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COLLECTED STORIES

By

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B.A., Stonehill College, 1973

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for

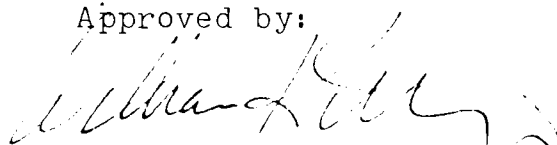
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COLLECTED STORIES

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AN INHERITANCE

I used to smoke. Smoking helped. One pale-gray morning in early April I stopped. A voice I recognized immediately, a slow, uneven voice woke me from my stupor. "Franklin," the voice said. Narcotic and cotton-mouthed I dragged myself from the mattress. It was Uncle Harry's voice; Uncle Harry was taking a break from his digging. "Where's your father?" His voice rose through the bare branches of the backyard, above a city's squalid spring, to remind me that my father's suffering had ended. Dumping cigarette ashes out the window, it occurred to me how justice works. Even my most reasonable prayers go unanswered.

From my father, a mustached, egg-shaped, brainy man I inherited a tidy sum, a sum that sustains me nightly at Trafaes. This is his money, his warning: "Stay away from my wife. Stay away from Corita." I am his child from a previous marriage--a marriage consummated at mid-century between one loving, azure-eyed, sensible beauty, my mother, and one egoistic, artful doctor, who never rose above the shadow of his own ambition. He made it plain he never loved my mother and that I was exactly like her, like her to a tee. I believe his coldbloodedness killed her. I prayed to see him suffer.

I live in an apartment above Swetts Court. Harry Swetts is my mother's brother. My father bought these apartment buildings sixteen years ago as an investment. A calculated risk his broker told him. My mother, though devoted as she was, objected. Immoral, she said; the rent, the living conditions. He was immoral, a doctor. He didn't need that kind of money. Over the months the arguments forged her liquid eyes and sanguine disposition into cold steel. He threatened divorce. More and more the arguments came to focus on me, justification's lever, until it became obvious to everyone that my mother no longer had the strength to fight him. One rainy morning in March, sick to death with the man she married, after living for years in a wilderness of isolation, he found her in bed, lying perfectly still, the blankets drawn taut to her breasts and folded neatly down, her hands across her waist, cold and white and bloodless.

I moved to Swetts Court to get away from him. It's a two room apartment on the third floor furnished with a throw rug over the kitchen linoleum, a two burner gas stove, a small, white ice box. This is home. My prize possession, my mother's oak dresser stands against the kitchen wall. In its drawers I keep my pens and pencils, sewing needles, stale cigarettes, my personal papers and Uncle Harry's medicine. On the blistered ceiling a forty-watt bulb illuminates the pea-green walls. Though I sleep in the other

room I keep the kitchen light always lit and the kitchen window always open. Nerves are funny things. You could ask Uncle Harry about nerves. Uncle Harry was my father's ward. My name is Franklin Drummer.

It's best to tell you right off that my father died of a vicious beating. He lingered for weeks in a hospital bed where wires pumped this solution, that current into him. He had just retired. In that respect his death was untimely, and for no apparent reason, except that it was God's will, and someone else's. With his wife of two years he expected to live another twenty collecting social security and a sizable pension; add to this numerous dividends, municipal stocks, apartment rents and her part-time insurance business.

His wife, Corita, used to tell me with an amorous wink, "Everything is terrific on Chestnut Street, well, almost everything." They lived in a terrific flagstone house surrounded by rhododendron and honeysuckle that were doing just terrific.

This is Swetts Court, ultra-moronic Uncle Harry's Court. My apartment is up three flights, but that's not enough, not when the river that runs along the backyard rises and overflows, like it does so often in early spring. One cesspool after another pours out its heart. The stench reaches the third floor smelling like low tide. How can I be expected to study? How can I entertain? Girlfriends stop me on the

street and ask if they can visit, but I'm not interested any longer. I've come to prefer older women.

Uncle Harry is six years older than dad and he has that blank, stark expression that comes from heavy medication. He maintains the grounds and the apartments in Swetts Court--the name father decided on--but handles none of the money. The money was dad's business, as was Uncle Harry. From now on Corita will take charge of finances; Corita is a take charge type of girl. She is fond of saying: "Franklin, people who know what they want get it. Others get left behind." It was Corita who thought to deck out the hospital room with roses when dad was dying, Corita who insisted they pull the plug. "The expense," she said. "That has to be considered, and Thomas Drummer would never stand for such an existence." She even dropped by the cemetery. "Franklin, she said, "I've made all the arrangements." Were Corita a less competent woman, dad would never have shown the slightest interest. Handing me the papers, "A plot next to your mother's."

Uncle Harry has been digging up the entire backyard of this apartment building with a short handled shovel for as long as I can remember. He has dug right down to bedrock six times. He digs it up, fills it in, and begins digging again. Consequently, Uncle Harry is bent over like a pretzel and his clothes reek of humus. There is no excuse for Uncle

Harry, except that he was my father's patient. Too many Harrys were my father's patients.

The apartment suits me perfectly. Why should I move out? Because I've inherited some money? No, money makes no difference. Now and again it buys Uncle Harry a new Ames shovel; it pays for his medication; it collects interest, but it does nothing to alleviate the remorse I feel when I remind myself that Harry is my closest relation. I have memories of him dating back to when I was five, perched in his lap. Uncle Harry in gray vest and charcoal slacks--my mother dressed him--his long thick finger poking my middle and me unable to contain my laughter. Even then he had the slow, immobile face of abnormality and the eyes of a sad dog. He loved to make presents of things to my mother. His last to her was a silver pendant. What little money I spend on myself these days goes for dinner at Trafaes on East Brooklawn.

I'll have soup, the Crab Diablo and a bottle of wine, I tell the waiter, and bring two glasses. Then I sling my right arm over the back of the chair, cross my legs and inspect the middle aged ladies. I like the ones in their early forties, well preserved, stately, peacockish, solicitous. I don't think my mother would approve of my behavior. I send a bottle of wine to a woman at the bar and watch her eyes

check with the waiter's. She looks around timidly. I nod my head and smile harmlessly though fully aware of the implications.

I never wear a suit. I'm a student. I'm six three, two twenty, a brawnier version of dad, almond eyes, square jaw, calculating, authoritative; coldblooded on occasion. I tell her the bottle is a sort of celebration and that my dad used to come here. He and my step-mom met her three years ago today. I tell this lovely woman, Emily, a forty year old divorcee, that my dad and step-mom met at this very table three years ago tonight, got married moments later and that my step-mom is now a widow. A peculiar introduction, no doubt, yet it has its impact. Quite unexpectedly a shock wave coarses through my right hand. It happens frequently these sudden, nervous twitches. There is a long medical term, akinetic . . . something or other--the forerunner of mild paroxysms to develop later, if you can believe the family doctor. "Are you all right?" Emily asks. Her glossed lips are pressed tight. Her eyes are hazel. Her eyes are sympathetic. I'm not interested in Emily's sympathy. Her skirt clings uniformly, her beige blouse is silky. Everything is in order. She pours two glasses of wine for us, almost motheringly. Emily wonders to herself where it is she's seen me. "Yes, I'm fine," I say. "I haven't been sleeping well." Where is it that I've seen Emily? She drinks all the time at Trafaes, she

says. Emily could be a doctor's wife; she could be a dress designer. Who cares what she could be. "What do you do?" she asks me. "Why have I never seen you here before?" Then hesitating a moment before leaning closer she asks, "And how does a student afford Trafaes?" Freckles highlight the bridge of Emily's nose. I like her white teeth. Most of all I like her skin, creamy, young, twenty eight. She could be a lawyer. I go ahead and tell her my father is Thomas Drummer, to which she nods her head as if to say that explains everything. "I've been introduced to your father," she says, "a highly respected man."

"Would you like dinner?" I ask. Her brown hair streaked with just a tinge of red splashes back and forth, no, no. "Thank you for the wine," she says. I put on my dinner bib. This is much the same way I met Corita.

Corita wore a tennis outfit. It was a Sunday afternoon, sunny and warm. She came into Trafaes carrying the paper-- the handle of her tennis racket tucked between the pages. All eyes on Corita. Ten years of marriage, she said, finally dissolved at thirty; television, the office, the desire to blot it all out. These remarks while running generous, slim hands down a well tanned leg. The Sunday paper. Why not clubs and weekend parties? A question posed with legs crossed while redressing sock and sneaker. We went back to her apartment by the Marina. Everything was terrific even then. She rented a terrific townhouse with a terrific view.

She suggested we take in the sunset from the terrace.

Corita passed along a terrific case of V.D.

"How did your dad die?" Emily asks. "I read about it in the papers, but it was so sketchy. Do you talk about it?"

I pour two more drinks and look into her eyes. "A beating," I say.

"A beating?" Emily sets her drink on the table.

"Doctor Drummer was beaten to death?"

"Convincingly."

"What's that you're wearing?" I ask, deliberately changing the conversation and pointing to a gold necklace. Emily leans towards me and I cup it in my hands. "My mother wore a necklace, a necklace her brother, Harry, sent her from the commissary in the institution two weeks before his treatment." I don't mean to tell Emily this, but there is no way to prevent myself from saying it.

"It's a camel," she says, pointing to the hump.

"Dromedary." I allow the back of my hand to brush against Emily's blouse and she smiles taking up the necklace, and fondling it while we finish our wine.

Emily is the first from Trafaes who I've ever taken to Swetts Court. She persisted. "Please, Franklin, it'll be fun."

The place is cold, unheated. I don't spend much time here. No, that's a lie, I spend all my time here. "That's my only chair," and I sit Emily in the rocking chair by

the kitchen window. She tilts it back and slowly rocks forward. She seems to like the chair and to be quietly amused by the looks of the place.

"But why do you live like this?" she finally asks. "Are you comfortable here?"

"Sometimes. Sometimes I'm afraid to leave this room. I did a wash last Thursday. I said: goodbye, this is it. You won't be back from this one. I get like that. I get frightened, honestly scared to death."

"That's funny hearing that come from you," says Emily.

I kneel down beside her. Outside the wind is picking up; the standard spring, evening with a steady wind. Branches scrape against the building.

"Is that Saint Paul's?" she asks. The steeple is visible through the trees, here and there masked by foliage, but at the peak beautifully silhouetted against the black sky. "Eleven o'clock." Her voice is a whisper. She asks about the peculiar odor and I mention something about Uncle Harry being an archeologist and a network of tunnels he's uncovered leading to an ancient cement reservoir. She lifts her head gayly, but I am thinking about Saint Paul's and my mother's funeral. Cold affair. No tears though. The ground was brittle and dusted with snow, the last flourish of an atypical winter. The bronze casket, before which we all gathered, lay on a green carpet; everyone stood to one side. My father stood beside me and I remember the condensation from his

breath beading on his mustache, the aborted attempts he made to button my coat, and the shadow of the man himself extending beyond the canopy which sheltered us. He pulled my coat snug around my chest and called me soldier. My mother's passing, he said, was untimely and for no apparent reason, except that it was God's will. God works in mysterious ways, he said. I see now what he meant. Ask and you shall receive. She has been dead these fourteen years.

Emily is not like all the rest. She makes love like a child. She hangs on. We are drunk. I say before falling asleep, "Emily, you belong here with me."

The next morning, lying on one hip I watch her put on her bra. She brushes a length of hair off my face saying, "Will you call me? I'm off tomorrow. She kisses my forehead. First this afternoon I will go to see Corita, and yes, it sounds good, tomorrow; an echo of high heels clicking down the stairwell.

The morning is clear and humid and Uncle Harry is digging in the backyard. I hear him mutter in that hopeless way. He says the only thing he ever says, "Where's your father?"

"Last month, Uncle Harry, last month they pulled the plug." I tell him this leaning out the kitchen window, admiring the trench, the final leg of an isosoles triangle. The air is heavy with the smells of magnolia and dogwood blossoms and the excited screams of children playing next

door. Uncle Harry on a local dig sifts through the dirt with the blade of his shovel. He pays no attention to me. He huddles by the fence, uncovering some rare artifact, later to be lost in retrenchment.

That afternoon Corita is digging her fingernails into my back. Her arms are all over me and by the perfume and mascara I can tell she's anticipating a full day of it. Inside the house with rhododendron and honeysuckle borders the air is hot.

"What is it?" she asks. "Is it one of your headaches?" She pours a tall glass and hands it to me then settles both hands on my shoulders. A certain line about the mouth of this erogenous widow while waiting for her potion to take effect.

I lift her arms. "No more. I'm through." Somewhere in the back of my head comes the sound of a shovel, that familiar sound of steel sinking into loose rock, not at all unlike teeth crushing ice. Corita's brown eyes search my face. Only the gloss-hard lipstick prevents her mouth from falling open. An injustice has been done. Corita, oh poor, mistreated Corita. Her face sours.

"What are you saying, Franklin?"

"I'm saying I want nothing to do with you." She deserves no explanation, nor am I interested in giving one. I have no excuses.

"Clever you," she says. "But why now?"

"You know why." I touch my fingers to her cheek and draw my thumb across her lips. Beautiful Corita. "What we did stinks."

Corita takes hold of my hand and presses it to her mouth. "You love me," she says. She slips an arm around my waist. "You love me."

There are a number of reasons why I hate Corita, but she wouldn't have the Latin foggiest about any of them. Corita doesn't even know she gave me V.D., but then Corita wouldn't know a Wasserman from a Ford. "Franklin, look at me," she says, but I am unable. I can only place my hand on her terrifically sexy face and push. She falls backwards into the couch and shrieks something. It's vicious. I slam the door. Swetts Court, please, I tell the taxi.

"Have you seen your father?" says Uncle Harry, gazing up from his digging as I round the corner into the backyard. His eyes are the size of half dollars, kind of a dulled metallic color, an aggravated reaction to thorazine.

"Last month," I mumble and turn to go upstairs then decide to linger watching Uncle Harry search for his brains. My father, the shrink, has buried them somewhere in the backyard. My father never explained to Harry exactly where he buried them or even why and what's worse, my mother consented to Harry's treatment.

"Either he has it done under my supervision," my father warned her, "or he goes away permanently." She never forgave herself.

"Corita pulled the plug," I say loud enough for him to hear. "How's that for justice?" The whole yard stinks of mud. Uncle Harry is an ancient woman, he needs only a babushka, a basket. With a swift, smooth stroke his shovel meets a rock--a clear ringing accompanying my climb up the stairs. I light a burner on the stove and lift a cigarette from the dresser drawer. The smoke rises to the ceiling, hangs heavy there then is sucked out the window.

This is the way things are: my father, the eminent psychiatrist, Dr. Thomas Drummer, dead, contusions of the skull. My mother, dead, beneath a bed of cinquefoil and pakasandra. My Uncle Harry, out of commission. Corita, my father's beloved, unloved. I am insensate. Emily is waiting for a lover. Who isn't? The smoking makes me dizzy.

The crowd at Trafaes is colorful plaster of paris, soap opera setting, nonetheless, they are aware of me, my presence an intrusion, a question whispered to the management. His father is Thomas Drummer? Was. Oh, I see. It makes me a pungent sauce that excites the senses, served compliments of Trafaes. Emily has come in and tonight she and I will be lovers. I kiss her, but she feels cold. She sits, uncomfortably. It is essential that she not learn certain things about me, though if she asked, I would confess everything.

"Is anything wrong?" I ask. Her nod tells me yes and no at the same time. She has thought twice about coming; embarrassed by the difference in our years? My arm slides over the back of her chair. I cross my legs and leaning forward tell her she looks beautiful. At this moment any good director would ease his camera to within inches of our faces and he would say: "Okay, now let's play this with feeling." And that's exactly the way I would do it, except that Emily is not an actress and no amount of prompting would help. She could have no part in a charade, mine or any other's.

"Did they find who killed your father?" she asks. Her voice is so soft, so unsettling, a fusion of child and woman.

"I did," I say. By her expression I can tell Emily presumes I mean that I have my own suspicions, but that is not what I mean at all.

From off-stage Corita comes in. She finds our table.

"I have something you might be interested in," she says to me. Corita's dress is interesting but not Corita. I am not about to listen. Emily, who hasn't the vaguest idea of what is going on, yet whose eyes are combing me like an inspector's eyes looking for a flaw, inches her chair back from the table. Yes, tonight Emily has her reservations.

"That's right, sweetheart, give us plenty of room." Corita's eyes flash back on me. "Why are you here?"

Lovely Corita; her lips are for abusing, not talking, not loving. Her lips are all around my ear. My eyes belong to Emily. Emily is not plaster of paris. "Your friend," Corita tells me, "must be desperate." Corita's wet, deafening tongue worms through my ear. My step-mom's tongue has always had a certain command over me. Emily is waiting.

"Please, leave us alone." My voice is louder than I intend. The room falls absolutely quiet. If someone jingled the ice in their glass it would echo. Management is watching.

"We have the house to ourselves," says Corita. It makes no difference, I am not about to tell Corita that I'm interested in this lady across the table with her legal eyes and perfect breasts, who is staring at both of us now trying to define me into a category, Corita into a mental reference. Corita deserves no such explanation. My hand pushes against Corita's face. She reels backwards into a table. Again something vicious.

"Don't come near me. Don't come near me," I say, neither overly vindictive nor threatened--the proper voice for such a serious warning. From the kitchen an unadvised waiter brings my dinner and with the appropriate piece of silver I flick butter sauce at all the shocked faces. Women are horrified. Their dresses will be ruined. But each and every last one right down to Corita gets it. Life is big with jest. I dab a smidgeon on Emily's nose. I lick my finger.

Who would have guessed such an incident at Trafaes? I am being held. At the top of my lungs I scream for Uncle Harry, but my voice only travels into some brave soul's ear. His herringboned arm jerks mine behind my back. A bald man presses against me, uncertain how to use his body. Corita flings something which hits the bald man. Emily is the only one seated. She has such a hard analytical expression. The doors fly wide open. I'm running.

The streets of East Brooklawn are residential. Confident professionals live here with third generation intelligence. Swetts Court is full of Harrys. Swetts Court is a haven for them, for the senseless, the backwash that Brooklawn never sees except for treatment. The Court swells up at night, especially warm nights in April, with third generation imbeciles and third generation automobiles and malignant faces in every window. I run past their places neither hearing nor caring, though the voices, I know, have never been more than a step or two behind me. Where is my apartment? I throw open a door: a pale, wrinkled face peering at me. "Who's that?" No, I live alone. Up a flight, in a door. Stove, ice box, rocking chair, one window--this is the place. I get a cigarette and smoke it. My chest heaves and I'm damp from running. Somewhere in the darkness below I hear Uncle Harry, the shunk of his shovel. It scrapes a rock. It gnaws. Smoke curls out the window. Tomorrow there will be time to apologize to Emily, time to buy Harry

a new shovel. But now sleep is what I want, sleep and no explanations. Three capsules of thorazine I set out on the dresser top. Sleep and more sleep. Heart, limbs. I draw a blanket taut to my chest and fold it neatly down. Oh, for one long repose, but across the way the bell in Saint Paul's begins to toll.

TWELVE DEGREES OF FROST

"These are the things all assassins remember," says Mrs. Saavedra. She makes the sign of the cross. "Sometimes the bearer of bad news becomes the target of revenge."

She sits on the front porch of a tenement brownstone and on humid nights such as this, she calls up to me on the second floor. She is a big woman, a powerful woman with a strong and patient face. Her stockings are rolled down, her dress is folded up into the cradle of her thighs; and her arms, arms the size of stovepipes, support her weight.

I have an advantage over Mrs. Saavedra, one flight of stairs that are hard for her to negotiate and two full years of law. This means I have hundreds upon hundreds of cases to tell her about. Still, she persists with her one--her Jorge Papita story, hoping I will listen. I do and I begin to see the boy. He walks down through the terraced hills of red dirt, the scorching sun soaking the small of his back. He walks with a limp, something acquired, and thrusts a shovel into the earth with each step. I think of The Real McCoys and Walter Brennen shouting, 'Papita! Papita!' But suddenly from behind a produce truck three uniformed men appear and Jorge Papita begins to run. The sun that rises and sets, the sun that crosses ten thousand rows of iceburg

and romaine drops behind the terraced slope and the running figure of Jorge Papita. When the law gets ready, they come.

"You knew he was married?" Mrs. Saavedra asks. The wind is picking up and a slight drizzle is beginning to fall, a welcome relief from the terrible Southern humidity. Across the street people move indoors, into front rooms with window shades half drawn.

"L'amore fa impazzire, Mrs. Saavedra. Love makes us mad." I tell her this time and time again, but she only shrugs and dismisses it with a wave of her hand. And yes, I know Jorge--I prefer to think of him as George--was married. How many times has she told me?

"Whacko is how he came home to me," says Mrs. Saavedra. He was like a stranger."

"What did you expect?" I answer, and leave the perch where I've been listening, one hip in the window. I have dishes in the sink and I enjoy washing dishes. I soap them and rinse them and put them back on the shelf. At present I'm using plastic, but I'm looking to buy good china--something with a pattern.

A knock at the door. Mrs. Saavedra enters and lumbers across the room to the television. "Why don't you watch?" she asks and flicks on the set. "Always so quiet. Don't you ever go out?" Under her arm she carries several articles of clothing, each ironed, each folded, each several sizes

smaller than her.

"I'm going out tonight," and think to myself, it's best that I do because this is her second sustained ascent to this abject room in as many nights.

"To the bars?"

"Always to the bars, Mrs. Saavedra."

"He was always a religious boy."

George, I think to myself. Here we go again.

"Two weeks before his confirmation," Mrs. S. lunges in, "his mother called me. I had to call the hospital. She was timid. Would they take her, I asked."

"She was sick?"

"His mother was sickly. The person at the hospital said they could take her a week from Thursday. On Tuesday I took the boy from school and told him his mother was dead. I blame myself for her death."

"I'm sure you do, Mrs. Saavedra. But those aren't the things assassins remember. And I don't think you have to worry."

With that she turns off the television, which hasn't come on because of a bad tube, and presents the armload of clothing to me. "These belonged to Jorge. Wear what you like." Her eyes cross mine like a pair of beacons, and in that momentary blind spot of their meeting I understand how powerful a woman she really is. It's more than a matter of size or the ebony bracelet worn on her melinoid wrist like a

symbol of some dark religiosity, though probably no more than a gift to her from George. George lived with her for years. He lived in the apartment I now rent. I think of him as Spanish Moss, hiding out, a kind of ghetto version of Jesse James. A desperado.

I'm learning. Every day I'm learning: the law is a living thing. At the office, a cubicle that Legal Services leases, I open the morning mail. Outside my window urban development is in full swing. Burned out skeletons breathe new magic into a city street--the kind of magic in which the hand is far less inventive than the eye. No sun again today, only haze and heat, the one immutable law that pervades everything around here. I had visions of the South being a slow, languid place with cypress trees and quaint apothecaries. But the trees here are shaped like corkscrews and at ten o'clock every night, when the heat is bearable, the street gets a little crazy, like a carnival midway. Keeping with the spirit of Legal Services, I have taken an apartment among my potential clients.

"Hector, are you in?"

A good legal secretary is a must because around here we're all learning. But Sheila will never learn because she's too busy sampling cologne or applying mascara, or running uptown to lunch at the "Sun Flour" or "Mustard Seed" cafes. Sheila fits into sweeping generalizations.

"That Ramos girl wants to talk with you," Sheila says. "Her husband took the kid again. Should I tell her you're out?" Sheila jots something down on a piece of paper and hands it to me along with the phone. It says I look cute today. Fitting. I live in a world of memos and briefs and it's exactly like Sheila to satirize that part of me.

George had communications of his own. I know. I've seen Mrs. Saavedra going over them, his letters to her, many times.

"This is how your law works," she shouted one night as I came in. George's letters were laid out on the kitchen table. She stood up quickly and gathered the letters and wrapped two thick elastics around them. "An eye for an eye." That was all she said. The elastics made a vicious sound. I remember going to bed that night and laying awake for nearly half an hour, wondering what discrete items the letters contained. Later, I got up and locked the door. Before I turned the latch, I couldn't resist poking my head out. I could hear her talking, though I was certain she was alone downstairs. She was asking questions, the kind in catechisms: "What happened to the angels who did not remain faithful to God? What is the Sixth Commandment?"

While I'm on the phone with the Ramos girl, Sheila practices typing. These are the real things all assassins

remember: disruptions, inadequacies and inuendos. They inflame like arthritis. Across the street a man cracks his hammer back and forth between the stud and crossbar in a doorway. New wood in old brick--like Sheila--the modern Tudor. Sometimes at night it seems like the whole city is crying, but I'm sure it's only the new wood beginning to warp.

When I set down the phone Sheila puffs up her cheeks like a blowfish and glances at our electric samovar, a red, plastic coffee percolator, Legal Services' counterpart to the Russian copper or sterling silver model, and which at the moment is jury-rigged, if you'll excuse the expression, to three extension cords.

"Pick up on the other line, Hector." Sheila's voice drops. "Mrs. Saavedra wants to talk. She says she can prove Jorge Papita's innocence."

"I'm not in."

"Why don't you look into it and get her off your back? Maybe he is innocent."

"He's more than innocent, Sheila. George is dead."

Holding the phone near to her shoulder she says, "You'll have to run to the store if you want cream." Then she glances from the percolator to me. "Why does she keep calling?"

The percolator, like my dishes is plastic and it makes a hideous sound, not at all the sound of good coffee brewing. More like the acetylene torches the men across the

street use. And we drink it hot, not iced as is the custom. She's coming towards me now, smiling and holding out a cup.

"Cha, cha, cha," she says and takes a few of those steps.

"Three men chasing a cripple," says Mrs. Saavedra when I come in the door. She's sitting at her kitchen table, waiting for me and wearing the same dress she wore last night, a flimsy gingham, loose and soiled. The kitchen smells of spiced beef and lemons. It's exceedingly bright. "I have a plate for you," she says. "Sit." She goes to a drawer and removes a letter. "This is what we have for our efforts," she says and sets the paper by my plate. "Lies. Lies on paper. To hell with your law. They say now things will have to wait. Not all the money is there. Am I to pay for the new roof myself?"

Judging from her fury, she's been building up to this all day. "There's nothing I can do, Mrs. Saavedra." She stands off to one side of the table, her arms akimbo, staring down at me. Her dress is hiked up, snagged in an undergarment and tiny beads of perspiration dapple the strong line of her brow. "That was a lame attempt using George to get me on the line earlier today."

She seizes the letter signed by the district representative and files it in the drawer with her letters from George.

"You remind me of him. He used to say we lived like hens, but he would do nothing either. Like you he waited only for the time he could leave." She glances at my briefcase. "How is it a young man has such a serious face?" There is a dark, desperate intensity in her eyes, but judging from her voice I can tell she's not referring to me. Behind me on the wall hangs the picture of who she is talking about. The white edges have been trimmed and the picture placed in glass. A striking face, lean, muscular and wide, but double edged--magnanimous and rapacious.

"It's federal money, Mrs. Saavedra. There's nothing I can do."

Once upstairs and in my room I'm aware of a slight breeze. The breeze tangles the drapes. Walking towards the window I notice the clothes on top of the dresser: two pairs of pants, not mine, and of the synthetic variety. Three cotton jerseys pressed and folded, maroon, green and black, all with pockets above the left pectoral. And one dress shirt, tapered and shiny. None of it mine. Does she expect me to wear his things? At the window I sit with arms folded gazing down on Mrs. Saavedra who has taken up her position on the steps. The evening sun has broken through the haze and throws magenta on the red brick buildings, turning everything a brilliant copper. Her shadow lies at her feet on the brick sidewalk and I wonder what could be going through her head. Music blares from a

neighbor's window and just as suddenly subsides. Noise more than anything makes this place hard to bear. You either create your own noise or suffer someone else's.

"Hector," Mrs. Saavedra calls. "Hector," she says and cocks her head towards my window. "Are you going out tonight?" For some reason I don't let her see me, but conceal myself behind the drapes. When I'm sure it's safe to move I go to my dart board and pull the darts from the cork. My first throw flutters and sinks into the dresser top. The second punctures the wallboard, then drops. One hip on the bed I glance around this mournful room. George couldn't have liked it much.

For days I don't dare try his clothes on. I'm working on the Ramos case six hours a day and hoping to get Judge Ringwood to sign a "Show Cause" order, to return the husband from Texas. The law library is twenty blocks away and the busses never run on time. I've been asked to keep my long distance phone calls to a minimum because Legal Services has a budget and I've consistently exceeded it. Somehow that pleases me.

"Well, my, my," Sheila says, seeing me come in one morning. On impulse I've thrown on George's pants, the maroon jersey and the shiny dress shirt. Why not? Maybe polyester alleviates the heat. The shirt I've left unbuttoned and outside the pants and the whole getup, if nothing else,

has added a certain swagger to my gait. "Well, let me look at you," Sheila exclaims. There's a delightfully coquettish note in her voice. "Up on one side, Hector," she says, adjusting the collar, "or haven't you noticed? And always button the bottom three buttons." She does this quickly herself, lingering a moment on the last one. "Where?" she says--the question as abrupt and straightforward as it is destructive.

"My landlady. She had some old things."

"Mrs. Saavedra's called twice already. You haven't been sleeping at home, Hector."

"What did she want?"

"She says you owe rent."

Sheila keeps glancing at me. At first she conceals her interest by asking questions about cases, but by mid-morning she is staring openly at me. What annoys me most about George's clothes and pleases Sheila, is the way they fit, tight in all the wrong places. Assassin? I think of hashish and men in desert robes and Robespierre, but not George, not dressed like this. I think of the rabid arguments between George and Mrs. Saavedra (she has mentioned several) and the packet of letters; that first night in the kitchen when I entered and found her pouring over them, like some kind of Madame Clairvoyante. She doesn't trust me. She never has and yet she's involved me from the beginning, as if

my being a lawyer is anathema to understanding and must be corrected. Mrs. Saavedra has told me that after one of George's break-ins, he locked his room and remained there for days. The silhouette behind the drapes, though George probably didn't have drapes. Perhaps he had a canvas shade like the people across the street. The transparent tenement in forty watt light, his bold face staring out the window. Those letters she has were passed to her in silence under his door, while inside George was dying of hate and desperation. "An ugly time," she calls it. "He was not himself." But one theft and one conviction was not enough.

"Come uptown with me?" Sheila says. "I'll buy you lunch."

I'm tempted, but the cases are piling up and I have a brief to write by tomorrow and besides going uptown with Sheila would be ruinous. Whatever else I am, inexperienced barrister, viatic pettifogger, Hector is not ethically impoverished. Sheila has been honing more than just her secretarial skills these past few weeks. Gazing out the front window, I noticed the man across the street with the hammer working on another floor. The faint clack, clack of steel against block reminds me that half of this section of the city was built with stone ballast. What didn't go into buildings, went to pave the walks.

"Hector." Sheila snaps her fingers in front of my face.

"No. I'm not hungry."

Before stepping out Sheila glances back at me. "Chicken shit," she says and closes the door. Staring up at me from my desk is a memo, to Hector, from Sheila: "Don't forget your appointment with Judge Ringwood at two." It suddenly occurs to me how foolish a mistake I've made wearing George's clothes. Clothes won't make me any more a part of this community than they did witches in Salem.

While speaking with Judge Ringwood, I realize Mrs. Saavedra is correct. After my internship with Legal Services I will move away. But unlike her, I don't begrudge George for trying to get out. At some point he decided the most expeditious route was simply to take. Maybe I'm tired and being tired makes me sympathetic. Maybe it's George's clothes, or the Judge's house--furnished and ornamented to the point of being baroque--but sitting across the capacious room and listening to how the law is the law, while he turns a glass of iced coffee in his thick, arthritic fingers makes me sick. The law is a living thing. Dressed as I am though, he wouldn't care what I said so I remain seated with coffee (iced, of course) between my knees and nod my head in agreement. Yes, the law is the law. His eyes are looped with bags and he has the pendulous lower lip and I half expect a harpsichord to begin playing.

"You know," he says, "I suspect Ralph Abernathy planned the assassination of Martin Luther King." He looks over his horn-rimmed glasses and smiles. "And I wouldn't doubt that L.B.J. conceived the whole show in Dallas." God, I think to myself, things don't get more baroque than that. "You know by now, of course, that the law is often no more than the clothes men wear," and his eyes pause on my attire to emphasize his point. When our chat is concluded the Judge holds out the "Show Cause" order and in my haste to get it and get out I bang my shin into his coffee table.

"Sounded nasty," he says.

"Why do you limp?" Mrs. Saavedra asks, watching me come up the walk, a raw recruit at the end of a forced march. Six o'clock, I'm home early for a change. I think I have a rash from George's clothes. She has changed her clothes, no longer has on the gaudy, pink gingham sheet; she's wearing avocado stretch pants and a tomato-red sleeveless blouse. "Too much fun at the bars?"

"Don't you ever let up?" I ask.

"What do you say?" Adrenalin coarses through her and she sits erect.

"I said let up. Stop. Give it a rest." I feel her eyes follow me as I climb the stairs and enter my room, eyes strangely assured. Shadows stripe the room: shadows on the floor, on the walls, and on the ceiling, too--the skeleton

frame of a shifting cell. But something is missing. At the window I call down to her.

"Where are the drapes?"

"They desired washing," she says.

Things are coming to a head. Though there hasn't been the least mention of Jorge Papita in nearly a week, Mrs. Saavedra still has the drapes. Some sinister purpose has settled into her face and she now regards me with contempt. Not open, outright contempt, but contempt nonetheless. She thinks of herself as an oracle of late.

"Look," she says, shaking the newspaper, "a man convicted of rape is set free. Is that how your law works?"

Every morning this past week I've gone to work wondering why I stay. Every case involves custody or minor theft, vandalism or wife abuse. I understand why lawyers charge seventy-five dollars an hour. Violence is blue. Sheila asks, "Are you in?" as if I have a choice.

"Answer me," Mrs. Saavedra shouts.

"I don't have an answer."

"Of course you don't. Why would you have answers?"

"Without the law you'd have nothing, Mrs. Saavedra."

"With it I have only excuses."

"Did the law excuse George?"

Rain. City of rain. It breaks the heat, but two days are enough. It empties off the roof into the gutters, gushes down the drainpipes and floods the yard. I haven't been feeling well and I haven't been able to sleep. Sheila calls twice a day. The police picked up Ramos in Alabama. His wife wants to drop the charges, again. More rain. Still no drapes. The bruise on my shin has discolored. At night I hear her moving around downstairs, but no word from her. She must know the letters are missing. I'm bored with darts and engrossed in George's letters, the disjointed ruminations of an aimless assassin. Sheila calls.

"Listen to this," I tell her. 'March 14th:' This is George speaking in one of his letters."

"Whose letters?"

"George. The one Mrs. Saavedra called about."

"Right."

"No, not right. Just listen. 'Gifts for her.' That's the heading and her is Mrs. Saavedra. 'A snapshot of myself taken in the photo booth at Woolworths. A wristwatch and a bracelet.'"

"What kind of bracelet?" Sheila asks.

"Just listen. 'April 22: a small appliance.' And this, 'April 29: I've "purchased" a gun.'"

"What's the point, Hector, and what are you doing with George's letters if he's dead?"

"This one," I say, cutting her off. "What do you make of this?"

"Hector," she says, over George's question, "there's a movie playing near the office that's supposed to be good, but I don't want to go alone."

"Why would he ask a question like that, Sheila?"

"The movie, Hector. Yes or no?"

More rain. More talk with Sheila. The letters are none of my business, according to her. "Isn't there a law against doing what I'm doing? When am I coming to the office?" In all the letters, George's signature borders on printing. In response to Mrs. Saavedra's question the night I locked my door: "The angels who did not remain faithful to God were cast into hell."

Slumped in the window one evening, my own reflection distorted by the interplay of light and rain, I hear Mrs. Saavedra call from the landing.

"Come down."

There is a long silence when neither Mrs. Saavedra nor I so much as breathe. But I can feel her presence--taste it--the same way the blind do. "Come down," I say to myself. "Did George come down?" Rain beats against the window streaking the glass with rivulets of dirt--holes in the gutter. A fly clings to the sash and hangs motionless. I'm tempted to press a dart through his back. Outside, the street, the buildings and the rain merge into one gray

current flowing through this pane of glass, my own face superimposed nearly to its edges. A face not so different from George's. Curious thing about him, George has dark features and blue eyes, soft blue at that--the color of Robin eggs.

"Come down," she calls again.

And my face is somewhat rounder. Leaning forward I wipe the vapor of my breath from the cool damp glass. "Did you, George," I ask, tracing a steady stream that cuts through the reflection at the level of his eyes, "ever come down?"

"No," he says and smiles. "I made her come up, always. She has difficulty on the stairs."

"Come down," she yells, "or I come up." Her voice has a quality I don't remember hearing. "Hector?"

"Don't answer her," says George.

"How did you ignore her?"

Mrs. Saavedra calls up again. "Hector, Sheila is here."

"I prayed," he says, "and made the sign of the cross, like she taught me. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Did you know we get three years indulgence for simply blessing ourselves; with holy water, seven. You'd think it would even the odds."

"What odds?"

He frowns. "Do you mind?" he says noticing the dart board. "Yes, prayed," he says and smiles. I like his smile.

The first dart strikes the wall. "She will try everything to avoid climbing the stairs. Sheila isn't down there." His second dart sinks into the cork. "Knowing the law as you do, you have her at a disadvantage, but you must be careful." Tossing the last dart, he turns quickly and says, "I see she's made use of my clothes. I'd be careful where I wore them."

"Why do you hate her?"

His face turns suddenly severe. "She is cunning. And she is a strict disciplinarian. I know what you're thinking," he says. "Hearsay is inadmissible evidence. I know all those objections. I'm familiar with all your terms. And I know something else."

"Hector, will you come down!" she yells. "Sheila is here."

George begins to laugh. "The law is the clothes men wear."

Suddenly, the hall light goes on and shines into my room through the transom above the door. A noticeable change in the room, effects of water on old brick, I suppose. I feel a special vulnerability having no drapes. The neighbors can see everything. Slipping from the embrasure of the window and spooning the fly off the sash, I go and turn out my lights.

"Give them to me," she says, meaning the letters, "or I will call the police." She is panting from the arduous climb.

Between the heavy rain and her pounding it sounds like a thunderstorm. "Give them," she says. "Don't be wicked."

I would hand them all to her untouched if I thought she would let it drop, but Mrs. Saavedra has brought this on herself. Possession is nine tenths of the law. George discovered that. Everything he stole, clothes, jewelry, the television, even the pistol, he stored in his room. Nothing relieves guilt like being secure in the knowledge that eventually you'll be caught with the goods. Why else would she keep these letters?

"I did my best," she says. "His wife did nothing. Twelve months and she gave up, left him. Jorge Papita needed someone. He came home to me."

"He was always a religious boy," I say, breaking my silence, and not without sarcasm.

"Yes, that's so. Jorge needed God. Now please give them to me."

This letter, one I've pondered over several times-- three words in black ink--"Who made me?" I slip under the door. Is this the way it worked for George? Of course, he composed extemporaneously and with great fervor, eschatological, so to speak.

"God made you," she says. Her voice is bitter. "Listen," she says, pressed against the door. Pressed as I am to it on the other side, I can almost taste her breath. "I did what had to be done. Stealing is wrong."

Another note, this one in red ink and printed--the baneful code of a catechism text--"What is mortal sin?"

"All in the name of law," she says. "Is that what you think? He broke the law, not me."

Another note: "Who was Judas Iscariot?" The assassin, I think to myself. George knew how to torment her.

"That's a lie," she yells, pushing her weight full against the door. "I did what had to be done."

If I had a pistol, as did George, then I could make this authentic. One shot fired into the ceiling, or out the window, enough to convince Mrs. Saavedra she handled it wrong. But reenactments are never the same. The last note, one of the Ten Commandments, slips under the door. Then from the hall comes a familiar sound of crumpling paper and I recognize the corner of the letter under the door.

"Things have not changed," says Mrs. Saavedra. "An eye for an eye is still the law." George's initial note reads, "Thou shall not kill," but beneath his writing is a line in Mrs. Saavedra's hand: "Or steal, and you have stolen. What would the law do?"

Then from the hallway comes the sound of furniture being moved, something the size of a chair. It's placed directly in front of the door.

"Mrs. Saavedra?"

Silence, except for the chair creaking and the transom overhead rattling. In the hall light the shadow of her

hand appears monstrous, three times its normal size. The transom screeches and paint chips fall and in a moment she will have it open. Confused and shaken I throw open the door.

"George?" she says. But she would never say George. In my memory I form the "OR" in Jorge with my mouth. Her face is wet, her nostrils flared, almost cavernous from my angle. She did say George. Beneath her into the hall I step, the harbinger of a tiny lie.

"George says there's nothing to worry about."

Unreal city is right. Regardless of rain, at ten o'clock these people are out--the carnival midway. The soft light oozing from their houses glistens on the wet sidewalk, infests the night with a kind of warm fog and disappears. The bruise on my shin aches. Three people with umbrellas, a woman and two men, separate and I move through them. "Look out there!" one of them shouts. A group of men smoking beneath a street lamp watch me pass and a block later one of them yells, "Papita!" Of course, I think to myself, I'm wearing George's clothes. The rain has stopped. A movie house lets out and for a minute I'm wading through the crowd. Several letters on the marquee are missing. Crushed popcorn boxes clutter the entrance and a violet light illuminates the foyer.

"That was stupid," someone says. "Four bucks."

The fog creeps in through the open doors and condenses on the glass ticket booth, which reflects the congested scene outside. A policeman wipes a hand across his mouth and yawns. He and I exchange glances and for a moment I expect to tell him something, something specific about the law. Maybe that the law . . . , but the back of my throat tastes like ash. My shoes make a soft slapping sound on the puddled bricks and the damp air soaks the small of my back.

"Move along," he says, "the show's over."

I button the lower buttons on my shirt and turn up the collar on one side while he watches. Tensing the muscles in my bruised leg I begin the long walk uptown.

MY OWN DEATH

Entry: 12/14/71

Sheila Martin is not an old sweetheart. She is an old friend. The two of us share an apartment in this city. God, of cities frightened me before Sheila agreed to give our relationship a chance. I was on my knees. She said in tired and bitter voice, "Okay, we'll try it." I'm better now and feeling less infirm. We rent a modest five room apartment on the third floor and we go out drinking together all the time. Drinking is deathly for my health, but I make concessions. It is part of love.

All the young women around here go out drinking. They go to the bistro and flirt with strangers and listen to men tell them secrets out loud, secrets they have sumptuously whispered to themselves in the third person. These women are lonely and Sheila is no different, except that Sheila is not looking for just any man. She would allow few indeed, as would most psychologists, to read her personal letters. Sheila works as a psychologist for an airline company and flies to the bistro nightly.

The bistro is a small cafe two blocks from our apartment. Sheila has told me on several occasions that without the bistro she would go crazy. Every night she slips into a silky

blouse and flared pants and goes to the bistro to dance. I have no choice but to go with her. Last night she danced until four in the morning. It is a good thing I don't work, a good thing for me that I have plenty of time to rest.

Sheila believes I am crazy. And where I am concerned, Sheila is never altogether wrong. Psychologists are secretly endeared to crazy people--that is why we last. Allow me to correct that: (if I may be so bold as to direct her pen) that is why Sheila and I lasted as long as we did. Last night at the bistro, you see, I shot and killed the poor girl. I say shot and killed and that is exactly what I mean.

I told you a minute ago that before I came to live with Sheila, cities frightened me and I told you that now I am over that fright. This is not altogether accurate. In fact, it's a lie. I'm an inveterate liar, my most humanizing, hereditary trait. Sheila has told me, "Yes, that is your problem." She believes everything I tell her is a lie, a curtain of dusty words designed to confuse her. "But you lie because it excites you."

Sheila is not an old friend. Our first introduction, you might say, was at the bistro. I am not suppose to mention names; my attorney says we must keep as much as we can out of the papers and the airline company agrees, but I will tell you that we met through a gentleman friend of hers. I fell in love with Sheila immediately. I couldn't help myself. You know how love hits; one day it's there. The next day I found

myself sharing this apartment in the Marina. The apartment has a view of the bridge, the bay and the northern hills, but tonight it has no view whatsoever. The blinds are closed, the lights turned off. I am huddled in the bathroom with pad and pencil. Someone must have the complete story.

I wouldn't say that I'm a person susceptible to bouts of depression, no. that is not me at all. I'm a stoic, solid and strong and able to endure. I would suggest this is an inherited trait, but at this writing my full lineage is unclear. I do not cry and I rarely show emotion. This I am sure will count in my behalf at the trial. Once depression does find its way inside my little world, however, it is locked there for days and days and days. Forgive me this, I know it's weak, nevertheless, a fact, a fact that Sheila could never understand, never accept and never dismiss. I will never be truly happy because of this depression. There is so much it touches upon--so much of it I don't understand myself. Sheila says that is ridiculous. If that were the case, she says, "We'd all be slaves. We must reason everything out. Everything has a reasonableness." But Sheila, at this writing, is unable to explain a thing. By the way, her real name is not Sheila Martin. My attorney thought it wise not to be explicit. He says that what's been written is not directly admissible evidence.

He has given wise counsel. Though I am a murderer--I have confessed here in this notebook (if you can believe the word of a murderer) and the facts are beyond doubt. My attorney

seems to think that complicated issues are involved. He says I may be vindicated. He says, "We don't know at this juncture, whether the state even has..." A legal phrase he uses here. I have forgotten the exact word, but yes, it sounds plausible.

Perhaps I am in love with Sheila still. Perhaps I am in love only with the idea of belonging to someone. Sheila wanted me to belong and honestly, here I am not lying. At times with Sheila I felt this city was the Garden of Eden. But Eve could not sit still in our apartment. She was lonely even with me. We used to walk by the seawall. Do you know the sound the waves make breaking gently? That is not the sound I hear in my sleep. I sleep so infrequently. My attorney interrupts what little sleep I do get with bothersome phone calls, asking me this and demanding I be certain of that, that I be exact, specific. I do not care about the trial. I tell him that this is being written down in detail, a De Profundis, and that he can read it in court if he likes. For me the case is anticlimactic.

"Life without parole is anticlimactic," he says and gets down to business. At night, usually right after dinner, Sheila and I sat at the table and talked. "About what?" he wants to know. She would have tea prepared. About life. "What about life?" he demands. We'd talk about the causes of depression. It was often unpleasant. I'd refuse to go into some things with her pleading immaculate conception. We'd shout. I'd try to make up. "Was it always you who tried to make up?"

Didn't she ever try?" No, it was always me. I was struggling, don't you see? I was struggling for my life. She wanted to end us. That scared me. Later we'd go to the bistro.

For Sheila the bistro was a release, a release from the problems of people she had counseled during the day and a release from me as well. It is difficult to think of myself as a burden, but that is me. For me the bistro was a cage, a cage trampled with insistent feet and boiling with cagey smiles. I forgive Sheila for taking me there. I am still in love. I know what the reader is thinking, that I am making a case for justifiable homicide. Not so. Yes, I would say Sheila deserved killing and perhaps I will say this on the witness stand. Sheila deserved killing! Not exactly a stroke of genius on my part and surely a stroke for my attorney. True, she helped me dearly, like a mother, yet I realize now that I was no more than her experiment, her laboratory animal, someone in whom her will could work itself out.

Nine p.m. is a difficult hour. My lawyer calls at nine. He has been appointed by the court because I am unable to defend myself. He is condescending, constantly challenging me. We go over the issues.

"I need to know," he always begins, as if everything I say will add a new dimension to the case. Our talks drag on for hours and in the end he knows nothing new. Sheila Martin has been shot to death. I am being held in lieu of one hundred thousand bond, charged with her murder.

"Absurd, a miscarriage of justice if ever there was one," he says. "Sheila Martin has had two abortions. I would like to go into this area a little deeper to shed light on her character. It could prove critical. You were aware she aborted twice?"

Incredible, my lawyer will attempt to drag this into it. Inwardly I believe he is a fool, the case lost. Of course, I knew she aborted. Now I will say what transpired between Sheila and myself that resulted in her death. Murder is murder, plain and simple. But not so simple. This murder was my own death.

"You are a shit." That is what Sheila would say to me on nights I refused to go out. On those nights I made it miserable for her. She would storm off to the bistro all the same. Did she have a right to do that?

"Right? What are you talking about, right?" my attorney asks. "You weren't even..."

Even what? I challenge him. Even what?

"Names," he says. "I need names of people she saw on those nights, specifically men."

I neither care about names or about what they will reveal, or about what my attorney is trying to do for me. I am deeply depressed over Sheila's death. I want to be left alone. Depression is almost comic. I have told Sheila this many times during our talks at the table. The comedy at the bistro was certainly depressing; still, we continued to go. Sometimes

at night the music kept me from sleeping. It was not at all like the waves lapping the seawall. It was cheap music. It cheapened us. After three months of living together I begged Sheila to leave the city with me. She said it was impossible, that she still hadn't made a final decision to stay with me. I'm making strides, I told her and so I waited and I endured.

"You want, you want, you want," she would say. "Don't you ever consider what I want?"

What do you want? I asked.

"Time. You're not exactly open with me," she'd scream. "You're leaving things out. You are changing my life, my life!"

After dinner two weeks ago Sheila and I took a walk. We walked through the marina along the maze of floating docks. We sat down and dipped our feet in the warm water. Sheila has long slender legs. Forgive me for injecting this but it is a part of her that holds men's fascination. Long slender legs that move so seductively. I have seen men's eyes. Were I a stronger individual she would give in, I know it. She is in love with me. Suddenly, in a strange voice she asked, "Why should I stay with you any longer?" It was funny, we were sitting by the water, lovers to anyone passing by, and she asked me that. I said she should stay with me because without me there would be absolutely no difference between her and her patients. Besides, think of me. I can't live without you. She told me that I had to go. She would

miss me but it couldn't work out. She said, of course, I was more important than the others; I was more of a mystery, and I was a part of her too. But I don't consider myself a part of Sheila anymore. I have the upper hand.

"It's over," she said sharply. "That's as simple as I can put it." She lifted her legs out of the water.

How can she think it's over? I cringed with the thought. There is the possibility, I remember thinking at that moment, she will desert me forever. And that is when I became resolved. We would not go our separate ways. Now there is a good possibility I may never go free.

From the marina we walked in silence to the bistro. The bistro was inevitably the same, same people, same drinks, same cagey smiles. I have named some of the people who work at the bistro and my attorney has questioned them. They have described Sheila as a "fun-loving girl, real pretty, having a good time." And me they have slandered as a "waste of time; depressing to look at." "They are of no help," says my attorney. "We must look elsewhere." They are not far off the mark, I have told him. Because of me people sometimes cast cruel looks at Sheila. But outside the bistro I was hardly a waste of time. Sheila needed my love. My attorney scribbles this all down in a notebook of his own.

At the table inside I asked Sheila again would she leave with me, get out of here for good. She said no, we were through. I sank back hopelessly into depression. She did not want to

talk to me again.

Sheila loved me. I will never believe otherwise. She was, however, embarrassed by my condition, my dependency on her. If she had precious little to give other than good counsel, and my attorney questions this, I would still love her. Asking her to leave the city may have been premature. It suggested to her that I was about to change her life dramatically. Our relationship ended in that fashion. Her mind was made up.

The bistro was jumping as usual. Coming into the downstairs bar with its cheap, red checkered tablecloths and cabaret atmosphere after watching a beautiful sunset didn't exactly lift my spirits. Thinking back on what the bartenders and barmaids have said about me, I wonder if they noticed anything unusual that night. Was I looking doubly depressing? Did Sheila seem gayer than normal? I probably should have shot them instead, but that is not the way it happened.

But as of yet, I realize, I haven't told you the cause of my depression, which Sheila has been treating because, as she says, I am a proving ground for her type of therapy. And it is essential you know. Doctors have told us repeatedly it is a condition I have to live with. The decision is hers. This special therapy of hers applies to unwed mothers. You see, the psychologist is thinking of aborting me. I wish I were lying, but this is the truth as only I know it. So trying to lift my spirits in this gloomy cafe, I asked Sheila

if she would dance.

"We dance enough at home, Michael," she said. Inadvertently I have allowed my name to be mentioned. My attorney will be furious, yet he is the first to admit that this piece of evidence, my name, is potentially explosive. Premeditated murder? Undaunted by her refusal I literally kicked Sheila out of her seat. In the process she lost a sandal. We began rocking back and forth to piano music coming from somewhere near the wall. I paid no attention to her other partner. Sheila was as rigid as a board and her eyes were little balls of rage, but she softened. She softened not because I was irate but rather because she loved me. I was honestly becoming the boundary between her and her patients, a scary line to cross for a psychologist, I suppose. Once you lose certain rational functions then everything is simplified. Sheila saw this type of thing in her patients every day. She understood how to cope with irrationality, so that is another possible explanation to why she softened. But the real reason why she softened had to do with her dancing partner, a strong, solid looking man, who just happened to be an ex-patient. I said to her, now we have to go away. She seemed most attentive. I was determined and what I said made good sense. Her dancing partner was quite worked up. We have to go away now, I whispered again. We fit together so perfectly that it was impossible for me to conceive of us ever breaking apart, yet that night I felt every inch of Sheila pulling away, pulling

away from me, from him, from herself.

I will concede the truth. I still love her dearly. But love makes demands. That night I demanded Sheila come away with me. The man holding her demanded she leave with him. I insisted in a voice she had never heard. He persisted.

"Michael, you were a mistake," she cried. "I'm sorry." Sheila said this to me, her baby. "You were a mistake. I'm sorry."

That's not so, I said and pressed close to her, talking more determinedly. Do not think that at this point she broke from me and ran. Do not think that as she ran I pulled a revolver and shot one, two, three. At that point I had no gun and I was pressed between two bodies. And at that point I believed in rationality. This man was frightening her. I pressed on with my argument. I asked Sheila to love me. That's right. I said, like any determined fool, Sheila I want you to love me because I will die if you don't.

At this point Sheila broke. She ran from both of us. She ran to the table and grabbed her purse, then ran to the door, but too many people were pouring into the bistro for her to squeeze out. She ran to the lady's room. Minutes later she emerged with a friend. She looked pale; I could feel my own heart beat. It was weak. Together they walked across the floor followed by her ex-patient. They sat with this other girl's friends, a man in his late thirties, bearded Bohemian, and with another man, big but indistinguishable in

the dark corner. It was at this point that I slipped away. Now I was looking for something that would convince her I meant business, something visible. I would not be like all the rest, her others.

Now I have a gun. I will not bother to tell you where I got it or how much I paid or even the model. That will all come out, my attorney tells me, via the prosecutor and far be it from me to spoil his day in court. He will tell you that three shots were fired. The first entered Sheila Martin's handbag and was later removed by the crime lab from the floor of the bistro. The second shot--I can hear him clear his throat, a low voice inflected and grave--shattered the left leg of Sheila Martin's chair.

The third shot, I swear, I had nothing to do with. In the struggle for the gun between the hairy faced Bohemian and the ex-patient, one of them bent back my fingers to the breaking point and pried the gun from my hand. I had no intention of firing again, but in the confusion the ex-patient tripped and fell backwards over the table. The gun went off. I saw Sheila clutching her stomach. Already I was a bloody mess.

My attorney will explain all this. No, he will do nothing of the sort. I have no attorney. How could this be in court if the killing took place only last night? Indeed, this whole script has been a ploy, written not by me but by my love. By the dusk light at her kitchen table, grappling with depression, Sheila is reading these notes. Of all the

things that strike at the heart of this woman I am glad I am the dearest. She has admitted as much. Sheila is reading the script at this very moment, seated at the dinner table at our nightly session. She has just taken a sip of tea and glanced at me. I can tell she is amused, possibly beginning to feel the excitement of love. Some of the things I've told her are quite true. This city does frighten me. I do become deeply depressed that our relationship is still tentative. Lying does excite me. Perhaps it is an inherited trait. The inheritance question must be discussed, but at a later date. I would like to move from the city and I will continue trying to convince her that such a move would be in both our best interests. The bistro must cease. It is killing me. Sheila is very much alive. How could I ever hurt you? And you would never try to leave me again. Would you. Would you?

AUNT ROSE

Of all the members of my family, many of whom I've traced northward from the Housatonic into the Totoket Mountains or the Guilford Lakes, and from those raw sanctuaries into the Berkshires or Pinkham Notch, I remember one trait: longevity. I think first of my father who still works, though he is well past the age of retirement, well into his nineties, and I think of Aunt Rose. Aunt Rose of the willows and candies, the small, white-haired apparition beneath the midnight sailor--the straw hat she wore on simmering days in August. The woman of the window where on holy mornings which came diaphonous, she counted the starlings and crows, the bluebirds and robins...even the blackbirds who didn't deserve counting because they were so many, and so black and because they never took flight when she rapped her ring finger against the glass. Aunt Rose of the bedroom who was given a comfortable rocking chair and a queen size bed on which she left the one small impression we have of her, a nuance in the mattress.

We lived by a river that locked tight in winter a world of windy hillsides, scaled and contoured by people like my father; I have no one word that describes him, merely an impression like that of the river which after a long freeze, in April formed rapids. Five stones and a plank spanned it in

August, when I fished for suckers and brown trout in clam-diggers, or crossed into the cow-pasture with its wild fruit trees and mountain laurel. A maple and an ashe fronted the river at the end of our yard and what morning light reached the house, a willow difused through its waxy, transluscent leaves. The willow gave us lady bugs and spiders--illomened widows, whose home uprooted in rain. Since our willow was a big one--split into three trunks and carrying one dead enormous bough--and since Aunt Rose's bedroom came closer to this tree than any other part of the house, she had on occasion seen its wild, hellish genuflections during the height of a storm. Storms came in September and left the sky pink and scarlet and Rose's window flecked with leaves. For Rose there were two seasons: the time warm enough to go outdoors and the time that was not. But on sun drenched days in winter, the calendar forgotten, we found her snowbound with garbage bag, a confused and mistrustful turn in her face. For those sojourns she wrapt herself in a blue overcoat and pulled on galloshes and with a shepard's sense of direction set out. The winter sun and barren trees stenciled a landscape silent and bright onto the snow. Rose, a stained glass figure, Our Lady of the Cornice, carried our trash in a five gallon bag toward some bridge in her life. But mostly I think of Rose in summer--Rose of the lawn.

We were inland people, not the crass, barefooted malnourished, but cartographers and painters. Though we lived by a river and had watched it swell and eddy and had seen four Guardsmen survey and estimate foot by foot, hour by hour,

the height of that swell, had Rose been living with us, she would have sat up playing trump cards one after another, sipping tea and taking the occasional chocolate, as calm as the eye of the storm. Uncle Dick, Rose's husband, was a big man, tall and slender with long, long legs and a bald head and a face remarkably expressive. They lived in Woodmont in a house on the shore. An old house, it seemed anxious to topple or collapse three floors into the basement. The shingles were bleached and alligatored and forever blowing off. At low tide the shore became a paste of avocado skins--muscles, clams, crabshells and smooth stones stuck in the hard muck, a wash of sea mucous, treacherous even in sneakers. A breeze blew through the house continually and I remember the sound of the typewriter Uncle Dick wrote at being loud and rhythmical. He typed wearing shorts, his skinny legs with bleached white hair forming perfect ninety degree angles to the table. The same white, wiry hair on his chest made him look primitive below the razor line on his neck. He stayed sunburned all summer, regardless of Rose's lotions and yelped like a whipped victim when we took showers together, dancing on slate tiles at the back of the house. His column, he said, circulated to an illiterate audience and his writing was or was not, depending on how he felt each afternoon, satirical. Look, he would say to my father while they watched the family sun bathing on the raft or jackknifing off the high-board, I say what a lot of people feel. My father, noncommittal, the map-maker would smile and cross his legs, the way a child crosses fingers.

What feeling's that, Dick? Just this. And Dick and my father would exchange glances for eternity, or at least the time a tide took to turn a raft one hundred and eighty degrees. Long summers turning clockwise beneath a confusing sun, endless summers rafting off the coast of Woodmont with Rose.

Hilda was a tropical depression that worked her way north. I have pictures of what she did to bridges spanning the Housatonic, what she did with steel girders at Drexel's marina, downtown department stores, fruit stands, bus stations and cococos. Nothing like a good black and white storm, a squadron of National Guardsmen, dull, slow alarmists piling sand on the ocean's floor. When the water descended, our garbage cans were a foot closer to the river. The willow was scarred and several branches lay on the ground. But the sky didn't color nearly as providentially here as it did at the shore. Ripples of scarlet and indigo, the antithesis of depression, emblazoned the sky. Vacant lots braided with Hilda's loose edges, telephone wires running through hedges and a dismantled section of raft garnered the block. The wind blew in gusts off the water. Everybody walked for days and days after Hilda, walked like common sea swallows picking through debris between the jetty and the fort. And walked back again, empty handed, a procession of mourners in windbreakers. We're coming, they seemed to say and heads bent, hands pocketed, the very penitent approached the ocean. The waves were shell-hard and cold. A definite sense of roundness shaped the world. A sailboat ran windward with the clouds. After such a storm

Colombus set out. My father, the old stancher, turned sharply and paced off the distance to the house. Sixty five feet. Further down the beach, neighbors cleared timbers from gable walls and patched roofs with tarplins. The clatter of hammers carried for miles and on into the dark. We climbed into the foundation through the front wall, the ruins at Mt. Parnasus, if a typewriter is evidence enough for that. No, said my father. Dick was a hack. He was an honestly misdirected man and saying as much in his column. That's why Rose has no alternatives. If you remember anything, remember to save.

That November Rose sold what was left of their property and came to live with us, and like the baggage or jetsam after a disaster, as bouyant as a hat box, she pretended that things would get better. She kept our house immaculate: the rugs vacuumed, the pictures and paintings dusted and in later years, the corners of the ceilings broomed. She picked threads off everything. Aunt Rose with eyes forged like diamonds beneath the fading tan of a wrinkled brow, gazed out her bedroom window. Say a prayer for me, she would say. No one will care when I'm gone. That winter the wind blew continuously; one rogue wind chased another. That winter there was speculation about the Hudson Bay, the Westerlies, the Gulf current, why the wallpaper in Rose's room should be changed, and politics, salesmanship, religious convictions and bitter coffee. I liked bitter coffee then. That winter Rose tossed heels of bread from her bedroom window to the crows and marked in pencil on the calendar beside her dresser, the temperature,

the cloud cover and the amount of snow that fell while she counted the days till summer. During her first few years with us Rose enjoyed, during warm weather, the mile and a half walk to town. Tea and toast and she was off, heavily wrapped, a careworn figure along the shaded route. She visited town twice a week for a permanent or to shop and bought a hat every month, usually a straw hat with a ribbon stapled to the brim. She came home with bags of carmel candy with sugar centers, which were not whiter than her hair. Rose entered the driveway, ankles canted slightly out, wearing a soft, anesthetic smile made gooey with carmel that was melting in her bag and sporting the newest hat, a concession to some saleswoman who swore they'd make her feel more alive. Rose wore silky blouses with padded shoulders. Maybe they reminded Rose of herself at twenty, the feminine elopement simply because Dick insisted he loved her for the way she walked. Silk because she thought of herself more and more in those terms now that he was gone. Once into the yard she removed the hat and dropped the bag. She pulled off both shoes and lifted her legs straight out and pointed her feet toward the river, toes exercising, as if to feel the same breeze that blew off the water in Woodmont. Nothing like a late afternoon in Bristol: the grass dry, the birds dulcet. Some days the sprinkler spun a carrousel of water in a six foot arc. Usually Rose said nothing while we watched cows graze on the opposite bank. She sat facing the river in the lawn chair my parents bought her, one with an attachable

tray, on which she kept a glass of lemonade and her spectacles--an old lady dreaming about the shore while she watched the river run through its summer course. You'll be old some day, Rose would whisper. By twilight when the white moths gathered in pockets beneath the porch lamp, Rose was ankle deep in tidal flat, her imagination and memory back in 1924. An evening sky above the cove, row boats lashed to mooring posts, Rose and Dick raking oysters from the brackish mud. In our yard fireflies caught fire and hovered waist high between the maple and ashe, fuses melting. We played Hearts in the evening, never poker or war, and Rose seldom spoke between carmels. We played till eleven when the frogs and crickets grew louder than the card snapped from the deck, louder than the television chanting inside. Most often we played until the porch light flicked off and on, or my mother opened and closed the blinds with uncharacteristic theatrics, something Rose may once have done with her. You'll never make a card player, Rose would say and hand the deck to me. Rose proved the exception to our family's line of longevity. She never had the constitution for loneliness and in a sense, she would not have gained from the experience.

August's heat began in the Gulf. We'd given up playing cards for badminton and badminton for croquet--knocking lathed balls through wickets that reached all corners of the yard. Mother's green sends Rose's blue from rhododendron to the palisades, the high ground above the river where the fourth wicket stood. Green sends my yellow to the fence. Let your

Aunt Rose hit the ball she wants to hit, my mother would say. Don't confuse her. Heat lightning forked night after night and knats and mosquitos roiled the humid air. Around the course we went like cannibals, desiring only swifter retribution or more contestants. Games, night after night until one night we stopped. Point blank my father told my mother he wanted to send Rose the mile and a half to the town's nursing home. He spoke in a patient voice, the voice he used even when angry and turned his mallet like an umbrella that lay across his shoulder. This is that portrait: growing darkness; the subjects, my mother and father appear in profile--angular lines against a dark gray house, lines that work not so much in harmony as in collusion. He said this loud enough for Rose to hear. Rose, head bent and hitting looked up.

In September rain storms became more and more frequent. Rose's jaunts to town ceased. That year Heather worked her way north, in and out of every jog in the coast, sixty miles inland at points. Again the river climbed and the willow stretched and in the morning I inspected the damage. Rose, in blue bathrobe, hands clasped, hair uncombed watched from her window. Slender willow branches hung from the gutter, the same abrupt arc a trout registers on a fishing pole. They formed a blind against the window, a kind of filter through which she stared. Though she saw the broken limbs and toppled garbage cans, the disjointed fence and ecstatic robins jerking roundworms from the soil, Rose also saw the moorings disappear and the high points of the jetty go under and appreciated her

own situation now in those same terms. Across the muddy river cows trudged through dormant berry bushes, their presence to Rose inflected and blurred, like the passing of fall. Living as she did on the cusp of the automobile age, Rose never learned to drive. Occasionally, relatives would visit. They came to comfort and console Rose, and too, out of a sense of guilt because somebody had to take their sister and they refused. Teddy Cunningham, my mother's youngest brother, came alone. He drove into the driveway backwards and edged the tail lights of his Falcoln up to the garage door. He came to the front steps and knocked in two rapid bursts of two. Wait until he knocks again, my father would say, holding my arm as if wielding a lead pipe. Resentment towards Teddy became my father's long suit. Rose adored Teddy. As for the others, four brothers and three sisters, including my mother, Rose met them in the living room where they entertained her with dull, vapid conversation, which Rose was later to use among the birds. They seemed suitably dull and void and pleased with Rose's constitution. They asked about her diet--questions my mother fielded--her exercise--croquet and badminton, said my father. They disapproved unanimously when informed that Rose walked to town, but they confirmed her good judgment not to over-do things. Rose spoke excathedra across the dinner table to these unwelcome aunts and irrelevant uncles, while my parents exchanged embarrassed glances. But Teddy visited by himself and without warning. He arrived like a meter-man and left just as suddenly. He never sat with us in reflective analysis, whispering "She's

slipping," as the rest of them did. And when the door to his car closed, my mother edged between the curtains seething with hate and envy. Everyone except Ted offered to take Rose for a week during summer, but that was as definite as plans became.

From her rocking chair Rose lamented. She had no patience anymore for cards or consolation or the wallpaper which multiplied white sailed skiffs caught in the doldrums. Every night she read obituaries, read them aloud. Outside her window the snow piled up. Why doesn't He take me, she would ask. Coming across the frozen river, sleds carrying their little sisters, a parade of ear-muffled, mittened revelers paused. They were silhouettes out there against the snow and the trees, studying another silhouette inside a pale back room--mute carollers, conscious of silence and cold. They lingered until Rose rapped the window, then free arms swinging, scarves and sleds trailing, late for dinner they headed home. Never get old, Rose would say, and turning back to her paper, nobody wants you when you're old. That winter Rose turned seventy. Visitors were infrequent--the high tide of sympathy receding. She seldom left her bedroom and rarely went outdoors, though blind exits with a garbage bag still occluded. Let her go, said my father one morning, that's what I ought to do. He laced his shoes, slipped on a coat and stepped into the yard. The back door cracked shut, but not before a cold blast raced through the kitchen. Her face was blue by the time they returned. Rose wore a bathrobe under her coat and no gloves protected her hands. The impulse that nearly killed her, she rationalized away. She

had managed as far as the willow tree to stay on the path, but there it forked and she strayed. My father caught her in the triangle of unbroken snow, shin deep and drifting into her unzipped galloshes. By the time Rose reached seventy, she was beyond asking anyone to pray for her and beyond caring if anyone cared when she was gone.

Winter died in the latter weeks of April. The yard turned emerald green and dandelions populated every square inch of it by June. I trapped bees in Skippy jars and punctured holes in the lid so they could breathe, but not big holes. A file pokes a ragged bird's beak through aluminum, an intrusion of consequence for a bee and one that Rose refused to put her eye to. I brought the bees to Rose and she lifted the window and released them into our laboratory, the vertical space between screen and glass. Some bees we watched exhaust themselves. Some vanished into the upper reaches or exited forthright out of the jar. These flew headlong at our faces and on one occasion Rose was stung. More often than not wasps entered through a tear in the screen. Warlike and in full regalia they strutted up and across the window, dragging transparent wings behind them, a masquerade of countless dukes. More often than not they received the blunt back of a book when they stood between Rose and feeding her birds. As round-bodied and decorous as the bees we examined, that was my impression of Rose.