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The Iowa Review

Volume 8
Issue 4 *Fall*

Article 21

1977

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Recommended Citation

McEwan, Ian. "Dead as They Come." *The Iowa Review* 8.4 (1977): 71-82. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.2291>

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Dead as They Come

I do not care for posturing women. But she *struck* me. I had to stop and look at her. The legs were well apart, the right foot boldly advanced, the left trailing with studied casualness. She held her right hand before her, almost touching the window, the fingers thrusting up like a beautiful flower. The left hand she held a little behind her and seemed to push down playful lapdogs. Head well back, a faint smile, eyes half-closed with boredom or pleasure. I could not tell. Very artificial the whole thing, but then I am not a simple man. She was a beautiful woman. I saw her most days, sometimes two or three times. And of course she struck other postures as the mood took her. Sometimes as I hurried by (I am a man in a hurry) I allowed myself a quick glance and she seemed to beckon me, to welcome me out of the cold. Other days I remember seeing her in that tired, dejected passivity which fools mistake for femininity.

I began to take notice of the clothes she wore. She was a fashionable woman, naturally. In a sense it was her job. But she had none of the sexless, mincing stiffness of those barely animated clothes-hangers who display *haute couture* in stuffy salons to the sound of execrable muzak. No, she was another class of being. She did not exist merely to present a style, a current mode. She was above that, she was *beyond* that. Her clothes were peripheral to her beauty. She would have looked good dressed in old paper bags. She disdained her clothes, she discarded them every day for others. Her beauty shone through those clothes . . . and yet they were beautiful clothes. It was autumn. She wore capes of deep russet browns, or twirling peasant skirts of orange and green, or harsh trouser suits of burnt ochre. It was spring. She wore skirts of passion-fruit gingham, white calico shirts or lavish dresses of cerulean green and blue. Yes, I noticed her clothes, for she understood, as only the great portrait painters of the eighteenth century understood, the sumptuous possibilities of fabric, the subtleties of folds, the nuance of crease and hem. Her body in its rippling changes of posture, adapted itself to the unique demands of each creation; with breathless grace the lines of her perfect body played tender counterpoint with the shifting arabesques of sartorial artifice.

But I digress. I bore you with lyricism. The days came and passed. I saw her this day and not that, and perhaps twice on another day. Imperceptibly seeing her and not seeing her became a factor in my life, and then before I

knew it, it passed from factor to structure. Would I see her today? Would all my hours and minutes be redeemed? Would she look at me? Did she remember me from one time to another? Was there a future for us together . . . would I ever have the courage? Courage! What did all my millions mean now, what now of my wisdom matured by the ravages of three marriages? I loved her . . . I wished to possess her. And to possess her it seemed I would have to buy her.

I must tell you something about myself. I am wealthy. Possibly there are ten men resident in London with more money than I. Probably there are only five or six. Who cares? I am rich and I made my money on the telephone. I shall be forty-five on Christmas Day. I have been married three times, each marriage lasting, in chronological order, eight, five, and two years. Each marriage was better than the one before if for no other reason than that it was shorter. But these last three years I have not been married and yet I have not been idle. I have not paused. A man of forty-four has no time to pause. I am a man in a hurry. Each throb of jism from the seminal vesicles, or wherever it originates, lessens the total allowance of my lifespan by one. I have no time to stay with a woman, listen to her story, know her soul, grow dependent and sluggish. I have no time for the analysis, the self-searching of frenzied relationships, the unspoken accusation, the silent defence. I do not wish to be with women who have an urge to talk when we've finished our coupling, I want to lie still in peace and clarity. Then I want to put my shoes and socks on and comb my hair and go about my business. I prefer silent women who take their pleasure with apparent indifference. All day long there are voices around me, on the telephone, at lunches, at business conferences. I do not want voices in my bed. I am not a simple man, I repeat, and this is not a simple world. But in this respect at least my requisites are simple, perhaps even facile. My predilection is for the biological fuck, pleasure unmitigated by the yappings and whinings of the soul.

Or rather it was, for that was all before . . . before I loved *her*, before I knew the sickening elation of total self-destruction for a meaningless cause. What do I, now, forty-five on Christmas Day, care for meaning? Most days I passed by her shop and looked in at her. Those early days when a glance was sufficient and I hurried on to meet this business friend or that lover . . . I can pick out no time when I knew myself to be in love. I have described how a factor in my life became a structure, it merged as orange to red in the rainbow. Once I was a man hurrying by a shop window and glancing carelessly in. Then I was a man in love with . . . simply, I was a man in love. It happened over many months. I began to linger by the window. The others . . . the other women in the shop window display meant nothing to me. Wherever my Helen stood I could pick her out at a glance. They were mere

dummies (oh my love) beneath contempt. Life was generated in her by the sheer charge of her beauty. The delicate mould of her eyebrow, the perfect line of her nose, the smile, the eyes half-closed with boredom or pleasure (how could I tell?). For a long time I was content to look at her through the glass, happy to be within a few feet of her. In my madness I wrote her letters, yes, I even did that and I still have them. I called her Helen ('Dear Helen, give me a sign. I know you know' etc.). But soon I loved her completely and wished to possess her, own her, absorb her, eat her. I wanted her in my arms and in my bed, I longed that she should open her legs to me. I could not rest till I was between her pale thighs, till my tongue had prised those lips. I knew that soon I would have to enter the shop and ask to buy her.

Simple, I hear you say. You're a rich man. You could buy the shop if you wanted. You could buy the street. Of course I could buy the street, and many other streets too. But listen. This was no mere business transaction. I was not about to acquire a site for redevelopment. In business you make offers, you take risks. But in this matter I could not risk failure, for I wanted my Helen, I *needed* my Helen. My profound fear was that my desperation would give me away. I could not be sure that in negotiating the sale I could keep a steady hand. If I blurted out too high a price the shop manager would want to know why. If it was valuable to me, why then, he would naturally conclude (for was he not a business man too) it must be valuable to someone else. Helen had been in that shop many months. Perhaps, and this thought began to torment my every waking minute, they would take her away and destroy her.

I knew I must act soon and I was afraid.

I chose Monday, a quiet day in any shop. I was not sure whether quietness was on my side. I could have had Saturday, a busy day, but then, a quiet day . . . a busy day . . . my decisions countered each other like parallel mirrors. I had lost many hours of sleep, I was rude to my friends, virtually impotent with my lovers, my business skills were beginning to deteriorate, I had to choose and I chose Monday. It was October, raining a fine, bitter drizzle. I dismissed my chauffeur for the day and drove to the shop. Shall I slavishly follow the foolish conventions and describe it to you, the first home of my tender Helen? I do not really care to. It was a large shop, a store, a department store and it dealt seriously and solely in clothes and related items for women. It had moving staircases and a muffled air of boredom. Enough. I had a plan. I walked in.

How many details of this negotiation must be set down before that moment when I held my precious in my arms? A few and quickly. I spoke to an assistant. She consulted with another. They fetched a third, and the third sent a fourth for a fifth who turned out to be the under-manageress in charge

of window design. They clustered round me like inquisitive children, sensing my wealth and power but not my anxiety. I warned them all I had a strange request and they shifted uneasily from one foot to the other and avoided my eye. I addressed these five women urgently. I wanted to buy one of the coats displayed in the window display, I told them. It was for my wife, I told them, and I also wanted the boots and scarf that went with the coat. It was my wife's birthday, I said. I wanted the dummy (ah my Helen) on which these clothes were displayed in order to show off the clothes to their best advantage. I confided in them my little birthday trick. My wife would open the bedroom door lured there by some trivial domestic matter invented by myself, and there would stand . . . could they not see it? I recreated the scene vividly for them. I watched them closely. I brought them on. They lived through the thrill of a birthday surprise. They smiled, they glanced at each other. They risked glancing into my eyes. What a kind husband was this! They became, each one, my wife. And of course I was willing to pay a little extra . . . but no, the under-manageress would not hear of it. Please accept it with the compliments of the shop. The under-manageress led me towards the window display. She led, and I followed through a blood-red mist. Perspiration dribbled from the palms of my hands. My eloquence had drained away, my tongue glued to my teeth and all I could do was feebly lift my hand in the direction of Helen. "That one," I whispered.

Once I was a man hurrying by a shop window and glancing carelessly in . . . then I was a man in love, a man carrying his love in his arms through the rain to a waiting car. True, they had offered in the shop to fold and pack the clothes to save them from creasing. But show me the man who will carry his true love naked through the streets in an October rain. How I blabbered with joy as I bore Helen through the streets. And how she hung close to me, clinging tightly to my lapels like a newborn monkey. Oh, my sweetness. Gently I laid her across the back seat of my car and gently drove her home.

At home I had everything prepared. I knew she would want to rest as soon as we came in. I brought her into the bedroom, removed her boots and settled her down between the crisp white bed linen. I kissed her softly on the cheek and before my eyes she fell into a deep slumber. For a couple of hours I busied myself in the library, catching up on important business. I felt serene now, I was illuminated by a steady inner glow. I was capable of intense concentration. I tiptoed into the bedroom where she lay. In sleep her features dissolved into an expression of great tenderness and understanding. Her lips were slightly apart. I knelt down and kissed them. Back in the library I sat in front of a log fire with a glass of port in my hand. I reflected on my life, my marriages, my recent desperation. All the unhappiness of the past seemed now to have been necessary to make the present pos-

sible. I had my Helen now. She lay sleeping in my bed, in my house. She cared for no one else. She was mine.

Ten o'clock came and I slipped into bed beside her. I did it quietly, but I knew she was awake. It is touching now to recall that we did not immediately make love. No, we lay side by side (how warm she was) and we talked. I told her of the time I had first seen her, of how my love for her had grown and of how I had schemed to secure her release from the shop. I told her of my three marriages, my business and my love affairs. I was determined to keep no secrets from her. I told her of the things I had been thinking about as I sat in front of the fire with my glass of port. I spoke of the future, our future together. I told her I loved her, yes I think I told her that many times. She listened with the quiet intensity I was to learn to respect in her. She stroked my hand, she gazed wonderingly into my eyes. I undressed her. Poor girl. She had no clothes on under her coat, she had nothing in the world but me. I drew her close to me, her naked body against mine, and as I did so I saw her wide-eyed look of fear . . . she was a virgin. I murmured in her ear. I assured her of my gentleness, my expertise, my control. Between her thighs I caressed with my tongue the fetid warmth of her virgin lust. I took her hand and set her pliant fingers about my throbbing member (oh her cool hands). 'Do not be afraid,' I whispered, 'do not be afraid.' I slid into her easily, quietly like a giant ship into night berth. The quick flame of pain I saw in her eyes was snuffed by long agile fingers of pleasure. I have never known such pleasure, such total accord . . . almost total, for I must confess now there was a shadow I could not dispel. She had been a virgin, now she was a demanding lover. She demanded the orgasm I could not give her, she would not let me go, she would not permit me to rest. On and on through the night, she forever teetering on the edge of that cliff, release in that most gentle death . . . but nothing I did, and I did everything, I gave everything, could bring her to it. At last, it must have been five o'clock in the morning, I broke away from her, delirious with fatigue, anguished and hurt by my failure. Once again we lay side by side, and this time I felt in her silence inarticulate rebuke. Had I not brought her from the shop where she had lived in relative peace, had I not brought her to this bed and boasted to her of my expertise? I took her hand. It was stiff and unfriendly. It came to me in a panic-filled moment that Helen might leave me. It was a fear that was to return much later. There was nothing to stop her. She had no money, virtually no skills. No clothes. But she could leave me all the same. There were other men. She could go back and work in the shop. 'Helen,' I said urgently. 'Helen . . .' She lay perfectly still, seeming to hold her breath. 'It will come, you see, it will come,' and with that I was inside her again, moving slowly, imperceptibly, bringing her with me every step of the way. It took an hour of slow acceleration, and as the grey

October dawn pierced the brooding London clouds she died, she came, she left this sublunary world . . . her first orgasm. Her limbs went rigid, her eyes stared into nowhere and a deep inner spasm swept through her like an ocean wave. Then she slept in my arms.

I woke late the following morning. Helen still lay across my arm but I managed to slip out of bed without waking her. I put on a particularly resplendent dressing-gown, a present from my second wife (who is now, let me add, Leader of the Opposition), and went into the kitchen to make myself coffee. I felt myself to be a different man. I looked at the objects around me, the Utrillo on the kitchen wall, a famous forgery of a Rodin statuette, yesterday's newspapers. They radiated originality, unfamiliarity. I wanted to touch things. I ran my hands over the grain of the kitchen table top. I took delight in pouring my beans into the grinder and in taking from the fridge a can of orange juice. I was in love with the world, for I had found my perfect mate. I loved Helen and I knew myself to be loved. I felt free. I read the morning paper at great speed and later in the same day could still remember names of foreign ministers and the countries they represented. I dictated half a dozen letters over the phone, shaved, showered, and dressed. When I looked in on Helen she was still asleep, exhausted by pleasure. Even when she woke she would not want to get up till she had some clothes to wear. I had my chauffeur drive me to the West End and I spent the afternoon there buying clothes. It would be crude of me to mention how much I spent, but let me say that few men earn as much in a year. However, I did not buy her a bra. I have always despised them as objects, and yet only student girls and New Guinea natives seem to do without them. Furthermore my Helen did not like them either, which was fortunate.

She was awake when I returned. I had my chauffeur carry the parcels into the dining room and then I dismissed him. I myself carried the parcels from the dining room to the bedroom. Helen was delighted. Her eyes gleamed and she was breathless for joy. Together we chose what she was to wear that evening, a long, pure silk evening dress of pale blue. Leaving her to contemplate what amounted to over two hundred separate items, I hurried into the kitchen to prepare a lavish meal. As soon as I had a spare few minutes I returned to help Helen dress. She stood quite still, quite relaxed while I stood back to admire her. It was of course a perfect fit. But more than that I saw once more her genius for *wearing* clothes, I saw beauty in another being as no man has ever seen it, I saw . . . it was art, it was the total consummation of line and form that art alone can realise. She seemed luminescent. We stood in silence and gazed into one another's eyes. Then I asked her if she would like me to show her round the house.

I brought her into the kitchen first. I demonstrated its many gadgets. I pointed out the Utrillo on the wall (she was not very fond, I found out later, of painting). I showed her the Rodin forgery and I even offered to let her hold it in her hand but she demurred. Next I took her into the bathroom and showed her the sunken marble bath and how to operate the taps that made the water spew from the mouths of alabaster lions. I wondered if she thought that a little vulgar. She said nothing. I ushered her into the dining room . . . once again paintings which I rather bored her with. I showed her my study, my first folio Shakespeares, assorted rarities and many telephones. Then the conference room. There was no need for her to see it really. Perhaps by this time I was beginning to show off a little. Finally the vast living space I simply call the room. Here I spend my leisure hours. I shall not hurl more details at you like so many over-ripe tomatoes . . . it is comfortable and not a little exotic.

I sensed immediately that Helen liked the room. She stood in the doorway, hands by her side taking it all in. I brought her over to a large soft chair, sat her down and poured her the drink she so much needed, a dry martini. Then I left her and for the next hour devoted my full attention to the cooking of our meal. What passed that evening was quite certainly the most civilised few hours I have ever shared with a woman or, for that matter, with another person. I have cooked many meals in my home for lady friends. Without hesitation I describe myself as an excellent cook. One of the very best. But until this particular occasion these evenings have always been dogged by my guest's conditioned guilt that it was I in the kitchen and not she, that it was I who carried in the dishes and carried them away at the end. And throughout my guest would express continual surprise that I, thrice divorced and a man to boot, was capable of such triumphs of cuisine. Not so Helen. She was my guest and that was the end of it. She did not attempt to invade my kitchen, she did not perpetually coo, 'Is there something I can *do*?' She sat back as a guest should and let herself be served by me. Yes, and the conversation. With those other guests of mine I always felt conversation to be an obstacle course over ditches and fences of contradiction, competition, misunderstanding and so on. My ideal conversation is one which allows both participants to develop their thoughts to their fullest extent, uninhibitedly, without endlessly defining and refining premises and defending conclusions. Without ever reaching conclusions. With Helen I could converse ideally, I could *talk* to her. She sat quite still, her eyes fixed at a point several inches in front of her plate, and listened. I told her many things I had never spoken out loud before. Of my childhood, my father's death rattle, my mother's terror of sexuality, my own sexual initiation with an elder sister; I spoke of the state of the world, of the nation, of decadence, liberalism, contemporary novels, of marriage, ecstasy

and disease. Before we knew it five hours had passed and we had drunk four bottles of wine and half a bottle of port. Poor Helen. I had to carry her to bed and undress her. We lay down, our limbs entwined and we could do nothing more than fall into the deepest, most contented sleep.

So ended our first day together, and thus was the pattern set for many happy months to follow. I was a happy man. I divided my time between Helen and making money. The latter I carried through with effortless success. In fact so rich did I become over this period that the government of the day felt it was dangerous for me not to have an influential post. I accepted the knighthood, of course, and Helen and I celebrated in grand style. But I refused to serve the government in any capacity, so thoroughly did I associate it with my second wife, who was by this time Prime Minister. Autumn turned to winter and then soon there was blossom on the almond trees in my garden, soon the first tender green leaves were appearing on my avenue of oaks. Helen and I lived in perfect harmony which nothing could disturb. I made money, I made love, I talked, Helen listened.

But I was a fool. Nothing lasts. Everyone knows that, but no one believes there are not exemptions. The time has come, I regret, to tell you of my chauffeur, Brian.

Brian was the perfect chauffeur. He did not speak unless spoken to, and then only to concur. He kept his past, his ambitions, his character a secret, and I was glad because I did not wish to know where he came from, where he was going or who he thought he was. He drove competently and outrageously fast. He always knew where to park. He was always at the front of any queue of traffic, and he was rarely in a queue. He knew every short cut, every street in London. He was tireless. He would wait up for me all night at an address, without recourse to cigarettes or pornographic literature. He kept the car, his boots and his uniform spotless. He was pale, thin and neat and I guessed his age to be somewhere between eighteen and thirty-five.

Now it might surprise you to know that, proud as I was of her, I did not introduce Helen to my friends. I introduced her to no one. She did not seem to need any company other than mine and I was content to let matters rest. Why should I begin to drag her round the tedious social circuit of wealthy London? And, furthermore, she was rather shy, even of me at first. Brian was not made an exception of. Without making too obvious a secret of it, I did not let him enter a room if Helen was in there. And if I wanted Helen to travel with me then I dismissed Brian for the day (he lived over the garage) and drove the car myself.

All very clear and simple. But things began to go wrong and I can remember vividly the day it all began. Towards the middle of May I came home from a uniquely tiring and exasperating day. I did not know it then

(but I suspected it) but I had lost almost half a million pounds due to an error that was completely my own. Helen was sitting in her favourite chair doing nothing in particular, and there was something in her look as I came through the door, something so elusive, so indefinably cool that I had to pretend to ignore it. I drank a couple of scotches and felt better. I sat down beside her and began to tell her of my day, of what had gone wrong, how it had been my fault, how I had impulsively blamed someone else and had to apologise later . . . and so on, the cares of a bad day which one has the right to display only to one's mate. But I had been speaking for a little less than thirty-five minutes when I realised that Helen was not listening at all. She was gazing woodenly at her hands which lay across her knees. She was far, far away. It was such a dreadful realisation that I could do nothing for the moment (I was paralysed) but carry on talking. And then I could stand it no more. I stopped mid-sentence and stood up. I walked from the room, slamming the door behind me. At no point did Helen look up from her hands. I was furious, too furious to talk to her. I sat out in the kitchen drinking from the bottle of scotch I had remembered to bring with me. Then I had a shower.

By the time I went back into the room I felt considerably better. I was relaxed, a little drunk and ready to forget the whole matter. Helen too seemed more amenable. At first I was going to ask her what the trouble had been, but we started talking about my day again and in no time we were our old selves again. It seemed pointless going back over things when we were getting on so well. But an hour after dinner the front door bell rang—a rare occurrence in the evening. As I got up from my chair I happened to glance across at Helen and I saw pass across her face that same look of fear she had the night we first made love. It was Brian at the door. He had in his hand a piece of paper for me to sign. Something in connection with the car, something that could have waited till the morning. As I glanced over what it was I was supposed to sign, I saw out of the corner of my eye that Brian was surreptitiously peering over my shoulder into the hallway. 'Looking for something?' I said sharply. 'No sir,' he said. I signed and closed the door. I remembered that because the car was at the garage for servicing and Brian had been at home all day, I had taken a taxi to my offices. This fact and Helen's strangeness . . . such a sickness came over me when I associated the two that I thought for a moment I was going to vomit and I hurried into the bathroom.

However, I did not vomit. Instead I looked into the mirror. I saw there a man who in less than seven months would be forty-five, a man with three marriages etched about his eyes, the corner of whose mouth drooped downwards from a lifetime talking on the phone. I splashed cold water on my face and joined Helen in the room. 'That was Brian,' I said. She said noth-

ing, she could not look at me. My own voice sounded nasal and toneless. 'He doesn't usually call in the evenings. . . .' And still she said nothing. What did I expect? That she suddenly be of a mind to confess an affair with my chauffeur? Helen was a silent woman, she did not find it hard to conceal her feelings. Nor could I confess what I felt. I was too afraid of being right. I could not bear to hear her confirm the very idea that threatened again to make vomit. I merely threw out my remarks to make her shore up her pretence. . . . I so badly wanted to hear it all denied even while knowing the denial to be false. In short, I understood myself to be in Helen's power.

That night we did not sleep together. I made myself up a bed in one of the guest rooms. I did not want to sleep alone, in fact the idea was hateful to me. I suppose (I was so confused) that I wanted to go through the motions so that Helen would ask me what I was doing. I wanted to hear her express surprise that after all these happy months together I was suddenly, without one word being said, making my bed in another room. I wanted to be told not to be foolish, to come to bed, to our bed. But she said nothing, absolutely nothing. She took it all for granted . . . this was the situation now and no longer could we share a bed. Her silence was deadly confirmation. Or was there a slender possibility (I lay awake in my new bed) that she was simply angry at my moodiness. Now I was really confused. On and on into the night I turned the matter over in my mind. Perhaps she had never even seen Brian. Could the entire matter be of my own imagining? After all, I had had a bad day. But that was absurd, for here was the reality of the situation . . . separate beds . . . and yet what *should* I have done? What should I have said? I ran and reran a number of scenarios of things I could have said, good lines, terse aphoristic remarks that ripped away at the flimsy veil of appearance. Was she awake now like me, thinking about all this? Or was she fast asleep? How could I find out without appearing to be awake? What would happen if she left me? I was completely at her mercy.

I should bankrupt language if I tried to convey the texture of my existence over the following weeks. It had the arbitrary horror of a nightmare, I seemed a roast on a spit which Helen turned slowly with a free hand. It would be wrong of me to attempt to argue in retrospect that the situation was of my own making; but I do know now that I could have ended my misery sooner. It became established that I slept in the guest room. My pride prevented me from returning to our nuptial bed. I wanted Helen to take the initiative on that. It was she after all who had so much explaining to do. I was adamant on this point, it was my only certainty in a time of bleak confusion. I had to hang on tightly to something . . . and you see I survived. Helen and I barely talked. We were cold and distant. Each avoid-

ed the other's eye. My folly was in thinking that if I remained silent long enough it would somehow break her down and make her want to speak to me, to tell me what she thought was happening to us. And so I roared. At night I woke from bad dreams shouting and I sulked in the afternoons and tried to think it all out clearly. I had to carry on my business. Often I had to be out of the house, sometimes hundreds of miles away, certain that Brian and Helen were celebrating my absence. Sometimes I phoned home from hotels or airport lounges. No one ever answered, and yet I heard between each throb of the electronic tones Helen in the bedroom gasping with mounting pleasure. I lived in a black valley on the verge of tears. The sight of a small child playing with her dog, the setting sun reflected in a river, a poignant line of advertising copy were enough to dissolve me. When I returned home from business trips, desolate, craving friendship and love, I sensed from the moment I stepped through the door that Brian had been there not long before me. Nothing tangible beyond the *feel* of him in the air, something in the arrangement of the bed, some different smell in the bathroom, the position of the decanter of scotch on its tray. Helen pretended not to see me as I prowled in anguish from room to room, she pretended not to hear my sobs in the bathroom. It might be asked why I did not dismiss my chauffeur. The answer is simple. I feared that if Brian left Helen would follow. I gave my chauffeur no indications of my feelings. I gave him his orders and he drove me, maintaining as he always had his faceless obsequiousness. I observed nothing different in his behaviour either, though I did not care to regard him too closely. It is my belief that he never knew that I knew, and this at least gave me the illusion of some power over him.

But these are shadowy, peripheral subtleties. Essentially I was a disintegrating man, I was coming apart. I was falling asleep at the telephone. My hair began to loose itself from my scalp. My mouth filled with cankers and my breath had about it the stench of a decaying carcass. I observed my business friends take a step backwards when I spoke. I nurtured a vicious boil in my anus. I was losing. I was beginning to understand the futility of my silent waiting games with Helen. In reality there was no situation between us to play with. All day long she sat in her chair if I was in the house. Sometimes she sat there all night. On many occasions I would have to leave the house early in the morning, leave her sitting in her chair gazing at the figures in the carpet; and when I returned home late at night she would be still there. Heaven knows I wanted to help her. I loved her. But I could do nothing till she helped me. I was locked in the miserable dungeon of my mind and the situation seemed utterly hopeless. Once I was a man hurrying by a shop window and glancing carelessly in, now I was a man with bad breath, boils and cankers. I was coming apart.

In the third week of this nightmare, when there seemed nothing else I

could do, I broke the silence. It was all or nothing. Throughout that day I walked in Hyde Park summoning the remaining shreds of my reason, my will power, my suaveness for the confrontation I had decided would take place that evening. I drank a little less than a third of a bottle of scotch, and towards seven o'clock I tiptoed to her bedroom where she had been lying for the past two days. I knocked softly, then, hearing no reply, entered. She lay fully dressed on the bed, arms by her side. She wore a pale cotton smock. Her legs were well apart and her head inclined against a pillow. There was barely a gleam of recognition when I stood before her. My heart was pounding wildly and the stench of my breath filled the room like poisonous smoke. 'Helen,' I said, and had to stop to clear my throat. 'Helen, we can't go on like this. It's time we talked.' And then, without giving her a chance to reply, I told her everything. I told her I knew about her affair. I told her about my boil. I knelt at her bedside. 'Helen,' I cried, 'it's meant so much to both of us. We must fight to save it.' There was silence. My eyes were closed and I thought I saw my own soul recede from me across a vast black void till it was a pinprick of red light. I looked up, I looked into her eyes and saw there quiet, naked contempt. It was all over, and I conceived in that frenzied instant two savage and related desires. To rape and destroy her. With one sudden sweep of my hand I ripped the smock clean off her body. She had nothing on underneath. Before she had time to even draw breath I was on her, I was in her, rammed deep inside while my right hand closed about her tender white throat. With my left I smothered her face with the pillow.

I came as she died. That much I can say with pride. I know her death was a moment of intense pleasure to her. I heard her shouts through the pillow. I will not bore you with rhapsodies on my own pleasure. It was a transfiguration. And now she lay dead in my arms. It was some minutes before I comprehended the enormity of my deed. My dear, sweet, tender Helen lay dead in my arms, dead and pitifully naked. I fainted. I awoke what seemed many hours later, I saw the corpse and before I had time to turn my head I vomited over it. Like a sleepwalker I drifted into the kitchen, I made straight for the Utrillo and tore it to shreds. I dropped the Rodin forgery into the garbage disposal. Now I was running like a naked madman from room to room destroying whatever I could lay my hands on. I stopped only to finish the scotch. Vermeer, Blake, Richard Dadd, Paul Nash, Rothko, I tore, trampled, mangled, kicked, spat and urinated on . . . my precious possessions . . . oh my precious . . . I danced, I sang, I laughed . . . I wept long into the night.