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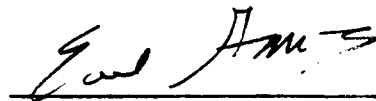
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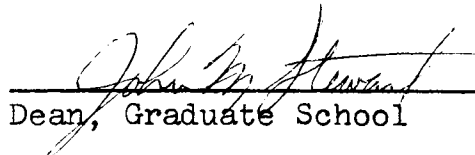
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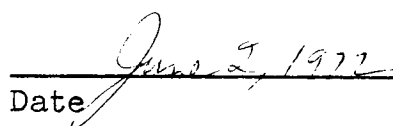
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US

I can't stop. I can't stop crying, the tears coming loose, licking my cheeks, crying to not hear Mama, crying because my Mama is. I hear her crying low and hurt, crying behind her door behind the hallshadows because my Daddy went. I sure want her. But my sisters won't let me see her. And I can't stop crying, swallowing the crying, but I can't stop.

"Mama, I'm trying not to."

Just this once. If I could see Mama just for a minute. But my sisters said I can't. "You sit quiet in the livingroom until I call you," Jeannie said. Her voice was falling away soft, like wheat. "You'll have to leave Mother alone today." My hand slips from my pocket, hugging my cateye marble hard, the marble getting warm in my fist. If I could see Mama I'd curl her warm red hair silky through my fingers, then she would stop crying and I'd stop. She would tuck the sheet up tight against

her chin like she does while Daddy's still snoring loud into his pillow, she would squeeze me, wrestle my hair. Then she wouldn't cry.

But Jeannie said. And Mary was bawling when I was in the kitchen, leaning her forehead against the refrigerator. I know. My Daddy got too sick and went. Now Mama's hall is all shadowy dark. My sisters don't think I know, but I do. Daddy went. I rub my tears out. I rub and my eyes pinch and the shadows fade, then the tears come back and the shadows. I saw Daddy go whitefaced up on the garage ladder yesterday, he grabbed his chest, his mouth puckered like a fish. He went inside the house, not looking at me. I know. I curl up closer against the sofa, watch the sunshine trying to chase Mama's hallshadows away. Then she will feel good. But the sun hides and still I hear the sound of her tears, I stand up and peer out the picturewindow, looking for the eye of the sun, the skinny maples leap up outside in their beds, but I can't find the eye and I hear Mama, the crying.

"Mama!" The livingroom goes fuzzy through my tears.

"David?" Jeannie says half-hushed from the kitchen.

I squat down. I shut up like I do in school when teacher wants me to read out loud from her book. Only the sky shows through the picturewindow.

"David?" Jeannie calls again in her tall voice, poking her head through the archway. Her red waxy eyes aren't crying now,

but I can see she hasn't painted her mouth pretty yet.

"Shhh," she whispers, peering around but not seeing me, her finger touching her lips. "You've got to shush now." Then the phone jangles and her head disappears.

Mary takes the phone. There's low talking, then she hangs up and one of them starts crying again. I can't tell which one. Sometimes my sisters sound the same that way. No, it's Mary crying, I can tell now, she snuffs her nose a lot, I squeeze my cateye tighter. When I was in the kitchen she was crying too, but trying not to show it, hiding by the side of the refrigerator, trying to keep me from knowing. She didn't think I knew but I did, she hugged me close around my shoulders, her tears leaked down her cheeks into my hair, her front it was warm like Mama. She wiped her eyes behind her glasses. Jeannie was crying too, her face streaked red and pink.

Then Jeannie led me in here. "You'll have to leave Mother alone today," she said. "Mrs. Gail is with Mother now, Mrs. Gail from church." I squeeze my cateye as hard as I can but Mary still won't stop crying, then I listen close and I can hear Mrs. Gail talking soft to Mama behind the door, soft and nice like prayer. My cateye shifts into my left hand. Cateye, fisheye. Daddy took me fishing once and they all got away. Mama's door swings open behind the shadows, Mrs. Gail steps out blinking, and I can see the foot of Mama's bed, her patchquilt is thrown back across it, but I can't see Mama. Then I can't see

even her bed, the door fills the wall again and my tears come. My thumb finds my mouth, my cateye in my fist. Mrs. Gail goes shaky into the kitchen, her hair gray as the shadows, says to my sisters in her nice voice, "It's better. She's crying now." Mary hushes and I hear chairs scooted. I think I should sneak outside and play with Rex. I don't feel so good.

I tiptoe to the frontdoor, my shoestring snaking along beside me. But Jeannie calls for me as I slip through the yawning door. "David!" she calls again, but then I hear Mrs. Gail say, "No Jeannie, each in its own time," and I jump down the stoop, running from the crying, my fists working the tears from my eyes. Daddy said the fish kept away from our hooks because they were smarter than us. So I'm running. The birds are awake, squawking to one another that I'm in the yard now, but I can't see them. I wave my arms and shout as I run past the madrona, and one of the fat jugeyed robins fights from the branches and flies up and up into the sun, his belly fat with berries, his wings clapping the sun.

Rex isn't around. He must have gone with some other dog because he's not in his wicker. I wish he would get home. I want to bury my face in his heavy fur, hear him growl inside. He's never home when he should be. But I don't whistle him. My sisters might hear and make me come in.

I stuff my cateye home in my pocket and pick up my basketball beside the garage, but it's flat and won't dribble worth shoes,

anyway the basket's too high. I shoot, but the ball only shucks up about halfway to the basket, then comes down plop like a biscuit in the dust. I wish Daddy would nail the basket lower. He won't though. I stare up at the hoop. I told him it's too high, but he said I'd have to learn to use it if I wanted to play good basketball. I guess he's right.

Yesterday when he was up on the ladder cleaning the garage eaves, I asked him. He looked down from the ladder. "David," he said, "if I put the basket any lower you'll just be wanting me to raise it back in a couple of months, the way you're growing. Why, you'll be stuffing it here before long." Then he laughed. His eyes were full of me.

"You sure?" I asked.

"Sure I'm sure." He looked at the net. "Let's leave it where it is, okay?" He still was smiling when he started down, his huge hands grasping the ladder sides. But suddenly he wasn't smiling at all, just staring way far away across the roof, his eyes bulged, his breaths coming in pieces. Then after a minute he came down the ladder slowly and carefully and stumbled into the house. He never came back to put the ladder away. It's still leaning against the garage beside the basket.

I take out my cateye, stretch up and flip it toward the net, but it misses and I catch it before it falls in the dust. Then I throw it again and make it this time and catch it again. Cateye, fisheye. Daddy's landing net hung useless from his belt

that day we went fishing. The fish were too smart for us, we only saw one the whole day, it puddled the surface of the clear water right beside our lines. Its eyes were shiny as Mary's glasses when she's standing in sunlight.

I wander along the edge of the yard where the ivy fence is, brushing the ivy as I walk, not crying anymore. The morning wind is cool against my face. I hope my sisters don't make me come inside, it will make me start crying again. The ivy feels like smooth green tongues, they laugh when I shake the vines. Beyond the fence is the wall of the house next door, I look at myself in the window in the wall. I look fatter. I like it here. Daddy planted the ivy. I helped, helped the dirt hide the roots. There's a crack in the bottom of the wall and I can see a bug climb out. It's an antbug but not an ant because it's bigger. It's not carrying bread or sticks like ants do. It goes back in the wallcrack. I've seen the bug before. I come here lots. He's a flatblack color. I shiver, the ivy laughs, and the bug pokes out again, crawls down into the dirt. I put my cateye in my pocket, stretch my leg through the fence, flick him over onto his back with the toe of my tennis shoe. He tries to right himself in the dirt, squiggling, his little spiderlegs kicking air. He tries, but he can't. So I stomp him.

I look away, shiver again. The ivy leaves laugh at me, shaking, laughing, all blurry. I guess I better store the

ladder away. Daddy left it out. I wish Rex would get home. I'll put the ladder away and wait for him. I let go of the ivy, march over toward the ladder, the ivy stops laughing and hangs quiet and thick on the vines. But I'm halfway to the ladder when the back screendoor creaks open. It's Jeannie.

"David?"

RIPE

Mortie--he just stood rooted beside me at the bottom of the hill, his fists sucked down in the pockets of those coveralls Ma still makes him wear picking, watching Duane and the girl hold hands as they plodded up the tractor-ruts to the fields. I blew into my hands, rubbed them together. The cold morning dust was riper than the raspberries, thick enough to stand on. But Duane and Francie didn't seem to mind it at all, they tramped up the hill laughing, kicking up whole barrels of dust. Francie's legs were flexed soft as a mare's within her Levis. I guess that's because she's older than Duane's other girls, most of them were skinny like they'd just been pruned. She and Duane hiked over to the scarecrow maple where they'd chucked their bellyboxes the day before. They never once looked back for us. And Mortie--well, the towhead ninny just hunkered beside me, his eyes red from the

cold dust. I shuffled around in the weeds where I'd hid my own bellybox, then started up the hill. If you stash your bellybox you're sure to have one the next day.

Right then Mr. Seeda's bus full of winos from town come bucking across the scabby burned-off pastureland, its wired-on hood clanging against the snout and its tailpipe farting a funnel of blue exhaust. Ma had just primped herself in our rear-view mirror, fitted her head into that perfumed kerchief of hers, and was halfway out of the Buick when the bus come homing in at her. She pounced back into the car and went flooding out of the passenger side as though she'd shot across that front seat without touching hide nor hair to it, then stomped over to the bus and bullied the driver, her chest heaving. The driver just grinned. That really started those winos mooing. You could see them pitching their heads around behind the bus windows like they were puking. I just dogged on up the hill, the dust gummied inside my nose. Below me Mortie sleeved some grit off his mouth, then stretched himself a little. He wasn't laughing either, too cold for it. August mornings here are like that, the mud left over from the July rains curls and cracks in the ruts and the gray sky slabs down across the hilltops. The heat doesn't break till noon, but then the fields cook up fast.

Duane and Francie were laughing, but it was hushed laughing, not at Ma or the bus driver. Duane more snorted than laughed.

He was pointing at the charred maple where his denim jacket dangled from one of the wrinkled branches. He always leaves things everywhere. He scooped his comb from his hip pocket and dawdled at his hair for a second, then picked up their bellyboxes, the bleached-out rear seam of his jeans showing its skunk streak. Francie kissed his neck as he bent down, and he spun up, whacked her rear, but before he could hit her again she leaped away, her orange sweatshirt flashing orange-brown against the hill. I knew what they were laughing about. Duane had worn that jacket when he and Francie snuck out of the house, after she gave Mortie the four bits to keep shushed.

Duane roped his bellybox around his waist real quick, then helped Francie. His arms looped her waist after he'd roped her, then his big hand slid up easy over her chest. Her mouth a red circle, she laughed quiet-like to him as she stepped away, looking around. I squinted, blinked the dust out. Francie patted her hair into place, then her hand melted into Duane's and they shoved on up the hill, the box joggling against the oiled wiggle of her hips. In a minute they disappeared into the split where the field is parted down the middle.

At the bottom of the hill the winos staggered out of the bus and snotted their noses, dug at their crotches. One had the jimmies so bad he come clomping headlong down the bus steps and bumped Mortie, jostling him back onto his crippled leg. The wino mumbled something, doffed his hat and shambled past.

But Mortie never even hollered, just caught his balance and rubbed his thigh, pouting. Something was bothering him real bad, but it wasn't just his leg. He had been born twenty minutes faster than me, sliding out of the old manhole with a leg which was an inch too short, so that now he walks like someone missing a shoe and he lies awake nights, working the leg. No, it wasn't just the leg. I think mostly it was Francie.

The night before, we'd laid in bed and watched the light seep in from the livingroom, listened to them scratch around on the couch, Francie's laughter low and nervous. Mortie was nothing but a shadow on the wall beside me, working that stinking linament into his sick leg. All at once he quit working the leg and scooted over. The bedsprings sagged and groaned. "Henry," he whispered, "what you think they're doing in there?" His eyes were pearly.

"Aw, nothing," I says. "Just wrassling around."

Mortie giggled like a girl. "You bet," he says. I was hunched about halfway off the bed, so I shoved him over onto his own side. He stunk of linament. After tossing the covers around he propped his head up on his elbow. "You think she's rooming with him after Ma goes to sleep?" His face was round and pale in the half-light. "You think he's took her clothes off?"

"You know Duane," I says. "He's a punch."

Mortie giggled, flopped down. "You bet," he says.

I socked my pillow up, then listened to Ma snore and watched the light from the livingroom squeeze smaller now and again as one of them eased the door shut. Except for Ma the house was quieter than the moon. But I swear you could hear Mortie trying to listen into the livingroom. Ma says he's got mouse ears.

Suddenly he says, "Let's sneak in there and watch." He coughed like the last belch in the pump before the water comes, jerked the covers back and sat up. "Let's go see what they're doing. Okay, Hen? Maybe he's took her clothes off."

"Naw," I says, "he'd whale you till you're crippled in both legs. Give it up, Mortie."

"Gees, Henry. We can hide in the kitchen behind the stovewood bin. C'mon."

"Naw." I rolled over away from him. His breath was enough to curl bacon. "Shut up and go to sleep," I says.

But he had already climbed out of the sack. He strung on his coveralls, then went limping down the hall, testing the floor with his toe before each step. Toe, heel, toe, heel, his bare feet made a sucking noise on the warped linoleum.

But I guess he made it, because the next thing I remember was him shaking me awake, that half dollar in his hand. "Look what she give me," he says. "Just look here." He pushed it against my nose. A Kennedy head. I had to squint, the livingroom light had been killed. "She give me this and told me

to get back to bed," he says. "And she wouldn't let Duane whale me either, Hen. He wanted to but she wouldn't let him." Mortie scrambled around under the bed for his tennis shoe and shoved the coin in. You don't see many half dollars nowadays.

"They still in there?"

"Naw," he says, backing out from beneath the bed. He stripped off his coveralls, dumped them on the dresser and crawled under the covers. "After she give me the money they took their coats and the Buick, and left. Don't tell Ma. You know what she says about Duane using the car nights."

"Did Francie have her clothes off? Did you see her naked?"

"Naw," he says. "Go to sleep." He bunked down then, and his breathing come wider and wider apart till I thought he was asleep. I was dozing off too, my head full of Francie. But all of a sudden he says, his face sunk in his pillow, "You know what she said, Hen? You know what she said after she give me the money?"

"She said in a couple of years I'll be sneaking some gal out from under Ma's thumb too." Through the pillow his voice sounded tired, like crying. "She wasn't laughing at me either," he says, and I started to say "Big deal," but the night pretty much and washed in on me by that time, I was dogged from picking all day, so I just kept quiet. Mortie started yapping about something else then, but I don't remember what.

But that's what did it. It's because Francie shelled him out the money like he was her Uncle Sam, then come morning she went hoofing up into the fields without even giving Mortie a Hello. She never said Hello when she slid into the car in front of Bee and Don's Grocery, not so much as a nod all the way to picking, her hand in Duane's. And Mortie just couldn't shrug it.

Ma tromped over and handed him a bellybox. "Hup up, now. Let's git cracking." Mortie stared at her for a second, then tossed his head back, whipping the hair out of his eyes, and limped off up the hill behind the winos.

But he hopped right to work when we reached our rows. I was picking on Ma's row, next to Mortie, same as usual. He took the left side of Francie's row so she could pick beside Duane, who had the left side of the third row. Mortie squatted with his bellybox half-tied around his waist and half-balanced on his knees, and began shucking the raspberries off their milk stems like he was shucking flame off match-heads.

Of course he had the side that soaks up the afternoon sun, so he had natural good picking, but bushy. That's the way it is, I guess. Berries and bushes both take to sunshine. Except once, last summer, when Mr. Eddie still lived with Ma and us. That day the berries were all clustered on the shady side, and the good side was the bad. Mortie had dibbed the sunny side while we were still in the Buick, then he seen how it was and he was cussing all day. He just hates to have anyone beat him in picking.

But that's a different story, and I better tell this one like it stands. On the far side of Mortie's row Francie wouldn't pick worth snot, just yap to Duane and sample berries, the ripe juice gooshing out between her fingers as she popped whole handfuls into her mouth. And Duane didn't pick much either, only smiled like he'd eaten weeds and liked them. Francie was his first girl who was older than himself.

I kept picking steady. When my bellybox was full I walked it down to my flat, picking some more as I went, the gooseegg dirtclods breaking under my tennis shoes. If you set your flat way down your row, then you don't have to carry it so far when you're done. I moved slow, the berries were stacked over the brim of the bellybox in a red apron up my chest. The berries at the bottom of the bellybox were mashed, and they ended up on top when I dumped into my flat, kneeling so I wouldn't spill.

Three bellyboxes full equal one flat. Mortie already had dumped twice, but his flat was empty. I looked back. Then I spied through his row.

Francie's flat was half-heaped. Mortie had dumped into the wrong flat, on purpose. He's dumber than Duane sometimes. I roped my box on and trotted back, copping off his row. It sure was a good one. He was stooped, working at the under-berries.

"What're you doing? Hey, are you crazy?" I asked, but

he kept picking, a kind of hawkish look to his face. "She paying you or something?"

"Naw. Leave me alone." I seen Ma take her second belly-box up to her flat, her kerchiefed head bobbing along the top of my row, so I jumped back to work. You couldn't hear Duane and Francie gabbing anymore.

And you still couldn't hear them when Ma walked her full flat up to the truck. Mortie had worked himself way past me, now he was just a runt squatted up there beside his row, so I ducked over and poked my head through the bushes. There wasn't anyone. I squirmed clean through. Francie and Duane were gone, they'd chucked their bellyboxes and left. When I crawled back to tell Mortie, he suddenly had disappeared too, his bellybox perched on his flat. So I untied my own box, jerked out a ground thistle that had stabbed through my jeans, and went.

The cold still hadn't broken, the sun just starting to slice through the clouds as I wandered along the edge of the field, pitching clods at post ends and spying down the rows for Mortie. I stopped when I come to where the hill banks up against the first row. Mortie stood in the parking area below, beside the bus. If Mr. Seeda catches you in the parking area when you're supposed to be picking, you'll get fired sure as hell. Cars get jockey-boxed.

I started to sprint down the slope, but pulled up short alongside the maple. I could see Francie's head flush against

the inside of the backseat window of the Buick, her hair splayed out against the glass. Then Duane's head nuzzled into view a little above hers. For a second I thought her arms were around his neck, but then the steam on the window cleared, and I seen I was wrong, that he was just trying to sit upright. He arched his back, his head jutting toward the rear window as though he was tucking in his shirttail or something, then the Buick door swung open.

His arm was around her shoulders when they climbed out. She squared her sweatshirt, folded a curl behind her ear, then slammed the door, smiling. Duane was smiling too.

"Duane! Your brother!"

She pointed, her painted-on brows arched. Mortie began back-pedaling fast, his legs churning, his mouth open. Francie started whimpering a low whining noise.

Duane caught Mortie, tagged him smack on the jaw. Mortie's head lurched and he toppled backward. He crashed against the bus, then grabbed his head and sat down in the dirt. He rolled over onto his stomach, bawling, the small of his back jerking like a pump. Finally he began to moan, trying to tuck himself up close to the bus tire because he knew Duane would kick him. But he couldn't tuck up his right leg, the knee won't bend much.

"Shutup your gawd damn bawling!" Mortie tried to rise, but Duane's boot thudded into his ribs. He fell back onto his elbows.

"Duane, for God's sake!" Francie grabbed for his arm, missed. He kicked Mortie again, then stepped back as Mortie skittered under the bus. "Damn you! I said leave him alone!" Francie's eyes were thunderagates. She squatted beside Mortie, but Duane snatched her by the sweatshirt and she stood up.

"You know what Ma'll do when he blabs? You know? She'll throw me out on my butt!"

"You bastard." Francie lurched away. He let her go. She kneeled again, straightened her sweatshirt, Mortie all the way behind the bus tire now. "It's all right," she said. "He won't hurt you no more." Mortie crept out from the bus but didn't get up. "Don't worry, honey. It's gonna be all right now." She lifted his head onto her lap. He was bawling softly, his face plastered with dirt.

"But I seen you," he said. "I seen you in the car."

"Oh, God." Francie slumped against the bus, her arms still wrapped around Mortie so Duane wouldn't kick him. "Oh, my God." She was crying.

Duane swore, spit. "You seen what?" he growled, glaring.

"I seen what I seen." Mortie coughed, took hold of the bus tire, hitched himself up. Francie helped him. He was just rubbing the dirt from his eyes when Duane collared him, lifting him like a fish. Only Mortie's toes touched the ground, his coverall buttons catching and losing the sun. He struggled, whipping his arms around, and finally wrestled

from Duane's grip. "I ain't gonna tell," he gasped, and Duane backed off. Mortie scowled, aimed a finger at him. "No, I ain't gonna tell nothing. But it ain't cause of you! You hear? I ain't afraid no more. It ain't cause of you!"

Duane started for him, but Francie shook her head.

"You jist watch your sass," he said, and strode off, his chin peaked so his stubble showed. One thing about Duane, he knows when he call quits.

Francie watched Duane walk away, then glanced at Mortie, then back. Her mouth curled down. "I'm sorry," she said over her shoulder as she stooped to brush off her Levis. "That shouldn't have happened." Suddenly she spun around, dug in her pocket and brought out some coins. "Don't you see? I'm his girl, Mortie."

"Hell, you ain't the first," he said, fidgetting the coins.

Then she trotted up to Duane, linked his arm. I ran up and hid behind the first row. As they tromped past the maple Duane yanked his jacket from the branch, put it around Francie's shoulders. Some loose bark peeled off with the jacket.

I couldn't stand it any longer. I hauled ass through the next row, streaked around to Francie's row and dumped her flat over. The raspberries stained a purple splotch into the dirt.

CLAIM

A little rice would have been good.

In his home village there had been rice. Rice enough to scoop your hand into the wickers, throw the dry kernels high into the air and watch them rain down to earth. How angry his mother had been when she had caught him playing. But that had been in his own village, a year ago, when he had been a child. Now he was nearly sixteen, a man.

Since then there had never been enough food. His cheeks were drawn tight against his teeth, but he had managed to hoard a little food these past weeks, whenever possible tucking pinches of rice into the cloth sack he kept beneath his shirt. If the platoon commander had caught him, he would have been accused of planning to desert, perhaps shot. But no one had guessed his purpose. No one had seen him pilfer the extra handfuls of rice from the sacks at mealtime that night

before his last battle. He had planned to carry enough food to reach his village. And it might have been enough, but he could not have foreseen the problems with the women and the child.

His opportunity came during the battle. Suddenly left alone by the flanking troops, he had pitched his rifle butt-first into a swamp and slipped away through the elephant grass. He would not be missed until later. Then, with luck, he would be counted as among the dead.

He had learned well, an unseen shadow stalking through the jungle, moving safely between patrols of both sides. Coming unknown to this place.

Thirst had driven him here. He had seen much water, but he could not drink it. The water was brackish, frothed with scum. Once when he had bent to drink, some animal bones had warned him, and even then it had taken a great effort to leave the water alone. But here in this village there would be a well. The dryness in his mouth would disappear, and again he could eat some of the food in his sack.

Still, he waited, hiding just inside the jungle, at the edge of the village. He licked his lips, they remained parched, swollen. His tongue was large in his mouth, he could not swallow. Yet he could not go into the village until he was sure it was safe. It had been bombed recently, only a few huts stood, but they might hold death. The place smelled of raw smoke.

He watched a long time, seeing no one, no movement. He waited. He did not allow himself to sleep. At dusk he entered.

Behind one of the huts a young woman sat crosslegged, nursing her child. Her eyes were sunken in their sockets, but still with her free hand she helped the baby keep her breast. A small joy.

"Do you have water?"

"Yes, do you have food?" Her wiry fingers grasped the sack he offered her, and she cradled it within her arm, between herself and her child. Then she pointed toward the ruined school, once a hut with no walls, now just four poles, burnt thatch. There, still standing, was a pump.

His thirst gone, he searched the village, then returned to find the woman joined by an old one. Together they had eaten all his food. He stood before them, looking angry. Their eyes told him they had not been able to control themselves, their hunger. And now they were afraid.

He was not angry, but he had learned the trick of using their fear to make them tell him the truth. Scowling, he interrogated them. They had seen no one since the other villagers had been taken away. They themselves had been left behind because the woman was giving birth.

There was some food in the fields, but neither of the women could get there. The midwife was too old, could not

walk where the ground wasn't packed solid. The other had lost too much of her vital heat giving birth.

Why did she not have the old one place a brazier under her bed, like his mother and sister had done? Their strength had returned within a few days.

But the woman feared that her dead husband's con hoa, the ghost of those who die in fire, would return for her. He understood. Many of his own friends had been claimed by the con hoa during bombings, journeying into death the same way their husbands or wives had done before them.

He would sleep in the village tonight. In the morning he would find food for them all. Then he would leave.

He found a sleeping place beside the stone wall of a ruined house, a small hollow in the ground that would cradle him, conceal him well. Far enough from the well and the women that he could not be discovered if the VC came. He lay huddled within the hollow, facing the wall, his knees tucked up beneath him. His arm was his headrest.

He had the combat soldier's ability to fall asleep instantly when he desired, even when hungry. But tonight he could not sleep. His mind returned to the woman. Something stirred within him as he lay still, thinking of her, something that had been buried deep within him ever since he first had become a soldier, and which before then he had known only in a vague way. Now it was awakening within him. The woman's hair was

a rich shining black. The night about him was black, and he thought of her.

In the morning he drank deeply from the pump, washed his head and chest, then went directly into the fields. They also were ruined, pockmarked with charred shellholes. The one time his village had been bombed the villagers had looked on with vacant eyes as fire finished the bombs' work. The old men had joked, saying that the Americans now were cooking their food for them, but few laughed. It was months before the fields were repaired. And his younger sister had been among those who had not returned from the hiding place in the jungle.

By midday he had grubbed enough yams and corn for the three of them. The cooked yams in his sack would carry him for many days. He began to wonder if he should attempt to return home at all, perhaps the luck of his ancestors had been broken and the commander had not listed him as killed in action. If they were now looking for him as a deserter, they would send men into his village. It might be wise to find a new home.

When he returned to the women, he gave them the food without a word and went to a place where he could watch the village unobserved. The women went about their tasks in the same way they had done for centuries.

At dusk they set a meal before him beside their hut, eating only after he did, gravely and gratefully treating

him as the head of the household, the provider. The meal was good. A little rice would have been good, but they had found some fish sauce, which they insisted he eat. He joked as he ate, licking his fingers, and they laughed, the younger one shrilly, tossing her head back, the old one with a cackling toothless grin. The old one teased the younger when she kept one breast covered while nursing the baby. He laughed, but he knew the reason for such strange modesty was the American capture of the village some months before.

"You act like a nervous young virgin who thinks she has seen her suitor," the old one said. "And you are no better, you are as jumpy as a bridegroom."

She paused, enjoying their embarrassment. "Come, little child, you and I must go to bed and leave the virgin and her bridegroom to themselves." She lifted the baby from its mother's arms and disappeared into the back of the hut, chuckling to herself.

They talked and watched the coals glow in the brazier that had cooked their meal. Deep in his mind he knew the brazier should be extinguished, that even its small heat could draw the bombers. But he wanted the fire to die of its own accord. For the first time in over a year he was comfortable. And he felt that when the fire did die this strange stirring within him would be satisfied. It frightened him a little, and he could not bring himself to put out the fire and hasten the moment.

They spoke of their lives, their villages. He told her of his hardships as a soldier, of his two sisters and his mother. And she spoke of the great city of Saigon she had visited once, and how she intended to journey there when she was well enough to travel. How she would pilfer from the rich American shipyards for her food. Then she told him of how her husband had stolen a truck full of American goods. He laughed, but she was suddenly silent. The last coal died in a puff.

They rose. His hands became an unspoken demand. But she shook her head slightly and he let go of her. "First the midwife must make me a cleansing bath of sweet herbs. Tomorrow," she said.

He smiled, nodding once. He knew she must be ritually cleansed of the childbirth. He would wait here in the village another day before leaving. This thing locked within him would find expression. Tomorrow he would possess her. Then he would go, but only then. Perhaps he would take her with him.

He went happily to his sleeping place by the wall. The air was hot and smelled of sweet burnt wood. He had not noticed it before now, but a year's training had drawn him to the strongest wall in the village. If he had thought of it, he would have brought the woman here also. But she was already in her hut.

The first red explosion set off an automatic reaction in him. He buried himself against the wall, his hands behind his head, shielding his vulnerable neck. The planes returned twice. When they finally left it was dawn.

He ignored the angry buzz of the spotter plane, the small striped and winged silver finger slipping among the jungle tops. He knew the sight of him would bring more planes, but it did not matter. Her husband's con hoa had claimed her.

The napalm had found them lying together on their straw ticking. She had curled herself around the child, hoping in some vain and grieving way to save it. Her bare chest was charred black. Blood trickled from her nose and mouth. Her eyes stared.

He searched throughout the village until he located two small altars. He hoped the spirits who resided in them would accept the two women. He retched as he straightened the young woman into a sleeping position. He pulled part of the collapsed roof off the old one, the thatch was still burning and he stamped the fire out. Then he found a little food near their meal-site and placed it at the foot of the altars. He crossed himself as his mother had taught him and he prayed to his ancestors, then to the women's.

He had finished and was sitting hunched beside the bodies when the planes returned. These were the great ones which fly

so high as to be almost invisible. He peered upward, watching idly as they passed overhead, shedding death. Like rice, he thought. Like rice scooped from the wickers and thrown high into the air. How angry his mother had been.

BLINDNESS

Jerry Krews squinted from the kitchen as a lithe vague form slipped into his apartment, a dreamlike figure which moved against the sunlight. Dressed only in his underwear and afraid the person at the door was Mrs. Joyce coming to clean, he had snatched up his Levis chest-high in some absurd gesture of modesty while he fumbled along the drainboard for his glasses, jostling canisters and greasy silverware. He could hear the flat slap of sandals against heels, then through the haze came a voice:

"Jerry?" More statement than question, it rose above the cadenced steps.

"Oh. Just a minute." Even after recognition Victoria appeared as the liquid blend of her gilt tan--the sheathing of her French-Canadian ancestry--and her pink shift. With her own key, a minor indulgence he had granted, she had joggled the door

only slightly, aware of how he relished his mid-morning sleep. And after an all-night stint at grading finals, he was just getting ready for bed. Now she swiveled and dropped into his easychair, settled herself amid the peacock eyes of the afghan.

"I'm going to have a baby," she said, her voice morose. "It's definite." Then she sighed, a small dying. Suddenly nauseous, he felt the kitchen walls film and whirl like those of a hospital during the first seconds of ether; he stepped back, his vision of Victoria lost in a golden fog, bumped into the buffet, wheeled around and gripped the table edge. A filament buzz lighting his ears, his head dropped. But to faint would be womanly; he musn't. "Hey, are you all right?" he heard her ask impatiently.

"Of course. I'm fine." He blinked, sucked the emollient apartment air, his back toward her, shielding him. Finally he righted himself, groped across the table for his shirt on the ironing board.

"Just what are we going to do, Jerry?"

He tried to speak; the words rasped in his throat, and he swallowed them. He stood trembling beside the table, his stomach in knots and the backs of his knees moist with warm sweat, staring at Victoria until her blurred image vanished. He suddenly was sorry for ever having met her and angry with himself for having remained in the city at all. "I don't know," he said at last. "How the hell should I know, anyway?"

"You're the male of the species, remember? The breadwinner, and all that."

"Well, I can't pull answers out of air because you can't remember to take your damn pills. I'm no genie. We'll just get married, I guess. I mean, that was the understanding all along, wasn't it?"

"I suppose so," she replied sullenly.

Again his fingers looked along the drainboard, then in a flash of insight he reached up and seized his glasses from their roost on the refrigerator. The plastic nose pads pinched his bridge, but he felt better. He associated his semi-blindness with a colorful forgetting: only twenty-six, he already felt like an old man with a lukewarm memory. The self-consciousness of thick glasses on a spine of a nose otherwise had fled long ago: born with glaucoma, his eyesight was deteriorating steadily, and the ounces of improvement after a fistful of operations were little compensation for a man who had run a milker with a copy of Baudelaire in his hip pocket. Now the room's cloudiness faded.

Eyes downcast, Victoria was slouched within the opulent hips of his reading chair, contemplating her toes, her extended yawning legs and arched ankles forming two smooth lines from the hem of her shift to her sandaled feet. Her arms were crossed just below her breasts, her dress gathered beneath her hands. And stacked precariously on an arm of the chair were his dogeared

paperbacks: Wordsworth, Crabbe, Donne's Selected Meditations. Muscles straining, Jerry cocked himself up on each foot and worked his alternate legs into his Levis, drew the tight bleached-out denim over his buttocks and tucked in the angular bulge of his sex, then pawed at the zipper.

"Why can't you just sit down to do that?" she asked. He ignored the remark, ducked through the kitchen archway and crossed the livingroom, bent and kissed her hair.

"All right, you're pregnant," he said condescendingly. Solemn, she did not look up; the calligraphy of her eyeliner was smeared. It made her stony anger endearing. Her woman odors rose to him, the sweet-oil perfume on her black Canuck hair and on her thighs--the smells of small freedoms--as though within that unconscious softness there breathed an annealment of heart, a mending of passion. And suddenly he felt the riptides of her despondency and damned frustration swell from her and wash through his own blood-flesh. For an unblemished instant they once again were lovers. Then she shifted her weight to the opposite hip, and Jerry realized that within their union there existed a definite separation. The awful paradox of her pregnancy was evident in her evasive downcast eyes. Her lids pulsed and lifted, and seeing the mirror of her eyes, he shivered slightly. His larynx throbbed and the words passed through his lips as of their own accord. "You're certain you're pregnant," he said.

She nodded. "For God's sake, Jerry, why else would I be here? I had a test and everything. Of course I'm certain. Even if nothing else is."

"Meaning what? What else?"

"Oh, things," she said to the wall. "You for one. You haven't so much as phoned since Thursday. I don't like the way you've been acting lately. I don't like it at all. You're so moody."

"Me? Hell. You change more than a damn chameleon." He recrossed the room, this time to the window, tugged at the shade. The end of it whacked the window frame even though he kept his thumb ringed through the lifesaver on the sash. He stunk of sweat, lack of sleep. Below was a narrow lawn banked on both sides by struggling flower gardens. Jerry stared at the windows of the adjacent apartment building until the reflection of his own building stirred distortedly in the glass, a perpetual regress of reflected windows, he knew, if he could only see it. And suddenly his old anxiety returned; he knew that the self-assurance the city's ophthalmologists gave him was not payment enough for his having relinquished his half-ownership in the dairy back home in Salmon Lake.

"Would you quit avoiding the question? What are you staring at, anyway?"

"That first day you walked into my classroom I knew you were easy," he answered in a monotone, his nose pressed

against the glass. "Those go-ahead eyes and that leather skirt hiked up to your ass." He recalled her uplifted chin and the book she cradled like an heirloom Bible within the crook of her arm. Sartre. She had raised a lanky arm when he began lecturing on Yeats, wanted to argue Sartre's concept of history as against the poet's. Jerry had dismissed the question as impertinent; Victoria's arm had coiled back onto her lap, and never again did Sartre enter their conversations. "I loved you more than," he said. "And I wanted you."

Sunlight was spilling down against the window, he shut his eyes. He wished she would leave, he needed a bath and some sleep, some time to shave the loose stubble from his mind. Yet if she left now she might leave for good, and there was some electricity about her that he needed. In her narrow lips, in the habitual beating of her eyelids, and perhaps in that inhuman inconsistency she had shown at the faculty picnic, when she sliced tomatoes with a table knife yet burned the hamburgers, there was embodied a beauty he only obliquely understood. No, he could not lose her. He had loved her once, and still did. "You seemed more alive then," he continued, "full of . . . full of come." Sweating again, he immediately regretted having spoken. His lips remained open except at the corners, where his mouth was driest.

"Well, aren't we the badmouth lately. The young brash intellectual just up from the farm."

"Oh, shutup!" He spun around, started for her. But her eyes were glazed with venom; she had a greater hate,

a greater fear. Jerry checked himself, a ragged fury rising in his throat. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that. I was just trying to . . ."

"English instructor has affair with student slut," she was saying, her fingers peaked to indicate the height of the headline. "Now wouldn't that look peachy on the front page?"

Yet her voice rippled nervous and culpable. She no longer had that coed confidence she used to wear like a liquid makeup, that cynical sleekness present in thin intelligent women and in certain breeds of automobile. She was seated with her legs tucked secretary-style beneath her; but when he moved toward her she extended them again. "I'm going to take a bath," he said and stepped over the legs without glancing at her, entered the French-curtained plexiglass door alongside her chair.

The door rattled as he shut it: he would not listen to such asinine rage. "Do whatever you damn well please," he heard her say as he switched on the small AC/DC radio on the toilet top. Mrs. Joyce had warned him about such hazards, had heard stories of men electrocuted in their tubwater. But the radio remained. Too much Perry Mason, he had told her. Rudely awakened, the red eye on the radio glared at him, but instantly, Baroque. Something by Bach, maybe. No, Purcell. Jerry always listened to the same station. The music chimed light, flitting. Those were the days when music caressed the heart instead of the head, he reflected. Humming, he stoppered the tub, wrenched the

porcelain handles, stripped off his shirt and T-shirt. The T-shirt was damp with sweat, and he had to pull it off inside-out. Beneath prominent ribs his belly was rowed with muscle--not the muscle of an athlete, but gaunt fluted muscle. Frank Willis, his partner in the dairy, used to kid him about his leanness; barrel-chested Frank with his bawling laughter, a wizard with women. Jerry wished he had never left Salmon Lake.

He removed his pants and glasses, lowered himself into the warm rushing water gravely and gratefully. At intervals the soft Baroque furred above the noise of the tap; he drew his legs up and rested his head on his kneecaps, and then slowly his indignation dissolved. Yet his entire tension did not pass so easily. He thought about the farm. Financially it had been a fiasco, a stupid maneuver for two boys fresh out of college; the labor had been killing. But he had been raised in the country, and the static wrangling and alive gray anger of the city, like his blindness, was foreign to him. Here he just could not think straight--except perhaps at school, where his lectures sparked stares and smiles. And his feelings toward Victoria never seemed to stabilize: at times he had loved her even to the point of marriage, then other times he would only need her. And her love for him--well, what? He did not believe she still loved him, though she had at first, certainly. But after she had heard and reheard most of his theories about love, man, the universe, and his tenor recital in the classroom of Keats and Yeats no longer

spun an eagerness in her eyes, then he saw he would lose her. But from the beginning he had known she did not love him physically. That is the idiosyncrasy of the age, it recurred to him--the ability to worship the mental. "You definitely are not beautiful," she once had teased him in her childish and womanly way.

The tub was full almost to overflowing, and he lunged for the handles. Faucets squealed; the music was louder; the flow died to droplets.

He was positive Victoria would not enter the bathroom. She probably was pacing the livingroom, smoking menthols and swearing silently. But beneath her callous behavior she was a sensitive girl: she desired him because she somehow understood that his attractiveness plunged deeper than the physical. His was the beauty of ideas. Not because he was brilliant, but because she was not. And she was an idealist, perhaps that was why she had switched off the lamp before he had had time to undress that first night they had slept together. Seated upon the sofa-bed, she had interrupted him, saying, "Let's use this for what it was intended, okay?" Her coy, frank voice. She had translated the sofa into a bed, arranged the blankets while he was brushing his teeth, but when he stepped into the room and undid his belt she turned a bare shoulder to the light, her arm snaking out from the blankets for the lamp switch. Her hair skimmed across the pillow like rich black fingers reaching smoothly down her neck to touch her soft, soft back.

"Jesus Christ, Victoria!" He stumbled against the chair.

"It's Vicki, remember?"

"Vicki."

There was the rustle of a silk-lined blanket against skin, then a lovely jangling as her braceleted arm touched him. "Some men are made to be seen," she whispered. "You are only to be made." And within her laughter he recognized the sex-throes of a whole pride of men. Now he only prayed the child was his own; he knew she was dating other men, but huddled in his mind over the tiny body of their love, there still seemed reason to breathe hope into it. The bathroom throbbed dizzily, so he shook the water off his arm, felt along the toilet lid for his glasses, finally called to her. The door handle squeaked in reply. "Now what?"

He passed his fingers through the coils of his unclipped hair. "I've decided to move back to Salmon Lake. Come with me."

"That place?" The door swung open, her nylons meshed together, her heels clattered on the bathroom tile. "Look, if this is your idea of a joke, forget it. We're staying here. You, me, and . . ." her voice lowered, "the baby."

In the tub he considered himself at the disadvantage, as though he needed his clothes to protect his emotions. "I'm leaving, Vicki."

"Why? I don't want to be carted off to some hick-town. I'm not exactly Thoreau, you know, or that other idiot. What's his name."

"Oh, come off it. Everyone's moving back to the country." The easy shield of his lecturing tone warmed within him. "This

is the era of environmentalism. Woodstock, the Hog Farm. Men cultivating beards as religiously as Mennonites." His glasses inched down his wet nose, and he pushed them back up with his index finger.

"But I'm not going," she stated flatly. "You'd be just as restless back there as you are now. You're so moody, Jerry, so . . ." She fought for the right word. "So changeable. Just like your stupid philosophies."

"That's not true."

"Oh, isn't it? Well, let me tell you, there's one thing around here that is true." She aimed a bony finger at him.

"What's that?"

"I'm pregnant."

He smiled sardonically. "Who says so?" She glared, standing over him, and shook her head slowly, slowly, her nostrils flared to dark ovals. Then she turned and left him, shut the door without a sound.

He extended his legs, his arms on the sides of the tub. If Victoria had agreed to the move, been willing to forfeit her fragile convictions, then there would have been a chance for them, regardless of the child's parentage. Jerry prided himself that he was not a jealous man. But he was a man. The tempo of the music crescendoed, and again the old dull anger began to pulse in his throat, not anger at Victoria nor at himself exactly, but at something more general, something which controlled his lifetimes. He felt slightly

feverish; his stomach tightened until he had trouble catching his breath; then suddenly he realized what he could do. For the first time in his life he saw things perfectly! He simply had to flex his arms, draw himself part way over the side of the tub and reach through the long arduous tunnel of his vision to that red eye at the far end, that humming unanimous eye . . .

But suicide would just be a great raw waste, he decided; after all, he was more dead now than he would be within the embryonic sack of a coffin. He grasped the stopper chain between his toes, yanked. Shoulders slumped, he shuddered as the water sank below his knees. Finally he stepped onto the bathmat, watched the last of the water eddy and gurgle down the drain. Then on wobbling legs he walked naked into the livingroom, a trail of watery footprints stalking him.

Victoria's key lay on the bookstand beside the front door. He picked it up, clenched it within his fist until his knuckles whitened, flung it onto the couch. "You'll never understand," he muttered, "oh, you bitch." Only vaguely aware of the water pooling on the floor, he stared at the door handle; he felt tired with that dreary relaxation which comes after losing an athletic event or a battle. He recalled what he had been thinking when he had wanted to reach for the radio. He had realized for the thousandth time he could never go home. His proposition to Victoria had just been a lie to drown her individuality. He turned from the door, moved lamely across the room, opened the

window. The morning breeze burst cool and heavy against his skin, and the odor of daphne smelled lavender in the spring air. He rubbed his eyes, forcing his glasses up against his forehead, then drew them off altogether, his fingers upon the lenses. And now Victoria was also gone for good--gone to some other lover perhaps. If he had told her his secret, that within the shallow span of a year or two he would be as blind as Milton, then she might have stayed. And now he did not know why he had not told her; perhaps he feared her desire to understand him might be transmuted into tacit pity. But he had conceived of her as a woman swaddled in romantic deception, and to have her live for him in any other guise would not be the way he wanted it. Jerry squinted, but through the sunny fog which engulfed him was unable to see the windows set like glass hatches into the brick of the **adjacent** apartment building. Well, it didn't matter. He turned away.

Service

Hulked within the M42 artillery turret, sweat oiling the rolls of his neck, Private Littlejohn seesawed his black sandpaper like a shoeshine rag across the breastplates of the gunmount. His T-shirt hugged his chest and his plump knuckles whitened with the work, yet regular as machinery the emery cloth hummed the girl's name in shining syllables: *Senorita Peregrina*, sandpaper rhythms. A child found fleshing in the body of a whore. Skin of terra cotta, *Peregrina*. A hot cunt, a moist mouth. Gradually the emery wore smooth; he pulled another from his hip pocket, began buffing again. But having broken the cadence he had lost the daydreamed girl gowned in a black brocade of satin. And unable to conjure her image, he could not forget his menial task and the stench of oil that suffused the motorpool. Every afternoon at Fort Bliss seemed the same, the days dragging themselves across the calendar:

the Texas sun overhead, and he in the track turret, fatigued in baggy pants and spit-shined boots, scraping and cleaning metal, polishing metal.

He stood and stretched, pressing his thumbs against his spine, then squeezed back into the close circumference between the loader's chair and the azimuth tracker's chair. Too fat for the nest. Overweight? Get off those scales, we'll sweat if off you. Look, buddy, we'd take your grandmother if we thought she could tote a weapon. M16. Neither rifle nor gun but a weapon, he had laughingly told himself during push-ups at boot camp until his tongue blistered.

Careful not to touch the hot metal, he began again to gather thoughts of her into the meter of his work. Pare-a-green-ah. Pere-grina. Peregrina. Suddenly he saw her imperfectly mirrored within the brilliant metal, seated upon a barstool and bathed in yellowish light, the humid room dusty with incense and cigarette smoke. The early afternoon tourists had all departed and the nightly crowd had not yet arrived. Teeth bared, lips taut and open against her upper gums, she was eating an apple while matching frown for frown her reflection in the mahogany counter. An apple, in a bar! Ridiculous. The hair of his arm tingled when she touched his hand, him in his plaid civilian shirt, a welcome estrangement then, the uniform of ease. Soft touch, virgin's blush, websilk. And her smile: mute arrogance and disdain. Yet in that one holiday he discovered her heart's

interior, the intricate corridors and lovely ovens of a maid's kitchen. Littlejohn nodded to stress the thought, spat on the metal and honed down with the emery. But slowly it occurred to him that the remembering and forgetting of her were equal thoughts of equal weight, indistinguishable as the ripening and rotting of fine fruit, and suddenly he found he could not recall her features precisely, nor could he quite remember whether the light was amber or beige, nor even the exact price he paid for the drinks. A vague pulse of anger rose in his throat. He jerked up, squinting through the sun's whiteness toward the barren peaks which frame El Paso. The mountains moved imperceptibly closer through the hot haze.

EL POPOCATEPETL. A ragged name for a bar. A ragged neon winked off right to left like an Arabic script. Sucking a cigarette as the evening drew down along the tiled housetops, Littlejohn loitered before the sign, trying to relax. His first pass since he was drafted April first, on the back it was stamped MEXICO OFF LIMITS TO MILITARY PERSONNEL, the ink still drying; and already during the day he had applauded a dildo act, and twice his friend Hooder shed his fruit of the loom for a five-dollar throw. But Hooder had drifted out of the arms of the Juarez Juanitas an hour before, and now Littlejohn, scowling, stood hesitant outside the last bar home. An adjoining alley was alive with the yipping of dogs, and at the corner T-shirted bronze urchins badgered and bickered for nickels. He had planned

to bus up to Carlsbad Caverns, but changed his mind at the last moment, headed south. New boots pinched a twenty tucked in his sock.

"Seegarette, Meester?" A head of straight black hair had popped out from the side of the building.

"No thanks, kid." The boy's grin vanished; he gazed down at the rainbow of cigarette packs in his carrier, then trotted away. Littlejohn dallied for five minutes more, finally sauntered across the street to a gas station whose tilting marquee was of the old wooden-frame type. He leaned against a pump, still smoking, listened to three Mexicans in coveralls gibber about something or other as they monkeyed beneath the hood of a yawning Cadillac, 1950 vintage. Flies, words. After a second cigarette Littlejohn recrossed the street and entered the bar.

The door opened upon an arch thick with long multicolored fingers of stringbeads. Only the lowness of the lintel hindered him: stoop he must. He bowed through, squinted into the dimness as the beads rushed and rustled behind him. The scent of incense lay heavy in the air, and occasionally a bell rang tinnily as a waistcoated barman, screwdriver in hand, struggled with the cash register, as aloof behind his bar as a count within his keep. On a shelf above him a voice in an electric box sang in a romantic tongue about a secret love, while tiers of polished glasses grinned down opalescent arcs across the bartop. Two girls on stools stared at their drinks; one drummed manicured fingernails

on the counter. A third girl, seated cross-legged, worked at an apple. Littlejohn paused; from the far left-hand corner of the room stirred a delicate conversation, the dark Spanish of young lovers, so he angled toward the right, shuffling shallow steps across the red worn carpet. The first girl, a pale Amazon with a russet wave of ratted hair--either an American or its product--half-turned in place. Fat cheeks impeded her smile within a continent of flesh.

The third girl nudged his arm. He wheeled; in the fluorescent light her form appeared almost spectral, goddess or ghostess; then her mirage carnified into its slender shape, the silver cleavage of long nyloned legs stepping down from the stool. Her high and resolute cheekbones emphasized her deep elongated eyes and the small tiara cushioned against her hair. Her oriental heritage was apparent: she was neither American nor Indian nor fully Mexican; not chicana nor mestiza.

"You buy me a drink, okay?" She spoke smoothly, yet without derision. He did not reply, and with calculated ease she dropped the core of her apple in a marble ashtray, gathered her evening bag against her hip and glided toward a table without looking back. She moved with the dexterity of a dancer, her body the strategy of an unlit lamp, hiked her dress up slightly as she slid into the booth. They were almost alone; the adjacent booth was empty, and behind them a desert garden recessed into the wall spilled forth its spectrum of smells: the favored bluegreen

of mesquite and phacelia, the intoxicant lavender scent of potted hyacinth and candlewood; these merged and mingled with the soapy odor of amole and cheap cologne upon her hair, and when she directed him to sit beside her rather than opposite, he complied. "You stay, no?"

"Maybe." He was wary, but eventually found himself touching her hand, warm hand, then her leg. The feel of her thigh with its nylon webbing was strangely familiar; he had touched this leg before--back home--except the woman was different then, less illusory. He withdrew his hand, peered around awkwardly for a waiter. But the bartender continued to tinker. In the front of the room a claue of whores clamored over a handbag of facial cosmetics, alternately lifting each little bottle to the light, as a priest might raise a chalice. They were positioned as to be unseen by a person entering the bar, yet able themselves to view everything and everyone. Their jabber stained the amber air. Littlejohn couldn't bring himself to look at the girl beside him, stared instead at her clasped hands resting on the table. Unpolished nails pointed sharply as trowels accented her tiny wrists. She dug into her evening bag, drew out a cigarette and a book of matches. He offered to light it, but she shook her head, struck a match without removing it from the book; her face glowed for an instant behind the flame and her tiara glinted in colorful sequins, a crown from which a century ago a veil solemn as sin may have hung gauzed for mass.

"You from the fort, es verdad?" Her voice had a nasal resonance.

"Si, soldado."

"Oh, habla Espanol." When she laughed her upper lip curled inward against her teeth.

"Si, un poco poco Espanol." He managed a wry wrinkled smile. So his year of Spanish in college was doing him an ounce of good after all! He hadn't been able to handle the speaking part of the language then, but he was doing fine now. While they waited for the waiter he told her again he was a soldado and again she smiled--condescendingly at first, then with another little laugh. He was about to tell her of his wife and unborn child in Missouri when a door opened out of the pineboard paneling of a side wall. Surrounded by a horseshoe of light, a slim figure in a sharkskin suit advanced, his jacket tight as though lacquered on. Through the doorway Littlejohn could hear the soft giggling of young girls.

"I may get you something maybe?" the man asked flatly. Littlejohn did not look up, finally realized the man was speaking to him and sighed a half-laugh, shaking his slow head slowly. "A drink, I mean," the shark said, his chin tightening with impatience. When he stared in turn from Littlejohn to the girl, she looked away, her silent lashes settling against her sallow cheeks. He was her lord. Littlejohn noticed upon the middle finger of her left hand a copious diamond.

"Beer," Littlejohn said.

"Si."

"You've got Three X?"

"Sorry, no Tres Equis. One kind only, Carta Blanca."

"That'll do."

"Amontillado for the lady?"

Her eyelids beat and lifted. She looked at Littlejohn with dark elusive eyes. "Scotch y agua," she whispered.

"Scotch and water," Littlejohn said. But the lord was halfway to the bar, and the words died in air. Sheepish, Littlejohn folded his hands on the table, started to reach for a cigarette, decided against it. He turned toward the girl. She was gazing toward the bar, her cheek cradled in her hand. "Cuantos anos tiene?" he asked. He had to think the words, for a second wondered if his verb tense was correct, then remembered it didn't matter. He knew the Juarez girls only pretended not to speak better English than the soldiers they entertain. "Cuantos anos tiene?" he repeated.

Her smile surfaced. "Vientecuatro," she said, looking at him now, her voice lightsome. He frowned. "Twenty-four," she said.

He wanted to ask her why she wasn't married, for he knew that would hurt her, but instead he replied, "Estoy twenty-one." Somehow he couldn't recall the exact word.

"Y su nombre?"

"Juan. John Littlejohn."

"Peregrina," she said, nestling against him. When the drinks arrived her hand curled about his bicep. Her hair touched his shoulder, then her head, then the weight of her head. "You like the USA Army, no?"

"No." Without looking at the waiter Littlejohn shifted his hip slightly and fished for his wallet, anteed up two bills. But it was worth it, he figured. Twin quarters were pressed into his hand; there was a gritty feeling to them, as though they had been in someone's piggybank for several months. He pocketed the coins as Peregrina removed her glass from the tray. The drink, probably no more than colored water or tea, contained ice cubes and was accompanied by a lemon-half. Her lower lip puckered slightly when she sipped. He grinned. In her deliberate grace and in the shallow dimple in her chin he sensed his wife, and it was just a quick trip home as his hand slid up her nylons. Her hemline inched up to her thighs revealing a silken triangle.

"Salute?" She raised her glass, a typical womanly diversion; she was not angry, but coy.

The clink of her glass against his beerbottle was that of fine silverware against bad china. Without glancing at the hand on her leg she kneaded her dress down as he replied, "Salute."

"Para divertirse en la cama."

"What was that?" But she only laughed, and he said, "To the Fourth of July," unable to think of anything appropriate.

"And--y--una muchacha bonita," he said.

She halted him when he started to drink. "You see? Like this." She squeezed a droplet of lemon onto the lip of his beerbottle, added a pinch of salt from a container beside the napkin holder. His mouth soured with saliva. "Take, drink," she said. He frowned, having thought they did the salt bit only with tequila, but raised the bottle. The semi-sweet beer felt good in his hot throat, but before he could swallow a third time she wanted to toast again. "Para divertirse en la cama," she repeated, her eyes anxious, and intuitively he stumbled upon the translation: for a good time in bed. But he wanted her near him just for conversation, just to dissolve and dissipate the loneliness which he wore like a second skin. Yet he longed to be touched, so he didn't push away her hand, warm hand, as it stole along his thigh. "Vamos a la cama," she whispered, the tip of her tongue discovering his cheek. Her Spanish, silver-tinseled, violated the moist rhythms of her broken English. "Vamos a la cama." But even her Spanish was de los mochos, like pidgin; not soft Castilian, the language of queens. "Vamos."

"No. Please, I'm married." But he felt a vague shift inside himself from loneliness into desire. The blood beat within his temples, and his hand seemed to yellow and crumple in the light like a burning leaf. He floated through intermingled and raging self-possession and passion as he reached for her. "No," he said. Her kiss was the taste of lemon. "No."

"No le gusta?" she whispered innocently.

"Si, I like you, but . . . tengo mujer." He turned his hand over so his wedding band tugged against her vision. "See? Married."

"No le gusta?" She pouted, and her hand, warm hand, found the apex of his legs. "Esta muy caliente," she purred.

Caliente. What? Caliente: warm. Very warm. "Why should I go with you?" he pleaded.

"Por que? Porque El Popocatepetl esta muy caliente." She laughed, tossing her head back, and squeezed his crotch. Not comprehending her words, he smiled blankly, completely off balance in the tilt. He lifted up his beer by the neck, somehow intending to sidestep her demands, but she continued the attack, flailing at him with soft little kisses and soft, soft words. He set his beer down with a thud and, gazing at her glass, shut his eyes.

Down, down, down he spiraled, drowning in drink, sucking into waterlogged lungs her tepid past. He dropped into her house, landed crouched and barefoot and in rags upon a hardwood floor--not dirt, as he expected. Nor was the roof thatched: tiled and braced with thick cedar rafters. Two tapestries on the wall displayed their colors: an ink sketch of Benito Juarez which hung above the fireplace, and a poorly-woven cloth copy of Goya's Clothed Maja beside the color TV. Peregrina's mother, dirndled in a flare-sleeved peasant dress and wiping her hands upon an apron, plodded from the kitchen into the livingroom to greet the stranger.

A funnel of spicy odors followed her. But her mouth only worked in a grotesque pantomime, trying to explain that Peregrina had left a year ago and not returned, when suddenly there was the crackling of ice warming to water. He was back in the bar. Peregrina was stirring her ice cubes with a lean finger, her hand no longer exploring him. "Four dollars," he heard himself bargain.

"You would cheapen me, senior?"

"Six." He remembered the two quarters. "Six-fifty." Her finger ceased its slow stirring and she licked it, brooding, then nodded and donned a smile, nudged his arm to force him from the booth. One of her spiked heels nicked him lightly as she slid out. But she seemed uncertain that he would follow, for her arm slipped around his waist; together they moved awkwardly through the open doorway, passed down a dark nave whose paint was peeling in great splotches, came to a clean well-lighted place. An old woman was seated in a green folding chair, her grayhaired head cowled by a heavy black shawl. She motioned rapidly like someone dribbling a basketball; he unzipped his pants, and she examined his penis and jostled it with a swab of cold cotton reeking of rubbing alcohol. Then she peered up at him, her arthritic fingers extended and joined as though begging penance. A tip. Tip for what, lady? Only protecting your own interests, your own girls. One of them perhaps her daughter or granddaughter. "No tengo dinero mas," he said, and she smiled toothlessly down at her empty hand.

The mustiness of the corridor made him giddy, the walls seeming to slant toward him as Peregrina guided him to a warm room filled with a queen-sized bed, opulent in its whiteness, the sheet turned down like a page of a thick book. A triglyph of mirrors behind the headboard witnessed from a hundred angles the naked light of the candle-shaped lampbulb. Littlejohn dropped into the chair beside the sink, pinched a grape from the bowl of fruit on the bureau and peeled it as Peregrina tucked a roll of toilet paper behind the pillow. He was just picking the seeds off his tongue when she ordered him to remove his clothes. He frowned, then undid his shirt one cuff at a time, finally removed his pants--as a woman might, without standing up--careful not to expose the twenty in his sock.

She took hold of his wrists and drew him from the chair to her lips. But the kiss was dry and ephemeral, and he was stung by the notion of never having kissed her at all. She motioned to the bed with a sly slim hand; he undressed and unhooked her with a slowness which astonished him, kissing each shoulder in turn, then her neck, then the nape of her neck. Her bra fluttered to the floor. A rude crucifix dangling from a gilted chain satisfied the symmetry of her perfumed breasts. He cupped her nipples in his hands, raised his head to the sweet scent of her hair. Banded by the tiara into sinuous spirals tapering upward like an ancient altar, her hair was the color of anthracite coal--the leavened earth, Peregrina. Both princess and priestess, she

peered up at him, her coy callow face deepened by her dark esoteric eyes, and pulled him softly toward bed.

As he mounted her he asked her to leave the light on. She made love expertly, rhythmic and responsive beneath his bulk, hurrying him; at last he groaned, hugged her tightly for an instant; then moved across her leg and turned over onto his back, sweating, his chest heaving, his eyes closed. The flat of her hand trailed down his slow roll of belly and pressed his groin; she nibbled moistly his earlobe. His eyes opened. The ceiling was speckled with a galaxy of tiny glittering stars. He sucked a deep breath through his nose, exhaled noiselessly through his mouth, then turned toward her, searching for the right words, his arm crossing her waist. Finally his Spanish ripened on his tongue. "Por que es prostituta?" he whispered hoarsely.

The ridged eyelids of her Asian ancestry were evident in the half-light. "Por que es Ud. soldado?" she replied.

CARDIAC

The good doctor's waiting room is unusual for these days: empty chairs. I shut the door with my palm pressed against the latch to deaden the noise, cross to the chair in the corner without glancing to either side. I'm wearing my best brown suit--the one with the brown-and-gold vest--so I blend in easily with the shadows and the maplewood paneling; I settle myself, then lift up the ancient copy of Holiday from the central round table and begin to read, keeping the magazine at eye level so the others in the room can't steal the stuffings out of the words. I move the magazine like a typewriter carriage; no sense showing your face overly much, I always say.

"Mr. Locke?" It's Mrs. Smith at the front desk. Her voice is its normal acid-sweet. Why they're always named Mrs. Smith I'll never know--perhaps that's one of the qualifications they must list in their occupational dossiers. "You've forgotten

to register." Again. Every single time I get unhorsed by the same lance. I always sign my own name to the guest register, never allow Mrs. Smith to do it herself. They take my name and store it in the file. I don't like to have it cramped between those dark manila folders, but at least I don't let anyone fool with the actual words themselves. After all, there exist just so many realities in this world and no more, and things shouldn't be juggled. I set the Holiday down face down, move along the knees to the desk. Mrs. Smith is sporting a newly-starched cap. I believe it was her inability to grow wimpled wings that ruined her chances of becoming a nun in a large hospital. "How are we feeling today?" she asks. Her teeth gleam less whitely than her cap.

I lean over the desk so the others can't hear. If the other patients discover your illness and get a handle on you, as the saying goes, G-O-D only knows what could happen. "Much better, thank you. As well as can be expected. Fair to middling. A bit above the weather." I realize my rump is bulged out too much and I pull it in. "I used to think if the good doctor didn't relieve the pressure in my heart just right now," I say, smacking my fist against my palm for emphasis, "then my heart was just going to swell up and explode. But with these modern medicines doctors have at their disposal nowadays, I'm doing just fine."

"The doctor will see you in a few minutes," she replies, knitting her brows.

"Don't worry, I won't make him wait too long for me," I say, and smile. Mrs. Smith smiles back as though she wants to be kissed, but being a perfect gentleman I restrain myself. I sign my name, JOHN PERCY LOCKE, wiggling the pen slightly in order to keep the others from analyzing my handwriting. Then I mark the time 2:59 from a little clock like a mileage speedometer on the desk, then quickly erase it and write 3:00 as the eyes of the numbers roll back into the clock's head. I get back to my chair and have my hands folded in my lap and my legs together before another set of numbers gets lost in oblivion.

The chair beside me is of course vacant, but in the next seat there is a man whose bulge is big in his lap. I do not look at him, just snatch up my Holiday. There is an interesting article toward the back of the magazine about how you can INCREASE THE SIZE OF YOUR BUST. I read straight through to the address at the end without skipping. Normally I only read things in the exact middle of the Holiday so there will be an equilibrium of words on either side, but today I'm feeling --how do they say it--savoir faire, because the sun popped up this morning. There is also an interesting article about pairs of brassieres with pointed cups and rounded cups, like chalices.

Then I see her. I spy over the top of the magazine and see her squatted among the mothers and their monsters over in the children's section, giving a lederhosened little boy a sucker while with her free hand she picks up a toy car--even

I can see it's worthless: a wheel's missing. Her long green-satin dress with its imitation rabbit collar and the black ribbon in her hair somehow make her look like Eleanor Roosevelt at age sixty-eight, except this woman's reflection is imprisoned in the polished floor, and dear Mrs. Roosevelt was much too refined of a FIRST LADY to allow that to happen. Nor would a P-R-E-S-I-D-E-N-T-'-S LADY associate with such vulgarities as childhood diseases. Not on your life.

Normally I would shut her out with my Holiday, but as I say I was feeling a bit royal, so I just kept watching her. Since she never once looked over my way there wasn't any real danger of becoming trapped within her eyes. The armpits of her dress had recorded big sweat stains, but she seemed to be enjoying herself in spite of what she was doing to the material. Her smile included her teeth. And then I reasoned it out: she must be one of the white-women, a nurse-nun except in plainclothes. No, that didn't make any sense. She was too old. Much, much too old.

"Mr. Locke?" It was Mrs. Smith the doctor's aid. She always announces my name too loud, unlike Mrs. Smith the doctor's registrar, who says it acidly, but at least with quiet ambassadorial dignity. Without looking at the children woman I go back into the doctor's chambers.

I find the doctor squinting into a small cosmetic mirror, lower myself into the black loungechair alongside his desk and

wait politely while he plucks a gray hair from his mustache. When he's finished he excuses himself and steps into the next room. Our relationship for some time has been on a first-name-only basis, and he normally takes a minute or two of my time to make himself presentable for lesser, less familiar patients. Well, may I not be the one to deny him the privilege.

"And how are we feeling today, John?" he asks, re-entering the room. I've always admired the way he uses the professional plural, we.

"Fine. Just fine."

"Relaxing a lot? Taking your prescription regularly?"

"Oh, certainly. The heart, being the mainstay of one's emotional and circulatory systems, is an immensely vital organ in the body's government, and requires care." I laugh lightly. "But of course, I needn't tell you that."

He sits down and adjusts his bifocals. "Yes, yes, of course," he says without enthusiasm.

And I realize I've overstepped myself. The artificial ivy in his office is a cheerful Spring-green, and I turn my attention there. When I look at it closely it curls up and down the center pole with anticipation, blushing shinily.

"No bad dreams lately?" the good doctor asks. His eyelids tend to furl down at the corners when he speaks. It makes him appear to squint even while wearing his glasses.

"Dreams?" I ask.

"Yes, yes, you know . . . dreams. Nightmares, in particular."

"Oh, nightmares. You mean my gastritis. You talk in such circles, Charles. Well, thanks to you, no more stomach problems. No, no more bad dreams." But it's something to remember. If the good doctor is still concerned about my stomach, then I'd have to stay on my toes, keep vigil over my health even while asleep. Perhaps Charles knew more than he was saying; doctors are like that. "But naturally I'm still worried about my heart."

"John, there's no reason . . . Your heart's fine."

I let my legs uncross, relieved.

"Still, I think you should have an EEG next Tuesday. You can inform the desk on your way out."

"But you just said my heart . . ."

"Is excellent, John."

"Well?"

"And it is, believe me."

"Okay then."

"But it never hurts to run a few tests, now does it?"

He removed his glasses solemnly and bit down on one of the stems.

I nodded, then shook my head, uncertain. I thanked him profusely for his services and we actually shook hands--a real handshake in the continental tradition, with my hands on both sides of his hand, protecting it.

Back in the waiting room all the people who had been there earlier had melted away and a new batch had sprung up in their

places. Even the children wore different faces. Only one person had weathered the storm of Mrs. Smith's guest register: the children woman. In fact she was now engulfed by this new bunch of brats as though she were J-E-S-U-S H-I-M-S-E-L-F.

I told Mrs. Smith the registrar of the coming EEG and she nodded and scribbled and then nodded me toward the door. But instead of leaving immediately, I sat down again. My chair was of course still vacant. Peripherally I could see Mrs. Smith frown, as this was a strict break from my normal business-like manner, but she knew better than to wail a complaint.

It was an especially tricky situation. Some fat lady in a sapphire-blue empire dress had hogged my Holiday. I kept a keen eye on the children woman as my fingers skimmed across the covers of the Field and Stream and the Mechanix Illustrated on the round table until I seized upon a Mademoiselle, a recent issue I discovered to my pleasant surprise, which meant the type would be more legible. I turned to the center of the magazine, then flipped over one more page because the gleaming staples reminded me too much of my cardiac condition. I always have been one to think in terms of metaphor.

.The children woman and her proteges all were licking suckers. A little towhead lifted up five stiff sticky fingers; she took another sucker from her rattan purse, gazed at it reluctantly, then handed it over. A rootbeer.

One by one the customers disappeared into the doctor's chambers like minutes on the clock, and no one from the outside

came forth to fill the gaps, as 5:00 was fast approaching, when we could allow the good doctor to retire home to his lovely wife and quiet children. At 4:44 the fat lady suddenly leaned toward me. "Are you in here for the same thing as me?" she asked.

I nodded knowingly. Best to play them along, who knows what some of these fat asses might do. But as usual my mind was clicking--I quickly closed my magazine so she couldn't see what words I'd been reading.

"Well, now isn't that just wonderful!" She clapped her hands together. "We have the same disease. Can you imagine! Perhaps the doctor could treat us together." As she spoke her underchin wobbled loosely. "You know, tete-a-tete."

"Perhaps next time," I replied, picking my words carefully. I drew back tightly in my chair, then said, "You must understand, my dear, I've already seen the good doctor today."

"Oh." She returned to my Holiday.

I had to smile inwardly at the way I'd handled myself, in the back of my mind I began whistling Rule, Britannia happily. A couple of sleek-legged women who had been busy in the outside world sauntered in to claim their children, but Mrs. Smith the doctor's aid merely shuffled most of the mothers and their snots into the back rooms, never to return. Good riddance, I say. The world is a sad enough garden without adding any new weeds. Only I remained. The fat lady, the children woman, the boy

with the shiny sucker, and Mrs. Smith the registrar remained also. We were four. We were four separate worlds.

Then Mrs. Smith's words floated out of the anterior and netted the fat lady, and she left, the backs of her legs laden with soft whiteness above her nyloned knees. The sucker boy began running the broken car along a chair. BRRRRRRRRRRRRRUMMM. I turned the next page of Mademoiselle.

Well, then I just had to make a face. The fat lady had tossed my Holiday down face up. I flipped it over. People are so thoughtless these days. You'd think a person would get used to this sort of thing, but I just can't. The world is too full of carelessness. Imperfection. Pain. And I refuse to be blind to the faults of others.

I turn another page of my new magazine. A woman's Mabeline eyes are soft zeroes, prettily painted.

At last Mrs. Smith the doctor's aide also retrieves the sucker boy. By the arm. She has to drag him. He starts bawling, drooling, his eyes vacant, waving the car around like the F-L-A-G. Oh, awful! I have to focus in on the magazine word casserole to drown the noise. The word has a funny taste to it when I repeat it several times in my mind. But even though the word holds boundless possibilities for contemplation in my not unilliterate vocabulary, I can't keep my thoughts from drifting across to the children woman. She possesses a certain quaint charm; or is it just the mysteriousness of her occupation here which makes her appealing? She's been here longer than I, yet hasn't seen Charles.

I wonder, alternately biting and examining my nails. When Mrs. Smith took the boy, the woman's eyes shone moistly with an evident sadness. Perhaps she's his grandmother, but for some reason isn't allowed in the back rooms with him. I almost want to take her into my arms and comfort her with a mad-dash of kisses, if it weren't that she's so old and grotesquely wrinkled about the neck and cheeks, while I am, as they say, prime beef. Besides, she can't be his grandmother because he was among the new arrivals.

She raises herself from the small triangular cobbler's stool on which she is seated and with a soft sigh collapses into a mother's-chair. There is just the two of us--other than Mrs. Smith the registrar, of course--so I pretend to read furiously. She takes a pack of Salems and matches from her purse, puts the cigarette in her mouth and brings it down to the shaky flame. After several shallow puffs she pettily knocks off a bit of ash in a mother's-ashtray. I can't hold back any longer. My pulse is racing, I'm certain my heart is going to burst any second, the magazine words stream past my eyes in an unconscious whirr. I've got to know!

I drop Mademoiselle on the round table without watching how she lands, grasp the chair arms (Danish modern) and count slowly to myself one -- two -- three, one -- two -- three, inhaling deeply with each count. Then I straighten the Windsor knot of my tie and stalk over to Mrs. Smith the registrar.

"Who's that lady?" I whisper hoarsely, almost choking. "Does she work here? Is she a special assistant assigned to the children's section?"

"No, she's just a patient," Mrs. Smith says without looking up from her paperwork.

"Then why doesn't she see the good doctor? Isn't she here for cure? For remedy? For medicine?"

"She's taking her remedy now," Mrs. Smith replies. "She has been all day. Why, would you like to meet her, Mr. Locke?"

"No!"

"She's really quite nice. Her name is Miss . . ."

"God forbid!" I cry out. And then I know I've done more harm than prevention, I've said IT and my tongue is going to blister horribly.

HANDS

Arthur stiffened as Harry's hand moved from his knee, began stroking his thigh lightly. But he didn't want to make a scene, Harry was his friend, Arthur tried to edge nonchalantly off the park bench . . . the curled iron arm blocked him . . . and then there was the hand . . . the moon, shadows. He quivered. The hand halted, touching softly the bulge of his crotch. Arthur blinked, stared down. A wrinkled hand, calloused. Lime-colored nails. He felt Harry's other arm cross his shoulders, then Harry's face loomed within his stony gaze and drew slowly closer, eyes moist. 'If he kisses me I'll puke,' Arthur told himself, yet immediately realized he wasn't revulsed, only afraid of the prickly touch of another man's face. He shut his eyes.

* * *

Dimly at Arthur's feet the dying man coughed. Beneath the streetlamp he lay sprawled on his side in the grass, his face

oily, eyes glassy and incredulous, a pool of blood oozing from the ragged wound just above the brow. Immobile, Arthur watched the shadows of insects dance upon the man's throat.

"You'll pay," the man whispered hoarsely, his voice thick with blood.

Arthur's right hand closed helplessly into a fist and opened again. He felt himself shake his head.

"You'll pay." The chest heaved heavily. A blood bubble formed at the nostrils, popped, trickled down along the upper lip and into the mouth. The throat gurgled, then the tip of the tongue protruded.

Arthur retched dryly and, his guts knotted, doubled over until suddenly he discovered himself on his hands and knees in a flower bed. "Not my fault!" he gasped. Heat surged through him, he was aware of his own sweat, his fingers curled around a handful of barkdust. He tried to exhale slowly but only gagged, eyes clenched shut, heart pounding. The sultry summer air beat against his forehead.

"Murderer. Oh, you'll pay all right." The man's voice sounded distant yet self-assured. "You'll hide, they'll find you. All rooms have doors, Arthur."

"No!" Arthur scrambled halfway to his feet, pitched the wad of barkdust, it flurried across the body, then once again he collapsed onto all fours. "An accident, goddamn you! An accident!"

"That's not excuse enough." Harry coughed a raspy little laugh. His hand stretched toward Arthur, shaking, uncertain, then gripped into a tight fist and flopped onto the grass.

"Please, it wasn't my fault." But finally realizing his friend now heard nothing, Arthur wiped the saliva from his mouth and reached forward, the raucous city traffic blurring with the throbbing inside his head. He touched the jacket sleeve, his back goosefleshed and he felt dizzy again. Yet his fingers slid slowly down the corduroy to the wrist. No pulse and then Harry shuddered. In final deaththroe the muscles beneath his watchband bunched and tightened, his eyes rolled back into his head, the whites vivid as two polished coins. Arthur jerked away, tasting vomit, managed at last to shift backward over his haunches, trembling, settling his buttocks against the solid weight of a large rock. He shivered and for a moment felt calm and innerly warm.

It just isn't fair, he told himself, biting his lip to hold back the tears. Only for a single second did he want the flush of Harry's touch. But he had not wanted Harry, he had feared the unleashed guilt, now he was being punished because he had had the strength of will to turn away before his self-respect degenerated forever. After all it was Harry who was queer, Harry who had lurched for him when he suddenly ran away from seduction, Harry who fell and struck his head. The paradox made Arthur's stomach pulsate, he suddenly hated Harry for

all the world, he grit his teeth, his face began to shake with an uncontrollable tension. "Bastard!" He lashed out, kicked Harry in the chest. The body toppled over squarely onto its back.

But instantly he felt ashamed. He looked at Harry and Harry was still. "I'm sorry," he tried to say, could only shake his head. He started to cross himself but realized he was acting foolish, not having crossed himself outside of church since he was thirteen and was caught stealing a pair of terrycloth socks, and racked by fear and trembling anger he drew his knees up and lowered his head to his forearms. "God help me," he tried to say.

He was aware then of the citypark stench of exhaust and marigolds. The grass beneath him was yellow-gray. He knew he should split before the police arrived, but surely this was all just a dream, in a while Harry's death would simply vanish.

He looked up and saw two whores silhouetted like caryatids before the bright lights of the bar across the street, hands on hips, legs fashionmodel. The door opened and remained open and he could hear boisterous laughter, the constant clicking of glasses, a fine fleeting sitar. And breathing in ever lessening sobs, he keened to the music, let himself drift . . . gliding entranced . . . dreamlike . . . up the soft stairstep syncopation. His head tilted back against the rock and he sucked consciously a half-dozen breaths through his nose, enshelled by degrees

within lethargy, staring dumbly and through slitted eyes down the mound of body. Then his gaze lifted, tailed off toward the moon which hovered just beyond the upreaching skyscrapers.

It occurred to him that before he left he should straighten Harry around. He knew the wish for propriety--even in death--was as necessary to the librarian as oxygen or money to most people. Stolid as a marble bust behind the checkout counter, Harry at all times had been a model of continentality, his Tattersall vest gleaming spotlessly beneath the hot white lights, his hands locked military-style behind his back. It was just a role he had liked to play, but he played it to perfection, and to leave him sprawled on the grass like a discarded mattress would be a sacrilege to his self-image. At the very least he should be covered--a luxury accorded even the commonest corpses. But Arthur was wearing no coat. And to remove Harry's jacket for a veil, to shut the silky eyelids, to bring the pudgy and stiffening hands up to a prayer . . .

Well, he couldn't. Just couldn't.

Footsteps scudded. Arthur lurched around, peered over the boulder. A bum sporting baggy khaki trousers, tennis shoes with the rubber peeled off the toes, was toiling up the short flight of flagstone steps which divided the park's lilac hedge, his weight leaned upon the iron bannister. Arthur did not look at the face, afraid of the haughty sarcasm he was certain to find there should the bum see Harry, and to block the bum's

view he rose to his feet, almost unraveling upward, and squared his shoulders with a shrug like that of a boxer or a lithe young singer.

The bum halted, sized up this obstacle in his path, then rose onto faltering tiptoes and squinted past. With effort he focused on Harry. "Looks dead," he commented, sagged down flatfooted, twisted his neck and spat a brown stream.

"That's right," Arthur replied coldly.

But the bum shoved by him without another word. Only then did Arthur see the blackly whiskered jaw, the grinning mouth full of teeth, the grinning eyes with their fan of creases. The bum's knees creaked when he knelt, he patted the dead man's hip pocket, then his eyes glistened and he snatched off the wristwatch. "Ya never kilt him," he stated, not looking up. "I mean, ya found him here, right kid?" His hand slid flatly inside the sportsjacket, but Arthur stepped forward and the hand came out quickly, empty. Around the bum's hand the coiled wristwatch screamed.

"I might have killed him."

Immediately the bum's back arched and he scrambled to his feet with a clumsy sidestep, his eyes narrowing until he peered from the pink corners. The hands, arthritic-knuckled, gathered into fists, drew tightly against his stomach. But Arthur was a head taller, and the way his shoulders were hunched slightly forward, evenly balanced, made him seem even larger than he

really was. He glided another step forward, tensing. "Give it," he demanded, but didn't hold out his hand, careful not to drop his guard. The bum sneered and backed up, but then he looked directly at Arthur and suddenly his fists jellied open, his head jerked back sharply as if already in the act of running even though the body as yet had refused to budge, staunch still. "The watch," Arthur said.

The bum lunged sideways toward the hedge, shuffling up barkdust, crushing marigolds and crocus as though his ungainly legs had to keep moving merely to hold himself upright. He fumbled with the thick branches which were now his greatest enemy, and Arthur closed upon him slowly. "Here, take it," he whined, the watch gleaming in his extended hand, but Arthur no longer wanted the watch, wanted only to bury this bum under a gala of punches, then suddenly the bum crawled through the hedge and dropped down the short retaining wall, stumbling, almost dragging himself, across the street to safety and friends. He glared back from across the pavement. Light speared out, disappeared again, as he dodged inside the Mission Temple. Arthur stepped back from the hedge, breathing heavily. Branches sprung back into place, a lilac blossom brushing across his cheek, and he snorted contemptuously, thinking, 'You stupid bastard.' He remembered the quaking eyes, thinking, 'You wouldn't have had . . .'

"Arthur."

He turned toward the voice. "Arthur," Harry whispered again, and his lips, though swollen purplish, seemed to move perceptively. His eyes had rolled back into place, but remained fixed, glazed by the wet light of the streetlamp. Arthur stood frozen for a second, then confused, relieved, stooped at Harry's side. He could see no sign of breathing, but swallowed thickly and lifted the librarian's cold hand anyway, cradling it.

"It's a little late for sentiment," the librarian said.

"Harry? You're alive?"

Harry looked up through a gaping sardonic grin. "Hardly, Arthur," he said disdainfully.

The hand fell. Rigid with disbelief Arthur stared down the chalk-blue face until it dissolved into wavery illusion, finally he managed to look away, the park's maples, small oaks, birches with their whitened trunks dancing before him blackly.

"All this because you couldn't make up your petty mind. All because you were timid!"

"Please . . ." A lump had dried in Arthur's throat, his mouth was cotton. Suddenly the beer neons across the street leapt out at him

HAMMS LUCKY LUCKY LUCKY HAMMS LUCKY WHEN YOU HAMMS then melted into rainbows, while in the park itself the benches and tree trunks washed together, merging in a tangled and opaque

and one-dimensional geometry. He rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands, realized he was crying, his hands moist, and rubbed his eyes again, this time with a certain astonishment and masculine shame. "I was just a little scared, that's all." His voice cracked, he couldn't restrain the tears, he buried his face in his hands. "I might have let you. I might have," he sobbed. "God, I didn't mean for this."

"Of course not. But that's all behind you, now isn't it. One can't always turn around." Harry's voice was severe, guttural. "But I suppose I shouldn't blame you. At least in the eyes of the law I'm the guilty one."

Though nauseous, Arthur forced himself to stand. Perhaps the voice will go away, he thought, perhaps it'll drift off. He stumbled over toward the hedge, his fingers gripped a slick branch. "Besides, my death is only one among myriads," the voice rang on. "Millions . . . billions like me. The dead are everywhere. The ground's full of them." The words issued in a solemn file into the night, rising even above the traffic noise. It was as though Arthur was hearing for the first time, previously deaf as an idol, and found it joyless.

"But why me! Why do things always happen to me!"

"Really, Arthur, such melodrama. For Christ's sake, grow up. What's done is done. Clocks and armies can be turned back, but not time. So why chastize yourself?"

"Leave me alone."

Then Arthur heard music again, the incessant relentless chords of the Battle Hymn of the Republic, and after wiping his eyes he witnessed a surge of winos spill from the Mission Temple, their slouched hats and upturned collars followed by a four-piece Salvation Army band decked out in shroud-black uniforms.

"If they decide to come over, then the cops will home in on this place like flies," Harry commented, his voice suddenly lightsome.

Arthur suddenly felt very tired, very alone. He knew he should run, hide among the cool quavering shadows of his bedroom, but he had a brief mental image of himself as the sole defender of some besieged jungle citadel, and although he wanted to go home, walk home--sleep beneath starched sheets, tomorrow would be a new life, perhaps he'd start back to school two weeks early--he could not. To run would just complicate matters. The law has more eyes than a peacock. Besides, there was a little matter to settle with a certain drunken bum, with Harry, with himself. A mosquito buzzed onto the top of his ear, his eyes watered, he did not slap it away. "I'll just tell the truth," he said finally.

"Oh, the truth! That'll stick in their craw all right." Harry's laughter breathed against the back of Arthur's neck. He turned, and Harry was standing directly before him, tucking some loose strands of gray hair out of his eyes. A bloodless face. Boneless teapot cheeks, dark cheeks. "Handkerchief?"

Staring, Arthur patted his pockets mechanically.

"Well, I suppose I'll have to use my own." Harry dug a handkerchief from his pocket and with great effort--for he seemed hard put to control himself, his face distorted with unconcealed hatred, with an ugly self-pity--folded it into a neat palm-sized square. "I hate to bloodstain it," he said, dabbing his forehead with feigned elegance. "It's my only monogrammed." He dabbed again, then crammed the handkerchief in his pants pocket, frowned at the bulge and finally took it out and folded it into an arrowhead and stuffed it in his coat breastpocket. Then he lowered his hands to his sides and there was silence. Arthur stared at the curvature of light reflected in the dead man's eyes. Neither he nor his adversary moved, facing one another as if caught in the tableau of a photograph or a magic trance.

Across the street the Salvation Army bass drum began to boom jovially, yet Arthur barely heard it. Like a man facing execution, he couldn't help but rethink the subtle choreography of events which had brought him to this point in his life. He wondered if he would have met Harry had he not elected to attend college rather than seminary. He had gone against his mother's decision, he had told himself, only because he wanted to study philosophy without the side attraction of a waiting occupation. He had known he was just kidding himself, yet his father had readily and discreetly seconded the choice, winking slyly as

he thumped his pipe into his palm and dumped the ashes in the fireplace, saying, "A fine thing, the priesthood, but no occupation for a man."

Probably he would have met Harry anyway. Arthur used the public library the way some people use the bathroom. He remembered standing beneath the glaring lights of the checkout counter, how their hands had touched--simultaneously, and yet without surprise--the binding of a large book. Harry's hand, thick, rough, not a librarian's but a laborer's hand--yet scented with cologne and the nails exquisitely manicured and a sickly buff-white color as though having been soaked in water or coconut oil too long, with clean spade moons and rubbery knuckles--Harry's hand had closed over his, drawing it down the black leather until the book's title was exposed.

"Medieval philosophers," he had said. "The old MP's. That's pretty heavy stuff."

Arthur found himself stammering. "I'm t-trying to get ahead of next year's homework," he managed at last.

"Flunk early. Avoid the rush." Only then did Harry's lips open to force out a soft nervous laugh, but Arthur noticed only his bulging eyes, then he quickly gathered up his load and was outside, shifting the books to the opposite hip as he started across the street against the WAIT sign, before he realized the warmth with which his hand burned. In the middle of the street he abruptly stopped. Shifted his books again, took

a couple more steps, stopped. Turned and started back toward the library, determined to return yet not knowing why. Grayly above him the surrounding buildings towered. Their thousand windows. And then a horn blatted. He glanced sideways, and hulked before him, a Fiat or Datsun. Foreign, anyway. He scowled and stepped back. When he was irritated his sloped shiny face took on the appearance of an ancient jousting helmet. The car roared by, the driver a stranger, and for an instant their stares met and locked. Mutual contempt.

"So you're going to tell them the truth, eh?" Harry was saying. He was not looking at Arthur, his face softening into an odd suave smile. Arthur followed his gaze and, turning, saw the bums jaywalking across toward the park. They moved haltingly, no one wishing to lead, their voices gruff and muffled, thick with information and opinions. The watch-thief was among the leaders, Arthur's hand tightened instinctively. "The whole truth and nothing but the truth? Or just the best half. You see, I want to get my program straight before the show starts." He pulled a silver cigarette case from an inner pocket.

"Shutup."

"My, aren't we theatrical though. Such delivery!" Harry lit the cigarette, picked a speck of tobacco off his tongue. "But you always did go in for drama." He backed up and plopped down on a nearby bench, arms outstretched. "It's a role you

play. As though you were gazing into a mirror and trying to act out what you thought you saw there. Like that time you demanded--demanded! Arthur--to renew overdue books. Without penalty." He fluttered his hands. "You should have books as long as you want. Right? Just like a spoiled child."

Arthur didn't answer. He didn't need to. For Harry was the librarian no longer, he reminded himself. Harry was the dead man.

"And of course, I kept tabs on your reading."

"So?"

"Such trash."

"Go to hell."

Harry laughed, combing his hair back with his fingers. The bums had stopped at the base of the steps, waiting for the band to catch up. The drum boomed as it bobbed across the street, there was a slap of cymbals, and as a tambourine rang out, the foursome burst into song:

What a friend we have in Jesus . . .

Arthur canceled them from his mind. He had begun to sweat, his heart pounding. He knew he must run.

But Harry second-guessed him. "You think I hate you for killing me, but you're wrong," he said, thrusting his cigarette out as though to block Arthur's way. "The dead haven't any emotions, remember? I'm just trying to get to the truth." He pursed his lips mockingly. "Just like youuu."

The air had become specked with insects. Arthur swatted little gnatlike things away from his eyes. The bums and whores were starting in a procession of twos up the steps, he suddenly saw through the facade of Harry's geniality, and was afraid.

"The truth, Arthur." Squirming with merriment, Harry yanked his wallet out and removed a passel of crisp bills. "Well, here's the truth!" He tossed the bills, scattering, toward Arthur's feet. "And this!" as he flipped the wallet high and backwards. Arthur watched it arc up until in midflight it vanished among the shadows. He didn't hear it land.

"Bastard," Arthur said quietly. He squatted to pick up the money, a dozen presidential faces winking up at him, when in a single body the crowd entered the park and encircled him, a few of the braver or drunker ones approaching to a distance a yardstick could bridge easily. The money felt oddly slick, and Arthur let the bills slide off his palm back onto the grass. He felt hot and muggy within his clothes, the lamplight was pouring down against his forehead and hard eyes, above him the faces were a balconied audience of amorphous masks.

A hand lunged for the money. The watch-thief?

But a woman's rough sanguine mouth leered back at him. Her womansmells hovered: her sex and sweat, the undertow of cheap perfume. Then he was also aware of the stench of the bums, the indoorsy stench, the oldman stench, their clothes odorous as moldy newspapers. He almost wished the police would arrive.

A forest of legs barred any possible escape, and who knows what scum like this might do? Money in fist, the woman raised her calcimine-white face and laughed triumphantly, shrilly. The crowd rushed forward and, excited the band struck up

Oh you must have been a beautiful baby,
you must have been a beautiful chile . . .

Arthur's eyes smarted with anger. He saw the watch-thief, now suddenly separated from the crowd, lower himself onto the bench beside Harry, his legs yawning into a slouch, genitals thick as a rooster's wattle in the sagging crotch of his pants. Harry offered a cigarette but the bum refused, raising his palm to indicate he had quit and shaking his head, his eyes shutting uppity.

I bet you drove those lil boys wild . . .

He wondered if perhaps he was dead and Harry alive, and as if to reassure himself Arthur found himself inhaling deeply. Surely this was all a dream, in a minute or two he would awaken, the patchquilt thrown down by the struggles of sleep to his waist, his mother downstairs cooking eggs and hashbrowns and singing Take my life I give you, Jesus. Except she hadn't sung in years, no he'd awaken at school, sunlight spilling dustily through the glinting window, his roommate snoring . . . or perhaps . . . in bed with Harry . . . thighs entangled, Harry's heavy chest against his own . . . oh God, no.

Light flickered redly, and the jazz the savior musicians never intended to play in the first place died. Arthur looked

up, and through the crowd's gabled legs saw a police car pull up in front of the darkened windows over on Burnside. A tall brownish Negro climbed out and, one shoulder slightly lower than the other as though the flashlight and notepad he carried were some ponderous weight, came stalking up the slow roll of lawn.

The crowd parted, hushing. For a moment the cop stood deep and dark before Arthur, silent, intense, then wheeled and knelt before Harry. The dead man offered a limp wrist. The cop checked the pulse, let the arm fall. He pulled open Harry's jaw and checked the teeth, snapped the mouth shut with a cuff of his hand. "Well, old Harry Evans." He laughed, showing his teeth. "Someone finally cooled the old queer." Without a word Harry dropped his cigarette and mashed it. The cop frowned.

"Okay, what happened here?"

Arthur found himself staring mutely into the dirty cracks of the cop's eyes.

"I said, boy, what happened?"

"He . . . he fell." But words sounded forced, seemed to float in air like an icy breath.

"Do you know him?"

Arthur nodded, wiping his nose. "I . . . I tried to help." His face was reflected distortedly in the convex mirrors of the cop's spit-shined shoes. "Wasn't any use." In cacaphony the band began tuning their instruments.

"Name?" the cop shouted above the noise.

"Arthur. Arthur Nevid."

The blue-black velvet stripe down the side of the cop's pants caught and lost the light as he paced back and forth before his suspect. "Now, again, do you know him? That is the question." His lips were red, engorged.

Arthur tried to concentrate, but the question, so simple, hovered beyond him, lost somewhere among those black slanting trees. He cupped his ears to stifle the noise, instead it crescendoed. The earth, suddenly dizzy, whirled. "I'm not sure!" He bellowed the words.

"Easy now." The cop's face appeared featureless, apparitionlike. The faces of the crowd loomed above their clotted shoulders. Giddy, Arthur shook his head, his fingernails dug at his scalp. He felt sick. "How did he fall?"

But Arthur said nothing, for he was someplace else, back at Loyola, opening one of the glass double doors in Thomas Hall for a fairhaired girl who smiled and pulled open the other door herself, ignoring his chivalry. Her smile danced dreamlike before him, but when he started to follow it down the hall his heart froze in his veins and he halted, thumbs in hip pockets. The fine silk of her long loose hair rippled in a golden cascade along her shoulders, she possessed oh such nice legs, her hips slim and soft in her checkered hotpants, and as she walked away the disorderly papers crammed

into her notebook peeked back at him. He saw her only once again before the end of his freshman year and the beginning of summer vacation--at church: she, lashes settling on sallow cheeks, sticking her tongue out for the pasty Eucharist; he, having followed her down the aisle, shivering slightly, watching the towheaded altar boy hold the gilded patin beneath the lovely peak of her chin. A-men, she breathed. Her tongue touched the priest's fingers as she took the bread.

"I said, didn't you push him?"

"Of course he did," Harry piped in. "He tried to roll me. You can see my wallet's gone." He opened his sports jacket, revealing the empty pocket.

Beside him the watch-thief shook with laughter and, leaning forward, pressed a finger against the side of his nose and snotted downward.

"Is that the truth?" the cop asked gently.

Arthur stared somnolently. Faced with a choice between the truth and the lie, he chose the latter, nodding. Best to explain things later, he thought. He'd find a way out of this mess. All rooms have doors.

"Want to tell me about it?" The cop's pencil was posed above his notebook.

Arthur shook his head.

"Well, we've got a priest on duty full-time down at the station now. He'll wring a confession out of you." The cop

stood. He stuck his notepad in his hip pocket, turned solemnly to the crowd. His command was a dark whisper:

"Take him."

The faces urged forward, hands outstretching. Arthur grimaced his eyes shut as people gripped his hair, pulled him to his feet. Tears of pain bulged from his eyes, someone slugged him in the stomach, he doubled over but was immediately pushed upright again. His mouth opened upon a gasping, unvoiced scream.

They stripped his clothes off. He didn't try to fight them, then was dimly aware of the feel of grass beneath his bare feet. He could feel the slap of sweaty hands, the hot beer breaths. Regaining his strength a little he twisted away in a single violent motion, but someone rabbit-punched him, and his head slumped forward, semi-conscious. The crowd's bulk supported him.

They tied his white shirt in a loincloth around his waist, lifted him by the arms and began dragging him toward the squad-car, his toes funneling the dry grass. The band burst into pompous song, Arthur managed to open his eyes. Through a swollen and swimming vision, biting his lip until he tasted blood, he saw the parapet of buildings which blocked the close warm moon.

Most of the crowd had rushed forward to form a gauntlet. At the far end, in front of the mad blipping light of the

squadcar, stood the cop and the dead man, arms about one another. The picture of brotherhood, they were grinning as if about to be photographed after winning an athletic event or bagging a major trophy. The watch-thief was kneeling in a football-stanch beside them. Arthur tried to cry out his hate toward the three men but the words only rasped in his throat. He allowed himself to be hauled between the lines of the crowd. A drunk stumbled forward and offered a toast, the whiskey pint uncorked, the stench invading Arthur's nostrils. Some whores did a snappy cheerleading dance, laughing hilariously. Bums clapped in unison.

* * *

Harry's hand stopped at the top of his pants. Still Arthur did not open his eyes. His cheeks felt hot, but strangely he did not feel shame, only for a thin moment did he feel any emotion other than fear, and then it was desire. He knew he was capable of guiding Harry's hand inside his pants. He convinced himself it was not desire exactly, but an ultimate act of self-giving, and so long as he kept his eyes closed he never in future memories would have to differentiate between the two, able to hide behind the veil of his innocence, his ignorance. He reached down and unzipped his pants.

Harry's fingers halted halfway in. "Say okay," he whispered hoarsely. "I want you to tell me it's all right. Say it!"

Arthur's mouth opened and the words tumbled out. "Go ahead."

"But not here."

Arthur blinked toward the heavily furrowed face. "Where?"

"My apartment."

There was a cartilaginous crackling in his ears when Arthur swallowed. His mouth was dry, he could not speak. He nodded slowly.

"I want you to stay the whole night," Harry said, getting up from the bench. "I want you to stay . . . forever."

And suddenly Arthur knew he must run. Oh, he knew, he knew.

DISCOVERY

About midnight you hear Juan Miguel call off the search. The men are tired and the women have gone to bed. Besides, it is the season of los aires, even the men without children do not like to be outside on the warm moon-filled nights. Through the crack between the boards you see them moving among the oily darkness in pairs, their straw hats drawn down tight against their ears, calling your name. You don't answer. Your mouth is pressed against the crack, but your breathing, hot, faulty, is punctured only by your low animal-like whimpering. For three days you've hardly known an hour without tears.

When the calling has ceased you crawl out of your hiding place alongside the church. The night air rushes against your throat and the exposed tops of your breasts, and you suddenly are conscious of the toolshed's oppressive heat, of the angry buzzing of the trapped flies. Giddy, you have difficulty

standing. Your hair clings damply to the back of your neck, your head tilts back and you suck a deep breath, shudder.

Then you glide from the alley and into the Plaza de la Luna, holding your bracelets together to keep them from jangling. Your dress threshes against your knees and ankles, your bare feet pad upon the resonant cobblestone. The buildings which line the pentangular plaza are indistinct blurs, but you remember their shapes exactly. You approach the fountain, slowing in anticipation. Crickets chirrup. Cicadas screech. The water stinks of scum.

Then at last the moon clears the clouds. And from a shallow basket afloat in the middle of the fountain the naked newborn child blinks up at you.

Yes. Ah, yes!

Oh for two terrible nights you've watched him slowly circle, splashed by the moist light of the moon, his head overlarge, belly fatly mounded above the small rubbery genitals, bedded upon a pillow of matted sorghum. But you know that to reach for the basket, even to follow it around and around the endless pool, is futile. For then the child and basket will simply vanish.

As the current pulls the basket by, you press your thighs against the marble fretwork and your breasts and belly tighten. Your fingernails grit against the fountain's roughworn edge, there are tears in your hard eyes, then the basket is beyond your reach anyway, dragging its nimbus-shadow.

Mosquitos swarm. One buzzes onto the side of your neck, you shake your head mindlessly. It's just not right, you tell yourself. The gods, villagers, even luck, is against you. You've sacrificed the best years of your life to make the other villagers happy, never marrying or allowing yourself to love any one man, yet in your grief you're being tormented.

Certainly it's the women who are responsible for the apparitions. Them, of course. Since you lost Paco the men have been afraid you will leave the village, but they would never resort to sorcery to keep you here--as the women might, to frighten you away. Juan Miguel and the others would be unable to live without you should you leave for Cuernavaca --they would search for you well into the night to keep you from leaving--but never would they conjure up the spirit of your child. In bed, when your thighs clutched their drunkenly heaving hips and your tongue explored their grunting mouths, every one of them confessed he loved you.

Your gaze lifts and you blink back the tears. Your pulse is beating thickly in your swollen uptilted throat and your eyes burn. The night is peopled by the random stars, you suddenly feel so helpless, so very tired.

A flurry of fireflies have stormed up from the south, settling momentarily in the wistaria vines at the other side of the fountain. Then once again they take to the air, and as they cross the moon, their light useless, you keen to a special sound.

For the child is reaching up. And crying.

Never before has he cried, this spirit-child, your son! Blood song, it seems to surge from your own heart. Your breathing quickens and you find yourself moving around the fountain toward the basket.

Somehow you sense you must get between the child and the full moon. The basket is eddying in the small whirlpool just before the corroded inflow pipe. You move cautiously, your hand rubbing along the fountain's edge, your shadow slowly forming across the water. Finally your shadow blackens the basket itself and slants on across the plaza, diminishing, rising and falling across everything in its path until it bends headlong against the windowless wall of the church.

The child peers up, pouting. But you dare not smile. Your shadow races partway back from the wall and you hold your breath as you lean over the fountain and stretch forward, the edge knifing into your abdomen. The sticky smell of sorghum fills your nostrils, at the last instant you close your eyes . . . and your fingers curl . . . around . . . nothing . . . around . . . water.

For the basket's an inch too far. You blink and jerk back, but this night you don't cry out in anguish. The child has not disappeared.

He's smiling, in fact, and then he gurgles. You hoist your fat self onto the fountain, gather your dress against

your waist, and step into the water a leg at a time. Your wake washes the basket even further away. The water, though lukewarm, makes you shiver. You slosh forward. Then the basket is immediately before you, and as you bend you imagine yourself as one of the village boys picking up his toy raft. You bite your lip and for what seems an age you are suspended between action and accomplishment, your heart pounding. Then your hand closes around the rough reed handle.

The child's cry shatters the air. You grasp him to you, letting your expensive Zapata dress fall. Awkwardly you take him from the basket, then with the child in your warm arms you move backward and manage to climb out of the fountain. You feel a little dizzy and your throat has constricted dryly, for touching his soft cold skin, your fingers remember another child a long time ago, and you wonder if this child is any less real, or perhaps more real. Bawling, he cranes his neck from side to side, twists against your grip.

You sit upon the fountain edge, his buttocks nested in your palm, water streaming from your dress. You rock him. "No, don't shiver, my little one," you whisper.

You wrestle your shoulders from your dress, pulling it down around your waist, bundling him in the soft velvet bosom. He struggles against the confinement, his face red, fists doubled, then finally his hands unclench and his crying breaks into short harsh sobs. He kicks, arching his back. Hungry.

But what can you do? Seven years it's been since your breasts were swollen with milk, and if you go to the midwife, surely the villagers will seize you. And the child as well. Desperate, you shut your eyes and lean your breast forward, guide the open mouth.

Perhaps . . .

You grow tense, rigid. Your stomach is a clenched fist and the veins bulge in your arms. You wait in dread for the mouth to turn aside and squawl its rage at your deception.

But the tightening and release of your nipple continues. You relax. Silently you thank the gods. A small miracle, but enough. For the first time in your life you're truly happy, you tell yourself. "Just before dawn we will set out for Cuernavaca," you tell the child.

It would be wise to leave now. But to venture into the fields at night is treacherous, to go beyond them, beyond the milpa cross and into the hills, is suicide. You hope that before morning your lovely Zapata dress will dry without caking with dust. Should you die in the desert your finders will know you were a real woman.

But do not think of death. For now you have the child. His eyes are closed contentedly. "Do not worry, my little one," you tell him, "once we reach the Yautepec Road there will be men who will give us food and blankets."

You hug him against yourself. "And in Cuernavaca there is so much work a woman never has to get out of bed." You

giggle like a young girl, then kiss your child's nose. "I will buy you a red rebozo, and for myself--black sandals and lace." You promise yourself he will have beef tortillas always. And on the holy days, marzipan. In Cuernavaca the men will look up from the gentle violence of lovemaking and see the child asleep on the trundle bed, and they will smile and pay you more than they intended. Oh, Cuernavaca! You've heard so much about it sometimes you dream you've actually lived there. A city where the exchange of silver in the marketplace is deafening and the people are forever happy, forgetting the reasons and even the names for the hundred fiestas. Where men have voices full of laughter and love and don't treat a woman like a pinata.

"But first you must have a name. A child is hardly a person at all without a name." You laugh warmly, maternally, and bundle him even tighter, then dip your fingers in the fountain. Overhead, the moon is gray-gold. You make the sign of the cross on his forehead, the soft slick water dripping down his brow. But he is much too busy at your nipple to notice.

Then suddenly you frown and step down from the fountain. You have no name for the child. "Not Paco," you say definitely, squatting down on the cobblestone, your back against the fountain. For you know now this child does not contain the wandering soul of your lost Paco. With his cauliflowered ear, his hands blotchy and too big even at birth, Paco was never so pretty. Paco--whose father had the pale ugly features of a purebred Spanish cacique.

The name must be something special, something which will remind him of his miraculous conception. You will tell him about it, of course. It will give him the advantage over the other boys, make him proud and full of macho. You wonder if the Virgin ever told the Infant, or if He simply knew all along.

Tepozcatl would be a good name, you decide, but that is too Indian and too local. Ixactlaclan, after the village's patron god, but no--for the same reason. Pietro, no. Nor Pablito nor Pedro nor Cristobel . . .

Far down a row of slanted houses a candle quavers in a window. The house of Juan Miguel. Probably his wife lit it so she could see to bitch at him. A blighted woman, like the rest of the wives it suffers her to know you've bedded all the best men in the village, their husbands as well. You've watched the wives here at the fountain while you washed your clean complexion in the mornings, beating their laundry and berating their husbands and absent friends. You've seen their chafed and calloused hands, heard their scratchy voices. Jealous, they often trained their glazed stares upon you until you grew nervous and would walk away. Oh how they must hate you--you and your dark beauty--your hard man-exciting eyes, the dress given you by Zapata himself.

The candle is snuffed and you continue to think of names. The slow sure rhythm of the child's mouth makes you drowsy.

Best to sleep a little. Long walk in the morning. You lean your weight against the fountain, shift the child to the other breast and brace him with your knees drawn up. Never have you known a child to nurse so long! The wind washes crisp and heavy against your moist warm nipple, and you tremble slightly. Then the moment passes and your mind again is filled with the soft slurr of names . . .

The morning breeze sends a leaf scratching across the cobblestone. You awaken to the yellow-orange light of late dawn. You snap upright but do not stand, for staring blackly through pupils chiseled into the white quartz of her eyes is Maria Alvarez, her face a shrunken catacomb. Her head is shawled in coarse gray, her fingers gripping the ends fiercely. Black rosary beads are coiled around her free hand. Probably she was on her way to church when she spotted you. Every morning she prays for her son who ran away to fight and die in the revolution which still has no name. Every morning, people have said, she prays to bring him back from his journey without end.

Slowly you rise to your feet, smooth your dress where it has dried against your forelegs. The child turns his head toward Maria, his face the color of the desert clay. His eyes slit against the light but he does not cry.

You notice Maria's shadow has splayed out across the plaza, stopping only inches short of your feet. You step backward.

But to run is useless. A word from Maria and things will just be all the worse. You sit upon the fountain edge, pinch your nipple between your thumb and forefinger. Milk tickles across the back of your hand and once again you're happy, certain that providence won't fail you now, not after last night's miracles. You bring your child to his breakfast. Your arms ache from holding him. Pain, pleasure.

A crowd has begun to gather, milling restlessly, the men's shirts bleached by the sun. Maria points toward you, and then there are angry whisperings among the women. Probably they are angry only because now their husbands have found a new excuse for not going into the fields, but you can't be sure. You clutch your child against your heart. Your jaw muscles harden. No matter what happens they won't take the child away from you, you assure yourself.

From the fields the air stirs up the stench of ragweed and dung, and when the crowd starts across the plaza toward you, their faces ugly with a blend of curiosity and anger, you are aware of the smell of your own sweat, your fear. You stand and move sideways until the fountain is between you and the crowd. The crowd halts at the other side, mirrored in the green and trembling water, and for an instant their eyes record bewilderment, uncertain of which way to go, yet not wanting to split up. You almost burst into laughter, hysterical laughter.

Then Juan Miguel shoulders his way through the crowd. A fat fetid man who married a well-used widow and suffers daily and in public her complaints about his laziness and his lovemaking, he moves sluggishly, frowning, his pants flapping. To ward off los aires he wears about his neck a clump of garlic and the bloodied ear of a newly-butchered hog. He stops directly opposite you, rests his weight upon his arms upon the fountain edge, and leans over. He glowers greasily. "Three days you've been missing," he says. "We thought you might kill yourself. We searched well into the night. Just look at the men." He waves toward the crowd. "Too tired to go into the fields."

"Yes."

"Whose child is that?"

"He is my child."

"Yours? Your son died three days ago, woman!" He lumbers around the fountain, stands before you, hands on hips.

"I found him in the fountain."

His upper lip turns under and he bites at his mustache.

"You found him in the fountain," he says.

"Yes. He is my child."

He sighs and turns toward the others. "Whose child is this?" And in a way you're happy. At least he did not lift the child from your arms to show it. For you know, try as you might, you would be unable to stop him.

The women look at one another and then shake their heads. "Perhaps it belongs to a traveler," says wiry old Pequo in a hoarse voice, himself a traveler.

"But there has been no one," Juan Miguel says.

"Perhaps it belongs to one of the neighboring villages."

Juan Miguel looks at you and you know he sees that your eyes reflect the dawn darkly, though this is not at all what you intend. His eyes become soft, gentle, like they do when he wants you sexually, and his arms fall to his sides. At your nipple the child has fallen asleep. "But then where is the mother? If she abandoned the child she now has no claim to him."

"It's the devil's child!" Maria spits out. "God took her child to punish her, so she's joined with the devil."

Your glares meet. "Then why did God take your child?" you hiss at her.

"Please . . . !" Juan Miguel steps between you and Maria. Lucky for her. You would scratch her eyes out. "I will settle this peacefully," he says. "For the time being you may keep the child. The midwife will help you."

But your anger is seething. You will accept no solace. "There is no need," you say stubbornly. "I'm leaving . . . for Cuernavaca."

"For where?" He has the look of a man lifting an unbearable weight.

"Cuernavaca."

"But there is much fighting," Pequo interrupts. "Huerta and Zapata have taken the city. You might be killed."

"Zapata will take care of me." And then you realize you've convinced even yourself of the lie, and the fact frightens you. A lump forms in your throat, you clutch your child tightly for comfort, remembering the sergeant who gave you the dress he had stolen for his wife, the sergeant who had deserted Zapata's army during crisis and could not return home.

"People are fleeing by the hundreds along the Yautepec Road," Pequo says.

"Zapata will take care of me."

For a moment there is silence. Juan Miguel and Pequo look at one another. In the distance a burro brays. "Pequo will take you in the wagon," Juan Miguel says without taking his eyes off the old man.

"I'll walk."

"Pequo will take you in the wagon," he repeats as though you simply didn't hear him the first time.

"The child goes too."

His shoulders slump, the air is thick with dust. "Yes."

Pequo grabs Juan Miguel by the sleeve, his white hair gleaming in the light. "No, don't let her go," he says. "Consuela is good for the village, good economy.. Men come down from the hills and spend money."

"The bandits come too. And once, the soldiers."

"They are not much trouble . . . usually."

"Yes, let her go!" Maria shouts. Others, mostly women, nod their approval. "Let her go to hell and the child devil with her!"

A woman in a violet broadcloth dress comes scuffling across the plaza. The wife of Juan Miguel, her grayish-black hair is drawn back tightly, her face hawkish, her arms crossed as though they have never known any other position. Juan Miguel frowns deeply. "I will let you go," he tells you. "But I do not want to. I myself do not want you to go."

You look up at him and the child awakens with a start, crying. You rock him. "Shhhhhhh, my little one."

"You are like a daughter to me," Juan Miguel says.

"You would mount your own daughter?" his wife breaks in, and then she laughs sarcastically and the others laugh too. "If you ever bothered to mount your wife perhaps you'd have a child of your own."

He ignores her and bends before you, takes the child's feet in his huge rough hands. "Whose child is it?" he asks in a whisper. And you feel that even if you named someone, then Juan Miguel would keep your secret.

"He is my child."

He nods solemnly and stares down into the fountain. The sides are slimed with scum, and the water, now turquoise in

the morning sun, reveals his engorged overtaxed face, the head bisected at the throat by the edge of the shimmering marble. "Pequo will get your things," he says. The sun beats against his back. You know he won't go to the fields today.