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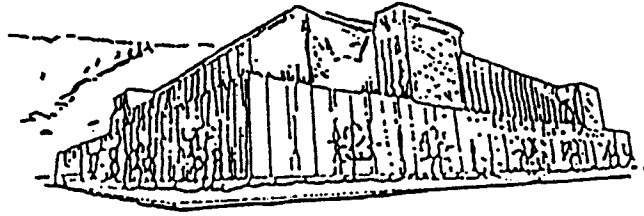
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Six Short Stories

by

Jack Thorndike

B.A. Tulane University, 1979

M.S. Villanova University, 1984

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

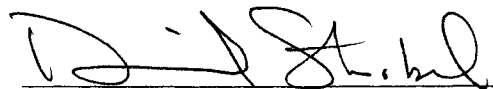
Master of Fine Arts

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1995

Approved by :


Committee Chair


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Creative Writing

Six Short Stories (81 pp.)

Director : Bill Kittredge



The stories examine characters at a critical stage of their lives. Characters in each of the stories serve as meeting points for the collision of life forces in the standard short story form. The setting for the stories follows a circuit from the East Coast, to California, to Montana, and back to the East Coast.

Table of Contents

1.Opening Day
8.Vacationland
31.Ramsey
45.Choosing Sides
52.Empties
60.Catacombs

Opening Day

- Jack Thorndike -

Bill and his friend, Robbie Whitcom, bounced along in the front seat of the Bronco. Gravel kicked against the floor of the truck as Robbie's father jammed it into four-wheel drive and gassed it up the steep, rutted dirt road through the woods. The leaves had long since fallen and the night's freeze left brittle panes of ice at the edges of the puddles in the wheel ruts.

The Bronco lurched to the side as it fell into soft gravel which collapsed under the weight.

"Dammit!" Mr. Whitcom cranked the wheel to the right and feathered the clutch. The boys' heads were thrown back when the shaking truck reached solid ground and heaved forward. The transmission continued its grinding wail as they climbed past bare maples and dense patches of pine.

"We won't do any hunting if we can't get to the cabin," Mr. Whitcom said, his mouth grim with concentration.

"That's okay, Dad," Robbie said. "We could walk."

"Nah, we don't want to do that. "The truck crested the hill, Mr. Whitcom shoved it into a higher gear, then downshifted again as the climb continued. "It's a good three miles to the cabin. Anyway, we can't show our guest a good time if we wear him out with a long hike before we even get there."

Bill squirmed in his seat. "I don't mind walking," he said.

"We'll be doing plenty of that tomorrow, Bill," Mr. Whitcom said to him, then turned quickly to the windshield.

"Shit!"

The Bronco swerved and went up on the embankment, narrowly missing a battered, blue pickup skidding down the hill, a dead deer tied over its hood. The deer's head dipped lazily to the side as the truck jounced through a rut. In the next second the truck was gone, leaving a spray of wet sand and gravel. The driver didn't glance at them.

"Goddamn rednecks," Mr. Whitcom cursed at the windshield. "They come up here shooting before the season starts." He spat out the open window.

"Maybe he didn't know opening day is tomorrow," Robbie said.

"They know it is. They just want to bag a few before the working people get up here. Good thing there aren't more of them, or all the deer would be scared up into the hills." Mr. Whitcom glanced over at the boys. "That's what it's like after the season's been going for a couple of weeks. The game moves up into the mountains and you can't get at them so easy. That's

why we're getting an early start."

The Bronco climbed until it rounded a sharp bend on the side of a hill and descended a valley to the lake.

The sun sank behind a looming overcast as they pulled up to the Whitcom's cabin. After helping bring in the last of the groceries Bill walked out on the porch and saw Mr. Whitcom talking to a man dressed in camouflage.

"You like working for Townsend?" the man was asking. "Or what?"

"He's okay." Mr. Whitcom put his foot on the bumper. "I'm the foreman, so he's pretty straight with me, at least."

"Yeah," the man said. "I heard about that accident last week where a man was crippled."

"No, he lost his arm," Mr. Whitcom said.

"So he's crippled," the man said.

Mr. Whitcom was quiet for a moment. "That's Townsend's kid inside. Goes to school with my boy." He turned around and saw Bill on the porch. Then he slowly turned back and asked, "So, what's your line of work?"

Bill turned around and went into the cabin where he nearly walked into Robbie in the dim light.

"Come on, I'll show you the lake," Robbie said as they jumped off the porch.

"You have boats here?"

"Not now--they're put away for the winter. You ever done water skiing?"

"Now listen closely, because I'm only going over this once." Mr. Whitcom leaned over at Robbie and Bill across the long, rough table. His face was half-shadowed from the single, overhead bulb.

"Tomorrow we're going to walk very quietly, straight through the woods, parallel to each other." He took a mouthful of canned beans and some beer.

"Now, this isn't like shooting at bottles." He turned to Bill. "Don't worry, you'll do all right. Did you ever shoot at anything before, Bill?"

"I shot skeet with my dad at our summer house once," he said sitting back a little.

"Uh huh." Mr. Whitcom looked at Bill. "What else do you people do down at Mare's Beach all summer?"

Bill pushed his beans around on the plate.

"I don't know. Sailing. Tennis lessons and stuff."

"Well, now you're getting a hunting lesson. Who knows? Maybe you'll kill a buck. You remember when I got that eight-pointer last year, Robbie?"

"Yeah," Robbie said eagerly. "Bill, you saw the antlers on the den wall, right?"

Bill nodded.

"So anyway, where was I? Oh, so we're walking parallel through the

woods. No matter what you do, only shoot in front of you. You shoot to the side you might hit someone else." He took another swallow of beer and a mouthful of bread. "Hey Bill, you know what your dad was telling me the other day? He said he never went hunting. Not once."

"I, guess so."

"I don't know how he's going to teach you to be a man if he doesn't take you hunting."

Bill didn't say anything.

"You've got to be a man if you're going to run a paper mill, tell all those other men what to do."

Robbie looked uncertainly at Bill who said nothing.

"Right Billy?", said Mr. Whitcom.

"I haven't thought about it," Bill said.

"Anyways, I'm not worried." He took another slug of beer. "More beans, Bill?"

"No thanks," he mumbled.

"Can I have some, Dad?"

"Sure, they're right on the stove. So where was I?" He pushed his chair back from the table. "Oh, yeah. So if we flush out a doe and its fawn, make sure you shoot for the mother first. It will be easier to hit the fawn because they don't move as fast, but if you get the doe then you have a better chance of getting both."

Bill thought of a truck that he'd seen in town last fall. The driver had killed a doe and its fawn, but rather than tying one to each side of his hood, he had tied the bodies together, each with its face in the groin of the other. As he fell asleep that night Bill thought of how every fall deer corpses suddenly appeared in town loaded onto vehicles. Legs jutted out of loaded-down sedan trunks and carcasses were bound to the roofs of muddied jeeps and pickups. It put him in mind of some disorganized, never-ending funeral parade.

Bill awoke with a start as light from the waning full moon poured through the window onto his cot. He dressed silently and let himself out of the cabin. The lake lay still and black, rimmed by the forest which had a depth he never saw under daylight. Bill walked around the porch and climbed quietly into the motorboat that was up on a trailer beside the cabin. He searched furtively amid the tangle of summer's fishing gear and life jackets until he found the compressed air horn, and put it in his pocket. He took the lid from a metal trashcan outside the neighboring cabin and started along the trail that skirted the lake and ascended into the hills.

When he reached the gap in the ridge Bill stopped to look out onto the broad, roadless valley. After walking a few yards he pulled the air horn from the pocket of his wool jacket. The cold made his fingers sluggish and he worked to pull the plastic band from the new horn. Bill raised it above his head and pushed the button. The echo of its loud, mechanical bleat ran through

the air cradled in the valley.

He heard a crashing in the woods not twenty feet away and the snorting warning cry of the deer bounding away from him. He saw three or four white tails, blue dashes in the moonlight, rhythmically switching back and forth as if following the leaping paths of the deer. Bill picked up a heavy stick and, with the moon at his back, beat the lid of the garbage can with an insistent rhythm as he ran down into the valley, stopping every few minutes to blow the horn.

Vacationland

- Jack Thorndike -

I was always wary around late summer after that. Lisa and I met at the Tamarack Playhouse, a little a summer-stock theater in the flat nowhere-land of southern Maine, way off the interstate and far from anyplace you'd think of being. I had just finished a punch-clock teaching job at UNH lecturing dozing frat boys and was burning time until my gig with the house jazz band at the Ramada Inn down on Route 9, in Mass. It was known as the blue-hair show and I took the job to pay my bills for a while. I wouldn't want to get stuck there. The Tamarack would be a fun little place to hang out until September, no complications, no regrets.

The theater was made out of an old barn, with corn fields all around, and salvaged movie house seats with cracked leather. In the afternoon swallows flashed through shafts of sunlight as they pitched and turned in the space under the high rafters.

The cast was a mix of pros up from New York, local drama teachers, and some college kids. There were six of us in the orchestra and we came

from all over. The company cranked through musicals like *Annie* and *The Man of LaMancha*, rehearsing one show while another was still running.

Lisa made her entrance at the Tamarack during our first rehearsal for *The Sound of Music*, in a rough auditorium, three stories up, on the top floor of a red clapboard Grange hall. Green light shone off the leaves through tall, severe windows in the mansard roof. It was the last show of the year.

When Lisa asked for the director I pointed my bow distractedly over to a clutch of actors and said, "Guy with the beard."

But we all paused long enough to watch her stride across the rough planked floor. Matt the drummer did a little roll, hit a cymbal, and pointed his stick at her. The sax player, a tall, hulking guy with a thin beard, worked his fingers over the valves in an agitated cascade of soft thumping and popping sounds.

"All right, gentlemen," I said. "We play serious music. Am I right?"

Lisa already had the songs down, and we all noticed when her voice rang out in the practice room. It was round and clear like a struck crystal bowl. But from a small center, like emanating from an abstracted point. Give me a fulcrum, I thought, then just watch me.

"And this is Phil," Stefan said after rehearsal. "He's the *basso profundo*."

I shook Lisa's hand. It had a firmness and a certainty all its own. "And

your name?"

"You don't have to worry about men who play large instruments," Stefan said, eyeing my bass. "They're usually compensating for the size of something else, I won't say what. Isn't that right, Phil?"

"Tell me her name, Stefan."

He took her arm. "Max und Elsa," he said with a thick German accent. Those were the characters' names.

"I can read the program, Stefan."

She smiled and said, "It's Lisa. I play Elsa. The loose woman."

Stefan's lover, Arch, appeared at his side and took his arm saying, "Und Herr Zeller: Gestapo officer."

"As if there aren't enough Nazis around here," I said.

Arch disengaged and leaned his cool, angular frame against the piano.

"Play us a number, music man."

He was tall and thin, with a little moustache and sad eyes that declined to join in when he smiled. I laid my bass down and sat at the piano. All of us agreed that this was very cozy and then we did a Thelonious Monk version of the theme song.

The hills

bang bang bang

Are alive

bang bang bang

With the sound of music.

a long run down to the E, then the E flat.

I stood and we took a bow to the laughing applause of the few people

standing around.

"That Monk's a real crowd pleaser," I said.

"He's so modest." said Stefan. "Really, he went off key all by himself."

The summer's first bloom of excitement had softened into a weary, end-of-the-party still life when Lisa came in, oblivious of the seasons. Just from talking to her I felt she'd have a solid, almost mineral permanence, whether in rainstorms, damp heat, or crusted late winter snow--always the same.

During breaks the cast escaped the stifling rehearsal room, filing down the Grange hall's steep, dusty-smelling stairwell. On the front steps, Stefan had a captive audience.

He was talking about people's entrances, declaiming from the lawn.

"Him, he fills up the stage. Her, she could be on Mars."

When Lisa sat in front of me a gap opened between her jeans and her white t-shirt. Just a sliver of skin between two cotton curves. I imagined it was probably warm, like marble sitting all morning in the sun and cool air.

"Your entrance, on the other hand," Stefan said to her, and took a drag on his cigarette, "is like merging on the Cross-Bronx Expressway. All the crunching and grinding, you know."

"You see," he sidled up to her, "you don't just plop yourself into the score. You've got to pluck that note out of thin air." He mimed snatching a slow-flying insect with his thumb and forefinger.

"Thanks, but my friend here, is going to help me out with the pitch." Lisa patted my black canvas hi-top and looked back me. "Isn't that what you said?"

"The Enforcer," said Arch.

"Sure, I'll slip you a note."

"He's going to slip her a note," Stefan said laughing. "That's good. Remember that, Arch."

She leaned her back against my legs and said, "Slip me a note, bass-man."

I laughed with the others. Somebody said, Make sure you're playing on the right bar, and another said, No, the right staff. *Molto allegro*, Stefan said in a deep Italian accent, spreading his arms.

We handily finished up *The Man of LaMancha* and swung right into *The Sound*, which came together smoothly except for the nuns' chorus. Beverly rendered an imposing grey-blond Mother Abbess figure as she herded the four high school girls cast in unlikely roles as nuns. They were just coming out of the whispery-giggling age and a charge of sensual electricity jumped and flickered around them. Sullen boyfriends in trucks or a muscle car constantly orbited the margins of the show.

The girls looked great in the habits they flung over their floppy tank tops and shorts. But, even with Mother Abbess gathering them around the key,

their voices slipped into discord before they made it through a single number.

On opening night a bunch of us waited for the curtain on a flatbed hay wagon behind the barn. The actors were in costume, the nuns clutched together. The New Yorkers were smoking, always smoking. Beverly strode out of the barn and rounded up her flock calling, "Nuns' conference!" and took them into the cornfield, just out of sight.

Pieces of the songs floated over the fields, and every so often the reedy sound of the pitch pipe would seep out from behind the wall of corn, followed by a swelling choir of young women's voices.

Arch and Stefan talked on about a friend of theirs and his mother. The band members gossiped about the music biz, which gave Matt the drummer another chance to talk about his two-month career as a studio musician in LA. I thought Lisa was giving me the see-you-later eyes but I couldn't be sure.

"They're full of it. Every last one of them's a two-bit bullshit artist," Matt was saying. "They're all weenies and they act like big shots."

The nuns' chorus swelled behind the rows of ripening corn. They had found their pitch together and ran toward us, past the parked cars, holding their habits rippling out behind them like wings.

We watched as they carried their note triumphantly into the theater. "You know," Lisa turned and said to me. "It would be fun to fly like that sometime, don't you think?"

The *Rochester Weekly Herald* called it "the finest dramatic production of the season." Yeah.

Every night after the show we went to the Lum's in Portsmouth. You know the scene: expanses of linoleum and orange vinyl, and Miller drafts served in the same soda-fountain glasses as the frappes. It was the only place near by where the high school kids could get in.

We'd pile into one or two of those huge, low booths, getting raucous. Stefan grabbed a piece of every conversation within earshot, leaving Arch to make ironic comments from the edges. They never sat together, but Stefan always positioned himself close, at the opposite end of Arch's table, or hung over the back of the booth from the other side.

At first I thought Arch languished in Stefan's shadow. I might have been thrown off by his mournful face. But he didn't mind lounging there while Stefan chattered away at center stage. Those two always played off one another like a team. Arch's part in *The Sound* was the Gestapo inspector and he cut a perfect slimeball figure. He'd give us this innocent-angel face and say, "For the life of me I can't understand why I keep getting cast as some bottom-feeder." But I knew it wasn't in his personality.

Lisa usually needed a ride home after we shut Lum's down since her car sat rusting on the street in front of her apartment. "It needs a new battery or something," she said.

First Stefan and Arch drove her home, then one of the nuns, but that

didn't work out. Lisa's apartment was in a shaggy factory town far from the beach, from the lakes, and from the interstate. Nobody lived close by.

After opening night, we all stood around in Lum's parking lot and she said, "Alright, who's driving me home?"

"Your turn, sport," Stefan said and clapped me across the back. He clamped my shoulder a little too long and gave me a big, fat, stage wink.

The slant-six engine ticked along the empty highway, past the yellow porch lights of cabins on the shores of black ponds in the forest. We slipped through the center of Lisa's town--quiet on a week night--and pulled to a stop in front of her apartment. The neighborhood looked worn and peaceful under street lights, and the soft ceiling of maple leaves was like cool and luminous green clouds.

She pulled her leg up on the seat and leaned back against the door. I shut the engine off. The soft planes of her face caught in the dirty glow of the dash light.

"I never played an instrument," she said. "I tried it, but I got bored, watching my fingers working along the keys." She had pulled her blond hair up and back behind her head in an arc. The curved angles of her legs in black tights lay in warm contrast to the dull vinyl seat.

"After a while you don't even think about your fingers." I said. "It's just listening to the sound and riding on it."

"For me," she paused just for a second, "there has to be something to

push against. Something so you don't just fly off into--" She laughed and brushed at the air. "You know, wherever."

"Up there. Right?" I said, pointing at the sky, but my finger bumped the roof of the car. There was a rigid network of dark holes punched into the plastic cloth.

"Exactly," she laughed. "Right there. So, you want to come in for some tea?"

Her apartment was clean but cluttered. Lisa asked if I minded watching while she watered her plants. "It's really better to do at night," she said as she tended each one. "And my roommate won't take care of these guys."

I sunk into the old couch and let myself feel the simplicity of the moment. After a bit, Lisa put on a piano sonata and sat on the couch beside me.

"Well look at this!" Stefan said. He grabbed Arch's arm and pointed in our direction. The others clustered around the hay wagon turned toward us. "They're an item."

Lisa and I walked past the parked cars in the field at the back of the barn.

"Stefan, your adolescent imagination is too much responsibility for me," Lisa said as we approached the wagon. "I'm sure I can't live up to your fantasies."

"Oh, you're doing fine," Stefan said, "just keep it up."

"We're glad to keep you entertained," I said.

"So," Arch said, "everyone's happy now."

That first week of the show Lisa and I quickly fell into a trance of domestic harmony. Whether we spent the night at her place or mine, we just had fun shopping for food or wasting time together.

After shows I'd hang out in Lisa's dressing room, sprawling on a folding chair, talking to her while she took off her stage makeup at the jerry-rigged dressing table. The dressing rooms were old horse stalls finished off with bare plywood floors and walls, and fitted with doors from demolished farm houses. Clutter accumulated in the room until it looked like her apartment--permeated with the mess of life, making a nest out of a hard place. Her scattered stuff was packed into the corners as if to keep discomfort from seeping through the cracks.

In the middle of the run, the cast got a Monday off, and I was ready to spend some time with Lisa away from the whole stagey scene.

"Hey," I said quietly as I poked my head in her door after the Sunday night show. "Let's do something extra fun tomorrow."

"Oh, hi Phillip." Lisa looked up at me in her dressing room mirror and gave a little smile. "Of course. Let me get this face off," she said, turning back to her mirror.

I told her no problem. The folding chair creaked tinnily as I reached down to pick up a copy of *Mademoiselle* splayed, face-down on top of a sweatshirt. When she pulled her chair around and faced me I felt pretty relaxed, like I belonged there. Stage makeup looks hideous close up, and I was glad it was off her.

"Okay, Phillip." She paused, looking at me, "we're not taking any of this too seriously, are we? Like, we want to keep it all easy-going, right?" I felt a thousand small pricks of heat at the back of my neck and when I stared at her she looked away. Lisa never looked away from anyone.

And 'Okay, Phillip' wasn't a thing I wanted to hear.

"Phil, it was really good. I had fun." She leaned toward me. "But I'm not ready for something serious."

"I think we have a lot of unfinished business."

"You're nice," she said and put her hand briefly on my knee, let it slide off, moved her chair aside, and sat on the floor. "I have to stretch."

Lisa always stretched out after a show. She would half groan and let out her breath, then stretch her body down one outspread leg, then the other. "We can still talk," she said from the floor. "I want it to work out."

Right. We kept talking as she lay on the floor in her tights, arching and elongating like a firm bodied sea creature on the rock she inhabits. I was the guest, not celebrated, but invited for the moment, at least.

Monday came on bright and breezy with early fallen leaves blowing across the road in front of the car. Beverly invited the cast, the band, and the production crew for brunch at her place, but she ended up with just the usual Lum's crowd. She served up great food and looked right at home outside her rented farmhouse. She had a bearing that implied a mastery of horses.

We drank Bloody Marys under an old oak in the sunny lee of the house. Gusts whipped the rasp of the summer's last cicadas from the woods and, when the wind died, the green fields threw afternoon heat in all directions. We stirred from our languor and decided it was time to head for the beach. I left my Plymouth wagon and went with Stefan, Lisa, and others in Beverly's van, while Arch drove with Sara--one of the nuns--in his and Stefan's battered two-seat Spyder with the top down. As they pulled out, Sara sang "Mandy" in a voice high, clear, and brittle, like peeling glass. We were pretty drunk by that time.

The old, familiar houses in Lisa's neighborhood looked dead in the flat afternoon light when we stopped so she could get her bathing suit. Roots of old trees buckled the sidewalk leading down to a small river beyond the factory.

Stefan and I talked about different clubs in New York while we waited for Lisa. He could drop names with the best of them: the Lush Life, the Vanguard and, of course the Blue Note. Oh, yeah, it was so great before it closed.

Inside, Lisa was probably barefoot, hopping to the side to avoid the patch where the linoleum was coming up near the kitchen door, or searching through the scarred bureau in her bedroom, yanking on the piece of knotted clothesline that stood in for a lost knob. The sun glanced off the leaves into her window. She skipped down the bright cement walk, swinging her bag of beach stuff and smiling under her sunglasses. She stepped lightly into the van, her hair brushed past me, and she flounced down into the back seat.

"I tried to get my roommate to come, but she wasn't into it," she said.

"Yes, one can have too much fun in life, especially in summer." Stefan mocked a sour face.

"She thought, maybe. Until I told her how much we've been drinking."

"What a choice, eight drunks and the beach, or an afternoon in ... where the hell are we? Sanford, Maine." Stefan lit a cigarette and threw the match out the window while Beverly started the van. "Hell of a place. Why live here?"

I said, "It doesn't seem too bad."

"Now, why do I live here, again?" Lisa mused. "Suicidal winters. Beat-up cars, unemployment. Oh, right. I grew up here."

"Yah." Stefan nodded.

"And I'm leaving as soon as you find me that little acting job in the Big Apple. Isn't that right Stefan?" She pinched his cheek, then gave it a light slap.

"Everyone wants a job," he said.

It still didn't seem like too bad a town. There had to be worse things than settling into one of these apartments. It wouldn't be anything special, but it would be clean. With old, comfortable furniture and yard-sale dinner plates. With a steady paycheck, maybe two, coming into the house.

We never got to the beach, but we got close. I could hear waves when we got out of the van, but I couldn't see the ocean until we trooped up the creaking, white peeling steps to Stefan and Arch's apartment on the second story. The kitchen was clean and very white. Arch mixed screwdrivers and Lisa went into one of the bedrooms to change.

Stefan crept down the little hall to the door, turned the knob gently, then kicked it open. Lisa shrieked and then laughed.

"Room service," he called. "Is this where a guy can get some service?"

Lisa cursed him loudly in high-school Spanish.

"Ow," Stefan said as she pushed him out the door. "That's harsh. Have it your way then, and we'll talk later."

"You'll be talking to yourself." Pieces of clothing and a stuffed donkey flew past Stefan's head and hit the wall behind him.

"What's this modesty crap? You're supposed to be the tramp." He stuck his head back in the door. "Anyway, it's not like you need more rehearsal time." We looked at each other around the table.

"Get out!" Lisa shut the door in his face.

Everyone laughed and Beverly went on with a story about graduate school. Arch leaned against the counter, a rigid pillar of anger. Stefan came back into the room smiling and started toward him, but Arch turned abruptly away and Stefan veered toward the table without missing a beat.

"Who needs a drink?" he asked, putting his hands on Beverly's shoulder, flashing that smile.

Just after sunset we set out along the sandy streets between rows of cheese-box summer houses to a little fried-clams-and-coleslaw joint. On the way back Beverly and Stefan had an exaggerated discussion over whether we should buy two small bottles of vodka, or just one of those jugs with the handles. We got two of the big bottles.

It's hard to remember what exactly happens after that. We're sitting around the table, talking over the glasses and half-eaten food. Arch plays one Motown disc after another and Stefan is always elaborating on some point. Then the screen door slams and we're stumbling down the quaking stairs, cast in shadows from a single, weak light bulb by the door. The stars are thick all the way to the horizon. We're waiting as van idles and Arch walks up the stairs alone, stumbling on one of the steps. "She'll have to get one of them to drive her home," Mother Abbess says and jams the van into gear.

"Girls just wanna have fun," we're singing.

I woke on the front seat of my Plymouth wagon, parked on a slant near the farmhouse. The drive back to my apartment in Durham was painful and took about three years. Back in my apartment I worked hard to focus on one thing at a time, but gave up after a while. I was glad it wasn't me going onstage in a few hours.

Fucked up. That's the only thing to say about the show that night.

It was nearly dark and the audience was already trickling in when the Spyder pulled in behind the barn with the top up and the windows closed. A few of us sitting on the hay wagon stopped talking and watched the car on the grass. No one got out. Inside someone was gesturing, you could see the end of a cigarette bobbing and cutting sharply, and the sound of muffled, raised voices came from the black pit of the little car.

The passenger door jerked open and Stefan nearly fell out, pulled himself upright on the door, and walked unseeing past us into the light inside the barn door. Arch followed, glancing at us, then breaking into a trot.

"They kept drinking," a nun said.

Sara, already in her habit, jumped off the hay wagon and ran to get the director, and the rest of us drifted in to get ready for the curtain. Lisa hadn't answered my knock at her dressing room door earlier, though her roommate's car was parked in the field.

The show went woodenly on its own momentum at first. But just before

Stefan's entrance I looked up from the pit into the wings and saw Arch holding him up and the director whispering angrily in his ear. Stefan's head was slowly wagging from side to side. They pushed him onstage and he stood there dazed for just a second and then composed himself.

Word salad came out of his mouth. No, it was worse than that, not even words, just garbled sounds ringing out into the theater. He stopped, and tried again, giving a short blurt before stopping himself. He paused, and this time got his first line out and that got him rolling. His delivery lacked the usual force, but he got through his part and the show lurched forward again.

Just about everything else went wrong, too. One of the von Trapp children kept forgetting his lines, looking plaintively offstage, and the pianist played the intro to a number that wasn't until the next scene. It was bad. And we didn't all go merrily out to Lum's after the show that night. As I packed up we could hear shouting from Stefan and Arch's dressing room, and something pounding the side of the horse stall.

"That would hurt," the sax player said.

The door to Lisa's dressing room was ajar, and before I knocked I saw her standing, just staring at a corner, perfectly still. I asked if she wanted a ride home.

"Thanks anyway, Phil." She came over and grabbed the doorknob. "I've got a car tonight. But I've got to change now. Please."

She pulled the door shut. It was an old grey-blue door, speckled with

white paint. It probably came off a tool shed, or maybe had been slung across a couple of sawhorses and used for a work table.

We never went out to Lum's again. The director bawled out Stefan and Arch for coming to work drunk, and the show went mostly well after that. But Arch and Lisa started playing games onstage. Actually, it was Arch doing the playing.

He was a pro. He had done experimental theater and improv, so it was no problem for him to make a question sound like a deliberate statement. Or pause, with total control, a sentence or two before the end of his passage and stand perfectly still, looking at Lisa expectantly.

Silence would fill the theater and Lisa would start speaking her lines to cover for him. Then Arch would shout her down with his last two sentences and it would look like a lover's quarrel in the middle of the scene. She had guts, she stepped right in with her next line, and she never let it disrupt the scene.

But twice Lisa left the stage in tears. She had acted in college theater, but that didn't get you exposure to the world-class ugliness of stage professionals.

Arch was showing up at the playhouse alone in the Spyder. Stefan sometimes came with Lisa in her roommate's car, or they'd get dropped off together. Once Stefan had to call up Beverly to come get him at a restaurant

near the beach. It didn't look like so much fun.

Then, on the last night of the show, Stefan and Arch drove up in their Spyder with Lisa riding behind the seats. They were joking--happy and relaxed. Maybe Arch looked a little tense, but they weren't drunk or anything. When the car slowed to turn off the highway Lisa pulled her long hair out of her shirt and hung it down the side of the car. They were all friends again.

I dropped by her dressing room after curtain call and asked, "So what's your next trick?"

"I'm staying around here over the winter. I got a waitressing job." She was packing her things into a huge army duffle bag.

"The job in New York fell through?"

"That wasn't anything. Besides, you know," she looked up at me and smiled sweetly. "fall in New England and all that. And the ocean is supposed to be exquisite in winter."

Oh man. I could just see the leaves whipping on a cold wind past her jeans as she walked through the little park in the center of town. She'd be bundled in some odd green corduroy jacket where the collar flips up and zips to right under her nose. I'd hear her laugh about getting another hand-me-down from her older sister--the one whose little boy just started kindergarten. This jacket will be all the rage again in a few years, just you wait. The low sun would shine under a high, clear sky.

"Exquisite, my ass. Or your ass for that matter, which is going to

freeze." Stefan leaned against the door frame. "I know it. I've seen pictures. Anyway, Maine is the soul of desolation in the winter. You're making a virtue out of necess-i-ty." He sang this last part.

"Stefan likes Florida." Lisa stood up. "Geriatric definitely suits your style Stefan, you're welcome to it."

"I'll only leave New York if there's a beach involved. I guess some people think that's odd." He raised his eyebrows and looked at me like an old friend. "Coming to the cast party, pal?"

When I packed up, the barn was darker than I had ever seen it. All the show lights were off and just a few bare light bulbs glowed weakly, high above the seats. I helped Matt carry his drums out, so the party was rolling by the time we got there.

The director's place was a fixed-up farmhouse: low ceilings, lots of white paint and wood floors--antique city. I pushed through the crowd over to the piano where Arch, Lisa, and the Mother Abbess were standing, singing show tunes. Stefan was circulating. I played some numbers with them, stood there for a while, and wandered out to the kitchen.

Around one o'clock the crowd thinned out, leaving the pros in their drunken endurance and the local talent drawing out their last fling in the stage world until next summer. The high school kids were long gone, following the call of adolescent chemistry, I suppose.

I got entangled in a conversation about the old swing bands with this

Dartmouth guy--a friend of somebody. He didn't know much about music, but he had a mouth. It's an Ivy League trick you see a lot: make yourself sound like an authority on someone's main interest, and you're hot shit with them. You don't have to know that much to do it. He was talking when Lisa floated past. I cut him off and said "excuse me."

"Lisa, we've got to talk." I grabbed her arm and steered her into the narrow, closed-in pantry at the back of the kitchen. It was your standard farmhouse pantry, painted green with a little window at the end.

"So am I going to see you again, or what?"

"Phil, you're leaving. I might not be around in the next few weeks. I might go away."

"You've been avoiding me, right?" There were rows of cans on the shelf behind her, and her face seemed frozen, half shadowed by the kitchen light.

"Phil. There's nothing to avoid." Lisa started edging out toward the kitchen, but when I moved to block her she stopped. "I like you Phillip. Really, I do. But I'm going away. And then you'll be gone."

"You said you're staying here."

"I mean I'm going for a little while. This is hard for me." She looked away.

"Oh. It's hard for you." The pantry was small. I was glad it was small. "That's the last thing I want."

"Phil, I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings."

"You shouldn't feel so bad."

She was leaning back, arching over the counter, maybe because I was so close. She couldn't move.

"You really did play the slut," I said, but then pulled back for just a second.

"I just came in to get a beer," she said and dropped down, past me and before I could move she slipped away into the light and noise of the kitchen.

The Dartmouth guy was gone when I came out of the pantry. There was no one left I cared to talk with and I wasn't going to stage any grand exit. The director had said he would forward any mail to the Ramada. The old guy who ran the club down there was known for looking out for his players. He would probably forward it from there after I left.

I stood on the granite step looking out at the floodlit front lawn. Three people lay on the grass, talking. A couple with their arms around each other looked off across the road. Napkins and plastic cups littered the lawn. A single floodlight glared down on two cherry trees.

Stefan and Arch and Lisa came out the door behind me. She was wearing Stefan's coat, a charcoal wool thing with random flecks of color in it. As I reached out to touch her shoulder, she knelt down, took off her slippers and started running with Stefan across the wet grass. My hand fell to my side.

I stepped off the granite block and stopped after a few feet. Arch walked up behind me.

"We don't get a vote, do we?" he said with a wry smile, patting my shoulder. "They'll just do what they want."

My hand shot out and knocked his arm away. He stopped, holding his arm, with his mouth slightly open.

"Don't ever touch me again," I said.

He just stared at me.

"Don't fucking touch me," I said and shoved him backward, toward the hedge three or four times, shouting. When we reached the hedge, Arch grabbed my shirt and yanked me forward, then stepped aside as I put out my arms to break my fall into the tangle of twigs and leaves.

When I pulled myself free he was walking calmly toward the car like I wasn't even there.

Nobody said a thing. Then Stefan called from the Spyder, "Don't hurt him. It's his turn to make breakfast."

People started to move again. Arch reached the car and opened the passenger door. When he got in, Stefan started the motor and said "Ta-ta, everybody. We had fun," and the car pulled out with a little skid. When Lisa turned around I couldn't see her eyes.

There was nothing else to do, so I drove back to Durham and ran out my sublet there. After that I spent a few years off-and-on down at that Ramada along Route 9, which is a seedy mall strip that connects up with the Mass Pike, which finally ends near the ferry docks in Seattle.

Ramsey

- Jack Thorndike -

The doberman remained in the back of Dick's mind as he walked quickly to the emergency entrance of the low, stucco hospital. He kept asking himself, Do I really need a watch dog? Now, in the waiting room outside Intensive Care he tried to concentrate as his daughter-in-law Stephanie described his son crumpling to the deck of the yacht.

Peter had fallen, blocking the cabin door and the other men pushed each other out of the way, stepping over his body, to get to the boat's radio. Someone's drink spilled on Peter's clenched body. No one wanted to touch him. One man had screamed at his wife to help Stephanie turn him on his back.

"Such men of action," she said.

Stephanie had reached Dick at the country club, where he'd stopped on his way back from San Francisco. His monthly trips into the city always rekindled his familiar sense of infinite possibility that had drained quickly away

when he retired last year. That was the feeling she'd interrupted when she told him about Peter.

When he worked at the bank in San Francisco he had seen retired people come in to shuffle investments around, keeping busy with one inconsequential deal after another. Dick knew he wasn't like that--he didn't make a move unless it put him ahead. Now his cherished trips to the city helped to keep his connections fresh, he told himself, to keep his hand in. Discussing options, liabilities, and degrees-of-risk with colleagues or even with the women in customer service gave him more pleasure than he would have imagined.

Maybe the city's getting along without me, he thought, and smiled as he drove the freeway, past the military cemetery that floated alongside him now. It lay south of the city, beyond warehouses and the stucco, row-house neighborhoods. Long lines of identical white crosses followed the gentle roll of the land, flecked with scattered old people--alone or in couples--who had come to visit their fallen sons or husbands.

"A city for the dead," Dick wondered aloud. "In a market starved for real estate."

Though he thought of himself as a man with a full, active life, doubt crept in again when he stood in front of the mirror in the golf club's carpeted locker room and saw one of his collar buttons undone. My God, he thought, I've gone through the entire day like this.

A steward handed him Stephanie's message as he walked past on his way from the tennis courts. The slip of paper asked him to come to Palo Alto Memorial. His son was there.

In Peter's room in Intensive Care, the nurse could only tell Dick what he'd already heard from Stephanie. The two of them, father and daughter-in-law, then sat in quiet shock amid the wires and tubes and aluminum bars. Peter seemed such a simple thing there, if these machines were enough to keep him alive. It was as if Peter's life were stranded outside him, on display in the room. And Dick and Stephanie were now mere observers. Safe, as long as their lives continued in the wet quiet of their own bodies. A place had been made for them to sit in the orderly clutter around Peter. They watched his chest rise and fall in time to the clicks and wheezing of the respirator.

"Watching Your Cardio-Vascular Warning Signs"--how often Dick had seen that phrase on pamphlets stacked neat and prominent in waiting rooms and the local Senior Center where he went that one time when his wife convinced him that it might be good "just to see what they might have for you." When they asked for his name and address Dick felt a vague apprehension at having his name on file because of his age. "Just for the list," the woman had explained, and he obediently gave the information.

I could list those warning signs right back to you, he thought as he listened to the doctor. What kind of an idiot wouldn't know that already? The

man's clinical remove irritated Dick when he looked at his son lying there. Peter had nothing to do with the flat, exact words the doctor applied. Dick listened with a passivity unfamiliar to him. Then the old feeling urging him to take control rose up, but it was not his habitual, excited rush to battle. It was a bid to keep the wounds small.

"A heart attack at forty-eight?" He stood himself up to confront the young man. "This is more than just a question of--" He paused but he would not stammer. "His habits, his lifestyle, Doctor." That doctor would know he had a lot riding on this. Dick thought, It must be obvious that we have a much better relationship than most men our age. He wouldn't let this doctor treat him like all the other patients.

"I'm sorry, we can't get a prognosis until we know more. We have to run more tests. I'm sure you'll understand that. The main thing is that he's stabilized," the doctor said. "That's good."

Stephanie sighed and Dick fixed his eyes on the doctor.

"Then you can tell me where I can go for answers?"

The doctor blinked and put his hands in the pockets of his white coat.

"We can't run neurological tests on him until tomorrow morning."

"This isn't much of a hospital, is it?" Maybe now we'll get some answers, he thought.

The doctor looked at him as if noticing him for the first time. His voice remained level. "I know this must be hard, I've been in your situation myself."

The encounter was slipping away. "Look *doctor*, you haven't told me anything."

Stephanie followed the doctor out of the room, and Dick saw him nod as they talked outside the glass door. That won't get anything out of him, Dick thought and bounced on the balls of his feet.

"They're so cagey with the information," he told her as she walked back in. "As if we're not paying for it." Stephanie looked out the window at the end of the room. "It's their way of keeping control."

"Dick, please," she said. "This doesn't help."

"I expected this." Stephanie said when they stood in the darkening hospital parking lot. The sky's lucid glow to the west bled down on the car roofs, surrounding the two of them with luminous blue rectangles. Street lights buzzed, then sputtered into an orange glare. Stephanie's face was gone in shadow and Dick felt for a second that he might seep out from his body into the waiting dark trees beyond the asphalt and the curb.

"Any fool could have seen what would happen." Stephanie said. "He's been working on a coronary as long as I've known him." Her voice was strained, and Dick thought it would sound menacing if he didn't know better.

He grasped to say something. "A lot of times it's hard to see what's right in front of us."

She's looking for a reason, he thought. These things just fall out of the

sky--it's just bad luck--but still we look for reasons. I could be responsible for her.

Stephanie seemed to be waiting, leaning silently on the car, gazing off across toward the trees.

"Look, Stef, why don't you come over to my place for dinner tonight?"

It was dark when Dick flicked the electric gate open and drove slowly up his curving driveway. When his lights cleared the edge of the garage, he saw the doberman, Ramsey, running back and forth behind the long stretch of chain link fence. Against the blackness all that showed in the headlights were Ramsey's tan underside and bright eyes, springing to one end of the pen, then the other, like a stuck machine. He'd bought the dog after a brutal murder in the next town. Another wealthy old man living alone, and Dick had long puzzled why the intruder had taken nothing from him.

Ramsey had been a puppy in his last gangly friendliness when Dick brought him home from guard dog training. He seemed happy and obedient, and Dick felt he needn't spend much time with him. Though lately, the dog had begun growling and charging at Dick when he brought his food, so that he had to put the bowl down quickly and slam the gate shut behind him. The first few times Dick was shaken, but now he and the dog had reached an uneasy equilibrium. In any case, he had discovered it was much easier to fill the dog's water dish through the fence with a stream from the hose.

Dick parked his car in front of the garage and stepped gingerly into the cool air, feeling thin spears of arthritis. He shivered as he turned off the burglar alarm and pushed his front door open. He had meant to be home hours ago, while it was still warm.

All the way to the kitchen Dick turned on lights and glanced into rooms off the hallway. There were no messages on his answering machine. The bland gleam in the refrigerator revealed only the meals he had organized for himself last week.

When his wife, Helen, had died a year ago, Dick told himself he'd have a full life and betray no signs of emptiness. Don't let things slip, a friend told him, it'll be the death of you. So Dick cooked his own food and made sure meals were regular, yet varied events in his life. A man living alone had to watch himself, that he didn't slip into a pathetic twilight bachelorhood. The thought of finding himself in a checkout line with a cart full of frozen dinners blossomed into a blot of shame in his stomach.

When Dick was a child, his mother moderated the family dinners and made sure that each of seven children got enough. And for years he and Helen had shared meals with four lively children, whose numbers slowly dwindled as they went off to college, then before long he and Helen mostly ate alone except for holidays. Now, here were these individual cellophane wrapped meals he'd fixed, waiting to be cooked. They were stacked neatly, even organized by day.

Dick pulled two out, put them on the counter, thinking how to combine them. He turned around and caught his reflection in the sliding glass door. His darkly tanned skin disappeared in the black glass, leaving an empty tennis outfit, leaning as if casually against the counter, with a thin white crescent of hair above where the head should be.

He lurched back to the counter and started to unwrap the packages. More and more Dick found himself soothed by concentrating on the matter at hand. Now he had to make dinner for himself and Stephanie.

Even before retiring, Dick noticed the old men and women on the streets and park benches of his clean, sunny city. They moved with delicate hesitancy into the little shops and among the palms in the small park between the main streets. He thought they looked like plants taking in the last few hours of sun. He dreaded seeming that way, as someone without a purpose--a simple old man whom you should be nice to.

"You don't let Ramsey inside?" Stephanie said as she came down the hall.

"He's just a watch dog," Dick said from the stove.

"I couldn't reach either of the kids."

Over dinner their conversation clung to Stephanie's daughter, Jen at UCLA, and her year in France. Dick listened as Stephanie told him about her store on El Camino Real, about Jen's prospects for summer jobs, about UCLA again.

When Dick brought bowls of ice cream to the table Stephanie looked up at him and said, "We need to think about what we did. Why he got sick."

"I think the doctors will tell us what went wrong--eventually anyway." He put the bowls down too hard with a clatter. Stephanie had such tension in her body and shoulders, and the noise didn't affect her at all.

"Almost everything he did, you pushed him into."

Dick sighed. "Stef, life is rough on everyone."

"I can't believe you're so secure in it. Even now." Her voice was quiet and tight, as if to break.

"You think this comes for free?" Dick gestured to the kitchen, the house, and all his property. "You wouldn't trade this kind of life, isn't that right?"

She couldn't say anything to that. What could anyone say to that? It was hard lesson and we usually have to learn it a couple of times before we finally accept it. "Stephanie, I think we're both upset tonight."

Dick's trembled like something strange and treasonous. Stephanie stood holding her dessert bowl and the Dick cringed when he thought he saw the anger in her face drop to kindness, or maybe pity.

"Let's just forget about it!" he said louder than he'd meant to.

"Yes, that's right. Why don't you go in and turn on the late news and I'll clean up."

To his protest she said "No," and her hand shot up. "I want to do it."

Halfway down the hall Dick paused and looked back at her arm jerking as she scraped food from the dishes.

They watched the news together, and then Dick walked her to the front door. She drove off, and he went through the house turning out lights and checking the locks. He was exhausted and stiff, and taking off his clothes took more effort than he ever remembered. He pulled the cool, heavy covers up around him and stretched almost lazily to turn out the light. In the dark bedroom Dick slammed his fist into the blanket when he realized he had forgotten to feed the dog.

Stephanie's car idled in the driveway the next morning while Dick closed up the house. When she rolled down her window, he said he'd be just take a second while he fed the dog, and hurried around the corner of the house. The dog hadn't eaten in twenty-four hours and would be hungry. Ramsey waited for Dick at the door of the pen.

"Hi boy. I brought your breakfast." Dick had never used that singsong voice before. The dog growled.

Dammit, he thought, I can't open that gate with him there. The dog stood facing him. Its muscles were tight under the skin on its hind legs. Dick crossly noted that his own legs trembled, though usually they were strong. They would be strong. The front of Stephanie's car poked past the edge of the garage. Well, he couldn't let this continue.

"Move!" he said and gestured to the dog with both hands. It looked at him coldly. Dick rattled the chain link fence with the toe of his Topsider. The dog lunged for the door, barking violently, and returned to attention with a low growl.

This is ridiculous, Dick thought.

Stephanie's car was still idling. He guessed she could see about half of the pen, though she couldn't see him or the dog. Dick walked to the side of the house and shakily screwed the garden hose on to the faucet.

Dick aimed the stream at the dog's paws. It shifted weight from one paw to the other, avoiding the water, not breaking its stare at Dick. Crimping his thumb over the opening, Dick aimed a lopsided needle of water at the dog's feet, and moved it up the legs toward the head. The dog backed away, then loped silently into the shade at the far end of the pen.

Dick pushed the latch up and shoved the gate open. He lay down the dish just inside the fence and looked up to see the dog charging silently toward him. He straightened with a jerk, banged his shoulder painfully on the post and yanked his body out of the pen, pulling the gate shut. He turned off the hose and hurried around the corner toward Stephanie's car, hating the vision of himself lurching backwards, away from Ramsey. Surely Stephanie hadn't seen him use the hose on the dog.

Dick lay his hand tentatively on Peter's shoulder as the respirator

whirred and clicked, driving his son's chest in a sighing up-and-down cycle. Green dots wavered purposefully together across a screen mounted above Peter's bed.

Dick gazed at the sliding glass doors which covered an entire wall. This whole production is on display, he thought. It's a public struggle for life, so perfect, and they have it so neatly ordered.

Like the precise, flowing lines of that military cemetery, the room lacked for the unnatural mess of a place where people live. Would I end up burying my own son? he asked himself. Like in wartime?

The test results were terrifying. The doctor said Peter was in a coma and there was no telling just now whether he would come out of it. Dick saw himself jumping to challenge the doctor, to push him and hold his feet to the fire. But Dick's body had remained still, as if it knew that such action couldn't matter, that the old force was brittle and used up and couldn't act in the world no matter how much he willed it.

Force, Dick thought to himself. It was never more than bluffing and making the right amount of noise. And besides, the young doctor looked tired.

"Thank you, doctor," Dick said and shook his hand.

The mild flood of relief surprised him. Perhaps it was not so bad to just accept some things without always fighting. But how could you let something go without being certain that you were right? What would that mean for the people who depend on you?

Dick thought of the pain he had caused those he'd pushed aside, or had forced to act against their wills. It had been part of his job to make his will matter the most. It was necessary and all for the good, he thought. And if he saw any of them now, he would treat them as equals. They might even be glad to see him, now that it was over.

He sat in an alert calm watching his sleeping son as the afternoon glimmered into twilight. He and Stephanie walked down the hospital path together and Dick felt light, not at all tired and his senses seemed more alive than they'd ever been. The sorrow at Peter's fate, whatever it would be, seemed far away, like all past surprises, angers, and joys--static and apart from him now. They hardly spoke as she neared his house.

It was nearly dark when Stephanie drove through the gate. The car turned the corner by the garage and then Dick saw the open gate of the dog's pen. The morning's events came back like walking into midday sunshine. In his hurried retreat he had simply forgotten to latch the gate. The pen was empty. Dick thought of the dog stalking around in the deep shadows, belligerent and wary. Stephanie pulled up to the front door and left the motor idling.

"Would you like to come in for a drink, or tea, or something?" he asked, trying to sound relaxed.

"No thanks, Dick. I'm really exhausted and I have to get home. I really have to reach Jen tonight. She might be back at her dorm by now. Maybe she's left a message."

Dick looked quickly up at his front door. It was about thirty feet from the car. That beast could be anywhere out there. "Okay. Well, thanks for the ride."

"Don't mention it."

Someday he might tell her about that peace he had felt that afternoon. But how would he do it?

"Stef, will you call me?" It would be completely dark soon.

"Sure, Dick."

"Are you sure you won't come in?" He thought he saw a curious look on the shadow of her face in the remaining blue light.

"I really have to go."

Dick gripped the door handle. "Do you want a ride to the hospital tomorrow?"

"I don't know. I'll call you after I reach Jen, okay?"

He nodded.

"Goodbye, Dick."

The slightly roughened texture of the black plastic door handle felt comforting in his hand. It had a good, solid feel, his fingers reached around it at just the proper angle. The warmth of the plastic told his hand what to do. The muscles on the top of his forearm tensed slightly as he pulled the handle, and the latch released.

Choosing Sides

- Jack Thorndike -

The setup was very cool. My cappucino buzz would leave around 10:30 and I'd save the morning's work on disc, put on a tie, and cruise down Pine Street, past Battery, to a part-time job in San Francisco's Financial District. Wearing a bank teller's ironic smile I did customer service for weighty executives, scheming small businessmen, and high rolling retirees in an intimate, street-level office. The job kept the rent paid and left me with enough time to write, and I knew it would be no problem keeping the glossy business culture at arm's length. I was a spy in the corporate counting-house, passing through on my way to graduate school. I was determined to stay above it.

Homeless people kept the Financial District somewhat honest. Gleaming German limos breezing through intersections and the brisk stride of sharply suited men and women--like a platoon of briefcase clasps snapping shut--convinced you of the pervasive, breathless, promises of wealth spawned from numbers--statistics, projections and rates of return. But among the throngs of kinetic managers slunk the shadowy presence of the homeless, like soft twinges of a bad conscience.

They moved through the crowds on their brooding rounds of litter cans and lucky panhandling spots. Among them I could tell the mentally ill from the merely unlucky. The sane ones walked through their day with a hunched resignation. They seemed to realize that no change in attitude could bring on a momentary lapse in their misfortune. But the insane often showed humility, as if expecting kindred acts of generosity from the pressing crowds. Their damaged thinking may have spared them from concluding that, because they were out on the street, people didn't care about them.

It wasn't that simple though. Coins and occasionally bills appeared in the styrofoam cups waiting on the sidewalk in front of these hunched, desolate figures. That welter of guilt, sympathy, rationalization, and defensiveness is by now familiar to all of us who brush against the lives of the homeless, but in the mid-eighties it was still new.

On a windy afternoon I saw a well-dressed woman hold out a sandwich to another, older woman huddled cross-legged on the sidewalk, a creased paper cup out for coins. Tottering a little on her high heels, the professional woman brushed her hair out of her face as she offered the food. Her attitude hung thick in the air between them: If I give you money you'll just spend it on cheap wine, you poor thing.

The older woman looked at the sandwich from beneath her black and yellow ski cap. Her expression hardened to bitterness as she comprehended the plastic-wrapped insult and reached up to grasp it.

I felt pretty distant from either of them. True, I had enough food and a decent apartment. But I was unlikely to ever own a sharp suit, or a BMW. As I said, I was just passing through.

A deranged homeless guy used to work the busy corner in front of our bank. Each day he appeared outside our plate glass windows as the early afternoon fog swirled around the peaks of the high rise office towers. His hair was long, black, and oily, and he manically combed it down into his face sometimes for ten minutes, or more, standing on the corner and muttering to himself. People in our office called him the Hair Man.

A few years before, California's Republican governor had led a crusade to close state psychiatric hospitals, delivering vast numbers of patients into the streets to find their fortune. I imagine the Hair Man was an alumnus of that unlucky class.

In all weather he wore the same blue parka with its sheen of dark grime, and the same slacks with tan, polyester material fraying off the cuffs in postage-stamp size swatches. Most days he wore some shoes. After going through the trash can on the corner which overflowed with lunch-hour debris and discarded food, he would try to panhandle. His method was unique. He would put his hand in front of someone and say: "Spare change sir?" as fast as he could, and spin around as they walked past. It didn't often work.

Managers, and most of the rest of us, prefer requests for charity coming from below--subdued and unassertive. After repeated rejections the Hair Man

usually started into an agitated combing session. Then he would drift off.

One time I passed him on Battery Street. I held out a folded dollar bill--my daily contribution to the first person who asked--and said, "Here's a buck. Can you use this?"

"Why, thank you sir," he said. "Thank you very much sir." His mournful eyes peered out from his hair and his sunken, pock-marked face. "I'm working on the battery now, Sir. We're going to get a charge soon. Things are getting better. I'm moving up."

When I worked in a psychiatric hospital years before, I often heard psychotic patients speak in a jumble of language fragments. In these shards I recognized the remnants of common human encounters: bar talk, scolding, or simply rage. The Hair Man's tattered language sought the underling's demeanor that finds a well-worn place in office hierarchies. He had tuned his disjointed speech to justify himself to the business world. To the Hair Man I was part of that world--fed, groomed, and I walked as purposefully as the rest of them. It didn't matter how I saw myself, the Hair Man put me in league with the sub-managers and executives around me.

He may have been on to something. He grasped that life in the Financial District revolved on negotiations of dominance. Everyone placed themselves as high as they could, including the Hair Man. By showing obeisance in exchange for my dollar, he was a player.

But I was outside that matrix. Languishing at the bottom of the

command chain, I gave no orders and my throw-away job insulated me from struggles for dominance. My power was the power to walk.

Our branch manager, Gordon, sensed this. The guy's soul was two-thirds personnel management seminar and one-third chubby kid with a chip on his shoulder. He encouraged everyone to call him Gordie. I couldn't say hi to him without feeling managed. He diffused my guarded disdain with boyish insinuations of camaraderie, but when the bank opened up another teller position he refused to consider any male applicants. Perhaps he thought women would be more pliable.

On a gusty March afternoon the Hair Man snapped. After about ten minutes of refusals and blow-offs, his panhandling became more frenetic. He spun like a cringing dervish, his grubby hand outstretched to the men and women who strode busily past. Then, suddenly, he stood still and began yelling at them. Right there on the corner outside our bank the Hair Man was letting them have it.

As customers pushed bewildered or amused through the glass doors I could hear snatches of his speech. As he got more frantic he began pointing at people shouting, "You, and you camp out at the OK Corral," and "I have a letter!"

I imagined he was railing against the grasping soul of a society that sends its powerless into the streets. Finally, someone was fed up with the plumped-up pride of this debased country and I loved it.

But the Hair Man was disrupting business. Gordie's secretary phoned down and asked if there was a homeless person blocking the doorway and yelling. I said he's not blocking the doorway. She hung up. As the only man in the branch office that afternoon I knew Gordie would ask me to get rid of him. I wouldn't do it.

No way, the Hair Man was saying. No way, I would say. Gordie could threaten to fire me, and I would still refuse. I would not be his private police.

In the end Gordie got Grey Willis to do it. Grey Willis's strategy in life was to hunker down, then wait for someone to open up a place for him. Even when giving orders he seemed obedient. But by the time Willis came down the Hair Man was gone. Nobody was confronting anybody and business could continue. In the space of a few minutes the Hair Man had led a revolt of one against the slick abuse most of us either suffer or gain from. And I was there with him, ready to walk out on the whole scene.

But I didn't. I kept my little urge to rebellion under cover as always. You could say it remained well managed. I stayed there for another year or so, and the Hair man continued to work our corner, keeping his defiance somewhere else while he did his job. I wonder, though, if Financial District full timers have their own little rebellions that never see the light of day. I'll never know.

The homeless still wander past the corner where my bank was, voicing a silent dissent from the gaps in the facade of business culture. The surface that

separates us is shiny and hard, like polished granite or thick-paned glass on the face of one of those office towers. It's much easier to look through, or to see your own reflection, than it is to go across.

Empties

- Jack Thorndike -

The newlyweds ski on a flat, easy ride down the cat-track until they come to the trail marked with a black diamond. Karen barely glances over her shoulder at Scott, then slips off the rim onto the sheer slope. Scott's smile falls against the back of her blue-orange parka. This is a leap into space, a fall onto the near vertical mogul field below. Scott asks himself: What am I to trust when I do this?

He jumps off and his whole body lunges between mounds that come so fast he acts before seeing them. Scott's back muscles and trembling legs use his last energy as twilight begins to thicken on the mountain. Taking sharp breaths he follows Karen down the slope, just to the side to avoid the damp chunks of snow flying back in a clotted plume. Scott can't believe that the same gravid force that kept him firmly on the ground now acts to peel him off the mountain's face.

He wants to tell Karen to slow down, for the baby's sake, but she is far ahead of him by now. She always skied faster and this was just like the other times. He pulls to a shuddering stop on the impossible grade and helplessly admires how thin and athletic she looks on the slope below him.

How her five months hardly shows in her tightly fitting parka. Her skis clack together in perfect rhythm, and her light brown hair bounces loose on her shoulders in time to the even back-and-forth of her slalom.

The condo where they sleep is a hermetic maze in two rooms. It was an investment that Scott's parents made, and they gave the couple a five-day honeymoon from the time-share. The sliding partitions, mirrors, and fold-out sofas lie at obtuse or acute angles, as if disorientation could atone for the apartment's cramped space. Dense curtains and dark carpeting leave the rooms mute and insulated from the world outside, like a private chamber in a high desert casino. A platform separating the rooms holds a sunken hot tub Karen can't use because of the baby inside her.

After dinner that night, and after fragile lovemaking, Karen sat in her bathrobe looking out the condo's single window. She gazed past the massive brown painted cement block wall as light from the late-day overcast drifted like dust down the mountain.

"Happy?" Scott asked, standing beside her. He was surprised when she grabbed him and buried her face in the front of his robe--not sexually it seemed--but just because it was the nearest place.

Last October, Scott sat looking out of the tall, plate-glass windows of his dealership by the highway. Bright yellow leaves were flung from their branches by a harsh rain and lay in fat circles under the trees. The surrounding

farm fields had already turned a sullen black-brown, hard with the first freeze, and hard until hot spring winds would blast off the plains of Eastern Washington. It was between seasons in Scott's line of work. The summer's jet-skis were sold or warehoused, and nobody was looking over the snowmobiles yet. A red and white banner in its second season flapped on the aluminum window frames, and an untethered grommet clicked on the glass. "We Sell Fun!" it read. Scott heard himself say, "Four seasons to a year," and felt a slight tremor pass over him.

He was glad to close up when Karen called and ask him to have lunch in town. In the Italian restaurant he leaned forward and said, "Honey, that's wonderful," when she told him about the pregnancy. Wonderful was a word he almost never used. He put his open hand on the table and she looked at it briefly before pulling her hand up out of her lap to hold his.

"I don't know what we're going to do, Scott."

Relief flooded his chest when she said "we" and he thought: Okay, we're in this together.

When Karen's mother found out, she gave her name to a religious group that tried to convince her to bear the child. They vowed to find a loving foster home and even made vague promises about a college scholarship for the fetus.

"Look at this crap," Karen said and tossed the glossy pamphlet to Scott. Pictures showing small, bloody bodies were interspersed with biblical quotes and

medical-sounding statements. "I feel so sorry for the ignorant slobs who swallow this shit," she said.

Yes, Scott thought, but there must somewhere be a grain of truth that make people so adamant. He hoped she would keep the baby. When he quickly offered marriage in the restaurant Karen said: "Of course, Scotty. But I still don't know if we'll keep it." She picked up her fork, neatly flipped a sprig of parsley off her plate onto the tablecloth.

"What do you think?" she said and began to eat.

Scott tried to joke that if they were married and living together they'd save money on gas by not driving back and forth in the middle of the night all the time. But a frown crossed Karen's face and he hurriedly asked how difficult it would be to get an abortion.

Karen sighed. None of the doctors close by did abortions anymore, she said. The nearest place was a clinic four hours away.

"That wouldn't seem too bad," he said, but she cut him off, saying "I was so stupid not to get the prescription filled on time."

Within a couple of weeks they had decided to keep the child, and planned a wedding for early January. Scott felt he'd been falling for a long time and suddenly was caught. Karen said a pregnant bride was no big deal nowadays.

All right, Scott thought. Nobody would ever know that we made this hard decision. And if someone asked me why we're keeping it? Scott tried to

formulate an easy answer.

Karen's boss threw her a goodbye party at a steakhouse near the office park. Scott met her at the restaurant along with three of her friends from work and "the boss with the indulgent smile" as Scott called him. After dinner the boss paid, wished Karen and Scott luck, and left.

The four women and Scott stayed for hours, drinking more. He started drifting in and out of the conversation when he heard the women talking about someone else they all knew who had a little girl last summer. No one had seen the father since right before the delivery. And then they were talking about someone named Rosellen's kid and his father who was in another state and finally someone said: "But that's not your problem now, is it Karen honey?"

She smiled tightly and looked at Scott who smiled back. Someone said: "Hell, some people don't even know who the father is, at least you've got it narrowed down." One of them laughed, then cut herself short. There was a silence, and that was quickly covered over when two of the women started talking loudly at once. Scott blearily tried to force himself to remember the remark. He forgot it, then went over it until he remembered it. But he never brought it up.

When he was feeling cynical and humorous, Scott suspected that most people live out their lives as if trapped in some country western song, all about

cheating hearts, and how you can't tie a man down 'cause he's got to be movin' on. Last year in a dreamy moment he had asked Karen if she ever felt like maybe there could be something more than just working to survive.

"Sure, Scott," she had said. "But we've all got to live."

He felt if he could only explain it right, then she would see what he wanted and she would want it too. Scott didn't even know what kind of life he wanted, exactly, but he suspected that it started with a family.

One Sunday night in November they were driving back from visiting Karen's father in Idaho. They rode in Scott's new Blazer--he'd bought it when they agreed to keep the baby. Driving through the cold November night made Scott feel safe and powerful, somehow autonomous, hurtling them along. He felt responsible for the generous warmth flowing out from the heater and the security of the green dashboard lights. The headlights pushed the darkness off the wet pavement and back into the brush by the side of the road as he carried Karen home.

The one station he could get on the radio was a call-in talk show. Scott tuned in during a question from a timid sounding man about polygamy.

"You better head down to Utah if you want to get in on some of that," the announcer said with a corpulent laugh.

The caller said, "What I'm getting at," and spoke about a theory of evolution that said the male's only function is to provide a variety of genes to

the female. If the genes didn't need to be mixed up, he said, females could procreate on their own. They wouldn't need the males.

"I don't know," the host said dubiously. "We might have some callers who disagree with that.

"But they discovered this at Harvard from studying insect societies."

"Ha ha. Insect societies at Harvard. Someone out there must have an opinion on that one? Maybe we've got one now--you're on the air."

Scott snapped the radio off. Karen continued sleeping beside him for the rest of the long, straight drive home. He wanted more than anything for her to invite him in, but she said: "Any other night Scott, okay? I've got to be at work early tomorrow."

Scott is halfway down the mountain, just below the swamp of clouds that covers the summit behind him and sprawls out in an oppressive ceiling over the valley. He lifts the goggles from his eyes and the orange background drains to a spectrum of damp grey. The black wall of the Swan Range, about ten miles distant, heaves out of the fields toward the clouds.

The valley is a flat gridwork of country roads hemmed in by bare hills and wooded mountains. A grey plume from the mill about six miles off boils up in a dirty column toward the impassive bulk of clouds. It stops halfway in a confused knob.

Scott looks down one trail, then the other. He has lost sight of her.

Through a gap in the trees lies an easier, bail-out run under the hanging, now stilled chairs of the closed lift. Downhill the vertical mogul field continues.

Karen would take the steep trail and he could follow her. It's the end of the day and he surely can't go up the mountain again.

Catacombs

- Jack Thorndike -

September 15

Dear Sam,

Perhaps you've wondered where all the tourists come from. Well, I can tell you that Erica and I have found that place. Philadelphia is a fairly homey big city and its grittiness is weirdly authentic. The air here is often foul, not like that subtle SoCal pollution blend. Already I miss that cool, almost citrus tasting mix that goes down so easily, like the sibilant rush from the early morning freeway. Here, it's more like a beefy particulate soup--a murky skein through which you can sometimes see the sun.

However, we've established our base camp and Erica--the mad medical student heroine--has left me with time for these deep and complex ruminations because she's always busy, busy, busy. Every day. But I know she's around because I sometimes notice a blond blur near our front door early in the morning. Even on Saturdays she studies in the library most of the day. And on Sunday, after a languorous morning of sleep, she goes to the lab or the library again. Philly may be the City of Brotherly Love, but matrimonial-wise it's just

a shanty town for us.

Not to say that I never see her. Just last week she dragged me off to this schmoozing party set up so the people in her program could rub face. There were some cool people there but, I've got to say, medical students are generally stimulating if you happen to be a medical student.

And these ones aren't angling for no medicare patients, either. You could just hear the oozing: Doctor Mercedes, meet Doctor BMW. Oh pleased to meet you, I believe I've heard about you through Doctor Bentley. Sam, good thing we're safe from all that. Those masters' degrees in philosophy put us in no danger of falling into any extra cash. Lucky us.

So while Erica is going through scientific boot camp with her crew, I'm occupying myself with such uplifting pastimes as unpacking our moving boxes, looking for work, and watching the bloated and battered American cars skid over the trolley tracks on Wissahickon Avenue. At least in Irvine I had our beery, peripatetic dialogues amid those manicured eucalyptus groves to keep me busy while Erica crucified herself getting into Penn. Here, I'm fighting to avoid turning into a houseplant.

Had enough? Next time I promise I'll have some good news, even if I have to make it up. Drop a line soon.

Adios,

Martin

October 3

Dear Sam,

Man, it is so freakin' *normal* here. Our gritty little apartment is in a place called Germantown--a rollicking, working-class-hero neighborhood, with old people and kids who actually play on the street, if you can imagine that. This scene is on another planet from the place we all had in Orange. I really miss the farm-town serenity there. Old trees, old houses, and what was left of the lemon orchards that once stretched to the vanishing point. Even the homeless down by Santiago Creek lived in a state of grace.

And, yes, I *am* looking for a job--thanks for reminding me. It's been pretty tough, though, not like back home where they pay you just to seem interesting. The problem is Philly's a city on a slide and whoever has a job is holding onto it.

People seem a little parochial in their outlook, too. I've had two interviews where they cock their head at me and say, "So, what made you major in philosophy?" They're obviously unaware of the acclaim and deference that commonly accrue to a Master of the Arts. Of course they wouldn't be particularly impressed that I bagged out of Irvine's Doctoral program on, lets say, an accelerated schedule, so they don't need to hear about that.

But the problem has concrete consequences: our funds are running low and the coffers getting scraped down. But I'm not desperate, oh no. The deal was I would support Erica's schooling and then she'd bring in major doctor's

cash while I did, you know, dilettantism, or whatever.

Last Friday I applied for a job at the phone company. After the interview the woman took me on a tour of the building. We went through some doors and came out on a platform just under the low ceiling of a hangar-sized room with rows of people plugged in to computer machines fairly stretched off to the horizon. There were no windows. She turned to me and said, "When can you start?"

No, I didn't take the job and still have my honor intact. But for the next few days I had this demonic second guessing rattling around my brain. When I told my science-mad spouse about declining to work for some cash a welter of emotions coursed under her face and she said, "Do what's best for you." Which I was going to do anyway so she didn't have to tell me, I said.

Dinner was a pretty frosty affair that night. Maybe I didn't help things by going on about the stack of books I got at the Penn Coop to celebrate my freedom from employment and security. And when Erica made the totally spurious connection between the books and the money it took to buy them I grinned, and said, "Erica, books is who I am. You don't like that?"

I knew that softened her up when she responded sweetly, "What kind of a bullshit question is that?"

I wish I could report that we had a major blowup, a sweet reconciliation, and then a heavy night in the sheets. Sorry, friend. You know how I detest cliché. Instead we just cast a few more desultory critiques at one

another and slunk sullenly off to bed. Then, bright and early the next morning, she's up and running to the library.

Maybe in Irvine we were too busy being Southcoast airheads for something like this to happen. But I know it will get better--only four years of med school and three of internship after that to go. Oboy.

Hope all is well with you,

Ciao,

Martin.

October 22

Dear Sam,

Erica commanded me to write you. The scene unfolded like this on Sunday afternoon:

me: Let's go to the park the museum a bar the country.

her: Not now, I've got to study.

me: How about a movie the zoo the sculpture garden.

her: Not now, I'm busy.

me: How about ...

her: Why don't you write Sam Wu? Tell him everything that's on your mind.

So I hope you don't mind playing second banjo. But, after all, I did

marry *her*.

I'm so glad to hear that you got a job at the studios. Maybe you should brag about it some more, it makes me feel so good. At least it's encouraging that a philosophy master's is good for some cash, in Sodom 'n' Gomorrah, anyway. I'm guessing that when a person gets a literal job (that is, not a Teaching Assistant gig--love slave for the Regents of California) is when you truly stop being a graduate student. As for me, I had that rite of passage last week when I got hired at a psycho hospital about ten miles outside of this spewing fetidopolis. It's not as glamorous as I'd hoped.

But now that I'm an authentic working person, Erica will be off my back and, more exciting, her parents will be forced to stop calling me the Philosophy Major. I think that was part of their revenge for my not being a Ken doll from Someplace Nice.

And won't Martha and Frank be shocked to learn that their little girl started working on her first cadaver. I noticed Erica smelled faintly of formaldehyde after we went out to dinner that night to celebrate my job in the loony bin. Or maybe it was the Thai food. We talked at dinner, like we hadn't for about a month. Then we went home and coupled like bunnies--tired and stressed-out bunnies--like we hadn't for a month. It reminded me of being married. It was fun.

About this job I got--it's wild. I work at this old state hospital outside of Philly, about twenty buildings clustered on the corner of a mile square patch

of land, right up against Norristown, the city that wouldn't die. The buildings are institutional Greek Revival and the whole place has a serious haunted house meets wax museum vibe to it.

A lot of the buildings are empty because the health authorities currently favor setting lunatics free on the streets where they can freeze to death of their own free will. The stately brick buildings give the place the quaint, obsolete air of the time when we dealt with unfortunate people in traditional ways: house them, feed them, take care of them. Today, I swear, the next step in the policy will be to crank up the ovens--yes, we've got a Republican governor, too.

I work in the Emergency Unit. If by some odd chance I happen to see Erica in the morning I tell her I'm off to The Unit--I imagine we're the only people for miles who see the humor in that name. The Unit takes in all kinds of patients--schizos, alcoholics, any kind of drug addict.

When somebody loses it out in the world we get to deal with them. They stay for days or weeks until the medications kick in, then we scoot them over to a long-term hospital, or send them home. So it's been my privilege to see these mental diseases in their most florid states. Interesting, but weird, and sometimes dangerous.

A mood of violence shimmers just below the surface of the place. The Unit sometimes gets patients who are so nutso that they go off a couple of times a day and have to be strapped to their bed before they hurt somebody or

themselves. We also get prisoners from the city jail--suicide cases or some junkie needing to detox. Forget about Genet's petty thievery. These are real criminals.

On my first day, I was being introduced to a nurse named Naomi Koitz when this scrawny guy with long, stringy hair and a mural of tattoos on each arm came up to the Nurses' Station and yelled, "Nurse Coitus! My medication's wearing off. Why don't you come give me a shot, darlin'?"

Then this huge voice boomed down the hallway, "Don't be giving shit to the staff, man!" A big black guy who could be a bouncer in Hell walked toward us, pointing at the guy. "You get down to the TV lounge and you don't hassle the staff!"

The skinny guy slunk away, then turned, sneered at me and said, "I'll talk to you later, greenhorn."

"Name's Morris." The bouncer held out his hand. He filled the doorway, top to bottom and, though he's officially a janitor, I think much of his function is to provide physical intimidation to the more extroverted clients.

Sam, being around crazy people all day really shuffles your deck. I always feel like taking a shower after work, like I need to wash the sickness off. Not a great job, but that's what a Philosophy master's gets you in Philly.

Oh, by the way, I saw Erica last week, she says to say hi. Apparently she's a little busy these days. "The first year is hell," she tells me. "Don't worry it'll be better next year." Or how about this? "I miss you. Tell me you

love me." Ha. That's a new one.

Oh, well.

Sayonara,

Martin

November 5

Dear Sam,

You've got to see this town. They stuck this gigantic clothes pin out in front of City Hall--five stories high. And next to this drainage ditch of a river there stands a huge sandstone box, featuring towering friezes of art-deco Sumerian manticores. You know the guys: man's head on a lion's body, stylized wings, a little inverted flowerpot hat, and the Hasidic beard. Towering sentinels, constantly vigilant ... guarding the post office, for chrissake.

This is my day: 6:30-wake and breakfast, 7:05-talk to my wife while she brushes her teeth, 7:07-fight traffic all the way to Norristown, 8 to 4-work, 5:30-dinner and the news, 7:00-read and write until, 10:00-when Erica comes home, collapses into bed, and sometimes tells me about her day as she's falling asleep, if I'm lucky.

Sound like fun? Nobody said marriage was going to be like this. You might have told me, guy. You were the best man, remember, and there are certain obligations. Well, it was a great ceremony wasn't it? On a cliff looking out over the Pacific. Yeah, the flute player was late, but so what? That was

eons ago, last summer.

So. I can't say that there is a whole lot to do here. I checked into something called the Baudelaire Society at Penn, just for kicks. Before even talking to me they wanted to see a resume (No, excuse me. A *curriculum vitae*) and two letters of recommendation from "a practicing pedagogue in good standing at no less than the post-doctoral level of mastery of his or her chosen field." Choke.

Back in the working world my indoctrination into the rhythms of what the natives call reality continues. Every Friday a bunch of us go out after work and have a beer-and-buffalo wings orgy at this nearby tavern that's fairly dripping with authenticity. It's been a tavern since seventeen-something and has those funky beams made of totally old wood. And no, I don't know what buffalo wings really are.

The tavern is on the other side of Norristown, and it adds about half an hour to my ride back, along this old freeway (called expressways here) that swoops in and out of a steep river valley. The road is really old and torn up, and is flanked by bands of rusted car parts that fall off the aged shitboxes that people around here drive. This is my fun for the week: going way too fast on this old expressway, drunk on beer and buffalo wings, weaving in and out of the light Friday night traffic. Sometimes I hit a patch of broken concrete, flustering the shocks of my old Mazda, and for a minute my wheels are hardly brushing the road, like someone wringing their hands real fast. When I reread

that it sounds a little nutso. Oh well.

So last Friday we all go out, and this nurse, Naomi Koitz, focuses her searchlights on me. I haven't told you about her yet, have I?

You've never seen skin so white--it's like marble warming in the sun under a cool afternoon breeze. She has deep, black hair, long lashes, and the kind of button nose people pay thousands for in LA. A person can't help but think of desperate animal sounds in a dark, warm place.

Naomi is just Ms. Efficiency and Professionalism at the hospital--she puts that act up to keep the inmates from giving her too much trouble. After prison, or the shelters, or life on the streets, Naomi is clearly the best they've seen for a while. The addict-criminal type patients like to call her Nurse Coitus and act like it's a big joke. How original. Like the whole male staff--except maybe the gay guy--doesn't think of her in that hot light, at least sometimes.

Sam, man, the scary thing is that she can see right into me, into the big gap where Erica's supposed to be these days. So here's my strategy, let me know if you think it's a winner. I'm going to pretend that Naomi is an abstraction, that sex is an abstraction (at home it might as well be.) I'm abstracting up a storm around here.

But drop me some substantial lines, friend. Something I can put my hands on.

Ciao,

Martin

November 25

Dear Sam,

Happy day, turkey. Yesterday, the day before TG, Erica was still at school when I got home. She came in and our conversation consisted of her proclamation that she was wiped out from studying all night. We've heard this before, right? She is still getting cranked up for finals and is working herself to a stub. So she hardly noticed me, flopped on the couch beside me, asked about my day and fell dead asleep.

Sam, this isn't quite how I had imagined a marriage would be. I guess I lost my owner's manual, you know, the kind with the lame English translation--linguistic vestiges of a technical language from the Far East.

We had that great honeymoon in the desert near Santa Fe. There were owls in the cliffs, Sam. We heard them all night as the half-moon shone on the braided arroyos that snaked down to the alluvial plain.

And then we packed it in and blasted off to Philly, to the agitated East Coast, where the sky has walls and a caustic irritant pervades everything. The upshot is that I married Erica, and she married medical school and now she's got some outside research project.

More time for the lab, less time for me? I ask her, and she says, It's only for this year. And I say what about me this year? She says, Do you want me to drop everything? And I say, You're dropping me from your schedule and what about that?

We agreed, Martin, that these would be hard years, she reminds me. And I lean back, pause dramatically and say, You don't have to make them *this* hard. The discussion gets less pretty after that.

But check this. I've been having the most scintillating conversations with Nurse Naomi Koitz. Over lunch we talk about history.

She tells me she likes to know how it looked before, and how it looks now. And who's lying, and what they get for it.

I tell her, You can't pretend it's a big game of pool, it's no way so direct as that.

Then she looks at me with absolute seriousness and says, "You can't deny that there's somebody right now chalking up his cue, even as we speak."

If it's billiard balls, I tell her, they're hitting each other randomly.

"*Something* gets it moving," she says, and now she gets a real intense expression. "It's destined, Martin. Like everything's already been done before."

Well, Sam, if it's been done before, then why struggle to do anything different? On the other hand, if we're destined to repeat our actions over and over, why shouldn't we do what's most fun?

Am I surrounded by crazed women?

We're not quite in Zarathustra country here, but it makes lunch go a little faster.

Later,

Martin

December 14

Dear Sam,

They've got me working some shifts on the ambulance. The deal is, someone gets their head scrambled out in the world and a couple of us civilians are sent to pick them up. Not surprisingly, the clients aren't always happy to be committed and they often have a fair amount of commentary to deliver on the mental health system in general and the ambulance crew in particular. On my first run my partner offered up stories about doberman attacks, and the guy who had a refrigerator pushed down the flight of stairs on him. This is fun.

The other day we had to go collect this woman with a real knockout case of depression. She'd been in and out of the hospital a few times so they knew about her--the driver acted like we were making a run to the 7-eleven. In a nondescript neighborhood of brick row houses, hers was the one with the yellow cartoon-duck planter out front with crusted snow on the dead blossoms.

Her husband answered the door wearing a blue shirt with "Lester" stitched in an oval patch on his chest. He said, "She's really under the weather this time, fellas." His wife was lying on the bed in a bathrobe, half propped up, with all the shades pulled. She was so depressed she couldn't move. Lester said, "Come on, honey. These men are taking you to the hospital." As we eased her into the wheelchair she started crying quietly and her husband

followed as we took her downstairs. He came to visiting hours later that day and stopped at the nurses' station, "Hi Naomi," he said. "I guess she's back."

That's some years he's been putting up with that. Old Lester just keeps on for a long time with things being not so great, and he's still sticking it out. Is this guy a saint or a fool? You tell me.

In the throes of her finals, Erica got some good news. Her "little lab project" is being adopted, so to speak, by this hot research team at the school. The main *jefe* is a Major Labcoat in his field--Lars Rypdal. This guy is a big deal. He's taught in Chicago, Cairo, and Paris. Erica's obviously glad to be on the squad.

I met him at that beginning-of-the-year party last fall, he's a big strapping Nordic yob, tall as hell, with big, bony hands. Somehow he chose Erica. Of course, she *is* probably one of the smartest in her class, and would no doubt have high research values, in that white lab coat, blond hair, and all. I can just imagine. The work going on in this lab, she tells me, is viral epidemiology, the study of malfunctioning viruses. Sounds perverted to me: sick viruses? Phrenology--now there's some clean, traditional science that I can get with.

Oh, and speaking of old science, over lunch Nurse Koitz told me this utterly gothic tale about the time she and another nurse got some master keys and went all through the subterranean catacombs that run between the different buildings of the state hospital.

See, in the old days the psycho patients were committed for life and had to spend their years entirely indoors. It was supposed to be good for them. The network of underground passages was built between the buildings so the patients could get around but couldn't escape. Naomi followed one passage which led to a big room with an oval walking track for patients to get some exercise. The track was cork and the curves weren't banked. The patients just shuffled around and around in the dim light until they got tired.

Naomi was really hot to tell me about coming up at dawn in what once was the incurably violent patient's ward. For a long time she described watching the sunrise through the bars of a window up on a widow's watch.

"The sun rising over Philly," she said.

On the one hand it gave me the severe creeps--we don't even have basements in California, much less horror-show underground labyrinths. On the other, I could get into the big adventure, exploring the depths that lie beneath our feet all the time, unconsidered.

Hope life in Hollywood remains cool and, ultimately, plausible. Watch out for the tar pits.

Ciao,

Martin

January 20

Dear Sam,

Yesterday was Friday the 13th like you've never seen before. Erica and I kicked it off with a fight. A fight! So tacky, it was. Just a regular old kitchen-table fight and I'm not even sure what it was about. Part of it was "How could someone possibly spend so much time at school." By objective standards I guess it wasn't that big a deal, a pair of toothless daschunds gumming each other, neither able to win, neither willing to surrender. Finally, I had to go to work. I was already late.

As soon as I got on the floor of The Unit this patient latched on to me--literally. He'd been brought in during the night and wasn't stabilized on his pharmaceuticals. I came up with my clipboard and asked how he was feeling, trying to figure out if he knew who and where he was, and he quickly grabbed my sleeve and wouldn't let go. Other counselors tried to kid him out of it, but he just stood there mute, clutching my sleeve.

This jive went on all morning. A doctor showed up, but the guy didn't respond to an authority figure, either. I suggested taking my shirt off, but the head nurse huffed and said: "That would be inappropriate." So we stood there for a few hours until his medicine kicked in and that short circuit stopped fizzling deep inside his head. He let me go without a word.

Morris lit up a big smile when he walked into the lunchroom. "Where's your friend, man?" He sat down like a cooling supernova just across the table

from me. "He just wanted to touch the garment, that's all. You shouldn't deprive a man of his personal savior."

Just doing my job, Morris.

"Shit. Many are called, but few are chosen." He shook his head in wonder. They don't pay me enough.

And if that weren't enough, Nurse Koitz somehow ended up at the Olde Buffalo Wing Pub without her car and, whattadyaknow, she was ready to leave just when I was. Okay. So we drove to her tidily sprawling apartment complex by the freeway and as we walked the cement pathway toward to her cubicle, the bilious residue of the week's tension fell away. We were a little drunk, too.

She unlocked her door, paused, smiled over her shoulder, and said, "You can't come in." I started to say "no problem" and she said, "Unless you promise to be good."

"Yeah. I'll be *so* good," and as soon as I said that a shudder of recognition took me back to when I was an ever-cruising horndog undergraduate at Santa Cruz.

That was before you were on the scene, Sam, so here's the rap. It was always easy, the same every time, and never a problem to find one with starvation eyes. There are plenty of us. We'd hook up and we'd party, we'd go to her place, and we'd screw. In the morning I'd have a look around and score her on how much cheap-looking stuff she had, or on the pulpy, lame

books she read, or just the stupid things she said. Always, she'd have a great body and the sex would be good, and I'd loathe myself when we weren't fucking, and sometimes when we were.

But from the glimpse I had into Naomi's door I could tell her place offered relief from the undertow of violence at work, and my empty home life, the brown, slushy land, and the wasted cities around here. Her place was bright and soft, with lots of pillows and plants.

But when I sank into Naomi's couch a major warning bell started clanging away in my head and it wouldn't stop. Sam, after you set me up with Erica, I stopped cruising. Yeah, I remained the same low beast as before, just that my time was taken up with Erica, and I didn't need that other scene and I was goddamn psyched to be shed of it.

So when Naomi bent low and put two glasses of wine on the table in front of me I said, I really have to go.

I told her I wanted to be home before all the Friday night drunks got on the road, you know, with all the bars around here and all. She looked at me quizzically and started in with a "you could just stay for a little while" line. But I stood up abruptly, said no, thanks, but I'll see you Monday, and lurched gracefully into the door frame on my way out.

I drove like hell past Germantown into Philly, avoiding the areas of chunked-up pavement this time. The entrance of the teaching hospital was way inside this maze of a health science complex, a funhouse of courtyards,

walkways, and lobbies. I couldn't find it again with a gun to my head. I was trying to give the security guard some feeble story concerning pickup of some biological samples, when a homeless guy came up to the booth and started yelling about what did they do with his mother, and I slipped in the door.

Rypdal, Rypdal, Rypdal. His name was almost at the bottom of the fourth panel of the directory, in green--his office is in the green wing. The fifth elevator dinged, I leapt in and tapped my feet all the way to the third floor where I was joined by an old black woman pushed in a wheelchair by a thuggish white guy. I think they hated each other.

The doors opened on the ninth floor and I strode out, right up to the map. Number 9315 was on an outer corridor. I noted exactly which turns to make and the approximate distance between each one. The corridors might have been long, I don't know. My vision blanked out except to focus on the next corner, the next place to turn. Third door down on the last leg, I could see through the wire glass fire doors that Rypdal's office was closed. Well, why not? Faculty always sleep with their students--it happens all the time. No need to advertise it. Just an unoriginal, stereotyped attraction and, ultimately, a mediation of power. But it was a cliché, Sam. And you know how I detest cliché.

Rypdal had a Far Side cartoon on his door, the one where the cows stand on two legs when there are no cars going by. Ah, the human-like touch. I knocked on the dull metal and stepped back. A slight colorful movement

caught the corner of my eye and I turned to see Erica standing at a lab bench across the hall from the office.

"Hey, what are you doing here?" I said. After all, it was almost ten-thirty, or eleven.

Erica raised her head and laughed an octave up when she saw me. Oh, she had the usual objections: it was late, she was just finishing, why didn't I come pick her up more often.

So, Sam, she showed me the different experiments, two just hers and three she's collaborating on. The tragedy is that she's doing all this work for free, but hell, she doesn't want to be the kind of doctor who's always running around with his black bag and halitosis. Yup, research is much more noble.

Erica took me to the heavy equipment room. Those centrifuge machines look like big, hi-tech clothes washers with digital readouts on top. Using massive flywheels they spin solutions of mixed-up DNA strands so they float to different levels in their tubes, depending on how long they are. These babies clock it at 800k rpm--so fast that they have to be supercooled under vacuum pressure to reduce friction from the air molecules. Zow! They go all night.

In this room full of genetic material whirling away in a frozen vacuum Erica reached over and turned off the fluorescent lights and we embraced, surrounded by glowing red numerals floating in the dark. Down in the courtyard a huge heating system, like an upended boxcar, gushed billows of steam up into the cold night air. As the spinning chemical chains found their

places in the controlled media around us, and heat poured up into the night,
we held each other.

That's all for now, Sam. It's enough.

Yours,

Martin