

He could see through open curtains into the compartment opposite his position in the corridor. An old man was pressing both hands together by the fingertips and making a series of graceful downward motions to emphasize whatever point it was he was making. Opposite him a girl of sixteen or seventeen was listening, now looking at the old man, now laughing, now shading her eyes and peering out the window. She turned and glanced once or twice at Markus in the corridor.

The girl was dressed in jeans and a large baggy sweater. She sat easily on the large seat with her socked feet drawn up beside her, shoes resting on the compartment floor. She shaded her eyes again and looked out the window like a sailor reading the waves and clouds.

The blue waters of the Gulf of Palermo were now visible, flashing here and there white on the sunlit waves. Markus pulled open the compartment door and entered. The old man said something to him that he didn't understand, so he simply nodded and wished everyone a good afternoon. The girl put her legs down and slid her feet into her shoes. Markus pushed his bag in the one empty place on the overhead rack and sat by the door on the old man's side. The girl turned toward him with a smile, leaning slightly in his direction.

"Grandfather was telling me," she said in Italian, "that you used to be able to see the Roman amphitheater at Solumno from here, but now that the mafiosi have built their villas, the view is blocked." A high wall appeared to one side, its apparent backward motion not fast enough to blur the sight of jagged fragments of glass embedded in the top.

The old man muttered something harsh and almost unintelligible, gesticulating now with a fist pounding into his other hand. One or two words Markus could make out. "Damned mafia," the old man was saying. "Our Solumno! Not theirs!" The malediction seemed to end with something about spiders or a spider's web, Markus wasn't sure. Then the old man said something else to the girl, still in dialect, a long and quieter speech this time. She frowned and crossed and uncrossed her arms, shaking her head and looking at Markus. Her eyes, green and flecked with tiny points of gold, were set off by the healthy brown complexion of her face. Markus had noticed other eyes like hers since his arrival in Sicily.

"I hope it isn't possible," she said to Markus. "No, it can't be right. He says one of the big villas over there, behind the wall, it was built with stones stolen from the amphitheater and the land around it. Everybody was paid off to keep quiet. The owner, he's one of the chief mafiosi, he has a room like a museum filled with ancient statues plundered in nighttime diggings. Grandfather says he brags about it in Palermo, knowing no one will touch him for it. But still—no, no, I don't think it's possible, such a thing. Maybe twenty years ago. Then, the bosses could do anything. But not now, not now. Times have changed."

The old man raised one eyebrow and looked at Markus with a small, confident smile as if they were sharing a secret only that men could understand.

"I wanted to go there," Markus said. "I was working in Bagheria. I'd always dreamed of seeing the famous ruins of Solumno. Who hasn't? What Italian child does not learn of Solumno in school?"

"Solumno," said the old man with reverence. "Our Solumno." His voice was quieter now. Was he a fisherman? He was a stocky fellow with thick fingers and white hair clipped short. "How I loved that spot of land." He was speaking Italian now, slowly and clearly. Better than a fisherman would be able to.

"The name is probably Greek," Markus said. "Although it does not sound so."

"Solumno was Greek?" the girl asked.

"The name," Markus said. "Perhaps it does not mean *soil*, as we were taught. You see, a temple to Selene once stood on that promontory, known in the ancient world from the Lebanon to the Gibraltar Strait. When Rome was nothing but a wretched huddle of villages along the Tiber.

"Selene?" the girl said.

"Selene," Markus replied. "Goddess of the moon, of the hunt, of wild animals. When Greek was the language of this island. Plato was here, probably visited Solumno, did you know that?"

"It was Greek, of course, the island," the old man said. "About Plato, though, that's just speculation."

"Grandpa was a teacher," the girl said. "And he can't leave his pedagogy behind in the classroom. A history teacher for forty years."

"Yes?" Markus said. "History? Well, see what you think of this. When I was in Bagheria, I walked up the hill to Solumno. Imagine my excitement." As he spoke, he pressed his hands together and moved them down and up and down again in the way he had seen the Sicilians do it. "In fact, that's one of the reasons I am here. The historical interest. The antiquity. But the main gate was locked. I shook it and shook it and finally a guard came shuffling up. He gave me a look as if no one had been there in years."

"Probably no one had," the old man said. "The site has been sealed off for a long time."

"They say the restoration money ended up in the wrong hands," the girl said.

"And for once, what they say is true," the old man said.

"Yes," said Markus. "But on that day, when I asked where to buy the ticket, he—the guard—looked at me as if I were a drooling idiot. So I walked up that steep hillside, along the fence, holding on to it for support, looking in. Everything was quiet. Much of the area was covered in plastic sheeting. In other places, plants were growing up between the old stones. It was warm on the hill, and bees were buzzing among the wild flowers. Then the guard appeared again, on the inside of the fence, huffing and puffing, and told me it was illegal to stand there, even though I was outside the perimeter."

"See, Claudia, it's true," the old man said. "Your grandmother and I picnicked on those stones fifty years ago. Now they have dug their looting holes and built a wall around their dirty secrets. Damned mafiosi. They spin a web that touches everything with poison. Crespucci is the name of the villain who plundered the ruins and bragged of it in Palermo."

"Grandpa, don't say the name!"

"I don't care, I'm sick of knuckling under to bastards like Crespucci and taking my hat off in respect to the so-called men of honor. You're just a girl, Claudia, too young to understand what goes on in this damned world. Nothing ever changes. They're bastards and sons of bitches, damned mafiosi, every damned one of them." He got up with surprising speed, opened the compartment door, and shouted into the corridor, "Crespucci is the one! The son of a bitch! His mother walked the streets of Castelvetro!"

He slid the door shut and took his seat, shooting a triumphant look at the girl. She turned her face to the window. With a humming and snorting sound, the old man fumbled in his pocket and withdrew a crumpled red handkerchief that he applied to his face. He turned to Markus. "I'm sorry for my outburst. Excuse my emotion. But you, sir—you are not from here, are you?"

"No, I am Piemontese. The cold and distant north," he joked. "Actually, from a town just outside Torino."

"Torino, a wonderful city. So stately, so well managed," the old man said. He slowly wiped his face. "I was there many years ago. And I guessed you were a Northerner from the accent. So you are now visiting Sicily? The South? You are making the grand tour? Splendid. There are other places of great interest. Segesta, Selinunte. You must absolutely see Selinunte. That goes without saying. I am sure of course you know that name too comes from the Greek." He paused, rubbed his hair. "Wild celery. It still grows there, among the ruins. But you mentioned work."

"Yes, I live here now. I came to Palermo almost five months ago."

At this, the girl turned and reentered the conversation: "You see, Grandfather, things *have* changed. Your generation went north for work; now they come to us. Things are changing all the time. You're wrong, Grandfather, very wrong."

"Not so wrong, Claudia," the old man said. "Not so very wrong. Unfortunately."

The girl turned to Markus. "And how do you like Palermo?" she asked.

"Oh, it's—wonderful! Lively." It was what all the Northerners said when they weren't among themselves. Better not to mention that it was the most chaotic place he had ever seen. Even so, he found himself drawn to the warmth, the freewheeling life, the emotions. "But mainly I'm interested in antiquities. In history, as I said. I spend as much time as possible out of Palermo, in the countryside."

"And you are by profession?"

"An English teacher."

"A teacher. Just like Grandfather," the girl said. "But of languages."

"Yes, something like that. Of one language, to be sure. And currently employed by the Commission for Educational Progress. They call me a consultant. With local colleagues, I give training courses for high school teachers of English."

"God knows they need them," said the old man. "And for that you were in Bagheria? One of these courses you work at? And went to—tried to go—to Solumno?"

"Yes. Most of my work is in Sicily. In the cities. Smaller places too, Enna, Ragusa. And sometimes on the mainland. But sometimes I wonder how I can be a trainer of teachers. Me, only five years out of university."

"And where are you off to today?" the girl asked. "Messina? Or are you going to Rome, like us?"

"No, I'll be on this train only as far as Reggio. I'm meeting a colleague in Pescara."

"Pescarna?" she said. "I don't think I know the name."

The old man squinted and turned his neck several times until it popped. The handkerchief lay half open on his lap. "I know it. Pescara. I passed there. I know the town. A mountain place, high above Reggio. I almost froze there one winter's night." He began to rub his knees. "I came through Calabria on foot in 1944, the long march home at war's end. These two legs carried me up and down every hill and ridge. Imagine, it took two months to get from Naples to Palermo. And today we cover the same distance in seven hours." The old man looked out the window for a moment and turned again to Markus, peering closely at his face. He took Markus's hand, gripping it warmly.

"See here, sir," he said, "you must be very cautious. I worry for you. These Calabrians, they have no honor or shame. They will never be good citizens. They are not honest men. They robbed me more than once, until I had nothing more to be robbed of. And then they robbed me again. Be alert, and don't believe a word they say. They are like hungry animals."

"Grandpa!"

"It's true, Claudia. You see how naive she is?" he asked Markus and added something, half in dialect, that seemed to be about a soft fruit being punched or squeezed. She reddened and shook her head.

"No!" she said. "That's ugly and I refuse to accept it. And I don't like it when you talk like that." Her eyes were tearing up.

The old man shrugged and turned again to the window. He watched the sea in silence, making a low snorting sound from time to time. Then he opened the handkerchief completely, leaned back, and covered his face with it. The girl found a book in her bag and began to read.

The old man dozed, woke briefly when the train stopped at Termini Imerese, and slept again. Markus looked between the travelers through the window at the sea. He could see farther now, to where the water was dark, almost blending into the sky. He had met Luisa Valcone of Pescarna at the orientation session the previous January in Rome. A cold, vivid Roman day under Roman skies, the sun bringing out the peculiar oranges of the old buildings. A group of high school English teachers from the South had come up to meet with him to discuss ideas for the courses they were to organize and he to visit as a "consultant." He hated that word. All of the teachers he lectured to were older than he.

Luisa's face had been pale. Melancholy. She was about forty-five, he guessed. Erect. Somber. Thin. And her manner of dress was somewhat subdued and darkly formal compared to that of her colleagues. At first glance he had been reminded of the traditional widow of southern Italian folklore, wrapped tightly in mourning black until the end of her days. But then he saw the elegant cut of the clothing and the graceful way Luisa carried herself.

She had struck Markus as serious and professional, listening closely and looking at him from a chair at the side of the room as he described his ideas for the courses. Almost alone among the trainers, she had taken notes. She would wet her pencil in her mouth before leaning over to write something in a large agenda book. Markus had almost

worried about the sharp point. She hadn't joined the rest of the group for a drink and then dinner the evening of the meeting.

At odd moments over the past four months, a suggestion of her face or the tip of the pencil on her tongue had appeared to him. At some point he realized that his image of her was mixed in his consciousness with the memory of a funeral portrait he had seen in the museum at Palermo. The eyebrows and the shape of the curling hair around the forehead were identical. And the woman in the portrait—a widow, apparently—held a stylus and papyrus.

Then one day a note came in the mail—she had no telephone—requesting that he come to Pescarna to visit her course for a Saturday morning session. That weekend he had wanted to keep free, but in the end he decided to go. He was required in any case to visit every course twice. And the only way to decline in time was to send an expensive telegram.

He opened his eyes. His fellow travelers seemed to be asleep. On the day of orientation in Rome he had spoken briefly to Luisa as the afternoon session broke up. While the others were leaving the room, scattering to their hotels or a nearby café, she had lingered by the window, putting papers in her briefcase and looking out across the rooftops. He asked what she was looking at and she replied there was a greenness in the Roman sky at dusk that she had never noticed before, certainly not in Calabria. He stood beside her, peering out across the city. She picked up her briefcase and he noticed a thin gold bracelet slipping out from under her sleeve onto the wrist above her ringless hand. She smiled at him and rubbed the window with her palm as if to see better. Then she was gone.

The vibration of the moving train was lulling, as were the soft voices that were audible from somewhere in the corridor and the very faint fragrances of tobacco smoke and perfume that were subtly penetrating the compartment. He wondered where they were coming from. Something about the perfume and his mind made a gentle leap. He began to doze. An image of a group of women or girls, their backs to him, presented itself to his mind off guard. They were in white gowns, dancing, wisps of flowering grass braided into their hair. They were doing something with their hands, but he couldn't see, the grass was drifting, floating, growing upwards and opening, curling over their heads. Now they were dancing. There was a strange antique quality, a jerkiness. They were singing foreign syllables . . . He slept.

"Messina, Messina." He was clearly aware of where he was, without the perception of change from sleeping to waking. Claudia's book, a cheap *fotoromanzo*, was lying open on the seat beside her. She was now awake and looking out at the station platforms. Her grandfather was gone. The train stopped and started with a jerk. It became darker and he knew—it wasn't the first time he had traveled by train to the mainland—that the train had been divided and was now being shifted onto rails that lined the cavernous bottom of the ferryboat. They would cross the Strait of Messina, and on the Calabrian side the train would emerge from below and roll on mainland tracks into Reggio Station, where he would say good-bye and take a taxi for Pescarna.

A series of rumbles was followed by a whining noise and a continual low-pitched vibration. The ferry was starting to move. The old man entered the compartment, wiping his face with the red handkerchief. "Go on up," he said to Markus and Claudia.

"I'll stay here with the baggage in case the thieves are out. Bring your jacket, Claudia, it's getting cold."

"Have you crossed the Strait before?" Claudia asked. They were standing at the front of the boat along an upper-deck rail. The wind was a freezing blast, directly in their faces. It surprised him, this Sicilian coldness in the midst of Mediterranean spring.

"Yes, but never at sunset." He had to raise his voice against the wind. "Usually I take the sleeper to Rome, and it's dark when we cross so I just stay in my bunk. But this is beautiful." Behind them, lines of piled-up gray clouds touched with orange on the undersides stretched back over Sicily. He pulled shut the front of his coat. "You know, Claudia, I love the way you talk. You're a real Palermitana, aren't you?"

She looked embarrassed. "I have to hide my accent in Rome. Otherwise they laugh at me."

They moved to the side where a tarpaulin-covered lifeboat offered some shelter from the wind. Leaning over the ship's rail, Claudia pointed to oddly shaped patterns of foam-capped water swirling around. "The Strait is so narrow," she said, "and the land presses in from both sides. Terrible currents form, whirlpools, waterspouts. Sometimes the level of sea in one area drops suddenly and huge walls of water are formed to the outside which then crash down toward the center. The why of it is a mystery."

"And ships, large ones even, have disappeared without a trace, gone forever," Markus said. "Ferry boats, too."

"Ferry boats?" Claudia smiled. "Are you making fun of me? Well, it has happened! And not just in the days of Odysseus." She took a deep breath. "But in those times," she began to intone in a low, pseudo-dramatic voice, "monsters lurked along the

shore, waiting to scoop unfortunate sailors out of ships. Sailors who lingered dangerously, to hear the siren songs of the beautiful ones." She turned round and round in a kind of dance, pressing her jacketed arms tightly against her body. She was turning by him, so close he could smell her. Or was it something in the Calabrian wind? Her hair was being blown back towards Sicily. "Come to me, come to me, my darlings dearly longed for," she sang with a laugh. "Stay with me, stay with me forever, dear hearts," she continued, loud in the face of the wind that carried off the syllables.

As the song ended she became motionless and, gazing at the Calabrian shore, began to hum a cheerful song that was popular that year. He thought of the *fotoromanzo*. "What will you do in Rome?" he asked finally.

"Oh, we go every year, and it will be no different this time. My mother is Roman; we stay with an aunt of mine who finds Grandpa amusing. He visits the museums and complains about the weather and his aching bones. I go shopping with my cousins. To cafés. To the theater."

The boat began to slow as it approached the mainland and came to rest with a shudder against a row of smooth bare tires nailed to the pier. Along the shore, the lights of Reggio sparkled like jewels in a faint smokiness. Hills, their darkness broken here and there by small glowing areas, rose behind and above the city.

The taxi driver had to pull over twice to ask for directions. Finally he stopped in the middle of a bumpy street and pointed to a narrow set of steps rising in the dark between two buildings. "Viale Franconi is up there," he said. "But this is as close as we

get by car, my friend. Go up the steps until you find a small piazza. The building to the left should be the Palazzo Valcone."

"The Palazzo?"

"Yes, friend, that is what I was told. I am from Reggio; I know nothing of this town. Will you be wanting a receipt?"

Markus ascended, slowly at first. His eyes soon adjusted to the dark and he stopped feeling for each step with his feet. To the left, an open gutter carried a stream of water that gurgled and fizzed. He reached the piazza, a dimly illuminated space with a representation of something—he couldn't tell what—in the fountain gushing water from its upturned mouth. He turned around to see how far he had come up. The bottom of the steps was not visible, but far below he could see the city lights of Reggio. They merged into a sheen that ended in a long curve of darkness which marked, he realized, the beginning of the water.

Pescarna was perched so high above the city that it seemed to him for a second to be hanging in the air. It was as if he were looking straight down, and it made him dizzy and uncomfortable. The smooth pavement felt slippery under his shoes. There was a sensation of being constrained, pushed in or even down, by the dark wet stone that hemmed him in on three sides. He followed the instructions of the taxi driver, clutching his bag and walking slowly across the piazza until he found himself in front of a small wooden door that had no suggestion at all of the palatial. He pushed the button for the bell and heard nothing. But the door opened almost at once.

"Luisa?" For a moment, the sight of red lips threw him off balance. He remembered no makeup at all from before.

"Good evening, Markus," she said in a slow, even voice. "Consultant Markus is very punctual." He noted the lack of southern accent and wondered why he hadn't noticed it before. Luisa extended her hand and he took it briefly in his. Her grip was feather light.

"I almost wasn't punctual," he said. "I had to run to catch the train in Palermo Station."

"But you are here now, and I welcome you. Come in, come with me."

He followed her through a vestibule, up a staircase and down a long corridor, noting how loosely her apron was tied in the back. They passed a living room whose furniture lay under the protection of plastic dust covers. There were glass cabinets and shelves holding knick knacks and bric-a-brac that he barely glimpsed.

She walked at a steady pace, leading him up more stairs and down another long corridor, this one lined on one side in cardboard packing boxes piled two to three high. "I apologize," she said over her shoulder, "for the clutter." From behind, Markus watched the single strand of pearls touching the back of her neck and a small run in her hose that exposed the skin beneath.

In the kitchen, he was told to sit at a table hidden under a clean white cloth. Atop the fabric, two places were set in heavy china and silverware for dinner. From his position, he could see into the adjoining dining room, where an enormous brown mahogany table was surrounded by chairs whose high backs were carved in ornate twists and scrolls. The dining room struck him as very old fashioned, like a museum display or a scene from a nineteenth-century novel.

"I hope you don't mind the informality," Luisa said as she attended to something on the stove. He turned his gaze from the table and chairs and looked at her. "We shall eat here in the kitchen," she said. "The dining room is no longer in use."

"Oh, I much prefer this."

"I have heard," she said, "that other teachers take you to restaurants. But Pescarna has none. So tonight, you must accept my hospitality."

"I'm happy to do so. The continual eating out, the traveling—I can't tell you how tired of it I am."

"We could have met somewhere in Reggio and dined there. But it would have been late, and I dislike driving the mountain road in the dark. I thought you would want to be rested for the course tomorrow. And you are staying tonight at the pensione. I made the reservation. Did you see it on the piazza?"

"No." This was the first he had heard of where he was to sleep for the night. The host teachers always made the arrangements.

Luisa stopped as if she were trying to think of what to say. Then she turned back to the stove and started to ladle something into a large white bowl. "My colleagues are so looking forward to your visit."

She approached the table with the first course. "I have a little surprise for you, I thought perhaps you sometimes miss the Northern food." Her pale hands trembled a little as she set the bowl upon the table.

It was polenta. "It looks wonderful, Luisa." She started to remove her apron but had some trouble unfastening it and gave up. He wondered if he should offer to help.

Sitting across from Markus, Luisa filled his glasses with water and red wine. "To your visit," she said and drank. "Yes, and to a successful meeting," she continued and took another sip of wine. "Markus." He raised his wine glass and drank and began to eat the polenta. It was good, but the sauce was a little off. The wine was excellent.

"The taxi driver said this was Palazzo Valcone."

"Yes, that's what they call it. But these apartments are hardly a palace. Most of the place has been closed up since I was a girl. Since before I was a girl."

"But the building has been in your family long?"

"Since the fifteenth century, I've been told. My family has been in Pescarna, Reggio, forever. Even our name is not Italian, though it sounds like it."

"Is it Greek then?"

"Greek, Siculi—who knows? It is only a name."

"And you are here alone?"

"I am the only one left. There is a sister, who emigrated."

"So you grew up here, and became an English teacher?"

"Yes, I wanted something to do. A place outside these walls, a different sort of place. English I learned from a governess. I enjoy the contact with the children."

The second course was Calabrian, a kind of fish stew in wine sauce with capers and a soft and somewhat bitter herb he couldn't identify.

"It's very good," he said.

"I'm so glad. I worked on it today. I don't often cook for two." She lowered her eyes and sipped her wine.

"And where is your sister?"

"My sister?"

"Yes, the one who emigrated."

"Oh. New Zealand."

"Do you hear from her often?"

"No. She left a long time ago. She wanted to get far away." Luisa took another sip of her wine, a longer one this time. Color was coming into her face. "There is no place farther, as I understand." She finished her glass and reached for the carafe.

A sitting room at the end of yet another corridor was where they took their after-dinner coffee. Two armchairs faced a large window from which, Luisa was saying, much of eastern Sicily could be seen on a clear day. Now a large floor lamp illuminated the room and threw a glare at the top of the window.

Markus ran his fingers lightly over a pattern in the chenille armchair covering and tried to find Luisa's reflection in the window. If it was there, the glare was blotting it out. He glanced at her profile. Was she looking for his reflection as well? He regarded her head and neck, thinking about the museum in Palermo.

He asked about the venue of the next day's training session and the topics to be covered. His questions answered, they became silent. He looked again toward the window.

"I well remember," Luisa said suddenly, "sitting here as a girl with my father, late into a spring night such as this one, watching Etna erupt. Yes, just at this time of the year, on this very date, perhaps. A little after the almond-blossom time."

"It must have been impressive. I've always wanted to see an eruption. The forces inside the earth rising. To the lips of the volcano."

"To the lips, yes. It is . . . tremendous. A vision of . . . simply magnificent."

"But Etna is far from here, isn't it? "

"About seventy-five kilometers, as the blackbird flies."

"Incredible," he said.

"On that night, the light from the glowing lava was reflected in the clouds, turning them orange and red." As she spoke, Luisa continued to look straight ahead, facing the window. "Looking up toward the sky, I had the upside-down sensation that the fiery clouds were becoming a kind of turbulent land, the foundation of the earth. They engulfed the moon, turning, moving, quivering. The violence seemed to me the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. I wanted to fly up there." She paused, looked at her coffee cup, and shook the remaining liquid a bit. "I was just a girl then." She drank off the rest. "I don't exactly know why I'm telling you all of this."

Markus was taking his coat off, draping it carefully over the back of the armchair. "Please go on."

"It is the wine," she said. "Or . . . I cannot tell you how much I have looked forward to your visit. I cannot hide it. I feel a kinship to you Northerners." Luisa's faint smile was strange. "As I was saying, at the time of the eruption, my father opened the window and leaned out, the better to see, he said. I came out of my trance and became uneasy—from here it's a twenty-meter drop to the piazza stones. The top of Etna was flaming, lapping at the sky and tearing open the fabric of cloud. I was in fear for the moon, which I loved. I asked Father to shut the window, for I could hear the volcano growling. *Papa*, I said, *I cannot tolerate that sound.*"

"The volcano was growling?" asked Markus. "You could hear it from seventy-five kilometers?"

"Yes. From seventy-five kilometers. As clear as the sound of your voice now. Father ignored my request and asked me with a laugh if I could smell the sulfur, too. I begged him again to shut the window, for the sound of Etna was becoming even more unbearable. There was a rough scraping, a horrid dry sound. Black plates of cooling lava were rubbing over each other in quickening movements."

She rested her empty coffee cup in the palm of one hand and turned it back and forth with the other. "Father finally did shut the window. But I could still hear the growling. Even after he shut the window, I could hear it. And the glass is double-paned." She stared into her empty cup.

There was a silence between them.

"And—?" Markus said finally.

"And what?"

"Did you tell him about it?"

"About what?"

"About the sound."

"No." She paused. "He wouldn't have understood." She began to toy with her coffee spoon and suddenly leaned toward Markus. "Would you have understood?" There was a soft *ping ping* as the spoon tapped against the cup. "Would you have understood, Markus?"

He got up and went to the window, wondering what flaming Etna must have looked like, but there was nothing but the reflection of the floor lamp glaring in the glass

and now, from this angle, Luisa's face ghostly to the side. He returned to his seat. She was leaning back in her armchair, studying him. She had placed her coffee cup on the floor. He looked at her in silence, interested but apprehensive.

"Am I not like a worm in my chair?" she asked finally. "They can never become butterflies, you know."

Markus wasn't sure he had understood correctly. Luisa's eyebrows were black and thick, darker than her hair, which was pulled back in a purple ribbon. Her slender neck was very pale, its lack of color accentuated by her dark dress and the stray curls which dangled past her temples. On one, a blue vein was lightly pulsing. She is beautiful, he thought. And older than me. Much older. In this old house.

He waited, listening to the tick of a clock he couldn't see. It seemed to be slowly winding down, the intervals between ticks growing almost imperceptibly longer. He adjusted his chair, hesitated, reached across the space between them, touched her hand. The fingers were so well formed, and the nails too. Shaped, he wondered, by one thousand years of arranged marriage among the upper class?

"Luisa," he said, not looking up, "may I?" He continued to look at her hand and gently stroked the nails one by one. They seemed smooth at first but somehow slowed his fingers with a subtle frictional touch. She turned her head and he was aware of the movement of hanging hair. "May I?" he repeated.

She didn't answer at first and he raised his head. She was looking past him toward the window, her lips open, her breathing deep. As he bent toward her, his coat slipped off the back of the armchair and fell to the floor. Her mouth tasted strange. Just as his tongue reached hers, he felt a convulsion run through her body.

"Markus." She pushed him away, shaking her head and wiping her mouth with the palm of one hand. "Markus, in my bedroom, on the nightstand, is a . . . book." She was still looking past him. "Try to understand me. You cannot see it, perhaps, even if you go in there, but believe me, it is present in the bedroom just as surely as Etna rises over Sicily. And if you open the book, you will find, here and there, pages that were torn by my father, who was an overzealous reader. This happened when I was a girl. But every night, when I go to bed, I still read a little in the book. It was his favorite, although I still, at the age of forty-four, find it puzzling and obscure. I read a little, and I see the torn pages. They were mended with tape, which is now becoming brittle with age." She paused, still looking at the window.

"Yes?" he said.

"In certain places, the tears can no longer be seen through the yellowing tape. But they are there. I sense them just as clearly as I sense the growling of that terrible volcano. And that is why I cannot remove the tape. For then, dear Markus, the pages would fall apart."

She stood, went forward, pressed her face against the window pane. "Can you hear it?" she said. "Can you hear it, Markus?" Her breath fogged the glass near her mouth. "The cooling magma is the source of the intolerable scraping, I know it now. Do you hear it too?" She was kissing the glass. "Dear Markus?"

He rose, stood close beside her at the window, and touched the cool, wet glass. Gently, gently he moved his hand to Luisa's waist. "Let me help you," he said. "I can hear it, too. I can try to hear it."

She turned her head toward him and he saw that her lipstick was smeared in a streak across one cheek. She moved her face closer to his. But at the last second she leaned to his ear and ran her warm tongue over it. He shivered involuntarily as she whispered, "The fish you ate was riddled by worms, didn't you know?" She pushed him away with a hard thrust of her arms. "Get out of here," she said. "You are all alike, all of you dirty drooling ones. Through every generation. Get out of here, or I will hurt you. You are filthy now, full of worms." She pulled her lips back, exposing small white teeth. "I have hurt you, have I not?"

"Luisa," he said, stepping back.

"My teeth are sharp," she said. "Next time, I will cut you deeper."

Markus found his way to the kitchen, where the dinner's dirty dishes were soaking in the sink. There were specks of green suspended in the oily surface of the water. He picked up his bag and went once more to the lighted room at the end of the corridor. "Luisa?" he said. "Luisa, believe me. You are wrong. Let me get help for you. Let me call for a doctor."

"It is not a doctor that I need," came her reply.

She was now in the armchair he had occupied, hunched up and cradling something in her arms. "Luisa?" he said again. He couldn't see her face.

"There is no course for you to visit to visit tomorrow," came the voice from the chair. "I will inform the others. Good-bye."

Markus returned to the kitchen and passed through the corridors and descended the stairs. He stepped out through the small wooden door. It had begun to rain. He

touched the wet side of the Palazzo Valcone, backed into the piazza, and looked up. Twenty meters above, the window was dark.

He went farther out into the night, letting the rain run over his face and soak his shirt. It was cold, and he shivered. He realized he was coatless and stopped and turned and then gave up and walked again, following the gurgling water down. He paused where it collected in a basin of stone and kneeled and washed his face and mouth. He spat, rinsed, and swallowed. Then he filled his mouth with water again.

STANDING LIBERTY

The parking lot was dark around the edges. Closer in, abandoned shopping carts, their black wheels twisted at odd angles, rested scattershot on the warm concrete. Late-night shoppers clasped large brown paper bags like shields, pushing their way through the obstacle course to the haven of their cars.

Inside the supermarket it was bright and cool. Muzak was leaking down from behind fluorescent lights and into the office, a raised platform wrapped in four wire-reinforced glass walls. In it were implements of accounting, dirty coffee cups and ash trays heaped with cigarette debris, locked drawers, a safe, various posted messages and warnings from the management, and a telephone with the number of the Highland Road police station taped below the rotary dial.

Behind the wire-reinforced walls were two employees. One was working, head down, nodding occasionally or murmuring *uh huh*. The other was talking: "So see, Al, then our butcher friend Rob comes roaring out from behind the meat counter, looking like a maniac with that bloody apron of his on, just flying through the store. Customers see him coming and duck for cover. And you know how he hates shoplifters. I mean, other than hacking meat, it's his life's work, catching them. And so then, on this particular occasion, the trenchcoat dude is just out the door when boom! Rob tackles him from behind. Steaks, pork chops, a big slab of ribs, you name it, it all comes tumbling out onto the pavement. Tony rushes out and pins the guy down. Can you picture the scene?"

"Uh huh."

"Meanwhile, and get this: Rob pulls out a camera—I mean, the guy is prepared—and he arranges the meat in front of Trenchcoat Man. Tony still has him pinned. This

was before they made him manager, but he was just as mean as he is now. Trenchcoat is a little shook up from Rob's tackle, he's woozy, and it's no fun either having Tony's knee in his back, pressing hard. There's a little bloody trickle on his head, but he's blinking, twisting his head around, trying to figure out what the fuck hit him. Rob is about to start snapping away, he wants a good picture—I guess you've seen his little collection back there—but anyway, you know what he says first?"

"What did he say," Al said, not looking up, running a stack of checks. He knew what the punchline was going to be.

" 'Cheese!' " A hoarse, jumpy kind of laugh—the high pitch was surprising given his size—came out of Ray, and the sheer raucous delight of it was enough to turn a few of the remaining heads in the check-out lines. The cashiers, keying in prices or glancing up to eye the clock, didn't react to the noise.

Ray was big, a tall man in short sleeves with forearms splotched with fading tattoos or birthmarks, it wasn't clear which. He had a thick mustache that touched his lower lip when his jaw wasn't working and an oversized key ring hanging impressively from a heavy chain attached to his belt, which was the kind favored by bikers. His nametag identified him as an assistant manager and expressed his commitment to customer satisfaction. "The motherfucker says 'Cheese!' Jesus, he's one of a kind."

Al pulled the printout from the adding machine and wrapped it around the checks. "I wish I had been there, Ray," he said. "I really do."

Ray stopped laughing and squeezed Al's shoulder, motioning with his chin toward a man waiting just outside the office.

"See what the guy wants, Al." Ray rolled his swivel chair toward the back of the office, where he had his cigarettes on the counter.

Al finished putting the checks and a tight bundle of cash in the deposit bag. "Say Ray, can you double-check the slip?" he said and walked over to the little customer window, trying to tug straight his tie, which was twisting under a light gray sweater. It was Jackson, an occasional customer whose social security checks Al would cash as long as Tony wasn't around. "Can I help you?" he asked. Jackson was as tall as Ray, but from Al's elevated position they were eye to eye.

"Now look what your old friend Jackson have for you tonight!" Al noticed tiny beads of sweat on the man's upper lip. Then, through the narrow confines of the window, he watched as two large and slightly trembling brown hands fumbled with a wrinkled paper bag. Jackson's eyes, under lids which drooped noticeably, were deeply bloodshot. A complex odor of stale liquor and tobacco was in the air, as well as an old house smell which seemed to come from Jackson's clothes. He was squeezed up tight against the window.

"I want some paper for this," Jackson whispered hoarsely. "Give us some *bills*, chief." He removed an old cigar box from the bag and held it up so Al could see it through the glass. He shook it and there was a heavy clinking noise. It sounded like a lot of counting work.

"It better not be just pennies. We're about to close," Al said as Jackson pushed the box through the slot. He received it with both hands and thumbed open the lid.

There were no pennies. It was all silver, and old looking, too. Dimes, a few half-dollars, lots of quarters. Al poked around in it, turning some coins over to look at the dates.

Ray came up and let out a very light whistle. He nudged Al aside and leaned toward the window. "You wanted to change this? No problem, sir."

They worked quickly, sorting and stacking the coins on the part of the counter invisible from the floor. Jackson stood rocking back and forth and glancing around, looking into the store and then back toward the front entrance. He suddenly crumpled the bag into his big fists and passed it through the slot. "Chief, you want to get rid of that for me? You can keep the box, too." He stuck his hands deep in his pockets and looked behind him.

It came to \$110, give or take a few dollars. They had counted it in record time. Ray pulled Al toward the back of the office. "How much cash you got on you?" he asked.

"Nowhere near that much."

"OK. We'll pay your friend here from the office till. There's not enough in the petty cash. I'll make it up first thing in the morning."

"Aren't you going to write out a slip for it?" Al asked. One of the notes taped to the wall specified this policy and warned of dire consequences for infractions.

"No, I'm opening, so I'll just put the money back first thing before Sharon notices we're short in here and goes into one of her classic panic attacks." Sharon was the head cashier and counted the office down early every weekday morning. "Then you bring me what—\$55—when you come in at noon."

"Are you sure that'll be OK?" Al asked.

"Trust me, buddy, trust me. And I can handle Sharon if she slips in here early."

Ray opened the drawer and looked up. "Two fifties and a ten, OK?" Jackson nodded and Ray took the money out, holding it low. He folded the bills over once and, expertly concealing them in his palm, transferred them through the window where they disappeared into Jackson's waiting hand. Al glanced over at the row of cash registers. A couple of last-minute stragglers were still checking out. Maria, the new cashier, had no one in her line and was looking toward the office. Al nodded at her and she raised her chin and lifted her eyebrows in reaction. He wondered what she was thinking. She had been looking right at him.

When he turned back Jackson was gone, off into the night. Ray was evening up the little stacks of silver coins and spreading them into two groups. "I'm doing you a favor by splitting it fifty-fifty," he said. "If this had been Tony's night to close, you wouldn't be getting a dime. Not a red fucking dime, man."

"You know, Ray, he's not really a friend of mine."

"Tony doesn't have any friends. I thought you knew that."

"No, I mean Jackson."

"Oh, the coin man? Who just waltzes in here at closing time? Who knows just where to come with the nice hot stuff he picks up over East Boulevard way? Just an acquaintance, huh? And here I was thinking you two were big buddies, the way you always cash his checks."

Ray pushed some of the coins toward Al's section of the counter. "You got something to put them in?"

"I got this cigar box."

"Well, Al, I really don't think we should hang on to that. It might not be such a red-hot idea. No, this little item is bound for the incinerator." Ray picked the box up, turning it in his hands. "And too bad, it's like an antique, huh?" There was an embossed picture in fine colored detail which showed men working in lush green fields fringed with palms. In the foreground, a planter on horseback, dressed elegantly in white, gestured with a cigar as black as his long riding boots.

Ray scraped his share over the counter and into his pockets. "You'd better do the same Al, let's get these coins out of sight, man. Look, I'll go burn this thing now. It's high time we started to get the hell out of here." He uncrumpled Jackson's paper bag and stuffed the cigar box inside it. Al was touching his coins, turning them over, looking at the dates. "Come on, Al, let's get this show on the road!"

Al lightly brushed the stacks of coins into his palms and filled his pockets with them. Lucky he had his baggy work pants on. He went to close down the registers, wondering if anyone else could hear the faint sound of clinking. He felt weighted down as he moved from register to register, a strange sense of incipient powerlessness.

After making the registers spit out their final readouts, he carried the heavy stack of tills back to the office and counted them down. Everyone was even or close to even except Maria, who was exactly \$20 short. He paused and then balanced her till with the last twenty from the petty cash box. He looked out at the little group of cashiers, milling around by the office. They were talking about a shoplifter, one that Ray had caught earlier that evening, caught red-handed at the door, a box of painkiller medicine in his shirt pocket. *You got a receipt for this, you sorry little mother? Now you're really gonna*

have a headache. Ray had grabbed him by the collar, roughly. Then almost choking him with a strong brown forearm. *Hey, Al, we got us another one. Make the call.*

"That kid looked young."

"Boy, he was scared too."

"They held him in the back till the police came."

"Ray better be careful, though. Someday he's gonna grab hold of some guy with a knife in his pocket."

Maria was standing a little apart from the others, just listening. Her dark eyes regarded her colleagues seriously. Al finished and pushed the register sheets through the window. "OK, go ahead and sign and punch out now. Be careful. See you tomorrow."

Ray was back from the incinerator. "I got the rear doors locked and bolted. That box is now smoke, drifting over the worst neighborhood in town. Here's our little nightcap, Al, our reward for a hard night's work." He put two cans of beer in separate paper bags and zipped them into his backpack. Al opened the safe and locked up the deposit bag and all of the office cash. He watched the cashiers filing out the front door. Ray was straightening things up on the counter, wiping quickly and lightly over the bare places. "One thing I can't stand at 7:00 in the morning is to hear Sharon griping to me about the mess in here. It's bad enough any time. But at 7:00 in the morning!" He threw the rag in the trash.

"You ready?" asked Al.

"Ready, set, go. Time to do the minute waltz." They had exactly sixty seconds to get outside and lock the doors before the alarm would go off, summoning a police car or

two and an hour or more of trouble, including phone calls to Tony—usually drunk by then—and the security company. Al keyed the code box and they hurried out of the office, moving fast.

Outside, Ray quickly locked the doors and shook them twice, hard. "Al, we are almost home free. But would you look at this shit? Damn." They still had to push the scattered shopping carts into some semblance of order. "Damn them all to hell. What happened to Herb and them? Always left for us to do, huh? They must have been smoking their fucking reefer again."

Ray slammed cart after cart into the back of a snaking line extending from the locked front entrance. Al pulled off his sweater and rounded up a few more distant carts, rolling them in Ray's direction. The ones out in the dark edges he left for others to worry about.

Of the vehicles left in the lot, all but one looked like they hadn't been in motion for months or years. Ray's was the exception, parked under a security light, clean and gleaming. He took out the bagged beers and handed Al his. They drained them quickly and sent the empties clattering across the deserted lot. It was a ritual every time they closed together.

"Hop in and I'll run you home."

"Ah, it's OK."

"Don't get mugged, Al. Don't let yourself get mugged, man." Ray unlocked the truck, got in, and rolled down the window. He leaned his head out. "You have increased in value tonight. You have become desirable. But only from a mugger's point of view." His laughter was drowned by the sound of the starting motor.

Al watched him drive off and then cut across the lot, homeward bound at last. It wasn't really such a bad neighborhood. Still, you had to keep an eye open sometimes. He walked north along Highland Road, thumbs hooking his belt, keeping his heavy pants up. He remembered a bungled holdup he'd witnessed a month or so before. Some guy had raced out from a convenience store, the one he was passing just now, waving a little gun and carrying a bag in the other hand. Suddenly police cars were pulling up from all directions and there was a pop! pop! pop! and everyone on his side of the street was hitting the ground or ducking behind cars. The next day he heard from the store clerk that the guy had been shot in the chest. *He expected to live though. Graze the heart.* In his little bag, fifty or sixty dollars. The gun had been a plastic toy.

He got to his street and turned up it. Actually it wasn't even really a street. East Iris Lane was more like a wide pot-holed path with an occasional scattering of gravel in the dips. Cars were infrequent here, but occasionally one could be seen bumping cautiously over the rough spots.

Al passed a row of identical little boxy wooden houses, each with a small screened-in porch in front. Once they had been fairly nice, he supposed. When had they been built—in the twenties? It would have been a pretty neighborhood then, quiet and almost out in the country. Nice houses, smelling of fresh paint. With owners who took care of them. Wisteria bushes in front. People sitting around on the porches on warm summer evenings, social beings, neighborly conversation, everyone drinking iced tea from tall glasses, brushing off the occasional bug which penetrated their sanctuary. Renters like him occupied these houses now, and the whole row had a look of quiet sagging desolation, which in darkness was accentuated by the artificial glare of the single

streetlight halfway down. And then there was the encroaching city hooking in from all directions. Little pockets of the past were being swallowed up by new apartment complexes, gas stations, convenience stores. By supermarkets like the one he worked in. Even at this hour he could hear the city rumbling. He could almost feel it in the ground.

He arrived at the last house in the row and tried the screen door on the porch, but it was latched, so he walked by the garden on the side in the warm darkness. Somehow he managed to find his loose house key—it was the only one he carried and he had no chain for it—in the jangling mass of pocketed coins. He let himself in the back door and paused for a second, breathing in the familiar old house smell, the musty fragrance of wood, of carpet and books. He listened. Everything was quiet, and he felt along the wall for the light.

For a long time that night he kept thinking it was time to go to bed, but instead remained seated at the kitchen table. Finally a birdsong, soft and throaty, stirred him out of half-sleep as he realized that morning was not far away. He stood and stretched and switched off the light. As his eyes adjusted to the hazy dawn glow coming in the windows, he started to make out the coins arrayed over the tabletop. What had he been dreaming of? There had been something, something of great import, but he couldn't bring it back.

Sitting down again, he felt a stirring of renewing interest, even excitement. He let his tired eyes wander over the coins once more. They were slowly gaining in clarity, but just now a kind of gauzy luminosity played over their stately and elegant designs. The sober and serious coinage of a bygone age.

These dim forms assumed a new and special beauty in the soft morning light. He

picked one up at random and brought it closer to his face. A Standing Liberty quarter. *IN GOD WE TRUST*. The date had been pretty much rubbed out by time and use, but it looked like 1929. Half a century back.

That was probably a good year. The roaring twenties. Jazz music. This house had stood then, he was sure. And maybe this very coin had passed through these same rooms before, shiny and new, in the pocket of someone his own age. Thirty years old and born in another century. The father of a family, a man whose life was invested with meaning, who had carried it in his pocket for a day, had given it to his child, or had spent it to buy milk. A sober, serious working man, with honest job and loving wife. And a child, a daughter perhaps, lightly stamped in his image, a child who would look up at him with dark, wondering eyes and say *Daddy, why?*

Or had the coin been used to buy whiskey? For a party? A party roaring with jazz music and laughter and dancing feet pounding the wooden floors? In Baton Rouge? Up the river, why not?

Above the fading date, Standing Liberty's form was clear, like a Greek goddess wrapped in soft silvery cloth. Her gaze was lifting toward some distant horizon as she raised her shield. *LIBERTY*. How had she ended up in the cigar box? How long had she rested undisturbed until Jackson rooted her out from some secret place? Maybe there were other hoards of coins in other old boxes, hidden away and forgotten in the walls or under the floorboards of these wooden houses. He studied the coin again. There was a grace about the form of the figure, a sense of integrity, that seemed to him like a sign of light. A beacon. But leading toward what?

He heard a creaking noise and a soft coughing and his wife came in, wrapped in her gray robe, her face troubled with sleep. "Alan, you never came to bed." It wasn't cold but she was dressed for it. She was accompanied, as always, by her black lab Champ.

"Look what I've got, Linda. Have you seen this kind of quarter before?"

Linda walked to the table and bent over it to look at the coins, clutching the folds of her robe and letting her breath out long and slowly. Her lips were pale. They almost matched the color—or rather the noncolor—of her hair. "Where'd you get them?"

"They call this one Standing Liberty. Can you read the date? It's the year your daddy was born." Champ was nosing around the door, eager to get out into the morning.

Linda took the coin and examined it. "It's the year the stock market crashed," she said and handed it back. "Where'd you get them?" she said again, rubbing her dog's ears.

"Don't tell me someone paid for groceries with all of these."

"No, they were just cashed in for paper money."

"Cashed in? Who cashed them in?"

"This guy Jackson. Acquaintance of mine. You don't know him."

"How much did you pay?"

"Face value. He just wanted paper money."

"For these? He's a fool then. They're worth more than that."

"Yeah, I know. But he was in a hurry."

"In a hurry to get rid of them?"

"He was gone almost before we paid him."

"You and Ray."

"Yeah."

"So this is only half."

"This is about half, right."

"Half your *take*." Linda turned away from the table toward Champ and squatted so he could lick her hands.

Al was in no mood to start an argument to last half the morning. He got up with a weary sigh and started looking around the kitchen for something to put the coins in. Sure, he could have turned Jackson down. Sure, he could have said no to the heavy eyes and large trembling hands. But it was hard to do with people you always greeted and talked with. And the coins were so beautiful, little antique symbols of grace and light.

He found a clean fruitcake can and carefully cleared the table of the coins. Linda was standing at the sink squeezing out a rag. Her bare feet looked bony and white on the floor. He sniffed the fingers of his hands. "Here," she said. "Wipe the table, Alan. And wash your hands, too. I'm going to get dressed and take Champ out." Al sniffed his fingers again. Old, worn, beautiful silver coins. He took the steaming rag and slowly wiped the cool tabletop. Then he squeezed it out and put it back and washed his hands at the sink, using detergent and warm water. Running off his hands, the water looked just a little green.

Linda reappeared wearing shorts and a t-shirt. She picked up Champ's leash and started to open the door, but then paused and came back. "Alan, I just worry sometimes," she said. She had an Iowa accent that no longer sounded exotic. "I didn't mean to make you upset. But all the stuff that goes on. You know what I mean. I wish your job was somewhere else. I wish we lived somewhere else."

"I like my job. I like this place." He had lived on East Iris before the marriage too, when he was still in graduate school. Linda had been his student in Intro to Sociology, just out of high school, alone on the big campus, in the big city. Sometimes, even now, in her smile, he would catch a glimpse of what had attracted him in the first place to the quiet girl in the second row who was so faithful in her office hour visits. Before her "pregnancy." Before his dismissal from the department. They had called it a resignation just to be nice. The Sociology Department people had all been very nice about the whole thing. The chair had been almost fatherly, concerned about his future, making small innocuous jokes, even talking about case studies and "real" life. But in the end he'd had to sign the paper.

"I know, sweetie, but I just worry," said Linda. "You know, all the strange people around. And that shoot-out thing at Pak-A-Sak last month." She caressed his ears. "If someone comes in the store with a gun, just *give* them the money. Give them all they want. Just don't let anybody steal my AI away from me." She laughed a little. "I know I'm silly. But you knew what you were getting into. Didn't you, AI?" She kissed him and started for the door. "And what if the police come and ask about those coins?" she asked, turning back. "I don't want to talk to the police. I don't like the police." She looked genuinely nervous.

"Don't worry, Linda. Everything's OK. Everything will be OK," he said, with a little more emphasis than was necessary. He remembered saying the same thing when she called him at the supermarket—he'd gone to work there in a kind of desperation, his academic career in tatters—his wife of two weeks had called him from the doctor's to say the pregnancy was a false one. That there would, in fact, never be a pregnancy.

"I love you, Al. I mean it."

"I love you, too," he said softly, wondering if he should make coffee or just take a nap.

Later, dozing on the sofa, he put his hands over his eyes to shield them from the morning light, which was rising to his face and starting to glare. Under the soapy fragrance, there was still a hint of old coins. It stuck. A tarnished silver smell. *His take.*

That afternoon he happened to take his break at the same time as Maria. He poured himself a bitter black coffee and then watched as she put a cigarette between her red lips and lit it. From the way she handled it, he guessed she hadn't been a smoker for long.

"Don't you smoke?" she asked.

"Well, sometimes." He took one and brought it up close to his face, enjoying the rich and complex tobacco fragrance before leaning over to let her light it. "Thanks. It's a pleasure because I don't do it often. It gives me a buzz."

"A buzz?" There was the faintest hint of an accent. He had noticed it before. But her English was good.

"Like, I feel a sharpness," said Al. "A happy feeling comes up. I think of when I was a kid. You know, all the good times."

"You smoked then?"

"No, it's just a feeling. Like . . . happiness. A kid's happy feeling. I sometimes wish I could bring it all back. You know what I mean?"

"I think, yes." She put out her cigarette, a little clumsily. She hadn't really learned how to do it yet. Her hands looked good. Soft looking, neat rounded nails, not the usual rough cashier's hands. Nice, well-shaped fingers. Her skin a light brown, a golden color. Olive. Why did they call it that? She was looking at him, attentive, smiling. "And by the way, thanks for last night."

"Last night?"

"I think . . . I think I mess up. I was, I . . . maybe I was not giving attention and someone got too many change. I was off, wasn't I?"

"It's OK," Al said. "It happens. It happened to you once before. Once or twice."

"I need this job, you know?"

"It happens. Nobody's perfect. Everybody makes mistakes. I should know that better than anybody."

"Always when you're in the office, Al. Never with Sharon. I sometimes wonder why." Her gaze lingered another moment and then broke away from his face.

Al's eyes followed hers. "Like I said, you don't have to worry. Everybody comes up short sometimes—or is over. It balances out in the end. Just as long as you're not too far off—or off too often."

"Off too often? It sounds like a poem." She looked at him again and stood and moved a little closer. "As, the sounds are dancing, you know?" Her hand brushed his shoulder with the lightest of touches. "Well, Al, they are waiting for me up front. Felicia wants to take her break." She brushed her hair back with both hands and went to the door.

Al liked the even rhythm of her words and the way *Felicia* sounded in her mouth. He tilted the cup back and started to swallow the last of the coffee. Outside the break room there was a brief murmur of conversation and Ray came in. "Good to the last drop?" he asked.

"More like bitter and burnt."

"It sure cooks long enough back here. But say, Al. You got something for me?"

Al put the cigarette in his mouth and slid forward so he could get his wallet out.

"Sharon cashed me a check." He handed Ray his \$55.

"She did? That's not normal operating procedure." The smoke was getting in Al's eyes, stinging them.

"I know. But, man, she's in a good mood today," Al said.

"Oh I noticed, pardner. Did I ever notice. Wonder what *she* was up to last night?" Ray folded the bills over and buttoned them into his shirt pocket. "Say, did you look over your haul yet? My brother-in-law checked mine out. There's nothing really rare though. But the silver is worth something. I didn't know those old coins had so much in them. Mike says I can get four to one for them. Four times face value. At some kind of metal shop he knows about. He's gonna take care of it for me. Not bad for a night's work."

"But Ray, they'll just be melted down then."

"So what, man? A bunch of old coins. What else are they good for? That's over two hundred dollars, cash in the pocket. Your friend Jackson is a big fucking fool." Ray smiled. "But what a fool! He may be a fool, but he's our fool, Al. Tell him to drop by again next time he finds a nice old cigar box. Just come on down . . . *Ray's Coins and Curios* . . . yeah, we take your silver, take your gold, we melt 'em and we smelt 'em, no

questions asked, and good money too! For us, that is. You get face value, you sorry little mothers. But service with a smile. Fast, smiling service. That's our motto. Yes sir, *we aims to please.*" He tapped his tag and then shaped a gun with his fingers and pretended to pull the trigger. "Bang bang," he said and smiled again.

"Ray, you're dangerous."

"With me the danger zone is never far away. Which reminds me. Sharon says someone's been in the petty cash again, and it sure as hell wasn't Ray your friendly assistant manager."

"Yeah, well Maria was \$20 short again last night."

"Listen, Al, we keep that shit for a purpose, and it ain't for you to cover for every two-bit cashier who palms a twenty. Come on, calm down now. You know me and you are buddies, I got Tony to put you in the office, didn't I?"

"Yeah, why'd you do that, Ray?"

"Because you're the only one we trust. From the first day I thought you had a nice honest face. Even if you are kind of slow. Cashiers like your pretty face, too. You're an educated man, an honest man. You're good for the company image, up in the cage, on display. You're rare, exotic, like the panda in the zoo. And I'll let you in on a little secret. Even Sharon has a good word for you from time to time. And that, my friend, is an amazing thing."

"So you really think Maria stole the twenty?"

"Come on, bud. We trust you, but let's not make the feeling mutual to everyone in the dump. Never—and I repeat—never believe a cashier. Especially a female. Next time it'll be fifty. Take my word for it, she'll up the ante. See how far she can push you."

I mean just think, she did her growing up on the streets of some South American hellhole, and this place must look like heavenly paradise to her. Especially with your shining face beaming down at her from the cage."

"Heavenly paradise?"

"Yeah, and just think how sweet a twenty-dollar bill must look to our Latin ghetto girl. That's fat cash, man, smells like money. But listen, Al, seriously, next time the little . . . next time little what's-her-name shows up short on the sheet—and this is from Tony as well as me—she's out of here for good. And if I'm in a bad mood that night: well, you might just have to *make the call*."

That night Ray drank two beers by his truck and Al walked Maria home. "You need to be extra careful, Maria. Ray said if you're short again you'll be fired."

"Oh, so that's why you asked where do I live?"

Al couldn't see her face well as they walked along the dark street. "I just wanted to tell you they're watching you. If it happens again, I can't balance it with office money or they'll notice. I could take it from my own wallet, I guess."

"I don't want to take the money from *you*, Al. That store has lots of money. And haven't you never seen Mr. Tony take out big bags of things? All the time. And he never pays." She was looking up at him, but he still couldn't see her face well. He had a strange feeling of uncertainty. Was it really Maria the cashier he was walking with? In the dark she almost seemed to be someone else.

"It's just . . . you can't do it again, Maria. They'll catch you, and you'll be in trouble. Ray might tell me to call the police. I can't cover for you again."

"Cover me? You won't have to do that, Al. Never again." She hooked her arm through his. "Al, you never took nothing that wasn't yours?"

He didn't answer.

"In this world," Maria continued, "is there even one honest person? In this world, I think, we have to take what we can get." Their shoulders were touching, rubbing even.

Then his hand brushed hers, and stayed, and Maria began gently stroking his fingers and pulling her rounded nails across his palm. It was very slow at first. "Al, look, we're here. 226 Carlotta Street, Apartment B. Don't you want to come in for a little?" She turned on a light in her key chain and unlocked the door. "Come in. Enter."

"Well—"

"Enter. Come."

He followed her through the doorway into the dark kitchen. She switched on the light and went back around him toward the door. He stood still and could hear the deadbolt sliding shut. The kitchen was clean and he smelled the fragrance of some spice he didn't know. He turned, and she was coming up him, serious, business-like, pushing her hair back with both hands.

Later they lay side by side in her room at the back, one of her legs brushing lightly against his. When they touched, it felt hot, but a hint of a fresh breeze was beginning to stir the air outside the open window, and it felt cool on his skin. He still had the odd sensation of not knowing exactly who he was with. In the semi-darkness her face was different. It reminded him of someone, but he couldn't remember who. He was tired, his eyes were heavy. What if he fell asleep here? The thought merged into a feeling of escape, a rushing feeling, a running into a vague dream, a movement toward a

landscape of tall dark trees on hills, of mists and foghorns, the crying call of a gull, a distant, flickering light.

Just as his dream began to pour in on him, the sound of Maria's voice brought him back. "You are thinking, Al, I am running away or something. That I am illegal. This is what the others, they say, but no, this is not true. See, we had a hard life in Chilanguera, but it wasn't a bad life. There were good times for me, too, when I was a kid. But after I was fifteen, I am always wanting the something different. I don't want to stay there and get married and wash the floors every day and the walls every week. I don't want to wait every night with my babies for my husband to come home. I wanted the something else. I didn't know what, but I wanted somehow . . . I wanted a place where *anything* can happen. Where I can live in possibility. And why I come to this country? Is this the place? I tell you now a story, Al." He was on his back and she raised herself and touched his lips and moved her fingers through his hair.

"My uncle he used to say a poem, in Spanish, of course, but he said is very famous and well known even to the North Americans. It show the wish of many people to come to this country. Al, it was so, how you say, *expresivo*, the way he said that poem. I don't know, maybe it was the voice. He was a big man, dark and strong. Much darker than I am, almost black. Fearless, afraid of nothing. You should have heard him! It was the voice. Or was it the words? No, the voice. It was beautiful, and I hear it so many times, I think I remember it good. I think I know it in the heart." She took Al's hand and put it to her breast. "It must be beautiful in English, too." He thought he could almost feel the warm blood beating beneath the skin.

"Listen: *There is a woman, tall and strong, she holds the fire in her hand. The fire flashes out like lightning.* It's like, how you say, a light for the ships?"

"A lighthouse."

"*She is a lighthouse of hope for the poor of the world. The mother of all of the homeless ones. The mother of who leave their country. She says, 'Come to me you poor, come to me you tired, come to me you lost ones of the crowded places. Come in the long ships, come through the night, come through the storms to me. My light shines out to the edge of the darkness, and I raise the lamp to the door of gold.'* Isn't it beautiful? *'To the door of gold.'* I am hearing him now, Al. And you?"

Al turned on his side and kissed her. "My poor uncle," Maria said. "Amando was his name. He had a big scar on one side of his face. They came for him in the night and took him to the mountains. But he wanted always to come here. It was his dream. This poem was his dream. His big dream. His name means loving. *Te recuerdo Amando.*"

"What happened to your uncle?"

"We don't know. He was a big talker, too big, and there are bad men in Chilanguera. One night they come and take him to the mountains. We don't know what happened. As they put him on the truck, he said to my aunt, 'Tell everyone I was not afraid.' "

"And? What did they do with him?"

"We don't know. We never know. That was two years ago."

"And so you came here," Al said. "You came here, Maria, for your uncle's dream? Is this your door of gold? Baton Rouge?"

"New Orleans was. And I came on an airplane, not a ship. Not a banana boat either like Mr. Ray says. But it was the same. I pass through the door of gold, I stay with relatives. I go to the high school, I come up the river to Baton Rouge, I start to work, send some money home when I can. And to the family of my uncle. Now, twenty dollars every month to them. It's a fortune in Chilanguera. And I'm living his dream, too, Al. My uncle's dream. He was crazy, like me. And he was not careful, he had a family, two boys, and still he talked too much . . ."

Maria was crying. "So I came up the river to Baton Rouge. My cousins in New Orleans all say *up the river* means going to the prison. I thought that was funny, but then at first you know here was kind of like prison, I don't have friends, I don't have nowhere to go. But then I got the job, I got the apartment, I met you."

"And I met you," Al said. The wind starting picking up again outside, hinting of rushing clouds and a change in the weather.

"Al?"

"Yes?"

"What is for you . . . what is your door of gold?"

She had to wait for his answer. Finally he said, "I don't know. Being here with you, I guess."

"You guess?" The even rhythm of her speech broke on the last word. There was another silence. Then she turned toward him and said softly, "But you know one thing, Al? Is also sad. Very sad, I think. To leave your country. Your land. Where you were born. Your home. It leave a scratch—a mark—on your heart." She was still crying, very softly. He had to strain to hear her voice. "There are some things I never can forget."

Al waited until he was sure from her breathing that Maria was asleep. Then he carefully got off the bed and went to the window. There, his bare feet on the wooden floor, he peered out into the starless night in the direction of East Iris Lane.

EQUALS RARE

*Just relax, Mr. Mankiewicz, sit back. Take a deep breath, you look overwrought.
Your soda will be here any minute now.*

That was caffeine free, don't forget. I don't use caffeine, don't need it in fact.

*Caffeine free. Of course, that was part of the agreement, wasn't it? And how's
your mother?*

Oh, fine, I guess. As fine as could be expected, Dean Jameson. We don't see each other too much.

You know your mother and I are acquainted?

Oh, yes. She's told me all about it.

*She has? Then you know we had dinner a few times . . . She was the Provost's
special liaison, back at the old campus . . . it seems like ancient history now. Before you
were born, I suppose.*

Mom told me you might have been my father.

What?

I mean, not that you are my father. But if things had taken another course, way back when. Before she met Mankiewicz. A few more dinner dates. A little more wine, a little more romance. That drive-in cocktail place. She told me all about it. Martinis in paper cups.

*I see what you're getting at. Yes, it's possible. She was single, and I was between
marriages. You know, Rolfe—may I call you "Rolfe"?*

Oh, yes, please do.

I was always a great admirer of your mother.

And she of you, Dean, she of you. Then, if you had been my father—I might have turned out differently.

Well, yes. You never know. Ha ha.

My real father—

Well! Shall we, ah, get back to the topic of today? Why don't you just tell me what happened.

Today? What do you mean?

The incident in the hall.

Oh, that. OK. But where should I start?

Well, why don't you begin at the beginning, and go on to the end? And let me emphasize, Rolfe, that we are friends here. This little chat is strictly for the purpose of getting to know each other a little better.

Thank you, Dean Jameson. Mom has always spoken highly of you, and now I see why. OK, so like I was working my way down the third-floor corridor of Providence Hall, office to office, well, you know what I do. It's grubby, used to be a dorm and has the showers to prove it. And then: Jesus Christ! What do I see but that Claire's nameplate is no longer affixed to her door. And not only that, the removal was violent, judging from the irregular chisel marks on the veneered particleboard. Nothing like your office, Dean. This is real maple in the paneling, isn't it? Solid, real-life stuff that you couldn't put your fist through even if you tried. What an impressive grain. It's dense, and just look at the whorl!

But back in Providence, on Claire's door, one screw was still hanging for dear life by a composite splinter protruding from a naked, ugly gouge. I leaned against the wall by

a tattered notice that promises—once promised—a brilliant future to those willing to sacrifice their lunchtimes for the time management workshop. Claire put it up, way back when, tacking it high and tight when spring still existed in the world and we would watch the blue sky out of her office window, me in the corridor, Claire at her desk. But you know, we never said much, Claire and me. She'd be wearing one of her professional outfits, maybe that one-piece in shimmering green and gold with the wide belt all snug around her waist, the hemline nuzzling skin inches above her pale knees. And me in my baggy uniform and nametag and maybe a jacket or something since it's always freezing in Providence with the AC running full blast. We would look out in silence at the glorious sky above the smokestacks of the university power plant until Claire would come out of her reverie with one of her amazing utterances like "that cloud disturbs me."

And that's . . . that's what I . . . I . . . What is that woman doing over there, Dean Jameson?

Please, Rolfe, get a grip on yourself. It's fine, everything's going to turn out all right, I'm sure. Here's a little packet of tissues for you, and don't mind Ms. Drew over there in the corner taking notes. She is here strictly for informational purposes.

Thank you. God, I'm just so emotional today. Well, ahm, now that you know a little about the uniqueness that is Claire, you might be surprised to hear me say I sometimes saw her shopping on Saturday morning at Handymart or Bull's Eye. And you are surprised, aren't you?

Well, yes, a bit.

But there she'd be, in blue jeans and a sweatshirt stamped with the school logo, eyeing the produce with a view toward a lunchtime salad. Just think: in the dreary

ordinariness of the American shopping experience, she'd be standing in full frontal view. And yet, she didn't stand out, except maybe to me lurking by the bread and jelly aisle. Claire was at home in any environment. At ease in the world. She fit, she fit in. God, how much I admired her. Plus—and this is the point I want to emphasize, Dean Jameson—there was nothing on earth that could match the sight of her bare knees nestled on the edge of the swivel chair in her office. I mean, I couldn't quite see them from the corridor, but I can imagine, can't I? I know there are rules and responsibilities, but the mind is still free, right? They were open, air breathing. Life enhancing. Mammalian, warm.

What exactly are you referring to?

Her legs. Her knees. Claire never wore stockings. Even in her Sunday best. Even—and I kid you not—for the Chancellor's annual welcome reception.

I see. Hmmm. Now, you were saying something about a screw.

On the door. Yes. That screw—that ugly metallic screw, with its confusing coil and flat, slotted head, brooding, threatening, and yet magnificent in some obscure way—that screw was disturbing me. I wanted to rip it out of the door, tear out its guts, heave it from the window onto Knoll Plaza. But as I attempted to marshal my resolve, the world seemed to collapse around me, dizzying my heart. Claire, Claire. My God. How clear things were once, how Claire . . . Rolfe plus Claire. But I'm losing it—was losing it—while the warm and fist-sized organ kept pumping iron, dissolved—and how is it possible for a metal to dissolve except in extremely hot conditions?—in oxygenated blood. Or had I forgotten my medication? In my confusion, in my dejection, I was not sure. Nothing, in fact, was certain anymore. The world had shifted, yes, the same world that had been so

solid a few hours before under the bathroom tiles as I, dressed only in bare feet, polished my teeth.

Polished, yes.

As I stood there, in the corridor I mean, breathing at it, looking its damned slotted face head on, the screw began to quiver with a funny little shake. Not funny, no. Demonic. It was laughing at me. Laughing at me, Rolfe Mankiewicz, as if it had every right. And that was the screw—the straw I mean—that broke my back. Everything was shattered at that moment, squeezed, pressed, rubbed out of existence. I know it sounds like a cliché. But I don't know how to better express it. It happened, and my mind exploded. Went numb. Well, I can't avoid clichés today. It seems I am no longer capable of originality of expression.

That's fine. Just tell me what happened next, in plain language. Ah, here's your soda at last.

What? Thanks. Oh good, it's my brand. The radiance that was once so bright, I bring you to lips parched—

Rolfe, another thing: try to avoid metaphor and literary phraseology. I know you were a teacher once, but please limit yourself, if you can, to concrete vocabulary. Let's attempt to stay focused and on task here.

You mean, like, just the facts? None of the empty words? Keep it short and simple? Avoid radiance and glory? Commitment? Sweetness and light? Time management? Teachable moments? You want everything spelled out in plain English? In plain Anglo-Saxon, even?

Yes, please. It's for the best. We want the best for everybody, Rolfe. That's all we want. And, of course, to avoid unnecessary complications.

Does the word "love" have a Latin root?

Let's keep our eyes on the ball here, Rolfe.

I'll try. I'll do my level best. Yes. Well, sir, I was still facing down the screw. And the short gasping breaths I was drawing rattled my rib cage. My jaw must have been jutting out in the tense way it does every time an unpleasant surprise—sorry, that's of French origin, isn't it? N'est-ce pas, ha ha? By the way, what's the Anglo-Saxon equivalent of "unpleasant surprise"?

Unforeseen badness perhaps?

So like unforeseen badness creeps up and grabs me from behind, or in front, from the side, wherever. The damned slotted screw. The slash across its face, an indicator of pained neutrality, lack of drive, of human emotion. Lack of, I mean. Flatness of affect. Stasis. And then I sense the sweats coming on, too, the awful, legendary ones, the poisonous stuff the body squeezes out of key cells in moments of great drama. With me, it comes out. The sweat. They don't call me the gusher for nothing. And that's why I am never without my trusty little handkerchief. Look, it's even monogrammed, I'll show you. Here, RM, can you see it? And, lucky man, I keep a spare shirt and an economy-size Mr. Natural in my closet on floor four. I particularly like the way little drops of oily moisture adhere to the edge of the shiny stick. Its motto is *Be Prepared To Conquer*, I'll bet even you didn't know that, Dean. Sometimes, when changing shirts, I'll sneak a peek at my deodorant bar and whisper, "Hello, little shtick."

Please, Rolfe, please. I have a four o'clock appointment. Did you remove the screw?

No. I did not. Although I felt a wild urge to do something, anything about it. It kept right on quivering, too, like this: da da, da da, da da. But then Suzette from across the hall sees me ogling the ruin of the door and slithers out from behind her desk. You know Suzette, don't you?

Yes.

I find her mode of locomotion remarkable; she may have been a dancer in a former life. Or a sailor in the pre-coal era. Her bow legs are mute testimony to an inbred ability to perform sea tasks on sloping decks when a nor'easter is roaring hot and heavy off Nantucket. She was dressed almost entirely in tight black stretch material. I wonder sometimes—involuntarily of course—about the color of her undergarments. Suzette is very thin, as you no doubt are well aware.

When she takes my arm, bracelets jangle. "Karl," she says in that weird New England accent of hers. "Karl. I wondered if you were going to come." Her voice is low and intense, especially as she enunciates that last word. *Come*. Oh boy oh boy, as my daddy used to moan in his sleep. See, there was a touch of heat in her diphthong. No, Suzette was no mere deckhand with a mop and bucket off Nantucket. She was a chanteuse in a smoky pre-war Berlin cellar. Called *Der Keller*. Catchy name. Catchy girl. Sorry, Dean Jameson. Catchy woman.

Actually she is from a rural area that will soon be a paved-over Boston suburb. I see her as a blooming corn-fed maiden with a light dusting of pollen, shooting her dreamy looks at the erect and elephantine stalks of the field. But how changed she is now,

and that's the hand that life at this school will deal you. With all due respect, Dean Jameson, and the good work you've been doing. Suzette, poor darling, went in the space of a few short years from a picture of health to a Kafkaesque apparition. As Dr. Dragan once told me during one of our counseling sessions at the health center, the backstabbing and machinations that go on around here would make Machiavelli look like a mild lad in velvet apparel. And that's a quote, no similes intended. My apologies for the Latinate diction.

Go on.

As the bracelets rang, Suzette's hard and glossy fingernails inspected the intricate cashmere warp of my cardigan, bought at the mall, and not just because it's beautiful and I luxuriate in the feel of real Himalaya. I also want to support the national economy in these troubled times.

Suzette's thickly made-up face was even whiter than usual. She really cakes it on when the semester's about to start, have you noticed? Who is she trying to show off for anyway? And plus, there was a faint whiff of grain alcohol on the air that moved in tandem with her body. I hoped for her sake it was the residue of the night before. But why was she closing a drawer as she stood up? I checked my watch. 11:10. She pinched and poked me for a while.

"Ah, that's better now," I said. My jutting jaw began to recede, to reassume its normal posture. It's embarrassing when my jaw sticks out and I can't get it to calm down. The thing seems to have a mind of its own.

"Karl, Karl, you came," Suzette said.

"My name isn't Karl," I replied. "I'm Rolfe, remember? Karl does floors one and two."

"Rolfe. Oh, Rolfe. Of course. Rolfe."

"Rolfe with an *e*."

"Yes, of course. I can never forget the *e*."

"Suzette, what is that screw doing on the door? My God, it's all so sudden. One minute I'm pushing my dust mop and the next, bam!"

"Look at me, Rolfe. Look at me and take a deep breath. But keep your hands down, I don't like it when they flail. Let's pause and refresh. Count to ten, OK? Nicotine is called for, I think."

All this in a thick New England accent, if you can imagine. I can't really do her accent. Imagine a Kennedy in a high voice.

"Can Dr. Thorne spare you now?" I ask her. See, I know her boss's reputation. He's a real stickler for punctuality and keeping busy. Chair of the English Department since the beginning of time. It comes with the territory, I suppose.

"He's not here, thank God, gone for the morning." Suzette returns to her ergonomic chair, rolls it forward, and extracts a pale blue mug from the messy clutter of her desk top. I follow her in, close the door, and sit.

"Let's keep the door open," she says. "It gets so stuffy in here. My, aren't you nervous and sweaty looking today!"

I swing the door wide open so I can peek at Claire's office now and then.

"The Robot is giving his welcome workshop," announces Suzette.

I make no reply. Her reference is, of course, to Dr. Thorne. And, Dean Jameson, just for the record, I want you to know I do not share her opinion. Not only has Dr. Thorne published in such journals as *Teaching Tips*, his generosity at Christmastime is unparalleled, well known among the custodial staff.

I will note that.

Suzette puts her lips on the rim of the cup. I have the feeling they are intimate in that area. Each sip she takes, a cheerful little wince puckers the skin around her eyes. She reaches down and fiddles with her two-way pager. I assume she is calling for tea.

"Let me set the scene for you," she intones. "The new instructors have risen with the rosy-fingered dawn and been shuttled in from the faculty housing area. Now they inhabit the front seats of Dowder Auditorium, eager, waiting, on fire in fact with enthusiasm. The old hands, the sad ones, the burnt-out losers, are clustered in the rear. By now the Robot is reading from his prompt card, making that utterly vacuous speech of his about information percolating through the coffee grounds of the mind and coming out in the form of brown knowledge."

Rolfe, that does not sound like the Suzette I know.

Dean Jameson, there are many Suzettes. As many as there are closets in Providence Hall. And this is the Suzette I have come to know in my years of pushing a dust mop. But I will agree with you in this: what she said was borderline libel. I know Dr. Thorne, and he is not at all robotic. He is a lively and sensitive department chair. I remember only too well my own initiation to the teaching ranks five years ago, and it is different from Suzette's malicious vision. As different as the night is from the day, excuse

the simile. As you will recall, Dean, I too was an instructor before my sudden and unexpected shift—I like to think of it as a lateral transfer—to the custodial ranks.

Yes, we were glad to find another . . . position for you.

I still reflect on where I went wrong, that terrible, unhappy year. I felt strangulated, inhibited somehow. Of course, I had my share of merry moments, too, the shared laughter when one or two students found my digressions amusing, the pleasant anecdotes at the water fountain, scuttlebutt in the no-parking zones . . . but these were rare. And then my hesitation to return written assignments to the students, my uncertainty regarding evaluations and the opinions of my superiors, the way papers had of piling up on my desk, the parental complaints. That one very hurtful letter to the editor, you may recall, comparing me to a circular file. Not to mention my other little problem, the one—

Let's get back to the events of this morning, shall we, Rolfe? Remember, we said we'd stay on task here.

Thank you, yes, I'm sorry. Well, where was I? Oh, I was still talking to Suzette, and our conversation was taking a remarkable turn. Her tone was becoming so frenzied. Sometimes the movements of her mouth did not match the words I was hearing in my brain. It was very strange. Also, I noticed little wisps of yellowish smoke coming out of her ears and, occasionally, her nostrils.

"The old-timers will put their shaky signatures on the attendance sheet and shuffle off during the break," she barked out in a staccato tone between bursts of smoke. "So the Thornemeister will spend the rest of the morning haranguing a group of increasingly baffled neophytes. A remarkable moment in the history of pedagogy." She made a panting laugh with her purple tongue hanging outside the natural boundary of her lips.

"But Suzette," I replied, trying to calm her, "those neophytes, as you so casually call them, will teach their first classes tomorrow. Even a beginning teacher commands a certain respect behind the podium or lectern, I never can recall which."

"Oh my God," Suzette screamed, "why do you remind me? Why, why? Scary, isn't it? Tomorrow begins the horror anew. And scheduling was such a nightmare this year!"

It was at this point I believe that she attached a nicotine patch to her neck and rudely shoved the packet across the desk to me.

"Listen, Rolfe," she screamed again. "That is your name, isn't it? Welcome to the no-smoking zone. And what do you think, how many hapless students, how many eager freshmen, will be ruined by the incompetence of these rank amateurs? And I mean rank in every sense of the word! They call themselves instructors? They are just out of grad school, for God's sake!"

Let me pause here for a second, Dean Jameson, I want to get what follows exactly right. I'm doing a little exercise in visualization, ah yes, now I'm seeing it:

I affix two patches to a spot on my inner arm where it isn't too hairy. No doubt naptime in the storage closet this afternoon will be troubled with vivid dreams, but no matter. Is Suzette attacking me? And if so, what is the source of her intense hostility?

"Well," I say, thinking still of the new crop of freshly minted teaching faces, "they have to learn on someone." I mean no harm, I am convinced, by this innocuous remark. I stroke my cardigan and remember the days when I wore a tie. I still feel it sometimes, even though it's not there, a ghostly amputated memory.

"They have to learn on someone," I repeat.

"Would you say the same of a brain surgeon?" Suzette asks.

"They have monkeys for that purpose," I reply.

"Don't be ridiculous. The animal rights people would skin you alive if they heard that."

At this point the smoke pouring from Suzette's orifices became even more intense. At the same time, I felt a light roaring in my ears. At first I thought it was the nicotine kicking in, but it turned out to be the animal rights people rushing in to get me. Of course, they were dressed for success in their ludicrous getups of parkas and boots. They had probably never seen the inside of a forest in their miserable little lives, but in an excess of caution I bolted like a jackrabbit and ran down the hall toward the shower area. They were gushing like mad and this was the source of the noise. Was Claire in there, too? Showering off the dusty misery caused by the cruel attack on her door? That was my major concern. Also, to be quite frank, I wanted to see her naked.

And . . . that was when the animal rights boys grabbed me.

Ms. Drew, can I see you at the window for a moment?

I told the parkas to open the shower door, and they did it, grinning, to show me how dry and dusty it was. The accent tagged along as they carried me kicking and screaming down three flights of stairs to the squad car, which was festooned with zebra stripes and illegally parked in the handicapped zone. I think that's when they gave me the shot. Judging from the size of the needle, it was the one they use to dose the giraffe. In spite of the drug, or because of it, the roaring was getting louder and louder. But through-

They are coming now? Excellent.

-it all, I could hear the accent telling a lot of lies about Claire not liking it in Providence and requesting a transfer as far away as possible. Then there were car noises, and I was carried again, and through the roaring I heard another voice, a kinder one, "Put him in that chair for now. We're still waiting for Dr. Dragan. Apparently there has been another incident."

I wake up and move my arms and touch my cardigan and feel Claire's nameplate under my shirt pressing hard on bare skin. Thank God it's safe. Safe with me. Her name is written on my heart forever. Rolfe plus Claire equals Rare. And man am I thirsty.

Just relax, Mr. Mankiewicz, sit back. Take a deep breath, you look overwrought. Your soda will be here any minute now.

That was caffeine free, don't forget. I don't use caffeine, don't need it in fact.

THE INCENSE TREES

Ryszard Ashton's mind surged toward the sound with a pleasurable flash. Someone was at the door, and this time it wasn't his imagination. A wooden *chocka chock* melted into a ring of glass and became hollow again. Evidence of a hand rising to the door panes and falling back. What did it look like, he wondered, long fingers or stubby, white or dark? What did it portend, presage? He let the fine words drift through his mind and exhaled the hit, losing his train of thought as he watched the gentle smoke curl in the air like a spider's web of indescribable delicacy. Smoke too had once been used to give the sense of an uncertain future. Divination. Fortune tellers with glowing eyes before burning joss sticks. The desert night under cold distant stars. Women in long folds of dark cloth, enveloped and unknown. The sounds came again, in reverse order: an enticement. It felt as if time were turning upside down. Doors opening; new worlds. Doors of perception. The hash was good, surprisingly so. Blue Mountain, Blue Mountain something.

He stood unsteadily and tapped out the little metal pipe on the edge of the desk. Gray ash paused, briefly suspended in air, before dissolving into the matching carpet. His father's old lamp glared upon an open book by a tablet of yellow legal paper. On the top sheet were Ashton's penciled scrawlings, copied passages from his reading, slanting and off center.

In the front room, he grabbed sections of week-old newspapers from the floor, tossing some to one end of the sofa and the rest in an empty corner. He hadn't had visitors in quite a while, and his thumping heart was warm toward any and all souls who would take the trouble to come calling at two o'clock in the morning. It might even be Jerry,

who owed him \$60 and had promised to stop by one of these evenings and erase his debt with a fat gram of cocaine.

The knocking came again, soft and insistent, chocks and pings and chocks. Ashton popped the stubborn deadbolt and pulled the door hard. Stuck. He jerked the loose knob sharply back and to the left while kicking the frame. There was a trick to it; hot humid weather often jammed it up. But now, in the early morning coolness, it should have been a cinch. Just when he wanted to see what was waiting for him in the darkness outside his door.

Ashton cursed, tried to kick the frame, missed. "Just a second," he yelled through the glass. He saw a clenched hand on the pane, a hand with a man behind it. Jerry? The body was about the right size. But then the figure of the man shivered and divided. Two—two men on his doorstep.

He felt his mood drifting downward, circling the drain. "Fuck!" he said and jerked and kicked again. This time he hit the spot. The frame released the door with a cracking noise.

"Open, sesame!" a voice said from outside. The light flowed out onto the men on the steps. One of them he recognized, Gace, a black guy, a very black guy, from a rural Louisiana parish, a place that raised sugar cane and little else. Gace had worked at the store the previous summer. Tony—the supermarket manager—had spent a day training him as a cashier and then about ten seconds firing him three weeks later for sliding groceries to his friends. Ashton mainly remembered Gace for his goofball talk, which had seemed funny at first. They'd gotten high a time or two out back, puffing reefer while feeding boxes into the dangerous maw of the incinerator.

"Hey, what it is, Ash! This your door? This you, baby?" Gace released a series of spaced giggles as if he had been holding his breath. "Fucked up."

"Aren't we all," Ashton said. From the doorway he looked at Gace and at Gace's friend, a white man about his size, in sunglasses and jeans and a tucked-in polo shirt, dark yellow and buttoned tightly to the top. Ashton had a shirt like that too, a birthday gift from Kathy that never left the bottom of his drawer anymore.

"Fucked up," Gace repeated. "Your door. Make you feel trapped."

"There's a trick to it," Ashton said. "You have to know where to kick." He touched his shoe to the spot.

Gace's friend wore shiny black cowboy boots that looked too big, like costume boots on a child. His head was small for his body, almost a doll's head with a plastic finish. The hash was very good indeed.

Gace's throat made swallowing motions. "Kick, yeah," he said. His forehead glistened with sweat. "Kick. Ain't that shit."

Ashton felt cold in the doorway. "It's pretty late," he said. The boots were embossed in an intricate pattern. Dragonfly wings. A freezing gust of wind surprised him, as if a giant bird were stirring somewhere.

Gace's head bobbed slowly from side to side. "Hey, Ash, this is Bobby, man. You never seen him at the store? Like when I was working back then, you know what I'm saying? Always in my line, and I wonder why?" He giggled and bounced around on the concrete steps, left shoulder down, right shoulder down, warming up, coming to life, grinning and showing off the gold in his mouth. He did a little dance, leaned over and squeezed Bobby's shoulder with a long-fingered hand. "You was always in my line,

wasn't you, boy? Every time I turn around, there you are, breathing down my throat." He laughed his high-pitched laugh, speeding up now. "You fucking creepy guy."

Bobby's head turned slowly toward Gace, reminding Ashton of a ventriloquist's dummy he had seen on television long ago. The memory dissolved into a picture of a freezing bathroom with a chipped and stained tub and his mother yelling. The stains sometimes coalesced to frightening faces that moved and swung. But there was no escape when his mother had locked him in.

Ashton could sometimes divorce such memories from his mind by trying to persuade himself that they belonged to someone else, but the tactic was ineffective when he was high. He blinked hard and concentrated on the reality of the room with its lights.

Bobby's hair was long and brownish blond, falling to the yellow shoulders of his shirt from a razor-sharp part that revealed a white band of scalp. His hand came up—again, in slow motion—and he jabbed his little finger around in his mouth.

Ashton glimpsed a signet ring on the base of the moving finger and shivered. He considered shooing the men away and locking himself inside again. He could tell them about his need for sleep. He could pull the door shut in their surprised faces. But he was afraid of shouting sounds and window glass busting and falling into the room. Dangerous bodies crashing through. Gace he thought he could handle—he knew him and his ways well enough from the store—but he was unsure of this Bobby character with the white scalp and ringed finger. It was still at work in his mouth, more deeply now, poking, probing.

Gace had a cigarette going. "He really take me to a new level, Bobby do. He like you, man." He blew some smoke through the door frame into the house. "Say, you wasn't sleeping was you, Ash? You little red-eyed grocery boy."

For three weeks, Ashton and Gace had been at adjoining registers, fellow cashiers, serving the public. He would watch Gace's wrinkled shirt, see his long black fingers with the pale palms pop and stroke the bills before reluctantly surrendering the payment to the till or the change to a customer's outstretched hand. Gace had been funny at first, interesting, different. Ashton had never smoked pot with a black man before. At first he enjoyed the camaraderie and the strange way—he thought of it as rural parish weird—Gace cupped a joint with his big hands while drawing in the smoke. But his whiney, sing-song voice soon became a grating refrain in Ashton's ears, a tape that couldn't be turned off. So when Tony asked Ashton if he thought Gace was sliding, Ashton had said yes without being completely sure. He thought it very likely that Gace was sliding, but mainly he wanted to get the sound out of his head.

Ashton rubbed his beard and caught a strong whiff of hash resin coming off his fingers. Perfumed, incense from afar. On the big day, Tony had fired Gace in front of a line of surprised shoppers. *Just get the fuck out*, Tony had said, *you're lucky Parish Prison is full up with losers like you, just grab your stuff and don't look back*. Ashton met him in the employees' room and slipped him some homegrown in a cigarette pack wrapper, just enough for one good number. It was for his break, but what the hell, he had more at home. A good-will gesture, one for the road. Gace gave him a questioning look and sauntered out carrying the paper bag with his street shoes. Out of sight, out of mind. Until this moment.

A large whirring moth flew past Ashton's face and began to thud softly against the lampshade. He turned to look and the men came noiselessly through the door. The moth brushed the ceiling and returned to the lamp. Gace and Bobby sat on the clear part of the sofa. Their legs were almost touching.

Gace slapped the pile of newspapers and kicked an empty beer can away. "Jesus, Ash, it's a fucking dump in here, brother. How can you live like this?"

Ashton closed the door. "Feels like a cold front," he said. "Want something to drink? Something hot? Cold front passing through."

Newsprint crinkled on the sofa. "Fuck that," Gace said, shifting his position. "We didn't come for the weather report, we got other things on our minds tonight, Ashboy. Just bring us a mirror and the biggest sharpest knife you got." He made more room for himself, tossing the newspaper sections one by one onto the floor. "Bobby here is holding some crystal that'll take the top of your head off. Only thing is, it got damp so it clumped up like. We need to chop it, Ash." He sliced the air with the edge of his hand. "And that, baby, is why we are here."

"Crystal meth?" Ashton asked. "Then we can dip it, clumps and all. No need to mess our noses up. Pass a clump this way and then I'll get you boys something to drink."

His heart was racing again, nervous and speedy. Contact high. These guys were OK, just a friendly nocturnal visit. He wanted to put a dab of the crystal on his finger and rub it on his gum. Work it in, just a little taste. Ice cold. Jazz up his world.

Gace shook his head. "No, this is special, director's cut stuff. Not your normal crystal, got an extra molly-cule. Made to order, special deal for big boys who can handle it. Man's world, you know what I'm saying?"

Bobby sat motionless, knees drawn tightly together, left leg pressing against Gace's right. Ashton wondered about the eyes behind the sunglasses. Hidden worlds.

"Gotta snort it, Ash," Gace went on, "it's the only way to go. Come on man, let's chop and bop." He slashed the air again. "You a man, you ready to rumble?" He got up and followed Ashton into the kitchen.

"Who's your friend?" Ashton said in a low voice. "Where'd you dig him up?" He found a knife under a pile of dirty dishes in the sink and rinsed it off.

"I told you, man. Bobby. You seen him in the store, you seen him with me, it's like he always in that damn place. Don't bullshit me, Ash."

"I've never seen him," Ashton said, drying the knife on his shirt.

"Don't fuck me," Gace said. "Or I will fuck you. You so full of shit. We even talk about him once, just the two of us, by the incinerator. Remember? You said some shit about your name being Bobby, too, when you was a kid. And you was so happy about it, such a happy little grocery boy. I loved you then. You made your buddy Gace feel good about his new job, smoking and everything."

Ashton continued to wipe the knife. He had no memory of having told Gace the story of the day he had become a Bobby. He was seven or eight and new in the strange southern school with the sour milk smell and the soft-voiced teacher who had looked at the note with his name on it and rolled her pretty blue eyes. So he lied to Miss Deblieux that rare, wonderful day, said his name was Bobby, and—miracle of miracles—she had smiled at him so sweetly then. Southern charm. And so pleased she didn't have to attempt his real name, his unpronounceable name, an artifact of Polish history. *Bobby, Bobby Ashton, welcome to Magnolia Grove Elementary. Sit over there next to Jackie.* That day

he almost danced his way home. Until his mother met him at the door and saw his face and asked him what in hell he so happy to. Too young and stupid to understand the strategy of silence, he told her and watched the mouth with the yellow teeth crumple at the edges in hatred of him and the whole confusing American world. *You no Bobby*, she said then in her fierce Polski accent. Wiping her hands on her dirty apron, stripping any trace of remaining smile off her son's face. *No boy of mine with name Bobby. You Ryszard.*

Somehow connected with this memory was the image of his father at the lighted study window, looking out into the dusky street, waiting for his only child to get home from school so they could read a story together before supper. Their eyes would meet, and his father would raise the hand with the red signet ring in greeting. But that had been later, when they had moved to the rental house with the stained sinks and old-fashioned bathtub on claw feet. Not long after, his father—*this American*, his mother always called him later—had walked out on them, packing a suitcase of clothes, leaving behind nothing but a book or two, an old desk lamp, and a note Ashton's mother had read and burned. And the ring, under Ashton's pillow.

What had he seen in her, Ashton always wondered. His father had felt sorry for her, that must have been it, felt sorry for the girl he'd found lonely and starving, far from her strange Polish home amid the rubble and rats of 1945 Berlin. His father had been eighteen, still a boy really but with army rations in his pack. Two lonely children in the manmade wilderness.

"Ash, we still waiting on that mirror," Gace said. But the only mirror in the house was attached to the bathroom cabinet door, so Ashton went into the bedroom to get the

picture of Kathy from his bedside table, five by seven, framed and glassed but never hung. He picked her up and gazed upon her face. He heard her voice: *I wanted to make you well, I saw something good in you.* It had been pity with her, too, goddamned pity leading to love and then reversing itself. Making the world go round and clattering to a stop. He slammed the bedroom door.

"How did you know where I live?" he asked Gace, who was prowling around the front room. He didn't particularly like the way Gace was inspecting his house.

Gace smiled. "Baby, we seen your lights on." He took the picture and tossed it to Bobby, who pulled a folded white envelope from his jeans pocket. "We seen your lights on, dude, and I tell Bobby, he want to see this fucked-up night owl, this white college boy, he better step up the concrete steps. Stairway to heaven."

Bobby set to work on a little mound of powder on top of Kathy's face. Chop chop chop. "Ain't that right, Bobby?" Gace said. "Ain't that what I said?"

Bobby didn't look up. Chop chop chop. "Ash, I mean it," Gace said. "How can you live like this? God *damn* it, man. Sometimes I worry about you, little buddy. And you was always Mr. Neat in the store with your tie and shit."

Gace tested the deadbolt and pressed his face to the door panes. "It's zombieville out there," he said. "Can't see a goddamn thing. Might be one man, might be an army out there. Lucky I found Bobby running with his crew."

Gace turned to his friend. "Hey, Bobby, you deaf? This the white college boy I was telling you about." Gace's crooked smile exposed the golden teeth. He leaned toward Ashton's ear and whispered, "He like you, Ash. He quiet, ain't he? He like you, baby!"

Gace paced the room and kicked some newspapers from his path. Bobby worked on, head down and silent. Chop chop chop. The moth circled the lamp and flew into the kitchen.

The chopping stopped. Bobby motioned to Gace, who sat down and arranged the picture carefully on his lap. The knife lay on the glass next to several lines of powder that covered Kathy like tiger stripes. But Ashton could still make out the shirt she was wearing—it had once been his—and the jeans and the bare feet on the grass. He knew how cool, how smooth those feet could feel under the touch of his hands.

"She here?" Gace asked. "She in there?" He picked up the knife and jabbed it toward the bedroom. "Your sweet little dreaming princess?"

"She's gone," Ashton said. "She doesn't live here anymore."

"Let's see," Gace said, looking down. "Let's check this one out." He used the sharp edge of the knife to scrape the powder off Kathy's face. "Pretty lady. Ash, I'm impressed. So you like the brown gals?"

"I liked her," Ashton said.

"And now she gone, too bad, she miss out on all the good shit."

"Yes," Ashton said. "Too bad." The moth fluttered in the kitchen, battering itself against the light. Knocking itself silly.

Gace raised part of one line on the knife and held it toward Ashton's face. "OK, here we go, college boy. You was so nice to let us in. Now we're going to pay you back big time."

"Put it back on the glass," Ashton said. "I'll just grab a bill and roll it. Just dump it on the glass again and I'll snuff it up."

"No no, Ash," Gace said. "That's not the way we do things. It's our treat, boy, so you take it off the knife. Run your chances with the metal. Carnival of life, man, destiny." He pronounced the last word with emphasis. "You thought only college boys knew that? You thought you the only ones know the hard words?"

Gace extended the blade and drew it back slowly. Ashton leaned over, reeled in like a fish.

"Daddy know best," Gace said, moving the blade back and forth under Ashton's nose. "It taste *real* good off the knife. Trust me. Trust your old daddy Gace."

Bobby's sunglasses were off. He seemed to be gazing sleepily at the door, his eyes dull and underlined by smudgy marks. He was feeling the air in front of his face with open palms, as if he were blind. But he had cut the crystal.

The knife tip beckoned with its bump of cool white powder. Taking his eyes off Bobby, Ashton exhaled fiercely, bowed low, and snuffed it up as hard as he could. A searing flash raced up one nostril and down his throat with a gunky chemical taste, like something aged a long time in rusting metallic barrels. After a spinning pause, the stuff was in his brain, sloshing from lobe to lobe as if water had filled the compartments of a pinball machine and a giant were shaking it a million times past tilt. Now his brain *was* the pinball machine, flashing lights and ringing balls that clanged harshly enough to destroy his hearing. The water was seeping everywhere, dripping. He felt it sliding over his lips and tongue, down onto the front of his neck. Salt, sea salt. Salt of the sea, salt of the earth. The eternal tang of metal. The pinball machine—he—everything ever created in God's universe—all of it was turning upside down and sinking through thick salt water toward a reef quivering with millions of blind fish covered with tiny feelers.

The fish touched him, slowly at first and then with increasing speed, covering his face and hands with gooey syrup. It felt good at first. Through it were the feelers, soft and wet. Underneath he felt his eyes, ringed in smudgy black. Raccoon eyes, he should have known. He floated, sickened. Eyes of death, gaunt eyes. And he was afraid then.

A background vibration cut through layers of thick cloth, a singing voice with many trailing echoes, a dead voice that belonged to a floating head: *Turned me, motherfucker turned me*. And then Gace's giggle, hollow and detached, passing through bubble sounds and vague wet murmurings and sighings with door sounds and drawers upon drawers opening and slamming shut.

Ashton came to with cold morning light filtering through the windows and the panes on the door. A breeze fluttered the curtain, or was it in his head? He closed his eyes again, but the light followed and punished him. He rolled himself up off the floor and staggered to the bathroom. The ugly head he saw in the cabinet mirror was for one queasy moment unrecognizable. Was it him under the splotched skin? For a moment he thought he had acquired new and hideous birthmarks. Then he realized he could wash them off. Lucky boy, luckier than some.

He ran water through his hair and over his face. How white he was when cleansed of blood. The nose cut was dry and not as bad as he'd feared; the worst pain by far came from the sides of his head, which felt as if they were being crunched in a tightening vise. No telling what had been in that shit. Every beat of his pulse brought a flash of bright pain. He quickly chewed four aspirin and swallowed them with faucet water. He had almost forgotten what it meant to hurt really bad. Kathy said she knew.

Cup of cold coffee in hand, Ashton slouched from room to room and inspected his world. Front door still bolted, kitchen door ajar—they'd left from there. Cigarette ashes here and there on the floor. They'd strolled around, having a smoke, having a good time, checking things out at their leisure. In the study, a few drawers were open, one bookshelf toppled. His stash—about four grams of hash, a bud of prime sensemilla, a couple of stray Percodans—was gone from the white cigar box. His wallet too, emptied of cash, but at least they hadn't taken his driver's license. A lucky break. Nice thieves, not malicious. Not too.

He turned off the lamp and saw in plain view the gram of hash he had been cutting the night before. Now how had they missed that? He picked it up, brought it to his nose. The fragrance was rich and perfumy but made his head hurt even more. Incense of the East. Doors opening on nothing. He turned the gram in his fingers, surveyed the devastation. It made him sick. What a mess. Nothing to do but flush the shit, clean his house and himself, start over. What a fucking mess. Flush the shit, flush the shit. He was going to do it this time. He was still able—just barely able—to envision a quiet room, neat, shelves dusted and the desk an inviting smooth expanse. Drinking fresh coffee, hot, rich, dripping cool milk into it and watching the colors swirl and combine. Black and white equals brown. He imagined Kathy with him in the house, sharing the cup, the way they had before. But she had said she would never come back.

Good-bye, Kathy, good-bye hashish. He twiddled the gram some more and sniffed his fingers, looking at the toppled bookshelf and the volumes scattered over the floor. The only book of his father's he still possessed, a condensed edition of Gibbon with lightly penciled notes in his father's elegant handwriting and *Jack Ashton* written in bold

ink on the title page, was ripped in half. The fuckers, the malicious fuckers. Knowing what they were about, they had picked that one to ruin. It was almost diabolical. He imagined that evil child Bobby, grinning at his work, his doll-like head rotating soullessly on its pivot.

In the bathroom, Ashton placed the gram on top of the ceramic tank and pissed dark yellow, so dark he thought he must be getting sick. The phone started jangling and he ran to get it, thinking Kathy, Kathy. It was beyond hope but he couldn't help it.

"Hello," he said, almost out of breath. "Hello."

"Ryszard." It was Jerry's voice. "Ryszard." Pronounced to rhyme with lizard. It was a day for crashing hopes. Night and day.

"Hello."

"What it is, Rysz. What's up, man? You sound stopped up. You getting sick?"

"No. What time is it?"

"Early, man, too early. Look, Rysz, I'm at Circle K. Dmitri, you know, the demonic Russian cashier guy, he says, like he was passing your place around six this morning and sees this tall black guy slipping out the back door."

There was a long pause. "You following me?" Jerry said. "You understanding what I'm saying?"

Ashton held the phone against his ear, looking at a stubbed out cigarette in a burn hole on the carpet.

"Rysz, are you there? Is everything OK? I'm calling to make sure you're all right. This is Jerry, man."

"I know who you are. Two guys."

"Huh?"

"There were two of them."

"Coming out of your house? That's not what the Antichrist here said."

"What does he know?"

"So there were two?"

"That's what I'm saying."

"What the fuck did they want?"

"What they wanted? Friends, Jerry, they were friends. On a friendly little visit. Best friends in the world." Ashton looked up from the floor. "Say, Jerry—any word on that powder?"

"Shh, don't say it on the phone. Any day now, Rysz. Any day now."

Ashton brushed his teeth for a long time. He plucked the gram off the blue ceramic tank and took it to the study. He got his bong from the closet and took it apart on his dusty desk, removing the metal tube and cleaning out the gunk with a pipe cleaner he fished out of the trash. He filled the barrel with fresh cold water and replaced the tube. With a long kitchen match, he heated up the underside of the gram and crumbled off about half of it onto a piece of cardboard. Then he smoked, holding the hits in so long he thought once or twice he would faint. His headache was going from very bad to very worst. But he kept going until he had finished the crumbled part.

He looked at the floor, at the ripped book. Then he picked up the yellow pad and went to the front room. Bobby's sunglasses were on the floor by a corner of the sofa.

Ashton picked them up, blew off a cobweb, put them on. He drew the curtains shut and

lay down on the carpet in a shady place. The newspapers in the corner were big enough to cover a man. They were bunched up almost as if someone were under them.

Lying on the floor, spinning in the space inside his head, he looked at the writing on the yellow sheet. Again and again, he read the words, in his handwriting but not his own: *Upon the blue dawn we saw the mountain Al Khor cutting open the sky. We were very near now and could smell the slopes with their famous spice trees drenched in morning dew. The bearers sang softly, "Al Khor, Al Khor, that is our home, our happiness."*

Ash pressed himself against the wall, pulling newspapers over his head and body, burrowing in as much as possible.

A SURPRISING
NARRATIVE

Entitled

“CAPTIVITY AND DELIVERANCE THEREFROM”

Or,

“Out of Savagery Have I Called Thee, O My Child”

WITH DIRECT AND TRULY ATTESTED DETAILS NEVER BEFORE DIVULGED

By

JEREMIAH EASTERER, late of Randolph County, Virginia



Parmak, A Sagawato Indian Brave

HAVEROCK:

Printed and Sold by MARSHALL BROS.

Publishers of “Jenny Two-Face,” “The Wanton Child,” & c.

IT IS NOT WITHOUT a deep sense of anticipation that we bring the world's attention to bear upon the following curiosity. Our aim is straightforward: we wish to direct the bright beam of public awareness toward a manuscript—if that simple word, indeed, suffices to denominate the preserver of the tale that we here present in inexpensive pamphlet form—which narrates certain occurrences in an era far antecedent to and vastly different than that of the present. The story told herein is scanty of pages, yet deep-shot with the rich matter that makes up the human heart. It opens new vistas into our understanding of the sturdy pioneers who fought their way into the unconquered, savage land, the same ground which we today occupy so lightly. And that the drama of this great human adventure plays out in a locale (Sharkey Gulch) well beloved today for berry-picking rambles and picnicking, is an added incentive to our readers here in the western counties who, we would like to believe, will buy the pamphlet and muse upon the former wildness and savage inhabitants of a landscape that was changed irrevocably for the better with the advent of the planked highroad and the recent implosioning by gunpowder of the south bank of Harrison Creek. However, above the narrow question of regional interest, as important as this may be to our local patriots—and their name is legion—the enduring themes that are here explored, ranging as widely as they undoubtedly do (and numerous authorities in various fields have confirmed our initial impressions in this matter), may, we trust, prove enticing to other readers across the Republic, from the limpid waters of the purling Mississippi to the fecund fields of the newest smiling addition to America's expanding destiny, the Florida Territory, soon to be cleared of hostile Indians by General Jackson in this balmy spring of 1822.

If our hopes in this enterprise are justified—and we have no reason whatsoever to believe that they will not be—the favorable reception we expect for this pamphlet will be the impetus to lay out others of a like nature for public approbation. THE PUBLISHERS

I AM GRATEFUL to the Marshall family for arranging the publication of my grandfather's manuscript, which, to quote that loftiest of poets whose fancy has taken such daring wings of flight (but whose name at present eludes me), has "slept in silence long" beneath an ancient wooden salt box used to catch drippings in the meat hanging room adjacent the smoke house. We did not know that Grandfather had left the work behind when he departed this earthly existence in last year's surprising conflagration, but the somewhat peculiar handwriting (self-learned from his childhood habit of copying out favorite Biblical passages) and the peculiar "shake" he appends to the last letter of several phrases of which he was obviously fond, leave no doubt as to the true author of the unsigned manuscript which turned up when the salt box began to exude a noisome stench and was shown upon closer examination to have rotted through.

But Grandfather's writings would never have made the leap from yellowing leaves to clean black printed lines on the best paper without the aid of our town's most illustrious family. It is, of course, the *Marshalls* to whom I make allusion, those brothers, both notable and enterprising, of the timber and paper trade, who have done so much to rouse this once sleepy "neck of the wood" from its lethargic slumber since they first appeared in Haverock two years ago. But has it been but two years? Or forty-eight fortnights, if I may be permitted an alliterative paraphrase? *Tempus fugit*, that is to say, "Time fugues."

Then (viz, two years ago) we had a dreary stretch of useless riverbank dotted with cottonwoods, willows, and burr brush; *now* we have the modern sawmill smoothly spitting out board after board of buttery lumber and grinding trashwood ripe for the pulping vats. *Then* we had loiterers on every corner potting and pitting the dust with the slinging brown evidence of their wet greasy chaws; *now* we have satisfying and fairly remunerated work for every willing hand (which is not to say that the indolent chewers of the leaf are a vanished breed entirely). *Then* we had smudged and crinkled week-old newspapers from Clarksburg and Charleston; *now* we have the cleanly ruled *Town & Crier*, pride of the better classes of the lower Tygart Valley.

Space forbids that I dilate longer on the Marshall family, their accomplishments, and the happy hopes awakened by the sight of their numerous and talented progeny. I will only add, before my sister Martha introduces the tale proper, that my redactive hand upon Grandfather's manuscript has been of the lightest touch. Apart from breaking asunder his long and often tedious sentences according to modern considerations of phrase length and punctuation, and correcting his frequent lapses from the bounds of grammatical correctness, I have done little else to the text* outside of pruning several thickets of sprawling prose, placing the uncatalogued sections in the most logical order (chapter headings were added by John Franks, printer) and clarifying to the best of my lights certain lines difficult of interpretation due to spotty marks of soaked-through bear and hog blood. At the express desire of the Marshalls (in conformity to their demonstrated and ardent allegiance to *Fidelity & Truth*), I have *not* excluded the more sensational passages, although I have attempted to tame their wildly ragged vocabulary in an effort to

conform to modern sensibility and taste. JONATHAN EASTERER, Haverock, Randolph County, Virginia, April 14, 1822.

* My one regret regards the disposition of Grandfather's approximations of Indian lingo which appear from time to time. General thanks is due to Jemima Possum, whom I repeatedly dragged in from her post at the stove (often enough that the cooking suffered) on account of her purported knowledge of the language of her mother's people. Sadly, however, her interpretations, though copious in comparison to the originals, made little sense and I did not incorporate them into my recension. Perhaps some of the finer points of Sagawato pronunciation were lost when I shouted the words across the table to Jemima, who is, after all, only a year or two away from being stone deaf.

I AM TOLD THAT in his youth, Grandpa wore his hair long and black. He was swarthy of type, which is not surprising since his people, as Father never tired of telling us, hailed from the eastern land of *Aran*, a mountainous isle which lies in the stormy billows betwixt the Greater and Lesser Hebrides. In *Aran*, the sun blazes through the long year and burns the people brown as they work the scanty soil, extracting boulders and chopping back the ever-creeping sea brush. Thus, it is no occasion for surprise that Grandpa was dark as an Indian.

He was an honest man, was my grandfather Jeremiah Easterer, a simple soul who spoke but little and then in grunts and hisses except on his not sober days, when the words would come tumbling out like dried peas from a bushel basket. He spent his quiet time by the kitchen stove, gumming his bear fat (he was toothless ever I knew him),

slurping molasses gruel, and sending out great clouds of smoke from the long, ornate pipe that my son Daniel will inherit when he reaches his twelfth year.

Grandpa was a schoolmaster of sorts, at least to us, and was even considered a fine lay preacher in his day. In his last years, however, he was mainly quiet, but even then he was known on great occasions, particularly after one of his famous "sweat baths," to hold forth on the glories of the Holy Spirit, which he termed, in his special way, *the Manaytoo*, a word we never fully understood since we know not the ancient Hebrew. His approach to religion was daring and original; from his lips we heard terms and tales that Reverend Spokes never broached, such as the Great Panther that stalks human sinners in the gloomy places of the earth, even though the Reverend preached twice a day on Sundays and regularly gave Humiliation Sermons on Thursday nights.

Plain truth was Grandpa's only measure when he surveyed life. He was much given to reading the Bible, the works of Bunyan and Reverend Stick of Fredericksburg, and various other volumes of piety and wisdom surveying the human condition. He was particularly interested in the tomes of learned scientists treating of primitives and other savage peoples. Perhaps looking at such books to excess tended him toward despondency and the habitual melancholic tinge of thought he showed in his latter days. The poor man fought the alcohol demon his life long and though he won the war—he died sober (we believe)—he lost many a battle. When in his cups, he would denounce obscure historians and scientists and then turn to the writers of fictive prose, letting sail a few choice volleys against the effrontery of *rubbishy scribblers* and *their fancy novels*, those *lying falsifiers*, as he called them, who, as he claimed, palm off the most bald-faced absurdities with their glib and oily pens and have the audacity to denominate them *facts*. I would to heaven

these plain words of mine could convey the force of expression with which he would say the word *novel*, or *scribbler*, or *romancier*, as if something filthy was eating away at his mouth and he must puke it out fast to the floorboards like a slimed biscuit tainted with the soft blue mold. He spoke right often of *those books of poison, those d-d novels and such*, and as he pronounced the blasphemous word, his lips would curl out and remain in a standing quiver until he pushed them back into place with an age-worn hand. *Reason and fact*, he would shout, *that's what we want, unseasoned with the bloated lies these fancifiers spew out. Truth is oft-times terribler than fiction.*

Strangely, he reserved his most burning scorn for those popular pamphlets and chappie-books every Jimmy Peddler tries to sell the fairer sex as he beats his cheap wares from door to door, the two-penny tales treating of the American Aborigines and young lassies wandering in the forest depths (*The Lost Maiden of Saratoke Valley & c.*). For these, he heaped up his witheringest invectives, the likes of which I have never heard, nor hope to hear, ever again. And whenever one would fall into his hands, he would read it with burning eyes and clenched jaw, shaking his head and snorting and puffing until he had turned the final page, after which he would bury it deep under the kindling.

This is why we were so surprised to find Grandpa's pages in the bottom of the corrupted salt box, for at first glance they appear not to be diary or journey day entries but rather novelistical musings and, even, verse. He writes of original characters and peoples his pages with names and terms unknown to us, that might seem almost his own invention had we not known him better. Some ignorant folk, upon perusing his essay, will no doubt conclude that this be *Romance* and Grandpa be, all appearances to the contrary, a *Romancier*. But this is not true, surely, for what my Grandfather wrote is not

fictive sport, or else everything he stood for was a lie. Or, if it be fiction, and I will close on this, a deeper (and more terrible) truth lies, or rather subsists, beyond it. In God's name, MARTHA PEARSALL, May 4, 1822

CHAPTER I

Voice of the Wilderness. — A Site Holy to the Indians. — A Meeting Place in the Spring. — A Strange Tale or Prophecy Regarding a Giant Bird.

Is this dry and wrinkled stuff the skin of a white man? Touch it, and it sloughs off like a serpent in the changing time. But the serpent's heart stays the same. Yet this *man* of divided tongue speaks as a white man, sees as a white man, pours the sugared rum down the throat that appears white when turned to the world. White man, white man, what do you see?

White throat, burning throat. *Wahilik* throat. Clear, cooling rum. Damn them all to hell. Have I fought a good fight? Have I finished my course? Have I kept the—faith? Damn them all to hell.

Of late, this white man, this pitiable old thing, sunk in raggedy dotage, finds his wings again in the dream world of night, and at second hand, when his pen glides the dreams into black ink across the page. It is at these times that he sees a red boy crouched in the cool damp forest, waiting, listening, watched over by the *Lakah* (People) and all soaring creatures. Once, this Earth was theirs, and the fullness was theirs, when they wintered by the river, and rose up each dawning year to the blessing place, and hunted through the summer mountains, this before an unclean thing came and swept them away like papery leaves before a strange dry wind.

By day, the white man sits by the fire and listens to the voice of the wilderness. When he dozes, the spirit creeps inside, finds the wild, whirling words incised on the bones at their oldest point, and casts the words into dreams. And the bones are—red.

In the eyes of his boyhood he looks, and sees the place, and behold: it is of the freshness of a dream, even with this running past of seventy winters in an instant. Tatters of golden light imbrue the glade, where the Grove sacred to the People stood since life's breath began. There is yet no English word on the air; the liquid sounds of *Lakahli* are a distant music, humming below the glade at the approach of the priests. *Lahaka mise kai ka?* The memory of that music will vanish when this one—the last one—crosses over.

The smooth sliding gray trunks of beech trees form two opposing lines rising from low grasses that glow in the mountain air. In the mornings the fog drifts on the upper branches, sure sign the Spirit of the Forest is attendant. The glade lay at the high end of a narrow valley the *Wahilik* call now after the chiefest of their decorated murderers, the Irish bloodhound who wore the heavy hanging badges, red signifiers of his deeds, until he too was struck down to lie in his own puddling blood.

And now? Are the remaining trees felled by those who call Gen. Sharkey a hero among men? Does the clear water still break forth from the little crevice in the rocks, washing down among stones and boulders rounded with the long slow hand of time? But the stain of blood never leaves the slashed and scarred ground that first opened to drink it in.

Every spring when the *seena* bush opened its delicate airy blossoms of pale red, the People would journey from the river village and gather in the sacred grove, the blessing place, to brighten the chain of life, to sing the old songs, to feel the rich givings

of the Earth, to listen to the two conjurers, one old and one young, the teacher and his acolyte. The old one was a *Burdah* and wrapped himself and the other, the high-voiced *Burdah* to come, in the wolfskin cloak nights before the fire, where they would clasp and tremble. Once the old conjurer told this prophecy to the red boy as leaves rustled, drawn out of sleep by the first of the hot winds:

Far from the glade, this is where the sun reddens the earth of a morning. Stony wastes rise up and the bird called gulloua builds her nest atop the barren rock. And the morning too was cold, and the boy hunting below in the forest broke the stream ice to find flowing water to drink. He lay and filled his stomach, thinking of the doe he was tracking and the sweet taste of her heart and liver. But the gulloua fell silently through air and grappled him to her rough underside before soaring above the clouds. The boy knew that to struggle was to fall and die. He watched the land move below and awaited his chance.

The nest lay perched on a narrow pinnacle of rock, and when the boy peered over the brushy edge, he understood that without wings, he would never leave the barren rock. He waited with another prisoner for the gulloua to come each day and feed them out of her mouth. He watched as the other grew feathers, slowly coming to the knowledge that she was the gulloua's daughter. He ate the mother's food at first with disgust but then with growing relish. When it was time, the daughter flew away clasping him now tight, now loose, with sharp drawn-up talons. He sucked her breasts so as not to fall.

They made their home in the forest trees on the other side of the mountains. One time he saw three bear hunters at a fording place on the Allegree River and shouted at them to see if they understood his language. They did, and warned him away with warlike

motions, for feathers sprouted out of his face, chest, and arms. But they felt pity, too, and left a bag of human food on the ground before passing over the river.

CHAPTER II

The First Attempt to Settle Sharkey Gulch. — A Troubled Winter Brings Death and Delusion.

This is the song my sister, my spouse, my Esther sang to me:

Around the time Gen. Sharkey was collecting Indian heads south of the Elk River, several families of landless Virginians from the Tidewater region crossed the pass that skirts Cheat Mountain and stopped to replenish their supplies in the Tygart Valley. This was most likely in July of 1765 or 1766. One member of the party, Robert Erwin by name, turned his horse up a faint trail that ran along a mountain brook tumbling down from the heights. At about one hour's distance, he came to a clearing. The grass was lush and high, and the surrounding hillsides well timbered with the tallest and straightest trees he had ever seen. This is the place, he said to himself, and rode down the mountain to where his young family was waiting. Near the place the *Wahilik* now call the Raven Cleft, in the darkening gloom, he shot a panther, most ferocious of the forest denizens, betwixt its glowing eyes. As he examined the paws of the beast, it shuddered in the throes of death and drew its razor-like claws swiftly across the left side of his face.

That summer, Robert Erwin began to cut trees with the help of his able wife Hannah. They constructed a snug lean-to abutting a hill in the place where spring water rushes out from a small crevice in the rocks. Their daughter Esther, a girl of twelve or thirteen, later recalled the warm days of August on the mountain that first opened to a

glorious paradise, but gradually became a stage for corruptive thoughts and terrifying fears, punctuated by the howlings of night creatures rambling in the wilderness, calling after their own kind. The humming and chirr-chirring of insects in the mild nights, so pleasing to her at first, became by subtle steps insupportable, tuned to a sharp and metallic edge that penetrated deeply her sweet dreaming mind, leaving scar upon scar. The girl, huddling upon her pallet, envisioned hordes of locusts descending upon the mountain and blanketing the ground with their quivering bodies that she could not help crushing wetly with every step. A stray remark by her mother—as a girl Hannah had seen Chesapeake Bay Indians roasting grasshoppers on flat hot stones before devouring them with dripping honey—gave sustenance for more insidious imaginings. Esther began to suspect the four sacks of dried Indian corn were infested with click beetles and other low, crawling things. Early one morning, she managed to pour most of it into the fire before her father awoke.

Robert Erwin was an old man married to a young wife. His fingernails grew long in the slack winter time, while his scars remained livid. He could not rid himself of the burrowing pain and would pace the room at night while the fire embers cracked and fizzled. In her dreams, or half awake, Esther sometimes saw him as a wandering wraith with red, starting eyes, reaching out his hands after prey as he lumbered along.

Robert Erwin died, lucky man, most probably of a taint in the blood, sometime after the turn of the year. His wife, daughter, and son Edgar, a boy of about eight years, put the stiffening corpse in a snow bank and waited for the spring thaw, which surprised them with its lateness. They were close to starvation by then.

*The Grove has been blasted by the axe's sharp blows,
Now darkling shapes skitter over frozen snows;*

*Well over the mountain, encamped on the night,
The full moon rolls eastward with a half-yellow light.*

Esther persistently saw the following dream: *I awake*, she said, to a hand scratching gently on the lean-to door. The dream continues. She arises and belts her robe as she walks from the pallet toward the sound. She tries the door and finds it jammed. The scratching ceases. She returns to her pallet and discovers a writhing form under the blanket. She pulls back the cover and the body's motions are temporarily stilled. Then the head turns on a creaking skeleton pivot, showing her the face while the hands claw the night air. The scars are opening and closing like soft jelly lips. She parts them with her fingers that are numb but beginning to stir to life. She holds the lips or scars apart and peers through the skin at the seething red inner matter, pressing her eyes hard against the apertures as the filthy fingernails stroke her hair and pinch her scalp as if looking to pop lice. She pulls her head away from the hands but, at the same time, in the heat of revenge, forces her fingers in. It is cold as fresh hanging meat, throbbing as a headcheese fallen from the mold. In her mind she senses the night's infinite silences when the chirr-chirring quietens, the voids beyond the rolling world.

Hannah and Edgar and Esther are very hungry now, a hunger which cannot be described to those who do not know it. (And I do not know it, not that clawing hunger. And write somewhere else of this: Esther's lost head came to me once in a dream vision, floating on a lake of bitter salt. It told me that my Martha has the clear gray eyes from Hannah, the able wife, her (Martha's) great-grandmother. And write of this too somewhere else: the *Wahilik* and the People: in her (and Jonathan) they now swim together. Silent blood.)

Esther visits a snow cave. She wanders its long echoing passageways, marveling at the symmetry of floor and ceiling. Along the walls are irregular water-cut shapes that prove upon closer examination to be hieroglyphical writings. Esther ponders the surprising antiquity of the New World and its aboriginal civilizations. The insect eaters were crude coastal dwellers, she decides: every step that further penetrates the continent opens new vistas to the student of the higher cultures. She retraces her steps and takes sustenance from a soft substance extruded by a rectangular ice block at the snow cave opening. Fortified, she notices on the way back to the lean-to that the snow is melting off the land.

CHAPTER III

A Savage Band of Sagawato Indians Strike Without Mercy.— Their Unspeakable Treatment of Christian Captives and the Dead.

The advance party climbed the last ridge on snowshoes. There they stood transfixed at the unheard-of sight. A gap had been ripped from the grove; long pale trunks lay at silent rest in the snow near the hacked stumps. Sap had run and thickened like congealed blood. Where the trees had once bridged earth and sky, a shrieking emptiness. Mutoksa said, "My heart has been sundered, leave me alone to die." Orsati and Parmak toiled shudderingly down the slope. In the crude dwelling, of sticks and wattles bound in vine, they covered their noses and wondered at the three sleeping *Wahilik*. How had these weak and almost lifeless ones managed the cunning necessary to challenge the Forest Spirit and defile the Grove? Had they remarkable *siddhis*? Were they saltwater demons from east of the mountains?

The foul air in the hut could not be tolerated for long. The men went outside and washed their mouths and noses with clean snow. At the slaughter place, they burned sweet *yerna* grass and prayed, bending and mourning over the stumps. Parmak said, "The Forest Spirit is lost to us. I feel His absence. This place is not good now. Soon, we will be swept across the land by these savage *Wahilik*. I will go to Mutoksa, find his body, cross the divide. We were friends since boyhood, did the spirit service together."

Orsati said, "No, leave Mutoksa to himself. He still lives; he will be wandering to the river, singing a sad song of this. The Grove will heal, the *Wahilik* are weak like women. We will take the children and return to the winter village. If they learn our language, we will swim together. If they are stubborn, we can sell them to the French across the river." Parmak argued against it, but in vain. Orsati was the elder and carried the speaking stick.

They went to kill the woman, but she was dead. They washed her carefully with snow water, and Orsati cut away the hair and head skin. The hairlock was very fine, a valuable trophy. When they tried to rouse the boy, they found he was dead, too. They washed him too in fresh snow water. But when Orsati cut the head skin, the boy sprang to life, making white eyes and screaming and panting. He crouched in the corner, breathing hard. He was clearly a hunger demon, so Orsati slew him with his axe. They burned away his hair and removed his head. Parmak carried it away to hide in the next valley. Orsati took the body out and chopped it, burning the parts so they could not reunite with the head and drift through the valleys in search of souls to haunt.

Through this all, the girl slept, turning and groaning. Now she awoke and made motions to show she was hungry. Parmak gave her a piece of smoked fish which she

gobbled up. He told Orsati they should feed her some of the pieces of the burned boy, saying, "Give to the savage food fit for savages." Orsati replied, "Hold. This one is not a demon." He pulled her upright by the long brown hair and touched all over her arms and feet. He asked her in French if there were more *Wahilik*. She shook her head, saw her mother, wept. This too showed she was no demon.

*Cloudy embers light the western sky,
Ever that day since;
Night's warning in seething billows,
Ever that day since.*

CHAPTER IV

To the Winter Village. — A Terrible Vengeance is Exacted Upon the Savages. — The Girl Gives Food to the Boy. — He Dreams of Water.

In the beginning of that year, a fire star appeared in the sky and on successive nights swept through the Sitting Woman Who Watches, flaring out with great trails of light each time in the distant west before dawn but returning the following night, six in all. This was reckoned a caution omen by the older *Burdah*. The People murmured in response and shook their heads. But the star's ponderous motion, slower by far than the bright one two years before that had presaged the season of good hunting, and its thick greenish tongue that slithered like a rock snake as it entered the Sitting Woman, set many to wondering about its true import. Thus, when Orsati and Parmak arrived with the news of the Grove's desecration, there was great unease and wailing.

They told the story to the men and boys. The elders decreed that the People should remain longer in the winter quarters. The Spirit of the Forest was angry at His

people, who had not prevented the desecration of the blessing place. He had called out to them, who had not heeded the sound of His voice.

And now, as the People waited, and watched, a darkness was already hovering like a bird of prey sliding on the fickle winds.

Therefore, behold, the days come, saith THE LORD, that this place shall be called the valley of slaughter. And I will make this city desolate, and a hissing; every one that passeth thereby shall be astonished and hiss, because of all the plagues thereof.

Now, the Wahilik girl went to dwell in the lodge of Orsati's second wife with the other women. And one day she said to the boy, "*Ashta no, ashta no,*" that is, "Take this (food)," or "Eat of this." He was surprised that her voice could so sweetly utter one or two words of their language. He ate of it (corncake), and it was good.

For, saith THE LORD, I will turn you out of your dwelling places, and fling you far into the darkness under the roaring flood. And I will make you thirst, and hunger, and then will I number you to the sword. For when I spoke, you did not answer.

Then it was that Parmak and, within the space of a day, Orsati, showed the true message of the fire star, burned upon their bodies. The first sign was a thirstiness and digging pains in the belly. Then swollen growths, about the size of a man's thumb tip, formed in their armpits and groins. This was followed by hot sweats, dark splotches from the neck to the feet, and, within a day or two, leaving. Orsati went first, and as they washed his body and laid out the clean grave cloths, his wives began to suffer great thirst and so on. Soon enough they too had crossed the divide after him. And the others, and their wives and sons and daughters.

In one turning of the moon, the People vanished like a volley of hail pelting into a dark flowing river. Most crossed over in the lodges; others crawled into the forest in search of coolness. They did not return. It was a great sadness that no one could wash the bodies.

The boy too was clawed by the sickness, but he turned back at the crossing place while there was still a little life in him, remaining to feel the warmth of the sun yet upon his arms. The girl left the lodge—she alone was untouched, moving freely among the groaning ones—and gave him—him alone—water and mash she made for him in her mouth. She pried open his clenched jaws and put it in, making sure he swallowed it. The next day, his swellings began to leak. They stunk vilely, but when they were drained dry, the fever broke and he slept for a long time, awakening weak and thirsty.

The boy rested and saw a dream. He was atop a group of tree trunks bound with vine, floating in a placid lake so large he could not see the shore. He leaned over to drink the water; it was salty and good, warm like blood.

After a time, a wind blew from the east. Curling waves sprang to life, pushing him along. He strove to stay in the middle of the slippery trunks, but the turbulent waters lifted first one side of his perch and then the other, sliding him often toward the edge. He shivered with cold and, for the first time, noticed his own nakedness.

Toward the south, an ice mountain drifted toward him. Dark shapes were moving within, pressing faces to the outside. A large wave tipped his raft and he swam upright as the ice mountain surged over him, pulling him along far under water.

CHAPTER V

In the Cavern. — Delivery from Captivity, Into the Arms of Death. — Out of the Wilderness.

For a long time (how long? three years? five years?), Esther and the Indian boy, Sorusa (for that was his name, Sorusa, or *Place Where the Sun Rises*) lived the two of them in a cave at the foot of a valley. He showed her to gather the plants good to eat and to set snares for squirrels and birds. They made deerskin breeches and tunics and stored food and wood for the long winter. Esther showed him her language, word by word. To his ears, it was musical and ravishing. She drew him the shapes of letters in the dust, and spoke their sounds for his ears to comprehend and his mouth to repeat. By the fire, in the nights, she read to him from her Book as he peered over her narrow shoulder:

Come with me from Lebanon, my spouse, with me from Lebanon: look from the top of Amana, from the top of Shenir and Hermon, from the lions' dens, from the mountains of the leopards.

And, after a time, he could read back to her:

Thou hast ravished my heart, my sister, my spouse; thou hast ravished my heart with one of thine eyes, with one chain of thy neck.

They made a bathing place in a still pool by the creek side, rolling hot stones from their fire down the grooved slope to the water that then bubbled and plumed forth jets of steam. Esther showed him the star-shaped lacerations in her armpits and groin. He traced them with his fingertips and touched his lips to the white imperfections of skin. Inside, the hot blood roared in its courses. She raised his face to hers and the roaring changed.

By the time the end came, she had told him many things:

I dreamed you.

My father killed me.

I would never marry a white man.

None of this ever happened.

My father is in here.

I was never born.

I killed my father.

You dreamed me.

The end: Gen. Sharkey and his banditti missed the turn to the Cheat Mountain Pass. Esther was smoking meat in front of the cave. They took her for an Indian. Sorusa knew this when he came up holding his string of rabbits and found her body, long and pale, laying at silent, headless rest on the flat rock. Or she spoke to them in English and they laughed and raised their swords to her fine white neck, numbered now for all eternity. Gen. Sharkey was a beloved man, he could pass her head off at the fort as an Indian's. No one cared, for it was smudged from fire smoke and worth good cash money, a ringing coin or two, a small cask of golden Jamaican rum.

Sorusa knelt and removed the wet deerskins, covering the truncated neck with a flowery *seena* branch. He washed her body for a long time and dried it and burned sweet *yerna* grass while the yammering infant scuttled underfoot.

Two days later, he tied back his long black hair and hid it under his hat. In a shirt and boots he had acquired from a half-breed trapper, he took his boy and the Bible and walked out of the forest, into the wilderness.

FINIS

ADDENDA

To the Second Edition

THE CLAIM HAS BEEN ADVANCED that the Indian brave pictured on the title page of this pamphlet is not Parmak the Sagawato warrior, but, rather, an Iroquois chief from upper New York State who posed in an advanced state of alcoholic intoxication. This claim is spurious. The further allegation that the illustration originally appeared in a cheap Philadelphia weekly is ludicrous on its face and entirely without merit.

DUE TO UNPRECEDENTED DEMAND, a special *Nickel Edition* of "Captivity and Deliverance Therefrom" is now in state of preparation. We envision for it new illustrations *never before seen*, that will allow the discerning reader to further amplify his conception of Orsati and his harem of comely squaws, an authentic hunting dance, Robert Erwin and his Hannah, Esther clad only in leaves and vines, Sunrise as a boy, a nighttime massacre of pilgrims on the Elk River, and the disturbing but unforgettable vision of the "fire star." The reading public will also be gratified to know that a hitherto unknown section of Jeremiah Easterer's manuscript has come to light and will form a prominent part of the Third Edition.

Because of the nature of the subject matter, and the unflinching manner in which the author bends his eye to his task, however, we cannot but recommend that the new material *not* be read in the presence of women and children.

Sales to begin Aug. 14. MARSHALL & MARSHALL, PUBLISHERS

Vita

The writer Richard Buchholz was formerly known as the pianist Richard Buchholz, nightly ragtime specialist at an Airline Highway pizzeria on the site now occupied by the Casual Male Big & Tall men's clothing store. Born in a wooden house on Stuart Avenue in the Southdowns area of Baton Rouge, he attributes the placidity of his early years to the benevolent influence of the nuns at nearby St. Aloysius. His southern idyll ended at a tender age when his family moved for economic reasons to an area of Detroit somewhere past the Ten-Mile Road, where school chums chided him for his stutter and accent. He found solace in the silent world of snow, whose secrets he was only beginning to plumb when his family returned to the tropical south three years later.

He keeps a picture on his desk that shows a family of six in a German farmyard in the year 1900. To the right is his grandfather, a boy of nine standing in front of a window with one curtain pulled slightly to the side. The boy does not yet know it, but in seven years he will go to Bremen, board the *Kaiser Wilhelm II*, and sail to New York with \$50 in his pocket.

His grandson cherishes his memory and strives to keep the curtain from completely blocking the view.