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THAT GRAND CANYON
AND OTHER STORIES

by

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LOVE

I

Unloading a half ton of manure had made Melvin's shoulders and arms ache, and he rested his elbows against his legs, holding the steering wheel with one hand as he drove. His mother had done it deliberately, he figured. There was no other way to figure it; the chicken house certainly hadn't needed cleaning that badly. And even if it had, she wouldn't have told the men to clean it on Saturday afternoon if she hadn't known that he wanted to use the truck that night. But now it was all done. He had given up supper and unloaded it, but his mother's ridicule still resounded in his mind: "You're a tom-fool. I no more'n got you out of your diapers, and here you think you're big enough to be seeing girls. Dating, you say! Ha! If your father..." She always mentioned his father when she really wanted to shame him. She knew the effect it would have, and Melvin always gave her the satisfaction of seeing that effect, outwardly, at least. He would take on a saddened, reflective look—letting his shoulders drop slightly—and stare at the floor. It was a kind of conditioned response that signaled his complete surrender to her. But this time he hadn't surrendered; he'd waved his flag of truce as always, but he continued fighting. Or perhaps he had just run away from the battle because he had known that he would eventually surrender if he stayed.

The sun was stretching from beyond the distant hills, leaving the earth to the dreamy, phosphorescent light of the full moon. Melvin looked out over the hood of the three-quarter ton truck. He felt better now than he had since morning, when, after milking, he had walked over to the Indian spring just at the foot of the mountain. He liked sitting there in that dark, shadowed hollow in the early mornings. Even the sun couldn't get in at him there. He felt free, free to let his thoughts go like a balloon in the wind.

Melvin revved up the motor and tried to spin the tires as he pulled out onto the hard-surfaced road. It was only a halfhearted effort however, and the truck merely lurched forward, the engine moaning painfully.

"Twenty of seven," he said out loud, although he had no way of telling what the exact time was. He hadn't even looked at the clock when he left the house. Pamela had told him to come at seven-fifteen, but he had left early in order to escape the mocking comments his mother kept throwing at him. He knew she wouldn't tell him that he couldn't go, but she kept ridiculing him in the hope of shaming him out of going. And he was afraid she might, so he had left early. Besides, he didn't want to be late, since Pamela had finally agreed: "Okay, ten minutes, but come at seven-fifteen. I have a date at eight." He hadn't expected that. He hadn't expected Pam to sound the way she had on the phone either. Ten minutes wasn't what he had hoped for, but at least it meant talking to Pam

again, which was more than he had been able to do since the end of basketball season. There was always so much to talk about on those long bus rides to the "away" games. Pamela did most of the talking then, but Melvin was an eager listener, especially when she talked about how proud she was of him for playing basketball even though he didn't have as much time to practice as the other boys because of the way he'd taken over the farm since his father's death. "You're just a natural," she would say. But he knew that wasn't true. He knew that the only thing he had that the others didn't was size and height. And in a little school like Cumberland that meant a lot. That he had taken over the farm after his father's death had never before seemed to him noble. It was something necessary. But Pam's praise had also become something that was necessary. And he had been without it for a month.

What he really couldn't understand when he thought about it was how it all got started. It seemed impossible to him that he could ever have said even an "hello" to Pamela. She was a senior—two years ahead of him—and probably the best-looking girl at Cumberland High School. She was a cheerleader and the team sweetheart, and it was rumored that she had run around with the assistant coach last year and that that was the reason he'd been fired.

The truck still smelled of the damp chicken manure. The little perfumed skunk that Melvin had bought three days earlier for the occasion didn't seem to help at all. He lifted it by

the string from the heater knob and swung it about in the cab of the truck, trying to disperse its sweet odor. "Pam probably won't get in anyway," he thought half-aloud, but continued swinging the skunk about.

Finding his father's body crushed beneath a fallen tree had had a profound effect upon Melvin; at least, everyone had told him it had. They had also told him how much he had loved his father. Melvin had never tested the validity of these statements. He accepted them as true because they had been pushed on him along with a lot of other things after his father's death. Doctor Wheeler had been the first to put forth a theory about Melvin's shyness. Melvin had overheard him talking to his mother several days after the funeral. "It's no wonder," he'd said. "That boy loved his father so much, he was like a shadow following him about. And then, when he found him there pinned to the ground why... Why it must've been like suddenly knowing that you were just a shadow." Pretty soon this theory was converted into law, and all the older people in the community deemed it their duty to speak constantly and animatedly whenever they were around Melvin. In this way, they hoped to cast enough of their own sunshine onto Melvin's shadow to blot it out altogether.

With the young people it was different. They had ignored him before his father's death and they continued to ignore him afterwards. The only difference they found in him was the black, threadbare suit that he wore to school every day for three weeks after the funeral. During this period, they

avoided him more than ever, and even walked on the opposite side of the hall when they met him. But then two things happened, basketball and Pamela.

Melvin knew that he had to kill some time before going to Pamela's house. He thought about going over to Carson's store and having a Coke, but then he remembered that on Saturday night half the men and boys in the community gathered there. He didn't want them to see him in his warmup jacket with a white shirt and tie on. He'd worn it especially for Pam and had had to slip out the back door to avoid the laughing eyes of his mother. He certainly wasn't going to the store and let them laugh at him. He remembered hearing about how they clipped some city fellow's tie off—right at the neck—with a pair of pruning shears. But that was a long time ago. Or maybe it hadn't happened at Carson's at all. Maybe it was on TV. Anyway it wasn't worth it.

He drove on by the high school. It was dark and haunted-looking in the moonlight. There was one nightlight that burned in the back parking lot. Its luminous glow rose above the buildings, silhouetting them against the darkening landscape. The gymnasium stood apart from the rest of the school. Its small windows, high up on the walls, reflected the blue-white glitter of the moon. It had all happened in that gym, and in such a short time.

"Did you ever think of playing basketball, son?" Coach Roberts had asked. It was during Phys Ed class one day in the late fall. "We need some height this year. Gosh, do

we need some height. Why, I have to squat down to talk to the tallest man on the team." Coach Roberts always talked like that. It was easy talking to him.

"Yes... I'd... I'd really like to try." Melvin hadn't really known what he was saying. He kept thinking all day at school about what his mother would say. She'd probably make fun of the idea, and shame him out of it. Thinking about it had almost made him decide to give it up even before he talked to her.

At first, she hadn't said anything. Then she smiled and said: "That's fine, Mel. That'll be fine." He wasn't sure at first whether she was shaming him or what. But the next day he stayed late for practice and came home after dark and milked and fed all the animals and ate a cold supper. She still didn't say a word about it, but just smiled at him while he was eating. He was sure she was shaming him, but he didn't care. It felt good to be a part of a team.

Melvin drove past Carson's store. The big clock in the store window showed five till seven. It had been five minutes fast for as long as Melvin could remember. A half-mile beyond the store he pulled into a dirt road and turned around and drove back the way he had come. I'll take it kind of slow and kill enough time before I get there, he thought as he pulled away.

The first night had been like a dream—a nightmare at first and then a blissful dream. The playing floor seemed to have shrunk to the size of a room. And the walls were

made of people, and all of them were looking down at the floor.

Until the second half, it hadn't seemed like he was anything more than a part of the crowd, sitting there on the bench. He could hear the yelling behind him, and, in front of him, the players kept running back and forth. Then, suddenly, Coach Roberts was calling to him. He felt his chest tighten and the blood rush into his neck. "Take your warm-up off!" the coach was saying. "Check in at the scorer's table. Go on, go on. Now!" Suddenly, he was out on the glassy floor. Someone was pointing to a spot where he was to stand. Someone else was shooting. Everyone stood in two lines. Melvin jumped and felt the ball between his hands. Seeing one of his own players, he immediately threw it to him and stood there stunned for a minute. "Get down court, you bonehead!" someone yelled in the crowd. He ran after the others.

The next five minutes were very much the same. Melvin ran from one end of the court to the other—the black and red lines flashed beneath his feet. He would grab the ball out of the air and immediately toss it to someone else. Then he would run again and listen to the rhythmical drumming of the ball bouncing on the hardwood floor.

As the game neared an end, the crowd grew louder and louder. Someone took a shot. The ball bounced high off the rim. Melvin jumped for it. Just as his feet left the floor someone pushed him. He felt himself falling. It

seemed like hours before he finally hit the floor. He heard the whistle, and people gathered around him. Someone pulled him to his feet. "You okay?" They patted him on the seat of his pants. He was standing then with his toe pointed toward a red line. The official was holding the ball out in front of him. He knew he was supposed to take it, but for a long time he just stood there. Everything had grown quiet. He could hear his heart drumming in his chest. Finally, he took the ball and almost in the same motion, threw it toward the goal. Instantly, there was an explosion. The walls of people seemed suddenly to dissolve and flow onto the floor. The coach was there smiling and shouting. Everyone was shaking Melvin's hand, or slapping him on the back. He stood there as if he had been stunned by the force of the explosion. He waited for the visions to fade into blackness as they always had before. Instead, the dream became more brilliant. Pam was standing there touching his hand and smiling—saying something that was lost in the roar of the moving crowd. Then she was gone, disappearing into the mob—her red skirt moving lightly back and forth, brushing everyone else aside.

Unconsciously, Melvin put his foot down harder on the accelerator. The truck moved on quickly through the gathering darkness. He was glad that it was dark. He was happier than he had been since morning when he had been in his own dark hollow beneath the shadow of the mountain. Ten minutes wasn't what he had hoped for, but it was something. Maybe he could arrange it for next Saturday night.

II

It was only five after seven when Melvin turned into the drive that led to Pamela's house. The house was a low, brick structure that sat about a hundred yards off the road. When Mr. Burnette went into the insurance business, he had sold all of his farm except this one plot of land. The Burnettes had planned to build a small mansion there with the money they had gotten from the sale of the rest of the farm. Mrs. Burnette (or so it was rumored) had insisted that they have a three-car garage, and, for some reason, the contractor started to work on that first. This was during mid-winter when construction work was at best a hit-and-miss thing. The garage was three months in the building and by that time, with the whole family spending madly, there was hardly enough money left to build one of the three bathrooms they had planned. But that's what they finally did. They built a bathroom onto the side of the garage and bricked up the three big doors and moved in.

Melvin kept the truck in second gear and drove slowly along the rough drive. He suddenly wished he had a stick of gum. He couldn't remember whether he'd brushed his teeth before leaving home or not. Feeling in the pockets of his warmup jacket, he discovered a piece of an old Hershey bar that had been put there by Pam at the last basketball game, the tournament game when they'd been beaten so badly. Melvin rolled down the window and started to throw the crumbled chocolate out, but then decided he would keep it and give it

back to Pam just for a joke. She liked things like that.

The dim, yellow headlights of the truck reflected from the rear of Mr. Burnette's old Pontiac as Melvin pulled to a stop halfway around the circle in front of Pamela's house. He wondered what had happened to the convertible that Pam sometimes used to drive. Melvin looked at the house, and his heart began to palpitate and seemed to hammer against his rib cage. He turned the lights and the motor off and sat for a minute staring at the dim glow that came from the front window of the house. Someone seemed to be moving about in front of it. Their shadow rippled about on the red clay of the front yard. Melvin wondered if it were Mrs. Burnette waiting for him, waiting to make fun of him just as his mother had. "You just turn around and get yourself right back out that door, boy! Dating, my eye!"

Melvin got out of the truck and walked toward the house. The sidewalk was just a couple of long two-by-six boards lying between the driveway and the front door. Melvin wanted to look himself over again, but there wasn't enough light to make a critical study. He felt the zipper of his fly to make sure it was up, and fastened the bottom two snaps of his warmup jacket to make it look more like a sportcoat. He wished more than ever that he had some gum. He was sure now he had forgotten to brush his teeth.

Suddenly, it all seemed so wrong, and he wanted to turn and run away, but he was standing in front of the warped screen door now and, almost instinctively, he brought his

hand up and tapped on it lightly. It rattled at the top and bottom as if the wind had blown against it. He could hear people moving around inside and someone was talking, but he couldn't understand what they said. Nobody seemed to have noticed the knock. He tapped lightly again. The door rattled. He waited. The door seemed still to be rattling. The voices came again.

After a long wait, Melvin finally reached out and pulled open the screen and raised his hand to knock on the main door. But just as he raised his hand to knock, the door opened and Mrs. Burnette stood there with one arm in her coat and a large, black pocketbook hung on the other. Melvin stood petrified, his fist raised at eye-level.

"Oh!" Mrs. Burnette took one quick step backwards. "Oh, you're the Hamlette boy. Pam's expecting you. Come in. I was just leaving. Church meeting. I'm late!" She twisted about and speared the other arm of her coat with her hand. "Go on in," she said, walking past Melvin in the doorway. "I know your mother. Sorry I can't stay. Church meeting. Make yourself at home. Sid's in there. Go on in!" She was gone before Melvin could open his mouth. He looked into the house like an inquisitive cat, then stepped inside.

"Shut the door, Margaret! For crying-out-loud! The wind's blowing stuff everywhere!"

Melvin closed the door and walked quietly into the living room where Mr. Burnette was frantically going through a stack of papers. He stopped a couple of yards from the table where

Mr. Burnette sat and just stood for several minutes without speaking.

"Damn it! Damn it! Damn it!" Mr. Burnette kept saying softly. Finally, he took his arm and pushed all the papers on the table onto the floor and leaned over to pick up a briefcase that was sitting beside his chair. It was then that he noticed Melvin.

"Hell... Hello... Hello!" he said excitedly, getting up from his chair. "Sorry, I didn't see you come in. Have a seat!" He sat down on the sofa and motioned for Melvin to do the same. "You're the Hamlette boy, right? I sold your fa... your family some insurance. At least, I tried to sell them some. I don't think I ever did. I was just... just looking for a memo sheet there when you came in. I can't find the blame thing anywhere. Company's always sending out memos, and you've got to follow them all to the letter. That's how it is in this business."

He stopped talking and just looked at Melvin who sat on the edge of the sofa, leaning forward as if he were about to get up.

"You want to see Pam, I guess?" Mr. Burnette said, more calmly this time.

"Yes, sir," answered Melvin quietly, staring down at his old Buster Brown shoes. He hated those shoes the way he hated the size of his feet, but they were the only ones he had besides his high tops.

"She'll be out in a minute. Pam!"

"That's okay... don't... ru... rush her."

"You don't mind if I keep looking for that memo while we talk, do you?" asked Mr. Burnette, pulling the briefcase toward him.

"No, sir," answered Melvin. He pulled his shoes back close to the bottom of the sofa, hoping they would look smaller there.

"The blamed thing's got to be here somewhere!"

"Yes, sir."

Melvin looked about the room. The walls weren't made of cardboard as someone had once told him, but he could tell that they had been added after the rest of the house was built. The furniture was rather assorted, some new and expensive-looking, and some obviously brought in from their old house. There were several straight-back chairs, none of which seemed to match. On an expensive-looking easy chair at the end of the sofa lay a half-eaten sandwich and some cracker crumbs. The table at which Mr. Burnette had been sitting appeared to be part of a dinette set. The formica top was peeling in several places. It looked very much like the table at which Melvin usually ate, except that its top was a faded green.

"How's farming going?" asked Mr. Burnette.

"Oh, pretty good, I guess," answered Melvin, coughing a short cough before and after speaking.

"Guess you're really gonna show these farmers around here how to farm?" Mr. Burnette said.

"Yeah, I guess so," said Melvin, releasing a little laugh

that sounded like the first cluckings of a young pullet.

Mr. Burnette continued looking through the briefcase. Melvin still sat leaning forward as if ready to jump up at any minute. His elbows and knees seemed to him to stick out grotesquely, and he kept moving them about, trying to arrange them so he wouldn't look so awkward. He kept thinking how he must look like a praying mantis, the way his knees and elbows stuck out.

"Nights are getting warm now," Mr. Burnette was saying. "Good for the crops, I suppose. When I farmed, I know we always looked for those first warm nights in spring. Good on the hay crop, I always said."

"Yes, sir."

"Pamela!"

"I'm here, Daddy." The voice seemed to come from right at Melvin's ear. He started and jumped up as if he had just sat down on a tack. As he straightened to his full height, he bent his head to one side, fearing that it might hit the low-hanging light fixture overhead. With his head still in this position, he turned around slowly and saw Pamela standing behind the sofa. Her hair was rolled up in a neat bun on top of her head, and she was wearing a white blouse and a red skirt which immediately reminded Melvin of her cheerleader's outfit.

"Hi!" she said.

Melvin didn't say anything, but just looked at her with his head still tilted to one side.

"Why don't you kids go out in the yard and talk? It's warm out, and I've got a lot to do," said Mr. Burnette, standing up and looking rather relieved that Pam had finally come out. "You can cut the spotlight on if it's too dark. Unless, of course, you're going somewhere," he added hastily.

"No," said Pam. "Mel can only stay for a minute. We'll go outside though. Okay, Mel?"

"Oh... Yeah. Sure. That'll be fine."

Pamela walked toward the door. Melvin was about to turn and say something to Mr. Burnette when he heard him say under his breath: "Haa, here's the son-of-a-bitch!" Melvin started off after Pamela without saying anything.

"Poo, what's that smell?" said Pam as she stepped out the door.

Melvin knew that it came from the truck, and he felt a hot surge of blood rush to his neck and ears. He wanted to explain to Pam about what his mother had done, but he didn't.

Pam sat down in one of the large, white lawn chairs at the corner of the house. Melvin seated himself on the edge of another one. They sat there for several minutes without speaking. Pam fidgeted about in her seat. Each time she moved, Melvin expected her to say something, but she didn't. She stared at the door of the house and rubbed the palms of her hands together.

"Well?" she said, finally.

Melvin almost stood up again. He looked at her as if waiting for her to say more. She didn't.

"I beg your pardon?" said Melvin. "What did you say?" He knew it didn't sound right, but it was the only thing he could think of to say.

"I said well!" answered Pam. "Well? Why did you have to see me?"

"I... I just thought we could... talk. I me... mean, we... we never get to talk anymore," Melvin said.

"What's there to talk about?" asked Pam coldly. "You could talk to me at school, you know."

Melvin didn't say anything. He looked at her in disbelief. She must be joking, he thought. But he knew she wasn't. A cold feeling came over him.

Melvin sat for a long time just looking down at his shoes. Then he said: "Too bad we didn't win that tournament game. I... I mean I wish we could have gone to the finals, don't you?"

Pamela gave him a quick, irritated look. Her eyes reminded him of his mother's, and he suddenly felt ashamed. He wanted to leave, just to get up and walk away without even saying good-bye. But he didn't. He kept trying to make things right—clutching for the dust that swept by in the warm, spring wind, mocking him with its elusiveness.

"I did some plowing today," he said. His voice sounded hoarse, and he coughed a dry, hollow cough and waited for Pam to speak.

There was another long silence. Everything was silent. Melvin moved his knees around to one side. The chair creaked.

"I like your father," he said. "He's nice."

"Yes," answered Pam. "I do too."

"And your mother too," he said.

"Yes,"

Melvin looked up at the night. The stars were all out now. They looked like holes punched in the sky with an ice pick, punched at random and for no reason. Melvin looked away. He wanted to ask Pam about next Saturday night. Maybe there was still a chance.

"What... What time's your date?" he asked.

"Eight o'clock," said Pam, as if it were the cue she had been waiting for. "I have to finish getting ready too. I mean I don't want to rush you but..." She let the sentence drop there and looked away.

"That's okay. I've got to go anyway. I just... I just thought I'd stop by and talk a minute." He knew he should ask her now, before she got up.

"Well, I'm glad you did," she said flatly, getting to her feet. "I'm glad you did."

Melvin got up and walked behind her to the door. Once, he reached out to grab her arm so he could stop her and ask her about the next weekend, but he didn't. He let his hand drop back to his side before it touched her. She opened the screen and turned to him.

"Glad you came by," she said. "I'll see you at school Monday."

"Okay. Sure. Okay. Good-bye." Melvin was still searching

for the words.

She opened the door and disappeared into the house. He turned and walked back to the truck.

III

Melvin drove along slowly, not caring where he was going. He didn't want to go home. He didn't want to see his mother's eyes. She wouldn't say much, but she'd laugh behind his back. He knew she would.

Everything was whirling about in his mind. It all seemed unbelievable. Pam's words kept coming back to him: "See you at school Monday. See you at school Monday." One time, it sounded hopeful; the next time, it was full of mockery. He began making up conversation in his mind— things he would say to her at school next week. Then he thought it might be better not to say anything— to just ignore her. And all the while, in the back of his mind, he knew that he wouldn't say anything to her, but that he wouldn't ignore her either.

He slowed the truck in front of a brightly-lighted house near the edge of the road. The idea of going and talking to Coach Roberts had occurred to him as soon as he left Pamela's house, but now that he was there he couldn't make up his mind to pull into the driveway. He drove by, stopped, turned the truck around, and drove back by again. He still did not stop.

He drove away so slowly that the truck began to lurch in third, forcing him to shift into second. He suddenly wished that he could play basketball. If he could only hold a ball in his hands and bounce it, he felt everything would be as

it was before. He lay his long, bony fingers out on the leather seat and clutched at it as if it were a basketball.

Melvin parked the truck behind the gymnasium so that no one would notice it from the road. He didn't want anyone to see him at the school, not that they would think he was doing anything wrong. He just didn't want them to know—to talk about it, to laugh.

The door of the gym was locked as he had expected it to be. He knew what had to be done, but he wasn't quite sure of himself anymore. It had all seemed so easy when he was driving there. He kept trying to think of Pam—the things she had said and done before tonight. But an image of his father lying crushed beneath the fallen tree kept crowding into his mind. Then he would look closer, and it would be Pam lying there. Then his mother. Then all three would be crumpled like paper beneath the broken limbs of the tree. And he mocked them, jeered at them, shamed them because they were dead.

Melvin searched about at the side of the building until he found a loose brick. It was large enough, but he would have to hit with force since the windows were reinforced with wire. He was standing in front of the door again. It all seemed ridiculous now, but he knew that he had to do it. He had to show them all that he could. Even though they wouldn't see him, they would know.

Melvin raised the brick to shoulder height. The moonlight shone on the cloudy glass of the door, and he could see

the dark silhouette of himself standing there, rather awkward looking. More than ever, he wanted to hit the glass, to shatter the ludicrous silhouette.

He raised the brick higher, almost above his head. His arm began to tremble. Everyone was laughing now. They knew he couldn't do it. They had known all along, but they had waited till the last minute to laugh. It was more fun to see him fail at the last minute. He had stripped naked for the battle, and they were laughing at him for being nude.

Melvin turned suddenly and brought the brick down with all the force in his body. It landed with a sickly thud in the soft earth beside the steps.

Melvin sat down and leaned back against the door of the gym. He sat there and looked up at the sky until the moon fell beyond the distant trees. Then he got up slowly and drove home.

THE STICK MATCHMAN

Like a mad game of follow-the-leader, they ran in a bric-a-brac pattern along the wide, broken sidewalk. His footfalls, muffled by rubber and canvas, were a shod echo of hers.

"I'll kill you! I'll kill you, you...you little pest!"

The wind streaked the tears across the little girl's cheeks as they ran. The boy's longer strides and quicker turns were closing the gap between them.

"I'm gonna kill you—you'd better run!"

The girl rounded a corner by a tall, brick warehouse; her dirty, bare foot hung on something black and her pale body went sailing through the air like a chip of wood and would have skidded mercilessly along the sidewalk had not a withered, biscuit-brown hand grabbed her arm, so that she slid to a stop on one foot and a knee and only lost a small patch of skin below her kneecap. She looked up beyond the withered hand and fell gently against the wall, sobbing.

The boy did not turn the corner but ran straight past. He slowed his forward momentum by swinging in a semicircle about a utility pole, and came to a stop. This maneuver brought him face to face with the girl and the thing on which she had tripped, but which had also rescued her.

"Why such anger, son? Anger will burn a man's heart out,

don't you know that?" The old man half sat, half leaned against the blackened brick wall, only the rounded part of his hunched back touched it. All his limbs seemed to be drawn in towards some central point of his body. His knees came up toward his chest, and his elbows went down and in, almost touching his knees. His hands stuck out not more than six inches from his body, and quivered like two dead leaves in a breeze. His head was pulled down so that the dark beard on his chin touched his dirty, black coat. Two dark eyes looked out from under the forehead; their whites were an orange color with a myriad of veins that ran out from the corners. He was a small man and drawn up all over so that he looked like a spider that had been dropped on a hot stove.

"Don't cry, honey," said the old man, "your little friend isn't mad anymore."

"He's not my friend!" said the girl, still sobbing—more from fear than from hurt.

"Yeah, and you're not mine, either!" replied the boy.

"But you must be friends?" questioned the old man.

"She's not my friend!" reiterated the boy.

"But she must be?" said the old man.

"She's not!"

"But how else could you be so angry with her?"

"She tore down my fort!"

"From within or without?"

The boy looked puzzled.

"She walked on top of it! And broke my canon and stepped

on all my soldiers!"

"Then she's your enemy— an aggressor?"

The boy was puzzled again.

"Nah, she's my sister."

The old man laughed, seemed to laugh. Neither his lips nor any of the rest of his face revealed the amusement, but in his eyes something seemed to flicker, to dance. But only for an instant.

The boy still stood some distance from the corner of the old warehouse. His anger cooled somewhat and he looked at the old man now as if he were seeing him for the first time.

"Come and sit down, son," the old man said, moving one of his jerky hands out from his chest and motioning to the boy.

The boy did not move but stood with his legs crossed—the toes of his black, high-top tennis shoes pointing out to either side.

"Come on, son."

The boy still did not move.

"I know you," he said finally. "My father buys matches from you."

"Are you the man that sells those big matches?" asked his sister. She sat up straight beside the old man and wrapped her arms about her knees and drew them in and rested her chin between them.

The old man turned his head slowly to one side, and looked for a moment at the brown pasteboard box beside him as if

he needed to be reassured that he was indeed the man who sold those big matches. The box was ragged and crumpled at the corners. The lettering on the side was faded and the paste-board itself was rain-warped and cracked.

"Yes," replied the old man. "Stick matches."

"My father says you're crazy," said the boy, coming closer, and suddenly assuming an attitude of superiority. "He says nobody uses those kind of matches anymore."

The old man blinked painfully as if all the lubricant in his eyes had dried up. The lashes interlaced for an instant before the lids began their slow, receding journey.

"He buys them," replied the old man.

"He's just being nice. We don't ever use 'em!" snapped the boy.

The boy was about to continue, but the girl turned to the old man and said in a soft, understanding voice, as if she were talking to one of her dolls: "He said you'll have to start selling something else pretty soon, or you're gonna starve."

The eyes flickered again with one quick, involuntary movement that half covered the cracked enamel eyeballs.

"Everybody needs a little fire," said the old man. "These matches give you just enough."

The boy started walking away, then turned and looked back at his sister.

"And you can make things out of them," said the old man enthusiastically, looking at the boy. There was something in

his gaze that held the boy there for a moment and kept him from speaking.

"Do you sell many?" asked the girl.

The old man didn't answer, but continued to look at the boy.

"I'll show you why it's important to have the right amount of fire," he said, producing a small, pearl-handle knife from the pocket of his coat.

"Can I look at that knife?" asked the boy, taking a couple of steps back towards the warehouse.

The old man said nothing but took two, long stick-matches from one of the boxes. With the small blade of the knife, he cut one of the matches in half. He split the headless part into two splinters, keeping one of them and replacing the remaining parts of that match back into the box.

"My daddy uses those for toothpicks," said the little girl. "But he told me not to 'cause if I ate the red part it would kill me."

"He did not! He said it would make you sick!" said the boy with authority.

"He did too! He said it would burn my insides out!"

With the thin, pointed blade the old man put a slit in the other match just below its sulfer head. His hands still trembled, but they controlled as if by magic the movement of the knife through the match.

"My father says you fought in the war," said the boy.

"Did you?"

The splinter from the first match was worked gently into the split of the second one until half of the splinter stuck out on either side.

"War is wildfire," replied the old man, simply.

The jerky fingers bent the splinter in two places. It cracked but did not break.

"Did you really fight?" asked the boy anxiously.

The pen knife split the second match from the bottom almost halfway up. Again the jerking hands bent the two split halves. They cracked but did not break.

"The flame caught me afire also," answered the old man in a tone of resignation.

The boy did not understand.

"What did you fight with? Machine guns?"

The hands made final adjustments on the splintered match.

"With fire, son, like everyone else," answered the old man.

"With flame throwers, is that what you mean?" demanded the boy impatiently.

"There," said the old man, holding up the match.

"A little man!" said the girl. "A little matchman."

The old man seemed fascinated by his own creation. He held its body between his thumb and index finger and turned it so that the extended arms of the matchman reached first toward him, then toward the girl, and last of all, toward the boy.

"Heck!" said the boy. "I could do that."

"Oh, shut up!" said the girl. "He looks just like the cornstalk doll that grandpa made for me. Can I have him?"

"He does not!" said the boy, placing his hands on his hips and eyeing the matchman critically.

"He does! He looks just like it— only smaller."

"Heck!" replied the boy with a sneer.

The arms of the matchman still reached out toward the boy.

"You don't know anyway!" shouted the girl. "You threw my corn-doll in the fireplace. You always mess up my stuff. And ruin it!"

The old man rolled his finger and thumb so that the stick-man came back around to face the girl.

"Yeah! What about my fort?"

"Oh, that was just sticks and stuff anyway. Stupid!"

The old man's thumbnail suddenly caught the head of the matchman. There was a crack like a cap pistol firing and a tiny swirl of smoke like a strand of silver hair. An orange flame bloomed up from the matchman's head.

"Oh!" cried the girl, jerking back and almost hitting her head against the wall of the warehouse.

With one trembling hand the old man held the flaming matchman close to his face. He did not look directly at the flame but stared past it to the yellowing, poplar leaves that hung from a half-dead tree on the opposite side of the street. Then, with extreme gentleness, he placed the matchman down on the sidewalk in front of him.

The flame quickly burned over the entire body of the make-believe man. The children watched the yellow, almost invisible, flame as if hypnotized. The old man continued to watch the falling leaves, and beyond. His eyelids twitched with heartbeat regularity.

As the matchman burned, some binding paralysis seemed to grip the limbs and draw them up so that the whole body appeared to crawl forward and draw into a knot. A final, blue flame flickered and died. The gray smoke rose in a straight line above the coal-black corpse.

"He's still there," said the girl, leaning over on her elbows and looking closely at the charcoal skeleton. "Can I have him?"

The old man looked up beyond the dying tree, beyond the street and the buildings, to the golden cup of sunlight that spilled its silver, dazzling rays into the emptiness of the powder-blue sky. His lids were stretched far apart but his eyes seemed unaffected by the harshness of the light.

"I bet you weren't even in the war!" said the little boy, and with a quick movement of his foot he crushed the black bones of the matchman.

"You ruined him! You always ruin everything!" screamed the girl bolting to her feet and pounding the boy's chest with her tiny fists.

The girl's fists pounded out wildly at the boy as they ran off down the street. The old man did not turn his eyes to watch, but continued to stare into the yellow blaze of the afternoon

sun.

"I'll kill you! I'll kill you!"

ONE DOMINIQUE'S MEN

I had one other visitor that day: A mottled old color-
 blind man that wandered in to look at the things in
 the store. I knew he was just one of the men from
 over on Dexter Highway's place, but I pretended he was
 a customer who'd escaped from the road gang and was here to
 see the store. It was the first time I'd been left there al-
 one, and I was determined something was going to happen, so
 I kept my hand resting on my father's blackjack until the old
 man finished his look and bag of pennies and left.

My father knew that Tuesdays were our slowest days. That's
 why he went into town and left me there alone, I guess. Every-
 body bought their groceries on Friday or Saturday and came back
 on Monday for what they'd forgotten. And the delivery trucks
 never came out that far until Wednesday or Thursday. But I
 was expecting something to happen. I even changed the color
 of crayon we used to mark the prices on canned goods. I
 thought that maybe if I used purple it would attract more
 attention and cause people to buy more stuff. I thought I
 might call anything in the store before my father got back.
 But the old color blind man didn't seem to notice anything dif-
 ferent about the way the prices were marked, and it looked as
 though he was going to be my only customer.

After he left, I practiced my guessing for a while and

ONE DOMINIQUE'R HEN

I had one other customer that day: A mottled old colored man with a scar the color of an earthworm that ran halfway round his neck. I knew he was just one of the tenants from over on Dexter Merryweather's place, but I pretended he was a convict who'd escaped from the road gang and was ready to rob the store. It was the first time I'd been left there alone, and I was determined something was going to happen, so I kept my hand resting on my father's blackjack until the old man finished his Nehi grape and bag of peanuts and left.

My father knew that Tuesdays were our slowest days. That's why he went into town and left me there alone, I guess. Everybody bought their groceries on Friday or Saturday and came back on Monday for what they'd forgotten. And the delivery trucks never came out that far until Wednesday or Thursday. But I was expecting something to happen. I even changed the color of crayon we used to mark the prices on canned goods. I thought that maybe if I used purple it would attract more attention and cause people to buy more stuff. I thought I might sell everything in the store before my father got back. But the old colored man didn't seem to notice anything different about the way the prices were marked, and it looked as though he was going to be my only customer.

After he left, I practiced my cussing for a while and

even tried to smoke a cigarette, but it made me feel like I had ants crawling around in my stomach, so I went outside and sat on the window ledge and watched a storm that was coming up. The lightning flickered out across the sky like a giant snake's tongue, and the thunder trailed after it like a pack of Redbone hounds.

The rain came so quickly that it caught me before I could get back in the store. On my red shirt the wet spots looked like blood, and I staggered in and stationed myself at the window and was preparing to return the enemy's fire with my own machine gun when I noticed a car pulling off the road into the driveway. The headlights were on, but I could tell it was an expensive new model. It splashed through the mud puddles and stopped next to the kerosene pump at the corner of the store.

The woman came in first, almost taking the door off its hinges in her hurry to escape the rain, and slamming it behind her so quickly she nearly cut the half pint sized man with her in two. He yelped once like a gun-shy puppy and managed to get completely inside before the woman gave the door another straightarm shot that almost sent it through the facing and into the driveway beyond. I got behind the counter and tried to appear business-like, expecting that my big moment had arrived.

The woman shook herself with a fluttering motion like an old Dominique'r hen. And in a way, she looked just like one: She was bent forward from her waist (her huge bust

making her topheavy) and then straight up again from the neck to the top of her head. Her dress wasn't much to talk about; all and all it must have contained a generous amount of material, but it didn't cover much of her. She looked just like a half-plucked old hen, who, instead of being ashamed of her nakedness, was, on the contrary, quite proud of it and strutted about shaking what few feathers she had left.

"Geeeeez-us!" she said, the first syllable catching in her sinuses and humming like a bee trapped in a Coke bottle. "It's raining cats and dogs!"

"Collies and Persians?" said the little man, his voice sounded like he was humming first through one nostril and then the other.

"Our Fathers! Homer, you've been using that trite little saying ever since our wedding night when it was raining. Don't you ever have any new ideas?"

"I had one that night..." he said.

"Oh, hush up," she said and turned to me for the first time. "Where's the proprietor?"

"Ma'am?" I said.

"The owner? Who's in charge here?" she said.

"I am," I said.

"You?" she said.

"Yes, ma'am," I said.

"Our Fathers!" she said.

"Ma'am?" I said.

"Nothing!" she said. Then said: "Our Fathers!" again

under her breath. And then she didn't say anything for a while but just looked like she was disgusted with herself, like she had just brushed her teeth with Borax by mistake and was mad because there was no one to blame it on but herself.

"We are just going to rest here till the rain's over and get some directions," she said, placing her hands on the overhang of her huge hips and looking about as if she were a general who had just taken over some very distasteful command.

"Yes'm, that'll be fine," I said.

"Don't guess you can give us much direction, though," she said.

"Well, my father'll be back..." I said, not telling her when but just saying it because I reckoned I ought not let them think I was going to be there alone forever. But I wasn't really afraid of them because they weren't like anything I had ever seen before, or even imagined. They could have been escaping bank robbers, except that she spoiled it by saying:

"Hon-nie, is there a bathroom here?"

"Yes'm, in back of the stockroom," I said and pointed to the door behind me.

She walked on by me and pushed open the swinging door and entered the stockroom. The floor sort of hummed when she walked on it like she was walking on a bunch of tightly-strung wires, and every time she raised her foot the dust would jump out of the cracks between the boards.

"Hon-nie, it's dark in here! Is there a light?" she said.

"Yes'm, overhead, there's a string. Just pull it," I said.

A few seconds passed and I didn't see the light come on. Then I heard a noise like two bulls fighting in a small greenhouse, like half the glass in the world had been thrown in a washing machine.

"Our Fathers!" she said even before the glass stopped breaking. And then she said it again like she hadn't heard herself the first time for the noise.

"Are you all right, ma'am?" I said.

I opened the door and fished about for the light string. When I found it and turned the light on overhead, the stockroom looked like it had been hit by an avalanche of glass, like two teams of football players had run across it with their cleats still on.

The woman had been pulling on the loose end of a roll of bailer twine which had been sitting behind a case of old lamp chimneys, which fell on a case of half-gallon canning jars, which fell on some 100-watt light bulbs. And it all fell to the floor and landed among a bunch of gallon jugs. And the Old Dominique'r hen had gone to roost about three-quarters of the way up the nail bins on the far wall of the stockroom with the loose end of the bailer twine still in her hand.

"I think I pulled the chandelier down in here, hon-nie," she said.

"Yes, ma'am," I said.

I just stood there and looked at the mess, kind of happy

that something exciting had happened. The woman's husband, who had just walked in, looked on over my shoulder and said in his high-pitched, well-oiled voice:

"Why, I thought that was just you going to the bathroom, Martha."

And she looked at him like she wished he was a piece of that glass there on the floor so she could beat it to dust with a sledge-hammer. But she didn't say anything, and he just shook his head and walked on back into the store. She watched him, then looked at me again and then climbed down off the nail bins like an old nanny goat backing down a step-ladder.

"Where's that bathroom, hon-nie?" she said.

"Right back there, ma'am," I said.

"Our Fathers!" she said picking her way through the broken glass.

"Yes, ma'am," I said.

When I went back into the store her husband was eating roasted peanuts from the box in front of the counter, cracking them with his girl-like fingers and popping them into his round, fish-mouth with the brown skin still on them.

"Don't worry," he said between munching on the peanuts.

"Yes, sir," I said, watching him take a couple of bills from his wallet.

"Will twenty dollars take care of the damage back there?" he said.

"Uh? Yes...sir," I said.

He handed me a twenty dollar bill.

"And five for you, for cleaning up the mess," he said.

He held out the five dollar bill but didn't give it to me.

"Martha wouldn't give you anything. She'd probably say it was your fault. But don't let her fool you—she's a good woman. She's like... Well, you know how you feel about your mother?" he said. His voice had changed and he looked just like a sad-eyed old dog I used to have.

"My mother's dead," I said.

"Well... Your sister then?" he said.

"I don't have any sisters," I said.

"Oh," he said, and looked at me and smiled kind of hatefully, like I might have just stolen the punch line from his joke.

"Well, to me, Martha's like... Well, like a sister would be to you. If you had one, that is," he said, and I was glad I didn't have any sisters.

"Well, what I was going to say was that Martha's a good-hearted woman in her own way, but she just wouldn't give you anything for the damages back there," he said.

"Oh," I said.

And he looked at me, and I thought sure he was going to whine just like that old dog use to do. But he didn't. He just folded up the five-dollar bill and put it in his pocket.

In the back room, I could hear his wife stomping through the broken glass. She re-entered the store looking like the

first character in the first chapter of a book, like she didn't know what had happened before the book was opened or what was going to happen on the next page, but was just there because someone had put her there. And she didn't know who had and didn't care either, but was just eager to get started with it.

"What kind of foolishness have you been feeding this boy?" she said to him, and then looked at me and said: "Don't pay any attention to him, hon-nie. What was he telling you?"

"Nothing, ma'am," I said.

"Well, that's about the right word for it," she said. "Nothing is about all he could tell you."

I didn't say anything to that. I just looked at her and tried to see if I could tell why her husband thought she was a good-hearted woman and how he could think she was like a sister to him. I tried to imagine that she had really kidnapped the little man and that she was making him say all those things, and that he didn't really like her at all. But then I looked at him again and I couldn't imagine anyone wanting to kidnap him... Or be related to him either.

"Have you been eating those peanuts, Homer?" she said, pointing to the box of roasted peanuts.

"Only the middle parts. I don't like the hulls," he said in a serious tone, but in the same oily voice he had used before.

"Can't you keep your hands off anything?" she said.

"I paid for them," he said.

"Did he?" she said.

"Yes, ma'am," I said.

"I told you," he said.

"Shut up," she said.

"Yes, ma'am," I said.

There was silence for a while after that and they both stood there like two foreigners who were new in this country and didn't really know what was going on. Then I decided that they were both disguised, and that they were really spies. Only they were spying on each other and neither one was doing a very good job of it, but I thought that the little man must be doing the better job, because he was sneakier than the woman who didn't know how to keep her mouth shut and looked too big to be a successful spy anyway. She looked more like a bodyguard to some gangster, or a statue that had been half-carved out of a big piece of wood but hadn't ever been finished. Or maybe she was just something incomplete, that the statue-carver hadn't known what she was supposed to be either but had just left her half done so there'd be plenty left in case he wanted to change her later on.

"Do you have Alpines?" she said, breaking in through the sleepy sounds of the rain drumming on the roof.

"Ma'am?" I said.

"Alpine cigarettes!" she said.

"Yes, ma'am," I said, pulling a package of them from the rack above the cash register.

She took them and tore open the whole top of the pack and

pulled out one cigarette pinched between two long, red fingernails.

"Are you going to pay him?" he said.

"Can't you keep quiet for one minute?" she said. "I want to listen to the rain on the roof. I haven't heard rain on a tin roof since I was a little girl."

"I thought they were still using straw on roofs then, dear," he said.

She didn't say anything but just looked at him like she had a burr in her girdle that she couldn't get out.

There was another silence then. And I wondered if she'd ever really been a little girl. When I tried to imagine her as a little girl all I could think of was her holding her father in her arms and rocking him to sleep, while she sang "Our Fathers! Our Fathers!" to him over and over, and a hundred-piece band played the background while she sang and every instrument was out of tune with every other one and she was out of tune with them all. But she just kept rocking her father (who was a little man and looked like her husband) until he turned into a raindrop and rolled off her lap onto the floor.

The little man coughed and his wife looked at him like he'd just said a dirty word. He was standing by the door with his hands clasped in front of him, looking just like a pallbearer. His face looked as though it had just been white-washed, and his eyes were like two blackeyed peas stuck deep into his face. His smile was just a thin line where his lips

met, reaching to either side of his nose. It didn't turn up on the ends, but you could still tell that it was a smile, the same way that you can tell that boiling water is hot without touching it.

The woman paced about in front of the counter just waiting for somebody to move or say something. But except for the man's cough, nobody did. So finally she sat down, oozing over both sides of an old split-bottom chair like biscuit dough.

"Homer," she said, finally, "why don't you run out to the car and bring in that bottle of bourbon?"

"Martha, it's raining out there!" he said.

"Jesus! You won't melt," she said.

He looked at her hard as if to say: "I wish you would. I'd put you out there and melt you down to size!" And she seemed to hear him say this even though he didn't say it, and they looked at each other for a long time, like a beagle and a hound that I once saw in a fight. The hound never moved or growled or anything before the fight started, but the little beagle had to keep fighting with himself to keep his nerve up. I thought for a while that the little man had reckoned up the nerve to really face her instead of just nipping her haunches when she wasn't expecting it like he had been doing.

"I need a little drink, honey. Pleeze?" she said, and her voice was like the bleating of a sick calf. She blew all the air out of her lungs and kind of withered up there in the chair and her head flopped over to one side like a dead turnip top.

And I knew there wasn't going to be a fight then, because she'd already decided that she'd won and there wasn't any need for it. And the little beagle was left standing there fighting with himself, because there wasn't any hound there to fight, just the purple top of an old turnip half-sticking out of the ground, and that wasn't going to fight with anybody.

"Pleeeeze!" she said again.

"Yes, Martha," he said almost to himself.

He stood there for a while, putting his hands in his pockets and taking them out again. Then he turned and opened the door and walked out into the rain.

"Our Fathers!" she said, turning to me.

"Yes, ma'am," I said.

"Give me a 7-Up," she said.

"Yes'm," I said.

Her husband was only gone for a few seconds but when he came back he was as wet and shiny-looking as a beaver. He handed her the bottle and took his place by the door. He stood there looking like one of those icons we read about in our history book, like it had been used so much it was worn slick and was glad just to sit up on a shelf and wait until it was needed again.

"Well, I see you got yourself good and wet," she said as she mixed a drink in a paper cup I had just given her.

He didn't say anything.

"Well, take your damn coat off, you blockhead!" she said.

He still didn't answer her but took his coat off anyway. The little smile had been blotted out and I could hardly tell where his lips were anymore. I wondered if he still thought she was a good-hearted woman.

She had downed three cups-full and was mixing up a fourth before the rain finally let up. Her husband didn't move the whole time, but she babbled on and on about how she loved the country and the rain and how country stores were so "quaint." The old chair she sat in did everything but tie itself in knots, but she just rolled about as if she were fastened on by a swivel.

"Our Fathers!" she said. "The rain has almost stopped. Go out and get the car running, Homer. I'll be there in a minute."

He looked up at her and pulled his shoulders in towards his neck so that he looked like a monkey, then turned and opened the door and walked out.

"Well, Homer's mad at me again," she said in a matter-of-fact voice, like she might have been concerned but didn't want anyone to know it.

I didn't know whether to agree or not, so I didn't say anything.

"He's a good man though... But tight as a tick," she said, getting up from the chair and reaching down into her bosom like she was trying to pick one black bean out of a whole sack of white ones.

"Here," she said handing me a twenty dollar bill. "That's

for that mess I made back there. And for the cigarettes and sodas too."

I didn't know what to say, and didn't really have a chance to say anything.

"He's a good man though," she repeated, "in his own way." She paused and then added almost to herself: "We understand each other, I guess... Yes, understanding. That's what we have."

She looked like she might blubber out like a rainstorm herself. Her lips trembled and she looked at the door but didn't make any move to go.

A car horn sounded outside, and she looked around at me like she might have thought it came from the stockroom.

"Well, I don't guess he's mad any more," she said and winked at me.

I didn't know whether he was or not, and I certainly didn't see how she could tell by the sound of a car horn.

The horn sounded again—two long blasts this time.

"Our Fathers!" she said.

"Yes, ma'am," I said.

After they had gone, I wondered if they hadn't been famous movie stars or something, and I was sorry I hadn't gotten their autographs to prove I'd seen them. I looked at the money they'd given me. That proved something anyway, and I reckoned it would be proof enough for my father. But I just didn't know if what had happened had been exciting or not. Even after I started cleaning up the glass, it seemed more like a dream

JACOB AND THE FAITH HEALER

I

The magazines the boy looked through in the solitude of his room did not contain the flesh-colored pictures of nude, open-mouthed females caught in impossible, enticing positions, covered only by dark photographic shadows that propogate mystery and desire in young boys' minds. The only female picture of importance in any of the seven magazines that he kept hidden in the bottom drawer of his dresser was the one that showed a girl gripping the powerful biceps of Ernie Averman as if she were about to chin herself on his arm. Ernie Averman had the most perfect body of any man in the world. It said so right under the picture.

"Jay! Jacob! Are you studying?"

His mother had called up to him three times already but he hadn't answered. He lay curled on his side, his head propped up by his left hand. With his right hand he turned the pages of one of the magazines. He studied each figure carefully and sometimes read what was written beneath it, or read an advertisement on the side of the page: "You are just thirty days away from being the biggest man in your school." There was bitter irony in that for the boy, but he always read it as if to punish himself. He already was the biggest person in his school. But he knew that wasn't what they meant. He

was biggest by over a hundred pounds.

His mother was on the stairs now. He could hear the faint squeak of the steps. At any moment she would push open the door to his room—push it open and walk right in without knocking or speaking, just as she always did. But the boy was accustomed to it and waited until the last instant before he lifted the white frilly bedspread and slipped the magazines beneath it.

"Jacob, if you don't start answering me when I call you, I don't know what I'm going to do with you."

She was standing in the room now but the boy was not looking at her.

"I was almost asleep," he said sheepishly, glancing tentatively up at her.

"I called three times!"

She held some sewing in her hand, one of her sheer summer dresses that everyone said looked so nice on her. She had been hemming it. The needle still dangled on a line of white thread like a delicate pendulum in front of her.

"Mr. Kerns and I are going out for a drive."

It was Sunday. She always went for a drive with Kerns on Sunday.

"Sure," he said, staring at the floor where her tiny feet were planted.

"Don't be impudent!"

He looked up at her, studied her with his limpid, disinterested eyes that were pushed deep into the globular flesh

on his face. She was a petit woman of forty, too old to be so young, to be his mother. Why didn't she just drive off with Kerns for good?

"The boys are playing baseball over on the church lot. Why don't you go over and join them? Fred... Mr. Kerns says that the Newton boy is probably going to be the best player in the state someday. He's over there."

The Newton boy! The Newton boy!

"I don't want to."

He stared out at her, his eyes dark in the pale, soft flesh.

"You don't want to! You don't want to!"

She was flaring up now. He had known she would. That was why she had come to tell him that she was going for a drive— so she could rave at him for not being like other boys, for not being like her. Her own flesh and blood too.

"You never want to do anything. No wonder you're fat! You eat all the time and never do one blame thing to work it off. Not one thing!"

Slowly he gained control over his senses— turned off the volume, shut out the sight, and became a senseless mound of flesh there on the bed.

II

The hunger didn't start in his stomach; it wasn't the gnawing, irritating sensation of an empty stomach. It began as always with something like a vision that flashed across his mind, a quick mental picture of some rich tempting food.

It might have been a strawberry shortcake with piles of whipped cream, or roast beef and mashed potatoes with gravy. Or maybe it was a juicy baked ham, or a thick piece of cheesecake, or just a peanut butter sandwich, oozing jelly. The boy had no way of knowing how it came or what it was that ignited his explosive appetite. Since his mother had left the room he had remained heaped in the middle of the bed, staring at the ceiling, trying to concentrate his attention on one dark spot on the wallpaper above him. But his thoughts kept darting about like tiny balls of quicksilver.

A half an hour had passed since he had heard the sound of the gravel cracking beneath the tires of Kerns' black convertible as it backed out of the driveway. The boy had resisted this long by just lying there on the bed gripping at the spread with his fist and glaring at the spot on the ceiling. But the malignant desire for food kept eating away at the fringes of his consciousness, dissolving his will power like an aspirin in water. And now there was only a morsel of his mind left that had not been devoured by his maniacal craving for food. And this morsel, this crumb, that remained of his sane mind was concentrated on that one dark spot on the ceiling where his eyes were unblinkingly focused.

He gripped the spread tighter in his fist and drew it part way over his obese body. The bright corner of one of the magazines slipped from beneath the cover, but the boy did not see it. His raging appetite twisted about the periphery of his consciousness. Only the dark spot above him remained stationary.

And this seemed now to be only an illusion. It seemed possible that only the spot was moving, and that all else was frozen about him.

The boy recognized this as a sign of his weakening and made one final effort to fight it off. He shut his eyes suddenly, squeezing the lids together until the fat rolled up on them. As his eye lids touched, his thoughts receded and died. For a moment, only the humming of an old tune played about in his mind. But it was a church tune, one his mother often sang, and slowly she followed the rhythm of the song into his mind. And he welcomed her, seeing her as he imagined her to be now. She and Kerns would be riding along in the open car. The white scarf would be fluttering about her face, complimenting both her dark hair and her backyard tan. They were always praising her for having a tan so early in the spring. The two of them were probably out in the country by now. His mother would be laughing or frowning, or squeezing her face into one of its flirtatious shapes. Kerns would be smoking his pipe, not really listening to her. She might be speaking, sighing, telling Kerns all about the problem again: "I just don't know what I'm going to do with Jacob. He does nothing whatsoever, just lays in bed all day and does nothing. I've just never seen a boy that lazy. My own flesh and blood too. Why, when I was his age..." From there she would fly off into some romantic, amusing lie about her youth.

The blood throbbed violently through the boy's veins, tongues of fire waved before his eyes. He jerked at the bed-

spread beneath him and clutched it close to his stomach. But the thought of food came again quite abruptly, coming as it had in the beginning as an instant mental picture of one or another of his favorite foods.

Again the boy was equal to the temptation. He tightened the lids over his eyes until the darkness returned. From that darkness he brought his mother's face so close that he could see the grains of powder that covered the lines about her mouth and eyes. The lines wrinkled and became more apparent as her lips moved: "I just don't know what I'm going to do with you, Jay. I just don't!"

But this time she died away quickly, fading as the light seeped into his mind. As a frantic last effort he yelled after her: "I hate you! Hate you!" But with that she completely disappeared, and it only took a second for a large wedge of chocolate cake to form in the darkness before him.

III

The boy's thoughts had wandered blissfully for a while, circling about in his mind but not really seeming to be a part of him. But now, something vague gnawed at the core of his consciousness and made him uncomfortable. He lay on his stomach before the fireplace in the living room like a beast sleeping before its den. The soft meat on his sides oozed out in rolls beneath his shirt and there was a smear of chocolate on the loose flesh at the corner of his mouth.

He tried to think of the magazines again, of the set of weights he was going to buy with the money he was saving, of

the homework he hadn't done. But always the same anxiety hovered over him, dispersing his thoughts.

He curled about on his side as if trying to hid beneath his own bulk, and fell into a restless, half-sleep which robbed him of any control that he had had over his mind.

His mother stood over him in her white scarf, her sun-tan. Tiny as she was, she towered above him as he lay there on the floor. Kerns was standing behind her, smoking his pipe. The boy could not look at them, but he could feel his mother's eyes on him, and he could tell when she looked away at the closed kitchen door and back at him. She knew without going into that small white room. And knowing, she screamed, and in her voice there was a shrill thread that was like crying: "I just don't know what I'm going to do with you!" And she turned to Kerns, still screaming: "You see! You see! You see!"

The boy was running now— trying to run, clumsily putting one foot in front of the other, stumbling and panting as he moved through the darkness. A wall popped up before him. He turned, and there was another. And another. And another. He paced about in the tiny walled block, knowing that someone was behind him, but not daring to look back. Around and around he walked going faster and faster until at last he stumbled and fell like a pile of wet rags into one corner. The dark figure that had been behind him had him cornered now. He forced himself tighter and tighter into the corner until he felt that there was no further escape. He screamed, but his

voice was not his own, but that of his mother. And the shrill thread that was in her voice wrapped itself about his neck and choked him.

The sweat trickled into the boy's eyes and woke him. He lay huddled in the corner by the fireplace; his throat felt tight and dry, and he breathed in short quick gasps. The abrupt change from sleep to waking stunned him, and his eyes darted about the room in frightened glances.

Slowly he ordered his mind again, pieced together all that had gone on before the cross-current of sleep had swept him away. He stopped his breathing and listened. The house was quiet. He looked again quickly about the living room, and resumed his noisy breathing. Everything seemed the same.

The late afternoon sunlight slanted in through the picture window, falling in an elongated block on the grey carpet, the sofa, and reaching all the way to where the boy lay. Far away, beyond the corner of the church, Newton and the other boys moved about in response to the rules of their game. The boy watched them intently for a while, trying to determine which of them was Newton, "the best in the state." But each of them moved as slowly and small and senselessly as the other.

The boy got to his feet and walked into the kitchen. The crumb-covered cake plate was still on the table, along with an empty apple butter jar, and a loaf of bread—its end slices fallen forward, lapping over one another. "You must have a tape worm, Jay!" He could hear his mother's words resounding in the room. "Honestly, you must have a tape worm!"

The kitchen clock showed three forty-five. He knew that she would be returning soon. It was useless to try to hide the cake plate. She might never miss the apple butter and bread, but she was sure to look for the cake at supper. She might even ask Kerns in for cake and coffee as she sometimes did.

Through the small window above the sink he could again see the boys moving about in the church lot. "You never do anything," she was always saying. "Not one blame thing."

He stood at the window watching the ballgame until almost four o'clock. Several times he turned suddenly as if expecting to find someone behind him, watching him. And each time as he turned back to the window he recalled Kerns saying: "I think you and the Newton boy would get along fine, Jay. He's a fine boy." He knew that Kerns had been lying. He turned and looked behind him again. The house was quiet. Through the window he could hear the faint shouting of Newton and the other boys.

IV

"We ain't got room for you!" said the boy in the green sweat shirt. "We already picked our sides." He walked away and picked up a bat.

The boy stood behind the bench at the edge of the playing field. The boy in the sweat shirt was the only one that replied when he asked to play. Newton sat on the bench joking with two other boys.

The ball skipped lazily across the field, and the third

baseball speared it with a quick, easy motion of his gloved hand and tossed it to first. The team on the field came charging in toward the bench stirring up a thin veil of dust as they ran. In the confusion, the boy got around in front of the bench. Newton was picking up a glove from the ground. The boy touched him lightly on the arm.

"H-Have you got room for me to play?" he asked.

Newton looked around at him and wrinkled his nose.

"I told you, we'd already chose sides," said the other boy running by, slinging the bat back toward the screen fence.

"We'll let'm play second," said Newton. "We need one more anyway. Anybody can play second."

Newton picked up another glove and threw it to the boy, and turned and ran off to the pitcher's mound. The boy followed, feeling the eyes of the other boys on him.

"Back there," said Newton, pointing to the canvas base behind the pitcher's mound.

The boy stood by the base, feeling the hot, unfamiliar, glove on his fingers. He looked back toward his house. Kerns' car was still not in the drive.

"Get over that way some! Don't stand right on top of the base."

Newton leaned forward and stared at the batter who had come to the plate. He fingered the ball behind his back. The boy at the plate waited, flicking the bat around in mock, half swings.

Newton's body straightened and his arms curled above his

head. There was an instant when he teetered between going forward or backward, but then, his arms uncoiled and his whole body lashed out toward the batter like a whip.

The ball cracked against the bat and skipped across the field by Newton, coming closer and closer to the boy. His hand was sticky inside the glove, and the leather seemed to be decaying beneath his fingertips. The ball bounced once more and moved through the air toward him in slow motion. He could see the red stitching that bound the frayed leather. The movement seemed so slow that he could follow the seam stitch by stitch around the ball.

Suddenly the ball veered off to the right, and the boy threw himself toward it.

The glove crumpled beneath him as he fell heavily on his stomach. The ball hit his shoulder and trickled away in front of him, spinning itself out in the dirt. A pair of feet thundered past him, kicking dust into his face. The ball was snatched from the dirt. The feet returned and stopped in front of him.

"Can't you even catch an easy grounder?" The boy in the green sweat shirt was standing over him.

"I-I'm sorry," he said. The dust was gritty in his mouth. The boy kept glaring at him angrily. He wished he could close his eyes and be back in his own room, on his own bed, but he was trapped there beneath the boy's stare.

Newton was looking down at him now, his figure dark and tall with the sunlight pouring over his shoulder.

"Can I have the next dance?" he said. "You clumsy bear."

"The bear! The clumsy bear!" shouted the boy in the green sweat shirt.

The cry was taken up all over the field. Newton seemed satisfied to leave the jeering to the others. He turned and walked back to the mound.

The boy got to his feet.

"I don't want to play any more," he said, but no one heard him.

As he was walking away, he glanced back at Newton who was standing on the mound, waiting for the others to take their positions again. Everything seemed to move around Newton as he stood there on his high place, tall and erect and waiting. The boy hated him, and envied him, and knew why his mother compared them.

V

The streetlight shone blue in the dark window of Carson's store. The boy knew that he must return home now, but he stopped and looked again at his grotesque reflection in the window. After he got past his mother he would be safe again within the small darkness of his own room; there he could breathe again, breathe freely of the darkness, and dream.

He was turning to go when he noticed the three posters at the bottom of the window. They were all the same: HEALING REVIVAL. UNDER THE BIG TENT. THE REVEREND GENE EVANS. A crowd was pictured with their hands raised and their mouths opened. In another picture an elderly Negro woman was rising

from a wheelchair on fragile, stilted arms.

"Bring the sick and the sinning," the poster read. "Reverend Evans heals and saves." The boy looked again at his dark reflection in the glass. He saw himself standing before Reverend Evans with the fat melting away from his body.

He stood for a long time reading the posters over again and again. "Just one mile from the city limits," the posters urged. "On Old Orchard Road."

The vibrations of the chimes that issued from the church steeple surrounded the boy and called him home. He watched his huge image dissolve at the edge of the window as he walked away, and felt almost as if he were thin already.

He looked back at the window but there was no trace of his reflection. The street light still burned phosphorescent blue in the glass. The old Negro woman glistened in the light, caught in a position half in, half out of her wheelchair.

VI

"Where have you been, Jacob? Where? I was just about to call the police."

The boy closed the door behind him and turned around fully to face her, bringing his eyes up last of all.

"Where have you been?" she repeated.

"Just for a walk."

"Just for a walk! It's pitch black outside. You've been gone for hours. I'd already have called the police if the Newton boy hadn't happened by. He told me he saw you walking off somewhere. How can you just walk off and not leave any

word or anything? I've been worried sick."

The Newton boy! The Newton boy! The bastard!

"I'm sorry," he said, taking a tentative step toward the stairs. There was more to come and he knew it. There was this, his tardiness, and then there was the other, the earlier, thing. She was saving it, waiting until the last minute to call it into play.

He was on the stairs, drawing step by step away from her, higher and higher. He heard the familiar squeek of the step near the top of the stairs. She was still talking, saying how she had worried, how cruel he was to her.

Only a few more steps now and he would be within reach of the door to his room.

"Your supper's cold, you know! But I don't suppose you want any after that half a chocolate cake you had earlier. And a whole jar of apple butter. Honestly, I just don't..."

It was done now; she had called all her cards into play.

He paused on the top step and looked down at her. Fore-shortened, she appeared even tinier than she was. She was raving on and on, as uselessly and endlessly as a dog after a treed animal.

He looked down at her meekly for a few moments, not listening, but letting the needle run along the groove of his thoughts, occasionally picking up a word or two of what she said. At her first pause, he turned and moved quickly into his room and shut the door.

The room was dark except for the white glow of the window.

The boy found the bed by walking slowly forward until his knees bumped against it. He forced his shoes off without untying them and lay back gently on the bed. The magazines crunched beneath his weight and he stood up again and took them from under the spread. His eyes had grown accustomed to the darkness now and he moved to the dresser without turning on the light.

After concealing the magazines under the clothing in the bottom drawer, he returned to the bed. For a few seconds his mind was as blank and quiet as the night there before him. But slowly things began to burn in through the darkness: The ball came at him again, its threads curving round and round like an endless staircase. A withered old Negro woman raced by pushing an empty wheelchair. Ernie Averman followed her. A magazine cover floated by; on it he was pictured as a tall, erect boy with muscles that bound his skeleton like knotted rope. Then, Newton's face appeared, smeared with chocolate; he laughed, and his mouth turned into a bowl of cherry cobbler, and his hair into globs of apple butter.

VII

The boy had known that his mother would go to choir practice on Thursday night, and he had planned everything around that. But at the last minute she had stood in front of the window watching for Kerns to pull into the church parking lot. And Kerns had been late.

The boy had stood at the top of the stairs in his Sunday clothes, watching her. It had been a few minutes after

eight before he had been able to slip out the side door and through the backyard to begin his long walk. Now his pants' legs flapped noisily against each other as he made his short hurried steps along the graveled edge of Old Orchard Road. The wrinkled shirt was wet with perspiration and his chest heaved beneath it, fitfully sucking in the cool night air. The crushed rock rattled under his feet and breathed a thin vapor of dust about his shoes and pants' cuffs.

Ahead he could see the yellow-brown glow of the big tent, and the reflections from the vast field of cars that surrounded it. He drew closer, and through the gaping entranceway the blurred forms of the crowd became visible. For the first time, the boy recalled the other picture on the poster. The insignificant photograph of the muted crowd suddenly came alive before him, and he was afraid.

He stopped, and for a while, stood with his eyes closed tightly. At last he looked down at his feet and stumbled off the edge of the road and sat down against the red clay bank there. The night was quiet along the lonely country road. A storm was gathering off in the distance. Thunder rumbled with the steady, distant monotony of shifting boxcars. From the tent the sound of the loud speaker could be heard, but only as an electric crackling as if it too were being produced by the storm.

A breeze stirred, coming from the direction of the tent. It was cool against the boy's neck, and he raised his head letting the air dry the hot sweat on his face. With the

sleeve of his coat he wiped his forehead, then his cheeks and beneath his eyes.

The breeze whipped itself into gust of wind that caused the dust to smoke from the gravel along the roadside. The crackle of the loudspeaker became louder; occasionally a word or two was audible. The boy pushed his coat back from his neck and let the wind get inside and flutter about on his shirt.

The air ceased its movement for an instant, and then, there came a violent gust that brought clearly the vibrant sound of the electric voice: "Are there others to come and be healed? Are there others?" The wind died, and the voice again became static, but it was enough to rouse the boy. He turned quickly and looked toward the tent. It seemed huge and golden, and the lightning played about its pointed top as if it were a thing alive.

The boy did not hesitate, did not wipe the dirt away from the wet seat of his pants, did not straighten his coat and button it in front to cover his wrinkled shirt, but with a single movement he pushed himself to his feet and began to walk toward the tent. He moved as if in a trance, conscious only of the slow rise and fall of the bellowed top of the tent—rising and falling as if it were breathing, as if it were a living thing.

He could see the rows of people inside the tent now, but he was hardly aware of them. The magnetic voice drew him onward: "Are there others who would be healed? Come to the altar now as we sing the closing stanza once again."

The boy worked his way between the parked cars. The entranceway between the flapping canvas sides was huge like an open mouth waiting to swallow him. As if it were only the sound of the wind, the organ music filled the air about him. The singing of the congregation rose and fell as rhythmically as the breathing canvas, and flowed from the mouth of the tent as if it were one voice.

At the entranceway the boy hesitated for a moment, blinking to adjust his eyes to the new light. As he moved forward again the eyes of the people in each row that he passed clicked mechanically around to focus on his grotesque figure. But the singing did not die down; it grew louder and louder, swelling behind him, pushing him forward.

He was almost to the altar, and still he seemed aware of nothing save his destination, and only his feet seemed aware of that, pulling him with long definite steps down the aisle.

And then, as he passed the third row from the front, there came a whisper that hissed at him from out of the crowd as if it were Satan himself:

"The clumsy bear!"

The boy's head snapped around and his eyes met with those of Newton. The cold grip of panic closed over him. Newton was there to make fun of him, to make fun of the whole thing. That would be the only reason he would come. He could hear Newton hooting it to the other ballplayers, to the whole school, the whole world.

The boy had stopped now. The singing around him seemed absurd and distant, and the altar which had been his destination was only a fence that threatened to pen him in. He looked again at Newton, and for the first time, he noticed that Newton's mother was there too. She had thrust a song book into her son's hand, and now Newton, his freckled face beaming, was singing with the rest. A little reluctantly, the boy moved forward again.

As he came to the altar, the singing reached its climax and stopped abruptly, leaving the tent in utter silence. The rain had begun to fall; its sound was hushed against the canvas roof. The lightning came, and then the thunder, breaking the silence.

The man in the black suit who held the microphone was standing on a platform above the boy.

"Another to be healed for Christ!" the man was shouting into the microphone. "Can Christ heal you tonight? Do you believe He can? Do you believe?"

The microphone was before the boy's mouth.

"Yes," he said weakly, and his voice cracked through the speakers to every corner of the tent.

"Belief is all that Christ asked of you! Believe and thou shalt be saved! And how can Christ heal you, son?"

Again the silver microphone was there before him. He could feel Newton's eyes on him.

"I-I'm... I'm fat."

The microphone was jerked away.

"A glutton!" the man shouted into his cupped hand that held the instrument. The other hand he raised above his head. "God, we have a glutton here who wishes to be saved. Can you help him, Lord? Save this poor boy from his sinful life."

The man moved about the raised platform like a caged animal. The black cord from the microphone trailed lifelessly behind him.

"A glutton, Lord, but he believes!"

The boy stood terrified before the shouting preacher. He felt the flesh hanging from his bones. He was a glutton.

"What's your name, son?"

"J-Jay... Jacob."

"Jacob! Lord, save this glutton who bears the name of one of Thy servants. Jacob, who saw Thy ladder reaching all the way to heaven! Strip this boy, Lord! Strip this glutton of his flesh!"

The rains came down harder. The thunder cracked, and the ground beneath the boy's feet trembled. The eyes of all the people were on him now, pinning him to the spot where he stood.

"Punish him, but save him!"

The shrill electric voice lashed out at him like a whip.

"Save him, Lord, because he believes!"

"Amen," said a cracked voice behind him.

The boy wheeled around as if someone had called to him. The voice echoed before him as if it had been uttered not by one, but many people. In desperation, he sought Newton. He found his nonchalant smile easily among the other pious faces.

As their eyes met, Newton's face brightened, and he seemed about to wave or speak, but his mother's elbow came sharply into his side and he looked away quickly.

The lightning cracked. The thunder crashed close behind it.

"Turn, son," the mechanical voice was saying. "Turn to God and be saved."

The lights in the tent suddenly flickered, came back on, then went out again. In every corner of the tent people began to scream. Amid the cries and the clatter of folding chairs, the voice of the preacher became only another human voice wailing out in the darkness.

In a few seconds the lights snapped back on. The people who had risen and begun stumbling over one another sat down again meekly. A murmur of embarrassment ran through the crowd. The boy was halfway up the aisle now, running with a strength he had never felt before. The loudspeaker blared behind him, speaking to the people again in the name of God.

A small crowd had gathered at the entrance, but the boy made his way through it, and without hesitating as they had done, he plodded out into the rain, between the parked cars, and into the road again.

VIII

"I just..." his mother began, but the boy took it from there.

"I just don't know what I'm going to do," he shouted, and his voice was not one of mockery or of desperation, but

one of self-assertion like a baby giving out its first cry.

He did not wait for his mother to recover from her shock, but walked through the kitchen past her, leaving dark wet tracks across the spotless tile floor. In the living room, he turned and mounted the stairs. His room was dark but he did not hesitate to flick on the light. He stripped naked and dried himself with a clean towel.

After putting on his pajamas, he removed the seven magazines from the dresser drawer and placed them separately against the baseboard in the hall outside his door, and returned to his bed and slept.

THAT GRAND CANYON

All morning flurries had whipped about in the wind, but now the snow was falling in earnest.

Handel Irby got out of the old Buick he had just backed into his garage and turned to face the Negro who was waiting there for his return.

"Can ya have 'er fixed by tonight?" asked the Negro. "I sho' would like to have 'er tonight."

Handy rubbed a greasy hand on the back of his neck. He was a short man of fifty. The skin on his neck was as dry and dark as the laminated rust that covered the used car parts which littered the garage and the unused farmland that surrounded it. He knew damn well he could fix it today. It sounded like a burnt-out wheel bearing. He could fix it in thirty minutes if it were. But it might be the rearend—he couldn't tell by driving it.

"Can't do it," he said. "How th' hell ya think I can put another rearend in this thing today?"

"Rearend?" The Negro's dark pink lips parted in a tentative smile, showing a flash of white teeth. "You kiddin', man?"

"Nope."

"You sho' hit needs a rearend?"

"Yep."

"Man, dat's gonna touch my back pocket right hard."

"Sixty bucks."

"Sixty?"

"Yep."

"Man, I don't know 'bout dat." The Negro patted the pointed toe of his shoe on the dirt floor of the garage.

Handy stared past him at the falling snow. He hated snow. It was so damn silent you never knew when it was falling and when it wasn't.

"If ya don't wanta take my word, ya just drive on back where ya come from and get one o' them city boys to tell ya. And see how much he'll charge! I told ya, sixty dollars, installed. Ya ain't gonna find another machanic that'll do it for that. Them city boys wouldn't even look at it for less'n a hundred."

"I know dat, but..." The Negro paused and seemed to forget what he was going to say.

"Well, it's up to you," said Handy, walking over to the stove. They were all alike. They all wanted something for nothing. Just like them stray dogs that Ida had collected all her life—just waiting for somebody to throw something out to 'em. And then, half the time they were too lazy to get off their fat bellies and eat it. He ought to kill every damn one of 'em.

"Well, I s'pose I'll leave 'er den," said the Negro after a long silence.

Handy kicked open the door of the tin heater and began poking about in the fire with an iron rod.

"Don't make any difference to me. Ya can drive it away now and let the rearend fall out on the road, or come back next week after I fix it. It's up to you."

"When ya think she'll be ready?" asked the Negro, at last putting down the temptation to just drive it away and hope for the best.

"Monday or Tuesday. Soon as I find a junk I can get another rearend out of." Handy turned and looked off up the hill in front of the garage to where a mass of junked cars lay stripped and ugly in the snow.

The Negro nodded and stared at Handy's back as he bent over the fire again.

"Wonder if anybody round here is gonna go to town this afternoon?" he asked finally.

"If ya walk out to the main road ya can make the 'leven o'clock bus," answered Handy. He knew Marshall was going to drive in later for some parts, but why the hell should he tell him. He could catch the bus easy as anybody else.

The Negro turned and started off through the snow. Handy tossed the iron rod beneath the heater and kicked the metal door shut. He watched the dark figure as it moved up the hill past the cluttered field of stripped cars. It'd be just like a damn nigger to come back wantin' to borrow a car or something. They all thought they were too good to walk through a little snow.

The Negro disappeared over the hill leaving Handy alone in the doorway, leaning against the hood of the Buick. He

looked at the dark holes of the empty car windows on the hill. The snow accentuated their darkness and gave them the appearance of eye sockets from which the eyes have been removed. He wondered which one it was. The metal bodies all looked the same through the swirling flakes of snow. Their empty eyes all seemed to accuse him now, and he turned away, somewhat disappointed that the Negro hadn't come back.

"That was my car! My car!" Ida had said. He was lying beneath a car, and she was talking to his feet that were sticking out on the other side.

"Your car hell!"

"Well, our car, Handel. Yours and mine. You know where we were going in that car." Her voice softened. "You know what we've always planned."

He knew damn well it wasn't the car she cared about. It was that infernal trip. There was something triumphant about lying there, pretending to work and listening to her. He hoped she was looking at that goddamn calendar. He hoped she was seeing how ugly and stupid it really was.

"My two hands worked for it, and kept it running," he said, shouting up at the underside of the car. It was the first time she'd been in the garage since the year after they were married. He wished he could get out and stick the calendar in her face. Maybe things would be back the way they were then.

"Where is it, Handel? Where is it?"

"All you ever did was sit in it and drive. I guess I gotta right to junk it if I want."

"You junked it, Handel? You junked it?" She was crying now, like she hadn't known all along where the damn thing was, like she hadn't walked right by it on her way back from town, like she hadn't seen it—rotting up on the hill with the rest of them.

He could see her feet planted in the dust, the firm pale flesh of her legs, and the hem of her skirt. He had hoped then that things would be different.

Handy walked back into the garage and kicked the side of the tin heater. The damn fire wasn't burning right at all. Marshall must have put a goddamn stick of wet wood on it before he left.

He hadn't thought much about her crying though. It was just like a woman to cry, the way she'd cried everytime one of her filthy dogs didn't show up for its free meal. With twenty of them swarming about the back door he didn't see what difference one could make.

"What happened to Blackie, Handel?"

"Blackie who?"

"My dog. Blackie!"

"Ya got twenty Blackies out there. How the hell do I know? If shells didn't cost so much I'd shoot every damn one of 'em."

"And you'd never see me again, Handel Irby!" He knew she wasn't kidding about that, and afterwards, he never ventured more than an occasional kick at one or another of the mongrels. But when she stopped crying, the silence was terrible. He

hadn't known she'd act that way about the car. But it wasn't the car. It was that stupid trip. And he'd known that when he stripped the old '39 Chevy, when he tore it apart piece by piece, and smashed the glass from its windows.

Marshall drove up in the truck, pulling right up to the front of the Buick and revving the motor a couple of times before cutting the ignition and getting out. He walked over to the stove and extended his hands, palms out, toward the heater.

"It's snowing!" he said. He was young, just out of high school. His long blond hair was stuffed beneath a red stocking cap, but his bulbous ears loomed from either side of his head.

"Is that what that is?" replied Handy, walking over to where the boy stood. Twenty-five years Ida'd been after him to hire another mechanic, and now she wasn't a year dead and he'd gotten this: A hot-rod kid who didn't know a screwdriver from a pair of pliers, and still thought a rearend was something ya sat on.

"Weather man says six inches or more," said Marshall.

"If you listen to that fool ya got less sense than I thought, boy, and that ain't much. Now are you gonna get to town before the roads get slick or are ya gonna wait and slide in a ditch somewhere?"

"I just wanta get warmed up," said Marshall rubbing his hands together briskly. "Ain't no heater on that truck, ya know. Ya sold it to that nigger, remember?"

"That ain't my fault," answered Handy. If he didn't need him to run errands so much he'd fire him right now. But with Ida gone, he had to have somebody to drive to town. He damn well wasn't going there again as long as he lived.

"It'll be after twelve before I get back," said Marshall.

"So what?"

"I thought maybe you'd want me to take the truck on home and just come in Monday."

"So ya can hot-rod around in it all weekend, I guess?"

Marshall didn't answer. He tucked his ears beneath the stocking cap and turned and moved toward the door.

Handy watched him walk out into the snow.

"Well, if it's a minute before twelve, ya come back here. I ain't payin' ya for four hours this mornin' for nothin'."

"Sure," said Marshall, putting his hand on the door handle of the truck. The wet snow flakes clung to the rough wool of his cap, and he smiled.

He was still smiling through the icy windshield when he started the truck and backed away from the garage.

After Marshall had gone Handy walked around to the other side of the Buick and stared at the 1941 calendar that hung in a clear spot on the wall surrounded by a maze of frayed fan-belts and used head gaskets. The first eleven months had been stripped away, but December still remained attached beneath the large color picture of a girl sitting on a rock and looking out over the vast expanses of the Grand Canyon. At the girl's feet one could see into the deep cavity all the way to

the faded blue water at its bottom. It was as if the water had sliced through a million years and left this beautiful, ragged wound exposed for this one girl, sequestered from time and held forever in the fashions of the year 1941.

"This's where we're goin'," he'd told Ida the day he brought the calendar home from Jennings Parts & Bearings Co.. "Soon as I get my garage in shape and can hire another mechanic."

He unrolled the picture before her slowly, revealing it to her an inch at a time. The blue sky rolled up first, and then, a distant opacity that concealed the horizon and blended the sky and earth. Finally, the canyon appeared, unwinding across the picture until it reached the very feet of the young girl.

"You're talkin' through the top of your head, Handel Irby. You ain't ever gonna get any closer to that place than you're standing right now."

"Aw, I think the '39'll get us out there, don't you?" he said.

"Huh! You can just leave me outa that please." She was snappy like that when they were first married, but he knew she'd liked what he said. It was the kind of womanish dreaming she was fond of.

He'd cleared a place on the garage wall and hung the calendar that same day. It was as if he had installed a window through which he could look into another world. The rich colors of the canyon offered a vivid contrast to the rust and

grease and dirt of the garage. And sometimes, he thought he could see eternity in the picture. He could see the beginning and the end, and he knew that what he was then was not what he would always be.

Handy walked back to the stove and kicked the door open again. He chunked at the dying fire with the iron rod and put two new sticks of wood in on the glowing coals. It was just like that damn jackass Marshall to go off without tending to the fire. And him complaining about no heater on the truck. He was just like a nigger, never missed a thing till it wasn't there, and then complained. If he came back today he'd put his bare ass on that stove and show him who built the fires around here.

Handy jacked up the left rear of the Buick and removed the wheel and pulled the bearing. The bearing didn't seem bad when he spun it on his finger, but he replaced it anyway and put the wheel back on. The dull roaring noise was still there when he spun the wheel around. It was just like a nigger to have something else wrong. It might take him the rest of the afternoon to fix the heap of junk. It probably was the rearend.

He tried to lower the hooks on the chain hoist so that he could hook them to the bumper and lift the entire back-end of the car. The chain refused to work properly, however, and soon became so jammed in the casing that he was forced to get a stepladder and unfasten the hoist from the metal beam above the car. He brought it down carelessly, beating the

chain against the trunk of the old car, and threw it on the work bench by the stove. The chain had run off of one of the pulleys and was tightly wedged between the casing and the side of the pulley. The hot-rod jackass didn't even know how to work a simple chain hoist that could work itself if ya gave it half a chance.

Handy forced a screwdriver up into the casing and beat on it with a hammer until the plastic handle shattered and the hammer came down full force on his knuckles. Throwing the hoist to the floor, he kicked at it and stalked about the garage cursing.

On the other side of the Buick three Beagle puppies lay curled against the wall just inside the doorway. Handy cursed vehemently at them, and finally gave each of them a solid kick with the toe of his shoe, sending them flying out through the doorway into the snow. He didn't know why he hadn't killed every damn one of those curs. They ate everything they could get their teeth on, and now they wanted to turn his garage into a dog pen. He ought to throw 'em all in the trunk of that Buick. Half of 'em probably belonged to some nigger anyway.

He pulled an empty nail keg up near the stove and sat down on it and spat on his knuckles and rubbed them. He stared at the Buick for a long time. It was just like a nigger to try an' fool ya. Well, he'd see damn well who got fooled. He'd stuff that rearend so full of sawdust it'd grind out two-by-fours.

He got another jack from beneath the work bench and took

two blocks of wood and placed one in front of each front wheel. Lowering the one jack that he had beneath the car, he placed two cinderblocks just behind the rear axle on either side of the car. He worked savagely, throwing the blocks beneath the car and then crawling about on his belly in order to position them.

After placing the jacks on top of the blocks he turned the handle of first one and then the other until the car was raised to a sufficient height for him to remove both rear wheels. He checked the bearings again, then, the axle and the brake linings. Everything seemed to be in good shape.

Anger began to rise in him, and he looked across the trunk of the Buick to the wall where the calendar hung. His eyes moved across the first six numbers on the curled yellow sheet and came to rest on the seventh—the seventh of December, 1941.

"I hope this won't mean that you'll have to go," Ida had said when they first heard the news on the radio.

"Of course I'll go. I'll go tomorrow if they'll let me." The words had come out automatically and they seemed strange to him even then, for he had never thought of leaving his garage for more than two or three hours at a time, and then, only to go to town for parts. But now, suddenly, and for no reason it seemed, he had committed himself to something halfway around the world.

The next day he drove into town and went to the post office where the men were standing in a thick, irregular line

in the second floor hallway. Listening to their strained, vibrant voices he felt even more uneasy about his commitment. It seemed ridiculous that all these men should be so concerned about something that had heppened in another world, and he felt awkward standing there among them. His garage, built with his own hands on the same little farm where he had always lived, and the town, which fulfilled any outside needs he had, all seemed as safe from the enemy as ever, and it seemed a foolish thing to leave what one knew in order to fight for something one cared nothing about. But though Ida would have welcomed him back without question, he knew that he could not go back to her until he had fulfilled his hastily-made promise. He had to prove to her that he meant the things he said.

"You're talkin' through the top of your head again, Handel Irby," she had told him before he left that morning. "Just like when ya talk about going out to that Grand Canyon. Ya been talking 'bout it for a year now, and the Chevy still ain't gone no further than town and back since we had it." He thought of the canyon again. In his mind he looked on over the girl's shoulder and felt again the aura of mystery that lurked in the length and depth of the great cavity. All that day and the next, he waited and filled out forms and answered questions, and dreamed of his ultimate task of defending the canyon against the enemy.

On the third day, they took him, along with the others, to the armory for the physical examination. There, standing

in a long line of naked men they had culled him—thrown him out like a bad ear of corn—because his feet were flat.

"Well, I'm just glad you didn't have to go," Ida had said at supper that night. And seeing his bitter, dejected face, she'd added: "I couldn't have you goin' off to war. We gotta go out to that Grand Canyon soon, ya know."

Handy lay down on his back in the dirt and slid beneath the car. The rearend was caked with grease and dirt and he scraped it away with his fingers until he found a small crack through which the grease was oozing. That nigger had known all along. That rearend probably worked about as well as ten loose bolts in a bucket. He oughta just get out and kick the jacks out from under it and see if that helped any.

He lay in the cold dirt for a while staring up at the rearend. Then, he turned his head and looked up past the side of the car where he could see the bottom two rows of numbers on the calendar. Ida had made a real fool of herself that Christmas.

"Don't bother buying me any Christmas present, Handel," she'd said. "We've got to save our money for the trip."

But he no longer wanted any part of it. He no longer felt that it was his to see, or want to see. It belonged to those who fought for it, and all that belonged to him in the world was the oil-soaked ground that was covered by his garage. And more and more, he withdrew into this dirty mechanical world. He came to have a loathing for the job which he once had chosen over farming, and his only pleasure came to lie in the total

destruction of the automobiles he had once so aptly repaired. Whenever he could afford it, he would buy old or junk cars and strip them of every part. Then, he would drag the shells away with the tractor and burn the upholstery from them and leave them with the others on the hill above the garage.

In this way he escaped from the fanatical plans that Ida was always proposing about the canyon. She never asked about the calendar again, or came into the garage to see it, but as the years passed the dream that it had once sparked in him became an obsession with her. She talked about it continually, and sometimes she would call people on the phone for no other reason than to tell them about it. She even tried to make the plans sound immediate.

"Handel and I are going to drive out to that Grand Canyon this spring—as soon as he gets some more help in the garage."

She would smile at him over the receiver whenever he was within sight, and he would look away, and go outside again and work with new energy on whatever car he happened to be junking at the time. Or sometimes, he would go back to the garage and stare for hours at the calendar until he became so embittered that he stalked about in his small domain and cursed the thick black dust he walked in.

He'd often thought of tearing the calendar off the wall and burning it, but he never had. He kept it partly because he knew that Ida did not want to see it again—that she was afraid to look at it—and partly because the picture and the month and year that hung beneath it had come to feed a bitterness

that grew within him.

He put his hands down on the ground beside him and dug the heels of his shoes into the dirt and made one jerky movement back out from under the car. As he moved again, his hand brushed against a brown and white beagle that had curled itself in the soft dirt of the garage floor. The dog yelped and in its confusion managed to get over Handy's legs and scrambled out toward the back of the car.

"Ya sonofabitch!" Handy drew his feet up and tried to lift the dog with his knees and trap it against the chassis, but the dog escaped and he hammered out at it with his left foot, trying to bring the heel of his shoe down on its back. He put his hands up on the chassis and raised himself a little and kicked out again. The car rocked under his weight and suddenly began to roll backwards. The jacks tilted diagonally and their bases ground into the rough cinderblocks. Handy dug his heels into the ground and pushed back against the chassis. The dirt underside of the car came down toward him like a press. Closer and closer it came, until at last he was able to stop it by digging his elbows into the ground and using both his arms as braces against the monstrous press.

"Ya filthy cur, sonofabitch," he shouted at the beagle as it ran around the car and out into the snow.

For a moment he lay there getting his breath and staring at the underside of the car that was so close upon him. He'd damn well shoot every one of those dogs now. That would have been just dandy if one of Ida's curs had gotten him squashed

underneath some nigger's Buick.

He looked at the leaning jacks and at the blue scars their bases had cut into the cinderblocks. If those god-damn jacks would hold now till he could get out, he'd kick the sonofabitch down on its ass for good. He started at ease one hand out from under the chassis, but with his slightest movement a groan came from the car above him and he jammed his elbow back into the dirt again.

He waited, his head laying back flat in the dirt; his arms sticking straight up from his sides. Several more times he tried to ease his hands from beneath the chassis, but each time a creaking sound went through the car and made him shudder and press his elbows deeper into the dust.

He lay very still for a while and tried to imagine how the situation would end. Marshall might come back from town before twelve. The little bastard had damn well better. But he'd probably stumble over his own feet and knock the car down on him after he got there. That nigger might get tired of waiting for the bus and come back wanting to borrow a car. It'd be just like a nigger.

Through the space between the front of the car and the ground he could see the snow flakes silently piling up. Far off on the hill the hollow eyes of the junked cars stared down at him through the haze of snow. More than ever he hated the silent falling of the snow.

At times he felt sure that no one would come and that he would be left to die beneath the car. When such thoughts came

to him he would draw up his knees and dig his heels into the dirt, determine to thrust his body out so that his head and shoulders would be clear before the car fell. But each time that he looked back over his head and saw the narrow space through which he had to slide, he would feel the weight of the car, like the heel of a shoe on a worm, grinding his body into the dirt, and he would stretch out flat again and wait.

By raising his head a little and looking down between his feet, he could see the legs of the tin heater and the ashes that had sifted through the front draft. On the bottom shelf of the work bench there was a stack of wornout generators, beside them, a small wooden box piled full of used spark plugs. All about the garage he could see the faint impressions his shoes had made in the dust. His recent spittle lay drying in little dust-balls about the stove.

Near the door the pointed shape of the Negro's shoes seemed so much clearer than his own more numerous footprints. He wondered how much the Negro weighed. He tried to imagine the Negro's feet coming down past the car and fitting again into these pointed molds.

The fire cracked in the stove, and for a moment he could almost see the shoes patting silently in the dust. But after he realized that it was only the fire, the minutes passed slowly into hours and the weight on his arms became almost unbearable. He lost all track of time. Sometimes, imagining that he had been under the car only a few minutes, he would listen intently for the sound of Marshall returning in the

truck. Then, abandoning all hope of Marshall's return, he would think of how many other customers he might have on a Saturday afternoon. Everybody knew he was open, not like those half-ass city garages that closed for Sunday and every two-bit holiday, and then took off at noon on Saturday. It wasn't unlikely that someone else would come.

The snow continued to fall. The logs in the fire crackled spasmodically and finally settled into a bed of coals that gave off no heat that could reach Handy there beneath the car. The desire to yell for help kept gripping him, although he knew there was no one within a mile to hear. He suppressed the desire for a long time, but at last he drew in a deep breath and screamed: "Help! Help! Help!" He screamed until he was exhausted, but the words only rose and disappeared like his frosty breath into the dark underside of the car.

Ida could have heard him at the house if she were still alive. Twenty-five years she'd been there, day in and day out, and he hadn't needed her. And now that he did she was dead. She probably wouldn't have come in the garage anyway. She'd probably have let him rot underneath the car before she sat foot in the garage again. She'd only been in that one time in twenty-five years.

"Handel, we were gonna drive the Chevy out to that Grand Canyon." She was sobbing, violently, brokenly, like a child. Then suddenly, her crying stopped and he saw her feet moving toward the front of the car and out through the doorway. She never spoke of the canyon after that. She seldom spoke at

all, and inside a year, she was dead.

In the weeks after the funeral, he sometimes would look at the calendar and find the girl sitting at the edge of the canyon to be Ida. Once when he had looked, the girl had disappeared altogether, and he had run to the house and looked through every room before he finally cursed himself, and Ida, and the dogs that got in his way as he walked back to the garage.

The afternoon wore on, but still no one came. Handy's arms became numb, and only a dull ache remained in them. He lifted one foot off the ground, but the feeling in his legs seemed to go no further than his ankles. They were gonna freeze now, and rot off. Served the flat, worthless things right. With all his strength, he kept his trembling foot raised above the ground.

"Okay, okay, step over on this paper and put both feet down flat," the doctor had said.

The paper was sticky on the bottoms of his bare feet. He had never been naked in front of people before. But everyone was naked—everyone but the two doctors who stood before him.

"Okay, step back."

He stepped back onto the cold floor and stared down at the footprints he had made on the paper.

"Flat as last night's beer," said one of the doctors.

"Yeah," the other grunted, scribbling something on the paper his clipboard held. "That's all for you, Irby. You

can get dressed." He handed him the paper from the clipboard, and pointed toward the rear of the building. "Report to that office after you've dressed."

The two doctors moved on to the next man. Handy's clothes lay in a pile behind him and he turned and began putting them on. He could feel the eyes of the naked men on him as he dressed. They were still watching when he zipped up his jacket and started across the long drill floor. His shoes had made hollow, echoing sounds in the quiet hall as he walked away.

Handy let his foot fall back into the dirt.

The last of the heavy snowflakes floated to the ground, and a sharp, slanting snow began to fall. Through the new snow the cars on the hill seemed to move closer. Their empty windows became wider and darker while the snow hid their ugly bodies. Handy stared at the exhaust pipe above him, then closed his eyes against even that.

"Handel, the Chevy has a miss in it. I suppose I'll catch the bus to town— would you look at it while I'm gone?" She'd been so trusting, almost tempting him. But he hadn't thought of junking it then.

She'd started off up the hill toward the main road. Then she'd turned, and he knew what she was going to say.

"We'll want it in good shape for the trip, Handel."

She walked away, going past the rotting cars and disappearing over the hill. The old '39 stood alone before the garage door, black and shiny, reflecting the hot July sun.

He hadn't even looked back up the road again.

Handy drew his knees up suddenly and wedged the heels of his shoes into the dirt. With one great effort, he tried to force himself out from under the car. But the strength seemed to be frozen within his legs and his heels only wiggled through the soft ground until his knees lay flat again. The car groaned above him, and he trembled.

Toward nightfall a wind began to stir the snow, pushing it this way and that, and twisting a loose curl of it in through the garage door, scattering the glittering flakes in the dust. Then, the wind ceased and night had fallen. Outside, the snow seemed to have retained some of the daylight, but in the garage everything was dark and formless. Handy's arms braced the car now with no more purpose than the two iron jacks which they assisted.

Sometimes his eyelids stayed closed for long periods of time and he seemed to sleep, his only movement being the slow heaving of his chest. It was during one of these periods that the daylight failed and the darkness crept down from the underside of the car and enveloped him. He awoke with a start, looking about him but seeing only the white strip of light in the doorway.

"Ida! Ida!" His voice echoed from the rusting metal of the Buick. He blinked his eyes and looked at the luminous strip of snow. She probably wouldn't come even if she were alive. She'd let him rot first.

He raised his foot and let it drop. It seemed to drop

for a long time before it finally found the ground again, the same way Ida had gone down for such an eternity before they finally pulled the straps out and shovelled the first spade full of dirt on top of the casket. Standing there, looking down into that small cavity in the earth, it had seemed that he was standing at the very edge of the canyon. He had felt a strange mingling of joy and sadness, and would have stayed longer staring down after Ida, but the spades full of dirt splattered one on top of another until there was nothing left but a mound, covered by the greens and flowers that the neighbors had sent.

Another silent hour passed. The only sounds in the darkness were the steady rhythm of his breathing, and occasionally, when he could find the strength to lift one of his legs, the clump of his lifeless foot falling back into the dust.

But then, there was another sound—the slow, padded sound of feet compressing the loose snow. Handy dropped his raised foot and listened. The footsteps were faint, but they seemed very near. He stared at the narrow strip of light in the doorway with a kind of horror and amazement.

"Ida! Ida!" His voice was a hoarse rattle that carried no further than his smoky breath.

The line of snow across the garage door quivered and burst forth, scattering its whiteness beneath the car. A large black hound slipped beneath the front bumper and shook the snow from its coat.

The dog curled itself up by one of the front wheels and lay motionless. Handy stared at the dark form whose noisy breathing broke the silence to which he had now grown accustomed. He thought of the nights he'd lain beside Ida and listened to the whispering sounds of her breathing. Often he had wanted to reach out and touch her, touch her the way they'd touched in that first year before the war. But then, she would murmur in her sleep and he would know that she was dreaming of the canyon again, dreaming of its quiet length and depth, its peacefulness. And he would feel the bitterness again, and would take a blanket and leave the bed and sleep in the garage among the worn parts of the junked cars.

Handy tried to raise his foot again, but the muscles in his leg only trembled and fell slack. All desire left him. Involuntarily, his eyes closed as the mesmeric breathing of the hound lifted a steady rhythm about him and carried him into sleep. And with sleep came the dream of reaching out and embracing the warm, vibrant body of the animal, embracing it while they fell together through the warm clouds as if they had stepped off the edge of the world.

The old Buick rolled slowly backwards, its front wheels passing the dog without disturbing its sleep. The exhaust pipe was the first thing to touch Handy, coming down against his face and forcing his head to one side, leaving a smear of brown rust across the bridge of his nose. His eyes popped open for an instant but closed again as the chassis pressed against his chest. The air hissed like steam from his lungs.

The hound whined in its sleep and snuggled toward the tire that was no longer beside it.

By midnight the snow had stopped and the moonlight came in through a thin haze of clouds. The blue-white light shone brilliantly on the snow and fell in a block through the open door of the garage, stretching across the hood of the Buick and along the wall of gaskets and belts, and reaching all the way to the faded canyon and the curling leaf of days that hung beneath it.

There were two girls who operated the key punch machines

THE MAGIC MIRROR

Merle Merman liked to sit before his mirror at night and read books. It didn't matter to him what books they were, he picked them at random from the shelves at the public library when he took his lunch break. Merle worked on the top floor of a twenty-four story building. Randy Mifflin who worked with him always greeted him at the elevator in the mornings with: "Going all the way to the top, eh, Merle?" Merle had always wanted to counter with something about putting his "head in the clouds," but he knew that Randy Mifflin would just think of something else to say. Besides, it didn't seem appropriate for the work they did. It was very practical work. They were employed in the cost accounting department of a company that made "foundations" for women. Randy Mifflin joked a lot about that too, although it had nothing to do with their work. What they did was practical. All day the yellow ledger sheets would come in from the other departments. Their job was to add up all the columns and enter the values for each job number and transfer all the appropriate information to the black-lined column headed "totals." The girls then took them and punched this information on IBM cards. Then the cards went to the data processing room—but no one in cost accounting knew what happened to them there.

There were two girls who operated the key punch machines

in the office where Merle and Randy Mifflin worked. There was a big girl named Josephine whom Randy Mifflin said the company's products would never be able to help. She wore tight skirts and kept cigarettes and lipstick and chewing gum and aspirin in the box on her machine where the rubber bands were supposed to be kept. The other girl was Loretta who was shy and kept her box filled with rubber bands.

Everyday on his lunch hour Merle would go to the public library down the street from the office and pick out a book from either the section marked "Adult Fiction" or "Adult Non-Fiction." It wasn't that he was prejudiced against children's books; it was just that he knew that Randy Mifflin would make some joke about a thirty-eight year old, balding man browsing through the children's section. Of course, Randy Mifflin never came to the library, but word might get back to him. Anyway, it made no difference what books he read. The emotions that they contained were all that was important to Merle Merman. Love, hate, anger, pride, lust—Merle had seen them all in the mirror.

It was no ordinary mirror. It had belonged to his mother, and she had been no ordinary woman. She had once been an actress—Zelda Merman—and she had stood before the mirror then and admired her beauty and her power over men. But when Merle was thirteen she quit acting and began preaching God's word in the streets. From then until her death eight years later, they had lived in poverty, and she had stood before the mirror and admired her righteousness.

The mirror was large and round, but the frame that held it was square. The frame was brass, and at each corner a closed eagle's claw clutched a shock of arrows. Merle liked these corners, and sometimes he would stare at them, and then look into the mirror and see the mighty eagle rising into the darkness while arrows of lightning cracked the sky behind him. And he would know the power of the eagle.

The room in which Merle had lived since his mother's death was in the attic of an old house in a rather poor section of the city. Three floors of husbandless old women lived beneath him, but he had a side entrance up the fire escape and through a window and he seldom saw any of them. And in fact, he was so quiet that few people knew that he lived there at all. Although his salary was enough now so that he could have afforded a better place, he preferred living there and saving the few dollars a month extra. Having money made him feel secure—made him feel that there was nothing that he could not do, or have. He kept his money in the top tray inside an old trunk that his mother had left him. It was the only thing she had left him: a trunk full of the costumes which she had worn as an actress. All her other worldly possessions she had given away when she left the stage, but these "special memories" she had kept, locked in the trunk. Sometimes, she would stand before the mirror and tell Merle about the things that the trunk contained. There was one pair of velvet slacks in there, she said, that had "shocked" the world. And Merle had felt the shock as he watched his

mother's huge silhouette moving in the dark room before him. But though his mother had been dead for seventeen years, and though he had never forgotten how she talked about the marvelous contents of the trunk, he had never lifted the tray where he kept his money to look at them.

"Wanta take me to lunch today, Randy?"

Josephine was at Randy Mifflin's desk again. Merle looked up at her back. She towered over him like a huge building. She leaned back, her thighs resting on the edge of his desk. The fulness of her tight skirt was no more than two inches from his arm. Sometimes at night, if he were reading a sensual book, he would think of that bulging flesh oozing over the edge of the desk, and it would excite him then as much as it frightened him now.

She pushed herself up straight again and leaned forward over Randy Mifflin's desk, putting her elbows down and propping her head in her hands so that her face was right in front of Randy Mifflin.

"Come on, Randy, take me to lunch, huh?" she said, her freshly-painted lips twisting to let each word slip out.

"You take me!" Randy Mifflin pushed aside the ledger sheets with his arm and leaned back in his swivel chair. "You got the jing. Not me, baby."

Her form straightened and hovered over Merle again. He stopped working but continued to stare at the ledgers in front of him. His right hand was poised over the adding machine. The thighs came back and pressed against the edge of his desk

again. Sometimes at night, if the book were particularly sensual, Merle would lie in his bed and stare into the mirror and see the turbulent waves thrashing about on the great belly of the ocean. Holding his breath, he would watch as one wave began to rise higher than the rest, rushing forward, sucking the strength from the body of the sea. And when it had reached its peak, and the column of water trembled with the power that was in it, the lightning would rip the dark sky and the wave would crash into a ragged cliff and split open, casting its foam into the night.

"You'll take me to lunch, won't you, Merle?"

"Huh... Ma'am?"

"You see, he even says 'ma'am' to me, Randy. Why don't you ever do that, huh?" She had her elbows on Merle's desk now and was twisting her head around to look at Randy Mifflin.

"Ma'am?"

"Merle'll take me. Won't you, Merle?"

"He ain't gonna take ya," said Randy Mifflin. "He's gonna take Loretta. Right, Merle?"

"Ma'am... Huh?"

Josephine laughed. Sweat was standing out on Merle's forehead. He looked back at the ledger sheets beneath his arm.

"Well, I guess I'll just eat alone. It's a shame for a girl like me to eat alone." She looked at Randy Mifflin and closed one painted eye.

"Do ya good," said Randy Mifflin. "Maybe you'll meet

some nice young man."

Josephine walked away in front of Merle's desk. He glared at the ledger sheets and did not look up. His hand was still poised over the adding machine. Behind him Loretta's key punch machine rattled softly.

At lunch time Merle ate at the M&B grill, three blocks down the street from where he worked. It was a dirty place, but cheap. He liked to think of the money he was saving by eating there. Sometimes he would stand before the mirror and try to imagine the great amount of money that was in the trunk. He would see the bills piled in a heap as wide and high as the mirror itself. Then, a whirlwind would begin in the center of the pile and the money would swirl about like a great swarm of green butterflies. As the greenbacks whipped before him in the mirror, the magic power of the glass would transform them into the riches of the world. Huge palaces would rise before him, and green pastures would roll out to the sea, jewels and precious metals would glitter before his eyes, exotic animals would parade before him bearing gifts from other times and other places, and skeins of loose silk would rise like smoke and twine about the bodies of strange women.

He imagined that there was a great deal of money in the trunk. He had been saving ever since his mother died. She had never allowed him to save anything. Any time she discovered that he had money she would take it from him and raise her hand before the mirror and beseech God to forgive

them for possessing such an abominable thing. Then, she would go out into the street and begin her preaching.

"The Lord has said, 'It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God!' " She would stop strangers on the street and force money into their hands, saying: "Here, sinner, take your ticket to hell!"

After Merle finished his corned beef sandwich and bowl of beans he went to the library and checked out a book entitled Rosa Makes the Big Time. As he walked back to the office he saw Loretta coming out of Edmunds' Cafeteria across the street. She was alone, and she looked as small and frail as a child, as she waited on the corner for the light to change. He wondered whatever had made Randy Mifflin say that.

After lunch Josephine came to Randy Mifflin's desk three times and whispered things to him, and he laughed. Merle refused to look at the hips as they pressed against his desk, but once she leaned back so far that her skirt touched his elbow like a hot piece of iron, and he left his desk hurriedly and went to the bathroom and urinated.

When he came back, Josephine was gone, but Randy Mifflin was still laughing. All afternoon Loretta's key punch machine chirped behind him like a young bird.

In his room that night, Merle sat before the mirror and read the book he had gotten from the library that day. It was the story of Rosa, a girl who came to the city to become

a famous actress. She had little success in acting, however, and she was lonely and afraid in the city. Finally, when her money ran out she had to take a job as a secretary with a large company. There she met a young man who had just come to the city. He too was lonely and afraid.

As Merle read he felt a great swell of emotions within him. He remembered his mother telling how sinful it was to paint one's face and strut before people pretending to be something you weren't. He was glad that the girl had become a happy secretary, and he wondered what the mirror had in store for him tonight. But he did not look up until he finished the part about Rosa's wedding and snapped the book shut.

At first, when he looked into the mirror, he saw only a dark blueness as if the mirror were a porthole that looked out into the depths of the sea. But then a light sparkled off in the distance, appearing like the innate gleam of some rare jewel. It moved closer and closer through the watery blueness until it illuminated the entire mirror with a radiance that was almost unbearable.

Merle sat mesmerized, staring at the ghostly illumination until at last all the colors of the light blended into the textures of skin and cloth and hair, and Loretta appeared on the other side of the glass. He thought that he had never seen a girl as beautiful as she. Her skin was smooth, and rich with color. Her hair sparkled with the light from her face, and her clothes seemed to linger about her like a cloud.

Merle basked in the beauty of this angelic figure until the light faded, and she disappeared. Then, he lay on his bed, and slept.

"Loretta's getting married," said Randy Mifflin.

Merle's finger came down on the total button. The adding machine coughed up figures on the narrow strip of paper.

"Huh?"

"Loretta's getting married. You know, 'married.' That girl right back there!" Randy Mifflin turned and pointed. Merle felt the blood rising in his neck.

"Oh," he said.

He added the next five ledger sheets wrong, and his ball point pen began to leak, making his mistakes and corrections look all the worse. He hoped that Loretta wouldn't see them. He hoped that Josephine would punch them so that Loretta would not have to look at them.

"Loretta's getting married," said Josephine, her lips twisting in front of his face.

"I already told him," said Randy Mifflin.

"She's marrying money," said Josephine.

"She coulda married Merle; he's got money."

"She's marrying real money," said Josephine. She turned to Randy Mifflin and parked her hip on the desk again.

"How about lunch, Jo?" said Randy Mifflin.

"No," said Josephine, letting her flesh creep further onto the desk.

Merle moved his arm. The flesh crept closer. He got up and took the ledgers to the basket and went to the bathroom.

At lunch time Merle didn't go to the M&B grill, or to the library. He idled about in front of Marilyn's Shoe Store and watched the people coming in and out of Edmunds' Cafeteria. He stared from time to time at a pair of black and white polka dot high heels in the display window of the shoe store. He imagined his mother in those shoes. She would strut about in them before the mirror and tell him how the audience had applauded her, and called her back again and again. She would tell him of the people she had known and of the fan mail she had received. Then, her tone would become severe, and she would tell him of the nitwit director who had given her a role in which she made only two appearances on the stage during the entire play, and how, as she was dressing for the opening night, the Lord had spoken to her out of the mirror. "Turn away from these vile things, and seek ye the ways of the Lord," He had said. And she had gotten up and left the theatre without telling anyone, and when she saw the long line of people waiting in the street to see her, she began passing out tickets of her own, and preaching the word of God.

"But I knocked 'em cold in my day," she would say, walking back and forth before the mirror in her old dressing gown and her high heel shoes. "They loved me." As her figure cut this way and that in front of him, he could catch glimpses

of the mirror. In it he could see the enraptured audience, and hear their thunderous applause. Even the eagle's fist seemed to tighten around the arrows in appreciation. As his mother talked again of sin and retribution, he claimed the audience for his own. And as she passed back and forth in front of him, he returned again and again for curtain calls.

At twenty minutes after twelve, Loretta came out of Edmunds' Cafeteria and waited on the corner for the light to change. Merle waited behind her. He could see the blonde hair that fell almost to her shoulders, and the delicate skin of her throat. The light changed, and she was swept forward in the throng of people. He followed, lagging behind the others.

In the lobby of their building, he made a gallant move to step in front of her and press the button for the elevator, but another man beat him to it. Loretta smiled at no one in particular. Merle felt frightened and started away to another elevator. His fear passed however, and he came back just in time to squeeze through the door before it closed. Loretta smiled again.

After the sixteenth floor they were alone on the elevator. They stood in opposite corners. Several times he tried to turn and speak to her, but each time his heart began to palpitate wildly and the high speed of the elevator turned the hunger in his stomach to nausea. When they finally came to a stop, he rushed through the opening door ahead of her and made for the bathroom.

Randy Mifflin was late coming back from lunch. Josephine was with him. They were laughing.

"You oughta hear what Jo and I are giving Loretta for a wedding present," said Randy Mifflin, sitting down at his desk.

"What?" asked Merle.

"Oh, I don't think I'd better tell you, Merle," said Randy Mifflin. "You look too pale to be shocked right now."

Merle sorted through the papers on his desk. The afternoon mail hadn't come and there was no work to do.

"You know what it is?" asked Randy Mifflin, after a while.

"What what is?" asked Merle.

"What we're giving Loretta for her wedding present. You can chip in if you want."

"What is it?" asked Merle.

"A negligee with fur around the bottom," whispered Randy Mifflin. "To keep her neck warm!"

Randy Mifflin laughed again and rared back in his swivel chair. Merle didn't say anything. There was nothing to do until the mail came. He took a soiled handkerchief from his pocket and dusted his adding machine.

"I bet she had to get married," urged Randy Mifflin after a while. He leaned closer to Merle's desk and whispered: "I bet she has to. She's getting married too quick. Next week, ya know. You can't ever tell about those quiet ones. I got a feeling I've been a fool to mess around with Jo all these years. Ya just can't tell about those quiet ones. Just like you, Merle. It's no telling what you do when they turn you

out of here at night."

The mail came and Merle went to work. He worked steadily all afternoon. Josephine only came once to Randy Mifflin's desk, and Merle ignored her then. He left at five o'clock without having looked at Loretta again.

In his room that night he read parts of Rosa Makes the Big Time again. But whenever he looked up from his reading, the mirror was as dark as the night outside the tiny window above his head. He lay on his bed and tried to sleep, but thoughts of Josephine kept coming unexpectedly into his mind. He closed his eyes and remembered the dreadful night when his mother had stripped his clothes from him and left him alone before the mirror.

When he opened his eyes again and looked into the mirror the waves were licking their tongues into the crevices of a towering cliff, and far away the storm rose in the darkness with the power of the eagle, rushing to be destroyed against the indestructable shoreline.

The next day was Saturday. Merle slept late. When he rose he tried not to look at the mirror. He went for a walk along the streets shadowed by the three and four story tenement houses. It was autumn, but the wind that blew along the street had something of springtime in it. He removed his coat and wandered about the streets thinking. The embarrassments of the day before passed, and he felt renewed and vital again. He thought of how his mother had wobbled about these same streets

in her high heels, giving money to strangers, and sometimes, yanking it back and depositing it in the nearest wastebasket—always preaching in her best theatrical voice her patent sermon on the sinfulness of money. "Take no heed of what ye shall put on, or what food ye shall eat. The Lord will provide." Passers-by would pause for a moment to look at her and then go on their way.

Though she never received any money after she quit acting, she worked three days a week changing linen and cleaning rooms in the hotel where they lived. Their room was a small musty space among the discarded furniture in the basement. When Merle was fifteen, he went to work as bellboy in the hotel for five dollars a week plus tips. With this money he managed to buy the necessities for their lives. His mother never condemned his earnings, but whenever she discovered that he had money, she would take it from him and go into the streets to preach.

A newspaper had once done an article on her, calling her "a rarity among sidewalk gossellers." Merle remembered how proud she had been of the article. All day she sat in the room and read it over and over, glancing occasionally at the mirror with her eyes ablaze.

The memory of the night that had followed had always been a bitter one for Merle, but now as he walked about in the warm October sunshine he thought freely of it. His mother had demanded money of him that night. When he lied and told her that he had none, she became angry and threw

him on the bed and stripped his clothes from him. After she found the few coins that he had tied in his handkerchief she stood over him and shouted, calling him a vile sinner and an abomination to the sight of God. With the money in her hand, she rushed away into the night, leaving him naked and alone before the mirror.

In the afternoon, Merle returned to his room and read Rosa Makes the Big Time from cover to cover. It was almost dark when he finished. The soft light of evening crept in through the window above his head, tinting the room with a pinkish hue. The air was still warm from the sunshine of the day, and it seemed more like April than October. Merle thought of the girls who had worked at the key punch machines behind him in the cost accounting office since he had been employed there. In the mirror he lined them up and let them pass before his eyes. There were nine in all, not including Josephine and Loretta. All of them had married and left, and he had never seen them again. Josephine had stayed longer than any of the others—almost four years.

Sitting in the soft lingering light of the day a strange feeling came over Merle. He felt that he had been quite intimate with all of these girls, but that he had rejected each one of them and waited for the perfect one to come. And now, she was here.

He closed his eyes, and when he opened them again, Loretta stood before him in the mirror. The evening light clothed her in soft pastel shades, and she seemed to sway back and forth

like a reflection in gently rolling water.

Merle sat as if in a trance, staring at the mirror, until the darkness came and took the vision away. Slowly he awoke and became aware of the sounds that drifted in through the window. Somewhere below him a radio played. It's music mingled with the laughter and the shouts of the children in the street. He could hear the swish of traffic and the far away honking of car horns. He thought of Randy Mifflin walking about the streets with Josephine. He thought of them laughing.

Then a strange idea came to Merle Merman as he sat there in the darkness, an idea that thrilled him with its possibilities. He got up from the chair and took the mirror from the wall on which it had hung for so long. A wild sense of adventure pulsed through his veins as he gripped the claws of the eagle and laid the mirror on the bed. He heard again the applause of his mother's audience. He felt like the eagle lifting its wings into the night air.

Working entirely by the dim light that came through the window, Merle took a pencil and paper from his dresser and wrote: "Dearest Loretta. Look into this glass and know the happiness of your life." It was a paraphrase from something he had read in a book, and it pleased him. He signed his name in a very scrawled hand and slipped the paper into a corner of the mirror, and began looking about the room for an old company directory that he had there. After he had found it and had written out Loretta's address, he wrapped the mirror in a large piece of brown paper. He lifted the

trunk lid and took a handful of bills from the tray, and taking the mirror under his arm, he went out into the hall and through the window and down the fire escape.

As he stepped into the street another idea was already taking shape in his mind, and he hailed a taxi with an authority he had never known before.

"I'd like you to deliver something to this address," he said, opening the door and leaning into the darkness of the cab.

"This ain't no delivery service," said the cab driver, letting the cab inch forward.

"There's money in it for you," said Merle boldly, holding out the handful of bills.

"What is it?" asked the cab driver, putting on brakes again.

"This," said Merle, laying the wrapped mirror on the seat beside the driver.

"What address?"

Merle handed him the slip of paper and the money.

"Okay."

"Thank you," said Merle.

The driver stared at him. Merle shut the door and the cab sped away into the traffic, leaving him alone on the street.

Back in his room again, Merle felt a lingering uneasiness about the absence of the mirror, but he tried to dispell it by concentrating on his new plan. He removed the money tray and lifted one by one the garments that had been stored for almost twenty-five years in the bottom of the trunk. There

was a huge gown with sheets of lace and ruffled borders. There were blouses whose bright colors were slightly faded now. There were sheer stockings of black and red, and all the harnesses and belts that held them and other things in place. At the very bottom of the trunk, Merle found the pair of black, velvet slacks his mother had told him about. He lifted them between a thumb and index finger of each hand, letting the legs unfold as they came up out of the trunk. Down each leg was a row of rhinestones that glittered like stars against the black velvet.

Merle lay the slacks carefully on the bed and replaced the other clothes in the trunk, before removing his own pants. As he lifted his foot and slid it into the soft, lined leg of the slacks, he felt a storm beginning to rage in him. He felt that he was already with Loretta, that he was touching her. Involuntarily, he looked at the wall where the mirror had always hung. Only a brown spot remained there. The bareness of the wall frightened him, and he looked away and forced his other foot into the slacks.

With some difficulty, he zipped the side zipper over his hip bone and buttoned the button above it. Having stuffed a handful of bills into each of the two slit pocket in the front of the slacks, he walked about the room and watched the bending lines of stones that glittered down his legs.

As he sat down in his chair, he felt that he was sitting on a throne and that his small room had suddenly become a sprawling palace by the edge of the sea. With his slightest

command, he felt he could bring before him the riches of all the kingdoms of the world. But he waited, waited for the magic hour of midnight when he would charge out into the night and rescue his captured queen. Above him the dark spot on the wall hovered like an anger cloud.

At one o'clock Merle was still walking the street before Loretta's apartment building. He was haunted by the memory of the brown spot where the mirror had hung. The room had become like a windowless cell to him as he waited through the silent hours for midnight. It was drab and cold, and there was nothing he could do to take his mind off the mirror. He kept turning to the wall, and turning away again. His dream of Loretta had quickly taken second place to an urgent desire to have the mirror back. He became like a vicious animal, turning and turning in the small confinement of his room.

At eleven, he sprang out through the window and down the fire escape and stalked through the streets towards Loretta's apartment. He became completely mad with the desire to have the mirror back, and from time to time, he would stop and growl like a beast in the darkness.

But when confronted by the tall, lighted apartment building he came to himself again. As he approached the entrance he thought again of Loretta, and he walked on past. He intended to walk to the corner and then come back and enter, but he walked by a second time, and then a third. In this manner, he had passed almost an hour without entering the building.

Now as he turned and started back from the corner again, he recalled vividly the dark spot that stained the wall of his ugly room. He touched the money in his pockets, and the thought of buying the mirror back came to him. A longing to have it back at all cost rose in him, and he rushed toward the huge, glass door of the apartment building.

The soaring speed of the elevator strengthened his confidence and he felt powerful and determined as he stepped onto the carpeting of the ninth floor hallway.

He pressed the buzzer firmly with his index finger and stepped back and stood with his arms folded across his chest. He waited for what seemed the proper length of time, and then, pressed the button again. He looked down the narrow hall toward the red exit sign. With a mingling sense of despair and excitement, the thought came to him that she might be in bed. Timidly, he pushed the button again.

At last, he heard a rustling from within the apartment and the door opened just wide enough for him to see a narrow strip of a rather fat-faced girl in curlers. Her cheeks were wrinkled with sleep, and she wore a faded blue bathrobe that was turned up about her neck.

"Who is it?" said the girl, blinking her eyes in the light.

"Lo-Loretta?"

"Yeah. Who're you?"

"I'm Merle Mer-"

"Merle. I didn't recognize you in that... What are you doing here at this hour?"

"My mirror, I was wondering if..."

"Oh, yes, we got it. That was sweet of you Merle. But honestly, you shoulda brought it over yourself. When that taxi driver came here I didn't know what to think. We just love it though—it was so nice of you. Rick is just crazy about it."

"Rick?"

"Yes, Rick—my fiance. He likes old stuff like that. His mother's an antique collector."

"She is?"

"Yes, it was just the perfect gift for us. You are coming to the wedding, aren't you?"

Merle stood on the sidewalk before a dark store window. He fingered the money in his pockets and sought to find in the glass something of what the mirror had given him. But the window only threw back the reflection of his small, slump-shouldered form. The stones on the legs of the slacks sparkled wildly in the glass.

Thrusting his hands deeper into his pockets, he clutched the money, and with one upward motion of his arms, he flung it into the air.

The bills fluttered for a moment in the mirror-blue light of the street. Above their frantic motion, the lighted windows of the sky scrapers stair-stepped into the night. Beyond the city, the green plains rolled out toward the sea. And somewhere, in the warm light of a castle, skeins of loose silk

rose like smoke and wound about the pale limbs of strange,
exotic women.