

THE CAMEO ILLUSION

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PREFACE

The notion of a monolithic narrative tradition must be held in abeyance during the reading of this introduction and the text that follows; for tradition is merely the rubric under which a panoply of diverse narration falls, admitting at once of the mimetic realism that makes up the bulk of today's best-selling novels (these works remain essentially nineteenth-century fictions and have little in common with the text under consideration) and the nonlinear novels of, say, Faulkner, Julio Cortázar, Alain Robbe-Grillet, or Claude Simon. For the purpose of the introduction, therefore, I shall restrict my attention to a brief historical overview of only one of the lines of development within the tradition (the one out of which my text emerges) and to a brief discussion of some of the cinematic devices in The Cameo Illusion and their earlier appearances in the works of others.

By the time Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880) and Henry James (1843-1916) started influencing the shape of the novel, it had already begun the process of altering; indeed, from its inception, had never ceased. Both Stendhal (1783-1842) in France and Dostoevski (1821-1881) in Russia contributed markedly to the future form of the psychological novel;

however, Flaubert and James might properly be said to mark the beginnings of the modern novel with its emphasis on narrative voice and point of view. Joseph Conrad (1857-1924), who was greatly influenced by James, further modified the use of multiple narrators in a manner that would in turn lend support to Faulkner's efforts at creating novels with multiple points of view. Although Conrad owed much of his method to James, the latter thought Conrad's devices excessive. The radical shift toward internal narration, however, must be credited not to James or Conrad but to two women: Gertrude Stein (1874-1946), who--immediately following her translation of Flaubert's Trois contes (1877) and still under the sway of Henry James's writing and William James's teaching--wrote and had privately published Three Lives (1909); and Dorothy Richardson (1873-1957), who--pointedly influenced by James's Ambassadors (1903)--in 1915 published Pointed Roofs, the first of the English stream-of-consciousness novels.

In steady succession, once the breakthrough was made, there followed the internalized narratives of Marcel Proust's Du côté de chez Swann (1913), published at the author's expense; James Joyce's Ulysses (1922), brought out by Shakespeare and Company, Sylvia Beach's little bookshop in Paris (Edouard Dujardin's Les Lauriers sont coupés of 1887 was the first sustained interior monologue and has properly been credited with influencing Joyce's technique); Virginia Woolf's Jacob's Room (1922), Mrs. Dalloway (1925), and To

the Lighthouse (1927), all published by her Hogarth Press; and William Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury (1929), As I Lay Dying (1930), and Absalom, Absalom! (1936). Contemporary with Proust, Joyce, Stein, Woolf, and Richardson and in a separate, but no less important, line of development, Franz Kafka (1883-1924) was writing fiction that later would influence the narratives of Samuel Beckett and Alain Robbe-Grillet; the two lines would merge with these writers, who also used the devices of Stein, Joyce, and Faulkner. Indeed, it is in Faulkner and Robbe-Grillet that we find, in common with contemporary writers like Cortázar, Michel Butor, Claude Mauriac, and Claude Simon, narrative features such as non-linearity, cinematic approximations, and questions of reality. This then--coupled with the blurring of reality, which derives from Kafka--is the fictional tradition out of which the cinematic novel in general emerges and the one out of which The Cameo Illusion in particular has come.

Also instrumental in suggesting the possibilities of a cinematic mode were three Bergsonian conclusions: that the mechanism of ordinary knowledge is cinematic; that the cinematic nature of knowledge is owing to the kaleidoscopic character of man's adaptation; and that the mind's tendency to follow cinematic method is both practical and natural to the intellect because it consists in making the general nature of knowledge form itself on that of action (Creative Evolution, pp. 306-07). A feature that is common to the thought process and to the cinema is the grammatical tense

of the action. Thoughts, memories, dreams, and fantasies are in the present tense; so too are all movies. That Bergson influenced writers such as Proust, Richardson, and Beckett should come as no surprise to anyone who has examined the nature of their works; that a continuous present should appear in The Cameo Illusion is also predictable, as are the other so-called cinematic devices: the flashbacks, the cuts without orderly transitions, the montage effects, and the dissolve--or at least what approximates a dissolve.

Neither the flashback nor the cut as a transitional technique needs any comment; each has long been a part of the convention. However, the montage can bear attention although notable examples can be found in Flaubert's Madame Bovary, Joyce's Ulysses, and Faulkner's Sound and the Fury. The agricultural show in Bovary may be the prototype of literary montage: in it, a romantic dialogue between Emma and Rodolphe is intercut by fragments of bestial reference and a prefect's inane speech, thus creating a sound montage that functions as an ironic comment on the love-making of the two. The Wandering Rocks section of Ulysses provides an excellent example of a visual montage in which major and minor characters are viewed moving through Dublin as they go about their private and public occupations; and the Benjy section of Sound and the Fury achieves a nonpareil montage of nonlinearity. Features of all three examples can be found in The Cameo Illusion:

first, with the rapid intercutting of memories and imagined scenes that follows the assault on Hunt and, again, during the bus ride through the devastated city after the storm.

Nonlinearity and dissolves form a major part of the novels of Robbe-Grillet, and his extensive use of these devices may owe its presence to similar uses in Faulkner's novels, notably that of the merging of characters in Absalom, Absalom! Indeed, one might even speculate that the world of art has contributed to the practice. Both Escher and Magritte share with Robbe-Grillet his concern with the question of illusion. One need only review Escher's Metamorphosis in which a series of images seem to dissolve into one another until at last the first image reappears. In a number of Escher's drawings, one level of reality representing fantasy is juxtaposed to another level of reality representing ordinary reality in such a manner that the viewer is required to consider the other levels of reality implied by the juxtaposition. Magritte introduces the same concern when he places in front of a window the exact representation of a landscape that is hidden from view by the painting, thus simultaneously creating in the mind of the viewer the real object outside the room and the representation inside. This, to Magritte, was the human condition: the world outside experienced exclusively through a mental representation. An analogous concern is introduced in The Cameo Illusion when a photograph of a ship passing beneath a raised bridge dissolves into the actual passage of

the ship; the attempt was intended to produce a similar simultaneous existence in the reader.

Perhaps a comment on the emblem of the Möbius strip is pertinent to the subject of a diverse tradition. At the end of the narrative, a minor character goes through a rather insipid demonstration of the paradox inherent in a Möbius strip; the scene exists first to offer comic relief to the far too serious implications of the end and, at the same time, to symbolize the nature of a narrative that ends up right back where it started with the main character stretched out in the mirror image of his first appearance. No doubt the Möbius strip can bear the weight of one more emblematic function, for its paradoxical nature seems to suggest a tradition that is at once able to accommodate best sellers and a text such as The Cameo Illusion, as well as many other kinds of narratives.

Either within or against (certainly not apart from) the tradition, I chose a rhetorical strategy that derived its value from the existence of convention. Any narrative voice, such as the so-called cinematic eye, that remains ostensibly outside the characters depends, if only through a process of opposition, on the convention of a reflecting center of consciousness for its effect. Moreover, "objectivity" is at best illusive, a mere device for the apparent eschewing of omniscience; even within my convention of suggested objectivity, an antithetically intrusive and speculative voice runs through the text to remind the reader of the

narrative persona who stands above and beyond the action directing what is after all not really cinema but literary fiction. Such reminders cannot avoid setting up tension; for example, against the grain of the so-called objective texture of the prose in The Cameo Illusion, run such sentences as "These revolutions, if anything, are what the young man sees . . ." (p. 9). Despite the reminders, if the illusion of objectivity prevents consistent and reliable direct comment, another method of commentary must be found. One solution occurs in the juxtaposition of disparate images and events, rendered so that the reader is required to consider their relations, to infer from them certain values, and then to order them in a meaningful way.

Throughout the narrative, such abstract and naturalistic images as vortices, Möbius strips, closed map systems, and erratic courses (the storm's course, its representation on a tracking chart, the cockroach's hesitant and indirect course across a wall and the ceiling of a jail cell, the bus route, no doubt altered by the devastation of the storm, and the closed system of the plot itself) correspond to one or another of the human events in suggestive ways. As part of a rhetorical imperative, these juxtapositions either replace the usual commentary of a reliable authorial voice or correct the unreliable intrusive one, but it must be remembered that the activity never occurs in a vacuum; the process always depends on a convention against which the author is

permitted to write, which he may try to subvert, but without which his activity cannot meaningfully exist.

Consequently, our accepted standards are still used to measure even those works that appear to deviate from the tradition; this is natural and inescapable and not at all to be lamented; and for that reason, I began my novel with the idea of a story that might have been found in any number of conventional fictions. A young man returns home from the service and tries to resume his life. He sells some of his blood and, trying to find work during an economic recession, soon learns that (if he is to get employment) he must take a job unloading heavy sacks of coffee according to stipulations laid down by an unethical employment counselor who is recruiting new members for the state National Guard.

Years before, when the young man was a child, a hurricane killed his father, and now another hurricane is moving toward the city. This hurricane provides the urgency for getting all the coffee unloaded and stored in a warehouse, and the urgent, arduous conditions of the work have deleterious effects on the young man, who is unused to such labor. In order to relax after work, he stops by a dockside bar, where he encounters a young woman he has known for a number of years; however, weakened by his loss of blood and exhausted by the work, he is hardly prepared either for the request from her that he repair a cameo bracelet he once gave her or for the assault that follows from her lover, an older man who dislikes my young man intensely.

The older man injures the young man, who is then ejected from the bar by the waiter and forced to make his way to his room, where the assailant's daughter awaits him according to an earlier agreement between them. There, he discovers from the daughter that his assailant was responsible for breaking the bracelet in the first place, and this information prompts the injured young man to return to the bar, ostensibly to seek revenge; however, waiting in the shadows, watching as his adversary emerges from the bar, he sees some other figure step from the shadows and attack the older man, who has made at least two other enemies--one Sam Graggs, who is the young man's surrogate father, and an old street vendor named Inigo Oestler. Presumably one of the two is the attacker, but the young man cannot see who it is as the figure runs past him in the dark.

The next day, the police arrest the logical suspect, and he is held until Graggs turns himself in as the assailant.

Meanwhile, the storm has drawn near; its outer fringes have begun to spread rain along the coast; and the National Guard has been activated to help evacuate people from low-lying areas. The young woman who caused the original assault appears at the refugee center and reports that the old street vendor has refused to leave his room down near the beach. When she asks the young man to help, he decides to go see what he can do to get the vendor to a safe place. Going to the section north of the harbor during the height of the

storm, he crosses the drawbridge only to discover the vendor has already left his room, but it is there in the abandoned room that the young man discovers the broken bracelet, a discovery that casts suspicion on the vendor.

When the eye of the storm passes over, the young man makes his way back through the flood.

After the storm and in his National Guard role, the young man searches the devastated area north of the port for survivors; he finds the dead vendor instead and takes it upon himself to see that the dead man, who has no family, is properly prepared for burial before then proceeding to a hearing concerning Graggs' assault of the young man's adversary, but Graggs is freed after the adversary takes the witness stand and inadvertently reveals his own culpability in all that has transpired.

Later, pressing for information about his father's death, a pursuit that has preoccupied the young man throughout the story, he is chided by Graggs for his foolish quest.

Irritated by the chastisement, the young man departs. When Graggs goes after him, overtakes him, and grasps his arm, he jerks free only to lose his balance and fall into the side of a passing bus. After the young man is carried to a hospital, Graggs tries to locate him; the surrogate father first sees the patient performing inane tricks with a Möbius strip, then finds the young man lying in a hospital bed and receiving a blood transfusion. Here, the story ends,

back at the same place it began, only this time the situation is perfectly reversed.

One can see that the plot is not very remarkable, a simple story that can even be considered a mystery; however, the unusual manner in which the story is related makes it unlike any typical mystery. To begin, the story is related in a continuous present tense that makes no distinction between the present, the past, or the future (that is, fantasies about the future). As an aid, though, I have used italics to indicate a change in time and have often used them to indicate a mental process, such as a memory or even a hallucination. In this manner, I could retain the illusion of objectivity and still go inside my main character's mind, much the same way that the past is revealed in a movie.

The images were also meant to help place the events: for example, because I wanted to give the impression of a character who was caught in the maelstrom of his private obsessions, I used a vortex to suggest that situation as frequently as I thought I could possibly get away with it--beginning with the large vortex of the hurricane, which is repeated generation after generation, and passing to those vortices of sinks and drains and even the trowel sweeps of some obscure concrete worker from the past.

With the erratic courses of storms and roaches and detoured buses, I wanted to suggest parallels to the erratic process of my main character as he pursues what can be of

no good to him--that is, the manner and causes of his father's death as if he were somehow responsible for that occurrence. This, then, I took to be his hubris and what eventually would lead to his downfall.

Downfall may be too strong a word for what follows from foolishness; tragic downfall must certainly be. Nevertheless, there are tragic elements in the character of my young man. That he seems at first more acted upon than acting places him in the company of several modern antiheroes, not the least of whom is Joseph K. That the young man slowly alters, however, through a sequence of events is clear: his work, his injury, his arrest, and his experiences in jail have a cumulative effect. Following those events, he still retains his consistently reticent nature, but he also begins to act: first, in his effort to save the old street vendor; then, contrary to his superior's wishes, in his insistence on going into the devastated area north of the port; and, finally, in his determination to take responsibility for the vendor's funeral preparations and in his determination to carry out his investigation of his father's death, even in the face of Sam Graggs's criticism. At the moment of his accident, he is willing to act. Even if such action is indeed foolhardy and compulsive, it must be seen as an affirmation.

That he is struck down at this moment may, of course, be construed as the counterpoise of that affirmation and one more of the many binary oppositions in the narrative.

The argument for such tension should reside in a recognition that the value of affirmation lies in its potential opposite; if there were no counteraffirmation, there would be no need for affirmation: the concept of victory, for example, cannot exist without an accompanying concept of defeat.

For all the strangeness of my technical devices, ultimately they serve only as the various means to my end-- that is, the narrating of a simple story. It would be a mistake for either me or anyone else to consider a "dissolve" or a "cut" or even a series of frequent "cuts" that appear to form a montage as an end in itself or as anything more than my means of executing my original conception.

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THE CAMEO ILLUSION

Backfiring, a produce truck approaches the intersection, is geared down, lurches sideways on worn shocks, and continues loudly toward the port. Part of a canvas, thrown over the crates of produce but improperly secured, has worked loose, and the flapping tarp has allowed one of the crates to work itself to the rear edge of the flatbed, where, set at an angle half on the truck, half off, the crate seems certain to fall.

Coming along the gutter from the opposite direction, an old man in overcoat and flannel shirt guides a pushcart to a halt alongside the curb. Backing up, he turns his wagon so that the felloes wedge against the concrete.

"Shrimp," the old man calls out, "snapper throats, mullets."

His stooped figure, bending over the bed of the cart, disappears as he dips into the cart and comes out holding up a gray fish, which he thrusts at a pedestrian approaching him from the front.

"Mullets. You want mullets? I got mullets."

When the passerby averts his eyes and continues without a pause, the old peddler tosses the fish back into his cart. It is built with scrap lumber, old weathered boards held together by rusty nails, by wooden pegs, the whole affair the work of an amateur joiner. Even the spokes are kept in place by odd little pegs that prevent slippage inside the oversized apertures of the nave. He stoops again and pulls out a crab, its legs and pincers waving helplessly at the end of his

outstretched arm.

"Crabs maybe? Here--here's a crab from the sea. In your diet is enough iodine?" He shrugs. "So here--I am offering crabs."

Water has begun to drip through cracks where the boards join, through openings gouged out at the bottom of the sides, but the old man appears determined to make a sale before moving on. He shakes the crab at the man on the sidewalk and starts to shout, but his spiel is interrupted by the loud sounds of backfiring muffler and rattling truck, which draws abreast of the two men on foot. As the truck goes past them, the glare of sunlight reflecting from the windshield causes the peddler to raise his free hand to his eyes so that he misses the fall of the crate, finally brought about by a jolt slightly more violent than the previous ones. At the sound of the impact on the pavement, though, he drops his hand and, still holding the crab in the other, jerks about. The crate, a simple openwork case of whitewood, the sort often used to transport fruit and vegetables, splinters and breaks open, strewing heads of lettuce across the asphalt, evidently without the driver's knowledge, for the truck lurches and bumps ahead to the corner, onto the harbor road, the muffler still popping as the truck is once more geared down to make the turn.

It is at this moment that the shutter of the camera snaps, catching all of the images at once: the lettuce heads fanning out from the shattered crate and scattering over the pavement, some still rolling toward the port, others already at rest in the far gutter; the crate itself, broken open and almost empty but still intact; the figure of the old street vendor, half-turned, the crab held high above his head, and looking back in the direction the truck has taken; the truck beyond the

corner curb but not yet out of sight, its tarpaulin flapping, one corner caught at this moment, uplifted by a sudden drop of the vehicle as it hits a chuckhole in the road. The photograph, its browntone tint well preserved, has been taken by a photographer, using a wet plate, who knows how to emphasize the juxtaposition of images and details, how to sense the exact moment that they all come together in that one statement so necessary to the meaning of the picture.

PART ONE

His pushcart stands before him. Already a small puddle forms beneath the cart; above it gulls swarm, one after another dipping to the unattended cart, then rising from the bed of ice and wood shavings to shake flecks of sawdust from the moist shrimp in its beak. The shrill cries of the gulls attract other solitary shadows that float silently by, soft-shaded puffs of gray and white feathers, sailing toward the old vendor, who facing about reveals his weathered face, brown like old leather, features obscured among folds of flesh that are wrinkled as much by the sun as by old age. He seems to have forgotten the sale now that the pedestrian has moved on. Beyond the vendor's stooped shoulders and raised hand, lettuce can be seen scattered over the street. The old man hesitates once, looking around, apparently thinking, but he does not linger at the sidewalk for more than a moment before quickly dropping the crab onto the bed of ice and hurrying to gather the scattered lettuce.

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This room, in every direction, consists of sharp angles, bare surfaces, clear cubistic planes and lines that employ the subtle aid of bright lights and abruptness to keep the heart pumping at a rate faster than normal, the blood coursing steadily through veins toward its destination: a plastic bag suspended halfway between the top of a bed and the floor.

Shaking, the transparent bag slowly fills. Both its motion and position attract and hold the attention. However, when concentration is limited for a long time to a darkening six-by-nine-inch packet, the effect is enervating. Attention wanes; motion--that of anticoagulant mixing with blood, even the rise of blood within transparent plastic--seems to abate. Unchecked, the eye relaxes; its focus dulls, widening its perspective only gradually and involuntarily. Within the widening periphery a tube is glimpsed ascending from the packet, and at the end of the tube a needle is inserted beneath the skin and taped to a motionless forearm. Although blood is visible inside the line, its movement is not, and the singular sense of a steady yet imperceptible flow has now ceased. Still--a certain distance is necessary or details blur. In fact, visual acuity is already in question, for the room is actually a small cubicle containing not a

bed but an examination table.

Reclining on the table, a young man stares absently at the ceiling. He is clean shaven; his hair, shorter than is fashionable, reveals the quick work of a military barber. Above the needle a blood-pressure cuff enwraps the arm, and in his hand he holds a rubber ball. The slightest pressure on the ball increases the flow of blood, but he seems unwilling or unable to make the effort. The ball remains loosely held not far from a field jacket that--well worn and out of season--lies next to him on the table. His sleeve is rolled above the elbow to accommodate the blood-pressure cuff, the impetus for this action evidently his own despite his abeyant attitude, which must be the result of the heat and humidity--or, at least, of the loss of blood. It may be that he is merely preoccupied, recalling the nurse as she prepared him for the needle. Whatever the reason, he does not alter his gaze even when a man behind the partition to his left begins to cough uncontrollably.

On the partition that separates them someone has tacked a poster, which is blank except for a centered, unadorned aphorism in sixty-point caps:

IT IS WHEN YOU GIVE OF YOURSELF
THAT YOU TRULY GIVE

But the young man appears not to have noticed the poster despite its size and location, and if he hasn't already, it's unlikely he soon will. More immediate concerns no doubt

trouble him, just as earlier, the nurse's inserting the needle, taping it down, and pressing the ball into his hand probably bothered him.

Contrasting with his inertia, a woman's brisk tread moves from one point to another outside the cubicle, and in the background a voice from a radio reports the weather:

. . . now veering northwesterly through the Yucatán Channel at twenty miles an hour, according to the Hurricane Tracking Center in Miami. Meanwhile, along the coast the temperature will remain in the high nineties with little relief in sight. The relative humidity stands at . . .

Someone, perhaps the person who walks so briskly, turns off the radio, and at once new sounds arise. A buzzing comes from overhead, then ceases. In that direction a fly settles onto the rim of a light reflector. Moving along a curve that is parallel to the edge, the fly reaches the cusp of its path and reverses itself, describing inside the reflector between the bulb and the metal a narrow crescent. Buzzing is again heard as a second fly appears and lures the first from its position near the glowing light. Together they go through a series of ellipses, each accelerating as it approaches and swings around the globe, each decelerating in the wide loop that follows. These revolutions, if anything, are what the young man sees as he lies outstretched, his face toward the overhead light now wrapped in threads of smoke wafting up from beyond the partition. Sounds of activity come from the adjoining cubicle, where the footsteps have finally stopped. If the young man notices the pause,

he gives no indication of his awareness--not a blink or a change in his position. His face remains expressionless; his gaze, vacant until a rapid series of sharp explosions outside resound through the quiet air and cause him to jerk his head toward the sudden noise.

The truck lurches past--its flatbed, tarpaulin, and crates of lettuce blurring in the swelter with the oncoming traffic, trucks crowding the gutters, the distance between them narrowing, disappearing, and opening up again as they pass. Seen from behind, the vehicle seems barely to miss a man standing unaware on the curb, his back to the street. His companion, glancing up, staring after the truck, pulls him away from the street and toward the middle of the walk. As they resume their conversation, the truck slows, approaches the corner, and turns into a narrow, one-way lane.

This street, almost deserted, seen from inside the cab, seems pinched between the old buildings, some boarded up, some gaping open without doors or window panes. As the truck accelerates, their facades seem to fuse into one long wall rushing past. An aqueduct crossing the street up front looms precariously close to the top of the cab, then whips out of sight overhead as the truck moves under it and toward an archway through which the street must pass in order to reach the warehouse district and the causeway beyond.

Into the shadow--sustained for maybe two or three seconds, the light beyond, a glare--then out into the glare,

the truck comes suddenly upon a railroad embankment past which it makes another left so that it can move alongside the loading dock of a warehouse. Again downshifting, the driver lets the truck roll past an empty slot, brakes--shoving the gears into a different configuration, throwing the truck into reverse, wresting the steering wheel around--and backs his load of lettuce to an abrupt halt against the concrete platform. Setting the brake, he snaps off the ignition and, swinging out of the cab, jumps to the ground, slamming the door, striding quickly toward the rear while the engine, now off, continues to diesel, turning over, sputtering as though still on and running.

Two men, talking outside one of the warehouse doors, glance over at him as he comes up the steps and raises a hand in greeting.

"Morning, Graggs," the driver says.

One of them nods and, still listening to his companion, turns to watch the driver stride past and enter the building.

The other man says, "I don't care how we do it, Sam, but let's at least get these cars unloaded--even if we have to bring in extra help."

"Okay," Graggs says, "I'll call the labor pool and have them send someone over. I'm sure we can manage. Don't worry."

Although the noise in the street subsides, the young man does not resume his former position of staring at the

ceiling. His new posture, with head canted as it is to the left, obliges him to look directly at the poster. His eyes move slightly as he reads; then without leaving the last point of focus, they relax, remaining fixed on the partition, and stare vacantly at the words. This brief lapse is itself interrupted by the nurse, who enters the cubicle and, glancing at the young man's face, approaches the table. She checks the pressure on the snap-cuff meter, then the packet before removing the ball, cuff, and needle. Pressing cotton to the tiny puncture, she bends his arm so that it holds the cotton in place. Finally she eases him into a sitting position. All of this she does without effort, maintaining throughout the various steps a professional disinterest.

"Hold it like that and wait in the next room," she says. "The receptionist will take care of you."

Her instructions given, she detaches the packet of blood from its brace and, clipping the tube, takes the full bag with her, leaving the young man to make his own way out. He, moving more slowly than she, holds his arm against his side and gets to his feet. He pauses long enough to balance himself and test for dizziness before stepping away from the table. Apparently satisfied, he reaches for the field jacket. Why he has it remains unclear. Even his khaki shirt appears too hot. Of course, it is possible the glare of the incandescent bulb directly overhead merely gives the impression of excessive heat, and in any case the young man, his face slightly blanched, seems indifferent to the heat as

he steps free of the table and toward the end of the partition. Despite his paleness he is steady. Still, he moves cautiously as if uncertain of his own ability to walk. Once beyond the partition, he looks to his left. Through the doorway of the adjoining room an unshaven man is shaking his head at someone who is not wholly visible within the frame of the door. Only the extended arm of the second person is in view. In the outstretched hand is a paper cup, which the man refuses. This man and the other person are the only ones present; the nurse has either passed from the room or stepped behind a partition in advance of the man's speaking.

"Save the oranges and get to money," he says, his voice carrying through the doorway. "I'm in a hurry."

He does not look up, but the receptionist, now in full view, turns to greet the young man at his entry, her smile friendly as she asks, "How was it, Hunt?"

A weary smile breaks quietly over his face. With a nod he assures her that he is fine. Across the room is a sofa, and he moves to it and takes a seat. The receptionist returns her attention to the unshaven man. Unlike her, the man frowns, taking little notice of anything but the cash drawer that she removes from the desk and sets in front of her. As she counts out money the man's face, pale above the stubble, draws intently forward, his lips moving slowly as he recounts, licking thumb and forefinger to double back and check each bill. The last bill paid out, she pauses and steps to her left around the desk. Her cheeks are flushed

from the heat as she opens the door and holds it for him while he pockets his folded money and glances at the orange juice he has refused. He turns without a second look, however, and slouches out. A moment later the receptionist closes the door but remains there with her back to the room, her head bowed against the jamb. Her hesitation is brief before she turns smiling to face the young man.

"You made it back, Hunt." Her words suggest both welcome and relief, an understated but pleasant greeting.

His response is an ironic smile; then laughing, he says, "Getting out alive was an investment, Dusty. Saved myself to sell blood." Ceasing, he crosses to the desk and takes the once-rejected cup of juice. He sips, swallows, glancing at Dusty over the brim of the cup. "That is," he adds, "as long as there's a market."

Her smile fades; she grows slightly more flushed and looks at the desk and the cash drawer. Also in her twenties, she appears one or two years older than Hunt.

"I'm afraid," she says quietly, "there'll always be a market."

"At least," he modifies, "there'll always be someone needing blood."

He holds onto the cup and returns to the sofa, his expression now solemn as he sits down on the edge of the couch and looks at the cup in his hand.

She follows, asking, "Was it bad?"

"The needle?" he asks, glancing up and smiling.

"You know," she chides, "what I mean, Hunt."

His smile passing rapidly from his face, he gathers to him the loose folds of his jacket and lets the question go unanswered while he gazes slowly about the room. The soft sound of coffee percolating is sustained in the silence. Except for the hotplate, small refrigerator, and upturned bottle of distilled water, it resembles a normal waiting room with the usual sofas, end tables, lamps, and magazines. He leans back against the vertical support of the sofa and, taking another sip of juice, closes his eyes.

"Are you all right?" she asks in a quiet voice.

His face, scarcely concealing his fatigue, recalls a restless sleeper, but the weary expression lasts only a moment before he opens his eyes and straightens his arm to remove the cotton from the stanch bleeding.

"I think so."

The wadding removed, he unrolls his sleeve and starts to fasten the cuff. There is a moment of embarrassment as, fingers shaking, he fumbles with the button.

"Here--" She leans forward and, taking the cotton, reaches for his shirt cuff. "--let me." In the same motion she tosses back her hair, which has fallen over her brow and into her way. Both are watching her hands as she asks, "Was this the first time?"

He abruptly looks up from her hands and regards her.

"To sell blood?"

Her nod affirms, encouraging him to answer. The

question seems to strike him as amusing, or perhaps it's the answer he is about to give. He continues to look at her, a slow smile faintly showing about his eyes as he hesitates before replying.

"Yes," he finally responds, "it was."

"I'm surprised," she says, now drawing away from the buttoned cuff. She goes to the desk, takes a card from it, and returns to him. Handing him the card, she adds, "You'll need to sign this."

"Why?" he asks, still regarding her thoughtfully.

"To show you've been paid; it's just a record. . ."

Interrupting her, he says, "Not that, Dusty."

She hesitates, lips slightly parted, and searches his face for his meaning. Her expression remains puzzled for the beat it takes to make the necessary leap to her previous comment. Then smiling, possibly embarrassed at not having followed his line of thought, she says, "I supposed it was common among soldiers--an easy way to pick up money toward the end of the month."

"That makes sense." He takes the pen she has offered him and looks up and sideways away from Dusty as if trying to remember. A vague smile, no doubt at some distant event, plays across his face. Shaking his head, he turns his attention to the card and quickly scribbles his signature, then looks up at her. "But it was easier to borrow."

"Borrow?"

He nods. "You know--ten for fifteen. Always someone

willing to lend at those rates--and always someone to borrow."

Before Dusty can speak, the nurse appears at the door.

"I can take three more now."

Both Dusty and Hunt look toward the door, but the nurse has already turned away, her brisk pace carrying her beyond the door frame. Except for the sound of the percolator, the room is quiet. Hunt rises and accompanies Dusty to the desk, where they both remain silent while she counts out ten dollars. Giving the money to him, she asks, "Have you seen Arnold Thorpe yet?"

"No," he says, shaking his head, "but I'd like to." He glances at the money. "Maybe he can get me on at the port."

She moves toward the door to the outer room.

"Unemployment's rising."

"I know," he says. Putting away the money and frowning, he adds, "But there must be work somewhere."

"There is," she says. "Just not enough to go around." Opening the door, she nods toward the outer room. "Take a look if you want a firsthand view."

"Like the one that just left?"

"Like him."

She leaves the door open, revealing four parallel rows of wooden chairs that cross the room. In each chair a man sits quietly staring to the front. Most smoke as they wait, and despite the great variance in ages, they somehow look the same--expressionless, each apparently isolated from the others. She turns back to Hunt and places her hand

affectionately on his arm.

"But you'll want to see Arnold anyway."

In the stillness of the room the voice of a hawker crying his wares along the street can be heard over the sound of gurgling coffee. It is an old man's voice, heavily accented and consisting sometimes of unintelligible words that blend with the outside street sounds. On the whole, however, the voice is clear enough despite the accent, but neither Hunt nor Dusty gives any indication of having heard it.

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Sunlight reflects from display windows, casting a glare about the head and shoulders of the old vendor, who comes trudging up from the direction of the harbor, his accented cries blending in the quiet morning air with the cries of gulls. The openwork crate, full again, lies across the pushcart, and on his stooped shoulders, along with the sun's reflected glare, falls the full weight of this added load. Nevertheless, the vendor moves at a pace measured to cope with the load while still allowing him to cry out at spontaneous intervals. His voice echoes through the street and comes back from the distance assimilated by the laughing cries of the gulls.

Commerce along the street is at its midmorning low. Few signs of any storm are evident, and those, man-made: one shop boarded up, a storekeeper in the act of covering his windows with plywood, and little else. The residents must be accustomed to hearing reports of tropical depressions that form in the Caribbean during the dog days, follow a course toward the Gulf for a day or two until encountering a high-pressure system, and then dissipate, because for the most part the shops appear open for business. The harbor sounds of winches and steam whistles have a calming effect at

this distance from the docks, and the street vendor's irregular cries subside altogether when he curbs his pushcart, steps to a window, which mirrors his face to the street, and peers into the shop.

The door is ajar, allowing sunlight to fall in an oblique band upon the floor. Motes, glittering like weightless mica, not only floating but actually rising in the sultry air, turn lazily in the light. The room itself recedes into gloom. Still, after a moment the eye adjusts to the dark, and back in the penumbral shop several parallel rows of bookshelves, intersected by three short cross rows, divide the room and separate the various categories of books: paperbacks, new and used, to the right; hardcovers, to the left. Crates stacked on the floor, on the shelves, and on the single bench against the wall are toward the rear, and around them stacks of books can be discerned among the shadows. Along with the crates and books, on top of both, old newspapers are piled in disarray, and in the dust of a vacant shelf someone has scribbled:

the last pages of a book are already contained in the first

Or so it seems, for the outside glare still interferes with adjustment to the dimness, and the writing, along with the other objects in the room, remains somewhat obscure. Near the open door, on the wall above the band of sunlight, hangs a framed photograph of a raised drawbridge, under which the camera has caught a ship entering the port, its prow and

first loading mast already past the angular line of the raised bridge. Below, in the bottom right-hand corner of the picture, someone has written a date that is smudged and indistinguishable. At the center the white band of the smokestack forms a bold relief against the dark bascule underside. Members of the crew stand ready at the rail, and a small bow wave, parted by the ship's stem, can be seen falling back and away from the sides only to disappear beneath the splash of bilge water spouting from the depths of the freighter. The siren, which has started low, souging over the water, has begun to rise, its pitch increasing to a sustained wail as the ship enters the port. Conversation is impossible while the bridge is up, and the ship's whistle fills the air with vibrant, deafening blasts as if to signal the bridge that she is through the narrow passage and into the turning basin. Hunt, seen from a distance, appears to be waiting for the bridge and siren to complete the cycle that will bring relative quiet once again. He glances away from the man beside him to watch the tugs maneuvering the ship toward a berth between two other freighters. As it passes, the ship cuts off all view of the city across the port. The man points out something on the captain's bridge, then turns his back to the water and faces Hunt. He shakes his head apologetically, apparently picking up the conversation that was interrupted by the bascule's siren.

"I wish I could help you, Hunt."

They pause again, neither speaking, and look toward the

nearest freighter as a pallet of sacks is raised by a boom on deck, swung wide of the side, and lowered to the dock. A longshoreman frees the cable so a forklift can move in and pick up the pallet, its load held in place by interlocking tiers of fully packed sacks, each tier securing an inferior layer and secured in turn by its superior one. Beyond the load, a chute is briefly glimpsed disgorging a solid stream of grain into a waiting ship; then the lift driver, racing the engine, throws the lift into gear and hoists the load, blocking the view.

Hunt looks back at the man. "Not much chance then. . ."

"No, all the gangs are set," the man says. His hands come up in a gesture of helplessness. "And every morning the hall's crowded with more waiting to get on."

He frowns and looks away from Hunt and down at the wharf, its heavy timbers swaying gently underfoot. A thick tar-stained hawser runs from the nearby ship to the wharf, where the line is turned twice round the girth of a piling. The dank smell of cargo sheds and cottonseed hangs in the air. Flotsam and scum-coated ballast between ship and dock lap at the pilings, wash back, and slap the sides of the ship and a barge moored behind it.

Still looking down, the man says, "We've got more work than we've had all year, but you've never seen so many trying to find jobs." He looks up, wrinkling his nose at the rank smell of raw yellow sea, and nods across the water. "Hardly an empty berth anywhere, and still the ships come in.

They all want to get unloaded and out before that storm hits."

A man dollying a bale of cotton out of a shed turns his head at these words. He looks at Hunt's field jacket and calls out, "What's your friend expecting, Thorpe, a snowstorm?" He starts laughing as he goes past, his laughter attracting a gull that hovers, wings extended, cocks its head, and peers with one eye down on the men.

Thorpe smiles, saying, "That storm's like money in the bank. Long hours mean overtime."

Hunt, who has been watching the other man laugh as he moves along the dock, looks back at Thorpe. "Not for everyone."

"No," Thorpe agrees, "if these ships don't get out on time, there'll be demurrage to pay."

"I didn't mean that."

Thorpe pauses and tentatively regards the younger man before asking, "Have you tried the employment commission?"

Hunt shakes his head, his attention and thoughts apparently elsewhere.

"Well, do it," suggests Thorpe, "they can help if anyone can."

He watches Hunt nod and look thoughtfully up the harbor as though considering the suggestion. Coming into view behind Hunt, a shrimp boat, its engine idle, drifts toward the barge, the strip of water narrowing between the two decks. *H C Pettick* is painted in red letters on the hull. The shrimper, delivering shrimp to one of the bargemen, steps

from the pilothouse, quickly loops a line about a cleat on the barge, and begins putting shrimp from his holding tanks into an ice cooler tossed to him by the bargeman. Apparently the barge is used in replacing old and rotten pilings, for freshly creosoted poles are stacked between skeins of cable and packing crates on its deck, which is seven or eight feet below the wharf and level with the deck of the shrimp boat.

Thorpe, taking his cotton hook from where he has hung it on his belt, glances up from the shrimper and asks, "Where are you staying?"

Hunt looks sideways and up at the whitewashed balustrade running along the street above the wharves. With a small quick lift of his chin, he indicates vaguely the streets beyond. "The same place."

The longshoreman grins, slapping Hunt of the shoulder with his free hand. "On the strand then. Good, maybe we'll see you at Holly's tonight."

For a moment Hunt regards the other without commenting; then he frowns and, nodding, dryly says, "Sure, Arnold, I'll catch you later."

He turns and, lifting his hand in a parting gesture and starting across the width of the pier, sidesteps the plastic shards of a broken thermos bottle. Still holding his cotton hook loosely at his side, Thorpe watches Hunt approach the steps and, reaching them, mount to the street landing. As soon as Hunt is at the street, Thorpe steps back and looks again toward the barge and shrimp boat. The shrimper, now

braced against the pilothouse, has already thrown off the line and, as the boat drifts away from the barge, stands scowling up at the retreating back of the young man.

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At the top of the steps Hunt pauses, his head and upper body coming about, and faces south to look across the harbor, its ships, and sun-spangled green water toward the city. East of the bridge the bay extends to the offshore islands. The barren dunes lie parallel to the strand on a north-south axis and divide the plane of bay and gulf. His gaze sweeps back from the water and takes in the street and north bluff balustrade. Street and balustrade separate commercial houses and waterfront. Starting west along the barrier, he glances down at the cargo sheds below the bluff and continues past the offices of a cotton broker across the road, then the North Bluff Tattoo Parlor. The elevators of Producers Grain Co-Op rise just ahead below the balustrade, and from the elevators glint shafts of sunlight brightening the stippled walls of little stucco shops. He slackens his pace as he nears the next landing and set of steps descending to the wharf, and there he looks down at a janitor, unstubbed cigarette between drawn lips, now stepping out of Holly's Bar on the far side of the grain elevators. The man empties his bucket of suds and, watching the dirty water seep through the cracks, removes the butt to flip it over the edge of the wharf. He then turns, peering up at Hunt, and reenters the

bar. Across the port, refinery whistles signal the morning break. The soggy butt floats outward, bobbing on the sun-spangled swells that rise in the wake of a ballast barge.

Hunt lifts his eyes from the bar entrance and directs his glance toward the distant wharves. Gulls skim the water at midharbor, their wings flapping strongly. As if by command, they suddenly climb, wheeling away toward tankers that line the piers and draw less and less water as the imported crude is pumped from them. Glancing at the port authority tower--the clock shows ten--he steps off the curb, pauses, and gives a quick look both ways before angling across the street to the offices of the employment commission. At the entrance he pushes through the glass doors without hesitating, stopping only after he is well into the foyer and faced with a large room on each side: to the right a room of desks spaced at regular intervals along the back wall, two rectangular tables at the front wall, and grouped between front and rear on wooden chairs, people apparently waiting to be interviewed or placed at the tables as soon as seats become available; to the left, one that is partitioned by a counter running the width of the room.

Halted, he peers into the room on the right at the waiting people. Most, with the exception of one woman, seem unaccompanied. She has put herself between two bickering boys, who undeterred have merely widened the quarrel now continuing over her lap and behind her back. The clerk nearest the woman pivots in his chair and, glaring

at the boys, heaves himself up and crosses to a cardholder. He detaches a card and motions to one of the men seated in front of his desk. The man gets to his feet, hesitates, standing not quite erect, then follows the clerk back to his desk. Everyone else is waiting. Hunt moves away from the room on the right and, peering into the second large room, seems to be considering it. The color still has not returned to his face despite the walk along the waterfront. Within this room four lines are steadily moving up to the counter, one at each opening in the dividers that extend a foot or so from the countertop. The brisk pace of the lines, the general bearing of the people--everything except the formal arrangement of desks behind the barrier is different on this side. Here, the people queue up, spend a moment at a window, and leave, while those on the other side move only when called and then with hesitation.

He enters and joins the line at the nearest window. At the head of the line a man is turning from the official across the counter. As the man puts away the prepunched card he has received from the clerk, he starts for the door. The line edges forward, stops for a beat, and resumes its forward progress when the next person leaves the top position. Hunt, his face glistening beneath beads of perspiration, fidgets and looks past the man in front to the clerk behind the counter. The official listlessly eyes the form pushed toward him by the individual across from him, repeats his litany of questions, and replaces the card

with a new one drawn from a pigeon hole on the back side of the divider. The line moves up once again, and Hunt turns to examine the other lines and the people behind him. They all, both men and women, gaze ahead and, with expressions of near reverence, crowd forward to receive their cards. Facing the front after a moment of inspecting the others, he drops his eyes and stares vacantly at the floor until the line starts to move once more. He edges up and impatiently peers over the shoulder of the man ahead. The man glances back, frowning, regarding him, but sounds of shuffling bring the man quickly about to take his place at the just vacated window.

A light touch on the shoulder draws Hunt's attention to the woman behind, who says, "This is . . ."

Abruptly ceasing, she stares into his face; then as if trying to recall the words, she hastily completes her question.

". . . the ten o'clock line--isn't it?"

"I wouldn't know," he replies, shaking head. "It's my first . . ."

The woman's distracted glance past him indicates the window once more is coming free. Without finishing his statement he steps up to take his turn with the official, who waits, a bored expression on his face. If the man notices Hunt's pallor, his face gives no hint of it.

"I'm looking for a job," says Hunt. "Can you . . ."

"Wrong place," the official interrupts. He directs his

attention to the woman, reaches for the form being thrust toward him, and adds, "You need Placement; this is Claims."

"Where do I . . ."

The clerk, giving his full attention to the woman now easing Hunt from the window, inspects her card and asks, "Has your address changed since you last filed a claim?"

"No," she replies.

Still looking down at the form, the man asks, "Did you work or have any earnings during the last seven days?"

She shakes her head. "No."

Neither she nor the official seems to notice Hunt wiping his eyes and forehead with his field jacket. He lowers the jacket and waits, the perspiration now wiped from his face.

"Were you available, ready, willing, and able to work?" Before she can respond the man continues, "And actively seeking work?"

"Yes, yes, I was."

"Did you fail to apply for or accept any job offered?"

"No, of course not."

Hunt starts to cut in, wavers, then turns his back and moves toward the door as the official intones, "Were you entitled to or did you receive wages in lieu of . . ."

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The woman seated at the closer of the two long tables along the front wall searches the job listings on a computer printout. Despite her move to the table she remains flanked by the boys. Each has crowded up to the table and is running an index finger over the pages in imitation of her as she guides her eyes down the columns. The smaller boy is on her right, pushing and pulling at the list. Though neither is old enough to read, the older one imitates his mother so accurately that an observer might believe he actually considers each position his finger comes to. On the other hand, the little one gives no such illusion; he finally tears a page and forces the woman to act. Exasperated, she sends them back to their seats behind Hunt, who sits quietly filling out an application form at one of the smaller tables. On the floor beneath his own chair the younger boy finds a pencil stub. To keep his brother from taking it, he throws it under Hunt's feet just as he rises with the completed form. Hunt looks at the boys, bends down, and retrieves the stub. Straightening up, he reveals a pallid face that is beaded with perspiration; a trembling in his hands is visible at once. In fact, the hand extended to return the pencil trembles so much that he stops, apparently changing his mind,

and sits down, letting the application and pencil slip from his hands. Staring straight ahead, his eyes seem fixed on the far wall until his head falls forward without a sound to his arms on the tabletop. For a moment he remains in this position, then simply topples sideways, sliding out of the chair onto the floor.

The younger of the two boys is the first to cry out. "Mama," he screams, "Mama," and starts to bawl. At first his brother stares speechlessly at the still figure on the floor before him, but in the next moment he grabs his bellowing younger brother and pulls him away toward the woman, now on her feet and hurrying to them.

The old vendor shades his eyes, squinting against the glare on the water while the shrimper inspects the crate of lettuce, separates a head from the rest, and, thoughtfully glancing out as though seeking the answer out on the bay, takes the heft on the lettuce with his hand. Small waves rolling shoreward beyond the jetty strike the rocks, break up, and propel spray into the air. Within the breakwater, sailboats, motor craft, shrimp boats bob and tug at their moorings.

"Look at it," says the vendor, "crisp." He reaches out and touches the lettuce. "Nice color. Good weight. Here, see how moist, how full of water. Nice, huh? No wilted leaves, no dark spots. From me you don't get nothing shoddy."

He pauses, waiting, his heavy overcoat contrasting with the skimpy undershirt that the shrimper wears.

From his flannel shirt he extracts while he waits a soiled rag flecked with dried fish scales. He blows his nose and, still watching the shrimper, absently shoves the rag not back inside his shirt but into the right outside pocket of the overcoat. Nervously shuffling his feet, he immediately removes the rag and switches it over to the left side of the coat before asking, "Well, what you think?"

Without answering, the shrimper selects another head of lettuce and slowly repeats the ritual of weighing the lettuce by hand. He frowns, one brow raised, and glances up to eye suspiciously the street vendor. "Where'd you get these?"

"I don't ask," the old man begins, his face flushing, "where you get shrimp. What, then, is it to you where I find my deals? This is my business; that is yours."

"Yeah, but I don't want no stolen goods, old man."

Apparently flustered, the vendor says nothing at first; then into his overcoat goes his hand, coming out with the rag clenched in his fist, which he shakes in the other's face.

"What you accuse me of is this? Stealing?" The hand comes back, dabbing angrily at his mouth with the rag. "Is this what you are saying?" he shouts, stuffing the rag back into its original place inside the shirt. "You tell me that, Pettick."

When the other does not respond, the vendor seems to

grow angrier and, muttering to himself, reaches for the lettuce that Pettick holds. Retrieving the heads of lettuce and returning them to the crate, he raises his voice once more. "Who says I need you to make me so much trouble? Sometimes I got a headache from you."

As the old man picks up the crate to leave, the shrimper places a restraining hand on the openwork container and says, "Hold on, old man, don't get so steamy." He hesitates, giving the old man a chance to calm down, then asks, "Now what do you want for them?"

Poised, ready to go, the vendor glances significantly back at Pettick. "I give you four heads for every pound of shrimp--no more."

Appearing to consider the conditions, Pettick turns his shrewd eyes full upon the crate and silently calculates before countering with, "I'll tell you what--five heads and I'll throw in all the mullets and hardheads I have in the holding tanks."

"In the first place," says the vendor, "I tell *you* what--I take your trash fish as favor and save you trouble. This I do for free."

A quick burst of laughter comes from the shrimper. "It's no trouble, old man. I just throw them back; like you say, they're trash. Anyway, they'll wait for me. On the other hand, that lettuce will spoil if you don't unload it quick. That's the truth, old man. It'll rot before you drop it on anyone else. Take it or leave it."

He steps back releasing the crate and turning his palms up.

"After all, you're right; why should I saddle you with my garbage?"

His face growing darker, the old man glares at Pettick. He starts to shout but stops as Pettick shrugs and says the word *garbage*. At the prospect of losing a deal, he seems to yield somewhat. Sucking his lower lip, he concedes.

"I give you five heads okay, but goddamn you give me crabs too. If not--I don't give a damn if all rots and stinks to city and back, you don't get nothing from me."

"Done, old man, but why get worked . . ." The shrimper interrupts himself and suddenly breaks into a smile. "Wait. You got a scheme, don't you? You sell to people what I can't--is that it? No? Ah--you're beautiful, old man. Did you know that? You're absolutely beautiful."

Laughing at himself, he stoops to pick up a small net and tosses it to the old vendor. "Here, get your own; I'll pick out the lettuce."

Two flies make rapid loops about the incandescent overhead light. Buzzing, they blur, then come into focus beyond the faces of people bending over the fallen figure of Hunt. Someone on the outer rim of the crowd asks, "Did he faint?"

"I think so," comes the answer, "but I'm not sure."

"Back off and give him some air," says a man at the

center of the circle of people.

Immediately, the circle widens, remaining distended long enough for the speaker to get Hunt's field jacket under his head; then it closes again, individuals pressing in, straining to see the young man on the floor.

"Must have been the heat," speculates one member of the crowd. "Look how pale he is."

A clerk, paper cup in hand, approaches the circle and, squeezing through, hands it to the man kneeling at the center. This man appears to be in his forties. His hair is still dark, receding only slightly; his build, as much as can be seen between the crowded people, about normal for a man who keeps his weight down. He reaches for Hunt and, propping him up with one hand, holds the cup with the other so Hunt can drink.

On the outer fringe of people another man turns to the woman who asks, "Is he okay?"

This woman has remained back as the man at the center of the crowd has requested. She has had to restrain her children, who, after their initial fright, have wanted to join the group of onlookers.

Assuring her that everything will be fine, the man says, "He seems better already. They've just given him something to drink."

"Then he's all right?"

"I think so," the man reassures. "He's getting up now."

Prior to anything else, the kneeling man turns on the

crowd and shouts in agitation, "Well, what the hell are you gaping at? Can't you see he's going to be all right? Go on--get back to your places and let us have some breathing room."

A murmur rises from the people pressed together. Above the general grumble a voice is heard.

"Keep your shirt on, McCall--you're not on the parade field now."

This last comment is certainly overheard by the man helping Hunt, for he jerks around and glares angrily at the individuals as they start to disperse. Slowly moving away in little groups, they drift toward their respective areas, hang back after several steps, and mill about, still discussing the event in speculative terms. McCall gives one last angry look and turns back to the pallid young man. Giving his support, he helps Hunt to his feet and brushes him off after handing the jacket back.

"How do you feel?" he asks when he has Hunt up.

A dazed expression conveys the answer; unsteady footing confirms it. There seems to be only one thing to do; accordingly, McCall takes him by the arm and guides him to his own desk.

"Just have a seat, and I'll get you some coffee."

Before leaving to get the coffee, he regards Hunt closely, making sure he is all right. While he is assuring himself, one of the secretaries comes from the vicinity of the fall with a sheet of paper. Taking it, McCall sees that

it is Hunt's application form. This he drops on the desk without a word and turns before something else can interfere and strides quickly away, leaving Hunt to gaze in confusion at the desk.

The desk itself is cluttered with papers either strewn haphazardly over the surface or jammed onto a spindle positioned a safe distance from the edge. The bronze base of the spindle also serves as a paperweight that prevents some of the loose pages from being shuffled to the floor. Others not as secure as these must rely on luck to stay within reach. Included among the various unsecured pieces is an addressed, already opened envelope bearing a commemorative stamp still half-glued to one of the corners. The stamp, burnt sienna in color and in good condition, is a reproduction of a contemporary lithograph, but it is not immediately clear whether the stamp commemorates the artist or some historic event. The latter seems doubtful since the scene contains undelineated figures that are difficult to perceive with any certainty. An event represented in this manner could only have been a disaster; the stamp must honor the artist. At first glance there seem to be three primitive figures--perhaps Oriental--apparently a man, woman, and child. They are naked, but the gender of each is impossible to prove. What may be the breast of a woman characterizes, though not dominantly, the figure on the left. This person sits with a knee propped under an arm that supports the head, bald and Asian, that, more graphically than the apparent

breast, dominates the figure. That much is evident, but every other feature dissolves to something other than that initially perceived.

On the far right a man squats upon the ground. He also stares pensively or vacantly--which one is not clear--at the earth before him. Between the two figures and slightly to the left of the stamp's center, a child sits, belly distended and resting in the lap of crossed legs. The child seems to be a boy or, if not a boy, a girl too young for pregnancy. Two transverse images are superimposed on the three major figures of the scene. These images lie supinely head to foot and appear to be transparent and lifeless; their features, vaguely Caucasian. One other figure fills the space between the man on the right and the child left of center. It is the face of a foreshortened head that rests on the crossed arms of a prone figure whose complete body is not visible. The background, which contains most of the burnt sienna color, resembles a cave wall, perhaps a forest, or even a field of high grass.

When the envelope falls back to the desk, not the wall of a cave but the far wall of the room looms opposite Hunt and forms a backdrop for McCall now returning with the coffee, which he sets on the desk in front of Hunt. The envelope has been pushed aside, its stamp shoved out of sight beneath the heap of other papers scattered over the surface of the desk.

"You don't feel worse, do you?" asks McCall sitting

down and taking up the application.

"No . . ." Hunt replies in an uncertain tone of voice, ". . .I don't think so." He glances at the coffee steaming in the styrofoam cup, and a grateful expression starts at the corner of his eyes. Reaching for the coffee, he shakes his head and adds with more assurance, "I feel better, thanks."

The interviewer watches him sip the hot liquid and nods in obvious satisfaction before lowering his eyes to the form in his hands. He immediately raises them, again regarding Hunt, and says, "You just back from the army?"

Perhaps he seeks time more than answers, for he asks the question as though considering something else that has at this moment occurred to him. In any event, he continues without waiting for a reply.

"I remember my own return after the war. Signed with the National Guard as soon as I got in; planned it that way. Smartest thing I ever did; now I'm a captain."

He tilts his chair back, clasping a lapel in each hand and looking off at nothing in particular, a satisfied grin on his face. However, something about the man suggests anything but deliberation. Although the haphazard practice of transfixing papers on the spindle of his paperweight does nothing to dispel this impression, it must be his appearance, as well as the desk and its messy condition, that suggests disorder--perhaps the way he knots his tie or the way his suit hangs or, and this is more likely, something in his

face. Whatever it is, he seems unaware of it himself as he leans forward and begins to rummage through the papers. Coming up at last with a clipping from a newspaper, he pushes it toward Hunt. The clipping, a hurricane tracking chart, is from the morning edition and gives the most recent position of the storm out in the Yucatán Channel with a symbol between intersecting lines of longitude and latitude.

"You know about this, don't you?" asks McCall, pointing at the symbol on the chart.

"I've heard about it," replies Hunt, "but it seems too far away to tell anything yet."

In fact the radio has reported a tropical depression, from which the city will be protected by the seawall and offshore barrier islands if it does come in. Moreover, the storm should break the heat wave that is general along the coast, but at this time insufficient evidence exists that the storm will indeed make landfall anywhere near the coastal bend; so there seems little to worry about.

"That's true on the surface," agrees McCall, "but it's never too soon to worry about these things. Besides, I have reason to think the guard will be activated. That means full pay, and we could use a man with your background, recent experience, and training."

He hesitates, looking Hunt over, then adds, "Naturally, it's not for everybody--a weekend out of every month, summer camp--but for someone like you with prior service, it'd mean sixty to eighty dollars a weekend."

Regarding McCall with a dubious look, Hunt seems reluctant about what McCall appears to be suggesting. "I don't know . . . I'm looking for something steady."

Avoiding the other's gaze, the interviewer reaches for his referral cards. "Yes, yes, of course," he says, nodding rapidly. "I understand that, but I thought you might want to consider it should I find you something suitable--full time, naturally, and steady." He pauses, glancing meaningfully at Hunt. "You know, something from you for the community and, at the same time, extra money for yourself."

A moment passes without any response by Hunt. He still seems somewhat confused, not grasping exactly what is meant. His eyes move thoughtfully from the interviewer to the desk, coming to rest on a triangular wooden bar near his elbow. On one side of the bar is a brass plaque bearing McCall's name. If the plaque has been overlooked until now, it is because someone has nudged it, either accidentally or intentionally, from its position parallel to the front edge of the desk. McCall, noticing its askew position, returns it to its proper place, where it can be readily seen by anyone approaching the desk.

Slowly a smile changes Hunt's expression. He looks up at McCall and agrees. "Looks like I'll be going to work."

Apparently satisfied, McCall takes from his desk two cards--the smaller, orange; the larger, white with an orange strip at the top--and begins transferring information from the application form onto each. He scribbles an occupational

code in the top right-hand corner of the smaller card and, without looking up, says, "You can file for unemployment insurance if you want to. You'll be working before you could ever collect, but that's up to you." The transference complete, he raises his eyes to Hunt and smiles. "The coffee company needs help unloading boxcars; how does that sound?"

"Sounds fine."

"This is hard work I'm talking about; you sure? I mean after . . ." He glances toward the table where Hunt fainted. "You don't have a history of that sort of thing, do you?"

Shaking his head, Hunt says, "It's never happened before."

"Well that's good." McCall hands the referral card to him and points at it. "Give this to the foreman; the address is on the card."

"Thanks."

"No thanks necessary," McCall replies, his tone sincere, "just doing my job."

A faintly ironic smile starts at the corners of Hunt's lips and eyes, but he checks it and says, "Well thanks anyway."

As he turns to go, McCall stops him by saying, "Oh, one moment; I almost forgot."

The interviewer lifts the small orange card from the desk, jots a number on it, and gives it to Hunt.

"You'll need this; keep it with you and bring it along

every time you come in." He pauses, then adds, "My number's on it; call me about the guard."

His eyes downcast, Hunt turns, examining the card and the number penciled on the back, and starts across the room.

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Squinting, his eyes downcast, Hunt strives to see as he stands in the penumbral recess of bookshelves in the shop. Books stacked in disarray lie on top of crates; a film of dust covers crates and books alike. Evidently, Hunt is the first in a long time to disturb this part of the room. As he lifts each book, opens it, and riffles the pages, motes rise and, together with the smell of mildew, diffuse. He replaces a book and starts through a box of old newspapers, each paper yellow, turning brown, and breaking at the edges. One bearing the *Párados* masthead has lost both right-hand margin and part of the end words of its lead article. Other than that, the print is legible. Under the paper is another with an aerial photograph of oil-stained sand, empty foundations, wreckage--the only remains of a devastated strip of land jutting into the plane of two bays.

His expression unguarded, Hunt stands in the shadows, his face intent and turned upon the aerial photograph in his hands. When the sound of footsteps startles him, his head comes up abruptly, and he pivots to his right to look down the aisle between the bookshelves.

Approaching him is a girl of nineteen or twenty who asks, "Hunt?" Her face expresses her disbelief. "I thought

I saw you back here, but . . ." She interrupts herself and starts again. "When did you get in? Why didn't you let anyone . . ."

She pauses, blushing, her tan face suddenly breaking into a smile.

"I'm sorry, Hunt; it's such a surprise though."

Also smiling and somewhat apologetic himself, he begins to explain, "I know, Trit. I had every intention . . ." His voice trails off, leaving his explanation incomplete as he silently regards her.

Her hair is short and blond and, like her face, shows the effect of hours in the sun. She looks down at the old papers in his hands and asks, "What on earth are you doing back here?"

His own gaze drops to the papers. Still smiling, perhaps a little embarrassed, he looks up. "Just going through these old papers to kill time until . . ."

"To kill time?" Her eyes move from his face to the newspapers and back again before she says, "You're kidding."

He glances uncomfortably at the books along the shelves. The aisle runs without interruption straight to the front window through which the outside glare comes only to fall short of the gloomy rear of the shop.

"If you want to kill some time, let's get a cup of coffee." She pauses, regarding him. "Or is this your idea of how to catch up on things?"

He drops his eyes to the papers. "No," he replies, "no,

it's certainly not that."

"Well come on; let's get some coffee, and I'll fill you in on everything--that is . . ." She smiles. ". . . if you still want to kill time."

Under the influence of her smile, he visibly relaxes. "I wish I could, Trit," he says, shaking his head, "but I've got to see a man about a job."

"You just got back; aren't you going to take things easy for a while?"

"Can't--jobs are too hard to find." He pauses, then invites her to walk over with him. "You're welcome to join me if you'd like; it's just down at the coffee dock. How about it?"

"That's the coffee you're offering me?" She starts to laugh, glancing at the papers again. "Okay, . . . take your time. I'll wait for you up front."

She reaches down and cants the newspapers so that she can see the photograph, looks up, giving him a teasing look, and turns to start up the aisle. He watches her move away and glance back at him when she reaches the aisle that runs in front of the store window. The encounter has taken only a few moments during which he seems to have forgotten the subject of the news story. A smile lingers clearly on his face as he starts to return the old papers to their place on the boxes, but again the photograph catches his attention. He hesitates, then tears the page out of the paper, folds it, and puts it into his shirt pocket.

Seen from behind, Hunt and the girl walk slowly along the street, their heads bent together in conversation, her blond hair gleaming under a noonday sun that gives little hint of the direction they are taking. Harbor sounds, however, come from the opposite direction; so they are going away from the port. Here, where the street is narrow and walled in by old buildings that extend along both sides until reaching a low archway, the district is quite old, although many of the buildings seem to have been rebuilt. On passing beneath the archway, they enter a pylon through which the street, now shaded from the sun and dimly lit, passes on its way to the causeway beyond. Stonemasons are at work replacing the blocks of a damaged frieze on the interior north wall. So far, a sun, some rays, and a catafalque drawn by twelve men have been reconstructed by the masons, who reassemble piece by piece the highly stylized scene by matching the angles of the sunrays. To the left, pillars support a sweep of arches, and through the glass doors that line the wall beneath this arcade, an auction hall can be seen.

Leaving the pylon, the two come upon a railroad embankment. It follows a line running along a north-south axis and separates the warehouse district from the drying salt flats on the back side of the strand.

As they reach the tracks, Trit is saying, "I mean

afterwards; what about later?"

"You know how those things are, Trit. We get together and forget the time." He grins at her. "Why not stop in yourself and join me."

"I would," she says regretfully, "but papa'll be there."

Hunt stops, his brows coming together in a frown. "So what?"

"You know how he feels about you," she replies.

"Besides . . ." She glances away from Hunt's scrutiny.

". . . Dusty will be there too."

He does not respond outwardly to this new information except to remain where he is, motionless beside the tracks and closely observing Trit. Having turned from him, she looks across the salt flats to the back bay glinting under the sun. Out on the bay, a dredge discharges a gray slush of oyster shell and salt water into a barge. Both shell and barge blur against the dark background of the bluffs that rise above the estuary and, following the shore of the bay, curve inward toward the river.

Watching Trit as she tries to avoid his gaze, Hunt asks, "Is Wedge still seeing Dusty?"

"I'd put it the other way," Trit replies. "She's still seeing papa."

For a moment Hunt stands without speaking; then he lowers his eyes and starts up the tracks that run beside the warehouse docks. They walk a little way in silence before he says, "Look, Trit, I've got to see about this job."

"Well," she asks, "what about tonight?"

"I don't know when I can get away, but. . ." Again he hesitates.

"Don't worry about it; I'll drop by late enough for you to be in." She stops and, allowing him to continue alone up the tracks a few paces toward the warehouse, calls after him, "See you tonight, Hunt."

He nods in agreement and, as he moves slowly away, his eyes cast down in preoccupation on the roadbed of cinders and ties, her gaze lingers on him. Her mood, in contrast to his, seems exultant. When he reaches the dock and pauses to hoist himself onto it, she smiles, her tanned face and blond hair gleaming in the sun. Before turning back to the low archway of the pylon, she lifts her hand in an affectionate gesture.

Ahead of him, sealed boxcars line the dock. Apparently the lunch hour is not yet over, for no one seems to be working. Hunt steps inside to find a warehouse stacked to the ceiling with skids of large coffee sacks but otherwise free from any evidence of human activity. His footsteps echo through the high shed as he crosses toward the open door of an office at the other end of the room. Just inside the office, two men in work clothes are bending over a desk, their backs to the door.

One is saying, ". . . use this afternoon to get these cars unloaded, Sam, and we'll see what the storm does."

The one called Sam straightens up, "I think that's the

best thing."

As he swings around with a handful of shipping orders, his eyes fall upon Hunt in the doorway. Both recognition and surprise spread across his face. In his forties, he still has the hard body that accompanies physical work, but his face has begun to show the effects of too much dissipation, which does not, however, prevent an expression of pleasure as soon as he recovers from his surprise.

"Would you look who's here."

The second man glances back, though his face fails to register any sign of recognition.

"Hello, Sam." Hunt eyes him quizzically. "Didn't expect to find you here."

A wide grin spreads over the older man's face. He steps forward, stretching out his hand to Hunt's shoulder, and says, "Let's have a look at you." His eyes move approvingly over his young friend. "You've put on weight; I guess army chow wasn't so bad after all."

Hunt laughs. "Or so good."

"No? Well, you seem to have survived it." He lifts his hand from Hunt's shoulder and lets it fall back in a firm pat. "It's good to have you back, boy." Turning to the second man, he adds, "Come here, boss, and meet one of the boys that's been protecting the country so you can sleep nights."

The second man faces about and extends his hand as Graggs presents him to Hunt.

"This is the boss around here, Hunt. When he hollers, the rest of us jump."

Although the foreman is dressed as Graggs is, his appearance suggests he does very little of the physical work. Unlike Graggs, he is overfed--dangerously so for his age, which appears to fall well into the upper fifties. His hands, though not soft, lack the calluses of a worker, and his clothes, for all their durability, show few signs of labor: no dust or grime, no wrinkles on the starched and pressed surface of the cotton.

Acknowledging the foreman with a nod, Hunt says, "Then you're the one--" He pauses to take the referral card from his shirt pocket and offers it to the foreman. "--I'm supposed to give this to."

Caught off guard by the unexpected act, the foreman accepts the card with his brows raised, examines it, and hands it to Graggs.

"It's from the state employment people." He glances at Hunt. "Looks like they sent your boy here over to help out."

Graggs looks up from the card, first at the foreman, then at Hunt. "We definitely need the help." He jerks a thumb toward the dock. "Got a bunch of freight cars on the siding outside and need the extra hand if we're to get them unloaded before that storm blows through."

"That's true," agrees the foreman. He is still regarding Hunt. "Did they tell you what you'd be doing? Make any mention of the hundred-and-fifty-pound sacks you'd be lifting and moving?"

"The man said it was hard work," Hunt replies.

"Oh, it's hard work all right," Graggs confirms. "It's plenty hard but wouldn't be much sweat for a young buck like you, Hunt--" He laughs and claps Hunt on the shoulder again. "--fresh from the army, still in good shape. Hell, it'd be like a normal day's workout for you, that's all."

He lets his hand fall to his side and gives the foreman a wink. His eyes appear permanently yellow around the irises. The skin sags below his eyes and forms pockets of ashen flesh on each side of a nose vaguely marked by a plexus of purple capillaries. Beneath his dusty workshirt, though, his shoulders seem solid; his waist only slightly thick. He turns his yellow eyes back to Hunt and gazes fondly, a challenge in his look, at the young man.

"What d'you say? Think you can hack it?"

Hunt shrugs. "Why not?"

"There you go." Graggs turns questioningly to the foreman. "What about it, boss?"

Without committing himself, the foreman says, "It's your baby, Sam; I just want that coffee in before it blows."

Looking back at Hunt, Graggs says, "You heard the orders, boy. Can you start right now?"

"No problem."

"That's it then; let's get to work."

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"Sam, have your boy sweep the dock before you get started."

Watching, along with two blacks, as Graggs tries to pry open the jammed door of a boxcar, Hunt turns his head so he can see the foreman and asks, "Where's the broom?"

Graggs lowers his eyes toward the coffee beans strewn over the concrete. The scattered beans indicate the direction the forklift must take to move the skids of coffee from the cars to the shed. Lifting his eyes, Graggs looks questioningly at the older of the two blacks.

"Inside," the man offers, gesturing at the same time toward the building. "It should be just inside--next to the door."

Hunt turns toward the warehouse but is stopped by the younger black, who says, "Don't get no affair going with that broom cause, like the main man say, we got four boxes to empty before the sea change."

"Ease off, W," chides the older black, "Ain't no way to welcome anybody."

As Hunt starts for the warehouse, W slowly turns his eyes, arched brows, and imperious expression on the older

man and gazes silently for a long moment.

"Ready," he finally says, "if you going to be preaching all day like usual, you can work them sacks with the sweeping man, and me and Sam'll work the rest." He stoops and picks up a skid and hesitates in order to watch the other two slide an iron ramp across the span to the boxcar. "Only be careful you don't catch what he got--you can't afford to be no uglier."

When the ramp is in place, he tosses his skid onto it, straightens the wooden pallet with his foot, and looks back over his shoulder at Hunt, now sweeping the loose beans over the edge of the concrete.

"Soon's you finish your conference with that broom, we ready to unload this box--if it suit you, that is."

"Come on, W," says Ready, "time to hit it instead of just talking about it."

"Always time to hit it with you--always time enough with me."

"Tell that to the company."

"Damn the company, man. W Cleveland Easely don't care 'bout no company."

W steps forward, taking the place that Graggs has left for him in front of the solid block of sacks stacked in the doorway of the boxcar. He and Ready grasp the near corners of the first of the hundred-and-fifty-pound sacks, slide it smoothly from among the others, and let it swing onto the far edge of the skid. Beginning at the top, they

work the sacks down to the floor of the car, work back into the car, and quickly clear a wide niche in the carload of coffee, the imposing wall diminishing as the load on the pallet grows, three sacks to a tier, five tiers high. They step back.

After the forklift hoists the loaded skid, Graggs takes another from a supply of them piled next to the building, pitches it onto the iron ramp, then looks at Hunt.

"You ready?"

Setting aside the broom, Hunt joins Graggs between the skid and the doorway of the car.

"Don't matter if he be or not," says W, "cause, like Big Ready say, hits time to hit it."

"Far as I can see," Ready answers, "ain't no holding back on his part--that's more than I can say for you."

Doing as the older man does, Hunt takes hold of the loose burlap corners, lifts his end, and throws. He watches Graggs's hands. When they reach for a sack, he reacts and reaches too, following the hands, which are brown from the sun, the fingers calloused, no doubt without feeling as they grip the rough texture. Three sacks side by side. Another three on top of these. They overlap and interlock, each held in place by the one that follows. A third tier--another. The work is rhythmic, repetitive. Bending, gripping, lifting, swinging, releasing, they produce an ictus of mass striking mass.

One after another, dead weights, they fall into place. One, on the far side of the pile, lands solidly, slides off, and breaks open, spilling out a lifeless body wrapped in black pajamas. It is left as it falls, attracting flies that swarm above the pit. The smell of death and decay hangs in the humid air as dirt is kicked onto the sacks. Bend, shovel, pitch, up and down, up and down . . .

"Slow it down, Sam," warns the older black, "or he won't make three o'clock."

"That's right, Hunt," says Graggs. "There's no rush."

They bend, take another sack, heave it up, and throw. With a thud it falls on the near edge.

"Just keep it steady. We still have four cars to unload."

Nodding, Hunt lifts, and they force onto the pile the last sack, locking all the others into place. As they step back to allow the forklift in, Hunt turns to Sam Graggs.

"It wasn't that bad."

"No?" W asks. "You tell us about it in a little while." He and Ready move in, and W looks first to the left inside the car, then to the right. Turning back, he grins at Hunt. "Won't be long, hard-working man, and we can all get in here."

"Slough-offs got no right to talk," Ready says. "Ain't nobody slowing you down."

"Ain't no need to as long as you doing so good."

W takes hold of the nearest sack and waits for Ready to follow. Looking down, grinning, he kicks at the pallet the older man is placing next to the pile.

"And just think how good it'd be if you got this skid in all the way."

In fact, the pallet is completely inside the car. By removing some sacks on each side and those that remain between the doors--the opposite one still closed but now visible above the remaining sacks--it will be possible to get two skids in at the same time and eliminate the need for alternating.

Once started on those that block the far door, the two men quickly reduce the obstacle to only a few rows of the bulging sacks. As the door is cleared, Graggs again picks up the crowbar and goes around the boxcar. After a moment a small snap informs the others that the seal is broken. It--the sound--anticipates a picture of the back bay, its calm waters fringed by the baked and cracking salt flats on the near side, a few sea oats pushing up through the cracks, maybe a beer bottle stogged in the silt just above the high tide line, and remnants of dried kelp. It raises the image of the bluffs once more, of ballast barges moving through the shimmering heat out on the bay, and of dredges spewing up the gray sludge of oyster beds.

Then the door slides back and reveals the unexpected sight of smoke billowing from refinery stacks beyond the turning basin at the end of the harbor. Instead of rising and streaming away, the smoke settles upon the refineries, which are covered with soot and smell of sulphur. The expected breeze does not stir. Dust rises from the impact

of the heavy sacks on the growing pile and, instead of settling, hangs in the still air, the unmovable supporting the unbreathable. The floor between the doors, however, is now cleared enough to afford them all the room necessary to work simultaneously, sack by sack, toward the opposite ends of the car. So, after the forklift removes the load this time, the empty space is filled with two skids.

For the present at least all talk has ceased, replaced by the staccato thumps of sacks landing one after another on the separately growing piles. The cadence matches the pace. They bend and lift and throw while perspiration rolls down their faces, Ready's sweatband and W's black silk babushka already saturated. Bending, gripping, lifting, swinging, releasing--as the work goes forward, Graggs and Hunt frequently wipe their brows to clear their eyes of the stinging moisture, which falls in beads to the dusty floor, each droplet striking an impression in the dust and sending up a little puff.

"Two o'clock," says the foreman, who stands in the doorway of the freight car, several sheets of paper in his hand. "Sam--"

The two pairs of workers, separated from one another by twenty or so feet of empty space, turn toward him from opposite ends of the car. Between the doorway and each pair a skid stands partly loaded and positioned for easy access. The sack that Ready and W have just lifted is tossed onto

the waiting load.

"--you want to see these shipping orders?" The foreman raises the papers he holds and steps out of the car.

"Time for a breath, W," says Ready. "Let's take a break."

Whipping off his babushka, W slips out of his shirt and begins to mop his face as Graggs squeezes past the skid he has been loading and leaves the car. Still toweling, W climbs onto one of the higher tiers, leans back against the next row, and looks down the length of the car at Hunt.

"How now, strongblood? Now what you think 'bout all this coffee throwing?" He glances at Ready. "Probably want to work right through the break--a man like him, working enough for two mans."

"Whyn't you learn something from him," Ready suggests.

"Now you talking, my man. Whyn't I just sit up here and study his action? That what you mean, Big Ready, just go to school on throwing them sacks till I act like I been knowing it some time?"

Laughing, he again begins to mop the perspiration with his shirt, this time his chest, shoulders, and arms as well as head and face. Both Ready and Hunt, who has remained silent, ignore him and start for the freight car door.

"Y'all recollect now," W shouts after them, "and don't nobody keep me waiting."

Outside, the foreman watches Graggs glance quickly through the shipping orders, then raise his eyes

questioningly.

"I thought we decided to hold these shipments up until we were sure about the weather."

"I called," the foreman explains, raising his shoulders in a helpless gesture, "but they had already started."

"Well, I guess that's the last word on that then."

"I suppose so," agrees the foreman, turning toward the shed door through which Ready and Hunt have passed. The two men approach the door and move slowly into the huge warehouse. Against the far wall, loaded skids rise almost to the ceiling. Both forklift and driver are standing idle near the water cooler, which Ready now steps away from to make room for Hunt. Seeing Hunt lean toward the cooler, the foreman offers a warning to Graggs.

"Better get him to go light on the water, Sam, or you'll have a sick kid on your hands." He pauses, watching the young man. "How's he working out, by the way?"

"He'll be all right," Graggs assures. "Getting the hang of it, like everything else, just takes time."

"That's true." Changing the subject, the foreman asks, "You about ready to open the next car?"

"Just about."

"Well, why don't you go ahead and let Ready and W finish what remains in the first car." He glances toward the cooler and calls to the black. "You hear that, Ready?"

"What's that, boss?"

"We got to speed it up--so you and W finish that first

car, and Sam here'll open the next one and have it cleared by the time you join him. Okay?"

"Sure thing," Ready says.

Hunt, taking little notice of the decision, moves away from the cooler and makes his way to a loaded pallet. He hoists himself up and stretches out, closing his eyes. As he does this, his hands fall limply onto the rough burlap, where they lie, cuticles splitting, blisters rising from the pads of his fingers, the sides of his thumbs, and the palms. Glancing at Hunt, Graggs is silent for a moment. He turns back to the foreman when the man, emphasizing the urgency of unloading the boxcars, repeats his instructions and leaves the men to their break. Graggs watches the departing foreman cross the shed to his office. He seems to be thinking. After a moment he approaches Hunt and lifts one of the young man's hands and, without commenting, inspects the blisters.

"Nasty looking," Hunt says as though expressing the unspoken thought behind the older man's look.

"I'm afraid it'll get nastier," warns Graggs. He drops the hand and asks, "Are you going to be all right?"

"Sure," Hunt answers, sitting up and canting his head to view the heights of the coffee piled load upon load toward the ceiling. The position directs his face away from Graggs. "Why not? Someone had to help move all this coffee; no reason I can't"

Graggs does not immediately reply. He seems to be

studying the young man's impassive face. When he finally does speak, his only comment is, "Let's break open that other car then."

By the time the blacks join Hunt and Graggs in the second car, its midsection has been cleared and both doors thrown open. A pallet lies ready on the floor, but neither Hunt nor Graggs has made the first move to begin loading it--the former, bent over, hands on his knees, trying to catch his breath, is at the moment in no condition to proceed. The situation no doubt amuses W, for on seeing it, he grins and casts a satisfied glance at Ready.

"Your boy don't look so good, Sam--you think maybe he allergic to coffee?"

"Leave him be," interjects Ready, "and look to your own self."

"My own self? Didn't I wait for young strongblood to come school me on throwing that coffee? Ain't no problem with me."

"No problem a considerable improvement wouldn't take care of."

"What you mean--improvement?"

"Just what I say. Ain't never seen you but you was coasting--lifting them sacks with lots of grunts and grimaces while all the time riding my action, ghosting out."

"Say what?"

"Ghosting--always fading out when there be work to do."

Indignant, W glares at his co-worker for a second, then

suddenly he laughs, bends forward, and grasps the end of a sack.

"Watch out, old man, that I don't work your ass and old bones into the grave." As Ready takes his own end and the two lift and swing the sack onto the waiting skid, W adds, "Man, when I ghost out, I find me a cool place and a drink and I take a long swallow and then I think about womens. I just think and drink, and you ain't never seen no fading out till you seen that."

They bend, grip the next sack, and swing it smoothly onto the skid. As they quip back and forth, their voices rise and fall, a cadence for the work. They bow and come up in easy unison without changing pace. Their breathing is effortless--as is their talk, which, fully modulated and untouched by the work, rises and falls, lilting through the quiet air of the hot and dusty boxcar.

Heavy sacks, three to a tier, five tiers high. The configuration is invariable, as is the numerical pattern: The first, fourth, seventh, tenth, and thirteenth sacks fall on the far side of the pallet; the second, fifth, eighth, eleventh, and fourteenth, on the near side. The third, sixth, ninth, twelfth, and fifteenth fall always in the middle and complete the five triads that make the whole. Then the cycle begins again. The loads grow, reach the established level, and are taken away. The number of sacks still remaining inside the boxcar, although continuously reduced,

seems interminable. As the refinery whistles signal the hour, Hunt lets himself wearily down to the half-loaded pallet. He braces his elbows on his knees and slumps forward, hands dangling between his legs, his head drooping while he stares at the exposed raw skin of the broken blisters on his hand.

The others watch him without speaking. It is Graggs who at last suggests, "How about something to drink?"

Hunt shakes his head without looking up. "I couldn't."

The older man turns to the others. "Ready? W?"

"Not me," says W, grinning, "I want to stay on and study how my man here work so hard without needing to drink. Must be some scientific secret he got."

W climbs up among the unloaded sacks and stretches out.

"Ready?" Graggs repeats. "How about you?"

"I'll get my own," Ready answers. "You go on along, Sam."

"And you too," W adds, "you blocking the draft with all your hot-air preaching anyway."

Stopping at the door, Graggs gives Hunt another look before turning to Ready. "Try to keep some peace, Ready." He smiles and steps out of the car.

Ready, crossing to Hunt, glances down at the other's hands.

"Them hands look bad. Whyn't you see if the boss got something for them."

"They'll be okay," Hunt says. "It's my legs that are feeling it."

"The legs always the first to go when you ain't used to this."

"Guts, you mean," interjects W. "Guts always go first down here. Lots of big mans come down and handle them bags and think it be nothing. Course by three they be long gone."

"You fast to forget the first time you down here," Ready chides. "Whining and carrying on, you was the first one wanted to quit and you ain't quit complaining yet."

"Who you talking to? Do I carry my weight or not?" He nods toward Hunt. "Looky here, chump, what background you got in coffee anyway?" Receiving no answer, W tries again, "Well, whyn't you doing something else if you got no history in throwing?"

This time Hunt asks, "Like what?"

"Like what you done before. Why you want to be down here in all this dirt and sweat making a fool of yourself?"

"Maybe he like the rest of us, fool," Ready offers, "and have to take what come along."

"And, Ready," says W, turning back to the older black, "maybe you in danger of catching his dumbness. In fact, you got it already. Every day you sound more like honky than honky do himself."

Out over the water the heat shimmers, distorting the bluff line beyond the bay. The afternoon sun beats down on the salt flats while the smell of decay rises from the

drying marshes and hangs in the air. On each coffee sack, the image of a maguey spreads its spiny appendages across the rough burlap. Below the image, the words HECHO EN MEXICO appear in red letters.

"Damn this Mexican coffee," W says, pulling at one of the fibers protruding from the material. "We need some Angolan--least we could get a holt of it."

"Maybe the next car," Ready offers.

"And damn your *maybes*," W suddenly blurts out. "All you do is trade in *maybes*."

"Be one up on a fool who trade only in *nothings*. Always you got nothing but *nothings*, W."

"Who a fool now, chump? Just listen at yourself. Least I can see it for what it ain't, while you with your old man's eyes and old man's ears listen to honky and believe all that trash he put out. Well you ain't got nothing neither, but the difference be you can't see it. There ain't nothing down here--not for you, not for nobody. That's why I'd like to know what this honky doing here acting like a nigger. Can you tell me that without trading in *maybes*?"

Ready lifts his hand, palm out in warning. "Watch your mouth, punk. You know where I stand if push come to shove."

Shrugging, W starts to say something, stops, and shrugs again. "Be all the same to me."

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Standing motionless within the pylon through which the narrow street passes going toward the beach, Hunt looks up. The day is over. Although dark will not come for some time yet, the workmen are putting away their tools and taking down the scaffolding that rises beside the interior north wall of the pylon. A transverse slash, running parallel to the frets above and below the frieze, defaces what remains of a scene once depicted upon the wall. Some blocks are missing; the remaining are covered with lichens, which have turned the frieze into a night scene. To the right, bright new blocks of limestone reproduce part of the old frieze and give the effect of a funeral procession moving from day to night, for the sunrays extend in bold relief to a catafalque drawn by twelve men toward the dark lichen-covered side. Above the cortège, a series of bowmen stand in profile, bows drawn, arrows poised at the point of release.

At first it seems he will stay until the workers are gone. In the next moment, however, Hunt swings his field jacket over his shoulder and moves wearily off without looking back. The street runs straight and narrow. It is empty and enclosed on both sides by old buildings, each separated from the others by a shallow gutter. The gutters

are coated with an alluvial crust, the result of flooded salt flats; that is to say, if the crust is not the residue of some industrial overflow. Windows, for the most part, have been boarded up along this street, and many of the buildings have no windows at all. Seen from behind, the young man appears to be walking down a corridor whose walls meet at the end of the passage. Moreover, the passage has the stark quality of seeming to be without exits. But this quality is an illusion created by the angle of vision and the distance from which the street is viewed. Like most other streets, however, this one does have its outlets. After walking a short distance, Hunt turns into one of the passages previously unseen. It too is empty, and traversing it at irregular intervals are aqueducts that limit passage to low vehicles and foot traffic. One explanation for the overhead water system might be the danger of flooding that exists on such low-lying strips of land. Whatever the original reason, the aqueducts now hold steam and water pipes that transport water pumped up from the coastal aquifer to service the strand. Here and there doorways mark the entrances of the old buildings, and although this is no longer part of the warehouse district, few of the buildings appear inhabited. They are the vacant remains of what once must have been a buffer zone between the waterfront and the warehouses on the back side of the strand. Nevertheless, *whatever* difficulty remains in determining the sort of district it *once* was, no contention over its former importance can possibly

exist. The buildings are two-story brick structures, adorned by both the names of the men who built them and by the dates of the years in which they were built.

Stopping in front of one of these buildings, Hunt looks up at its name and date. He then tries the door by pushing against the larger upper panel. When the door opens, he steps past it and turns back to shut it, hesitating, still holding the door open before closing it and shutting himself in, which the click of the uncoiled spring confirms.

Inside, the staircase, neither papered nor plastered, reveals the exposed tongue-and-groove shiplapping of the interior walls. These unplanned walls run diagonally from top to bottom and form soundboards from which echoes the sound of Hunt's walking on the floor above after he climbs the stairs. At the top of the stairs an uncovered light bulb provides the only light; if the building has windows, they are boarded, at least at each end of this second-floor hall. Up the hall, Hunt has stopped in front of a door and is going through his pockets, pulling out objects, inspecting, and replacing them. An open transom, though it remains unnoticed by Hunt for the moment, is above the door. Without looking up, he finally gives up the search and starts to turn the doorknob but stops. He looks to the side as if thinking, then goes to his shirt pocket, from which he pulls the orange card given to him earlier by the employment commission interviewer. He peers at the card for a long time before looking up, glancing at the transom, and

turning back to come toward the head of the stairs. Going past the staircase to a pay phone at the other end of the hall, he takes up the receiver and inserts a coin, looks at the card again, and dials. When he gets an answer, he says, "Mr. McCall please," and falls silent for a short interval before saying, "Yes, Mr. McCall, this is Hunt Crofford--yes, in the morning--well, that's what I'm calling about. I'd like to see you."

He pauses, listening, then adds, "Fine, I'll see you then."

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Out on the dark water, reflections of harbor lights tremble in quivering eddies, float in long broad streaks at the water's edge, and disappear among the wharves. The air is warm and still. The harbor itself (rimmed on the west by refineries whose towers are brightly illumined for the swing shift) seems heated by industrial burn-offs flaring high above the plants. At the piers along the south shore, ships --fully lighted and manned by loading crews--are being readied for sailing. Even to the east, lights gleam from ships anchored out beyond the harbor in the impenetrable darkness of the roads. All of this--the activity on board the ships, the individual glimmers shimmering softly out on the bay, the contiguous shifts working at the refineries--they all, no doubt, reflect the harbor backlog, the urgency of the situation, and the attempts to unclog it before the weather changes.

However, the strand side gives a different impression. Ships are also worked here, but cargo sheds and grain elevators block off much of the light below the north bluff balustrade and create, in contrast to the far side, darkness, the illusion of calm, even abandonment.

The calm is an illusion nonetheless, for among the

shadows at the bottom of the bluff is a solitary rhomboid of light, a door that opens onto the wharf of Holly's dockside bar. A crowd, the result of the full port, has gathered inside. The congestion is equally distributed around the room: parts of the crowd--mostly men--have pushed up to the long counter; some with women sit at tables; the others stand talking and gesturing in clusters of three or four along the walls; and, in the middle of the congestion, Hunt, following a less crowded path among the tables and tightly packed bodies, pauses to look around. All the chairs seem taken as he peers about. Looking right and left, he finally glimpses Thorpe signaling from the bar with a mug of beer lifted overhead. Hunt starts through a narrow opening between the tables in front and the men at the bar, his hand raised in acknowledgment. When he reaches Thorpe, Hunt takes the proffered beer and turns to observe the room.

Off-key singing, barely audible above the talk of the crowd, comes from a back corner, where a man plays the house piano. A woman beside him sits straddling an overturned, number three washtub. She strums a venetian blind cord, which is attached at one end to the rim of the tub, at the other end to a cut-down pool cue that rises from the center of the tub's upturned bottom. Between the couple in the corner and the bar, the tables appear placed to accommodate the bald waiter who winds his way through the crowd, his shiny head dipping and bobbing, usually above the crowd but sometimes out of sight when he leans forward to replace the

empty mugs. Here and there he stops, listens, grinning and nodding along with the speaker, then moves on, placing full mugs before the next customers and taking away the empties. If Hunt has been watching the waiter, he might suppose the man is wanted not for his service but his personality. However, it is not clear whether Hunt, standing with his back to the bar, is watching the couple or the waiter, for his gaze, instead of holding on one place, moves over the room, lingers near the corner one moment, and shifts toward the waiter the next. Occasionally he turns from the room and joins the longshoreman in conversation--usually for no more than a few words before turning back to the crowd as though searching for someone. His glance falls in no discernible pattern upon the drinkers, both standing and seated, the couple in the corner, and the waiter until it stops at Dusty, sitting with the old street vendor and the shrimper who took his lettuce.

They sit at a table previously obstructed by the men milling about in the narrow space between the bar and the first line of tables. The posture of each, contrasting noticeably with that of the other two, provokes speculation, even suggests their separate attitudes. The old man, now leaning aggressively forward, his head turned toward Dusty, sits facing the bar. The combination of fish offal and common filth permanently stains the fabric of his sleeves, is visible as he gestures at the shrimper across from him. The old man seems to be complaining about the man, who,

unlike the old man, has exchanged the undershirt he wore earlier for a clean chambray workshirt. Dusty appears distracted and uninterested in the vendor's complaint. From time to time, she turns from him to glance toward the bar, then quickly at Pettick, who maintains a restrained--even rigid--appearance.

The cause of the shrimper's rigidity is ambiguous. If the direction of his attention is an indication, the street vendor is responsible, but these accusations--coming as they do from an inconsequent old man--are unlikely sources for such obvious tension. Moreover, Pettick's attention may be more feigned than real, for, when he finally looks at Dusty, he motions toward the bar with a short rearward jerk of his head.

"When did he get back?"

Startled no doubt by the sharpness of his tone, she asks, "Who?"

"Soldier boy."

For a moment more, her reluctance persists; then, beginning at her lips, a smirk gradually spreads over her face until she is openly and defiantly ridiculing Pettick. "Is that your name for him now?" She pauses and, lowering her voice, asks in a confidential tone, "Tell me, Wedge-- why are you always putting him down? Because of me--" She leans closer to him, and places a hand on his sleeve, drops her voice to an exaggerated whisper. "--or Trit?"

Striving for control, Pettick wrests his arm from under

Dusty's hand. "Leave the girl out of this." His glass remains untouched in front of him; his hand, clenched, the knuckles white, tenses on the table.

"For this you come out?" asks the vendor, making an abrupt gesture that shakes dried fish scales from his sleeve. "Why are you wasting time on him?"

"Shut up," Pettick snaps, cutting the vendor off. "What are you doing here in the first place, old man? Move on."

"I asked him to join me," says Dusty. "Leave him alone."

Glaring, Pettick nods toward the fish scales and the viscera woven as a stain into the cloth of the old man's coat sleeve. "Well get him to wash if you're going to bring him around."

"You should talk," says the old man, his voice rising and trembling with rage. "Tell her today how you cheat an old man." He raises his hand and thrusts a finger at the shrimper. "If you want to talk, tell her that, but don't think you are so smart--don't think you get away with it forever. You better wash yourself, or your sins catch up with you quick."

"I'm not telling you again, old man. Shut up."

"You two can settle this without me," says Dusty, rising from her seat.

"Wait a minute," demands Pettick, also starting up. "Where do you think you're going?"

Patting his sleeve, Dusty says, "No need to get up, Wedge. It would look out of place, you being polite." She steps away, and easing herself past two men that stand

nearby, approaches Hunt at the bar.

Behind Pettick's half-rising, half-sitting position, the old vendor mumbles to himself, "You must leave someone always is saying. When there is quarrel, they say you must go; when there is storm, again you must leave. Always they are saying you must move on."

Pettick turns and looks at the old man. Both hands, splayed on the tabletop, support his awkward position as the vendor lifts his eyes and says, "Here I am staying. For sure I tell you this, Pettick--you who make so much trouble. I go nowhere, and you can look from me a visit." He crosses his arms and glares angrily at the shrimper. "So just you try to move me."

At this moment a table of young men and their dates, no doubt college students spending the summer break on the coast, begin to sing along with the woman and man in the corner. As the song comes to an end, they all rise, applauding and lifting their beer mugs to salute the couple. Their cheers are sustained for some time before they start to sit down again.

One young man who remains on his feet after the others have taken their seats shouts across at the woman straddling her washtub. "Say, Buttercup, are you still playing at Hogan's Baitstand?"

The woman lowers her mug, raised to acknowledge their tribute, and wipes foam from her mouth. "Why hello, boy. Where have you been?"

"Off at school, Buttercup."

"You have?" She sets the beer mug on the upturned bottom of the tub and asks, "What you learning?"

One of the seated young men says something that is too low to be heard outside the circle of the table. The others laugh, causing the standing student to blush, but he ignores his friends and replies to the question.

"I'm studying Spanish."

"Well I'll say." Buttercup glances back at the piano player. "Did you hear that? Says he's learning Spanish."

The man smiles at her, then at the student while she, reaching again for the beer on the tub, turns back to the crowd and volunteers, "I learned Latin once back in grammar school--" She pauses to take a deep drink of the beer and, when she looks up again, admits happily to the young people, "--but I done forgot it."

In unison the students rise, clapping their hands, laughing, and shouting their approval. They cheer the implications of her forgotten knowledge; no doubt they recognize a kindred spirit, one of their own. Accepting their tribute as her husband begins a new song on the piano, she takes a last sip from the mug, raises the now half-full mug once more to the clapping students, and places it beside the tub before starting to strum the venetian blind cord. During each step, her gaze sweeps contentedly over the drinkers along the walls, over the bar, over the whole room, and falls at last on the bald waiter leaving the

vicinity of the students as they settle back into their seats. His tray loaded with empty mugs and held high above the crowd, he makes his way toward the front and squeezes through the narrow passage between the bar and the first row of tables. Excusing himself, he jostles against Dusty, who has turned from the crowd but is still smiling at the preceding demonstration.

"Some show tonight," she says to him.

Grinning, he nods and pushes past while Dusty, glancing back at the corner of the room, adds to Hunt and Thorpe:

"Everyone seems to be having a good time."

"So it seems," Hunt agrees.

Turning sharply, her brows arched, she regards Hunt.

"You sound dubious."

"Not at all," he corrects.

Her cheeks color slightly at his tone, and she looks quickly away, glancing at Thorpe as though seeking support.

"Pettick hasn't changed much since I last saw him."

"I don't suppose he has," she admits.

"We're all a bit set in our ways," Thorpe suggests.

"How about it, Dusty--you ready for a beer?"

Apparently relaxing, she smiles, thanks him for the offer and, breaking into a little laugh, chides them both. "I thought you'd never ask."

"Speaking of asking," says Hunt, "how's Alex?"

She shakes her head. "The same--hopeless, still behind on his child support and his other payments, still on the verge of losing the store. I'm afraid he'll never change."

As Arnold says, we're all a bit set." She shrugs. "What can I say?"

"You can say how Miles is, can't you?"

A grin breaks across her face; her expression brightens.

"You should see him; he's so big you'd hardly recognize him."

"He's with you, then?"

"No, he's staying with Alex right now, but I'll have him next week. You'll have to come by and see if he remembers you. I'm sure he will."

"That's not likely; it's been too many years."

"Come and see," she repeats. "You might be surprised, Hunt."

Thorpe, who has signaled for another beer, turns from the bar and offers her the full mug, its froth spilling over and running down the side of the glass. Where his fingers have touched the frost on the outside of the mug, whorls smudge the cold exterior. He thrusts the beer forward, trying not to spill any.

"Here you go, Dusty."

Noticing his gesture, she interrupts the conversation with Hunt and starts to open her purse.

"Would you mind holding it a second, Arnold?"

As she searches through the handbag, Thorpe protests, "It's already paid for, Dusty. Put up your purse for Christ's sake."

Having found what she seeks, she looks up, laughs

nervously, and removes from her purse something tightly clasped and concealed in her closed hand, which she now extends toward Hunt.

"What do you have?" he asks, lifting his own hand to receive what she holds.

Into his open hand, she drops a cameo bracelet that falls unclasped across his palm and cupped fingers. For a moment, his eyes remain lowered as he regards the bracelet; then he raises them.

"The clasp's broken," she says.

Nodding, he takes it by the ends, fastens the clasp, and lifts the completed circle of cameos for a closer look, but the clasp yields under the weight of the onyx.

"What happened?" asks Hunt.

"I must have broken it," she answers, "but I don't know how or when."

He turns the bracelet over in his hand and inspects the metal latch. He snaps it shut again, then, squinting at the catch, pulls it open by putting pressure on it.

"Just bent a little," he says, holding the bracelet up and repeating the demonstration. "It's simple to fix."

"Would you mind?" She hesitates before adding, "I could ask Wedge to if it hadn't come from you, but. . ."

Lifting his hand, he reassures her. "I understand, I'll take care of it tomorrow and get it right back." He slips it into a pocket of his field jacket, getting the bracelet in under the flap just as Pettick pushes into

their midst.

Without looking at the two men, the shrimper shoves his face close to Dusty's. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Don't be a fool, Wedge," she replies, making no effort to conceal her impatience.

Thorpe, who until now has said little, steps forward still holding the fresh beer and tries to calm the man. "Take it easy, Pettick; you're off base here. No one's bothering you."

Turning toward them, part of the crowd along the bar grows silent. The hum around them drops off as someone says, "Watch out; a tiff's starting."

Again Thorpe urges, "Come on, Pettick, be sensible. We're all here to have a good time. You don't want a scene, do you?"

The shrimper neither answers nor backs off. Instead, it is Dusty who moves. Brushing Pettick aside, she reaches past him for the beer Thorpe still holds.

"Here, let me have that, Arnold."

She takes the mug and, facing Hunt, drinks the beer down to a manageable level. Then she looks up apologetically.

"You'll have to excuse all this, Hunt; I don't know what else to do."

Shrugging, he dismisses the interruption. "It's not important, forget it."

The vein in his neck swelling, throbbing, Pettick's face turns dark red. By turning away and speaking of the intrusion so distantly, the two make him look ridiculous. He stands speechlessly watching them. The vein in his neck swells larger; his face grows darker. Despite Hunt's apparent detachment, he must be aware that his presence contributes to the tension. Yet, until now, he has regarded the confrontation with passive detachment, and Pettick, although he has concentrated on Dusty, must sense the younger man's attitude. Perhaps he takes it for arrogance; maybe he has merely been seeking an excuse. Whatever the reason, Pettick suddenly, without warning, lunges at Hunt, who--caught off balance, driven back, and pinned against the bar--drops his field jacket as he tries to protect himself. Held there by the shrimper, he is incapable of warding off the slow, clubbing blow that comes looping toward him, lands with a sickening crack just beneath the eye, and rocks him back. Stunned, he sags against the bar. His knees seem to buckle, but he catches himself, regaining his balance before he actually starts down, and manages to remain upright despite the force of the blow. In catching himself, he is left unprotected, but Thorpe has stepped between the two and, grabbing Pettick, pushed the shrimper back. Several onlookers grasp the older man and wrestle him away from Hunt, who staggers forward, trying to follow him into the crowd.

Unsteady, the young man is easily restrained. The transformation in him is sudden: his eye has already begun

to swell; blood, streaming down his face, covers his shirt. He appears dazed, although a moment before he was in complete control. As he falters, the crowd surges in, fascinated, excited. Their gaunt faces, sallow under the harsh lights, are expectant, each expression registering the emotion that lies behind it. Whether repulsed or frightened, no one turns away. Instead, they press forward, vying with one another for better positions. Their mood is terrifying. Some seem to sense it, and perhaps this is what frightens them--perhaps not. Whatever it is, it must be powerful to produce such faces of fear and, at the same time, to goad them on with such force that they struggle with each other to get as near the violence as possible.

In contrast, Pettick seems almost tranquil. He has shaken off those who first contained him and now stands unrestrained but making no effort to advance. His eyes, beneath heavy lids, are half-closed, observing the field jacket kicked under foot in the scuffle. He stoops to retrieve it and, stepping to the rear of the onlookers, removes the cameo bracelet from the pocket. The bald waiter, possibly unaware of Pettick's role in the disturbance, brushes past him and shoves, shouting for order, into the ring of people.

"Here," he is shouting, "stand back. This won't do--break it up."

Looking up from the bracelet, Pettick glances toward the old vendor still at the table and is met in turn by the

old man's gaze. Beyond the table and old man, a little to the right and just inside the door, is Sam Graggs. Having apparently just entered, he stands on the fringe of the crowd and surveys the confusion. He looks around the room as though trying to sort out what has taken place. Nearly out of sight behind all the standing people, the piano player has ceased playing, spun about on his stool, and is alternately directing his attention toward the disturbance one moment, toward his wife the next. She, in order to see what is happening, has climbed onto the tub and is shouting at the people in front to get down. Time after time the piano player pivots to gaze up at her, poised atop the tub, the cut-down pool cue gripped in her hand. Except for the vendor, the piano player is the only one still seated.

But the vendor, unlike the piano player, shows little interest in what happens, and, just as he ignores the matter, he too, though quite visible sitting alone at the table, is ignored. He hunches over the sticky tabletop and remains motionless except for his lips, which move constantly as he mutters to himself.

Hidden in the crowd, the waiter can be heard above the turmoil loudly insisting on order. "Get him out," the little man shouts at the others. Then at Hunt, who looks too dazed to understand: "Out--let's go. Out with you now."

Once he decides that Hunt must go, he wastes little time getting him started toward the door. Hurriedly ushering the dazed young man through the melee, he hesitates

just long enough to look over his shoulder and shout a warning at Pettick.

"You," he calls back as though there could be no doubt to whom he speaks, "if you want to stay, get that blood off and straighten up. Otherwise . . ." With a jerk of his thumb he makes a gesture of ejection.

Composed, his anger fully dissipated now, Pettick responds by nonchalantly tossing the field jacket to one of the bystanders, who in turn passes it on. When the jacket reaches him, the waiter shoves it into Hunt's arms and prods him forward.

As they clear the fringe of the crowd, Graggs intercepts them. Directing his question to the waiter, he asks, "What's the matter?"

"Him," the waiter replies, indicating Hunt, "and the other don't want to abide by the rules; so this one's out and--" The waiter gestures vaguely rearward with his head. "--the other can follow if he don't like it."

Graggs puts a restraining hand on the waiter's arm. At that moment Dusty, struggling through the packed bodies, breaks from the circle of onlookers and comes up.

"Here," says Graggs, "let me help."

Too dazed to speak until now, Hunt waves Graggs away and pulls himself free.

"No . . ." he begins. Then faltering, trying to get his bearings, he continues in a confused tone of voice:

". . . can manage . . . no need . . ." With uncertain step,

he starts out the door and, probably sensing that Dusty will try to follow, repeats, "No need to . . ."

Stopping her, Graggs says, "Let him go, Dusty; he'll be all right."

Doubtful, not sure what to do, she halts short of the door and watches Hunt pass into the night. She remains like that for a moment after he has departed; then she turns, looking questioningly at Graggs.

"Are you sure?"

Nodding, Graggs reassures her. "I'm certain of it."

This part of the waiter's job completed, he swings about and, signaling toward the back corner of the room, raises a hand, his index finger extended, and whirls it in the air. Buttercup steps down from the tub and says something to her husband. He pivots immediately and, striking the keys, starts to beat out a playful tune on the piano while the waiter moves away from the door and back into the room.

When Dusty tries to follow, Graggs detains her. "Just a moment," he says, glancing from the waiter and drawing her aside. A concerned expression on his face, he asks, "How did this happen?"

Avoiding his look, she answers, "It was Wedge. I don't know what got in . . ." She shakes her head and raises her eyes to face his steady gaze. "Look, Sam, please don't ask me about it now; I'm too confused . . . I just want to . . ."

She turns away without finishing and, moving toward the

table where the old vendor still sits, beckons to him. When Pettick approaches her, she steps to the side, going out of her way to keep others between them until the old man reaches her and they can make their way out.

Left alone, Graggs watches Pettick. The shrimper, so tense and withdrawn before the scuffle, merely shrugs off Dusty's snub. He seems pleased with himself, even expansive now. Returning to the bar, he pushes in next to Thorpe, who has turned his back on the crowd around him. For its part, the crowd is more animated than ever. Everyone has an opinion on the fight, its cause, and effects.

"What'd that guy do?" one man asks, pushing a mug of beer in front of Pettick.

Ordering a round for those around him, Pettick takes the mug, tastes the beer, and passes it back. He gives the man a self-satisfied look and says, "He had a smart mouth."

"What'd I say?" the man says, turning to his companion who has disagreed with him.

As the bartender, filling mugs as fast as he can, puts beers on the counter, Pettick distributes them throughout the crowd. He passes a fresh beer to the man who offered him a drink, then slides one toward Thorpe.

"There you go, Thorpe; no hard feelings."

The longshoreman slides the beer back.

"I already have one."

"Well, don't be a sorehead; have another."

Thorpe, placing his hand on the bar, blocks Pettick's

attempt to return the beer. "Keep your beer, Pettick; you need it yourself." Turning his back on Pettick, he steps away from the bar as a second man points at Pettick's shirt.

"Got a little blood there," the man says.

Seemingly grateful for the diversion, Pettick pulls the shirt out from his chest and gloats over the specks of blood that splattered on him during the scuffle. "Yeah, guess I'd better clean up my act, or Baldy's liable to throw me out." He tosses several bills on the bar and, grinning at the men near him, heads for the men's room. The crowd parts to make way for him as he passes through greeting old companions.

Graggs, struggling through the drinkers in front of the bar, crosses the room and approaches the closed door, where he pauses and raises his face toward the heavy wood that stands in his way.

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The lavatory door closes behind Graggs as he pauses inside of it. Here, away from the cacophony of the barroom, both silence and sound are distorted. The pock, pock of dripping water seems magnified above the subdued flux of the sea lapping at pilings below. Making the step down to the lower level--once the shell terminal but now converted to Holly's washrooms--Graggs hesitates again and peers into the gloom ahead of him. The single overhead bulb is inadequate. Dim light merely glistens from damp walls. At the center of the room a drain is recessed in the rough concrete floor. Trickling from urinals and toilets back in the shadows, water inches along circular ridges in the unfinished concrete and works its way down the declivity to the drain, where it swirls away in a low sucking sound. He remains at the bottom step and seems to be listening, trying to see into the dark recesses of the room. A dank smell rises from the drain; warm humidity, the primeval dampness of subterranean baths, rises from the floor. Along one wall doorless toilet stalls form a series of cells from which comes the constant sound of running water, then the squish of a shoe, wet leather against wet concrete--this sound, like the others, distorted.

A second footstep signals a movement at the last stall,

and Pettick, stretching the stride of his trousers, emerges. His head is down as he concentrates on his fly; so he is not aware of Graggs waiting near the step. The shrimper has already started toward the door when he finally looks up and sees Graggs for the first time. Not yet past the drain, which marks the middle of the room, he halts, perhaps surprised to find he is not alone. He eyes the man in his way, and while he stands there, water seeps around his shoes and trickles forward.

"What's the matter, Graggs?" he sneers at last. "No Greek ships in port?"

Again he starts for the door, this time his tread smacking against the wet floor as he steps over the drain and continues toward Graggs. When he reaches him, the shrimper crowds close, reducing the distance between them. The sneer, now more a grimace of anticipation than an expression of contempt, has altered, become more contorted in the brief time it takes to cross the room.

"Or did you have something else in mind?"

Graggs stands fast; yet he says nothing. He does not yield to Pettick's steady gaze, but he makes no move toward him either. Wet sounds come from beyond the first toilet stall. A hot mist rises from the damp floor as each man silently awaits the other. The moment seems endless before perspiration, beading up on both, breaks first down Graggs' brow and trickles into his eyes. As though this is the signal he seeks, Pettick brushes past Graggs and, pushing

the door open, is gone. The moment is over, and only the gloom, the damp sounds, and the heat remain.

It has been a moment in which nothing has happened, not the expected struggle, not the final gesture. Nonetheless, Graggs appears more than merely troubled; he seems somehow changed, as does the room. Sounds audible but a moment before seem to have ceased. Despite the gloom, details appear more sharply defined than they previously did. Quite alone now, Graggs turns his gaze to the floor, to the wet circular ridges formed years before by a trowel in a strange hand. The whorls glisten damply and seem to turn, moving outward in widening concentric curves that encompass more and more of the plane until it begins to draw centripetally inward toward the drain. Around the vortex the ridges whirl faster and faster, threatening to absorb the viewer unless he frees himself at once.

Hunt stumbles over to the building, stops, and--leaning against it, resting--peers sightlessly into the bowels of the condemned structure. From under its rotting subfloor the stink of a rat's nest rises, hovering near the pavement. From somewhere down among the joists comes the sound of the rats scudding along the boards. Overhead, two rows of streetlamps recede and converge in a V down along the port. Shadowy forms, bent, crippled, coughing, stagger in and out of wan sectors of light, then fade altogether at the nadir of the glowing V. Off in the alley sighs and groans muffle

the sounds of retching and grunting ecstasy. A canticle of night voices is heard in the dark:

VERSICLE

Hey, Bro, watcha do when the man come stalking?

REJOINDER

Give him my chrome-plated life-defying cut and slash.

VERSICLE

Sal si puedes, Sancho.

REJOINDER

That's a laugh--I got out while your pants was down.

VERSICLE

Come on, lady, give us a feel.

REJOINDER

What--and catch clap from your mucking hands?

Hunt steps back from the condemned structure and moves on, but he gets no farther than the next building before pausing again, this time in front of a cut-rate carpet store. He seems confused as he looks in at the window display. Through the dirty glass a night-light in the display case gives off a mauve glow, which falls across plastic bitterns and carpet samples. Beneath one of the bitterns a sign advertises a sale:

25% OFF

FINE SCULPT & SHAG BROADLOOMS

ACRYLIC PILES FROM CRANE MILLS

Toward the rear of the store an adolescent is slowly buffing the floor. His movements are effortless; yet the work seems to hold his complete attention. Hunt watches the buffer swing smoothly over the vinyl floor; then, as if startled, he suddenly draws back and stares at his own reflection in the glass. One side of his face is swollen and covered with crusted blood, his eye almost closed. His hair is disheveled, and superimposed on a remnant of shag, it seems to wave like the wash of seaweed in a mauve subaqueous world. Shaking his head as if trying to clear it, he again looks into the room at the night worker.

In the foreground the plush carpet, already shampooed and vacuumed, is fluffy and resilient to the trod of feet. Beyond the carpet the buffer passes over the vinyl floor and swings right. Handle raised to the proper position, balanced there, the brush spins in place near the inverted image of Dusty reflected in the polished surface. Now the buffer swings left to its antipodal limit. Again spinning in place, it remains in line with a man and woman who watch a crude demonstration of carpet durability. Scissors are raked across the nap of the carpet sample without snagging the pile. On the other side of the room Dusty seems amused by the act--that is, smiling, she regards both spectators and demonstrator with interest. In her lap, however, she holds a paperback novel, which she also regards with interest. So the book may be her source of amusement, especially since the cover of this particular edition presents a photograph of a handcuffed nude, who--as it happens--

bears a striking resemblance to Dusty. Perhaps she has noticed this and, in spite of the scissors gimmick, imagines herself in the portrayed situation and is smiling at the notion. Whatever her thoughts may be the couple leaves without making a purchase.

"Alex," Dusty says when the man turns back from the door, "maybe you need a new closing technique."

Shrugging, frowning, he approaches and drops into the chair beside her. Gesturing impatiently toward the couple still visible through the store window, he asks, "Why come in if you're not going to buy?"

For her part Dusty continues to smile; in fact, her smile is wider, more amused than before.

"Don't you want walk-through customers, Alex?" Then holding up the book, she adds without waiting for an answer, "Where did you find this?"

"It's Hunt's; they're all over the place," he says and looks toward the buffer, which passes back and forth over the black vinyl.

Beyond the brush the floor reflects the image of the pair seated side by side, each one's attitude contrasting in the reflection with the other's.

"What's it about?"

Alex looks away from the buffer and glances at the book. "I don't know, Dusty," he answers impatiently. "Something about dogs tearing the underwear off young girls--just another French novel, I imagine."

She laughs lightly and riffles the pages. "You're kidding."

"Not at all; he leaves them around, and I see the names. They're all French."

"I mean about the dogs." Grinning, she looks toward him for

confirmation and adds, "Sounds like the tan lotion ad."

He slumps back and sighs, Crossing his legs as
she has done, he again looks toward the buffer and gestures in this
direction. "He reads them; ask him."

She turns without speaking and drops her eyes to the buffer as it
glides effortlessly across the polished surface. Staring at the machine,
she lets the book fall back to her lap. She no longer smiles. Her hair
has fallen slightly forward and spread over her left shoulder. At this
moment she absently reaches up, taking a loose strand of hair, pulls it
forward, and brushes it against her lips.

Suddenly she turns to Alex. "Alex, there's an opening at the
blood bank--" She pauses, then continues, "--for a receptionist."

"So?" he asks.

"So I'm applying for the job."

Regarding her curiously, he asks, "Why? What do you want a job
for? Don't I give you enough money?"

She takes the book from her lap and sets it on the floor beside
her chair. After that she leans forward, looking directly at him, and
says, "Alex, I want a divorce."

Hunt steps away from the window and gazes around. In
spite of the streetlamps, the streets are dark here. Among
these narrow passages and recesses many windows and doorways
remain indistinguishable from the surrounding surfaces.
Aqueducts and buildings jut out from among the shadows as he
starts forward, again on unsteady legs.

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The absence of certain sounds indicates a late hour. The presence of others--a dog barks somewhere off in the night; the solitary sound of an approaching launch increases, then diminishes as it goes past and moves up the harbor; rats, their gnawing persistent and audible in the stillness, nibble at the gypsum inside the walls--each muted sound sustains the initial conviction that the hour is late.

Bare to the waist, Hunt lies stretched out on the bed. A metal reflector above the ceiling bulb, the only source of illumination for the room, increases the dim force of the light and directs it over his reclining figure. He has already sought and ceased looking for a comfortable position on his side and now lies quietly on his back, his arm shading his eyes from the light that falls upon him. Although the arm prevents a clear view of his face, a few patches of dried blood are visible along the line of his jaw. His shirt, which is tossed over the back of a chair, is also blood stained, and upon the dresser--the only other piece of furniture in the room--a pan of murky water sits next to his field jacket. Both, along with the opposite wall, which stands unbroken except for the door, are reflected in the dresser mirror. In fact, it is in the mirror that movement

is first seen as the door slowly swings inward without catching Hunt's attention. At the sound of a light rap on the door he starts up in the bed and, halting the upward progress of his head just above the mattress, simultaneously looks toward the door.

A hint of blond hair appears in the widening space between door and wall; then Trit's face comes into the pale light.

"May I come in?"

Arm out as a counterbalance, his head raised from the mattress, Hunt says nothing. Instead, he lets his arm drop gently over his eyes again and falls back on the bed.

Apparently she takes his silence for consent, for she lets herself in and closes the door behind. It is the click of the rusty spring snapping the bolt into place that brings him up once more, this time his face completely uncovered. He braces both arms on the bedding, pushes back, and props himself against the metal rods of the bed. The spectacle of his disfigured face produces a shocked reaction in Trit. Speechlessly she steps toward the bed and drops her handbag at his feet, her abrupt movement no doubt prompted by a desire to act in the absence of speech. Taking his face into her hands, she tilts his head toward the light and, wincing, inspects the gash below his eye, the swollen purple skin, and the area surrounding the wound. Immediately she moves to the dresser and, taking the basin, starts for the bathroom. Once in motion, she regains her speech. From the bathroom

her voice is heard above the sound of running water.

"What happened, Hunt?"

"I ran into your father," he replies when she returns.

"And Dusty was with him," she adds.

"Yes," he acknowledges simply, "she was with him."

Without further comment she approaches, sets the basin back on the dresser, dips a cloth into the fresh water, and begins to rub at the blood that has dried on the lower part of his face. When she moves the damp cloth up his cheek and dabs gingerly around the wound, he winces, drawing his head back and away from her touch. Satisfied to clean the less sensitive areas beneath the swelling, she places her free hand on his chest and scrubs briskly at the specks of blood still on his throat. Almost at once, she pauses as though noticing his chest for the first time and, turning her attention to it, slowly traces an invisible line over his bare flesh with her fingertips.

As the cloth falls back into the water and gradually opens, the blood it contains dissolves and slowly spreads, a dark cloud, on all sides of the cloth toward the white porcelain slopes of the basin, and once again the water is murky. Trit slings her handbag over her shoulder when she goes to the bathroom to dispose of the dirty water, and this time she does not return immediately. The sound of water running from the faucet comes back to the room through the open door, and after a while the unmistakable odor of smoke drifts from the bathroom too. When Trit emerges, she is

without the basin. Instead, in one hand she carries an unlit candle, taken probably from her handbag; in the other, a cigarette. Like the smoke she seems to drift into the room and approaches Hunt. Raising the cigarette to her lips, she inhales deeply, then passes it to Hunt. While he draws on the cigarette, she places the candle in an ashtray and arranges it in front of the mirror on the dresser. After lighting the candle, she switches off the ceiling light and returns to Hunt, his face now illuminated in the varying glow of the candle. He offers her the cigarette and slides over to make room for her. On the one wall visible in the mirror, shadows, cast there by the inconsistent candlelight, rise and fall. Smoke, two entwining threads slowly twisting, wends upward, wafting above them in a double helix. The scent is that of burning hemp as dry hot ashes flake off and fall, drifting aimlessly to the mattress.

"It has been a long time, hasn't it, Hunt?" Trit says and leans her head against his bare shoulder. "At least it seems so . . ."

Now the buffer has swung right, across the polished black vinyl. The machine spins, buffing the surface near the reflected image of Dusty.

"Alex," she is saying, "will you pick up Miles this afternoon?"

"How?" he asks. "Who'll take care of the store?"

"Well," she begins and looks toward the buffer, "couldn't Hunt?"

Looking in the same direction, Tiriack says, "Sure, I can see it all now."

"And Miles--" She raises her brows in a questioning expression.

"--how will he get home?"

Frowning, Tiriac looks away impatiently; then, his hands coming up in a gesture of dismissal, he says, "Let Hunt go for him. He'll be glad to get out of the store for a break."

"Okay," Dusty agrees, "but be sure and leave him a note."

Slowly rising, smoke drifts past the tapestries and entwines the columns of the scene. The weaving takes place in the dim light of the empty store. Upon the desk an unused ashtray serves as a weight, but the papers--first, second, and third copies of bills of lading in pink and yellow and blue pastels, unanswered letters from collection agencies, overdue invoices--are too spread out, the desk too cluttered for any paperweight to be effective. A search through the papers only serves to shuffle them more; consequently several sheets fall to the floor. One of these, a slip smaller than the rest, is retrieved, held out at arm's length, then moved closer.

Pick Miles up from nursery two kilos down beach. . .

Beyond the note, back in the room are rolls of linoleum and floor coverings of every design and material, polyester fibers, nylon, acrylics, wool, each sheared or looped, sculpted or plush. There are shipments of boxed vinyl tile, samples on cardboard displays, inside binders, on metal rings, carpet shampoos both dry and wet, vacuum cleaners, buffers, mechanical rug shampooers for sale or rent, room dividers of bamboo, lacquered wood, jalousies of fixed and movable louvers, hanging baskets made of wire or rope or wrought iron, and beneath the note, more papers--

scattered bills, receipts, orders, advertisements--litter the desk. Half-buried beneath all this clutter is a paperback novel, its cover depicting the tents of a Roman camp, at the center of which dances a woman wearing golden bracelets and anklets. Spinning among caldrons of burning oil, from which billow thick black columns of smoke, she seems to enthrall the legionnaires as they watch, expressions of utter absorption, of adoration frozen upon their faces. Although unfettered, the woman is probably a captive. At least the bracelets and anklets resemble shackles that suggest an imprisoned person instead of a mere camp follower. However, she also wears a tiara and could, therefore, be a member of some royal family, perhaps a disenfranchised queen on whom her captors have placed regalia in order to mock her. Whoever she is, it is clear that she has in turn captured her captors and for the present holds them motionless while she dances. Whirling, rapidly whirling, she lifts her face to the sky. It seems impossible that she can continue the pace. When the wind shifts, smoke completely envelops her, and the smoke alone is enough to make one dizzy. Nevertheless, nothing--neither the moments of smoky obscurity nor the belief that it must soon end--gives pause to the tension as she spins, her bare arms lifted and locked above her head. But something must relieve the vertigo; the observer must either look away or fall, and even then the peripheral--or remembered--image of her spinning does not disappear. Neither does her collapse, but it is a moan that finally draws attention to Dusty lying propped against cushions in the corner, her hands bound above her head. She is naked in the dim light, her rapid breathing synchronized with the rise and fall of her breasts. Were it not for the bas-relief of her nipples, subtly raised from the soft curves of her breasts, her

breathing might suggest fear, even terror. As it is, however, this one detail precludes such a possibility; her physical alteration, then, must mean she is sexually aroused--unless the effect of terror is the same as that of sexual excitement.

Two wisps of smoke wend their way above the cushions and sculpt oriental rugs. Ashes drift to the wool nap of the carpet, where a shoe covers them, grinds, and is removed, the ashes now gone from sight, replaced by the note, which is difficult to read in the dim light.

Pick up kilos from nursery two miles down beach . . .

The note is retrieved from where it has fallen on the carpet, wadded up, and tossed onto the desk.

". . . to me. I know it's different for you, always thinking of Dusty, sulking if she crosses you, happy when she's nice, but it'd be better with me, you see, better for you . . ."

Trit pauses and, placing the cigarette between Hunt's lips, drops her hand to his chest. She softly caresses him as he squints against the smoke drifting past his eyes.

At the north end of the strand the nursery, with a view of both the bay and the city curving along the south shore, is favorably located just above the tideline. During clear weather this is ideal, but a light rain now falls on the strand, the city, and the bay. The rain is probably the forward fringe of a storm that is, according to a report published in the morning paper, somewhere in the Gulf between the Tropic of Cancer and Yucatan's northern tip. Because the strand, intersected by the twenty-eighth parallel where the coast angles sharply from a north-south axis to one of east-west, is in the path of the storm, there

is some fear of flooding in the low-lying areas. Under similar conditions before, tides have suddenly risen and cut off unsuspecting residents.

Dusty's anxious expression, immediately transformed at the sight of Miles, no doubt reflects such a worry. She holds out her arms in relief when the child runs to her and buries his face in her dress. Tiriac, on the other hand, seems preoccupied with checking shipments against orders when the boy arrives. Showing neither Dusty's anxiety nor her relief, he merely asks if Miles has enjoyed school.

Dusty also wants to hear about school but, apparently concerned with his manners, wonders if Miles has thanked Hunt for picking him up. Shaking his head, Miles burrows deeper into his mother's skirt.

"Well, don't you think you should?" she inquires, ruffling his hair.

Embarrassed now by his mother's questions, he will not even shake his head in response, and to press him further would only distress him.

"He must learn though," Dusty says, "or he'll never get over his bashfulness."

This is true, but there will be time for that later, and Tiriac, frowning at the fuss Dusty is making, agrees that the delay won't hurt him. It is his idea that the boy need not start today.

"Then I'll have to make up for everyone else, I guess." says Dusty, smiling brightly. "And see to it that proper thanks are given."

Moving away from the shipments, Tiriac stops at the desk and sets aside the orders. He takes up several sheets of paper, which he seems to consider as he offhandedly mentions that he expected Pettick to drop by.

Dusty offers no reply. Instead, smoothing the boy's hair, she

seems to slip into thought, to drift away from Tiriac's point.

Following the buffer as it swings left, the angle of vision, still retaining a certain distance, includes a hurricane charting map that someone has left near the large front window. Rain, which is general all along the coast, beats against the pane and is reduced in the moment it takes to recognize the map to a small dot, a stylized fluent, between intersecting lines of longitude and latitude. So, the storm is still far removed to the southeast, while the rains continue, alternately falling and letting up. After a moment Tiriac looks impatiently away from his papers and repeats himself.

"I thought Pettick was stopping by."

Startled from her reverie by his tone, Dusty glances at him. The handful of papers, apparently less important to him now, is shoved onto the desk as he waits, obviously expecting an answer. She regards him briefly before dropping her eyes again to the boy. Brushing
his hair back from his forehead, she replies.

"Yes, Alex, he is."

Interlacing spirals of smoke rise from the candle whose stem has melted to a stump in danger of tipping over and being doused in its own aliment. Trit reaches up and draws Hunt to her. She gently holds his face against her own as their shadows flicker behind them. Suddenly the shadows soar up the wall, for the candle has finally toppled into the molten pool of wax, where--first flaring, then subsiding to a pale insufficient light--the floating flame continues to burn.

"You can't wait any longer, Hunt," Trit murmurs.

"You're going to have to make up your mind who it's going to be. I wrote while you were away, but you didn't answer. Every day I looked for a letter that didn't come, and now I wonder if you were writing her all the time."

The last ashes of the cigarette crumble and fall their separate ways.

"I could tell you things," she continues, "that might change your mind."

"Such as--" His tone of voice and torpid state suggest that he is not convinced. Now that the cigarette is finished, he seems satisfied to lie quietly as he is.

"Such as the fights they have. You wouldn't believe what she takes off papa, how she goes out of her way to make him jealous, to what extent they both will go."

A truck in the customer parking lot is causing Tiriac considerable irritation. Neither Pettick nor Dusty, however, seems to mind. No doubt they are used to the situation, just another of his confrontations with freight people, although Tiriac describes it more vividly when he accuses the driver of conspiring to disrupt his carpet business. The man, flipping through his sheaf of papers, ignores the invectives. Coming to his final page, he folds back the rest of them and thrusts his clipboard toward Tiriac, who is in the middle of ordering the man to take his rig around to the alley before unloading.

"I need the original bill of lading," the man interrupts.

Cut off, Tiriac is taken aback. He glares at the driver without comprehending and finally asks in a more subdued tone, "The what?"

"To unload your carpet," the man explains, "I've got to have the

original." He is still holding the clipboard up for Tiriac to see.

"Since when?" Tiriac demands, his voice starting to rise again.

"You never did before."

"All I know is what I'm told." He taps the sheaf of papers.

"No original, no carpet. Check it with the dock if you like."

"I'll do just that," says Tiriac, spinning about. Coming toward the desk, he mutters, "We'll get to the bottom of this right now."

The driver turns to Dusty and Pettick, who--sitting side by side in front of a tapestry--have been watching the discussion. Raising his clipboard, the man extends it for them to see.

"What can I say? I don't make the rules."

Pettick leans across Dusty to get an unobstructed view of the page in question. In reaching past her, he must assume a position that appears, from the other side of the room, to place his arm against her breasts, but she shows little interest in the matter of bills of lading. If anything, it is Pettick's gesture that catches her attention. It seems to amuse her. She may also find Tiriac amusing, for he has begun his call by shouting into the telephone and is now listening to the response, which apparently does not please him.

"You know damn well," he replies, "the mills always bill me--none of this bill of lading crap."

A silence follows during which the color in his face deepens. At last he slams down the receiver and remains there, his hand still upon the cradled instrument. He maintains this posture only briefly, however, before lifting the receiver again and dialing another number. When his party answers, he speaks in a calmer, more controlled voice than before and asks for the collection department. While waiting for the connection,

he looks back at his wife and Pettick, but Pettick has already returned to an upright position in his chair.

Glimpsing her husband's look, Dusty says, "You don't seem to encourage repetition, Alex."

Tiriac, evidently discerning her meaning, turns his back to await his connection. To Pettick, though, her comment may not be clear. He watches her as if seeking an explanation, which in the end is not forthcoming. Rather than say anything else, she reaches back and touches the tapestry on the wall behind them. She runs her hand over the surface and traces with her fingertips the vertical lines of a column slightly raised from the surrounding surface. By tilting his head and looking over his shoulder, Pettick observes this demonstration with a smile that is hidden from Tiriac's view.

Seen from the opposite direction, they and their inverted reflections form a dyptych in which the paired images are pale in the smoky surface of polished obsidian. Smoke itself seems to rise and entwine the columns behind them. And once again, the man looms over her who is bound and naked. Struggling against her bonds, she forces herself to contain the scream that is on her lips, but she is unable to suppress a moan deep in her throat. Blood appears in the corner of her clenched lips and trickles over the delicate skin beneath her mouth. A look of pain, of terror, is fixed upon her features as the man raises himself. Poised above her, he begins a chant, his body straining against gravity and desire. Caldrons of oil boil and burn. Smoke billows forth from the pots and engulfs the throbbing rites, while the chant continues. At the moment of his plunging down a scream cuts off the chant. Sweating, soot-covered figures thrash upon the raised platform until, head thrown

back, mouth agape, eyes open in an unseeing stare, she ceases to struggle. Her face is streaked with sweat and ashes. The moisture glistens in the glare of burning fires, which flare and subside, throwing shadows against the columns and into the portico behind them.

Hunt starts abruptly away from the bedstead. He looks about the room, which is dim and bare. The light from the floating flame casts shadows around the narrow rectangle in a way that increases the feeling of oppression. Perhaps it is a desire to break free of this feeling that brings him up. He lifts his hand to his face and gently probes the sensitive area around his eye as Trit, interrupting what she has been saying, asks what is wrong. Without answering he looks at her, then falls back against the metal rods. The drug has had its effect. The smoke, dim light, and incense have lulled him again into himself, and only a sense of existence remains in the room. Perhaps, no longer seeking to avenge his injury, he desires nothing. Perhaps the notion prevails that one cannot dwell on the troubles of only one person, even though those troubles be his own. Closing his eyes, he now seems content to stay where he is.

"I could fix another joint," Trit offers.

Declining, he leads her back to what she has been saying, "No, that's all right--go on. You said Dusty fought with Pettick."

"And papa with her."

"Over Tiriac?" Hunt suggests.

"No, not after she left him."

"Over what then?"

Trit hesitates, watching him, his eyes closed. His breathing is barely perceptible; his face, swollen but calm.

"A lot of things," she finally responds, "but about you mostly. For example, that bracelet you gave her."

Hunt opens his eyes and, turning his head so that he can see her, regards Trit.

When Pettick rises this time, he has the paperback novel on whose cover is depicted the Carthaginian woman. Dusty, who has pointed it out, prompts him to inspect it by saying:

"Have you seen that yet?"

At the same time Tiriac is heard saying, "I'll send a check right over." A pause ensues and is followed by, "All right then--you'll have the money."

Once more the buffer has swung to its opposite limit, where its brush revolves near the smiling image of Dusty reflected in the polished floor. On her wrist she wears an onyx bracelet that is seen briefly before she steps from the vinyl to the carpet that covers the floor from the middle of the showroom back past the desk at the rear of the store. The nap of the carpet consists of matted loops, each disappearing behind its neighboring fibers, which in turn lead to others. Together the matted strands begin to form a larger figure, a pattern, in the wool--until finally the configuration takes shape and the separate fibers of the fabric become recognizable as one. Tiriac is moving toward Pettick, is removing from his wallet a fold of bills and thrusting the money at Pettick, who regards suspiciously first the bills,

then them man offering them.

"Do me a favor, Pettick," Tiriac is saying, "and take this to the bank--all you have to do is pay a sight draft and bring back the original bill of lading." He taps the driver's copy with his finger and inquires, "Okay?"

Before Pettick can answer, Dusty begins to laugh, and while everyone turns toward her, she approaches Tiriac, takes the money from him, and says, "You can't ask Wedge to do that, Alex. He has things to do himself."

An embarrassed expression on his face, Pettick looks at Dusty, drops his eyes to the hand she has extended for the money, and sees the cameo bracelet that she wears.

"What about it?" Hunt asks.

"She didn't tell you?" Trit inquires in surprise.

"They had a row over it, and papa got mad, broke the clasp, and tore it off her."

Hunt starts up on the far side of the bed and, without hesitating, comes around to the dresser, where he picks up the field jacket and looks through one of the side pockets. Finding it empty, he searches the other before throwing the jacket onto the bed and reaching for his shirt. He goes to the door and opens it, but for a moment he stands there, his head bent in thought. Looking back at Trit, he questions her one last time.

"You're sure?"

"About the bracelet?"

"Yes--that it was your father who broke it?"

"Yes," she says simply, "I saw him."

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A mist, glowing and quivering with a soft luminescence, rises around Hunt as he hurries head down along the quay. It drifts, the mist, in off the water and loops up the bluff and through the interstices of the balustrade before settling into the streets and alleys along and just off the waterfront. At random moments he raises his eyes from the pavement before him and stares across the port toward the lights of the city. They shimmer and go out in the shifting density of mist only to reappear a second later.

Water, lapping at the pier below, intermittently throws spray over the edge of the wharf and onto the already wet timbers. The night is humid; moisture clings to everything.

And dim mist-shrouded faces, alone and in clusters, stare out of doorways along the street. Some of the women have moved to the curb; some, to the corners to get the best effects of the streetlights. Others sit on their stools inside the open windows of their cubicles, their faces bathed and shimmering through the fog with the red glow of crepe-covered lamps hidden beneath their window sills. The glow accentuates the prominent features of their faces and obscures the rest. Murmuring soft indistinguishable enticements, they call out to the shadowy and faceless

figures that pass. Head down, he is trying to hurry past when a small hand reaches out from the nearby shadows to detain him.

"Have you got a light?"

Distracted, he pats his shirt and, discovering a matchbook in the pocket, offers a light. When she leans over the flame, it casts a bright glow from her cupped hands across her face and into delicate nostrils that reveal tiny veins beneath translucent flesh. In the brief moment it takes to light the cigarette it becomes evident that the girl is hardly sixteen, and yet as soon as the flame goes out, she drops her hand and touches him.

"Give us a little. You've got time for a quickie, don't you?" Taking no notice of his swollen face, she nods down toward the shadows of the cargo sheds. "We can do it on the boards if you like."

Her small body exudes a smothering floral scent that blends with the stench of wharf rats and scum-coated flotsam and seems confined by the damp air to areas around her erogenous folds.

"Not tonight," he says, moving her hand.

As he steps free and walks away, the girl shouts after him, her voice--no longer that of a young girl--now hard and spiteful.

"All mouth and no money. Is that what happened to your face--put your mouth down where it wasn't wanted?"

To his right an old woman blows him a kiss and invites him with an obscene gesture to come to her. Two whores smile at him from their window and kiss, one slipping her hand down between the other's legs, and off in the fog the sounds of weary flesh can be heard laboring for one more orgasm. Ahead of him a sailor crawls over the balustrade to the street, then turns and helps a woman over after him, her skirt slipping above her thighs and up to her waist as she slides off the barrier to the sidewalk. She wears nothing but a garter belt under her skirt--not even a pair of hose. Pulling the skirt down and straightening it, she links an arm in the sailor's as they start up the street, her deformity unnoticed until she begins to hobble. Together, they pass under a streetlamp and drift from sight into the pale mist beyond.

Narrow streets and alleys open onto the harbor, each offering its own path to the catacombs of recesses, cul-de-sacs, and covered passages--little more than tunnels--that quickly swallow one at night. From out of this dark labyrinth the mad cackle of an old hag begins, is cut off, and is heard no more. Shadows shorten behind him as he approaches a corner. They leap forward and lengthen as he passes. Turning away from the alleys, he crosses to the balustrade and continues along the wharves until he comes beneath the shadow of the grain elevator. Here he stops.

Below the balustrade at the center of the large unlighted area a rhombus of light glimmers, its usual glare

softened by the diaphanous strands of mist that curl across the wharf. From time to time people appear in the light and, passing through it, temporarily distort its geometric shape before disappearing into the humid gloom, which muffles their voices, now rising in laughter as they cross the pier, now falling to a murmur as they ascend the stairs to the street and pass on, vague figures wrapped in a glaucous shroud.

The street itself, having no nearby lights, is empty here, and alone, Hunt leans against the balustrade. He waits, concealed in the gloom, in the vaporous cover of the late hour, and watches the lighted doorway below. Off toward the railyards the coupling of freight cars being shunted from one track to another is heard. Along the wharves unseen tankers and freighters nod on the incoming tide, their positions marked only by a muffled clank of iron on iron or the creaking of wet shrouds; from midharbor, only silence and obscurity. The night does something to sounds, to objects. It distorts and finally obliterates everything it brushes. However, the bar, well lighted and still full of people shouting, laughing, drinking, each jostled against the others, is not yet under the influence. This is clearly emphasized by the mood of those departing. Not until they are well outside and into the night is a change perceived in them. At first they laugh, continuing some humorous sentiment started inside, but after a few moments of sensing the fog closing round them, they lower their

voices to a murmur or fall silent altogether.

Inside, Pettick, now expansive and gloating, presides over the remaining drink cadgers and admirers who stand about him. As a group, they keep the spirits of the place high long after the man at the piano and his wife have given up singing and joined the others. Paying for the most recent round, the shrimper exhorts all of them to drink up. It's his last for the night, he says.

"What--" says the woman, "--are you through already?"

"It's been a busy night. Caught a mullet; now I need some shrimp," he responds without concealing his satisfaction. "And if I'm to get any before that storm ruins it, I got to get going."

"At this hour?" one of the men asks incredulously.

"You're not taking the boat out now?"

"Come along and see," the shrimper challenges, laughing at the man's disbelief. "I could use a hand--no telling where that girl's off to. Just know where she ain't."

He looks around, bestowing his smile on the laughing admirers who nod their assent.

"Which girl?" the woman asks.

Bridling, his smile abruptly passing, Pettick regards her defensively.

"Trit. Why--what are you getting at, Buttercup?"

"Take it easy, Pettick," she says. "No offense intended."

Pettick glares at the tub player a second longer,

measuring her intentions, then turns his mug up and finishes the last of his beer. His mood has suddenly changed from gloating to sulking. He shoves the empty mug across the bar and starts away from it.

"Come on, Pettick, have another," the woman offers, trying to assuage his irritation. "It's on me."

"Sure," others pitch in. "Stay for one more, Pettick."

Shaking his head, he declines the invitations.

"It's late." He pushes through and makes his way to the door, where he stops, scowling back at the woman, and mutters, "Goddamn busybody."

The glare of the bar lights has had its effect on his vision, for he halts again outside the door, this time the rhombus of light framing his silhouette, and peers into the rising fog as if to let his eyes adjust to the change. As he stands there, the light from the doorway falling across his shoulders, he draws something from his pocket and stares down at it in his hand. At that moment, he seems to notice something to the side, and jerking his head that way, he instinctively lifts an arm to shield his face. Before he has moved completely out of the light, something catching points of light in the downswing of its arch strikes him. Without a sound Pettick crumples, half in the light, half out, onto the wharf. He lies there, completely still, no marks, no cuts visible; only his stillness and his hand, apparently still gripping what he has just been examining, appear to be unusual.

No movement, except for the drifting and rising tendrils of fog, occurs for a time; then a hand moves from the shadow, reaches down, apparently grasping Pettick's outstretched hand, and seems to feel for a pulse. Drawing back, the hand passes from sight, and footsteps are immediately heard on the timbers. When the stairs are reached, the sound changes from the resonant pounding of heavy running on wood to a harsh rasping of shoes scrabbling up concrete steps. The sound rises through the mist until a man's form emerges at the street landing. Without pausing, this person runs for the nearest entrance to the strand's maze of passages just off North Harbor Street. Down in the light, now, only the stillness of the fallen man seems strange.

Below, someone appears at the door, sees the crumpled form of the shrimper lying motionless on the wharf, and shouts back into the bar. It is at this moment that Hunt, still poised rigidly against the balustrade, decides to run. Taking the same direction as the other, he enters the alley and pushes past rows of flimsy structures, some gaping from demolition, others from decay. At the first exit he turns out of the narrow passage and into a side street. Halfway up the block a light comes on, causing him to veer into a recess under one of the aqueducts just as someone, coming from it, steps into his path. The man looks round and darts forward but too late. Unable to keep his balance, Hunt stumbles into the man and knocks them both against the wall,

and in the ensuing scuffle each goes down. The man grabs Hunt and holds onto him just as a second light comes on across the way. The sudden light startles the grappler enough for Hunt to wrench free and scabble to his feet. Without looking down, he shakes off the other's last clutch at his leg and plunges into the mist hovering just above the pavement of the narrow side street.

PART TWO

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Much of the mist has lifted now, but with the temperature already at dewpoint, moisture condenses on the cool surfaces of predawn streets and sidewalks. A film of fine black dust, industrial fallout, is settling onto everything; it falls lightly on the bank of garbage cans and corrugated boxes set outside the deserted buildings by cleaning crews during the night, collects on the head and shoulders of the old man as he rummages under the light of the street lamp through the trash; the soot imbues the district with the unmistakable tinge of heavy industry. The street vendor shuffles impatiently from one can or box to the next, mouthing oaths in his search. When a receptacle fails to yield what he seeks, he excoriates it, shaking his fist, but continues to bang at the cans until he finds a packing crate full of discarded excelsior. Squatting, he balances the crate on his knees and, spreading the wood shavings, holding them up to the light, examines the substance of his find. Evidently paper excelsior will not do. Having ascertained the quality, he raises his face to the sky and rises, carrying the box to his cart, where he proceeds to spread the shavings neatly over its bed.

He tosses away the empty crate and, leaving his cart

at the curb, starts into the alley just past the corner of the building. After a moment of knocking boxes about and scattering trash without finding more of the bedding, he pauses, squinting as if trying to remember something, and stares up the alley. Either recalling or deciding that his chances of finding more excelsior are good, he resumes his search only to halt abruptly. Before him, among the boxes and refuse, two feet and a pair of legs are drawn up and scrunched clumsily beneath several old newspapers. He throws up his hands but, then, drops them to push aside the boxes. Pulling off the papers, he uncovers Sam Graggs curled up on his side and braced against the wall, his hands clenched over his head. Soot has fallen on him; it has permeated everything, is embedded in the old bricks and mortar, forms a layer on the shoes of the sleeping man, on his sullied trousers, even on his drooping socks and exposed ankles, which the vendor nudges. The old man nudges harder before giving the legs a sharp kick for which he receives a grunt and a garbled phrase that lapses unfinished as the other man reaches out, eyes still shut, grasps the removed sheets of newsprint, and draws them back toward him covering his head again. The sleeping man reeks of stale tobacco, alcohol, and urine; his trousers, wet and vomit stained, are saturated with the sour stench of excrement; and his immobile face, deprived of all dignity, is mottled, the combined effect of liver-colored and jaundiced splotches.

Growing less patient, the vendor stoops to jerk the

paper off and begins to shout. "This is what you come to-- sleeping in alleys? Get up. From you--a grown man and working--I expected more."

He grabs him by the shoulder and shoves, pulls him back, and gives another violent shove that uncovers a billfold on the ground beneath him. The vendor releases the shoulder and, straightening up, opens the billfold to peer into empty compartments. He drops it and begins to go through the sleeping man's pockets by first turning out those of the trousers. After finding nothing in them, he goes to the shirt and pulls from the first pocket he tries a cameo bracelet. The old man stares at it for a moment, then, seemingly aware of the implications, reaches down, takes the other's face between thumb and fingers, and squeezes, twisting the face toward him, shouting up close at the puffy, unmoving features.

"You will wake up or I break your head." He slams Graggs against the bricks and yanks him forward again. "Do you hear me?"

Graggs opens his eyes, squinting without apparent recognition, and quickly closes them. He shifts to bring his body more in line with his twisted head and slurs what sounds like the word *cigarette*.

Releasing him, the old man straightens up and retraces his steps to the street. He goes directly to one of the garbage cans and reaches into it, bringing out a couple of half-smoked cigarettes, one, the longer, with a filtertip.

He breaks away the filter and holds the two butts out for comparison. The one is still longer after its filter is removed; so he throws the shorter stub back and returns to Graggs.

Shaking the sleeper once more, he mutters. "I should sleep so sound," then louder, "Get up, at home you belong. Forget this bum stuff and go home."

Pulling up the other's head, he wedges the cigarette butt between the lips and watches the eyelids flutter and twitch against opening. Quickly the old man goes into a pocket of his overcoat with one hand, pulls out a rag, shoves back, and tries the second pocket, from which he extracts a handful of rusted bolts, nuts, and screws. He thrusts them back and, opening his coat, tries his pants pocket. First he finds torn scraps of paper with figures marked on them, then fishing hooks, followed by a skein of twine, a plumb, and a book of safety matches. Picking the matches from the other objects, he returns all the rest to their place and bends forward to strike a match.

Eyes still closed, Graggs draws on the cigarette, inhaling at the same time both burnt sulphur and tobacco smoke. His suspiration, a wheezing snort, snuffs the flame. He opens his eyes and raises himself shakily to a sitting position after the second puff, draws again and exhales, the same wheezing force blowing the smoke up parallel to the wall that supports his back. As he shifts, he uncovers the billfold, which he has covered in sitting up and which the

old man picks up and holds out to him.

"This is yours?"

Squinting past the single thread of smoke winding, curling across his face, Graggs glances at the wallet and nods.

"And this?" the vendor asks, drawing the bracelet from his coat pocket. "This too--this is yours?"

The room, again, is crowded; almost all motion, immobilized in aquamarine. They seem, these men, to gravitate without moving, imperceptibly afloat, no support, nothing palpable in their attraction. Columns, refulgent beads of air, rise through the waters of aquaria along the walls; the furnishings are bathed in a sea green glow. Viewed through this refractive medium, each object is disproportionate to the others: the depth of the room obliterates its breadth; distorted figures crowd together along the bar; distant, taunting murmurs drift past.

". . . self-flagellant penitents? You mean masochistic queens, and you among them--oh, you'll get your beating. . ."

"I'll truck no interference with my religion."

Past the quarreling pair, a youthful face--the gaze, the smile entice. No. Out of the dark row of toilet stalls, he seems to materialize; the face, not youthful, glistens in the dimness, mature, hardened, the smile more grimace than enticement. He comes forward, Pettick, his shrimper's sun-blackened face crowding close, sneering in anticipation, in contempt.

"What's wrong, Graggs? No Greek ships in port?" Wet sounds seep

from beyond the bank of toilets. A hot mist rises from the dank floor.

"Or did you have something else in mind?"

The sound of trickling water back among the urinals approaches along the floor as though following its contours in little runnels. It seems to sink, falling away, into the drain at the center of the damp dark room. Beads of sweat rise in a band across the arch of his brow as he watches, waiting; his eyes, hard and intent and eager, seem to defy, to--then he is past, and the door is closing on the gloom. Concentric ridges stand in relief from the concrete floor; wet, they glisten and appear to turn, to move outward in widening circles, their motion broken only by intermittent patches not yet moist. Again, no. The pattern, no longer circular, is rhomboidal, a flattened depth, not dark but bright against a black density that hides him. His foot strikes something hard and sends it thudding over the boards a short distance before it comes to rest. He bends, reaching down, and closes his fingers around a short length of pipe, lifts it, and examines by touch the length, determines with a slight backswing and quick forward stroke into the other hand its heft and balance, the check repeated in a smack of metal against waiting flesh as fingers close reassuringly around the piece. He stands in the darkness and waits.

Fog lies upon the port; the air, among the tendrils of rising mist, is still. In the distance, the intermittent crash of metal echoes in the night, empty boxcars being shunted from warehouses to railyard sidings. When the shrimper emerges, pausing in the middle of the flattened light to glare down at the bracelet, the arm goes up. A sound or sudden stir of air causes him to raise his face, his own arm coming up in reflex, surprise the only reaction showing in his face. The impact is not solid.

A glancing blow, it snaps first a bone in the raised forearm and then one above, somewhere in the shoulder. The drop is straight to the swaying boards, a thud of flesh and bone on wharf planks, a rush of air as the pipe is flung out over the harbor waters, a splash and, somewhere in the night, a splintering crate. Again the crash of a boxcar coupling echoes in the distance as light spills across the hand that reaches down to grasp the unmoving wrist, withdraws, and leaves the curled fingers empty except for the insubstantial light. Now the face--upturned, half in the light, half out, expressionless, without grimace, sneer, or contempt--lies immobile . . . a young face that invites, promises release and pleasure . . .

Still holding the bracelet, the vendor leans forward to relight the cigarette, which has gone out in the humid air. Graggs--inhaling, exhaling, blowing out the flame--restrains the old man when he starts to draw back. "Wait, I need your help."

"Help? Is it help you want after this?" The vendor thrusts out the bracelet. "About help you should have been thinking when you started."

"I don't regret that, but I need your help in getting it back to Dusty."

Expressionless, the old man regards him, looks away and down at the onyx, at his fingers working, rubbing the stone.

"I know it's too much to ask; it means a lot though." Graggs halts, gazing up at the old vendor still rubbing the

stone. "What do you say? Will you see that she gets it back?"

"And you? What about. . ."

"Don't," Graggs begins, "no questions, okay? It's all I can do to ask it. Just see it gets back--that's all, anyway you want to do it. Will you?"

"A man your age and working. It's not right, this."

"A lot's not right. This has nothing to do with that. It goes beyond."

The two look in this moment of quiet at the object held between them. At first there is only the silence of the early morning, then, far out over the surface of the still dark bay, the long, resonant sound of a foghorn. Their arms are extended, the bracelet linking them as the vendor moves a foot and steps on a turned-back section of scuffed newsprint that seems in the distorted mix of halftone dots and sooty residue to reveal the image of the mayor and governor, their hands outstretched and clasped as the familiar jowls are turning toward the camera in reflexive acknowledgment.

"The injury, that he deserves, but you--here, like this--it's not right."

"She should have it back."

"Maybe," the old man says to himself. Looking at the bracelet, he continues to rub the stone. "And the blame," he says, still to himself. "The blame she must also have. A man like that--what is she doing with a man like that

who would cheat an old man, cause so much trouble? The injury he deserves. I wish it on him again, but her?"

"I don't question it."

The vendor looks at Graggs suddenly as if noticing him again. He seems to consider what Graggs has said before saying, "No, of course, you couldn't."

"Will you do it?"

The old man slips the bracelet into an outside pocket of his overcoat. "Maybe." Nodding, he adds, "If not, at least Pettick will not have it."

"She should have it. Hunt gave it to her."

"Perhaps--and you," he shakes his head, disapproving, "at home you belong."

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Beads of dew, sprinkled among the sheaths of Johnson grass along the railroad tracks, refract the morning light and give a sparkling hue to the otherwise dull salt flats stretching from the embankment to the back bay. The morning heat is already building, turning the air above the bay into shimmering waves that distort the bluffs beyond. Damp and steaming flats have started to dry out by the time the foreman appears in the warehouse door. Watching Graggs try to pry open the jammed door of the boxcar, Hunt seems content to let the man expel some unpleasant thought by the violence of his act. Using the crowbar, Graggs inches the door back in stages by yanking, thrusting, repeating. Neither Hunt--his face swollen and discolored--nor Graggs--eyes bloodshot, skin puffy and sallow looking--speaks.

W and Ready follow the foreman to the boxcar as he announces, "Looks like we're going to get it after all, Sam. The radio says it's headed in and going to hit us."

"Looks like something already hit my sweeping man here." W pauses, appraising Hunt and his swollen eye.

The foreman glances at Hunt and looks back at Graggs, who has worked the door all the way open, revealing the half-loaded car the four of them had stopped with the day

before. "What about it, Sam. Think you'll make it?"

Graggs steps back, turning his weary face toward the foreman. "Maybe." He throws the crowbar down and adds, looking at Hunt, W, and Ready, "Wait for me. I've got to get some coffee." Without saying anything else, he starts along the loading platform.

Startled, the foreman seems to accept this behavior. He leaves the car as the other three step inside, W finding a resting place high on the coffee sacks, Ready glancing at Hunt and saying, "How you making it today? You going to be all right?"

Hunt nods. "I'll be all right."

"I hope so," says W, "you don't look so good right now." He grins and raises a finger at Ready. "What'd I tell you yesterday about working with young honky here? Look what it done to Graggs. He look like death warmed over, and my man here, he look like someone done worked him over with the ugly stick. Better mind me, old man, when I tell something. You hang around him and you likely to catch hit too."

Ready shakes his head and speaks to Hunt. "Might as well get used to it. He don't ever shut up. Hit's like this every day with him. A body can't get no peace."

"Least we got some coffee from the Angolan brothers," W says, slapping a hand down on the sack next to him and sending up a puff of dust. "The brothers looking out for us." He pauses, glancing up at the door as a man in a business suit steps into the car.

The man looks at each of the workers before addressing Hunt. "Is your name Crofford?" As he asks this, he identifies himself with the minimal official gesture, a brief exposure of metal framed in leather, snapped quickly shut, and put away. The movement, done with the carelessness of habit, is abrupt.

"Yes," Hunt acknowledges.

"Come with me then," the man says, stepping back without turning around. "We'd like to talk to you."

Stepping out of the small cafe, Graggs stops short. Down the street Hunt is being put into a car parked at the end of the warehouse. As Graggs stands there, the car backs out and heads in his direction. He turns as it goes past and watches it move along the street to the corner. For a while after the car has passed from view, he remains where he is, frowning thoughtfully as though trying to figure out the event. When he glances up, he does so in order to look toward the embankment and the spangles of sunlight glinting off the water beyond the salt flats. The bluffs, shimmering across the bay, seem barren in the searing heat. The grass that is visible is brown from the heat, which has left expanses of cracked and empty flats whose salt crystals glitter like mica in the glare. Only the gray sludge, pumped up from the oyster beds and disgorged onto barges out in the bay, gives any sense of life to the back side of the strand. All else is still.

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"He's ready."

The deputy drops Hunt's hand and thrusts a paper towel at him for the ink-filled crevices of his split and broken skin. As the announcement is made, the man waiting by the elevator pushes its button. The doors slide back and reveal a large compartment divided halfway to the rear by a wire restraining wall.

"This way," says the waiting man, motioning Hunt forward.

He enters and, flanked by the man, faces about. His inscrutable expression conceals what he is thinking as he raises his face to observe the floor numbers lighting up in ascending order. The elevator comes to a halt at six. Again the doors open, and the two step out and proceed along a corridor whose steel walls are secured by large rivets that run in vertical rows from floor to ceiling. They stop before a heavy steel door at the end of the corridor. To the right is a control booth. Two main bars span the complete height of its window and pass through a strip of metal that traverses the square approximately halfway up. A third bar, descending from the top, stops at the horizontal strip and leaves a small opening below.

Into this opening the deputy pushes a sheet of paper, and the steel door promptly opens. As Hunt steps forward and the door clangs shut behind him, a trusty in white overalls appears and points to a pile of wool blankets. They reek of unwashed bodies, as does the hot rancid air. Taking a blanket, Hunt follows the trusty along a row of solid steel doors, each separating the corridor from a small cubicle. Clearly there is no communication with these cells except through narrow slots, which are opened and closed from outside. Past these doors the corridor takes a turn and passes between a series of barred cells. For some inexplicable reason the lights in the passage are out, while those in the cells shine dimly on the far side of the bars, throwing the corridor side into shadows. Moving down this corridor as the bars of light and dark alternately flash by creates a confusing effect on the senses. The sides, ceiling, and floor seem to converge up ahead, and for a moment the passageway resembles a shaft dropping precipitously into the heart of the structure. At its end, however, the corridor is merely a passage that opens onto a large rectangular tank built within the shell of the building.

The front side of the rectangle consists of bars that, passing through thick crossbars, cover the height of the room. Behind these bars men silently watch the approach of the two. Some of them are stripped to the waist; others wear overalls. Across the back of the rectangle three rows of cells extend at right angles from it and, along with the

rectangular area, comprise the main holding tank of the jail. The floor inside this tank, which is wet from overflowing commodes and strewn with piles of sodden newspapers, reeks of urine, and near one wall a moaning junkie lies doubled up and hugging himself on the wet surface.

As soon as the door opens, Hunt steps into the tank. He pauses and looks around. To his left four men sit playing dominoes at a long table. One whistles; another, seeing Hunt's eye, asks about it. The answer (that he fell) causes knowing glances among the men, and they drop the matter. To the far right a solitary black ignores the others, while in the center of the rectangle three youths, hair to their shoulders, interrupt their conversation long enough to observe Hunt's entry. He crosses the larger area and, moving into the center row of cells, begins to check them. Each consists of a seatless commode, two metal shelves that serve--one above the other on a side wall--as bunks, two uncovered mattresses, a sink, and a square grating in the ceiling. It is from this grating that the cubicle receives what little light it has, from this grating also that inadequate ventilation comes.

Tossing his blanket onto the top bunk, Hunt selects the next to last cell. Its toilet, unlike those of the other cells he checked, is free from excrement and newsprint and appears unclogged. At the far end of the lower bunk the mattress, its ticking worn and stained and smelling, the stench of old vomit exuding from it, lies rolled, available

either for back support or, unrolled, to pad the metal surface. Choosing neither use, he lets himself down to the edge of the bunk and gazes at the opposite wall, where a roach in a plethora of false starts seems confused. At this moment Hunt lifts his hand to his face, passing it over his brow and dropping it to his throat. He unfastens his shirt pocket, pulling out the picture and article he had taken from the old newspaper. The picture filling the upper-left quadrant of the front page balances the headline with the story:

CORPUS CHRISTI--Yesterday, the combined force of waves, floating timbers and wind swept over the islands and bay, killing an undetermined number of people, demolishing the tank farm at Harbor Island, and spilling hundreds of thousands of barrels of oil into the flood. The oil somewhat reduced the force of the waves but made difficult the task of identifying the dead, who were washed across the back bay and onto the opposite shore.

Had all the residents of low-lying areas evacuated their homes, loss of life might have been averted.

The strand lies on a north-south axis and divides the plane. Forming an angle, its base extends along the port. The perpendicular line of the angle runs parallel to the offshore islands that separate

bay and gulf. Salt flats fill the inside corner of the angle, and to the east, an abnormally low tide reveals a wide band of muddy sea floor. Streets are empty; houses, abandoned except for one half-darkened room where a man lies motionless upon a bed. At his side another man leans over him. It is difficult to determine in the half-light who this man is. Perhaps he is a priest, although it is possible he is only the doctor. Back in the corner a boy stands unnoticed. He does not cry; he merely watches, his hair wet, a blanket wrapped about him.

To the south across the port is the city; to the north, the causeway. Soft light reflects from clouds high in the sky and, coming through the window where a slat is broken, casts an oblique shaft across the dimly lit room. The light strikes the floor in a triangular pattern near the opposite wall. At the front door a man looks out at the golden, rose-colored clouds and soft light from the setting sun. His expression, free from anxiety, is thoughtful--preoccupied even. Behind, at a table a woman sits watching him. Her face--its expression, that is--appears anxious, questioning, perhaps a little frightened.

The man steps back from the door, half-turning, his eyes lowered thoughtfully. Distracted by a sudden thought, he lifts his eyes and glances around the room as though seeking something; then looking at the woman, his voice on edge, he says, "Where's Hunt?"

"He's down on the beach," she answers.

"Get him back," he says sharply. "I want that boy up here now."

"He's not in the water, FJ. Let him be for a while."

Hunt's father turns back to the door and looks out at the clouds and the sun as music comes from a radio on the table. The music, a

suitable complement for the copper sky and soft light, is gentle and seems to soothe the man somewhat.

"Why don't we get out if it's coming in?" she asks.

"And who'll look after the house?" he asks. "Someone's got to."

"Why? What could you do?" she asks. "You couldn't do anything if you did stay."

He jerks his head about, glaring at her, checks himself, and lets his gaze slip absently to the triangle of light on the floor. "I can try," he says. His voice is distant but determined; after a moment he turns his back to her and softens his voice to say, "You two go to your sister's."

She looks up in surprise, watching his back for some sign of a change. When he remains at the door without altering his posture or position, she rises and steps to a side window, her own expression becoming pensive while she looks out the window. Outside, the boy is seen on the beach. He stands looking out over the water, which is withdrawn from shore. Where the water previously stood, a band of muddy sea floor divides sand and bay. Although withdrawn, the water itself is calm. Not a ripple is visible on its glasslike surface.

She returns to her place at the table and, sitting down, says, "No. . . not if you won't. . ." She tries to match his earlier firmness, but failing this, she looks down, pauses, then asks in an uncertain tone of voice, "Your family left in 1919; why won't you?"

Perhaps uncertain himself or unwilling to express the reason, he remains silent. The silence suggests he is considering her words before answering. When he finally does speak, it is in a quiet way.

"They left and lost everything," he says as though the reply is

self-explanatory, "and never forgot it."

"But that was before the seawall."

He shakes his head. "That seawall won't help the beach."

"No," she admits and gives up her argument to stare vacantly at her open hands. As if in afterthought, she asks, "When will you put up the shutters?"

"Not till morning, but I want Hunt here anyway."

"He's all right, FJ. Leave him alone."

The man looks toward her. She does not return his look, however; instead, she keeps her eyes fixed on the surface of the table, passively resisting the silent demand of his gaze. Although she visibly weakens under his persistent silence, she holds fast for a long time, giving way only after he turns back to the door.

Rising, she concedes in a weary voice, "All right, if it bothers you that much, I'll get him."

She starts to say more, stops, eyeing him, and leaves him to his solitude. All along the beach, houses are boarded up, abandoned. No traffic--not even parked cars remain in the street that runs parallel to the water. Boats have been pulled high onto land, turned over, and staked to the ground. Out in the water the boy is caught by the undercurrent and pulled down. He emerges farther out, struggling, but is again forced under. The old man is swimming to him with strong sure strokes. Once more the boy comes up, starts to go under again, but the old man has him . . . No, it was then--sometime before--perhaps in 1919. Yet, the water is calm; not a ripple is seen, only the band of muddy sea floor and the old man returning to shore with the boy.

Now the light coming through the break in the slats has moved

nearer the far wall. Despite the passing time, Hunt's father still stands at the door. His wife's departure has removed the principal figure from the room and left in her absence only peculiar signs of life; four small, water-filled saucers--in which the table legs stand--provide the table with miniature moats. Filled with water, not yet dust-collecting vessels of abandonment, they confirm the existence of life in a desire to keep ants off the table. So too do the radio and music. A voice interrupts the music, goes monotonously on for a while, then gives way to the music again. Near the table the light leaves the floor and moves up the wall, but FJ seems not to notice. His attention is directed to a black Nash that turns the corner and approaches. A design is painted on the door, an oval of mint green on which is centered an oil derrick, the name of a company circumscribed above and below the structure inside the border of the oval. The first two words of the name, above, are divided by the derrick, whereas the longer last word forms its base. The Nash stops in front and a man gets out. He, like Hunt's father, is about thirty and appears to be someone who works outside, although he wears a suit and a tie.

Starting around the car, he calls across the hood to FJ, who has stepped out to meet him, "Looks like everyone's pulled out but you, FJ."

His smile is not returned. Nor does he receive a reply to his comment, for FJ looks away along the beach as though confirming the report. Across the sand the woman is walking toward the boy, who faces east, looking out over the water. She is about to reach him. Except for the woman and boy, the beach is deserted. It is a clean beach, unmarked by piers, and gradually slopes to the bay. Although withdrawn from shore, a wide band of muddy sea floor exposed, the water has no

ebb or flow; it is merely calm, without the faintest ripple, and sucked out from shore.

"Well," the visitor says, "we got them off the rigs; they're all in now." He takes off his coat and puts it through the open window of the car. After placing the coat on the back of the seat, he removes a logbook from the car and, opening it, says, "You ready to go to work, FJ?"

Regarding the book, FJ shakes his head. "Not now, Sam."

He raises his eyes and watches the other man, who--ignoring the answer--offers a view of the log, moves a finger down the page, and says, "Got one in Starr County. What about it--you want on?"

The man looks expectantly up from his logbook and waits.

"After this is over" is the only reply.

Apparently disconcerted by the response, Sam takes a pencil from his shirt pocket and circles something on the page; then snapping the log shut, he tosses it through the open window. He unknots his tie and loosens his collar. The tie has indistinct purple threads running through it, and completely untied, it hangs loose on the front of his white shirt.

"Are you holding something back, FJ? Not anyone sick, is there?" The man frowns and glances out toward the woman and boy, his expression showing concern. "Your boy all right, FJ?"

"What are you driving at, Graggs?" FJ impatiently asks.

"Why--nothing, but if there was a reason . . ." Faltering, he ceases, remaining speechless for a moment before blurting out, "Look, FJ, this is no time for pride. . ."

"No one's sick, Sam," FJ reassures.

His lips slightly parted, Sam Graggs stares at his friend.

"Well, how come you're not getting out like the rest then?"

Hunt's father lifts his eyes toward the bay and, jaw set, gazes across the calm water as though seeking some of its calmness for himself. Moments pass before he seems to be sure of his control and turns his restrained gaze full upon Sam Graggs.

"I'm staying with my house," he says matter of factly. "You can understand that, can't you?"

"Sure, but I thought the beach was to be evacuated."

Nodding, FJ says, "It is."

"What," asks Sam, "about you and your family then?"

When he receives no answer, he hesitates, searching the other's face, which remains the same, impervious to his scrutiny.

"Look, it's your business, FJ," he finally says, "but this will be the first to go if it hits."

At the moment sky and water are quiet; nothing except their unusual calm indicates that this day is any different from the others. Yet, the beach and street are deserted; the water, despite its calm, is free of boats. Nothing is heard, not even the cries of gulls, for no birds are in the sky.

"That's true," FJ calmly agrees. He does not look away as he adds, "I'll be staying just the same."

"But why? Why, when you'd be safer away from the coast? Besides, I need you in Starr County; Why not pack up the wife and boy and go with me?"

FJ looks back at the door, at the window and its broken shade, and says, "Being safe won't help my house; I'm needed here."

"Staying won't help it either, FJ." Graggs hesitates before adding, "And you have to earn a living too; that's also your responsibility."

"Maybe you'd better let me decide that, Sam."

"Sure, FJ." Graggs lowers his voice. "No offense intended."

The bow of a tanker, low in the water, appears just beyond the point and grows larger as it emerges from the port. Sunlight reflects from the bridge, a soft, colorful glint out on the water, which is east of the strand. The ship slips easily through the perfectly still water and moves away from land, now softly lit by the sun's oblique rays. Moving steadily through the motionless water, the tanker closes the distance between it and the offshore oil rig visible on the horizon.

"Another one leaving without unloading; no one but you wants to get caught here if it comes," says Graggs. "Even the refineries are preparing for the worst."

On the near edge of the empty space, side by side, the woman and boy stand, looking out across the wide band of muddy bottom dividing shore from sea. Their heads cant upward, following the boy's arm as it stretches seaward, then swings up, describing an arc that sweeps across the sky and back toward the shore.

Sam Graggs, watching the woman and boy, says in a quiet voice, "This place was wiped out in 1919."

After a silent moment in which his wife and boy seem frozen in attitudes of reverence, FJ answers, "I know."

Once more, Sam Graggs speechlessly observes the inscrutable visage before him. His own expression, unchanging as he seeks something in the other's face that might help him understand, reveals wonder and

disbelief. While staring at his friend, he lifts his hand to his brow, brushing at something unseen. He lets his hand fall to his shirt front and begins to search his pockets by first patting the left one, then crossing quickly to the right; unable to locate his objective, he gives up the search altogether. When he is offered a cigarette, he declines; so cigarettes are not what he sought. Apparently disregarding the lost item or items, he squats on his heels and, taking up a stick, begins to draw in the sand. It is only when he stops to speak again that he moves the stick, revealing an oval described in the sand at his feet. With four quick strokes he inscribes the rough image of a derrick within the oval and looks up, squinting at FJ.

"We need you to help bring in that well," he says. "It's not like you're running out on anything, FJ. Nothing can make a difference anyway." He hesitates, offering the other a chance to respond, but only briefly before adding, "Well, at least consider your wife and boy; you can't put them through something like this."

"They can go to her sister's; I'm staying."

Graggs, still on his haunches, peers briefly up at FJ. He looks away, drops the stick, and picks up a handful of sand, letting it trickle through his fingers until only a small amount remains in his upturned palm. Sifting through what is left with his thumb, he flicks off all but a few grains. An awkward silence hangs in the air as they both look at the remaining grains of sand. Graggs reaches out, thumb extended, and starts to speak. Before he can say anything, however, the other stops him.

"Don't bother, Sam; you've said enough."

"That's your final word?"

When FJ nods, Graggs, producing a handkerchief, rises and wipes his hands. "After this is over, I'll contact you." He steps toward the Nash, adding, "Sometimes it's better to take a little help than to refuse and. . ."

Reaching the car, he rounds it, stops, seems about to finish his words, but does not. Instead, he gets in without speaking and leaves. Hunt's father watches the car move slowly away before he turns back to the house, slipping his hands into his pockets, and looks thoughtfully across the beach. His wife and boy have left the edge of the exposed mud and are walking toward the house. Behind them, their tracks extend in two parallel lines to the empty space between the beach and the water. Out on the water the tanker has passed from sight; water, beach, and street are now completely deserted. At the front steps, the man stops and takes a coil of rope from a peg on the outside wall. The hemp is weathered and stiff from disuse in the salt air. Carrying the coil inside and placing it on the table, he takes a paper sack of tenpenny nails from a cabinet and transfers the contents to a waterproof bag. As he is doing this, his wife comes in with Hunt.

"Was that Sam Graggs?" she asks.

He nods without looking up. "Yes."

She glances tentatively at Hunt and asks, "He has a job for you?"

"Yes," says FJ. "One in Starr County; he wanted us all to go."

"And?"

"I told him I was staying."

The anticipation drops from her features and is replaced by a weary acceptance. She leaves Hunt and his father and crosses to the door. The last rays of the setting sun catch the lower fringes of the

clouds, turning them gold vermilion and throwing soft-glowing light over the deserted strand. She raises her eyes to the clouds and silently gazes out toward the western sky, her back turned to the man and boy within.

Hunt watches his father gather up tools and supplies and asks, "Are we going to ride it out?"

His father looks at him. "There probably won't be anything to ride out." He nods toward the beach. "I hope you weren't planning a swim."

Shaking his head, Hunt says, "The water's kind of strange looking-- but guess what happened while I was down by the water."

Still regarding Hunt, his father asks, "What was that?"

"You know all those pelicans and cranes? They just took off and headed inland. It looked like all the birds in the world filling the sky."

"Must have been some sight," FJ says and smiles.

"I wish you could have seen it."

"So do I."

From the door, Hunt's mother says, "Come here, FJ, and bring Hunt; I want you both to see the sunset."

Reaching out to ruffle Hunt's hair, FJ grins and gestures toward the door. "Let's take a look."

They approach the woman, each taking a place beside her at the door. High above the back bay, wisps of cirrus clouds, like little tongues of fire licking westward, extend curving counterclockwise from a still unseen source hovering in the dusk out over the Gulf.

"It's beautiful," she murmurs.

"Take a good look, Hunt; you won't see that very often," FJ says. "It's what my grandfather used to call a brick-dust sky."

He looks down at Hunt, who has raised his eyes to his father. Then glancing up at his wife, he adds, "But that was a long time ago."

Suddenly the stillness is interrupted by a hammering in the plumbing. Prolonged, the noise soon builds to an almost unbearable pounding. It continues until water, flushing through the pipes, intervenes and cuts off the din. At the first vibration the roach has ceased moving, and as long as it remains still, it is impossible to pick out from among the other dark spots on the wall. Once the disturbance subsides, however, and silence again fills the cell, adjacent tank, and surrounding corridors, the roach, now recognizable, begins to move--tentatively at first, then more boldly in the dim light that filters down from the grating. Reaching the ceiling, the bug scurries over it traversing the space between the wall and the grating, where it stops for a moment at the edge, abruptly starts up again--darting onto the grating, this time changing direction--and heads diagonally across the wire. *These intersecting lines of the grid, superimposed on a map, mark off the Gulf, Caribbean, and western Atlantic and provide the coordinates of the storm. Tracked as it moves out of the Caribbean through the Yucatan Channel, its erratic path and location are indicated by a broken black line and a small dark symbol that is now just a few degrees north of the twenty-fifth parallel. The storm has swerved to a northwesterly direction that--if followed--will put its landfall somewhere near the coastal bend. So far, however, it has started*

in one direction only to shift laterally, stall, reverse itself, and turn north again; so there is no reason to believe it will not change again.

A scream suddenly rends the silence. It comes from the main tank and causes Hunt to jerk his head toward the cell door. Coming up from the bunk, he steps toward the corridor but hesitates as the scream abruptly halts and is replaced by sobbing. Whether or not the cries come from the junkie is simply not clear. However, Hunt, evidently recovering, decides to remain where he is and not get involved. The sobbing continues, but he turns back to his cubicle and this time, unrolling the mattress, spreads it over the metal surface. As he eases himself onto the bunk and stretches out, the water hammer, starting low, begins again, building steadily until it finally obliterates the cries from the outer tank. His hands behind his head, he settles as comfortably as possible onto the uncovered pad and closes his eyes.

Silence, except for the drip of rain outside, pervades the dank vacuous air of the chapel. High in the vaulted ceiling, a shadowy gloom hangs above the bent heads of dark-clad mourners. Below the overhanging gloom, Hunt, his own head bowed, peers at the lapels of his dark suit. His mother kneels beside him, a black veil over her face. She is supported on the far side by a woman of similar age, perhaps the boy's aunt, his mother's sister. Shifting uncomfortably on his knees, he glances furtively at the saddened aspect of Sam Graggs next to him. The man's face, bowed over his own dark-pinstripe, reflects the solemnity of the occasion.

On its bier before the chancel, the coffin lies draped with a black pall and flanked on each side by candles of unbleached wax. The candles provide the only light for the dim chapel. Kneeling, heads lowered, the mourners are subdued as a server comes forth bearing a vessel. He is followed by a priest, who, vested in black cope, halts at the foot of the coffin and begins to chant a prayer. The pale candlelight flickers in the gloom to the rise and fall of his unctuous voice, which intones above the bowed heads of the friends and family of the deceased. The drizzle continues to fall on the already sodden earth during the service, and in the background the sound of dripping water can still be heard. The sky, seen when the door opens to admit late mourners, is gray. Dampness and shadows, the first halting words of a solemn canticle, held at reverent and beseeching levels, petition a dim enigmatic figure for eternal rest, for perpetual light.

Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine: et lux
perpetua luceat eis.

The celebrant starts to intone the Pater Noster but falls silent as the boy lifts his eyes to watch the priest walk twice round the coffin, which he sprinkles with holy water. This done, he concludes aloud and is answered:

C: Requiescat in pace.

R: Amen.

C: Domine, exaudi orationem meam.

R: Et clamor meus ad te veniat.

C: Dominus vobiscum.

R: Et cum spiritu tuo.

Traces of incense hang in the heavy air of the chapel, the scent slightly oppressive. Breathing becomes difficult. Beside him, Hunt's mother begins to weep, emitting constrained little sobs that only those near her can detect. Sam Graggs places a devoted hand on her arm and silently consoles her while the others bow reverently to the words of the celebrant, who makes the sign of the cross over the coffin and returns to the sacristy, where he continues to intone the Kyrie Eleison before unvesting.

Without a stir of breeze steady drizzle falls on the bared heads out in the gloom. It adds to the already stifling atmosphere under the canopy. Gnats cloud about the boy as he gazes quietly at the mound of damp earth beside the black open trench. He holds a wreath in his hands, on which mosquitoes, apparently unnoticed by him, light, depart, and are replaced by others. Above the pools of water among the gravestones, the mosquitoes hover and swarm.

Eased down on bands looped round it, the coffin passes below the brink of the pit and out of sight. On the winch at the gravehead the sexton restrains the descent to the bottom then retrieves the coffin bands before taking up a spade to join Graggs. Together they begin to shovel the damp clinging soil into the hole, where it falls in alternating muffled clumps upon the coffin. Every two or three minutes they must pause and knock their shovels against the winch or the grave trestles. Where Graggs brushes the dirty haft of his spade against them, the cuffs

of his dark pinstripe are covered with mud. He continues, however, to pitch back into its hole the moist earth, its fall now cushioned by the first layer of replaced soil.

Across the flooded cemetery a long line of broken palm trees is barely visible in the drizzle that flicks at the canvas canopy over the grave site and falls softly on the graves and on the puddles of standing water. Palm fronds, stripped from the trees, have been carried away so that even the occasional trunk that stands upright and unbroken is difficult to recognize. A stench rises from the rancid mud and water while the sounds of dripping rain, of spade against earth, and of earth falling on earth merge in the funereal gloom and become a lugubrious dirge for the dead.

. . . for the soul of thy servant Francis Joseph Crofford, who at thy bidding has today departed from this world. Do not deliver him . . .

Griggs beckons to the boy, who steps forward and places the wreath on the grave.

"Crofford!"

The shout, coming from outside, rouses Hunt from his reverie. At first uncertain, perhaps doubting his ears, he lifts his head and cants it in an effort to make sure.

"All the way, Crofford."

There is no mistaking his call. Swinging his feet to the floor, he pushes up to a sitting position, where he pauses

briefly to get his bearings. The silence indicates that there will be no second rousing. He stands and, rubbing his eyes--the damaged one, gently--steps from the cell. Beyond the main tank the same trusty who brought him in is standing in the corridor.

"Don't leave your blanket," the man impatiently yells at him, "unless you want to make the trip twice."

Hunt returns to the cell and, taking the blanket from where it has lain unused on the top bunk, begins his exit. Reaching the main tank, he glances at the remaining men. They grin when they see him enter, each making quips about his short stay. One, pointing at his eye, tells him to duck next time; another invites him back anytime. Generally showing humor at his departure, they seem oblivious of the shrouded heap that lies on the wet floor where the junkie had been. The large bundle blocks his way; Hunt stops and stares down at it.

"Don't let that hold you up," says the trusty. "Happens all the time if they're left in here to go cold turkey. Besides--" The man opens the door for Hunt. "--there's usually no helping them once the convulsions start."

This time the numbers above the elevator door light up in descending order. At the ground floor Hunt steps out of the elevator, glances toward the ink blotter, and sees Graggs, head lowered as he watches the deputy press inky fingers to the form before him.

"Let's go," says the man at the elevator. He nudges

Hunt forward and points at the door across the room. "Keep going if you don't want to go back up."

Pressing forward, Hunt glances over his shoulder as he leaves the room, but Graggs has not lifted his head or looked up.

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The backdrop is stark, a stippled plaster wall, illuminated only by the yellow glare of an uncovered light beneath which Dusty stands, half turned, head canted toward the ceiling, her attention directed away from the small overnight bag on the floor and toward her uplifted hand, poised as though ready to help make the point she has just interrupted. She seems to be waiting for a chance to continue as soon as the noise subsides or, perhaps, as soon as she catches her breath. Her expression indicates that she will not be put off, not by the old man's words or by his tone, which rises with each new phrase.

"What do I care? Here I belong." His head bobs insistently. "Protection you want? Good. Go for God's sake, go to your armory and leave me alone."

The old vendor steps toward her, the flesh tightening beneath his jaw, around his eyes, the knife in his hand threatening as he waves it toward her.

"Don't you see . . ." she begins, but he stops her by turning impatiently away.

His free hand open and lifted, he raises his face to the ceiling, the furrows of his brow coming together as he mutters, "From the young we must endure this? What--into

walls I walk? In a home I belong?"

He crosses to the table and again takes up the fish, flopping it over on the outspread newspaper, the belly turned up, wood shavings clinging to the white skin, the eyes, like the old man's, filmed over, bulging beneath the batter of sawdust and printer's ink. Plunging the knife into the soft belly, he slits the skin, opening the body, thumb and forefinger spreading the two sides, and pops the viscera and yellow roe onto the paper with the skill of an oyster shucker.

"Don't start that. You know this has nothing to do with homes. Are you so blind you can't see the danger?"

Setting aside both fish and knife, he runs his fingers over the offal piled in coils on the paper and begins to touch the twisting intestines, feeling each dip and rise, each curve and line. He folds the paper around the organs, a runnel of yellow juice curling from the crumpled package as it is dropped into the trash can.

"Not so blind." His back still turned, he waves her off. "Go away, go anywhere, but show an old man respect and go."

His body seems to sag; he shakes his head, lowers his eyes, gazing from beneath drooping lids at the room around him, the worn wooden floor, the bare walls, their plaster cracked and yellow, the bed without sheets, picked up at the Goodwill Store, moved in one day or night, now forgotten, without importance, one more of the irrecoverable times. He

seems tired as he moves slowly away from the table, stops beside the bed and, drawing the bracelet from his pocket, stares down at his open hand, his body shielding the object from her view. He considers the bracelet a moment, hesitating, his attention wavering as he closes his fingers around it.

A muffled fart breaks from him. Without looking up, he says, "I'm having trouble with my stomach. You should excuse me."

No longer acknowledging her presence, he lets himself down to the edge of the bed and gazes absently at the far wall, his mind no doubt preoccupied with images from the past--a time when a man could go his own way without interference from others, could make his decisions and accept the consequences. He abruptly pulls his feet up and, swinging his legs onto the bed, stretches out, shifting his vacant gaze from the wall to the ceiling.

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Stepping from the sidewalk, Hunt bends forward, reaching for the door and peering into the car that has swerved from the line of traffic to the curb.

"Sorry, Crofford," McCall says as Hunt slides in beside him. "I was held up--first by the district manager, then this ungodly traffic." Without waiting for a response, the older man immediately jerks his head about to look for a courteous driver who will let him cut in.

"That's all right," replies Hunt, speaking to the back of the clerk's head. "I understand how it is with government organizations."

Through the driver's window, shop fronts appear in the small gaps between front and rear bumpers. Blinds have been lowered against the late afternoon sun and the din of five o'clock traffic. Both McCall and Hunt remain silent, waiting till they are moving before speaking again. A honk from a car behind and an unusually wide gap in the line signal their opportunity. Lifting a hand in grateful acknowledgement, McCall wheels from the curb and eases the car back into the briefly interrupted flow.

Back in the traffic once more, McCall relaxes and loses some of the tension that was visibly present in his face.

He points ahead and says, "What this place needs is an adequate transit system. If I didn't live so far out, I'd sell my car and walk."

"That's an idea," Hunt encourages, smiling.

"Yeah," says McCall dryly, "but then I'd have no way to escape this madness." He looks gravely over at his younger companion and shakes his head. "There's always a catch."

Still smiling, Hunt peers straight ahead, nodding agreeably. In the opposite lane a stooped figure, stacking traffic up behind him, is seen coming toward them. He slowly pushes his cart along the gutter before him. Fortunately, the main flow of traffic, for the most part consisting of workers from the Reynolds plant around the bend of the bay, moves toward the bridge, and the obstacle he presents causes more horn honking than danger. Wearing flannel shirt and heavy coat, the old man seems oblivious of weather and traffic alike, for he gives attention to his cart alone, refusing to look up even when an angry driver accelerates, holding his horn down, and lurches hazardously close going past.

The old man passes, and McCall lifts his eyes to the rearview mirror and looks after the slumping form pushing his cart and tendering his fare to occasional passersby.

"Now there's an old soldier for you," McCall says, indicating the old man. "He's the kind we need in the guard--dogged and undeterred in duty."

He chuckles mildly to himself, taking a last look in the mirror at the bent and retreating figure. Drawing his attention back to the front, he peers cross as the waterworks building looms ahead. A pedestrian passes before the great arch and double doors of its entrance, glances up, then lowers his eyes absently to the pavement, which he casually strolls, his pace contrasting with the haste of impatient drivers.

Nodding across the port to the city, McCall says, "I'm looking forward to showing you our armory." He unclasps the steering wheel with his soft hand, putting it out in a gesture of caution. "Now don't expect your ordinary armory; it's new--and very modern. I think. . ."

His voice trails off as the car slows, keeping near but safely behind the one in front, which slows without stopping. Harbor sounds seem to rise proportionately to the falling of his voice. Seen from inside the moving car, the harbor slides steadily by, interrupted only by the succession of widely spaced street landings above the wharf. A prolonged silence is maintained until the car returns to its previous rate of speed; then he resumes:

". . . you'll like it. Of course, it won't compare with what you're used to, but I'll tell you this--it's the best-equipped armory in the state, and there won't be a safer place in town if that storm comes in."

McCall quickly shifts his eyes from the traffic to Hunt. The young man, his expression noncommittal, regards the

north bluff balustrade and harbor, still full and, despite the hour when work has ceased other places, active. They follow the balustrade onto the bridge approach and pull up a safe distance from a span opening above the channel as an upright, zebra-striped barrier drops in front of them across the right-hand lane. The siren begins its low wail, and its pitch increases--slowly at first, then more rapidly as the gap widens between the rising bridge and the roadbed. With the siren retarding normal speech, McCall holds his gaze on Hunt.

"What can you do?" he shouts over the noise. "You'd think they'd schedule these things so they wouldn't come at the middle of the rush hour . . ." He pauses, seeking agreement. ". . .wouldn't you?"

Leaning forward, he sets the hand brake and slumps against the steering wheel. Settled comfortably for the wait, he turns his head to look across the bay for the incoming ship. The slight shift brings his head around just enough to reveal a freighter behind him and beyond the distant breakers. A tug guides it through the roads and toward the raised bridge, now perpendicular to the water. The ship, despite moderate size and maneuverability, remains bound by regulations; it is unable to exercise its own navigation into port and dock.

The siren sustains its wail at its highest pitch as the ship sails beneath the raised bridge. Even inside the customs terminal the sound is hardly muffled, but the boy's mother, standing with Graggs at the

window overlooking the harbor, does not seem to notice. She draws Hunt to her and looks anxiously at Graggs.

"Are you sure you want to do this, Sam? You've done so much already."

Gently chiding, he reassures her. "Now don't start worrying, Mary." He grins at Hunt and places a hand on the boy's shoulder before adding, "We wouldn't miss this for anything--would we, Hunt?"

"No, sir," says Hunt, looking up from the ship passing in front of him out in the harbor.

"Sam," Graggs corrects. "Let's not get started with something we'll have to change later on." He regards Hunt and affectionately adds, "Okay?"

For an awkward moment no one speaks; then, her lips quivering, Hunt's mother starts to explain. "It comes from his father; he was always so . . ." Faltering, her voice trails off as she lowers her eyes and struggles for control.

"There is no need, Mary. He was a good man."

"Yes, I . . ." she begins.

Distracted, unable to finish, she stares vacantly at the floor, her frail body trembling. Between the wharves on each side of the harbor a tugboat guides the ship past the buildings of the city--white beneath golden rays--rising across the port, through water green in the afternoon light. Moving up the channel, the ship gives a final ear-splitting blast of its whistle, falls silent, and remains quiet. With visible effort Hunt's mother removes a small compact from her purse and raises the mirror to her face. Although she has not cried, her eyes are moist, her face pale. As she starts to dab at the paleness, the compact slips

from between her shaking fingers and shatters on the floor. For a moment longer she just stands there shaking, looking down at the shards of the smashed mirror, her face twisting in distress. Suddenly, as if realizing what has happened, she goes rigid, and just as abruptly, the despair seems to pass.

She looks up, a weary expression replacing the former one. "I'm sorry, Sam, but I can't seem to reconcile myself to it."

"I understand." His sympathetic gaze moves from her to Hunt, who stares in a daze at his mother. Graggs pats him on the shoulder and looks back to her. "Look, why not get out while we're gone; take a trip; see some old friends you haven't seen for a while," he urges. "It'll do you good."

Gratefully regarding him, she tries to reassure both Graggs and the boy. "Don't worry about me. You two enjoy yourselves. I'll be fine-- a new person when you get back."

They lean on the rail, both man and boy, waiting for the sway of the ship with the pull of the anchor chain, waiting for the rasp of the chain against the hawse as the anchor is hoisted. Off in the distance, muffled reports from a pile driver echo across the water; overhead, a volary of gulls mew in the gold green light of afternoon only to be silenced by a sudden, prolonged blast of the ship's whistle. Gulls and pile driver, the air itself, all are vibrantly overwhelmed by the unvoiced deafening sound. The force of it seems to take away the breath; then as abruptly as it has begun, the noise ceases, leaving everyone gasping for air. Slowly, the distant sounds of pile driver and closer cries of gulls emerge from air still dulled but beginning to revive from

the blast. A crewman hoses down the deck behind Graggs and Hunt, the spray spattering over the bulkhead. Washing a film of salt and grime ahead of it, the water swirls across the deck, through the scuppers, and into the harbor like the splash of bilge. But the ship is moving now, warping cautiously out to the center of the harbor and pointing its prow toward the rising bridge.

Expressing his pleasure in a smile, Graggs nudges the boy and asks, "What do you say, Hunt? Are we moving or not?"

He watches Hunt's face as the boy nods, grinning excitedly. Graggs turns into the slight head breeze stirred by the movement and sees a young ship's officer approaching.

Addressing the young man, he asks, "Is it okay to go up front?" He stretches his hand forward, indicating the windlass reeling in chain and drawing the boat toward the anchor out in the harbor.

"Your best view of the city," says the officer, "is from back on the poop deck." He nods astern. "Come along; I'll show you."

They step from the rail and follow the officer in that direction. The fit of his uniform speaks well of his tailor; his tanned neck hints of tropical ports of call as they make their way back to the stairs leading up to the next level.

"Watch your step," the officer warns, looking back. "It's wet."

On the poop deck a clear view of the bascule lies before them; the harbor, aft. Lifeboats swing in their davits over the side of the ship. The officer, having steered them away from the windlass and found them a place overlooking the fantail, starts off again but is detained once more by Graggs.

"What time are we expected at the captain's table tonight?"

Glancing back, the officer replies, "The skipper likes to eat at three bells into the second . . ." He stops when he sees the confused look on the other man's face. "Sorry," he says and begins over. "He'll be expecting you at 1930; that's 7:30."

Grinning at the bit of confusion, Graggs thanks the officer and says, "We'll be there." He watches the officer move off, then turns to Hunt. "Well now, looks like we're on our way."

While talking, Graggs seems to have missed the ship's initial forward motion, but taking note of it now, he points at the raised bascule. As the ship approaches it and moves smoothly into its shadow, they look up from the rail to the dark underside. Past buoys and channel markers they sail, the head breeze hardly disturbing spume thrown up from the stem cutting through the water. Clearing the bridge, they look back at the city. Astern, the ship's wake spreads, sending waves rippling against the pylons that support the drawbridge; following seagulls flap excitedly off the fantail. Buildings rise and broaden and turn, exchanging positions as the ship nears the point and moves past the nearest structures. Ahead, the channel curves toward the Gulf pass. Graggs turns from the city and strand and faces the open sea. Again the blast of the ship's whistle, and the last sounds of the siren, refinery whistles, and tugs, launched somewhere shoreward, are lost.

Now, once again, the ship sails at the center of the vast circle of water, which extends beyond comprehension on all sides. Except for the ship, the water appears empty, as does the ship itself, sailing silently through the night, its decks abandoned, the window of the bridge emitting a greenish light from the glowing binnacle. The desolation is

illusory, however, for in the shadow of the gunwale, the boy is seen moving past covered hatchways and loading booms. Before him is a small stairway, which he ascends to continue his way along the starboard rail, past coils of fire hose, past lifeboats, tar-stained shrouds of canvas over them. He leaves the rail and crosses the ship, this time descending the stairs and entering the larboard sea doors. Within is a narrow hall, painted white with cabins opening onto it. At the end of the corridor, another set of stairs confronts him. These stairs take the boy farther below, where they stop at yet another passageway running at right angles to the one above, this lower one dimly lit and leading, no doubt, to the quarters of the crew. Here, before a closed bulkhead, the boy stops as if confused. He pauses a moment, then turns back.

A glow emanates from the binnacle box and bathes the expressionless face of the helmsman with soft green light as he glances down at the compass. Graggs and the first mate, who have just entered the wheel house, stand back silently observing the others.

"Something's showing on the radar," one of them says. Without looking away, he beckons the mate forward to have a look. "It's straight on course."

The mate approaches, notes the signal, and gives a calm but firm order. "Left rudder."

Turning toward Graggs, he adds, "Let's step out on the bridge."

Outside, the brisk breeze is cool; it carries on its currents the salt seamist of night. "Nothing out there yet,"

says the mate, motioning off the starboard bow. "It should be out about there." He falls silent, waiting.

After a moment, he steps back and puts his head in.

"What do you have?"

"We're coming up on her now."

"Strange," says the mate, a perplexed note in his voice as he rejoins Graggs.

"There--what's that?" Graggs suddenly asks. He has thrown out his arm in the same direction that the mate had indicated earlier. Moving to the rail, they both remain speechless as something appears out of the dark. "Looks a little like a sailboat."

"You're right, a ketch," agrees the mate, "but she looks deserted."

The ketch, in full sail but without lights, glides quietly abreast of the freighter. No one is visible above deck, no lights are on, no sign of life can be seen--only the strange, apparently unmanned sailboat out in the middle of the ocean. The two vessels pass silently in the night and part, leaving only an everwidening void in between.

"How can you pick up something that small on the radar?" asks Graggs.

"The only way is if it has reflectors up on its masts or something else that we can get a signal from."

"You mean if it hadn't had something like that, we'd have. . ."

"Not a pretty thought, is it? But it does happen,

you know."

"No, I didn't; I guess I just hadn't thought of it before."

The mate again approaches the wheel house. "Log in the time and coordinates of the sighting. Looked like no one was aboard; maybe the crew was swept over."

Returning to Graggs, he shakes his head. "Damnedest thing I've ever seen." He gives a quiet laugh and adds, "Reminds me of a story the captain tells on himself. His first night as watch officer when he was in the navy, he was on a destroyer in the Formosa Straits and had just turned the watch over to the junior officer while he turned to do something--nothing important, you know, just something that needed attention--when suddenly he heard the junior officer cry out, "Right hard rudder."

"Of course the straits were full of junks and sampans with whole families aboard. They were living out there; so the destroyer people were keeping a pretty close watch in order to avoid the international crisis that would come from wiping out an entire family. Keeping that in mind, you can imagine what went through the old man's head at that moment; he was only a lieutenant j.g."

The mate pauses, laughing to himself as Graggs pulls out his cigarettes and offers them. The young man declines but waits while the passenger lights his own. The flare of his lighter first imbues his face with a gold red hue, then snapped out, leaves it in shadow.

"The old man," continues the mate as they start back along the bulkhead "turned back, and out front he saw a light right on collision course with them. He got on the tube and called down to the captain who was sleeping in a cabin just off the wheel house. About the time the captain answered him, one of the young enlisted men edged uneasily up, clearly wanting to hold back. He was only a kid and naturally reluctant to tell his supervisors anything that made him look as though he were trying to undercut their positions, but the old man noticed this kid and before answering the captain's already impatient voice, he had the youth speak up. 'Excuse me, sir' said the sailor, 'but isn't that the moon rising?' Well, all this time the captain's asking what is wrong, and the old man has no other choice but to turn back to the tube and say, 'Sorry to get you up, sir, but I thought you ought to know we just altered course to avoid collision with the moon.' There was a moment's silence, then a soft laugh from the captain. 'That's all right, Norwood, wake me any time you have an emergency.'"

Stifling his own laugh, Graggs groans sympathetically.

"How embarrassing."

"It's probably not true, but the old man's always telling it on himself. Hell, maybe it is, who knows. Can you imagine what it must have been like?"

"Only too well," answers Graggs.

"At the master's lounge, they halt. "How about something

to drink?" asks the mate. "I have a nice Spanish red from the Rioja if you'd care to try it."

"Go ahead and I'll finish this," says Graggs holding up his half-smoked cigarette.

"Take your time, I'll uncork it."

Alone, the older man rests his elbows on the rail, looks pensively out at the sea, then takes a deep drag on the cigarette.

When the boy regains the deck, the only movement comes from high above the bridge, the arc of the radar revolving overhead, scanning the empty periphery. Everything else seems lifeless until a burning ember is noticed up against the wall of the master's lounge, which is submerged in shadows; however, concentration on the shadows reveals the silhouette of a man behind the glowing tip of the cigarette. The glow brightens and dims on the open deck outside the lounge. The boy hurries up the stairs toward the smoker just as the glowing coal arches out beyond the side of the ship and sinks toward the sea gloom below. When he reaches the deck above, the smoker is already gone, leaving the boy alone outside a row of lighted windows. Nevertheless, he approaches one of the salt-filmed windows and, wiping the damp salt from the glass, peers in through the smudged pane to the lounge. Graggs, together with the young ship's officer, sits before an opened bottle of wine, which Graggs is at this moment taking up in order to refill the glasses on the table. Each glass filled, he raises his own to the officer, holding it there for a moment, then lifting it to his own lips. The boy draws back and looks up at the sky, the sweep of the

radar, the emptiness. The stars seem to turn, exchanging positions, while following, the ship's wake describes its own wide curve.

The throb of the engines turning deep within the ship's bowels comes up through the superstructure and bulkheads and fills the dark cabin, where two facing mirrored walls create an illusion of great depth. The resonant vibrations seem to envelop the boy lying in his berth as pale moonlight streams in through the porthole and falls obliquely across the swaying floor. Unmoving, he stares into the mirror at the dim reflection of the door. In a few minutes the steps--faint at first, then clearer, along the passageway and through the opening door, light into darkness slowly widening, out of darkness slowly closing--of Graggs, weary and unhurried, quietly come. He stands inside the closed door and reaches out for the bulkhead to steady himself. Immediately, a cloud passing across the moon, the remaining light diminishes and is succeeded by a penumbra that obscures the movements reflected in the mirror. Gradually, unsteadily, he undresses, taking something from a table near the door, and raises his free hand, squeezing the contents onto his fingers, which he lightly rubs together. Setting aside the container, he begins to spread his hands over himself, starting at the feet. Prolonging the rhythm of his hands, he moves them back and forth over the surface of his skin. Slowly, carefully, over the soles of his feet, around and between his toes he strokes, bowing and rising. His calves, his thighs. Over his hips and stomach, over his chest the anointing ascends, silently, without interruption, a prolonged and tactile ceremony. Almost at one with the man, the ship rises and falls as he begins again, unhurried,

methodically covering every part of his flesh. Again and again he bows, applies the ointment and rises. When at last the cloud passes, once more allowing a dim glow to filter into the room, he steps through the pale stream of light and begins the third anointing, still without haste, without any evident concern for the hour, which is late.

Now lowering, the bascule drops forward toward the roadbed, the sound of the siren falling in proportion to the closing angle between bridge and water. McCall starts the engine and releases the brake when the wooden barrier goes up and locks vertically into place. Toward the western rim of the turning basin the ship, lost in the glare of late afternoon sun on the water, is turned by its tugboat, which has been joined by a second tug.

"Someday," says McCall, slowly pulling onto the bridge now settled into place, "I'd like to take a cruise."

"What's preventing it?" Hunt asks, regarding the interviewer. "You might like it."

"I don't really know--just can't find the time, I guess."

He eases the car down the approach and, reaching the asphalt, turns left onto Shoreline Boulevard. Once on Shoreline, he looks straight ahead and gestures.

"The armory's up ahead of us just a few blocks from here."

Toward the designated location, both shore and boulevard make a wide sweep and, following the curve of the

bay southward, bring them past the city and bluffs. McCall lets the speed climb as he maneuvers the car along the crowded boulevard, his expression registering pleased anticipation.

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Now that the wind has picked up, the rain, slanting in from out over the bay, falls with driving force on the city. It falls into dark streets, is driven obliquely past streetlamps whose visibilities are only glimmers in the night. Where the pavement reflects light--for example, outside the perpendicular tracery of the armory's largest window--the shimmer is broken up and softened by the pointillist effects of raindrops impinging on already flowing gutters. Gutter currents seem to rush beneath the stippled surface on which each ephemeral stroke displaces a previous one and, in turn, is replaced by the next. The impression of the everchanging scene remains the same: at the center, light softened by dark rain, widening to darkness heightened by light-catching droplets at the fringe. The two opposites merge as Hunt, standing at the window, looks up from the pavement outside to the stream of people still coming into the armory.

McCall, his fatigues starched and pressed, approaches, looking the young man over.

"I see quartermaster got you squared away."

Looking down at the wrinkled fatigues and unshined boots he wears, Hunt replies, "I still had these, but he did

fix me up with a poncho and helmet liner."

"Fine, that's fine," says McCall, "you're going to need 'em before this is over."

He turns to inspect the incoming people. They continue to stream into the armory; they come in groups, families crowded together in cars, old people brought in on buses, others hurrying through the rain; they come alone, sodden newspapers held above their heads, their clothes thoroughly soaked. A taxi stops to let out a group of young women, the first two of college age wearing sweaters pulled over starched blouses, points of light shining on their freshly washed hair. They are followed by two more, slightly older and strikingly different, one wearing a man's hat, tie, and trench coat; the other, a hood with heavy rope wound round it at the throat, a belt buckled on the outside of her tunic, a jeweled, costume dagger thrust into a sheath at her waist, and spiked wristbands that offset such theatrical accessories as rings on all fingers and chains looped beneath the heavy rope.

Within the large area, families have appropriated clusters of cots, which have been spaced to allow maximum circulation of air. Along the makeshift aisles, children run and shove, their cries festive, senseless, excited. Dusty breaks away from the incoming crowd and, taking a firm hold on her child, starts toward the two guardsmen. The cast of her countenance, unlike the general mood, is one of concern as she approaches.

"Hunt," she says, "Mr. Oestler's still on the strand."

"Everyone in low-lying areas was supposed to be evacuated," says McCall.

"I know, but he wouldn't listen when I tried to get him to leave. He's over there now."

"You mean he refused to?" McCall asks, turning an incredulous expression toward Hunt.

"That's what I'm saying. Can't you do something? Go after him, make him leave, or something?"

McCall looks back at Dusty, who has not let go of Miles. The man seems to consider her words before responding.

"I'm afraid not if he refuses. We can't force him."

"But somebody's got to. He's an old man."

"Just a minute, Miss," McCall begins, "we're here to help, but if we tried to take care of every unwilling individual, we'd soon undermine our purpose, which is aiding those who need and want our help."

"But. . ."

Raising his hand, McCall stops her and, preparing to walk away, looks to Hunt.

"Crofford, you explain it; I have to check on the others."

As McCall starts off, Dusty faces Hunt.

"You too? Are you just going to leave that old man over there?"

Hesitating, Hunt looks away, gazing reluctantly out at the rain beating against the pavement and the building

across the street. The noise and wind have already grown extremely high in the last few minutes. *Water falls upon water. It is squeezed from the washcloth into the basin. Beside the basin a candle burns, its flame rising and falling, casting an unsteady light onto an old newspaper that, brown and broken at the edges, describes the strand and its surrounding water, which is calm and withdrawn from shore. Despite the calm there must be a strong undertow, for out in the water the boy is pulled down. He emerges farther out but again goes under as the old man swims toward him with sure and steady strokes. When the boy comes up, the old man has him and is returning to shore.*

Now all is quiet and abandoned except for the candle-lit room, where a man lies motionless upon the bed. Another bends over him, but it is difficult to determine in the half-light who the latter is. In a corner the boy watches without speaking. He does not cry; he merely observes, his clothes wet.

The old paper does not explain. It merely reports, stating that the combined force of waves, floating timbers, and wind demolished steel storage tanks, spilling hundreds of thousands of barrels of oil into the flood. The oil reduced somewhat the force of the waves but made difficult the task of identifying the dead, who were washed across the back bay and onto the far shore. The article ends with a brief note that, had all the residents of low-lying areas been evacuated, the loss of lives could have been averted.

The bracelet is removed now and lies across a circular dish, bisected into equal parts that are, in turn, divided by the shadow of the basin. For a moment the washcloth resembles a shroud draped over a lifeless figure on a wet floor; then the dish--divided into four

*quadrants--the basin, and the cloth dissolve once more into rain
impinging on the pavement outside.*

Hunt glances up at Dusty, who waits, brows knit, for his answer.

"All right--where can I find him?"

"Above the Burleson Street Curio Shop. Do you know it?"

He nods.

"His room's above the shop," she explains. "You can't miss it."

Taking up his poncho and helmet liner, Hunt slips them on and winks at Miles, clinging sleepily to his mother's side. Hunt ruffles the boy's hair and grins at Dusty.

"Don't worry," he reassures her. "If I can find him, I'll bring him back."

He glances once, as he leaves, in the direction McCall has taken and approaches the door, where people, wet and battered by the wind, continue to straggle in from outside. He pauses and takes a prolonged look at the people before plunging out into the rain.

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Outside, the rain drives past him in solid sheets. Head down, shielding his eyes with one hand, he moves across the driving rain by leaning sideways into the wind. When he reaches the corner of the armory, the wind, driving straight in off the water, whips around the edge of the building with a force that almost takes his legs out from under him. Ducking back into the protection of the building, he regains his balance. The blast of wind has taken his breath, which he tries to catch before starting again. When he does start across, a burst of lightning quivers all around out in the street and reveals down toward the bay the long line of the seawall and jetties. Tops of massive waves tear off and drive in horizontal sheets over the rocks and wall so that it is impossible to distinguish rain from sea. Taking the least resistant course, he allows himself to go with the wind and rain, his poncho standing straight out before him. At the next corner he steps into the cover of a doorway and raises his head. Across the way a gas blue flame rises mysteriously from the superstructure of the bridge, and overhead a strange sound is heard above the roar of the wind. No doubt the wind, passing through the scaffolding, creates this piercing scream. Whatever its source, the

scream and its accompanying roar drown out every other sound. In the glare of sustained lightning a steel tower is seen toppling noiselessly into the boiling froth, and the ship channel, turned upon itself, is now a river rushing backward from the sea. It rages beneath the bridge, between the two shores, and floods into the harbor.

Planks and pieces of tin fly by at roof level. A steel awning rips loose and wraps about the crosstrees of a telephone pole just as Hunt, lowering his head, leaves the doorway and moves toward the bascule approach. Up in the superstructure the luminous glow, instead of subsiding, grows higher, spreads along the upper edges of the crossbeams, and rises, a quivering blue flame, from the swaying apex of the structure. Barely in control he cautiously makes his way onto the bridge and moves out over the roiling water, while the wind, its force accelerated by the narrow straits of the channel, threatens to carry him over the side and into the froth churning below. At the middle of the span a crackling can be heard among the beams and stanchions overhead. Again he lifts his head and, shielding his eyes, turns his face toward the plexus of steel girders directly above him. Without warning a burst of light explodes at the top of the steel supports. The concussion knocks him to the paving, where he gropes blindly for something to hold onto. *Sightlessly he raises his face. Mud and water are all around. The flashes increase, as does the shelling, which grows so intense that he must crawl if he is to reach the swale at all. It too,*

no doubt, will be full of water, but it will offer protection. Above, all around him, the rapid crackling of a machine gun continues without pause. Then, in a sudden flash of a nearby explosion, the unmoving bodies are revealed at the bottom of the swale. They lie contorted, half-submerged in mud and water, and covered with slime, their clothes torn from their bodies.

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Rising to his feet, Hunt struggles to the far side of the bridge, leaves it, and seeks shelter among the low buildings of North Harbor Street. After a moment he continues to move forward but finds little cover in the maze of streets just off the harbor. The narrow passages form wind tunnels through which the howling winds boom against old buildings with the force of concentrated solids. Perforations appear suddenly in the stucco walls, exposing the underlying chicken wire. Parts of roofs fail to hold and are whisked away as soon as they separate. Some of the old aqueducts over the streets are missing, and a flash of lightning, as Hunt slowly wades forward, the sea swirling around his legs, reveals one of the few remaining aqueducts being lifted intact and carried off. The water, which roils over the beach in booming waves, pushes debris ahead of its crested swirls and slows his progress. He tries to stay as close to the walls as possible, but time after time they disintegrate soundlessly as the water pours through their wind-created openings. Along the streets that run from the beach the main body of water breaks store windows, inundates the shops, and washes out foundations. Mud covers everything not well out of reach above ground.

Going down Avenue A and reaching the Burleson Street intersection, Hunt finds the water as deep as it is in the avenue. He enters the cross street and lets up some. Catching his breath again, he eases down toward the curio shop at the middle of the block. The pressure of a ruptured water main throws up a spout that gushes into the blind alley beside the building and backs up, held there by the jet of water spewing out of control. The backwash forms an eddy around a demolished pushcart. It rises above the raw scum of oil, floating lettuce, and pieces of broken crate and blocks the side door. He pulls the cart out of the way and steps inside. As he leaves the rain and wind and mounts the old stairs, the building quakes beneath the force of wind and sea. It is as though the stairs, the walls, the whole building will break apart any moment now, but he continues to ascend the stairs. At the upstairs hallway, he feels his way along the dark corridor to a door. Without pausing, he pushes into the room. Its one window is blown out, allowing the rain and wind and the glare of lightning to pass through the opening without obstruction. While the glare flickers over his face, Hunt peers about. The room is empty. He crosses to the bed, a sodden mass that sinks in the middle. It has no sheets, no cover of any kind. The room itself, like the building, is bare and abandoned to the contending forces outside. At the bed he turns to leave but abruptly halts and appears to listen. The wind had suddenly dropped; the rain has ceased. He looks toward

the window, where a pale stream of light now falls into the room and somewhat illuminates it. Drawing near the window, he lifts his face to the sky. Up through the eye of the storm an unobscured moon is visible against a clear, starlit night. The quiet, the beauty of it all is overwhelming, but he does not linger. Turning, stepping away from the window, he looks down at something glinting from the bed. There, half-stuffed by an unsure hand under the edge of the sodden mattress, a piece of metal glimmers in the pale light of the moon. Staring at it, Hunt seems unwilling to leave. He stands for a moment more, transfixed, perhaps puzzled by the slightly protruding object. Slowly reaching out, he bends forward, takes hold of it, and draws it forth. Stretched across his open hand, the onyx cameos lie subdued, in contrast, by the sheen of the metallic clasp.

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HURRICANE STRIKES
TEXAS COASTLINE

Razes Gulf Coast
City--Governor
Calls out Guard

CORPUS CHRISTI, Aug. 3--Hurricane Celia has struck the Texas Gulf Coast this evening with 145-mile-an-hour winds and driving rain, devastating this port city and several towns on Corpus Christi Bay.

The number of injuries and deaths is not known because of a lack of telephone communications. Power is out in the entire bay area, and toppled communications towers have added to the problems facing the city.

Witnesses say every structure in town is damaged. Glass, debris, downed power lines, and overturned automobiles litter the streets. Boats have been blown out of the marina and swept almost to Water Street in the downtown section.

Looting in the uptown and downtown areas has prompted Governor Smith to order out the National Guard, and some store owners are manning their shops themselves armed with shotguns and rifles.

The communities of Aransas Pass, Gregory, Ingleside, and Portland across the bay from

Corpus Christi are virtually destroyed. Thousands of residents have been evacuated, and thousands more have been driven from their homes by high water.

A curfew is in effect, and the Texas Department of Public Safety has put a blockade around the city to keep outsiders from coming into the area.

Oil fires are raging out of control at Ingleside, Port Aransas, and Alice. A Humble Oil & Refining Company storage tank burst into flames at the height of the storm in Ingleside, and a Shell Oil Company pipeline is also burning late tonight.

In Corpus Christi the hurricane appeared at first to be weaker than expected, but the winds got stronger after the eye passed over the city. Mobile homes have been heavily damaged. They are strewn over wide areas, overturned, and split open, their contents scattered in all directions.

All highways and roads in the coastal area are under water and covered with broken cables, wrecked automobiles, palm trees, and debris. Most are impassable.

Damage is heaviest around the port and in the warehouse district on the strip of land north of the port between Nueces Bay and Corpus Christi Bay.

In Miami, officials of the Hurricane Center say that sustained winds in Hurricane Celia dropped sharply to 90 miles an hour just before hitting the coastline, then picked up as it moved across land, reaching 120 miles an hour with gusts up to 145 miles an hour. Officials added that such a drop is not unusual.

Civil Defense authorities ordered the evacuation of Port Aransas, Rockport, Fulton Beach, Aransas Pass, and North Beach at Corpus Christi,

but there were indications that all did not leave. At this moment National Guard units are combing the wreckage for people who may be trapped and injured.

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A silence lies upon the buildings, upon the bowed heads of the stragglers, upon the flooded streets. Water surges quietly through the streets and overflows the curbs and gutters. It swirls against the young man's legs, resists his forward efforts, and saturates his fatigues, already soaked to the crotch. Drizzle flicks at his helmet liner as he slogs ahead of the jeep and tries to avoid the dead and bloated animals swept along by the current. Mud covers everything. It exudes a stench that rises and converges with the humidity to contaminate the city. The odor is suffocating; the humidity, oppressive. It weighs upon the people going the opposite direction, none talking, knee deep in the water.

When one of them, an old man, stumbles, they continue as though unseeing past him. Only a woman stops. She tries to coax him up, but the old man does not respond. Instead, he just sits there, his shoulders slumped, arms dangling in front of him in the dirty water. She turns for help to the others, who either shake their heads or ignore her altogether. They are mostly old people, themselves dejected or dazed, women without men, and children. The determined ones have already reached shelter. Only these remain, vague shapes

that neither seek nor offer aid. They accept the muddy aftersplash of every step or stumble, accept the viscous drag of each confluence whether large or small, accept the night, the drizzle, unending dampness no longer felt by senses overnumb. They come, it seems, from flooded rooms or unsafe dwellings, mostly old men deprived of comfort and seeking shelter, a dim hope of refuge for their wives and grandchildren. They stagger on without questioning when or how or why and, if one falls, they trudge around him to rejoin the trek slouching through the night toward the armory at Tonkawa.

Hunt looks back and signals the others in the jeep to wait while he goes to the woman's aid. At his approach, she turns, frustration revealed in her expression. The old man, seemingly unaware of them, simply stares at the water eddying in the cove of his submerged lap. People plodding by, their arms full of belongings, splash floating sewage over him. A gob of mud oozes past his ear and down his cheek; some of it remains clotted in his hair, but he seems not to notice. Even when Hunt grasps him beneath the arms and lifts him to his feet, he remains expressionless, unwilling or unable to respond to the woman's queries. Putting an arm about his waist, she steadies him, then nods to the young man. She no longer hesitates, does not allow the crowd to deter her as she starts forward, supporting the old man, who lets himself be guided into the stream of people whose bowed heads and shoulders remain downcast in

the steady drizzle.

It saturates from above and below, seems to cut off the very air. Hunt removes his helmet liner, wipes his forehead, and lifts his face to the falling rain. Above the downcast heads a wet rat inches along a gutter spout. It halts, then inches forward again, moving cautiously until it disappears over the edge of the building. Replacing his head gear, he steps into the street. He glances back once, but the woman and old man are already out of sight among the stragglers. Nearing the jeep, he lowers his eyes to his upturned hands and inspects the seamed and shriveled skin. Although morning must be near, darkness still prevails. With an abrupt gesture, he suddenly raises a hand and motions the jeep forward, turning himself and wading against the water while watching in the glare of headlights for water swells that might indicate an open manhole or a ruptured main. To the left of the bridge a tremulous glow lights up the sky above the western rim of the turning basin. The glow, flaring, subsiding, throbs quietly in the moist air over the harbor. Lines are down all along Water Street. The few vehicles that have reached the foot of the bluff are stalled in high water, which, sluicing through the interstices of the balustrade above, has cascaded the thirty or so feet to the pavement and washed it out. Transformers, blown when either hit by lightning or overworked, are shut down throughout the city. Here and there a light gives evidence of a private

generator; otherwise, all power is off. Yet, despite the wreckage seen in the flares of the burning tank farms and crisscrossing headlights, a strange repose emanates from the soft glow in the west.

With a sweeping motion, he directs the jeep around a clogged storm sewer out of which roiling water spurts uncontrollably. Still the procession sloshes past. At every intersection, refugees--the strongest, broken and spent by the effort of wading against the tide; the weakest, too tired to stop--converge and follow the main flow toward the armory. Among them a young woman carrying an infant struggles through the water. A frightened and crying child clings to the young woman's skirt and is pulled along after her. It is the child, staring at him from beneath wet strands of hair, who seems terrified by the presence of the uniform; the mother hardly notices. Her attention is on a truck that comes from the direction of the shoreline. Her hand lifted, she tries to flag down the truck, but it is full, loaded with elderly people and small children. As it passes, she drops her hand and, turning her attention once more to the infant, wipes its face with a corner of the blanket. Her hair, like the child's, is wet. It streams over her brow and eyes and clings to her wet face. A drop of moisture glistens at the end of her nose, but she seems too weary to wipe it away.

As she moves off, Hunt informs her of the National Guard armory at Tonkawa Street, but, looking neither at him

nor at the jeep, she gives no indication of having heard. She pulls the inconsolable little girl forward and lowers her own head against the rain. Turning his attention from the woman, he continues in the opposite direction. When he reaches the drawbridge ramp rising from the water, he moves out of the water and halts, waiting for the jeep to pull up beside him.

Although no one inside volunteers to exchange places with him, he is invited to get in. Once out of the drizzle, he removes his helmet liner and leans back. His soaked fatigues cling to his wet skin; they bind his movements as he shifts his position to straighten out the cowl of his poncho bunched at his throat. After loosening the drawstrings, he seems more comfortable. The monotonous sound of the windshield wipers has replaced that of the drizzle flicking at his head gear, and, for the moment, he seems absolved of his obligations as he turns to watch the glow of burning storage tanks pulsating dimly through the rain. The fires cast quivering points of light on the dark water out to the left of the bridge. They light up the faces of the two men in front, their glowing profiles anxiously poised as the headlights sweep past steel girders and stanchions. Both men regard the superstructure apprehensively, their expressions revealing their unvoiced misgivings about the old bridge. Downshifting, gears grinding, the driver eases his vehicle across the span until, as the jeep approaches the far side and starts down the ramp, he suddenly jams on

the brakes, throwing both the captain and him forward, their faces pressed against the glowing windshield. Straight ahead where buildings used to be, now only foundation piers and grim clusters of sodden rubble rise above the water. They jut up at stark angles from the muddy surface lying quietly out front under the beams of the headlights and the slowly falling rain. Here and there a solitary telephone pole marks the street. Within the periphery of illumination, nothing else can be seen. All is either washed away or submerged. Gradually the two up front ease back and, turning from the emptiness, look back at each other.

"Can you believe it?" asks the driver.

McCall shakes his head.

"You'd think something would be left," the driver says, still looking at McCall. "Wouldn't you?"

Agreeing, McCall nods. "Something."

"At least they got everybody out. Wouldn't be much hope for any that stayed."

Saying nothing, McCall turns his head slightly and glances quickly at Hunt.

"Where does it get the force to do something like that?" the driver asks.

"I don't know," replies McCall, looking back to the front. "I've never seen anything like it before." He pauses, still leaning forward, gazing out at the unseen water beyond the range of the headlights. "But I don't think we should go any farther."

"Maybe we'd better," Hunt suggests.

McCall glances rearward, holds that position, and hesitates thoughtfully before agreeing.

"It's up to you, Crofford. You're the one who'll be out there."

"Someone has to." He is already replacing his helmet liner and preparing to disembark. He pauses, still leaning forward, and gazes out at the darkness beyond the range of the headlights. To the east, the sky is beginning to grow lighter. Without further hesitation, he gives the front seat a nudge and steps from the jeep to the paving of the bascule ramp. He stops one last time at the bottom of the incline before entering the water, which ripples outward when he moves into it at last.

The stench is stifling; the swish of each stride, exaggerated in the silence. Bits of sewage floating on the surface rise and fall with the widening concentric circles that enclose him. Across the harbor, fires burning out of control light up the western quadrant of the horizon, but he hardly seems to notice, walking deliberately, though not as much from caution as from fatigue, into the flooded devastation. He moves past a clump of rubble jammed against a set of foundation piers and heads toward what used to be the warehouse district. He reaches its near edge, where windrows of twisted wreckage stretch in waves across the strand to a railroad embankment rising like a levee from the water. Splintered boxcars, huge timbers, bales of

cotton, sacks of coffee--once sixty kilos apiece, now either broken open and strewn beneath the surface or still intact but waterlogged and swollen with mud--are heaped together with once whole buildings, now dismantled and redistributed, and all of it covered with a slime heaved up from the bottom of the sea.

Hunt slowly shifts his gaze to include everything within range of the headlights before he changes direction and moves off parallel to the embankment. For the most part, the road is clear beneath the water. Once, though, he has to move a fallen awning. When he stops, he peers out to his right and, unmoving, apparently tries to make out something off in the water on that side. Lifting a hand, he motions for the others to wait while he wades out from the roadbed. About a dozen steps from the road, he stumbles into a depression scooped out during the storm by the waves. As he goes forward, stretched full length beneath his poncho, water flows over him. He struggles to his feet but slips again, this time going to his knees, and reaches for the drawstrings at his throat. His helmet liner has been thrown off in the fall and now floats upside down to one side. Kneeling there, he resembles a monk at prayer, his hood falling back to form a cowl that lies in folds around his neck. Slowly he lifts his hands to his face and wipes away the mud, but he does not attempt to rise again; instead, he remains kneeling, staring out to the front. Straight before him lies the old vendor, his head twisted

oddly and propped at an angle against a concrete piling. The water, where it has lapped at the old man's neck, has left a dirty ring of oil and mud. The once tanned skin is soft and white; his seamed face, an amorphous lump of shriveled flesh that matches the color of a bloated fish turning slowly in a little eddy near his head.

Hunt turns his face to the sky. Only his hands and bared head, raised in wonder or supplication, are visible; the rest is hidden either beneath the spreading poncho or the surface of the water. Rain falls against his face; it falls without vigor, a torpid drizzle, while behind him, all around, slate gray and full of floating sewage, water lies upon the desolate plain shrouded in a gray pall.

The drizzle continues, but in the east the sky has already begun to turn gray. Above him, across the water, on every side, all is gray, a gray desolate plane. Outside of that--nothing except the smell of mud heaved up and stinking.

PART THREE

On the inundated west and south sides of town, slowly receding waters are preventing the return of many to their homes. Up River Road, flooded by the Neuces, remains closed; the coast highway is impassable (all bay bridges are washed out); and on the other highways to the city, state police have set up roadblocks and check points from which they are turning back all but those who have official business or live inside the city limits. Homes, businesses, public facilities are in ruins; the destruction is widespread; and still it continues: fires set by arsonists during the night are sweeping through the remaining buildings of the restaurant and warehouse districts; trees and buildings weakened during the storm continue to fall without warning; everything with structural damage is off limits. The city, at this time, remains sealed off from the outside; however, the National Guard is pulling out, returning control to local authorities and protection of private property to the few owners who have armed themselves, in the wake of the storm, against the looting that is rampant in isolated parts of the city, the business districts, and suburbs.

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Kneeling there, the young guardsman resembles a monk at prayer, the hood of his poncho falling back to form a cowl that lies in folds around his neck, his face turned toward the sky and falling rain, his hands raised--perhaps to wipe the rain from his eyes. He makes no attempt to rise from the water. Straight before him lies a blurred figure, the outline indistinct and unrecognizable. The young man's face, raised in wonder or supplication, is visible, the rest of him covered either by the spreading poncho or by the water. Rain falls against his face; it falls without vigor, a torpid drizzle, while behind him, all around, slate gray and full of floating sewage, water lies upon a desolate plain shrouded in a gray pall.

No, there is no rain, no desolation, only the dull hue of a coin that conveys this impression, a coin whose exergue, bearing no date, reveals nothing of the time of coinage. It may be of modern mintage, even contemporary, struck in commemoration of an ancient faith; Sam Graggs, however, seems unconcerned by that possibility, unconcerned that the emblem may represent some apocryphal event. That the coin occupies his attention is apparently sufficient cause for possessing it, and if it ceases to serve this function, he can slip its chain over his head and return it to its usual place; then without rising, he can turn his attention elsewhere--to the facilities of his holding

cell, its scattered fixtures comprising only what the law demands: a bunk, mattress, blanket; the roll rim lavatory, its single cock and faucet; the porcelain enamel toilet without seat or cover, Ejel baked in washed, pale blue ripolin on the enamel, stained and reeking of ammonia, its nexus to the wall a half-inch pipe showing, along with slip joint and wall flange, brass beneath its worn nickel plating; and the rivets, repeated one after the other, up and down and across, in lines that form intricate grids on the surface of the sheet steel.

"Hunt," Trit says, nudging him, trying to recapture his attention, "don't worry about it. Sam'll be all right."

Still distracted, still looking away, he nods. "I know." He lowers his eyes, staring absently at his feet, and at the same time raises his hand to his face, touching it, probing gently the edges of the swollen, discolored skin around his eye. "I was just thinking of the boredom."

"The boredom. Are you bored?"

Lowering his hand without looking up, he says, "You know what I mean, Trit." Pausing, his head moving slightly, a gesture of negation. "But you don't know what it's like--"

Tiny bubbles rise in his drink, some clinging to the side of the glass before dislodging themselves and rising to the surface where, piercing it, no longer constrained, they burst, transforming themselves into an effervescent mist.

"--all the filth, which you get used to, and dragging time, which you don't despite the devices, such as counting rivets on the wall, their lines and grids. At sixty a minute, you might tick off an hour with one wall."

"Is that all you do--count things?"

"No, you sleep and daydream. You even look at the stains and scratches on the fixtures, make mental tallies of their numbers, note their configurations. But mostly you sleep. If you're lucky, you get to watch a fly foraging for something to eat."

It lands first on one fixture, then another, each surface a conduit that absorbs the vibrations of flight. Settling upside down on the under-curve of the toilet, it inches downward--proboscis working ahead, viscous deposits glistening behind--taking its time, pausing, restarting. Folded, one overlapping the other, both superimposed on its body, the wings resemble supple, tiny windows delicately traced and revealing the nuances of iridescent green shading to gold, no beginning, no end, and two orbs above, the soft curves of the central oval below, gray light slanting down, filtering through the transparency, past the tracery, striking the pigments of green and blue and gold, subtle, shifting hues now projected onto the boy's hands folded before him, his head bowed in reverence and despair.

et lux perpetua luceat eis

"The boy, if something . . ." Hunt's father hesitates, looking down, averting his eyes.

"You ought to leave too, FJ. It's not right, your staying. You ought to pack and go too."

Unheeding, eyes still downcast and averted, he says, "You help, Sam, as you're able to. Don't let . . ."

"FJ, don't take the chance. This'll be a bad one, don't risk it; you pack up and go with them."

Without beginning or end, the colors form a continuous flux as the fly probes the old porcelain, veined with a crosshatch of dark striations, minute grooves that collect the residue of age and tempt it on and down the curve of the bowl until it reaches the floor and halts near an object partly obscured in the bloom beneath the commode pipe.

Graggs rises, goes to the stool, and stoops to retrieve the object, a small cylinder. Turning it over, he examines it. It seems to consist of marbled plastic and has a light-diffusing disk at one end, a eyepiece and braided chain at the other. Telescopic in construction, it is less than an inch long until extended, its two sections sliding apart to form one of those peep shows readily picked up in pornographic book stores and novelty shops.

Stepping to the barred window of the cell, Graggs raises the instrument and peers into the aperture of the eyepiece. Except for his thumb and middle finger rotating the extended section, he stands unmoving, gazing into the chamber of the tube. Blackness stretches outward, but etched on the lens is a vortex of brilliant, three-dimensional particles of light that swirl about the darkness at the center of the disk. By some illusion, perhaps of mirrors, the light appears to break up, disappearing into the void only to be replaced by more light out at the periphery of motion as if in ceasing the

light were able to regenerate itself. Perhaps the motion produces the new light; perhaps neither dissolution, in the first instance, nor new light, in the second, actually occurs. In any event, the swirl of motion itself, holding the viewer past all reason, is compelling and perplexing as an illusion within which--detached from, yet caught up and swept along with, the adjacent light--a capsule plummets toward the void without ever breaking up or reaching the brink of blackness. Intact but irretrievable, the capsule merely remains.

Below the cell window lie the port, its docks and warehouses and old bascule bridge, the channel, its riprap banks, the rock jetties and, beyond them, the bay and sky, now gray and overcast. Outside, to the edge of the water--it too, gray under the overcast sky--extends the devastated city from which sounds of reconstruction are already rising: the clanging tailgates of dump trucks; the clap and clatter of wood stacked on wood; the uninterrupted pounding of heavy steel driving sheets of corrugated metal into the wet earth, of hammers echoing out of empty cofferdams; the sustained revving of engines hoisting tiltwalls into place, engines disgorging concrete sludge of caliche, shell, crushed basalt, or gravel; the chopping racket of a helicopter overhead, the separate sounds of saws--the metallic whine of circular power saws, of table saws, the ratcheting of chain saws, hand saws souging up and down, and all of it a reverberant cacophony of repetition in the dead, dull air.

Dawdling over her empty glass, Trit raises it, nudges her lip, and begins to work the rim around in a slowly revolving motion. She prolongs the movement at one point, probing absently for some difference in the feel, hurries over the regularity of the next one until, before the revolution is complete, she finds the flaw in the glassware and begins to worry it, at first only with her lip, then with the tip of her tongue, running it along the grain of the imperfection, across, and around it in a tight little circle. Moving the glass, she looks at it.

"Are you interested in a joint?"

She brings the glass back to her mouth and flicks her tongue over the rounded flaw as Hunt says, "Not now."

"Let's go to my place. You might feel different when we get there."

He shakes his head. Disappointment, perhaps frustration, seems to rise in her expression. She sets the glass down and looks around, turning toward the concourse behind her.

"I'm going to play the pinball machines, okay?"

Hunt nods.

"You don't mind then?" she asks, rising, hooking a finger under each of the front edges of her cutoffs. She pulls the material out and down, stretching it and revealing for an instant the bind marks impressed on her thighs. As the marks disappear beneath the jeans, her hands move sideways in opposite directions, following the curves of her

thighs, passing over her hips, and repeat the motion, pulling the cloth tight behind.

"No go ahead."

Hunt tilts his glass. Only a small amount of his drink remains. Straightening the glass, he watches the liquid spread out, flattening across the circular plane at the bottom of the glass, which he now places on the surface of the table. His eyes follow Trit as she walks away, her hips and legs slim, tight, yet flowing easily in the movement.

The sight, past a gray knot of mosquitoes hovering at the window, is full of heasily erected men-at-work signs, company and union acronyms, names, traffic signals, decals-- one spelling out *Halliburton Enterprises*; another, *Heldenfels Construction* or *Champlin Petroleum* or *Fluour Engineering*. Mottled images, they appear in scattered succession, a montage of names, words, titles:

CP&L SPOOL and POLEYARD, ROACHES CRUSHED ROCK
and CALICHE, CENTEX CEMENT CORPORATION, IBM,
REYNOLDS ALUMINUM, JONES & LAUGHLIN STEEL, NAVI-
GATION PIPEYARD, LICHTENSTEINS, PERKINS BROTHERS.

Juxtaposed, they meld, the unrelated seeking synergistic integrity; linemen restringing cables, replacing transformers, making hookups, restoring power; sewer crews unclogging lines; work gangs opening roads, providing detours

and access lanes around and through the tangled wreckage and fragmented structures.

"Don't call me Dub--Dub's a honky name. Call me W. My mama is Mama'dana to me, Idana to others; her mama, Mama'rie to her and me; and Mama'rie's mama was Mama Djin to everybody. Names signify; so don't call me Dub."

A sulphuric stench hangs in the air, humid and palpable and clinging; its weight contradicts barometric evidence as the helicopter appears against the dull backdrop of the sky, hovers for a moment and, turning, tilting, swings away and out of sight beyond the upright frame of the cell window. Uplifted and carried away from the courthouse by the down-thrust of circular motion, the sound fades. Graggs slips the peep show into his pocket.

A solitary welder at the top of an antenna high above the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Building works to restore the structural integrity of the tower. Below him, every section is independently braced by four pairs of diagonal rods, fastened not by threads or crimps but by clamps that spread the tension equally along the axis of each brace. Reaching from the upper to the lower angles of the corner posts and cross girts, the braces reinforce the angle irons, which increase in size every two sections. The lower posts, being wider than the upper ones, overlap the latter and keep the inner edges even and in line with

the others. which, when they join, seem bevelled to increase the strength of the seams, now trembling, separating, and beginning to fall apart from the base. The structure collapses, its integrity dissolving in the gray matter that forms its background, and the welder, left without support, topples silently forward, his welder's hood pivoting away from him, tumbling outward and down, parallel to him as they both plummet.

From its anchor plates on the roof to its apex, the tower stands completely whole and visible above the harbor entrance, its spiderwork of stanchions and girts the only tangible object in an otherwise empty space. Alone, the welder sights along his torch and forges trestles; masked by his hood, he must limit his attention to the welding. Graggs raises his face toward the perpendicular structure, his eyes fixed in an inward gaze as he slowly rocks back and forth and waits.

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Within the entrance to the bus terminal, water collects in a puddle; tracked in, it forms an oval that tapers toward the center of the concourse, dim, full of waiting people, noisy with the sound of clanging, thumping pinball machines, their circuits charged to maximum capacity, producing multicolored flashes, the ring and plop of activated rollover buttons, advanced bonus multipliers, reset spinners, of hidden drop targets, and the muted sound of digital computers, of electronic impulses making contact, every synapse emitting subdued whirrs and buzzes. The wall along which these are lined contains a series of windows in the gaps between the games: the display cases of a women's apparel shop, glass-encased transit maps, the studios of a radio station, its disc jockey and broadcast apparatus--turntables, microphones, records--visible through the glass. The transit company and the radio station have wired the terminal for sound, which somehow remains audible above the clang of bells, the double thumping of flippers, the sharp, rapid knocking of tallied points and games, as a voice announces the arrival of the Saxet Heights bus at the Water Street exit.

Hunt raises a hand to his bruised eye; he probes gingerly at the swelling and squints toward the electronic array. A repeat of the elaborate technology occurs in the display windows, where a hidden Extagraphic projector casts the life-size images of three models and a motorcycle onto a screen that serves as a backdrop for the display case. First a whirr is heard, then a click followed by a different scene from another angle, a five-second delay, and a repeat of the process that creates seemingly endless variations of the display in the foreground: two male manikins constructed to resemble the original models in dark glasses, black leather jackets, heavy nail-studded boots, and Naugahyde trousers. As they straddle a large Harley-Davidson, their faces, like those of the models, are expressionless and turned outward toward the people in the concourse. Seated between and framed by them, a female manikin wears a red slip with black leopard spots. It is split to her thigh and reveals her bare leg, which is extended, foot arched in an open-toe, high-heel shoe. Her vulnerability seems to suggest the adventure of wearing that particular piece of clothing and the others worn by the young woman portrayed in the scenes projected onto the screen.

Neither these images nor the noise, however, seems to affect the waiting people, the old men--having nowhere else to go waiting for nothing, for no one--who have come here undeterred by the water standing in the streets. On the benches, they sit slumped, dozing, sometimes shifting

their positions. The radio music drones on while the disc jockey rises to pour himself a cup of coffee. He returns and, interrupting the music, cuts to a newsman's report that the governor and mayor, accompanied by the president's personal envoy, are at this moment lifting off in a helicopter for an inspection of the devastated city. In the background of the broadcast, the martial music of a military band can be heard. As it rises, it finally, along with the cacophony of flippers and bells, obliterates the sound of the reporter's voice.

Hunt rises and approaches the line of machines, moves along it until he reaches Trit, who, without noticing him, is intent on mastering a Bally *Chic*, its title painted at a rising angle across the top of the scoreboard in bold red cursive. In shorts, halter, and clogs, she maneuvers this realm of imitated fashion and design before her with her fingertips, quick reactions, a bump at just the right moment, a nudge of knee, a well-timed dip of one of her bare shoulders, the continuous rise and fall of her hips, flexing, humping, easing off, yet ready, eager for the next thrust that will make the machine respond to her. A glint of chrome shoots up the slot, arcs out, the propulsion of the ball still stronger than the force of gravity, reaches its apogee, wobbles and, breaking off, starts to fall. (Rolling over side buttons will light *C* and *h*; striking either red target will light *i* and *e*; and completing *Chic* advances the bonus multiplier for an extra ball.) The ball strikes a

pin, caroms against the rubber rail, and is impelled across the game board to the center bumper pins between which a double ricochet sets bells ringing in clanging succession, lighting up at the same time the scoreboard with double-bonus features, bursts of yellow, explosions of moldering embers, jump cuts of green and red Arabic numerals, and rapidly changing images that flash once never to reappear in the infinite combinations of colored lights and configurations. He watches her timely flicks of the flippers as she keeps the ball in play. When it does get past her, she seems unconcerned, satisfied perhaps that she has received an extra ball.

Street conditions will delay the inbound Lawndale. Anyone wishing to go to Six Points, Baldwin and Staples, or stops on the south side of town must await further word.

She runs her fingers lightly over the plunger, caresses, takes it into her hand, and slowly, carefully, draws it out, holding it poised as she cautiously presses herself against the hardness of the case, testing, probing, measuring the stroke, tensing herself for the first solid contact, her heels rising slightly from her clogs, the motion forcing her thighs, her hips up and forward. She releases the shaft and, at that instant, nudges the machine. The carousel whirrs, clicks, projects the image of the young model across the backdrop of the display space. In strapless bra and panties, she leans forward, stepping from her half slip at the edge of a clear pool of water while, in the background,

the two motorcyclists watch expressionlessly from beside the Harley-Davidson. The ball, its chrome coating catching points of light from the flashing scoreboard, describes another lazy arc that brings it down on the left side, where it rebounds from the rail. Legs spread, hips taut, Trit hedges sharply, sending the ball off at an angle through a spinner and over a reset button that activates a pop target. Caught between the side rail and a pin, the ball is held high on the board by bouncing it back and forth horizontally until missed timing causes it to hit the underside of the post and bounce free, dropping rapidly toward the hole at the bottom of the case. Trit strikes it squarely with the right flipper and propels it against the activated pop target, ringing up points by leaps of tens and twenties. The ball plops into a kickout hole from which it is flung amid the flashes of red and green and yellow light, rushing upward to explode out, spilling over in a shower of liquid gold. Reversed again by Trit's double flipper action and rapid humping, the ball bounces crazily against the glass top, hits a rollover button, and, losing its lateral momentum, falls with a plop and multiple eruptions of spasmodic flashes into the hole at the nadir of the extended flippers.

Passengers for N.A.S. North Gate please board at the Schatzel Street exit.

A whirr is heard, seemingly from high in the gloom of the vaulted concourse, drawing closer, increasing in ten-
sity, hovering overhead, then passing on. As the sound

diminishes, it is followed by a click of shutter, a five-second delay, another whirr and click, and the image of the pretty girl leaning back against a tree, a foot braced behind her, one knee raised and protruding from her nightgown. About her throat, a long scarf flows down and obliquely out along the length of her arm, which is fully extended backward and out of sight beyond the tree trunk. Her head is turned sharply to the left, a look of surprise or terror on her face as she gazes expectantly at something or someone outside the frame of the camera lens. *Spiraling wisps of smoke drift up and disappear in the overhead dimness that obscures Pettick's features, now briefly illuminated, glistening with beads of sweat in the flickering glow, now completely darkened as he raises himself, comes down in a sudden rush to an abrupt stop and muffled thud, the sound of two padded surfaces converging, the immobility of one, the softer, interrupting the motion of the other, which is harder. A rising flicker catches the pulse and swell of his neck, accentuates the blueness, the unexpected turn of distended vein jutting out irregularly along his swollen throat, at his temple for the moment that the flicker lasts. Darkness, the heave prolonged at its highest point, then the sound of descending motion abruptly halted, repeated . . .* impatient when the ball falls through the chute on the right side, Trit pumps another into place, draws the plunger, and releases it without the earlier measured caution. She thrusts her hips up, releases, and lifts them again, her

heels digging in, then rising from the clogs as her thighs go forward in anticipation, her excitement obliterating everything and everyone near her, everything except her determination to keep the ball up and moving, to reduce by deft movements the disadvantages of working against the incline of the game board, her determination to gain an additional instant to react, to gauge both the distance the ball must travel and its rate of descent, to measure its trajectory and time the intersection of that and the arc described by one or the other of the flippers. Every move, each nudge, dip, or bump is calculated to gain these, to heighten the senses, to prolong the pleasure of that final burst of kaleidoscopic light, of tumescent, multiple eruptions of molten gold, of red and green and yellow stars shooting up and out and spilling over in a rain of exploding embers, pulsing, erupting; hudging, humping, she triggers the tilt switch, shutting down the circuits and throwing the scoreboard into sudden, silent, premature gloom. Her bare shoulders flushed with fine points of prickly heat, her legs still straining, quivering, beads of perspiration clinging to the skin at the small of her back, eyes dilated, Trit slumps forward. Unspent, her efforts cease, her frustration and disappointment unmistakably evident at the instant the shadow falls across the machine. Reflected from the dark surface, the inverted image of an illuminated transit map signals the abrupt reversal. Six separate flyers comprise the complete bus

schedule beside the map, which is so highly stylized it bears little resemblance to the geographic realities of the city; distances between stops and transfer points are distorted for the sake of giving equal weight to every sector without interference from political boundaries or topographical features--that is, the distances between points in the central city are proportionally increased while those in outlying districts are decreased. The result is an evenly spaced design without clutter, a map restricting its directions to the vertical, the horizontal, and the diagonal and demonstrating the simplicity that is attainable for even the most complex systems. Contrasting with this man-made object, however, the results of light and shadow and of the inversion seem complicated beyond recovery, the names of stops and transfer points no longer legible. They resemble words composed of characters from the Cyrillic alphabet, and attempts to make sense of them lead only to further confusion. Even the throbbing red *TILT*, superimposed on the glass case alongside the reflected image of the map, remains illegible in the inverse.

Exhausted, disappointed, Trit steps back from the pinball machine. Her face is flushed, the skin damp with perspiration. At her temples, wisps of hair cling to the moist skin. Brushing the hair away from her face, she stops as though surprised to find Hunt behind her.

"How long have you been here?"

"I just came up."

She seems to consider his answer before saying, "I was too energetic and tilted it."

He nods, glancing toward the scoreboard where *TILT* lights up, blinks off, a throbbing red sign that warns the next player to be cautious. "So I see. There's a bit of your father in you."

The Lawndale bus has arrived at the Mesquite Street entrance.

"Not where you're concerned."

"I hope not." He pauses, apparently thinking about something. Several people are moving toward the exit to catch the bus. As they pass, he steps back and says, "Is he pressing charges?"

"Against Sam?"

"Yes, has he said anything about it?"

"Not to me, I haven't seen him." She comes forward, taking his arm. "But surely Dusty would know. Why not ask her?"

"I haven't seen her."

"Call her."

"Where?"

"Don't you know?" She turns him, guiding him away from the exit. "Anyway, the hearing's this afternoon. You can find out then."

"True." He halts, removing her hand. "But I still need to see the old man. Don't suppose you want to tag along."

She looks at him a moment before saying, "No, you go ahead. I think I'll skip that." Starting to leave, she stops, turns back and asks, "Why?"

"What? Why didn't I think you'd want to come along?"

"No, why do you need to see Oestler?"

The outbound Lawndale is now loading. Passengers for Six Points and south please board now.

*

*

Turning west, the bus leaves the seawall, passes the Corps of Engineers Headquarters, a solitary welder high atop the new steel antenna, and draws alongside the channel. The absence of personal motion or sound is noticeable inside the carrier. The passengers, dazed, unable or unwilling to speak, observe a conspicuous silence; it hangs in the air and seems to spread from the rear of the bus forward, to swell, pushing sideways at the windows shut tight against the smell. Outside, hissing, mincing through the sludge, the wheels suck it up and fling it out behind. A tugboat has been driven hard upon the riprap and now lies swagged down at the edge of the channel, a scum of dirty foam and flotsam collecting in the eddy of the wheelhouse where the tide--turgid, coffee-colored, and roiled--runs across the beam of the broken vessel. Part of the wheelhouse breaks away and goes over, turning slowly, one end tilted up by the surge. The piece swings lazily around, rolling up and straightening out to rush, dipping and bobbing, toward the bay.

Some passengers are leaning forward, expressions intent, rigid, eyes glazed and unblinking, watching the

current as a cage floats past. It is half submerged, turned on its side, buoyant top and bottom perpendicular to the water while, inside it, two white mice strive to keep afloat. The people on the off side seem more concerned about the damaged buildings and general destruction of the city than the others, who are mesmerized by the force of the current.

Like those on the off side, Hunt peers out at the devastation. Muddy ruins line the streets; rubble rises from rubble: shattered glass, twisted metal rods, crumpled sheets of tin, corrugated awnings snapped from their moorings and deposited among the sorry residue of fallen bricks and reeking sludge, aluminum siding peeled from structures like aging lacquer, roof tiles and shingles ripped up and flung to the ground, toppled trees, the branches stripped of their leaves and broken, roots jutting skyward, crews of men hacking with chain saws through the tangled mass, collapsed porches, demolished carports, roofs and walls with gaping holes that reveal interiors mired and ruined by the rising water, and all of this collateral debris covered and held together by more mud. Ahead of the bus, behind it, all around, motionless and vast, the mud is everywhere; it adheres to everything it touches, fills the heavy air with its stench, the stench of gas flushed from sewers by the upswelling brine, the stench of corpse gas oozing from bloated carcasses, rushing out when they burst to foul further the oppressive humidity.

They stare out the bus windows at sewer crews, at the machinery of street construction; they stare at bulldozers cleaving swaths through cluttered lots, their blades pushing around great piles of wreckage, erecting embankments about sloughs and polders that are being drained, the heavy, gray slurry dredged up and pumped out, gushing forth in massive streams that gather force, pushing debris ahead of them on their way to clogged sewers. Convoys of transports, hauling graders, construction cranes, steam rollers, trenches, pile drivers, transform the streets into narrow, isolated strips of quagmire; other vehicles carrying supplies crowd the curbs--flatbeds stacked with lumber, concrete pipes, or boulders to replace the riprap of eroded banks or broken and submerged jetties; dump trucks, their beds loaded with yards of sand, caliche, or crushed basalt for roadbeds; cement trucks bespattering the already foul pavement; half-tracks scoring and scuffing the roads.

The Lawndale bus lumbers past a chilling station and approaches the new roadbed for a high bridge just west of the old bascule, its gears and thick axle still functional despite the storm. The bus turns south along Ben Garza Ravine and moves into line behind service trucks all bumper to bumper and slowed to a pace that overheats engines and ruins clutches in the constant downshifting of grinding gears. As the procession inches along, Hunt turns his attention to the faces of the occupants. Each seems huddled down in his seat; all appear numbed by the destruction,

subdued by the gloom. He glances at the driver, who concentrates on the road conditions and traffic while watching for people at bus stops. Past the sewage treatment plant, past a lot of people lined up at the Little U Ice House, beyond the Garza Gymnasium, and up the bluff where there is less damage, the bus crosses Leopard Street, pulling onto Brownlee and following a course parallel to the one in red on the transit map that is posted on the wall above the windows and reflected from the Plexiglas partition behind the driver's seat.

Once again, the startling feature of the map is the regularity of design: all distances are equal; each direction, one of the standard three--horizontal, vertical, diagonal. Unaffected by incidental conditions, the structure of the map fractures time and place in order to emphasize movement. All transfer points are references that focus on destinations without considering geographical realities or topological interests. As such, their function is not one of identifying locations within a particular district but one of showing with unexpected rigor the way to a given station.

Rain begins to fall in large, scattered drops that smack against the windshield. Ahead, in the crosswalk of Spahn Clinic, a man crosses the street; he is hampered by a cast over much of his upper body, but the bus is already slowing, pulling over to the curb for a woman waiting at

the bus stop. Behind her, two young men try to prevent a third's return to the building they have just left.

A helicopter swings into sight as a few drops of rain begin to fall from the overcast sky. Ignoring the aircraft and its racket, Dusty hurries ahead of Pettick to the clinic portico, turns, glancing back at the street, and waits for him. With his shoulder, chest, and left arm in a cast--the arm bent, elevated, held perpendicular to his body by a rod extending from the elbow to the base of the cast--his movements are restricted, forcing him to cross the street slowly, awkwardly. Behind him some young men, the first of the lunch crowd, come joking and laughing out of a building. Two of them push a reluctant third forward; they brush aside his protests, resist his efforts to go back in; however, the outbound Lawndale--passing between Pettick and the young men, stopping at the curb, and cutting off the view--leaves the result of their struggle undetermined by the time he reaches Dusty. She straightens the light jacket draped over his shoulders and glances at the sky. The helicopter has already passed from sight, its clatter indicating its presence somewhere above the overhang of the building as she turns to help him. The rain has ceased also, dissipating without effect in the moments of Pettick's crossing.

The woman, striving to mount the steps, enters and sits down opposite the driver while she searches through her purse for the fare. The bus pulls back into the line of traffic, resuming its southbound transit. At Six Points, it angles onto Staples and passes into another devastated area; it moves past reconstruction sites where cranes hoist prefabricated slabs or great hods of concrete and barrowmen recklessly tread the boards crisscrossing muddy grounds, struggle up slippery ramps, and inch their ways along narrow scaffolds, each hustling back and forth between teams of bricklayers and mortar troughs.

Finding her money, the woman looks up at the map whose mirror image, while adding symmetry to the geometrical configuration, complicates the original syntax of starting point, transfer, and destination by turning routes on themselves where no loops are intended and creating a synchronic organization of closed systems. However, if there is any difficulty in the map for the woman, she gives no hint of it. She rises, drops her coins into the meter, and takes her seat again, this time settling back in preoccupied thought, a dull expression on her face.

The man nods, reaches across the papers--some scattered over the surface of the desk, others jammed onto the spindle near the edge--and straightens the plaque on which the name *McCall* is spelled out.

"That's what we're here for," he tells the two men, "to see that everyone gets to work. Construction's the thing now. There's work for everyone."

The taller of the two directs a sullen gaze at McCall and holds it on him, causing the white man to shift uncomfortably in his chair. "How much you talking 'bout?"

McCall glances down at the card before him. "Uh, Mr. Easely, is it?"

"W Cleveland Easely."

"Yes, that's right. Well, Mr. Easely, it'd vary depending on the company, but there's an immediate opening at seven dollars an hour, and time-and-a-half for overtime."

"Don't sound so good to me," the tall man says.

"Hold on now, W, let the man talk."

"Talk, Ready--man, don't you understand nothing? The government's putting up for all this building. We got a right to union wages when it's the government. That's the law."

McCall edges back in his seat; picking at his lower lip, he says, "Perhaps we can get you some better wages, but the work's worse, harder, that is."

"Like what you talking 'bout--better wages, worser work? How much worser and how much better?" W asks.

"Working concrete at nine dollars an hour."

Ready nods. "I'll do it. W's got to talk for hisself, but I'll work concrete."

"Well, Mr. Easely, what about it? You want some of that work? It's hard, you know; count on that."

"Ain't no news there," W says. He looks sideways at his companion, his eyes angry. "Shit, man." He tosses a wad of scrap paper onto the desk. "Yeah, put me down."

"What are you saying? My policy hasn't lapsed."

"I'm afraid so, Mr. Tiriatic. Here's the record." The claims adjuster points to the first page. "You stopped making payments last November; you didn't make the first-quarter premium after our notice or respond to our notice of cancellation in March of this year."

Tiriatic reaches for the sheaf of papers that the adjuster offers and, glancing quickly at the pages one by one, returns them. Slumping back, he cups his head in his hand.

"I know I made those payments."

"If you can produce the cancelled checks, we'll cover the damage. Do you have them?"

"I'll have to look for them," Tiriatic says, adding, "There must be some mistake."

"I hope you're right, Mr. Tiriac, but I don't have much hope. It's all pretty well laid out here." He taps the papers. "But you let me know if you find those checks."

Sam Graggs looks up through the bars of his holding cell window against which scattered drops of rain fall without disturbing the mosquitoes that swarm at the pane. Beyond them, the helicopter hovers in the gloom until it banks to the right and makes a wide arc that increases the intervening distance and carries the aircraft outward, a gray speck that, diminishing, finally reaches its vanishing point against the gray background. Graggs closes his eyes and rests his head against the wall behind him. The cell is silent, the light dim.

The hiring hall is empty except for the old hands who have no families. They seem to be waiting, biding their time silently at games of cards or dominoes. Arnold Thorpe bends over his dominoes, a solemn expression on his face as he contemplates the double quincunx before him. The others sit at tables along the walls and play their hands or dominoes without speaking, each making his play and

quietly marking his score. Above the paymaster's cage hangs a sign:

PORT CLOSED

The fluorescent glow bathes the old vendor in a silver hue, adding a sheen to his complexion, which shades to dark at the extremities, his feet and ankles already blue. In contrast, a shock of white hair stands above the scrotum and limp, circumcised penis; his face, set and so bloated that the bones are obscured beneath the pasty flesh, no longer expresses resistance; it appears to accept its surroundings: the sterile walls, all tile and porcelain; the embalming slab inclined toward a wall basin at the back of the chamber; the separate sink with chromium taps gurgling; and the stainless steel pump that will inject a solution of formaldehyde and borax, restoring the old man's lifelike color. Laid out on the counter are the scalpels, surgical scissors, augers, forceps, clamps, needles and, on the shelves, wax, sprays, creams, oils, paste, and powders. His eyes, open and staring sightlessly at the ceiling, are dull and covered with murky films, the cataracts of age. The pump, primed with embalming fluid, resembles an alembic; the interior of its helm, a polished gallery doubled inward to form a lip that channels the solution to separate spouts, one of the tubular vessels above, the other below,

each leading to a line attached to a chrome-plated nipple that will deliver the fluid and its alchemical transmutations of color and firmness.

Wearing latex gloves and plastic apron, the embalmer soaps and sponges the old man's skin with detergent; he lathers the flesh, scrubbing with vigor, addressing his silent subject in a pleasant, good-humored voice when resistance occurs; he chides and cajoles, applies physical pressure when necessary before hosing down the body and washing away the suds. His gloves, delicately thin and the color of fresh milk, gleam in the light, squeaking when they touch. From a perfuming pot of smoldering herbs, pungent vapors rise and imbue the air with the odor of verbena; the fragrance of steamed leaves and flowers diffuses from the pot and permeates the atmosphere of the chamber. Ablution completed, subject prepared with the prescribed rites, the embalmer makes a four-inch, transverse incision at the juncture of upper thorax and throat. The incision runs across the thorax as even as a straight-edge. Blood gushing from the opening, he takes the first of the pump lines, plunges his hand into the cavity, and inserts the chromium nipple into the subclavian vein, making sure it is securely lodged before withdrawing his hand and laving off the body. He quietly clamps the incision and stitches it shut, leaving it like that, a gash held tight by clamps and sutures, the scar running straight from the start of the cut to the metal nipple at the center

of the thorax, where it opens and admits the attachment in two facing obtuse angles that join and extend in a second straight line beyond the tube from that point to the end of the gash. Octagonal, the insert pierces the body at an angle in sharp, shimmering brilliance, each of the eight tiny planes a miniature mirror when turned to the light.

Watery blood lifts, is driven with force ahead of the surge, crests in a pale foam along the legs, leaving a wake of fresh water behind, and falls, washing the brine into the wall basin at the foot of the slab. Swirling around the glazed bowl, the color grows paler and paler until it disappears completely into the vortex at bottom of the basin. The embalmer moves down the table and makes the next incision along the right thigh, raises the femoral artery and, notching it with his scalpel, inserts the second nipple, its chrome plating gleaming against the tough, colorless tissue of the artery. His technique is methodical. Performed in deft maneuvers and by sure hands, it demands the dexterity of a surgeon. After closing the leg and switching on the pump, he sprays his work with water for the last time, pauses to survey the sutures, and checks the machine to make sure it is pumping out the blood and injecting the fluid. Satisfied, he raises himself above the corpse and, staring into the old man's cloudy eyes, embracing him, draws the left hand forward, lifting it to the abdomen. Struggling with the old man, he brings the near hand into the grasp of the other, where they now lie

at rest, reverently clasped for a moment before slowly releasing. He watches them slide apart, move off the stomach, and return to their former positions alongside the haunches. Gently swearing, he makes no attempt to bring them together until they cease moving. As the pump forces fluid into the arteries and through the old man's body, the embalmer again raises himself and, taking the hands, brings them back, firmly wedging the left into the grasp of the right, this time making sure that the rigidity of the dead man will keep them in place.

The doctor snaps the second X-ray into the fluoroscope and examines from a different angle the condition of the clavicle, represented by a blurred white shape against a black background. Curved somewhat like an italic *f*, lying horizontally across the upper thorax, and forming the anterior portion of the shoulder girdle, the clavicle extends just above the first rib from the sternum at its inner extremity to the scapula at the outer. A shadowy rift in the superior surface passes forward and outward along an oblique line and ceases short of the outer end of the anterior border. Apparently perplexed, the doctor switches off the light behind the X-ray and turns, glancing up. He takes a pen and begins writing, at the same time, giving instructions to Pettick.

"I want you to get another X-ray this afternoon."

"I have to be in court this afternoon."

The doctor looks up and passes the slip of paper across his desk. "As soon as you get out them."

At the sound of light rapping, the embalmer glances back, lifts a hand, and beckons Hunt in.

"All right, Bob?" Hunt, putting his head into the preparation room, questions in a low voice.

The other comes forward and closes the door behind Hunt. "No need to whisper. There's no disturbing them back here. Only the dead need apply; the living ain't supposed to be here--excluded by law, you know. Don't want our secrets out."

He returns to the cadaver and encourages Hunt to join him as he finishes the jaw by running a wire through the flap of skin between the lower lip and gum, up in a duplicating motion between the upper lip and teeth, back down where, holding the lips apart, he twists the wire together and draws the teeth shut, the upper row slightly overlapping the lower. Stepping back, he inspects the old man whose cloudy eyes stare dully at the ceiling.

"Every time I tried some intricate maneuver, he farted and threw my timing off."

"He was always complaining of gas," Hunt says, "a sour stomach, he said, usually something he ate or failed to eat." Hunt glances at the embalmer. "Can't you do something about his eyes?"

"No problem." Grinning, the embalmer goes around the slab to the shelf and takes a pair of eye caps and a tube of cement. He approaches the body on the far side and works a little paste under the eyelids, shuts them, and fixes in place the flesh-tinted caps.

Glancing up, he says, "You ought to let me do something about that eye of yours." He holds up a needle. "All I need to do is drain off some blood and--just like that--the color's gone, the swelling's down. Nothing to it. Take a look at the old man if you want proof. I drained all his blood, and in a minute he'll be as good as ever."

"There must be a better way."

"Oh sure, if you have no sensitivity, there's the burn and scatter way. They put you in Saran wrap, fire up the kiln, and scatter your ashes, and quick and easy. None of that bake and shake stuff with us though. Dignity--that's what we give, death with dignity."

Hunt leans forward, looking directly into the rigid face, the eyes now closed. A tinge of pink has already begun to spread across the dome of the dead man's brow. Livid patches recede, giving way to the infusion of formaldehyde and borax, the solution imbuing the skin with the uninflected glow of the terminally ill.

Dampness and shadows, the first halting words of a solemn canticle, held at reverent and beseeching levels, petition a dim enigmatic figure for eternal rest, for perpetual light.

Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine: et lux
perpetua luceat eis.

The celebrant starts to intone the Pater Noster but falls silent as the boy lifts his eyes to watch him walk twice round the coffin, which he sprinkles with holy water. This done, he concludes aloud and is answered:

C: Requiescat in pace.

R: Amen

C: Domine, exaudi orationem meam.

R: Et clamor meus ad te veniat.

C: Dominus vobiscum.

R: Et cum spiritu tuo.

Traces of incense hang in the heavy air of the chancel, the scent slightly oppressive. Breathing becomes difficult. Beside him, Hunt's mother begins to weep, emitting constrained sobs that only those near her can hear. Sam Graggs places a hand on her arm and silently consoles her while the others bow reverently to the words of the celebrant, who blesses the coffin and returns to the sacristy, where he continues to intone the Kyrie Eleison before unvesting.

Drizzle falls on the bared heads out in the gloom. It adds to the already stifling atmosphere under the canopy. Gnats cloud about the boy as he gazes quietly at the mound of damp earth beside the open trench. He holds a wreath in his hands, on which mosquitoes, apparently unnoticed by him, light, depart, and are replaced by others. Above the pools of water among the gravestones, the mosquitoes hover and swarm.

Eased down on bands looped round it, the coffin passes from sight below the edge of the pit. On the winch at the gravehead, the sexton restrains the descent to the bottom, then retrieves the coffin bands before taking up a spade to join Graggs. Together they begin to shovel the sodden earth into the hole, where it falls in muffled clumps upon the casket. Across the flooded cemetery a long line of broken palm trees is visible in the drizzle that flicks at the canopy over the grave site and falls softly on the graves and on the puddles of standing water. Palm fronds, stripped from the trees, have been carried away so that even the occasional trunk that still stands is difficult to recognize. A stench rises from the rancid mud while the sounds of dripping rain, of spade against earth, and of earth falling on earth merge in the funereal gloom and become a dirge for the dead.

. . . for the soul of they servent Francis Joseph Crofford,

who at thy bidding has today departed from this world. Do not deliver him . . .

"If we could only devise a method of making them sweat," the embalmer is saying, "but decency demands that cool look when you get them all laid out in the slumber room. You know how particular some people can get about their stiffes. No constipated expressions, and no matter the corpse gas, for God's sake, don't let it show in the face."

Hunt looks up at his friend as he snaps off his latex gloves, goes to the sink, and begins washing his hands. After drying them, he drops the towel into a bin and joins Hunt at the side of the inclined slab.

"Who'd have guessed the old man was in such good shape?" he asks, indicating the vendor's waist and hips. "Must've been all that exercise pushing his cart of fish around. And that overcoat--like a sweat suit." He pauses, reviewing the body. "Well, what do you think?"

"About what, Murtorff, the exercise and coat?"

"About the job I did on him. Actually looks younger than he was." Hand extended and swept along the line of the body, he invites Hunt to examine the vendor. "Just admire that attitude of repose, that look of healthy, eternal youth." He casts a look sideways at his visitor. "Makes you want to croak, don't it?"

The old man lies on his back in the water, his head propped against a foundation pier. His eyes are shut, his

face puffed and gray, hair matted and smeared with the stinking mud thrown up from the bottom of the sea. His face is turned to the side as though left that way not by the receding water but by some human hand; the flesh of his eye sockets, the wings of his nostrils, and his lips, parted and swollen, are pasty looking, shading to the color of ashes. A dirty tar stain runs at an angle across the side of his neck, curving down and around to the front of his throat. He lies crumpled and motionless, his skin shriveled from being too long in the water while--beside him, belly up and bloated--a dead fish floats, turning slowly in the eddy of his bent arm and body, now slack even as it begins to swell with gas.

Turning away, Hunt gestures toward the door with a nod. "Let's go outside, Bob, before someone finds us in here."

The embalmer wags a finger of reproof, mocking Hunt's uneasiness. "Don't want it to get around, is that it? A hard reputation to shake, the necrophile's."

He goes to the door and, opening it, holds it for Hunt, then leads the way down a dim, thickly carpeted hall with pale oak paneling. The hall ends abruptly at an exit that leads to the alley behind the mortuary. Stopping in the doorway, he lights a cigarette, shakes out the match, and grinds it with his shoe into the mud. He blows skyward trailing ovals of smoke that rise, trembling, expanding,

and diffuse as an unseen racket comes toward them from overhead.

"My God, what's that?" asks the embalmer.

Both lift their heads as a helicopter appears from beyond the edge of the building and, tilted, its bubble canted toward the ground, moves across the gray patch of sky. Their upward gazes are met by the flushed, peering faces of well-dressed, middle-aged men pressed in down-staring poses against the transparent bubble of the aircraft; then it is gone, sucking its clatter along after it.

"Or better yet--who?"

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Slowly revolving, the blades of overhead fans provide only marginal relief from the stillness. The motion obscures their cruciform construction and creates, instead, an illusion of four transparent disks in line along the axis of the corridor, across which another passageway lies, the ceiling at this intersection between the second and third fans curving up to form a dome whose concavity, rather than abolishing the cruciform pattern, actually unifies it by establishing a center and imposing a circular coherence on the sharp angles. Although unseen, the presence of four additional fans--one pair hanging from the ceiling of each transept, their blades equally spaced and turning at an even rate--can easily be inferred from the regularity of the visible portions of the hallway.

Brushing her brow lightly, Dusty nods. "Yes, he's going through with it. I'm afraid there's no stopping him."

"He doesn't know," Hunt asks, "that the old man had the bracelet?"

"Did he have it? When?"

"You didn't know it either?" Surprised, Hunt looks at her. "I thought you knew it."

"No, how could I?"

"You were with him before the storm. He had it then-- when you were in his room."

She glances uncomfortably over her shoulder, looks back at Hunt, and asks, "Are you sure?"

Behind her, the door is recessed, set over a slightly raised plinth whose once sharp edges are now worn and sloping toward a soft depression at the center of the block. A doorplate indicates that they are standing before the men's room.

"Positive. It was there when I went after him. He left it stuffed in his mattress."

"But how . . ." Her expression suggests incredulity.

"That's what the judge will want to know if Pettick pushes this matter."

Frowning, her eyes holding Hunt's, she says, "But that wouldn't stop him. He's mad at everyone, including me."

"No, it's not likely to, although he'll probably wish it had." He pauses, then adds, "Why don't you get away from him. The guy's nothing but trouble. Even Trit refuses to put up with him. That says something, a man's own daughter not wanting to have anything to do with him. You're the only one. Besides . . ."

"No." She shakes her head, reaches out, and places her hand on his arm. "It's out of the question, Hunt, and I don't want him to come out and find you here. It would only make things worse."

"I suppose you're right, but I'd . . ." He lets the words trail off.

"Don't rush things. Wait awhile and see what happens."

"No one's rushing," he says, looking away and up the hall. A sign on every door indicates the court that is in session behind the closed doors. Above them, open transoms, tilted inward, aid the circulation in the separate chambers, hot air here in the corridor rising along the marble walls, cooled and pushed down out in the center of the hall by the circular motion of the turning fans. A clerk comes from the right passageway, turns, and moves sluggishly along the hall to a water cooler. She stops and drinks, then turns back, retracing her steps apparently without taking notice of Hunt or Dusty. "I stopped by to see the old man is being taken care of."

"Is everything all right?"

He nods. "Everything's fine."

"I'd like to help."

He shakes his head. "No, this is something I want to do alone."

"But why?"

"It's just something I, something I want to do. You wouldn't understand."

"Hunt, please don't--he was my friend."

"It has nothing to do with that; it goes beyond."

"Beyond?"

"That's right, beyond friendship, beyond talking about. It's something I have to do."

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"This is not the time," she says, withdrawing her hand and glancing back at the men's room, "to discuss it, but I wish you'd reconsider. It means a lot to me."

Hunt nods toward the door. "Don't worry about him. He'll have his hands full of other things if he persists in pressing charges against Sam." He reaches out, touches Dusty's hand, and starts down the corridor. Above him, the fans turn slowly, evenly. The marble floor catches the light and shadow of his movement as he walks toward the center of the crossed corridors. Dusty watches him until he turns the corner; she continues to gaze vacantly after him for a moment, then lifts her eyes and looks at the nearest fan. Her expression is thoughtful, perhaps troubled as she waits. Now that he has passed, only the glare of overhead lights and the reflected motion of the fans turning can be seen in the polished surface.

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To the left of volume seventy-five--open on the shelf--tall, white, canvasback ledgers stand with their spines turned toward the room. They contain complaints entered according to number and cite the court, date, and defendant.

Number 57866. 126th District Court. State vs. Samuel Graggs. Assault with a Deadly Weapon.

On the counter, a computer printout gives the docket entries; however, a register to the side duplicates in a small, clear hand the entries.

DOCKET ENTRIES

Eight August, Thursday, Court reconvenes at 2:00 o'clock P.M. Honorable Phlete Martin, presiding.

Eo die, District Attorney, Donald Carr, moves the Court for leave to submit Bill of Indictment Number 57866, August Sessions.

Eo die, Leave granted the District Attorney to submit above Bill of Indictment Number 57866, August Sessions, charging Samuel Graggs with Assault with a Deadly Weapon.

Eo die, the Defendant, Samuel Graggs, being present in Open Court and represented by his Counsel, J. R. Toland, moves the Court for dismissal of the charges.

Eo die, Motion Denied. By the Court.

Eo die, District Attorney, Donald Carr, moves the Court to set bail for the Defendant, Samuel Graggs, at two thousand dollars.

Eo die, Affidavit that Defendant, Samuel Graggs, is a citizen in good standing filed.

Do die, Counsel for the Defense, J. R. Toland, petitions the Court to release the Defendant, Samuel Graggs, on his own recognizance.

Eo die, the Court takes petition of the Defense under advisement.

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Xiphoid images, alternating in the elaborate woodwork of the room with those of balanced scales, suggest an authority-and-justice motif whose thrust seems to intimidate most of the spectators and participants. Brought from his holding cell and placed before the bench, Sam Graggs remains the exception; he appears calm, even indifferent, his composure revealing nothing of his feelings. The requirement of his presence, the accusation, and its consequences apparently do not affect his mood. Pettick, though, is clearly uncomfortable. The air is heavy and warm, and frequently shifting his position, he seems to chafe under his cast, which forces him to turn his body when he wants to see anyone not in front of him. His restlessness, however, seems to go beyond physical causes; the implications of his presence and accusation appear far more unsettling to him than to the accused. The others--beside Pettick, Dusty keeps her eyes lowered; sitting directly behind her father and Dusty, Trit regards their uneasiness with amusement; on the back row, Hunt waits; they all sit without speaking, waiting on parallel pews for the court to convene. Subdued, they hardly stir; it is as though the slightest exertion demands

of them some unexpendable effort; yet, they come up immediately at the appearance of the presiding judge.

He enters from his chambers in a ponderous movement of black robes, takes his place, and solemnly surveys the people before him. His expression, the pinched look of constipated discomfort, suggests little patience with legal maneuvering, inappropriate motions or objections, stalling tactics--above all, little patience with stalling tactics. His instructions, given in a severe tone, confirm and lend decisive weight to the impression that these are the limits he is setting forth here at the outset, limits beyond which he will not tolerate any attempts. This hearing is in session simply to determine bond if that is indeed necessary. He beckons the attorneys to the bench for a moment of murmured discourse, dismisses them, and positions himself to listen.

The old man pivots toward the witness box and thrusts a blind, accusatory finger in that direction. His overcoat billows out in the motion, settles back, misshapen at his sides. His finger, raised, threatening, intrudes on the space between them, cuts off all protests before they are voiced, fixes Hunt to the back of his seat.

"What does the name of one Francis Joseph Crofford mean to you?" the old man rasps and jerks his extended arm up, hand unfolding, fingers outspread, splayed on the air to stop the response before it is given. "Remember, you're

under oath." He pauses, lowers his voice, and asks, "Now, do you know him, this Mr. Francis Joseph Crofford?"

"He was my father."

The old man adjusts sharply, his leaden gaze moving slightly to fall on the source of the response. "Was?" He edges aggressively forward.

"He's dead; he died--"

"Just answer the question." The old man cuts him off, canting his head to the side and up as though listening or trying to recall something. As he turns away, he raises his hand to his brow while vaguely continuing, "This man, your father, was he sometimes called FJ?"

"By his friends, my mother; I think most people called him FJ."

Turning back, the old man comes forward, saying off-handedly, "I see." He reaches the dock, halts, confronts the witness directly. "And what did you have to do with his death?"

"Nothing, I was a child when he died."

"Yes, let's examine that point. How did he die?"

"He was killed in a storm."

"Death by water, then" Is that what you mean?"

"I wouldn't put--"

"And how," the old man interrupts, "would you put it?"

Hunt shifts in his seat, shrugging. "I don't know."

"No, no, I insist." The old man is unyielding. "In your own words put it."

"Well," again Hunt falters, looking first to the bench, then to his left at the jury members. "I'd probably just say he was killed in a storm."

"Come now, from you, a soldier and patriot, I am expecting more. By lightning he was struck? No? Then by something in the wind, a piece of metal, perhaps a slivered timber or flying glass?" The old man waits for confirmation, his patience enduring the long silence that follows without an outburst, without any sign of haste.

"There was never a ruling. Too many died for individual rulings. He was found washed up on the far side of the bay." Hunt pauses. "He was dead."

Satisfaction in his look, impatience too long repressed, the old man notes, "Death by water then. But how are you alive when your father is not? With him, you must have lived. What? A son abandons his father? This is how you were taught?"

"My mother took me to my aunt's before the storm."

"Your mother, yes. His mother a son should not forget, but in your deposition there is no mention. More respect for your parents, this? Or something else?"

Hunt stares in confusion at the old man. "I don't follow?"

Dull eyes blink, turn to the jury. "No?" he dryly asks, pivots, and shuffles to the table on which lies a satchel of rucked leather. Lying flat, its seams worn and splitting, it appears empty, without lining or support, a

flap thrown carelessly back from the open maw of the bag, where, before he probes it, slack straps and buckles can be seen and, in the silence, empty shadows after he reaches into it, digging down toward the bottom, where he fumbles for something, running his fingers from one end to the other until he finds what he seeks.

And the rest of them, sitting there, expectant, fanning themselves, waiting in the uncomfortable heat.

He turns back and, holding his find in one hand, goes with the other into the right-hand pocket of his overcoat, pulls out a rag, and blows his nose, a loud, disconcerting snort, before opening the coat and shoving the rag into the waist of his pants. He approaches the witness box and, producing a small photograph, offers it. The images are faded and foxed where pocks of moisture once touched, the coated surface of the paper a network of cracked and yellowed lacquer that obscures the outlines and details of a child rocking on a young woman's knees, his fixed, inward gaze betraying the pleasure of the contact she indulges, the feeling of warm softness, remembered, accompanied by a freeze wafting the smell of perfumed talc against the fevered tissue of nose, cheeks, and brow. It might have been only he and she alone and not this hot room of stale air, smelling of sweating bodies and sewer gas.

"Do you recognize?"

He glances at the picture and back at the old man.

"It's my mother--and me."

"Tell us what is happening?"

Looking again at the picture, he studies the details for a moment, his face slowly reddening. He says nothing as the old man holds out his hand for the photograph, takes it and, crossing to the rail, lifts the scene up for all to see, then passes it to the jury foreman. Without turning back, he asks, "What could a father think?"

"My father? He took the picture."

"He was angry. They quarreled about it."

"No."

"And your mother took you to her sister's not, as you say, because of a storm but because of the argument. This, you cannot deny."

"That's a lie!" His face white, he presses forward on the edge of the chair, his knuckles pale as he grips the wooden arm rests. "It's not true."

"No," Dusty is saying, "they never argued in my presence; I never saw them disagree, never heard either one say anything against the other, not that Sam won't have reason to after this, after these accusations. He's bound to resent him now. I know he doesn't like what Pettick did. I don't either. There was no excuse to behave that way, not then, not ever, but Sam was not involved; he came in at the end of it. I saw him as I was leaving; he was near the door, and I could see that he knew. He didn't press me, but he knew without my saying it who was behind the trouble. Sam saw Hunt, blood all over him, his eye

cut and bleeding and already swollen shut; he had to know." She pauses, then adds, "The bracelet belonged to Hunt's mother, it means a lot to me, and Pettick resents it, resents my wearing it or even having it. That's what it comes down too--not a dispute between Sam and him but his inability to accept a bracelet."

Soft light reflects from clouds high in the sky and casts a hazy, oblique beam across the dim room. The ray of light is projected in a triangular image onto the floor beside the far wall. His father stands at the front door and gazes out at the brick-dust sky. His expression betrays his agitation while, back in the room, his wife's face reflects her concern. She still holds the boy, but she has ceased bouncing him, has settled him quietly on her knees.

His father steps away from the door, his eyes averted, and says in a tone of irritation, "Put him down--it's unhealthy, always stroking and touching him."

"He's fine where he is, FJ. Let him be."

Turning back to the door, his father again looks out at the sky and the setting sun as music comes from somewhere behind him. Although the music is low and soft, it seems to provoke him further, for he abruptly leaves the door and, crossing to the table, snaps off the radio.

"FJ," she complains, smoothing Hunt's hair, straightening his [✓]dollar, "don't take it out on us. If you're so

upset, go for a walk; go down to the water to cool off. There's no need to make us suffer."

He jerks his head toward her and, glaring, snaps, "you'd like that, wouldn't you?"

Looking at him in surprise, her expression revealing its first traces of anger, she puts the boy down and says, "You go outside, Hunt, and play for a while."

Rising, she follows him to the side door and stands there watching as he runs toward the water. At the edge of the beach, he stops and looks at the water, which has receded from shore, leaving a wide bank of glistening sea floor that separates water and beach; yet, out on the bay, the surface is calm, not a hint of motion or even a breeze.

Beginning in a soft voice that grows stronger as she speaks, she says, "It's bad enough that you think that way--" She turns from the side door in the middle of her words and faces her husband. "--but if these outbursts continue I'll make sure he doesn't hear them. I'm not going to let you warp him."

"Warp?"

"That's right, warp. If you ever looked around, you'd know it. Children have feelings too." She pauses for a breath, her face flushed. "And if you can't accept it or at least keep your complaints to yourself, I'll leave and take Hunt with me."

"What the hell do you mean? I happen to be talking about sex."

"It's that, all right." She lifts her hand toward him, her finger extended and pointing. "Your sex, yours because you don't like it when I show him any affection."

"Who do you think keeps this family going? Who makes it all possible?"

"You should see yourself now. You're irritable, nothing pleases you, you make it miserable for us--but that's going to stop, or it'll be only you in this house, you out here by yourself on the beach." She starts to say more, stops, eyeing him, and leaves him to his solitude.

All along the beach, houses are boarded up, abandoned. Boats have been pulled onto shore, turned over, and staked to the ground. Out in the water, the boy is caught by the undercurrent and pulled down. He emerges farther out, flailing the water, but is again forced under. The old man is swimming to him with strong sure . . . No, it was then--sometime before--perhaps in 1919. Yet the water is calm, not a hint of motion, only the band of glistening sea floor and the old man and the boy.

The judge seems interested in Pettick's admission, after a claim of provocation, that he assaulted Hunt and took a bracelet from his coat. Now, with right hand turned toward himself, fingers together and extended, indicating collar bone, left side, and arm, Pettick begins to relate his sense of something or someone back in the shadows, perhaps even a blur that he saw out of the corner of his eye of something swinging down through the light at the

moment of impact, that is, just before the shock, the sharp, excruciating pain but only for a moment, and then, nothing; he saw nothing else, remembered nothing afterward, remembers now only these sketchy details. But he never considered Graggs or the old vendor. No, not the vendor. Yes, he had had the bracelet, had in fact stopped at that moment in the light of the doorway to look at it.

"Let's get something clear, Mr. Pettick." The judge interrupts the witness to ask, "Are we to understand that you admit the assault and battery of Mr. Crofford? You admit taking from his jacket a bracelet that did not belong to you, and yet, it is you who are bringing this complaint against someone else for an action that you, according to your own testimony, have been largely if not exclusively responsible for? Do I understand this correctly?"

"I did not cause it, your honor; I was provoked."

"So you've said," the judge responds dryly, "but without providing the court any supporting evidence. In what manner were you provoked? Did Mr. Crofford threaten you or say something objectionable?"

"Not in so many words."

"Come to the point, sir." Clearly losing his patience, the judge's voice rises.

"It was his look, your honor."

"His look." Incredulity slowly gives way to displeasure as the judge casts a glance at the prosecutor,

frowns, and turns back to Pettick. "What, then, does this have to do with the accused?"

"I don't know, your honor. I was told he was the one that hit me."

Graggs' attorney rises and, addressing the bench, says, "Your honor, if it please the court, we move the charges against the accused be dismissed for lack of evidence."

Brushing aside the motion for the moment, the judge, as though trying to understand what is before him, studies the witness, who shifts his position. "You may step down, Mr. Pettick." Then directing his displeasure at the two attorneys, he adds, "The court will take this motion under advisement. There will be a fifteen-minute recess, and I want to see you two in my chambers."

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Still a child, he crouches next to his father in the duck blind, his arms tucked tightly against his sides for warmth. Vertical illuminations, the lights of refinery towers, rise out of the southern darkness; they give a glow to that quadrant of the sky from Tule Lake Turning Basin to the Naval Air Station at Flour Bluff. In the west and north the sky is dark. The smell of the Gulf, the salt sea breeze, and marsh grass drift across back bay and river mouth on cold, early morning currents of air while overhead the sound of wings passing in the dark goes toward the open sea. From that direction come the sharp chill and first light of dawn. Once started, dawn comes fast on the estuary, growing lighter to the east, shading to darkness inland, and leaving a penumbra over the decoys in between. A whirr of wings comes out of the darkness, this time not passing. Indicating the gun, FJ says, "Take it and follow through to the decoys. Others will be going up when you fire."

As the boy stands, his father raises a flask to his lips, swallows, and lowers the flask in an exhalation of pungent vapors that cut through the chilling air. Swinging

the gun down and ahead of the lone duck slanting in from right to left, dark against the graying sky, Hunt fires. The duck breaks off in a long low angle toward the high grass and, at the same instant, a flurry goes up out among the decoys, ducks seeming to rise on their tails, wings beating, running to take off, three of them climbing and turning when the second shot goes off without altering their flight. The scent of burnt gunpowder, that acrid smell of ignited saltpetre and sulphur, of cordite on hot gunmetal, of spent cartridges and singed wadding, of whiskey on the cold salt air . . .

"Leave it like that," Graggs is saying. "Don't rummage around, pushing for something that'll do you no good."

"And you--did you leave it along? What about Pettick? Are you saying he was mugged by the old . . ."

The words follow, reluctantly expressed, excluding the old vendor, offering no alternative except what is deduced in the silence from that exclusion. Yet the vendor had the bracelet; that fact cannot be negated, not by his absence, not by a mere denial.

"It's true he had the bracelet . . ."

His mood subdued, now one of circumspection, Graggs hesitates, rises, and goes to a sideboard. He seems to be considering his response as though afraid he might commit himself without some sort of hedge. So far each admission, either qualified or tacit, avoids the matter of the bracelet without actually ignoring it. He reaches for the bottle.

Three bottles stand side by side in the open cabinet-- Bicardi rum from Santiago de Cuba, the label foxed and faded, a sediment of crystalized sugar at the bottom of the dark liquid. That is how it would look, the same gold medals, the red seal and emblematic, golden bat, logo of the cane distillate for as long as can be remembered, the base of the bottle at that time a conical punty uplifted, penetrating the interior, and forming inside the bottle a circular gutter that collects the sedimentary sugar. The rum is for his mother, Haig & Haig Five Star, for visitors, its yellowed label once cream colored, the snap wire cap now rusted. The I. W. Harper, its heavy foil peeled away from the neck, FJ pours for himself after removing the cork and placing it upside down, resting it on its red, checkerlike crown. He turns, holding in one hand the glass of whiskey, in the other a cameo bracelet, which is held out to his wife, smiling, her face flushed with excitement and pleasure.

" . . . but he had nothing to do with getting it from Pettick."

"How then . . ."

"He got it from me."

Accepting these words, Hunt looks away, raising his eyes to the window, which is level with the sidewalk but opaque with a film of soot and grime. Outside, the street is already beginning to fill with people, seen from the room as vertical shadows moving across the horizontal

grayness. Unseeing, they rush to beat the traffic: sales girls, receptionists, secretaries with powdered faces and quick strides, executives looking neither left nor right, accountants, lawyers, clerks, hurrying blurred movement, each image seen for a moment, then followed by another that flickers across the gray film in contiguous motion. The hour does something to them; to avoid collisions is enough. They want only to reach their destinations before dark while here, below in this room without direct light, it is already dark, as the sound of traffic increases.

"Then you didn't leave it alone?"

Although the older man seems impassive, he puts off his response and replaces the bottle. He takes a step, pauses, occupying himself by scraping at a spot on the glass he offers Hunt.

"No."

"But you want me to? You think I should remember only the good times, things like hunting, swimming in the summer, pleasant things, is that right?"

"I don't think you should dredge up unpleasant ones."

"Such as my father's death?"

"Such as your father's death. That can't be changed."

"And the responsibility for it? Can that be changed?"

"No, that's something FJ took with him; it was his."

"Only his?"

"His alone the moment he decided to stay."

"But what caused that decision? A disagreement? There was an argument, wasn't there?"

"There were discussions. Your mother tried to reason with him; I tried to reason with him."

"About me?"

Graggs studies the younger man for a moment before turning and retracing his steps to the bed lying along the far wall. The room is trapezoidal although it seems rectangular from the wider end. Above the bed is the window. Looking back at Hunt, Graggs seems to fill the room with his presence, seems to dominate the space as he asks, "What are you getting at?"

"I want to know if I was the source of the disagreement between them."

"Your mother wanted FJ to leave the beach because the storm was approaching; everyone wanted him to. I don't see how you could have figured in that."

"I could have been the reason he wouldn't leave. If he thought she was giving me too much attention, that could have caused a fight."

Graggs laughs. "I suppose that's true and, if your mother thought FJ spent too much time with the boys, that could have too."

"Did it?"

"As much as what you're suggesting."

"I'm serious, Sam."

"Look, you're the one that's reaching, not me" he smiles. "You're too serious, Hunt; that's what's wrong. You're too damn serious for your own good."

The gray window beyond Graggs still contains the shadowy movement of people passing by, an everchanging scene that remains the same, like the effect of rain on moving water.

The current seems to rush beneath the stippled surface on which ephemeral strokes displace one another: at the center, light softened by dark rain, widening to darkness heightened by light-catching droplets at the fringe. Opposites merge as Hunt looks up at the people. They continue to stream into the armory; they come in groups, families crowded together in cars, old people brought in on buses, others hurrying through the rain; they come alone, sodden newspapers held above their heads, their clothes thoroughly soaked. A taxi stops to let out a group of young women, the first two of college age wearing sweaters pulled over starched blouses, points of light shining on their freshly washed hair. They are followed by two more, slightly older and strikingly different, one wearing a man's hat, tie, and trench coat; the other, a hood with heavy rope wound round it at the throat, a belt buckled on the outside of her tunic, a jeweled, costume dagger thrust into a sheath at her waist, and spiked wristbands that offset such theatrical accessories as rings on all fingers and chains looped beneath the heavy rope.

Setting aside the glass, Hunt goes to the door. He seems offended, impatient; his expression, sullen and brooding, turned away from Graggs, conveys his distraction. When the older man asks where he is going, the question apparently fails to register, for he opens the door and leaves without answering.

Crossing the room, Graggs steps into the hall, hesitates, watching the young man go up the steps to the street door. He starts back to his room but stops and, frowning, goes to the exit. Outside, he moves into the crowd; working his way through the people to the curb, dodging, half running, head up and craning to locate Hunt, he hurries after his young friend. By moving hastily and avoiding oncoming pedestrians, Graggs manages to catch Hunt before he reaches the corner.

Reaching out, he grasps the young man's arm and says, "Wait a minute, Hunt."

Startled, Hunt jerks free as he turns to look over his shoulder without slowing. Off balance, he misses his footing; his momentum carries him forward causing him to lurch toward the street. For an instant, he seems to hang there, his equilibrium uncertain, his face drained of color. The crowd presses close, individuals with dull, unseeing eyes; it surges past, every head turned to the front, as Hunt wavers, unable to regain his balance, then starts to fall. Lunging toward the traffic, he is struck by the side of a passing bus, is flung around, and thrown

into the gutter, his back coming to rest against the curb, the rest in the muck. There he lies as Graggs goes forward, bending down to him. The only visible mark is the swollen, discolored flesh around his eye. Along the sidewalk, the people hurry on, no one stopping, a few glancing down. Graggs looks up from the fallen figure and gazes at the crowd. He watches the people, expressionless, intent on destinations as, off in the distance, the prolonged wail of a siren starts to rise above the noise of the traffic.

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Zinc green in color, the patina of the cornice contrasts with the sheen of the floor; buffed to a high gloss, the hallway leads to double doors at the end of the corridor. As the distance decreases to these doors, the illusion of a narrowing hall distorts, giving the impression that it is opening at a rate proportionate to the rate of movement. When Graggs halts, the movement ceases; when he resumes, the walls again appear to open for him until he reaches the doors and a cross corridor. The section to the right leads to a new wing; the one to the left, to the center of the hospital. Graggs starts to the left, but a sound stops him. He approaches the set of doors and listens as a whirring sound draws near, then passes, followed by an alternating thump.

Edging the doors inward, Graggs peers into a ward filled with patients, all wearing pale green gowns. Bearing a person of indeterminate sex, a self-propelled wheelchair is moving away. Only the back of a full head of disheveled gray hair is visible above the back of the chair. A swarthy man swings forward on a leg encased in plaster; the cast extends from mid thigh to his toes.

Swinging the leg around and to the front, he sets it firmly out before him and, body pivoting, thrusts himself forward to the center of the ward. He halts and eyes the rows of bedridden patients. Legs elevated, backs in traction, dozing, or staring listlessly at nothing in particular, they possess a common feature--immobility.

The man produces a roll of one-inch adhesive tape from which he snips a two-foot strip, gives it a one-hundred-and-eighty-degree twist, and brings together the two ends to form a loop. He raises the band and gives his viewers a wide, toothless grin. Expressionless, they either ignore him or stare dully at the loop without a hint of recognition. Undaunted, perhaps encouraged that no one has objected, he brushes back his sleeves to reveal the images of brilliant red and green dragons, one tattooed on each forearm, then forces the points of the scissors into the cloth side of the tape while keeping the incision exactly in the middle of the tape as he begins to cut around the band until, coming full circle, he reaches his starting point. His hand remains at the apex of the loop, around the last strip of material that connects the loop; his fingers obscure the final snip as it severs the tape. Again the arm goes up in exultant dumb show. He beams at his viewers and bares his gums, gives a flourish, spinning on the pod of his cast, comes about, and shakes out the loop. It falls apart not in two separate bands but together in a single band whose circumference has doubled

that of the first circle. He hobbles to his left, displaying the surprising result for each patient to see, then to his right, a toothless grin revealing his satisfaction.

He is not through, though, for he returns to his place at the center of the ward and repeats the routine, including the final spin and flourish, ending his present efforts in a final shake of the loop that produces now, unlike the first time, not another larger band but two interlocking loops that fall from his hand in an elegant figure eight as a nurse approaches. Shaking her head and smiling apologetically, she intercepts the man and leads him, thumping and pivoting in a half bow, back to his bed. As the doors ease shut, Graggs turns, head down, a pensive expression on his face and retraces his steps.

Thoughtfully, he moves to the end of the corridor, where a window looks out over a staff parking lot. As he watches, a truck pulls in, stops, and--reversing itself--backs up to a loading ramp. The driver gives a blast on his horn, jumps down from the cab, and comes back to the flatbed at the rear, where he unfastens the tarpaulin and throws it off, revealing a load of block ice, the boards around the load already wet and dark from the melting ice. As Graggs leans forward, squinting down at the truck and its load, a door opens behind him, and a nurse comes out of the room, pauses, and looks at him.

"May I help you?" she asks.

Graggs straightens up, glancing back. He turns, shaking his head, and says, "No, not really--"

Without finishing, he looks past her into the room. He seems startled for an instant before catching himself, his expression moving slowly from polite to weary attention. It seems to fall into a look of distant remembrance--tender, long absent, yet tender. Memories from a past, so often distant, are perhaps less far off now as he sinks into a fixed and weary gaze--both time and place cut off, inexorably gone, called forth at last only in distorted approximation. Images, words, mere shadows, all melted or melting away.

"I'm sorry, sir, but you're not supposed to be here now. You'll have to come back during visiting hours."

"Yes," He glances at her again, nodding. "Yes, of course."

He turns to go while, in the room beyond the nurse, the young man lies motionless, the dressing over his eyes his only visible bandage. Beside him hangs a bottle of plasma from which descends a tube that is attached to a needle inserted beneath the skin of his forearm. Both the position of the plasma and the glint of light on the bottle attract and hold the attention. However, sustained concentration produces a weariness that dulls the senses. Attention wanes; the apparent stillness begins to waver. Unchecked, vision blurs, becoming distorted until that which was motionless seems now to move. The absence of

distance blurs the details--bright lights, abruptness, the subtlety of cubistic planes and lines, the clear, bare surfaces, the sharp angles that comprise everything, real or imagined--of this room.

THE END

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Robert Ewing Campbell

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Thesis: THE CAMEO ILLUSION

Major Field: English

Biographical:

Personal Data: Born in Alice, Texas, December 26, 1940, the son of Mr. and Mrs. James V. Campbell.

Education: Graduated from W. B. Ray High School, Corpus Christi, Texas, in June 1959; received Bachelor of Business Administration degree from North Texas State University in 1968; received Master of Arts from the University of Southern Mississippi in 1972; completed requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree at Oklahoma State University in December 1980.

Professional Experience: U. S. Army enlisted man, serving at Ft. Hood, Texas, 1959-62; writer in Medina, Texas, 1968-78; graduate associate and teaching assistant at Oklahoma State University, 1979-80.