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by

Sands Hetherington

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A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of the Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro
1972

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APPROVAL SHEET

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A RITE OF SUMMER

The car came slowly down the dirt road and now as it approached the cabin its lights winked off. Darkly, quietly, it found the weedy driveway and crept into it. The two men got out. Each had an overnight bag, and the driver also carried a flat leather case. Gently the two men pushed the car doors shut and went into the cabin without speaking.

The driver closed the door. "What time is it?" he said.

"Two-fifteen," said the other, switching on the light. "We never made it much before this."

The driver tossed his bag onto a cot and put the leather case on the large, blackpainted dining table. He looked over at his friend who was checking the drawn curtains.

"You want a drink first?"

"No, I think I'll wait 'till after. You go ahead though."

"I think I'll wait myself," said the driver, unsnapping the case. Now he paused.

"Bob?"

"Yeah."

"How about you taking the .22 tonight? The trip made my eyes tired."

"Sure, man, you know it doesn't matter. You O. K. for the concussion gun?"

"Sure, I'd just rather you'd handle the fine work," said the driver.

He began taking things out of the case now and putting them on the table--the long, peculiar-looking target pistol with the counterweighted barrel, the fat magnum .44, the two powerful flashlights, the ammunition cartons....

He took a screwdriver from among several tools in the lining of the case lid and removed the grips from the target pistol. These he replaced with others having a thumb-rest on the opposite side.

"Wish you'd learn what hand to shoot with," he mock-growled.

The other man smiled. He was wiping out a large black skillet:

"What do you mean, Sam?" Hell, we've got a natural crossfire this way."

"Oh," said the driver. "I hadn't thought of that. A natural crossfire, for God's sake."

He started putting the little hollow-nosed cartridges into the magazine.

"Let's see now," he mused. "We've got this cabin and these fancy guns, and we've won close to a hundred shooting trophies between us. We've got flashlights that cost twenty dollars apiece, and now, to top that off, I come to find out we've got an ass-withering natural crossfire!-----Bob, I ask you now____"

"What?" said Bob, who knew very well what was coming.

"Bob, does anything strike you as ironic about all this?"

"Well, there's Dodie."

The driver snapped the magazine into the pistol butt. "Yes," he sighed, "there's Dodie. There's always Dodie. You put it very well."

He opened the big magnum and began dropping the thumbsized cartridges into the cylinder. His friend tested the flashlights.

"If there was any way on earth for him to get out," said the driver. "I checked all the plugs last time, you know."

"It's weird," said Bob.

"You're telling me it's weird? One jump and gone, vanished." He snapped the big revolver shut.

"Weird if you ask me," said Bob.

The two men moved toward the door now, each with a gun and flashlight. The driver gripped the doorknob and paused:

"What if we don't get him this time?"

His friend answered evenly: "Don't be silly, Sam. We'll just come back and try again, same as always."

They left the unpainted plywood room and closed the door quietly.

From somewhere off in the humid July air, now, the chittering sound of a lone cricket. This and the muffled footfalls of the men. Slowly they crossed the road and entered the abandoned lot, moving by moonlight. When they had come within twenty yards of the pit, they dropped down and began to crawl.

It was an awkward business with the weeds and sedge grass, a heavy implement in each hand, but now they came to the edge of the pit and stopped.

It was an old septic tank, ten feet by six, and lined with cinder-blocks. A foot of rainwater stood in the bottom, and across the middle there was a cement partition with a large hole in it.

At this point the cricket's sound stopped, as though on cue. The sudden silence seemed to trigger the two men, and rising, they snapped on their glare of light and stared into the pit.

This time the frog stayed. He squatted there big in the hole and would not jump. He was a big frog and he looked quietly into the light and if he was not astonishingly big he was at least as big as a quart of gin. The man with the target pistol fired quickly.

The frog sprang from the hole and splashed into the black water in the bottom of the tank. He disappeared, leaving only bubbles.

The big revolver exploded now, six times rapidly into a circle around the area. The huge bullets spewed water up onto both men. Then there was quiet.

The one called Bob had worn boots. He set his things on the ground and, with help from the other, lowered himself into the pit. While his friend played a light where the bubbles had been, he reached left-handed into the black water. He groped, and then in a moment he brought up the big killed frog by a leg. The top of its head had a single small hole.

"So then," he said. He hardly bothered to look at the thing he held. "Dodie." It came out rather as an afterthought.

He handed the frog out to the driver who dropped it into the large pocket of his hunting jacket. "Dodie," he echoed tonelessly, and then helped his friend to clamber out of the pit.

The two men picked up their things and started back for the cabin now. They walked purposefully, and neither spoke. The routine was set.

When they entered the cabin, the driver produced a cutting board from one of the cabinets and set it on the sink counter. The other poured olive oil into the skillet.

"Medium or medium-high?" he said. "I swear I forgot."

"Medium-high, you ass."

The driver hefted the frog from his pocket and thumped it rudely onto the cutting board. He opened the drawer and took out the thin Swedish knife.

"If you'll just bear with me a minute," he said to the frog, and began slicing into its groin.

The steel knife slipped easily through the meat until it met bone, making the driver have to bear down hard against the cutting board. Snap, then, went the knife and it was through the bone, and in two more strokes the leg was off. This process was repeated for the other leg, then the feet were removed. Two slits by the point of the knife, the skin was peeled off, and now the pale meat stood revealed.

It was not washed. Instead the legs were sprinkled with salt and left on the cutting board, where soon they began twitching grotesquely in reaction to the chemical. The truncated frog lay alongside and seemed to eye them interestedly. The skillet had started to smoke.

The other man came over now and picked up the legs by their smaller ends. He carried them jerking to the stove. While the stolid frog-half looked on, he dropped the legs, first one and then the other, into the hot oil, causing it to crackle angrily. After a moment the legs became still.

The driver washed his hands in the sink and mixed a pitcher of martinis. He filled two stemmed glasses and then added olives from the refrigerator.

"Just put mine on the table," said the other, who was standing over the skillet with a meat fork. "Got to turn them in a minute."

And now this was done and the oil crackled and spattered. When it quieted, the cook sat down with the driver.

They drank the martinis deliberately, quietly. A number of times the cook glanced at his watch. Then, when the time had passed, he stood and moved toward the stove.

"Hey, you ass," he said. "You forgot the paper towels."

The driver looked sheepish. He crossed to a cabinet, took out a roll, and tore off several sheets. He spread these quickly on the sink counter.

The other man clicked off the burner switch. And now, as the big green frog-half looked on steadily, he forked the browned legs onto the paper towels, turning them once. He put them on small plates. Then he took them over to the table where the driver had provided napkins. Both men sat down.

"Care to say grace, Sam?" smiled the cook.

The other failed to answer. He seemed preoccupied.

The two men took the legs in their fingers and began eating. Both soon appeared off in thought, and it was several minutes before the driver broke the silence:

"It doesn't seem real," he said.

"I know," said the cook. He looked down at the half-eaten thing in his fingers. "It's not like I thought it would be either."

"I mean it doesn't seem any different from the last time. Like we're still just going through the motions. Like rehearsing.....I guess it just hasn't had time to sink in yet."

"Yeah," said the cook.

They finished silently and stood and took the plates over and put them on the cutting board. The big frog-half rested on his forelegs. He seemed to speculate over the little bones placed in front of him.

The cook took the martini glasses from the table to the sink. The driver was putting pillows on the two cots. He paused and looked around the room.

"You know, Bob," he said, "this place wouldn't be bad if we painted it."

"Right," said Bob.

The driver finished distributing pillows and settled a sheet over each of the little beds. The other opened some windows. When he saw that the driver had reached his cot, he snapped off the one light and felt his way across the room. Both men undressed in the dark.

The trip home meant an early morning, and so before long they went to sleep.

Over on the cutting board the big frog-half lay on his belly and stared.

RIGHT OF PASSAGE

When the Atlanta thing happened, it was 3:35 on an August afternoon and rather hot.

The young man sat in the mouth of the driveway, waiting for the traffic to clear. He had already come by the teller's window and cashed a check, and now he sat in his big car waiting.

The flow continued heavy from both directions. After some moments, then, there was the voice; it came from the left--

"What I'm gonna do?" it said.

The young man turned and saw the thin, tall Negro woman standing there in her white uniform. She could have been a maid, a nurse, perhaps a mammy, it was impossible to tell, and she wore thick eyeglasses which obscured her expression. It seemed the man's car blocked most of the sidewalk, and she could not get by without detouring.

"I suggest you go around back," he smiled, guessing that she was a bit vague. At the same time he regretted her having to walk around his big Lincoln. She wasn't young.

The woman simply stood, however. Her arms hung at her sides, and her thick-lensed gaze settled over the young man. There were no other pedestrians.

Nervously he searched the traffic for an opening. He still found none, and now he began to be irritated.

What's the matter with her? he thought. If she thinks I'm going to back up, she can go to hell.

Maybe she doesn't see those cars out there. It's possible, he speculated. Or maybe she's one of these liberated blacks that think they can walk all over you. Hell, he thought, she's probably just crazy. Hard to tell anything, though, through those glasses.

He looked at her again. She had not moved and her arms still hung at her sides.

Those lenses....

The traffic had not cleared when the woman turned now and started around the back of the car.

"Well, I did have d' right of way," she said. She chuckled peculiarly.

After a few moments an opening appeared and the young man pulled out into it. He had to tend closely to this, and so he failed to see the woman as she continued stiffgaited down the hot sidewalk in her white uniform.

A SOUTHERN STORY

It was a crazy piece of business, all right. That's all I can say from here, a hopheaded affair pure and simple and leave it at that. If I'd gone along like I was told, now, things might be different; maybe then I could announce it was all in accord with the Spheres and Verities. Maybe the guy was Santa Claus, I don't know. It's all beyond me. In any event, see what you can make of it. I'd welcome some explanation because, Lord, that store manager was a puzzler himself.

It happened altogether in about three days. I was driving back into Richmond from a trip early one Saturday evening in one of these inspiring November rains, thinking of nothing but getting home fast, when pop like a custard pie it hit me that what's-his-name and his cousin were coming over for dinner the next night and I was out of food. So, reluctantly, I started looking around for an open supermarket--in what, to make it seem worse, was an unfamiliar end of town.

It wasn't long, though, just a few blocks of houses and a commercial building or two, before I found this huge, new-looking A&P, all lit up and with a parking lot full of cars. I found a slip down at the end and made a wet dash into the place.

It was a typical-looking layout, I remember thinking. Bigger and shinier than most, to be sure, but still just another supermarket. Produce department here, seventeen brands of dog food thirty yards over on aisle J, you know the deal.

Anyway, I got a basket and started poking around getting the things I needed. Nothing fancy for tomorrow, I thought, nothing with ingredients

or I'll be here an hour. Just some steaks, baking potatoes, a bottle of red California, and go. Still, what with the crowd and having to hunt for everything, this took twenty minutes, and so by the time I was finishing up at the wine shelf, I was an impatient soul.

Italian Swiss Burgundy, that'll be O.K. Yeah. Now-just-where-in-the-hell-IS-it?.....THERE it is.

"Hello, young man," the voice said, "My name is Mr. Napier."

"Huh?"

"I said 'hello.' By way of greeting you, you see. I then introduced myself. My name is Mr. Napier." There, about two feet behind me, stood this little colored man. He was wearing an A&P uniform and sunglasses, and had his hands clasped in front of him in this kind of precious Hollywood coffin salesman manner. His face was expressionless.

"Well, uh, hello," I said, "is something wrong?"

"Wrong?" he shot back (deadpan), "By Olympian Zeus, fellow, what a question! What an amazing question! Why, one has only to..... Oh, I see. You must forgive me. You put it rhetorically, of course. Yes. Very clever. Hm."

"Look, I----"

"Such a pleasure, meeting a client like yourself these days. My new people tend to be so leaden. Before the treatment, you know. Why just last week a gentleman undertook to edify me with a lecture, forgive me, a eulogy on natural fermentation. Quoted Lichine to me.... Gad, fellow, I slew Alexis Lichine eight months ago next Tuesday."

Lord Mayor of the Screwballs, I thought, it's got to be this guy, and I think the exit's around the corner to the left. Being in a hurry was one thing, but it struck me now that Lichine could've stood here once.

"Mm-hm," I said, starting to sidle away, "that's very interesting. I've, uh, got to get going, though. You know how it is."

"Yes, I do indeed, or as the quintessential lout once phrased it, I wouldn't be in this business. Now would I?" He paused and put a thumb and forefinger to his chin, then took a step backward toward the canned grapefruit juice and continued. "Excellent piece of reverse irony, of course, on your part. Much indeed to recommend it. Yes. But down to cases now, shall we? You'll want first of all----"

I interrupted him. There just wasn't any other way. "Look," I said (over my shoulder and starting down the aisle), "I'm awfully sorry but I've really got to run."

"Yes," he answered, "but first you'll want to return that bottle to its shelf."

"Do what? Return what bottle?" He'd stopped me in my tracks.

"Why, the bottle of wine in your shopping cart. The only bottle you have. There, you see? I can be as nimble with an ontological puzzle as the next man. (pointing his finger) I'm on to your tricks."

"Listen, Mr. uh--," I started.

"Napier, Mr. Napier."

"Uh-huh, yeah, right. Look: I'm gonna buy this wine. I got it for a dinner. I'm not gonna steal it."

He cocked his head a little: "You're not going to steal what?"

"The WINE!"

"To be sure," he said, raising his chin but never any expression--
"I knew it was the wine from the first. Simply giving you a dose of
your own medicine, eh? But come, I'm afraid you've missed my original
meaning--"

"That's possible."

"Yes. Well, then, it's really quite simple. The wine you have
there should be exchanged. It's not recommended."

"Uh-huh. By you, I suppose?"

"There! Now you've hit it! Please permit me." He forked over
this card.

To all to whom the bearer of
these presents shall come

Greeting

Be it known that he has been
admitted to the title of
oenologist with all the rights,
honors, and privileges there-
unto appertaining.

Bacchus

I just couldn't resist: "Speaks to you from time to time, does he?"

He took a couple of steps back and put his hands on his hips.

"Look at me, young man...Very well. Do you think, then, that any-
one could ever take me for a maenad?"

I told him for all I knew I guessed not.

"So much for that, then," he said. "Besides, what would be the point? An oenologist, once so, is quite capable in his own right."

"E-nol-o-gist?"

"Yes. Wine expert. Oinos and all that. Porter as far as the store is concerned, but I enjoy the game it makes. Come, let's play it."

"How does it go?" I asked, a little resignation creeping in.

"Well, there are variations to be sure," he said, "an infinitude of them. And you can never escape the built-in ironic element. Still ...There now, what did I just tell you? Avocation calls, off I go, sha'n't be a minute." He scurried up the aisle in answer to a checker's signal and pitched in bagging some woman's groceries. And before I could resolve to sneak out, he was back, just as intent as ever. It couldn't have been more than, well, a minute.

"The game, the game, 's the name o' the game," he twittered. "You do understand, don't you? Tell you the basic moves? Why certainly. There are only three; viz: Napier advises client in a wine/client buys said wine/Napier carries same and other purchases to client's car. The object, by contrast, is too involved a matter for present discussion. Fair enough?"

Here was my out, then. Just let this guy sell me a bottle of wine and he'd release me. One bottle of wine, what the hell. "O. K.," I said, "I'll have a shot at it."

"Excellent. God's wounds, young man, what a boon for you," he said. "But you'll find this out quite soon. That bottle of yours,

then. Let's have it."

He bounded over to the basket for it and I stopped him.

"Oh, no, I'm hanging on to this. I'll buy a bottle of what you say, but this too. I like the stuff. O. K.?"

"By all means, fellow, don't misunderstand me. Buy a case of it. Buy the Bangkok subway system if you want to. Only consider the fact--" (he paused and put his hand on my shoulder) "that alchemically speaking the stuff's quite worthless."

"I'll take it under advisement," I think was my nimble reply. "So O. K., let's have a bottle of this elixir of yours. I've got to go."

He seemed to puzzle for a minute, looking off toward the stockroom. Then, abruptly: "So's your old man." He paused again as if to verify the statement in his mind, nodded, and said, "But certainly, let me fetch you a bottle."

He came back cradling it waiter-style--a quart of red liquid in a square decanter with a screw-on metal cap. This was the label:

*
* *

HOROWITZ'
Sweet Rose of Killarney
Wine
alc. 20% by vol.

THIS IS A PURE CHOICE GRAPE WINE

* *
*

I wasn't surprised, of course. How could I have expected the man to give me something drinkable? Still, there was the awful risk of being seen carrying such a thing. The checkout clerk and his stifled snigger!

God, I didn't think I could do it.

"Is this really what you want me to get? It's wine stuff. Alcohol and reject grape juice. It's for the Bowery Boys, man."

"Right on all four counts!" he chirped. "Though regarding the latter three, you might have employed a qualifier to finish the job. Very effective forensically, though. Very."

"No, look," I said, "can't you give me one of these others? Something twelve per cent. You know, natural."

"Sorry, I'm not cut out for it. And just as well, too; a twelve per cent solution won't bind these ingredients. Takes twenty--right on the nose....Mark me, boy--(he paused and pointed his finger) this isn't one of your silly little Burgundies or Moselles. This is the real thing."

"He's right, you know," said the man, a customer, who just then sailed by clutching a bottle of the stuff. "Right as rain," he said, and was around the corner and gone.

I didn't get much of a look at him, but two things I can say: One, he was a middle-aged executive type, an au chateau man, you'd've thought. Prosperous looking. And two--here's the weird part--his face had this I'll-be-damned beatific glow about it. Like nothing I'd ever seen. It was only an aura, of course; there weren't any sparks jumping off the man. Whatever it was, though, it was startling. Tuned in, the gentleman was; nothing was troubling him.

"I take it you noticed" began Mr. N., looking in the direction the man had gone. "Been coming to me for two weeks now, the Saturday omikron appointment. What a wreck he was." He turned toward me now,

all blank-faced, and handed over the bottle: "Well then, shall we proceed with the second move?"

"Mm," I grunted, obediently putting the stuff in the shopping cart. I was worn down. (Maybe, you know, maybe it would run in my lawnmower. I could try it and see, what the devil.) So it was at this point that I happened to look down and saw it stamped on the bottle cap--not in any blurred, furtive way, but in characters clean, clear, and black: SEVEN DOLLARS (ONE PER CUSTOMER). It was a new ball game.

"If you think..." (I was grinning from ear to ear, I couldn't help it.) "If you think I'm gonna...." The rest of the sentence was too obvious to say. I burst out laughing: "No, I'm not payin' any seven dollars! No, no, and definitely no! And I love my lawnmower! How do you like them apples? I and my lawnmower would like to know, how do you like them apples? Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! About them apples, then (I was really running away with myself) my lawnmower for its own part asks you...Ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Oh-ho-ho!"

I couldn't talk anymore, the howls had me. For another minute or so I just roared and shook while Mr. N. stood there calmly, looking at me out of those dark glasses. Finally he ventured forth: "Quite all right. Nothing to worry about. Not untoward a reaction at all. Somewhat typical actually....Here, let me steady you....There now. Yes, young man, you've every right to goggle at the price. Every right indeed. Seven dollars, truth to tell, barely covers distribution costs. You're right, of course; it's just as you thought--the whole operation's subsidized."

"Uh-huh, yeah," I nodded, unshakeable by now. "I was just thinking it'd be a steal at fifteen. Now I understand. Tell you what...."

"It's your idiom," he said. "You're certainly welcome to try."

"Yes...um,..well then, are you ready?"

"Lay it on me, Baby."

"O. K., well, it's just this: (I lowered my voice a register and leaned toward him) "I'm not buying your wine; I'm returning it to the shelf. Observe...thus. Awfully sorry, no slight intended, and now I'm really afraid I've got to go. It's been an honor."

"Very well," he answered. "Of course you'll forfeit the game and such a pity. We'd made such progress. Ah me...de debil gon' git you."

Settin' in de cane field,
Settin' in de grass,
When de debil see you
It'll be yo'....

No, son, truthfully," he said, now the soul of decorum, "it's not all up yet. You'll be back for another go, and if (hem) if I'm any judge of things, you'll prevail. Now if you'll excuse me...."

He started briskly across the store and for the time being disappeared.

So then. There was a fair wait at the checkout counter because of the crowd, but eventually I managed to get my things paid for and was at the glass door getting ready to dash out in the rain. Well, there he was, out in the lot talking to this other guy, no raincoat or nothing. And directly between me and my car.

I waited for a minute but they didn't move, just standing there in that rain. With my luck he'd nail me for sure. Still, I had to chance it, and so out the door I shot, head down and clutching the groceries like a fullback.

Oh, he got me all right. I'd swear the little devil tripped me if I hadn't been eight feet away and behind his back when it happened. A parking space divider or something. Anyway, as I was picking myself etcetera off the wet pavement (unhurt to speak of, and having fully expected something like this to happen), I looked over and the other man was parting company with Mr. Napier. "See you, Pastore," he said, and left. A nice-looking fellow, twenty-five or thirty, and, yes, he had that happy glow. You could see it in the rain. Also, of course, he had a square bottle.

Mr. Napier came over to me now, dripping wet and beads of rain glinting on his dark glasses. His tone was serious: "Just wished to tell you, my boy, that prudence dictates your earliest return. Something's come up." He turned, walked back into the store, and I went home.

I guess it was sometime during the eleven o'clock news that night that my doorbell rang. It was the "client" from the store, the older one, and the downpour hadn't let up. He fairly beamed as he spoke: "Shall I come in? Or perhaps you'd rather we had our talk here on the stoop. Quite seriously, it's all the same to me."

"Please. Come in, then, won't you?" I said, seizing the initiative along with his coat. The day was not done yet.

"Oh, of course," he answered. "Naturally you'd want it this way. I wasn't thinking." He crossed to the nearest chair, the worst in the room, and sat. "The Pastore asked me to look in on you," he went on. "Seems some problem's arisen down the line, and we're trying to sew up accounts while we can. Care for a cough drop? Luden's Wild Cherry," he luxuriated, holding out the box. "Or I've got licorice...."

"No, no thanks," I said, sitting down. "Not just now, but you go ahead."

"Believe I will have just one, then. And for your part," he said, reaching inside his jacket and bringing out this mimeographed booklet, "for your part if you'll look this over where I've marked the page... there--it'll give you an idea of how I'll operate. May as well get started, don't you think?"

I read: Volunteer's Field Manual, The New Solipsism (across the top).

Chapter IV

Procedures, The Recalcitrant Client
(note: see Glassblowing, pp. 14-15,
if applies)

Tack A--Elevate client's feet. Delineate
universe and wine's related function.
Be brief.

Tack B--Place two "theta" tablets in client's
drink.

Tack C--(to be used only in conjunction with
Tack B) Transmogrification:....

Sure. Same old wildman stuff; here we go for half the night. But the fellow broke in and surprised me: "That's really enough. Tack A should do it in your case, and anyway I haven't much time."

He had gotten up and now presented me with a hassock from across the room. "Definite correlation," he explained, "greater success rate for some reason, just by raising the feet. Weird, isn't it?"

I started to say something cute and stopped myself. For God's sake, let him get on with it. And get on with it he did, let me tell you, launching at this point into a metaphysical morass the like of which is seldom encountered on my block. Blissfully sailing up and down the room, and such a torrent of stuff...I hope I caught the gist:

"...the old solipsism, admirable as it was, simply failed to take this into account. Of course the self's the only thing, but it's also everything else!"

"Look, I'll explain again: the self and the rest of the world are a continuum, a whole, they can't be separated--anymore than you can separate time in the real sense. Time is a unit, no matter what artificial divisions you set up within it. Minutes don't exist by themselves, and neither do we."

(Pops a cough drop and sucks it briefly.)

"We are artificial divisions with no natural status. Mere mental contrivances, don't you see? Imagined drops of water in a real ocean, or minutes flowing from others into the next and the next and indistinguishable in the whole, reaching ultimately throughout the whole,

we are the whole; it's as simple as that."

"Put off your conclusion and back up," I said, reeling a little. "Just how do I know we're mixed into things that way? All I've gotten from you are analogies."

"Why, the wine, man. That's what it does. It proves the system. A jigger every few hours and you know it's true, formal proof be damned."

"Yeah, well, still, I don't see how...."

"Listen. We're not mystics. We've got no epistemological debts to pay. What we're offering is rational intuition, pure and simple and seven dollars, tax included. Like three and two are five, right? You 'see' that with your mind's eye, do you, no need for proof or prayer? Fine, that's all there is to it. Let us service your account and you'll see the universe in the same way. It's felicity," he said, beaming.

Now, retrieving his booklet and coat, the gentleman hurried. "Two more calls tonight," he explained, "one Tack A and a C for sure. I take it you're all set?"

He didn't wait for an answer, just glancing at me as he made for the door. Reaching it he warned--"The store opens at 9:00 Monday; you'd best try to be there."

Out into the rain and down the steps he trotted, his coat over his arm.

"What's your name by the way," I said.

He stopped and turned with a smile: "The Pastore used to call me God as a joke. Do you get it?" He winked and was gone for good.

He must've done a job on me, though, really. Before the weekend was out I was making up excuses, telling myself I'd have the stuff analyzed or some such thing. It was eating me up.

Late Tuesday I managed to break away and get out there. Into the store, down aisle E to the back, and sure, you guessed it--no Mr. Napier, no turned-on-types, and something called Roma Rocket where the wine had been.

I tracked down the manager: "Crazy Nappy," he said, "that's who you mean. Showed up here about three months ago asking for a job. Said he'd work for free. No kidding. Well, just a loony, I thought, but anyway to humor him I told him sure, check in tomorrow and I'd put him on carry-out but not to look for any check come payday, you know. Sure never thought I'd see him again....Well, bright and early the next day he shows up and never since missed a minute of work or took a dime in pay. Right up to yesterday noon when he walked out the door with the last of that wine of his and never came back. Doggondest thing I ever saw."

The wine, I asked him. What did he know about it?

"Well, I let him consign it, you see, he had the tax stamps and everything. Came walking north up the highway out there every morning pulling a coaster wagon full of the stuff. Seven dollars a throw, I guess you knew, and sold out before lunch half the time. Kind of explains the salary angle."

"Any idea where he went?," I asked.

"No, Lord, I never knew where he came from in the first place. Since I didn't pay him wages, there weren't any forms to fill out and that kind of thing....All I can tell you, he struck out south down the road there same as always, pulling that wagon of his."

"I'll tell you the truth, mister," he continued, "it hurts me to see him go. A free carry-out boy's one thing, but that wine----well, calling it a popular item just doesn't tell the tale. Two-sixty a bottle we made, clear."

THE RECKONING

Not that it made any real difference, but it was warm, warm even for North Carolina at the end of May. Inside David's parked car I was beginning to sweat. It was the heat, sure, but it was also the fidgets. How was she going to take it, me coming along like this--some guy she'd met once at a party? I could see her getting upset over it, hippie chick or not. David's nerves, this was the least of her problems.

Down the steps they came now anyway, Ruth with an overnight bag. Kind of a small girl, fairskinned and two feet of straight black hair. Beads and a sweatshirt, the way I remembered her.

David was his usual nondescript. And not to slight him, he's just one of these medium people who blends into things. No feature stands out, not one, and the first time he went off to school, his mother forgot his face. (I don't know, maybe that's why he still lives with her.)

They came over now and swung in on either side of the car. David started the engine and Ruth turned to me in the back. She couldn't have been over twenty, and she was actually smiling:

"Well, it's Mack here in the back seat. Going with us, Mack?"

"That seems to be the plan," I smiled back hopefully. He hadn't even told her.

"Cool. Hey really," she said, handing me her bag, "Dave must be up the wall by now. You're cool to do it."

We were moving now in the late afternoon traffic. Air fluttered through my window and things seemed better.

"Want to go to an A. B. Monday night?" David had said. "I could use the company."

"I guess so if you want me to," I had said. "Whose?"

"Ruth Green."

"Oh yeah. Yours too, I suppose?"

"I was smashed one night. I don't remember," he had said.

We came onto the highway now and headed east with the sun in the rear window. Up front they were talking:

"This is no sweat. Three months, it just isn't any sweat. Charlie, he said last year the woman did one five. This is shooting fish in a barrel."

David did sound a little tense.

"Well, now," I asked, leaning over, "just who in the great scheme of things is Charlie?"

"Charlie? He's the one that put me on to it. Spade guy, works at the store, kind of an errand boy and stock clerk. Says he's been using the woman for years."

"Sounds like a friend in need," I said.

"Yeah, Charlie's a good guy. We kid around a lot and look out for each other when we can."

The speedometer held on sixty-five. Traffic moved freely on the four-lane, and so far there was no hint of dusk. A motel skimmed across on the right, smoothly, then a pasture and a patch of woods. It was a

warm day out there.

"I don't know where it is," David was saying. "Just Durham. Got to pick up Charlie's fiancée in Hillsborough to show us the way."

"Hillsborough?" Ruth asked.

"Yeah. Charlie used to live in Hillsborough. He had to work tonight."

"What is this," I said, "a scavenger hunt? Why couldn't he just tell you?"

"I don't know. Just wants to be accommodating, I guess. And anyway he said Cora knows the way so well." David looked around at me.

"I see," I smiled.

Next to me under a jacket was a bottle of Scotch I'd thought to bring along. Reaching and uncapping this now, I helped myself and was about to pass it to Ruth when I remembered:

"Hey you know Ruth, you better not, no kidding. Or eat anything much either. You dig? I mean you know you're welcome to it...."

"Sure, Mack," she smiled, "that's O. K., no sweat at all. I'm cool without it really."

"Here, man, for you," I said, switching over to David.

"Thanks. Not right now."

"What?" I was shocked. "Hey, you're putting me on."

"No, later, really. Save me some, will you?" He stared at the traffic ahead.

I couldn't believe it. Not David. Not now anyway.

"As His Holiness wishes," I said, leaning back. "As for the faithful...." Ruth smiled.

Nothing much then for a time. I curled up with the bottle, while Ruth watched the scenery flow by out the window. Her long hair hung over the seat back and it was nice hair and I wanted to touch it. We passed Burlington.

We passed Haw River and a stretch of farmland and David drove steadily, working at it. Hillsborough wasn't far now.

"The woman used to be a nurse," he said. "She's cool."

Ruth touched his arm: "Dave?"

"Yeah."

"You told me that, man. I know she's cool. It's all cool, you dig?"

"That's what I said."

"Then groove, man," she smiled to him. "It's like a dose of cramps, that's all."

I wondered whether she believed this. It seemed so from all appearances, but Jesus!No, I just couldn't buy it. Not three months gone, she knows better. She must know better.

The white-on-green Interstate sign seemed benign enough at any rate:

Hillsborough Exit
3/4 Mile
N. C. 83

...covering that distance quickly now, now veering onto the ramp and upward like a salmon going home, slowing, slipping onto the tarred road and accelerating into a brief but dense cedar forest...

"About half a mile."

"A groove," said Ruth.

"A drink," I said.

And just against the other side of the forest on the right was Cora's place, somewhat out from Hillsborough, actually. A small, ordinary, but neat and recent brick affair with lawn to match. We stopped in the driveway and waited.

The old uncle in the porch rocker seemed not to move or take any notice. His arms and hands resting evenly on their chair supports, gaze fixed--these guys know about heat, I thought. Or was it the heat? Come on, Cora, it's hot.

"Hi there," she was saying now at David's window. A beige girl, nice-looking in a print dress and heels, twenty-five or so.

"I see you made it."

"Charlie gave good directions."

"That'd be the first time, then," Cora said. She had a piece of paper in her hand. As the door was opened to let her in, she spoke again: "Listen," she said, "I'm just sorry as I can be but this thing's come up and I got to be somewhere? I wrote it all down here."

David mutely accepted the note she handed him. It was printed with a red ballpoint and folded. David, it said:

Travel on I-85 and take Trinity Drive exit.
Take a left turn onto Hammond Ave. Go past the 1st
stop light on Hammond Ave and take a right at the
next block. Travel this street until you make a
left on Benjamin St. The address is 932 Benjamin St.

(The rest was in longhand--)

David & Ruth,

Sorry I won't be able to go with you tonight. The above directions should carry you directly to the house.

Apologetically yours,
Cora

"You get it all right from that?" she asked.

"I guess so. Yeah," he said, passing the note to Ruth. "Thanks."

He started the engine, paused, then quickly took an envelope from his pocket.

"Here Cora, I almost forgot. This is for you."

She shook her head, backing a step: "Mm-mm, no, you keep that.

That's all right."

"No, really," he said, "I want you to take it."

"Mm-mm," she grinned, "that's all right."

"Well, thanks, then."

"Glad to, really," she said, and went back into the house.

We pulled out of the driveway and I noticed the old uncle again.

He never moved.

"How'd she know my name?" Ruth asked. We were back on the Interstate now.

"I guess I mentioned it to Charlie."

"Maybe you should mention Cora to him," I quipped. "She seems kind of busy."

"Yeah," David said, and now hesitated.... "You know, I can understand it, though. Not about that so much, but maybe just not wanting to come? They're taking a chance with a fay chick." He looked quickly

at Ruth. "I mean, you know, if they got caught."

"They're cool," Ruth said, as we rounded a curve and I felt the sun on my neck again.

Ten, twelve miles, just a short hop now, and dairy cattle there on that hillside. Must be a hundred of them. Ruth's long hair hung over the seat back. Rest Area, $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles, the sign says, and now we had passed all that and yes I'll have another nip and what do you do with a drunken sailor? That black hair fascinated me.

I reached forward and gathered it laterally at her shoulders:

"You don't mind, do you? Your hair turns me on."

She leaned obligingly: "Mind? Oh man," she cooed, "I thought you'd never ask."

I held to it the rest of the way into Durham.

"Seven-seventeen over there," David was saying now, "nine-thirty-two is on this side of the street."

We eased along, dead in the middle of the ghetto. Gray houses, blocks of them, squeezed together gray against sidewalks that were empty now. An occasional parked car, an old one, and black people there on those porches. So many porches. It was an hour before sundown and I let go of Ruth's hair.

"There it is," she said, "up there with the two doors."

David slowed, stopped in front. Quickly the heat. And now with the engine dead this heat just as suddenly almost audible. Sitting there, we listened to it, and we looked up at the house.

It was gray like the rest, kind of like a duplex with those two front doors, kind of but not and it was poor. It was very poor and this

surprised me and now the girl was at the porch rail speaking. A fat girl, very young and very dark, and she had a faceful of red pimples.

"House Lady fishin'," she was saying. "She say for you to come back when it's dark."

David stared, momentarily derailed. Recovering soon, though--banging the starter, crunching into low--"O. K.," he gave the girl to know, and out of there we shot. Like bats.

Before anybody could turn around, then, here we were on some back road north out of town, digging for Philadelphia for all it seemed. Nobody said a word. And now Ruth, who had waited, finally saw the school....

"Hey! Let's stop there. There's a playground and everything!"

David's car seemed to just run down--like a surfboard, kind of, with its wave spent. We pulled into the school lot and stopped.

"What the hell about the God damn time? What did they tell you?" I asked.

"They just said tonight. I didn't think about the dark." He looked winded for some reason.

Ruth had gotten the car keys and gone out and opened the trunk: There was a metallic clank, a thud, then another clank, and now she was back brandishing this hokey red-white-and-blue basketball.

"Let's go," she said, "the court's open....Dave?"

"Yeah, O. K."

"You smelled that ball," I said to her.

She looked quickly, then smiled and gestured: "Have you seen it? Really, have you? Look back here, man, it's cooler than Santa Claus."

Well, let me tell you, the stuff that guy had in his trunk. There were golf clubs and fishing rods. Tennis rackets, baseball gloves, and a skeet gun. Swim fins and at least two footballs. A saddle, for Christ's sake. And there was even a small outboard motor in a carrying case.

"Jesus," I said, "we'd best get started. Rouse up, Sport, come on. Play you a game of 'ASS.'" David slouched out of the car and we all walked over to the basketball court.

What happened now was droll: Ruth stands at the foul line, glances at the hoop, and lets go with this bizarre, underhand shot. Flick, somehow, down through the cords and out, and now David has to duplicate the feat and he misses.

"A," I say, "a big red 'A' on your permanent record. Here, let a man try it...."

I stand back twenty feet and just manage to rattle one through. Ruth now, same spot, that crazy underhand, the ball's colors flickering stroboscopically against the fading sky.....Zik, through the cords and down and now David's shot which he misses badly.

"Yeah, yeah, I know. 'S'."

"Listen," I say, "you better think about this. Bear such a stigma the rest of your life? Man, they won't let you vote or drive a car or anything."

He grins perfunctorily. I take my shot and miss. And now Ruth drops one through from way out in the corner.

"Strength, Dave," I murmur.

Dave shoots too hard, and the silly-looking ball bounds off the rim and out to him again. He stands holding the thing, grinning and seeming not to know what to do with it.

"Don't say it," I stage-whisper quickly to Ruth. "Let's pretend not to notice."

The sun had gone down now, but if anything the air seemed hotter. It suited me, then, when I was eliminated and Ruth and I walked back to the car. David had gotten there earlier.

"Well lookit ol' Ass," he smirks from the driver's window.

"Only second degree," I manage to say. "Time to go, you think?"

"Better kill another fifteen minutes. Since they set the clocks ahead, seems like it never gets dark."

But it had gotten dark for the most part. Fifteen minutes and the ride back ought to do it. Just kill a little time now....

"You got any Kleenex?" David asked Ruth. "I got to go take a dump." She obliged with a little packet.

When he came out of the woods quite a bit later, we started for Durham.

"Runs," he offered, and let it lay.

There was a lone street lamp at the corner of nine-hundred Benjamin Street where we turned now, and this gave off a pale, steady light which was effective enough as far as it went. It wasn't a gradual thing which gave out **by** degrees toward the edges, it was more like an umbrella.

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When you passed beyond it it got dark, suddenly.

Windows glowed dim yellow as we moved along the street, but, like eyes, they only reflected; they gave off no light. The house would have been hard to spot without the two doors.

These were marked at the cornices now by what looked like small electric candles. Again we stopped, and again we let the engine die, there in the dark heat at the curb.

And now Ruth's door popped suddenly open, causing David and me to jump.

"Hand me my bag, huh, Mack?" she said. She was scrabbling around under the dome light for her other things. When I gave her the overnight bag, she was quickly out on the sidewalk:

"Dave?" (Dave stared) "Dave?"

"What?"

"You coming?"

"Now?" (and now he caught himself) "Oh sure, yeah," he said, tumbling out of the car to confirm this.

A quick blast from the bottle and I followed them up to the door on the right.

"Well," the woman said, "you all jus' come right in. Been wonderin' where you was. Come on in, me an' Squatty jus' cleanin' some brim I caught this evenin'."

We shuffled through the door.

"Yes, right on in," she said, backing into the living room and smiling widely.

"I was jus' tellin' Squatty. 'Squatty,' I said, 'I bet those people got lost,' Idn't that right, Squatty?"

"Yes'm," said the fat girl from earlier.

"Squatty's my niece," said the woman.

She was about fifty, we could now see, and going on stout. Her face, still smiling, was the ineffable color of potroast.

"You folks, won't you take a seat?" she said, motioning to Ruth and me. "Any seat, Honey, that's fine." And having easily singled David out--"Jus' look back here in th' kitchen wid me a minute. At these fish I got. Nices' ones this year."

David followed her out of the room, and now she called back:

"What can I bring you folks?"

"Not a thing." I answered. "Thank you."

Squatty had gone out by another door and Ruth and I were alone.

The room was typical poor Southern, mostly. There was old soft furniture and new garish furniture and a console television supporting vases of pink and purple glass. There were souvenir ashtrays from well-known resorts. An oil heater. And Christian objects--it's just that there was an extra helping of these because they were everywhere--on the tables and on the walls, Bibles, crosses, and statuettes. A large color crucifixion above the mantle. Hymn books. Man, it was one holy place, believe me.

"...jus' hand size," I heard the woman say in the kitchen. "...lemon butter."

It was hot.

And now there was a knock at the door and Squatty appeared and let in two of the roughest-looking black boys I had ever seen. They weren't big, but they were cruel-looking; knife fighters judging by their scarred faces.

"Where's she at?" asked the one who had his hair peroxidized.

"In th' kitchen, 'cep she's wid somebody."

Ignoring the warning, they started toward the back, just glancing at Ruth and me. Their shoes were muddy.

"Spanky an' Red!" came the screech. "I bet you better git back outside an' wipe yo' feet! Git right on out o' here 'fo' I take a stick to ya! Git!"

There was a shuffle and here they came now, back through the living room kind of hang-dog, the woman close behind. Her arms were folded; her face was in a fierce pout.

"Git!" she iterated as the routed figures passed out onto the porch. "Comin' in here like a Judgment...."

"We was jus' gonna ast you for a beer," Red managed to say.

"Oh, I see, a beer. For messin' up my flo'. Mm-hm, now, was it any special kind you wanted?"

No answer.

"Awright, wait a minute," she said, and brought two cans of Schlitz from the kitchen. She handed them out the door. "Now git on away from here," she said.

Ruth waited until the woman had gone back to finish with David, then turned to me:

"How you makin' it, Mack?"

"Better since Spanky and Red left. How about you--really?"

"Beatific, man."

"No, for real."

"I'm O. K.," she said.

"You sure?"

"Yeah," she said. "I'm cool."

They came back from the kitchen now, and the woman was piping away at David:

"Naw, don't always use a hook. Th' place I know about, sometimes they come up to me to where I can gig 'em."

"You don't mean that," David said. He was trying.

"Co'se I mean it....Squatty, is th' room ready?"

"Yes'm."

"Then take th' lady's bag on in....An' you boys, you go on home now too so we can see 'bout things."

Ruth followed Squatty through a door.

"How do I--" David began.

"Call this number whenever you want," she said, giving him a slip of paper. "Ast fo' House Lady."

Fortified by the promise of escape, David finally managed:

"What about complications?" he asked.

The woman's eyes came fixed now. What had been a smile turned to something like arrogance and she stared at us, first at one and then the other.

"I got 'er covered," she said.

We were six blocks away when I first noticed the car, and we were well out on the Interstate before I thought it might really be following us. A bit further on and I was about to tell David, but then the car exited, so I don't know whether it was following us or not. For a while there it seemed to be.

"Pass me some of that sauce now, will you?" David said. It had gotten cooler.

"Sure, man. Hey, tell me something."

"What?"

"In the kitchen, man--what did you talk about? Besides fish, I mean."

"The money," he said. "Crazy as hell, too; she only wants fifty dollars."

"What for? Excise tax?"

"No, really, for the whole bit. I couldn't believe it."

"Must be subsidized," I said.

David took a large blast of Scotch and kicked up the speed a little. He took another blast. In an hour we had reached High Point.

"Then you really don't mind?" he said now, turning onto the exit ramp. "I mean, with Mother there in the house...."

"Sure Dave, I'll do it."

"I just thought that with you working at home and all...."

"I'll do it, I'll do it," I said. "Jesus."

So the next day at noon I called Durham:

"How're things going?"

"They goin' jus' fine."

"No problems at all?"

"Everything's very nice."

"Can you tell how soon?"

"Not yet. Call later."

"O. K. And listen, let me give you this number in case you need to call. You got a pencil?"

"Mm-hm."

(I gave her the number.) "O. K., thank you very much."

"You welcome."

Simple enough so far, I thought. I reported to David.

Then at ten o'clock that night my phone rang:

"There you are Joe Dimaggio," came Ruth's hysterical voice. "You fucked up. Your funhouse has worms in it Joe Dimaggio and it isn't funny Joe Dimaggio your damn funhouse has flies in it and...."

"Ruth," I said, "Can you hear me? This is Mack."

But she never broke stride.

"...snake is nice but that stone thing that woke up--Joe Dimaggio it won't eat straw so let's go now Joe Dimaggio and I'll be good to you and...."

"Ruth."

"...means I'll fuck I really will Joe Dimaggio I really will and"

CLICK went the telephone in my ear.

Nervously I dialed the number.

"Hello," came the woman's voice, rather quickly.

"Hello, uh House Lady what's the matter over there? I just got this call from Ruth."

"Nothin' th' matter," she said evenly. "Everything's fine. Tryin' t' void it an' she jus' had a little spell, that's all. You can come git 'er tomorra night."

"You're sure she's all right?"

"I am. You jus' come git 'er tomorra."

The next morning I confirmed this with Durham and then called David:

"Mack," he said, "I really feel rotten about this. I got to be at that dinner, though; I'm the God damn master of ceremonies....Appreciate the hell out of this....You know I'd go if I could...."

"What do you want me to tell Ruth?"

"Tell her to call me when she gets a chance."

And so the day passed. And when the last light finally died, I arrived at the house on Benjamin Street. Clocks, I thought--they can keep the dark off just so long.

Squatty answered my knock, and I could see Ruth coming to the door now. She carried her overnight bag. The woman appeared from the kitchen.

"Bye now, Honey," she said. "Didn't we ketch us a nice one?" (I gave her the envelope.) "Didn't we ketch us one, though?"

We went down to the car and started off.

"You feel O. K? You're sure?"

"Right on, man."

And so we drove along talking about one thing and another. It was halfway to High Point when I remembered to ask:

"What did she mean back there--about catching something?"

Ruth turned to me in the dark interior of the car; she sounded mildly surprised:

"She took me fishing, Mack. Didn't I tell you."