Cassandra

by

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-I-

The image, a tapestry.

Pictorial designs, threaded. A fusion of colors, some like weeds and horrors. Polychromy. This is the only way I can hold it.

A tapestry has recurring themes. Mine is no exception: green in a gray desert; thistle; narrow corrugates of clean water sparkling in narrow rows between growing leaves; car wrecks; animals; rose petals dry and withered; a nude girl, and below her bare feet, centered, the comic mask of laughter, a grotesque grinning mask. The laughter rolls around the earth - laughter, a wrap-around, the wrapper around the earth.

Perhaps Cassandra is the weft that passes over, then under, threading the warps alternately. If so, then I am one of the warps. So is Mary, even when she is in Florence; so is the war; my mother; the leopard-spotted dress. But what if it is I who am the weft? The needle and the harpoon? Then I tell the story wrong.
The bus ride, miserable. Pulpy, if not grinding. All night a vibration under feet from the motor. A hot desert sun in the morning coming up red beyond flat fields sprinkler-irrigated. Sagebrush off to the east. I should have enjoyed the ride; I had the entire back seat to myself all night and morning. I could stretch out, around, or up on the seat; but even so I felt squeezed and distorted, my back feeling stiff instead of my legs, and my legs feeling like it had no bone, no muscle, soft stumps; procrustean.

At noon we arrived. The sidewalks in town were the same color as the summer, gray-yellow, heat waves rising on the streets. I looked out the seat window. A small group of people waiting on the hot sidewalk. Then our bus veered to the curb and stopped. A jerk forward, and the motor died. The door opened.

I thought I'd feel free, relief to be here. I had left the state in which I had that humangrinding wreck. But instead of relief, I was miserable. No relief, no calm sleep. The body has a way of taking its hairshirt with it.

Through the bus window at my seat, I saw the people outside on the hot sidewalk, and their shapes in the glass doors behind them at the hotel entrance. Their faces were
sun-feverish as they squinted up at us inside the bus.

I dismounted behind the other passengers, the last one off the bus. Alone, I stood shabbily on the hot sidewalk, grimy, soiled, baggy trousers, jacket on my forearm, a weed, waiting for somebody, but everyone in the crowd found somebody else from the bus. Nobody saw me. My Uncle Bill wasn't here.

Cassandra came up the street. I didn't know her yet. She approached from the beauty salon on the corner. Long legs came at us, knees active; a mini-dress loose and pale blue as sky above the town, swaying; long hair over one cheek. She came up, threaded through the crowd, gaudy perhaps, a prize show ring animal.

Up and down the eyes went as she wove through them, eyes like judges, up, around and down, boldly. First the legs, length of bone, skin coloring, bloom, rib cage, bare shoulders, long neck, head, straight light-brown hair, pale mouth, pale eyes. Then, the back of neck, long back, loin, hindquarters, swaying skirt, back of knees, back of legs, ankles. I saw that one of the thin beaded thongs around her ankles didn't have any beads on it. She was magnificent, but flawed. She disappeared around the corner on Main Street. I had no idea I'd ever see her again, nor cared. When she went around that corner on Main Street, she'd gone out of my life I thought like last year's winner at the fairgrounds.
The sun was hot. I thought of a cool drink. Then I saw my summer's employer, my Uncle Bill, walking toward us. I turned away to find my two suitcases that were lined up at the far end of the neat row on the curb alongside the silver-gleaming bus. The crowd was thinning.

I had thought about my meeting with him while the bus went cross-country over the mountains and down across the green desert that was beginning to brown, and dreaded it. I heard him stop behind me. Hesitation. Silence. I kept moving about my luggage.

"Are you Clell?"

I whirled around quickly. Let him get a full look at once. I wasn't the 19-year-old boy now, the age I was when he saw me last, a growing young man, my future still out there - ahead, beckoning, not behind. I was a man in mid-thirties, in the future that I destroyed; a grimy man in a soiled white shirt, baggy jacket on my forearm, baggy trousers, broke except for a few dollars in my pocket, a face puffed and flabby, wrinkles carving the skin, hair thinning, and eyes blood shot from too much drinking, drifting. For 15 years I'd been out of touch with him, and only a month earlier had written him a letter asking for a place to sleep and a summer job for my bed and board. We were strangers on this hot sidewalk. I looked at him,
waiting. Shock him. Trap him into showing surprises, 
dismay, confusion, doubt at what he'd see. 

He surprised me instead. 

He put his hand out and I found myself clasping it. 
He didn't indicate the slightest surprise at my appearance, 
my age, the changes in me, at my quick movement. 

He knew me at once just as I knew him. He was in his 
farm clothes, a beatup felt hat on his head with smudges 
of tractor grease around the brim. He was much taller than 
I; taller than my father had been, but he had my father's 
slow, closemouthed smile, and I was suddenly relaxed, 
comfortable. 

"I'm glad to see you again, Clell."

I felt good. A few people were still gathered behind 
him, the men wiping their necks with handkerchiefs. I felt 
social among them now. 

"I'm glad to be here, Bill."

"You must be tired."

"A little."

"You must have travelled all night?"

I was tired. I'd been riding for 600 miles. The heat 
of early June was humidified in the bus. I wanted a cool 
drink. I was dry. 

"Want a drink?"

"No", I lied.
"I've been wondering if you'd done any irrigating or any kind of farming since you went off to school," he said when we were in the hot cab of his new green pickup truck, headed out of town. As a boy I used to think this town was the largest, most splendid city of wares, shops, farm parts, and restaurants in all the West, instead of knowing it was a well-to-do county seat of 20,000 people. This was a disappointment when I learned it.

My suitcases went into the truckbed beside his irrigator's boots and his polished shovels. The smell of new leather was strong in the cab. The motor ran quietly, but there was no radio on the dash.

"You never said in your letter what you've been doing all these years," he went on.

"I know. I didn't say much. I haven't done any farming since I went away," I said. Nothing more. Nothing. Unless he heard from my mother, who didn't write to anyone, least of all to me, he didn't know I'd become a newspaperman. Nor that I wasn't able to hold a job with the better newspapers in the state I just left because of the car wreck, and the killing of the child, the father, and with the mother still in the hospital. I could shout and tell about this accident, but I couldn't talk about it. Even when Mary began to ask me about the details, and she and I were engaged at the time, I couldn't talk about it. The thread between
us was broken. I had recoiled from that slaughter on the highway so completely I felt I was shrinking inside myself, shrinking till my own voice sounded small, weak and unreal, too weak to reach Mary, or other human beings.

I'd have shrivelled up like a droplet of water in this desert if I knew how, into total disappearance if I knew how, into dust.

On the freeway our pickup travelled slowly. Other cars passed us. It was 22 miles to the farm, east and south out of town. My uncle gripped the top of the wheel with both hands, leaned forward as he always had, and watched the other farms off the highway. Many farmers were just coming out of their yellow-brick houses. It was after the noon meal. These homes were new. Memory was returning. I also watched the fields that we went by slowly, noticed how the quackgrass was growing tall in the barrow pits, and green. Heat waves were quivering out on the fields. There were many feedyards now, and white corrals, and white concrete-lined ditches that cut through the neat fields. Some fields were black with wetness where the water flowed out of the corrugates into the drain ditches. Only the alfalfa and grain fields were tufted green in the sunlight. Other crops were newly emerging, or still to be planted like beans, some spuds.
Still leaning over the steering wheel, my uncle was
talking about old-timers or their children who had left
the country. Some left rich. Some broke. Some dead.
His neck was thinner than I had noticed, and he rolled his
window up to keep the cool wind out. He was aging too. He
recited names of the dead, most of whom I didn't remember,
but I listened as a newspaperman and knew he was in that age
of people who read the obituaries closely, like scholars,
who memorized all the facts, the dates, the chapels, the
family names, and the pallbearers. Most of all the name
of the cemetery where property values are extreme, beyond
the price people will pay for living quarters.

At the turnoff to the county road where we'd head
south, he asked softly, "Do you remember Sophie Carter?"
I watched him shift gears to slow down for the turn.
"Who?" I asked vaguely.

"Sophie Carter. You went with her, Clell."
He was speeding up again, shifting into a higher gear,
and I waited until we bounced across the tracks of the rail-
road. I wanted to be vague about answering so it'd be easier
for me to be evasive about things I didn't want to answer.

I hadn't thought about Sophie for years. Of course I
remembered her. Dark-haired, quiet, she seldom smiled, but
she was a wild one. She wore her sister's high heel shoes
to school in the sixth grade because she enjoyed startling
the teacher who preached long sermons on proper conduct
and that girls must learn to be lady-like. Sophie jumped
from the fence at our corrals onto the back of a wild cow
on an impulse; and some neighbors who raised horses used
her to break a Shetland pony when they saw how well she
rode and that her feet couldn't touch the ground while sit­
ting on the pony. She also undressed in front of a gang of
us and jumped into the canal for a short swim just to show
us we were sissies. In our senior high school year, when
we had begun to tire of each other, she was elected beauty
queen, and she pushed me through a patch of mature Canadian
thistles into a ditch filled with flowing water over a
quarrel that had something to do with her poetry. Then she
was dating married men and some of the younger members of
the junior chamber of commerce in town.

"You must remember Sophie and her folks, Clell," my
uncle said. "They used to have the farm joining on the
south."

"I remember."

"Well, she's dead. Killed in a car accident in New
York."

So long as I didn't know about it, or remember her, her
death didn't matter. Out of sight, out of mind. Now my
memory had restored her; she did matter; her death mattered.

I had to ignore my uncle and the way I was feeling. I could almost taste burrs. I looked out the window at the fields and the houses we were passing. Barbed wire fences were passing, fence posts went by, and power poles and glass insulators sunglittering on the outstretched arms high up the telephone poles. Names on mailboxes, some new, some familier. Carl Sims house, painted yellow. He used to be county commissioner. But he was ancient even then, and a baby carriage and some dolls were below the front door on the lawn. Some men waved as they stood up from the shaded ground under the small trees in the orchard at one side of the house. But my uncle was still talking about Sophie Carter.

" - she was going to an acting school in New York," he was saying, gripping the wheel with both hands. "And she was doing real fine."

"When was all this?" I asked.

"Oh, let's see. I'd say about the time that you were in the army."

I might have been in Viet Nam, living there in one hole and then moving to another, from one hill to another, clothed and fed, worrying about civilians and patrol actions, officers, and avenues of fire, with nothing so unsensationally complicated as I found with people at home.
"Her folks were busted up by her accident. It all happened you know on one of those big bridges, the Tri-boro I think, with a big pile-up of cars on top of the one Sophie was driving. They buried her here. After the funeral they sold out and moved away to California to be near their oldest daughter and grandkids in San Diego."

His voice softened. "Every Christmas they send a card up here. They ask about you once in a while." He tapped his horn twice in recognition at the white car that came swerving around us, its horns blowing steadily, and the driver with a new white stetson waving as he went by. He looked at me quickly before turning back to watch the road.

"Weren't you and Sophie kind of sweet on each other in high school?"

"Yes."

I remembered and he knew I did. But other associations germinated, assembled, that he didn't know about. The weft on the loom was moving frantically. I flipped the sun visor, but it was just a gesture, the sun was coming from my side, through my open window. I put my arm out into the wind, and turned my palm so it caught handfuls of the air, resisting it, then turned it sideways so that it sliced through the wind. The fences were moving fast. Beer cans off the road in the barrow pit glittered in green grass.
Everything was blurred; cows on a tall manure pile at the corner near a mile road; tractors rolling out of farm yards, away from the gas tanks, toward the fields; fields were treeless, ditchbanks were appearing and disappearing, the road was moving fast under us.

I saw Sophie sprawled out in a grotesque position, head twisted like a slaughtered cow's out on the paved road, just like the young father's head had been in that car that mine had smashed into, with his feet up in the seat, the knees twisted like two towels, and the door dragging on one hinge. And the child, a baby, blood on its face and bib from the blow against the dashboard. Only moments before the tremendous pulse of life in that child, then nothing, less than nothing. The prophecy at birth that all living is dying, coming so soon to fulfillment of that prophecy. Instantaneous, birth and death.

And their windshield splintered and cloudy with the headlights shining on it, like a poster advertising violence on that dark road, darkness all around like in black space, with small glimmers of light in the emptiness of the dark desert. And the young mother, moaning, one eye cut deeply and mouth swollen, and her moaning on and on till the police drove blinking red and yellow into the night's chaos. Shadows, steps measured, paces, questions, reports on a pad, and her hysteria when the ambulance came. That scene is in
my mind like a blazing tapestry now, part of the accident, part of the design, colored horribly. Cacophony.

We slowed down, we were arriving. Slender branches of a large willow cascaded on one side of the tall white frame house, and green arborvitae columned up on each side of the house at the end of the front lawn. We turned into the driveway, crossed the culvert and stopped. Branches reached out in front of the windshield of the pickup, and we got out. I had planted the tree from where these branches came. Behind the house, the lilac hedge around the green lawn. The hedge of lilacs had always been there. I told Mary when she first came to join the art department at the university that I planted this Siberian elm, the first tree I ever planted. Now it was taller than the white house.

We went inside the house, where my aunt, Carmen, was waiting, lunch on the table on a white tablecloth, and silverware laid out for an occasion. She was pleased to see me, but awkward. We shook hands. She used to dislike everyone in my family when we owned the farm, and they were renters on other places. But I suppose dislike, like love, fades away, though it certainly can be revived more easily. She was aged. More wrinkles, more weight, but a thinner neck. She still had the look of a spinster woman, even when she stood beside my uncle. Their only son had died in an airplane in the Korean War. Their only other child, a daughter,
taught school in Alaska, and was still there I learned.

They gave me the same upstairs room that I occupied as a boy. Not for sentimental reasons, but it was just the better furnished of the two bedrooms upstairs. I went outside with my uncle, chatted with him, and when he walked across the road in his irrigator's boots and his shovel on his shoulder to check the water on his alfalfa field, I stayed and walked across the yard toward the farm buildings and the corrals. I moved slowly, my feet somehow familiar with the ground, and the slight hill wind on my face, and with the sun beating down so that I was soon squinting in any old way. Tractors were parked around the mounted gas tank, and the polish on the zerks showed they were just greased. The machine shed was empty except for some sacks of bean seed and oil barrels against the back wall. Several sparrows that had nests for their young on the rafters flew out and back inside while I stood there.

The large yard was clean, gravelled, but a few weeds, lambsquarters and redroot, were growing up tall near the barn. I went into the milk barn my father had built, now a grain room, and around to the corrals that had about 100 whiteface steers in it. Their reddish hides in the sun shone like oil. They backed away from the feedbunk as I walked by. A spayed collie dog, fat and dusty, came out from under the wagon near the two new steel granaries, and followed me
to the hay stack where I sat down on a fallen bale to watch the cattle. She went back under the wagon to lie down in the shade after I scratched her behind her ears. I had several dogs when I was a boy. One was shot on a neighbor's farm when it was caught chasing lambs one winter morning; another just disappeared, and the last one was on the farm when I left it. He was gone now. I thought about him.

Sitting on the bale, I felt the heat of the sun and began to perspire. My father also used to perspire easily. Recollections about him and how he farmed came pouring up through me. These eighty acres; how it used to kick out the crops!

I'd been raised on this farm. These eighty-acres, how it used to explode out of the earth each summer, sun-greened, water-blackened, metal-plowed, windblown desert soil made fertile with water out of the ancient Snake River, with seeds of weeds old and new waiting always to germinate, and to be cut down. By each June this land was ready to take crop seed and sprout into thickly green bean leaves and heavy pod sets, green spud vines that bloomed white; alfalfa chaff that was sweet smelling in water that flowed down the corrugates after the first cutting; grain that stoolled and shot up in the boot and headed sometimes to over 100 bushels to the acre and went down flat when you weren't careful about irrigating in winds of late July; and corn
that grew tall, 30 tons of silage to the acre.

Perhaps it did better now. My uncle was a good farmer.

I got up and walked around the hay stack where the
breeze moved freely and I could see the neighbors' fields
below our ditches and fences to other distant fields, dots
of houses, then hazily toward the purple, fading mountains
of Nevada where the sun was going. Occasionally, the sun
flashed off water flowing in an irrigation ditch miles away
and from the polished glinting metal of a much-used irri-
gator's shovel.

I headed back to the house, but looked first for the
brand I had burned into the siding on the rear of the
machine shed. It wasn't there. I jumped a ditch that my
father had laid out. I unbuttoned the front of my shirt
and stood looking around at everything. I was going to
work on the ditches this summer. At last I went up to my
room to lay down, feeling as if I'd been run over by a plow
and turned over. My father had tended this land really for
such a little time, and I - not at all.

I was almost 19 years old and in the army when my
father died and my mother sold the farm to my Uncle Bill.
My mother moved then to Portland to live with a sister of
hers I've never seen, and in the winters the two women go
down to Las Vegas.
Thinking about this, I fell asleep, awakened, sweated with the heat in the room, whirled, remembered pictures that used to be there on the wall, wishing I hadn't come back after all. Yet there was nothing else for me to do. I had to try a summer of hard work, labor. I had to get the car wreck out of mind. I shrank up from it. It was horror. What a speck of dust I was. And I had to forget that Mary, at her father's insistence, had gone abroad to Italy after my trial. She didn't help. I had now a craving to visit Sophie Carter's grave. I wanted to do this. Then I didn't want to. It didn't matter. I was ready to hit the bars again.

-III-

I found that the most crowded of the bars was on Main Street and that these were the easiest places for me to be alone in. There are 14 bars on Main Street, mostly within a three-block area. I had tried them all, sometimes in one night. There are also four banks on the street, six commercial loan companies, and the usual cluster of Main Street stores - cafes, dress shops, barbershops, superdrug stores, news stand and two old hotels. Places to borrow and places to spend; you did one or the other in this city.

The most crowded of the bars was called the Blue Lounge, and it was where Cassandra worked as a barmaid.
Though I recognized her as the tall girl who had threaded her way through the crowd at the bus stop, I didn't notice her often, not at first, and then badly.

She seemed to me right out of the House of Borgia, shameless and cool, an attractant to lure the customers, pocketing the change I left sometimes at the counter in forgetfulness, and then smiling sweetly at me and other drunks as they closed us out.

"Come back to see us again," she'd call out at the door, but I only brushed by and worried only at that hour about driving back to the farm in my uncle's pickup on the quiet county roads, which weren't patrolled regularly by the state police. I drove slowly.

Each morning, drinking or no, I went out early to check the bottomlands, and pencilled on my shovel handle those corrugates which didn't have water trickling all the way down them. Then I'd go up to the head land and run additional water down those corrugates I'd marked. Then I'd come in for breakfast, and so out to the fields again. After the first week I handled the irrigation by myself. We had over 250 inches of water in the ditch. I also helped my uncle plant his beans, feed the cattle, burn ditches with stove oil, and a pressurized 50-gallon oil drum, and cultivated the spuds. I had forgotten nothing, except some
reasons for the work. My body remembered how to do things better than my mind. On the cultivators I could feel when the knives went in too deep between the bean rows, or when I swerved. When I came up to a ditchbank at the head of a field, the bump I'd feel from the front wheel hitting the bank would cause me to clutch and brake to a stop, and then I'd remember to back up, lift the cultivators out of the ground and turn around for the next rows.

Then I started receiving letters from Mary. My uncle always delivered these out in the fields, wherever I was. Her letters were forwarded to me through the newspaper I had worked for. The business office had my forwarding address because I was owed a check for money I contributed toward my retirement fund. I had no friends there. I was bad company, by association, after the publisher dropped me.

Mary's letters came from Italy. I threw the first of them away, unread. I wanted nothing from anybody. Work by day and drink by night. That's all I wanted. No time to think.

At breakfast one morning my uncle said, "I don't think you can hold together with the late hours and the early working, Clell."

"Am I doing a poor job? Are we falling behind in the work?"
"No, I'm not trying to say that, and I don't have any complaints about your work. But I don't see how you're going to keep up with yourself for long."

That was all. My uncle and aunt accepted my vagueness patiently. But he kept delivering Mary's letters to me out in the field, and he often waited to see what I'd do with them.

At night at the bar I ignored Cassandra, and talked only on rare occasions to ranchers. Finally she began to wonder who I was. She knew she was the siren, the Sadie Thompson, and the Circe of the Blue Lounge, but she had no response from me. I wasn't one of her followers, nor of any other girl or woman who came in to flirt and dance and there were many. Nor was I one of the young bucks from the ranches nor from business families at home for the summer from college.

I was drinking hard, and blurring sometimes the unpleasant scenes on the tapestry in my mind, and I was trying to quiet what was a scream inside me. The recollection of the car wreck was a revulsion, intolerable. I wanted to shrivel up sometimes and I didn't know how to obliterate myself or my thoughts.

She finally sat down on an empty stool beside me many nights, but I wasn't good company. She was another shill
and I wanted to be alone. One night she watched me and after a pause, she reached over and brought my drink over to her nose.

"Ugh," she said. "That's awful stuff."

She put the glass back on the coaster when I said nothing, and put her fingers under my chin to turn my face toward hers. Her fingers were warm, and I was looking into shadowy green eyes.

"Hello," she said softly, "remember me? I work here. I've been here every time you were."

"Yes, I remember you." Her fingers were still under my chin.

"Do I look like a bottle of poison, or an old hag?"

"No. You don't. You just look very young to me."

Age, and the passage of time, was bothering me deeply since I'd returned to the farm, and I thought about this with my many drinks. My shabbiness had showed as I'd gotten off the bus. At my age, I thought, if only I had arrived by car, or by airplane in a little grander style.

"Do you think I'm very young? At 22, in this place? Man, where've you been?"

She pulled her fingers away from my chin and shifted as if to leave but changed her mind and turned so that her knees were touching lightly against my thigh. I looked to see if she realized this, and noticed she wore no make-up on her mouth, and that her lightbrown hair kept falling over
one or the other of her eyes. Her nostrils were a little wide where they joined her face, a feature that gave her a warm quality somehow, and I surprised myself. I enjoyed looking fully into her face. Without make-up close up she didn't resemble at all the girl at the bus stop, nor the flirt of the club.

"You're paying for the light bill here the way you drink," she said, moving her knees away and then back again. "Do you hear me? You're paying for the light bill. What's the matter with you, are you a lush?"

I had to laugh. "No, I'm not. I'm just cooling down with alcohol. I used to be a poet."

"Are you kidding me?"

"Yes."

"I'm glad. But I like that about the poet."

I turned away. Personal questions might follow.

"Are you really a poet?"

I didn't want to talk anymore. I wasn't one of the bar crowd, and I didn't want to belong.

She leaned, and again to my surprise, heard faintly in my ear, "I write poems sometimes, and I'd like to show them to you."

Her perfume was like rose petals, and I stared at her to see if in those shadowy green eyes she was kidding but I didn't see this. Shadows, green eyes, long hair, soft-
ness, and she stared back as if to read me, then tilted her head slightly one way, smiling, then tilted it the other way, murmuring finally, "Oh my."

She was a shill; a go-go girl out of her cage; a small-town Borgia who had stolen my bar change a few times, but I believed her now. All my senses concentrated on that part of my arm where her fingers were resting. Her face was pale and soft I thought and her eyes were still searching me out. I was aware of the trembling in my arms, and the gnawing in my stomach. Agitated, I told myself she was only 22 years old, and it was no good. We talked. She kept her head on my arm, and I told her a little about the war and how our artillery made pock marks in their fields, and that we had a whiskey ration on the ridges, that a fifth of good scotch was $1.50 on the line. I hadn't talked about this for years.

She drank orange juice when I ordered drinks for both of us at the bar, with a little water added, and ice. She didn't want alcohol.

"I don't know when to stop after one drink," she said, "and then everyone thinks I can be pawed over."

"I don't care what you drink," I said, "and I'm not interested in pawing you."

"I hope your interests change," she said, smiling, and squeezed my arm and pressed her knees against mine again. My hand was soon between her knees, squeezed. The street
door began to open and close, open and close, and people were entering one behind the other. Jukebox dancers were now out on the floor twisting, and the music was loud, and the bartender in his starched white waistcoat was calling for her above the loud noise of music and roar of voices and for her to get over to the other end of the bar where he was busily mixing drinks. She lingered to lean over to kiss me on the mouth. "There's something happening to us, isn't there," she asked and went away to her job.

I watched her walk, lithe and gay, in a short skirt inches above her knees.

She flirted with everyone who stood in her way in the aisle behind the bar stools until she was at the other end and in front of the bartender. She worked at her job with enjoyment, carrying trays filled with glasses for customers at the tables, and returning quickly with another order on a tray. She was part of the atmosphere of the Blue Lounge, part of the atmosphere she created.

I thought about her while I worked in the fields the next day. I shovelled about a quarter mile of ditch, cutting the sides smooth, and puddling sod around the cement checks to keep them from washing around the sides. I worked harder than ever, setting water, pulling corrugates in the bean fields till my back stiffened and then muscles loosened
while I sweated under the sun. I wished my life could back up a year, before the wreck. I decided I was a fool. I was too old, and she was too young, even if it was for just a good time. She was a shill, and I was a fool, putting absurd meanings into a flirtation at a bar. Yet, there was a quality I didn't understand at the time about her, an irreverence that seemed to suggest there was no importance to age or a difference in years. I worked steadily, sweated and breathed harder, and forgot about her and Mary until I was in bed. Then I thought about her name in the darkness: Cassandra.

Cassandra. The gift of prophecy. When she didn't give herself over to Apollo as she'd promised the sun god, he added the curse to the blessing of prophecy. "Nobody will believe what you will foresee!" What a horror. To predict the truth and to be sneered at for it. To prefer to be silent about it but compelled to speak. And what was the prophecy of this Cassandra, I wondered, - youth? That at age 50, she will have fears of cancer, female trouble, an errant husband, domestic chores, Little League, and that she'd better accept desires of her youth while she had it? Or was she the luscious, worldly, exaggerated female of the future right out among us from the ultrawide screen who would never, never, never in our fantasies and hers, reach age 50?
I brought three red roses to her at the Lounge the next night. It could have been two red roses, but it just happened to be three. She put them carefully in the ice cooler behind the counter, warning the bartender about them, and she sat with me again till the club filled.

"I don't want to wear them in here," she said. "Someone will snatch them off my blouse." Her blouse came loosely over her bare shoulders. "I'm going to place them beside me on the pillow tonight when I go to sleep." Then softly, "Thank you again, Clell."

She was in my thoughts even as I began to read Mary's frequent letters from across the sea in Florence, and I'd think about ways she looked in different dresses, or her fingers on my arm, or the ways she expressed herself and had been indrawn when I gave her the roses. I didn't see her for a few days, and didn't seem to need to drink as much as I did before.

Mary's letters from Italy'-- the floods of the Arno River had not ravaged the city of Florence yet -- were about the art works there, the paintings, statues, religious scenes, priests, fountains in the large squares, palazzi, and about wanting to return home. Mary wrote that she regretted now that she had taken her father's advice to go abroad "to think it all out." But she was shocked by my terrible accident, and then was ready to believe anything
when she learned who'd been in the car with me. It unbalanced her. It was jealousy. Could I forgive her?

My uncle brought her letters, sometimes two a day, to me whenever they arrived. He'd walk across the headland near the feed ditches above the field, his shovel flashing on his shoulder and my letters under his hat. He walked slow, sometimes stopping to shovel-slice a weed. He came even if I was a quarter mile away from the house, at the checkgate where I might be cleaning out wet slimy branches or water weeds that plugged the spillway and that kept us from receiving out full share of water out of the canal.

Mary's letters contained sketches of whatever she was looking at on that particular day in Florence. There were madonnas, Christ figures, columns, entablatures, wide street scenes in the shadows of buildings, faces. She sketched well. I showed some of the pencil sketches to my uncle.

"Here, look at these sketches," I said, handing a page to him when he sat beside me on the ditchbank, his dirty hat tipped forward to keep the bright sun out of his eyes. He studied the drawings. It was the first time I even talked about one of Mary's letters.

"They're alright," he said at last.
"What do you think about the nude sketches?"
"I guess they're alright," he said eyes twinkling.
"If they're there, and she's drawing them, I guess if she's an artist she'd better put it down like she sees them."
"She's very good."
"What's she do?"
"Nothing now, except with Florence. But she teaches art in the university and some of her paintings hang in the state capitol. A painting of her father on a horse is in the governor's office."
"What's her father do?"
"He ranches. He's got a large spread up against the Rockies, and he was a state legislator for years."
"And what's his daughter to you?" he asked quickly, a question he'd apparently wondered about for weeks.
"How old is she?"
"Twenty-eight."
He nodded. "She pretty?"
"Yes, very pretty."

My uncle was snooping. I pulled a metal file out of my back pocket and began to sharpen the edge of my shovel. I had talked too much. We went back across the field
together, and I helped him sort fat cattle for shipment to the West Coast. It was hard driving some of the cattle through his chutes, but easier than sorting my feelings for Mary and Cassandra. That night I drove to the club in town.

Cassandra came over to sit beside me as soon as I entered.

"I missed you," she said. "I even wore a new dress last night, and I wanted to call you up, but I don't know where you live.

I ordered a double from the bartender.

"Somebody's sure got you in a terrible way for you to drink heavy again," she said. I still didn't feel like talking.

"Don't you feel like talking? - She looked inquiringly into my face. - I've been wondering about you. Are you married or something?"

She put her hand over mine. "Are you?"

"No, I'm not married."

"Something's biting you. Were you married - recently?"

The double shot acted quickly, and I relaxed.

"No. I was married once if you want to know, but I was a kid in the service, about your age. She was a Red Cross worker in Japan, and when peace came sweetly and we went
back to the states, our marriage soured, so we called it quits. But that was a long time ago, I don't think I'd recognize her if she walked in here tonight."

After a silence. "What do you do?"

"Sit and drink."

"Don't be sarcastic. I mean what do you do for a living?"

I showed her my hands. They were puffed, calloused from gripping the shovel, and horned. "I farm."

She examined my hands. Then my face. "I can see you're farming now, but I still don't think you're a farmer."

"It's my uncle's farm. I'm on my uncle's farm for the summer."

She laughed. "You're really a poet. With red roses for all the girls."

"Did you put the roses on your pillow?"

"Yes. And they multiplied, like things about you do every time I see you."

"Are you saying that to be polite, or what?"

"I mean it. Let's see. One of the roses you gave was for sleep, nice sleep. Another for sweet dreams - nice dreams, sometimes of you. Another - that's the third? - for love. A fourth - for loyalty and honesty."
"But there were only three roses."

"I said they multiplied, didn't I? 'On a cold pillow, velvet petals are sprinkled, and roses turn to stars.'"

I stared at her, not associating her to anybody I knew or to scenes in my mind. I watched her play with her long, glass earrings, feeling her body affect mine when she placed my rough hand in her long soft ones and then put it on her lap. I was sorry the club was crowding up, music bursting the dark quiet.

"Look at me, please," she said softly. When I did, she whispered, "Could you fall in love with me?"

Pale was her face, soft; the colors of the blue and red lights on the walls and ceiling spinning on her glass earrings, alive; and her green eyes, bold yet wistful, pleading, watchful - I squeezed her hand hard, crushing hard. I could have fallen on my knees. But I said nothing, taking too long perhaps, and the bartender was calling to her. The music burst into the quiet between us. I was a mess of thoughts, astounded. She pulled her hand out of mine and left quickly to serve a crowd of young fellows at one of the tables. They were dressed in levis and white shirts and one wore a new stetson hat, and they were shouting for her to bring them drinks and sit down at their table. When she sat down with them, crossing her legs boldly, never glancing at me, I left.
She was crazy I thought. I drove the pickup up and down Main Street, wanting to return to the Lounge, but instead drove back to the farm. My aunt and uncle were surprised to see me back so early. "I just felt tired," I said, and went up to my room. A fly was buzzing around the lamp near my bed, but it shut up after I turned the switch off.

I thought about her; then about Mary. I wished Mary knew that I could still affect somebody this way. I didn't believe I could affect anybody this way again. For too long, I was like the fly - who'd want anything to do with me? Mary's letters were what I needed, but they came from over the sea, and she wasn't here.

And Cassandra was here, reaching for me across the years; looking for some reason for her future in me, in what had made me. But I was learning to live with vagueness, not commitment. If I committed myself to Cassandra, she'd have to learn about my life - the farm, Mary, the wreck, the whole rotten granary. Didn't she realize how old I was? A hair or two was beginning to grow in each of my ears, and there were younger men. I doubted her.

But if she was out to seduce me, I thought, she had an odd way of doing it.

I went back again the next evening, wearing a tie. It
was sprinkling when I reached town. Cassandra was sitting with another couple at a table near the empty dance floor and she left them to come over to me as soon as I entered. She was dressed in a short green dress with a star-shaped clasp pinned by one shoulder. She stopped in front of me, and I saw she wore no make-up except on her lips, and her long hair was tied behind her ears with a green ribbon. Her shoes were yellow, and she wore dark hose.

"I shouldn't have walked away from you so quickly last night," she said.

We sat at a small table against the dark wall, beneath a faintly glowing blue bulb. The plaster on the wall was cracked.

"I should have answered you," I said. "You didn't wait."

"Are you angry with me?"

"Certainly not."

"I was too forward," she shrugged. "Maybe I'm too honest. Clell - I was thinking - ."

"What?"

"I've never heard you laugh. I mean not a strong laugh."

"I don't laugh very often. - You're a very perceptive girl, Cassandra."
"How do you mean?"

"I don't know exactly. You just are. But I can think of several ways in which you are."

"Can you? I've been wondering all day if you think anything about me at all."

"I think about you - too much." I looked away at the clasp on her shoulder.

"Why too much?" she asked softly.

"I don't know. It's the way it is."

"Are you worried about our ages?"

"That's part of it."

"Then forget that. It doesn't bother me at all. - But I know it'll bother you more than it does me."

"How can you be sure of this?"

"I just am."

"You understand people here."

"And why not? I had two years of college."

We both thought this was a funny piece of timing. I laughed and she started giggling too.

"I went to the university for two years," she said, "and then I quit. I'm a college drop-out." She giggled again.

"There are worse kinds of dropouts," I said.

"You're talking about yourself, aren't you?" She reached across the table and fingered my tie. I asked for
another drink and she went to the bar to get it. She came back with it and an orange for herself. She sat closer to me and I wondered what was about to happen to us. An affair? What?

Quite soon, I was telling her just enough about Mary and myself to let her know about another girl.

"So now she's in Italy?" Why isn't she here, married to you?"

"Nowadays it's important for some to go to Italy, France, Mexico, Spain, you know, and I couldn't make it you see." I wasn't exactly truthful.

"She doesn't make sense to me. Or isn't she afraid she might lose you to someone else?"

"I'm not a catch these days, and I'm almost broke all the time."

"Sometimes you're not very bright," she said. "But I don't like her, anyway, I don't think." She didn't ask me anything more about Mary, and she simply leaned over and kissed me quickly.

"Will you take me home after I finish up tonight?" she asked.

"Yes, if you'd like." I said, "but I hope I'm not drunk by that time."

"You won't be."
The street door soon began to open and close, but the light rain was keeping many of the night crowd away. I drank alone at the table but soon went to the bar where the bartender came over to chat about crops and the rain. I was hoping it'd rain all night so we'd do nothing the next day but irrigate. It'd be too wet to move tractors in the fields. As for irrigating, it doesn't stop with the rain.

I watched Cassandra flirt outrageously for larger tips from the young ranch hands. Her star clasp, and her short dress, black hose, and yellow shoes, were discussed among them. They drank till closing time, and left.

The bartender agreed to clean up so we could leave earlier.

Outside the cowboys were waiting on the hood of their car, sitting side by side and getting soaked in the downpour of rain now. They watched us leave the club and dash over to Cassandra's car. When we were inside, away from the drops splashing on the dark wet sidewalk, they appeared in front of the headlights and shouted, "Night night Cassandra. Night, Dad. Night, Dad. Night night. Take care, mare."

They followed us in their car, blinking their headlights, honking, speeding to draw up close behind, even
bumping into the back of our car at a red light, and I thought I'd have to get out and settle it with them. My stomach was fluttering though from too much drink, and fear of getting into a scrape where the law would check me out. Trouble too with cars at the highway ended in a wreck, and I didn't want this to happen to me again.

I made a move to get out, to settle this.

"Wait," Cassandra said. The light changed to green and she turned a corner sharply, then another, down a side street, another dark side street, and soon the other car was no longer behind us with its rain-blurred headlights and its taunting horn.
Cassandra drove us to a large lot between two small frame houses in the older section of town, and then into an acre lot through a pair of rutted tracks, while tall wet weeds slapped and dragged against the underside of the car. There were mud holes and we bounced and swayed in the ruts.

"My place is a mess," Cassandra said suddenly. The twin headbeams fell and rose to spotlight the high branches of a large weeping willow at the far end of that lot, and then fell to some outcroppings of large roots, and to a few lambs huddled around the base of that dripping tree. The car turned sharply at a right angle on the rutted tracks and the beams lit on a small stucco - it looked like stucco - house with a large lilac bush against each of the dark windows on each side of a cracked, unpainted wooden door. The car stopped, and Cassandra sat still. The rain was pouring now, splashing on a duckwalk of two by fours going to the house.

"You don't mind a messy house, do you?" she asked, sitting in the darkness of the car.

"I couldn't care less," I said. "Or are you looking for a reason to take me back to my pickup?"

She didn't answer me, and dashed out quickly, up the
duckwalk and opened the door. Thinking she did want to take me back to my pickup, after all, I waited before I finally stepped out to follow her up the walk. I walked deep in tall, wet weeds. I felt the wetness spread inside my shoes and through my socks to bare skin before I got inside the door.

I was stunned by what I saw at first glance. She closed the door behind me. I didn't expect luxury in her apartment - in fact I had no expectation at all. But as I stood there, desire and love, yearning and hope, dialogue, the odor of roses, these vanished, disappeared, fled like shadows that never were. My mouth was dry. I watched Cassandra as she walked to the center of the room, taking off her light coat. When she saw my face, she uttered a small cry. She whirled to look around the room.

"I shouldn't have brought you here," she said wildly. She dashed over to snap the wall switch down behind me near the door. The room went dark. She opened the door, a shadow in the darkness. "I'll take you back to your pickup!"

"Don't be silly," I spoke softly. "I always look this stupid at this hour of the morning. Turn the light back on." I guided her away from the open doorway where the wind was sweeping rain over her, and closed it behind her.
She left me and went across the dark room to turn on a night lamp on the small dresser near the unmade bed. I sat down on the arm of an old velvet couch near the door. Across the small, wooden floor - board floor is more accurate - the unmade bed was wadded up with soiled sheets, a ball of blankets of all colors, magazines that poked out everywhere, curlers, a box of tissues, and wads of used tissues, towels red, white, and brown, a douche bag with a long red hose, several empty paper sacks, and some wrinkled skirts.

The disorder was accumulative. On the floor below the bed were more piles of clothing including a luminescent green skirt, meshed stockings, magazines, newspapers, an aspirin bottle filled with white tablets, an aluminum-foil plate full of crumbs, a glass with water in it, a brassiere.

She kicked the water glass over on her way back from the bed, and the water spilled inside the cup of her bra on the floor. It must have been terrible for her. She kicked out with her feet to sweep everything on the floor into a pile. I sat down on the cushion of the old velvet couch, and leaned back to shut my eyes. My eyes were throbbing and dry-feeling. So this was Cassandra's bedroom - living room - receiving room - her love room. It
was her domain, her salon, the room where she placed the roses I gave her on her pillow. Which was her heaven and which her hell, the bar or the house? I felt like I was in a bad movie of an apartment in a bombed out city in World War II. And those planks for floors - she was living in a shack!

Cassandra fled into the bathroom which opened near the small dresser by her bed. I thought I heard her speak or cry out, and then came the sound of tap water rushing in a circle in the basin. I looked around the room and saw two hunting guns and fishing rods stacked and leaning against a tall bookcase up against the wall near the bathroom, with a white banjo on the floor beside the guns and the poles. Cassandra was full of surprises this night, enough to dissipate romantic illusions, and I was prepared to think anything about the life that came out of this Pandora's box of an apartment. Did these guns and fishing rods belong to some man - who might show up at any moment?

Then under my nose I saw more! On the small, scratched coffee table in front of me, with the hosiery hanging over the edge to the bare floor and almost hidden under a newspaper were my roses against the side of a portable phonograph player. The roses were withered, dead, the leaves and stem dry, and the petals blackish. What had she
said at the bar? 'Velvet petals are sprinkled...?' It was an absurd lie; she had charmed me with her talk, a charmer, a phony bitch.

I thought how everything on this coffee table - the sheer hosiery, the dead roses and the phonograph player would make an excellent still life painting, or a clear, offset, 6-column photo for the Sunday supplement that I'd call "Life's Asides," and then I'd mail it off to Mary to put among her sketches of the art works of the western world, or suggest to her that she duplicate it on an altar.

I felt like getting up now that I saw the dead roses, and telling Cassandra, and Mary if I could and anybody else, to be off, now, toward hell! Everything was a lie. I believed nothing. Nothing was true. Not even my wreck was true and real.

To my right another room, in darkness. I could see into it enough to know it was the kitchen with a tall heaping pile of dirty dishes disfiguring the sink.

Cassandra came out of the bathroom wiping the tap water off her cheeks, chattering about the rain, the cowboy incident, the drunks at the bar who always waited outside to watch her come out. She kept wiping her face and never looked at me once. Then she frantically gathered everything off her bed and off the floor and
heaped them all into a corner of the room. She chattered nervously but I was so mad and distrustful that I didn't hear much of what she was saying. She sat down on the opposite end of the couch and reached for the roses.

"Oh, I should have put them in water after the first night." She held them up close to her breast against the star-shaped clasp. "I'm so sorry."

"And what happened to the petals?"

"The petals?"

"You said you sprinkled them, or something - at the club." I felt I'd been made a fool, another of Circe's pigs.

"Oh that? That was just a try at a haiku, just to show you what these roses meant to me. We were arguing that they meant more than three things to me, remember? So I said, 'On a cold pillow velvet petals are sprinkled, and roses turn to stars.' That's all I meant."

Finally I tuned in on other things she was saying. She hated this terrible two-room house in the vacant lot, but the rent was only $30 a month. She began to brush her hair, glancing at me only sometimes as she went on.

She loved the record player on the coffee table, and spent many hours listening to the music, all kinds of music, like rock, classical, all of Mancini, a few
poetry readings, ballads.

Then there was the bookcase over there with the glass doors that had her notebooks with every poem she had ever written from the time she was in grade school. And in the bookcase were her favorite books, The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayam, and The Prophet by Kahlil Gibran.

There was also a small stack of letters tied with a ribbon that she'd saved since she was 15 years old when a shy boy in her class wrote to tell her about his love.

She kept brushing her hair, stroke after stroke, glancing rarely at me, while I waited to hear about the guns and the fishing rods and the banjo, but she said nothing about these. I think I was about to drop off to sleep, or tune in on the rain splashing outside from the eaves to the duckboards, when she turned on the record player, full strength. Wham! Wham!

She was playing an old Beatles' record, "Let Me Hold Your Hand." It was loud enough to break open the walls, fill all the decks and corridors of a pleasure ship out on a black sea, but it had no pleasure for me. It was as if I were getting pounded to the sand, turned over by water from the Snake River rapids, to nothing. She finally toned it down.

Cassandra reached over as I opened my eyes in that dim
room, and took my hand.

"Disappointed in me?"

"No. I'm nobody to be disappointed in anybody," I smiled at her like an idiot.

She kicked her yellow shoes off her feet, and then she was unrolling her long dark stockings down to her knees, down over her long calves, ankles, over her toes. Her skin was faintly golden, and pale and smooth.

"I swear to you I slept with the roses on my pillow," she said, getting up and looking down at the dead roses now on the small table.

"I believe you." I felt tired, drained.

"Do you?"

"Sure. I didn't before, but I do now."

She began to undress before me, not at all embarrassed, and then with the soft green dress on the floor, she was standing before me in white panties and a white brassiere. She swept her long hair behind her ears, and stood motionless, her face pale and her mouth smaller than I'd realized. Shocked, I began to awaken again.

She stared seriously out the window behind me, as still as a faintly glowing, golden statue, long-limbed, full ribbed, a prize out of the show ring. Then she sat down, away from me, a slight smile and some fright showing again.
I sat motionless.

"Can I have a drink?"

"I'm sorry, I don't have a drop in the house. Not even beer. But how about some coffee? Or a glass of milk?"

Almost nude, tall, she went into the kitchen to make coffee and when the light went on in that room I saw the aluminum-foil plates from ready-made dinners all over the table and the sink piled full of dirty plates and glasses. She didn't attempt to apologize and kept putting teaspoons of coffee directly into the water in the small coffee pot, boiling it, not percolating it, in old farm style.

I walked over to the bookcase while she was rinsing cups, and opened the glass doors. About a dozen books were stacked on one shelf at eye-level. One was an old botany textbook, another an introduction to chemistry, a book on anatomy, a thesaurus, dictionary, Dr. Zhivago, anthologies, some unfamiliar novels, and thin volumes of the Prophet and the Rubaiyat. On a lower shelf, two boxes of shotgun shells, and a stack of notebooks on top of each other, and another stack of copies of Harper's Bazaar, Vogue, Playboy, and Mad.

She was baffling to me. I inspected the guns on the floor. Both were single-barrelled shotguns, one an automatic .16 gauge for upland game, and the other a pump
action .12 gauge. Both guns were unloaded, and lightly oiled. I learned about the guns while we were back on the couch, drinking good but weak coffee.

"I'm married, Clell."

"You're kidding me."

"No, I'm not. I wish I were. I'm married. That's what I've wanted to tell you for some time."

Suddenly it was funny, absurdly funny. Wild! Crazy! Roaring! A veil had been rent at last, torn away, and beyond it I saw the universe was a big joke, a howl, a book of vaudeville jokes. The coffee splashed out of my quivering cup down on my trousers and also on Cassandra's bare legs. I couldn't stop laughing.

"Please."

But the laughter I was hearing was too much. I couldn't stop it. It was at both of us, at everything. I set the cup on the coffee table, near the red roses, and when I saw the dead flowers I went into another paroxym. So she too carried her secrets alone, desolate, desperate, unique. She - I - fill our lives as if our lives were tapestries, with scenes on it, and more scenes, - there on one side crowds of people I knew, a car wreck in that corner of the tapestry, red blood colors near it in abstract pattern, a Siberian elm tree and a boy taller
than the tree when it is a sapling, an older woman, my mother, in a Cadillac stopped in front of a road sign pointing to Portland, statues all over the tapestry from Florence, sketches on a sheet of paper pale and gray in another corner, O.D. uniforms, the mortars of war - what a tapestry we make! And now, Cassandra has added to mine the grotesque mask of comedy, centered in the middle of all the scenes. She was a married woman. I quieted down finally, eyes wet.

"Are those his guns and poles?"

"Yes, and the banjo too, although I play it. He left them here so he'd have an excuse to come back."

"Why should he need an excuse to come back to his own home?"

"Because we don't live together."

"Come on now. You're sure he won't stumble in tonight and find me sitting along with his nude wife?"

"Yes, I'm sure he won't come here tonight, or any night, and if he did, he'd be the stranger, not you."

"And he's your husband?"

"I know what you're thinking and it isn't true. I slept with him once, and not since. It was a bad mistake. We didn't have anything in common, nothing, and I locked him out of the house more than a month ago, just before I
met you. I filed for divorce, and should have it in about two weeks."

She poured some more coffee and sat down again, only closer to me now. "You still don't see it, do you?" she asked.

"Yes and no."

"Will you listen to me if I tell you about my marriage?"

"Of course I'll listen - unless you think I should go now."

"No, I don't want you to leave. I want you to know all about it, especially you. But listen to me. Everybody complains today that nobody listens to them. Then they don't listen either."

"Of course I'll listen, Cassandra. I'm drinking your coffee, sitting on your furniture, and I want to hear about it."

She crossed her bare knees, and leaned relaxed against the back of the couch, folding her bare arms into her stomach. Then as she looked at me she giggled.

"I want to tell you the whole sad story," she said, sleepily, "but I don't have to, do I?"

"No you don't. And not at this hour." I added, "And certainly not if you're separated from him."

She laughed again. "You make me feel so good again,
I could sit on your lap like a cat. I have to say something though to explain about this mess here. I didn't know until tonight how messy I'd become, letting myself go so badly. I was so terrified when I saw through your eyes how filthy the room was I wanted to hide or shrink to a speck of dust and disappear. I'm not so afraid now," she added, smiling. "And I feel like expanding again."

She reached behind and unclasped her bra, and stood up, breasts bare, waiting and inviting me to look at her. She posed, full-bosomed, naked except for her panties which she rolled at the waist till they were in a scant v-shape. She stood still, her head high and her hair behind her ears, staring at me without expression, with a suggestion of a smile, waiting, a sculpture.

I spent the night with her, and phoned the farm early the next morning to tell my Uncle Bill that I wouldn't be back for work. It was drizzling outside, gray and dreary and the lambs were grazing the weeds near Cassandra's car, and my uncle wasn't put out that I wouldn't be back for work. While I slept in, Cassandra cleaned the kitchen and the room, and then cooked breakfast. She disliked eggs, so there weren't any in the refrigerator. At noon, when it stopped raining for a while, I drove the pickup back to the farm, gathered by toilet articles, a clean shirt, and
agreed at once to my uncle's suggestion that I take another day or two off. Cassandra had followed in her car, and I went back to town with her.

The clouds were racing like in a freeway in the gray sky, and I felt like it was Christmas. Everything was pleasant, easy, warm, relaxing from field work, and I told Cassandra about the car wreck, and more about Mary.

"But why didn't you tell Mary you weren't as drunk as the police thought, and that it was your fun friends who jerked the wheel out of control - ?"

"I did."

"Why didn't you tell the police?"

"I did, but it was just another story to them. I had been drinking, and there was alcohol in my blood, and I was the driver. My newspaper buddy and his wife, and her girl friend with the wild reputation, who upset Mary, all said they couldn't remember what had happened."

"And you almost went to jail because they grabbed the wheel when you said you didn't want to go to their house for another drink?"

"Yes, in a way, but I was also responsible. I was driving. I'd had too many. And it made front page headlines in my newspaper: Reporter Charged With Manslaughter in Death of Child and Father. If that autopsy on his body
and his wheel tracks didn't show he had been drinking, I'd be in jail now."

"What about the mother of the baby; how'd she get over it?"

"She didn't."

"Not even now?"

"Not when I came down here a month ago."

"That's terrible, Clell."

"It's worse than terrible. - It's for - forever. I carry my own hell - it's nowhere else."

"But this Mary, she should have stayed with you. She had no business going away. I'd never leave you."

"Mary stayed on through the trial, then left. That was her father's idea anyway. He's a big cattle rancher, wealthy and all that, and I always respected him and he me, I think. He's no fool, and he thought if she'd go away for a year after all that happened, she'd know how she really felt. Oh, sure her father's a real King Solomon, dividing people from each other to get at the truth, but I'll tell you about this another time." This was my first discussion about Mary, or the accident, with anybody.

Cassandra seemed to grasp details I'd omitted, and went out of her way to cheer me up and to please me these two days. We made love and slept when we felt like it.
She dressed in short skirts, changed into more conventional dress, back to short skirts and low cut blouses, swept her light brown hair back behind her ears and wore long dangling earrings that caught the sunlight when the weather changed and we went out into it. She also read poetry from the Rubaiyat, changed into something flimsy, or undressed completely, and played her phonograph, softly. She drove us out one night to the desert, beyond the borders of the cultivated irrigated farms, and we talked and watched jackrabbits appear in the lights from the car, saw shadows of grazing cattle, watched stars above the southern mountains, and went back to town for Chinese food when we were hungry. I drank only milk and coffee. I refused to talk much about newspaper work.

"Are you good at it?"

"I know my job, if that's what you mean."

"Will you go back to it?"

"Maybe. But never, if I don't have to."

"What'll you do then?"

"I don't know, but I just don't want to go back to a newspaper for a while."

She recited a favorite quatrain from the Rubaiyat:

"The Moving Finger writes; and having writ, moves on. Nor all your piety nor wit shall lure it back to cancel half a line nor all your tears wash out a word of it."
She loved poetry, some of it, she said. And she loved her English courses the two years she spent at the university. She'd gone up to the northern part of the state to live with her father and his new wife, his third. Her father was a skilled carpenter but he wore western clothes for some reason, the cattleman's coat, boots and stetson. She'd gone up to live with him, and entered the university nearby as a freshman, at 19, and was happy doing it. In less than two years, her father and stepmother broke up, each moving away, her father first, and then her stepmother. She stayed on, working as a waitress in a restaurant till she had finished the second year at school. Then she returned, broke, and miserable. She got one job, then another, hating office work, and when she was 21, went to work in the Blue Lounge. She was a natural shill, a man-trap, and music was exciting to her.

"It has meaning for me. I think many young people think they live in today's music. Something in modern music says to me, this is the way I ought to live, and the heck with the others and the lushes at the bar."

"Like me?"

"You weren't a real lush. A lush is a slob who is so far gone he doesn't have any reason or sensitivity about other people when he's with alcohol."
"That's the way I was."

"No, you weren't. You cared about the people in the accident, about Mary and her father, and you cared about yourself. You must also care about me."

She was enjoying her job at the Blue Lounge, until I came along, but she was frustrated by losing her father again. She had found and lost him many times, she said, since she was a girl of ten. She was lonely. Her mother was in Elko, her father was in Seattle. Her father had married three times since she was a girl, and her mother five times. She didn't know which parent started it, but it just went on. They messed up their lives.

"Life is hell," she said. "I hate it, sometimes. I didn't think so at school when I was in chemistry, or biology, or in English, when I was learning something. You know what I mean, don't you? But that ended. I always seem to lose what I want before I really find it. I hate it all sometimes. No, maybe I don't. Not when I'm with you, anyway. But, Clell, I always had to steal from life to get anything. So, I let this boy I knew from high school talk me into marrying him. I was lonely, and he's a good dancer, a real doll, but letting him talk me into the marriage was the worst mistake I could have made. I knew that on our wedding night. I wanted my marriage to be bright, but it turned into frustration and hell."
We were sitting in the darkness in the car that night, outside the little house, and a strong wind swayed the car every so often. The rain had stopped but it was threatening again. The air masses in the valley were swirling, top to bottom and the wind was strong. She slid close to me. Her eyes were large, clear green and wet either from tears or from the pale light from the street lamp on the road.

"I really want to keep house. I think I married Joe because I wanted to keep house or have a home. I thought I'd sew, wash his shirts, scrub floors, slave for him - it seemed so romantic. But now I don't know if I can do that for anybody. I remember when I was a sophomore in high school we girls would talk about keeping our own house, not the way our mothers wanted us to do it, but in the fun way we wanted to do it. We'd tell ourselves it might be wonderful. How stupid we were! The only time I think that I liked to be a teen-ager was when I wrote for the high school paper - I wrote the poems - and my English teacher said I should always continue to write poems. She was a doll. I loved her, and I wished all the time she was my mother."

She wanted me to read the Prophet when we were in the house, and I did it to please her.
She liked to be comfortable, and she'd either stretch out on the bed or on the couch where I sat, and she'd wear nothing but a pair of lace panties, or not even that. She also played the banjo and sang ballads. Little by little I could feel that I was alive again, growing. She read me only two poems from her notebooks and one she'd written since she'd returned from college. The last poem was bold and bitter. She overcharged her lines with alliteration when she wrote about love and bombs.

Some phrases I recall are 'finger-foundations of love', 'leg-love', 'darkness destroyed', 'bombed breasts, blown to bits', and 'hateful earth, hot birth, father and mother eating dirt.'

She shocked me often. I didn't think anybody could. She also played records that contained long silences between the plucking of weird combinations of sounds, mood pieces, and she read poetry in rhythm to these records.

"Do you like my poetry?"

"Yes, I like it," I said, though her talent had a long way to develop.

She got off the bed once, and came toward me spinning on her toes on the planks on the floor, naked. She had no shyness about nakedness in front of me, and she didn't understand why I didn't strip down always when she did.
"Do you ever feel embarrassed about going around naked?"

"No, why should I? There's nothing I like doing better than walking around naked when I'm feeling good. I'd like to go naked with you in a warm rain." She put on those long earrings, with her hair coming down on her bare shoulder and posed in the nude for me. She seemed to watch me when she posed, immobile, sculptured, slightly fearful or watchful for my approval. I never understood this. When this momentary mood would leave her, she'd dance some more.

"Sometimes I wish I were a stripper in a burlesque house," she said, dancing to the music, provocative.

"You're crazy."

"No, I'm not. Don't you think I'd make a good stripper?"

I was sure of it. Full-limbed, she suddenly folded her hands under her breasts into her stomach, and turned sideways to look off into some thought, or pensively over my head, a nude sculpture, alluring.

She abandoned the small house two weeks later when her divorce papers were issued. She moved into a motel on the edge of town on Highway 30, near the green lawns of the city golf course. Her rooms had limited kitchen
facilities, and I stopped drinking and spent many hours after work with her at her motel room, swimming with her in the small motel pool. She took over the afternoon shift at the Blue Lounge, but not without a reduction in salary. Her boss, a tall, lean man with sallow skin, never drank but quietly sat at each of the many bars he owned in town for an hour each evening. He watched the cash register closely. She had to work late only on Friday and Saturday nights, when the club was jammed with fun people. I didn't go to town on these nights.

---V---

In early August I decided to bring Cassandra out to the farm for Sunday dinner. My Uncle Bill thought it was a good idea. My aunt did too. She was a good cook, and she liked to show it. She just asked me one question.

"What church does the young lady go to?"

I didn't have the slightest idea, and said so.

"I don't think I want to go," Cassandra said, when I met her that night. "I'm not the kind that farm families want to invite to Sunday dinner."

"I know you're not. But I can't see why that makes a difference."

"It can."

"It can't."
"It can. It can make a difference between us."

"How?" I didn't want her to be so fiercely resistant.

"I don't know; I just feel it will."

"You'll have to come," I said. "I told them you'd come and I want you to see the farm, Cassandra."

"And supposing I come, shall I tell your aunt what I do for a living, if she asks me? And she'll ask me. You don't know women like I do."

"Why, Cassandra, tell her you're stripped down these days to making a bare living."

"Funny man. Come let's shower and talk later."

Later when I talked about the dinner, she still refused the invitation.

"What do you care about my aunt, and the way you make a living?"

"Because I care. Because I'm a barmaid and I know how she would feel. I have a good job, and it's acceptable - in a bar. People look for you there. They want to introduce you to their friends and their wives but this doesn't work in the daylight, in the world outside the night club."

"You may be right about some people, but not all. How can you be so sure at your age. You're not old enough to know for sure. I tell you that you can be friends, be
accepted anywhere, like anyone else, at bridge clubs, or even campfire councils."

"Oh, no I can't. You might be a bright newspaperman, but you've got something to learn. Sure, it's easy for barmaids and hostesses to have friends, with all the men that come in, and even with some women. And they like you, they really do if you're a nice person. The men buy you drinks and tell you their problems, and then they use their happy little paws on you if you let them do it, and they may even think they fall in love with you. That is more than I can accomplish or do at bridge clubs or church socials. But the friendships I make at the Lounge - even with the wives - are made when one of us has had a few drinks, or is smashed. And this friendship is between us only inside those bar rooms where the mirrors and the polished glasses reflect the night."

"So?"

"It doesn't go for the day, only for the night. Outside the Blue Lounge, where it's daylight on Main Street I don't even talk to any of these friends when I meet them. Some of them won't talk to me either. But I can't stand them outside the club anyway, so that doesn't annoy me. I don't see anybody. I don't even remember that day you said I came up through that crowd at the bus station - like what was I?"
"Like a prize animal out of the show ring and with a bead-less thong."

She laughed and went to fix coffee. "You almost make me feel like the Queen of Sheba, or something special."

"You are something special, something new, I think. You always will be."

"That's gracious. OK? I'm glad. But you know I was afraid the first time I talked to you, how'd you take to me in the daylight. Even now, I hold my breath. So I'm the prize in or out of the show ring, the Queen of Sheba, Cleopatra. I get you all stirred up, but what will happen when you tire of me? Will you still want me around? Will I hold up day after day? I keep this place clean; there's no dirty dishes or douche bags laying around, but am I passing the exam? Will I continue to pass? - I couldn't stand to flunk out. I'm too involved. Before I met you I told myself I'd never get involved again. It's too painful. Even with you, it started out to be fun; you were only supposed to be my fun guy, and I your fun girl."

She went to the closet and pulled out a dark brown dress. She held it against her body. The hemline came down to mid-knee.

"Now this dress ought to be respectable enough for your aunt," she said.
"Then you're coming?"

"Yes, I'll come. And you can tell your aunt I work as a clerk-typist in a bank. OK? Then tell her I also love pumpkin pie with whipped cream on it. I think I can taste it now."

She came out to the farm the next Sunday, shortly after noon. It was a bright, golden day. Every crop, excepting the grain, was a brilliant deep green with all the leaves full grown. There were no washed out greens that showed too little nitrogen or too much water. The green was deeper and more brilliant than jade. The grain field was golden and the large plump kernels were filling into the hard dough stage. I'd set the water trickling evenly down the corrugates that early morning so that each would flow at the same speed as the other to the bottom of the fields. The water glittered at the feed ditches, and again in the drain ditch at the bottom of the fields. I had changed into clean Sunday clothes, silver cuff links, and a neatly pressed tie.

Cassandra stepped out of her car in a new dress, not the brown one. It was much shorter than the brown one that she showed me in the motel room. This dress hung on her almost like a short night gown, filmy, high waisted, straight down in columns, frilled at the hemline high above her
knees, well upon her thighs. It was orange with black spots on it, a leopardess in a bed dress. She had dyed pale streaks through her long hair and swept it back behind her ears to show off long glass earrings with pointed tips along her neck. When I came toward her, she didn't look at me, but at the buildings and up to the branches of the Siberian elm tree, which were stripped of leaves and bare in spots. An army of furry orange and brown caterpillars had attacked it a few days ago. It was of no consequence in the life of the tree.

Cassandra's face, I saw on coming closer to her, looked heated under the thick, pale make-up. She seemed to me, even as I recognized the fragrance of her perfume, and the green shadows smudged above her eyelids as something frozen, dry, but like magic ice, burning and scorching to look at.

"Lovely," I said. I was delighted now that I was over the initial shock of her effect. She was funny in a way, but exciting. I didn't care what she was wearing. If my aunt had to ask Cassandra which church she attended, that was her business and perhaps her discomfort. If she wanted to know what Cassandra did for a living, I had no misgivings about her saying anything, any trade. If my aunt persisted in questioning and Cassandra wanted to say she
was a stripper in a burlesque - which I knew she had never yet seen or set foot in - that was fine with me too. I took her up the steps into the house and I knew then that Cassandra was not even going to offer to help with the dishes. There was going to be no pretense, no quarter given to the norms of social habits, and she was coming to exaggerate her own way of life.

I sat across the table from Cassandra all through the dinner. She said little, asking no questions and answering briefly. If she had thought she was going to destroy the hour she was mistaken. My aunt was very gracious, and she openly admired Cassandra, for wearing a short dress so well. This startled Cassandra and she soon warmed up to my aunt and uncle.

"It's lovely on you," my aunt said. "I wish some of my friends could see how lovely one of these dresses can really be." She really believed Cassandra looked lovely, not cheap as Cassandra thought'and would judge her and the pale make-up delighted her. My aunt's response to her dinner guest fooled me too. As for my uncle, he acted as if the dress and make-up were routine sights around the farm. He liked her most when she took a second thick helping of pumpkin pie. He also liked her earrings.

"They're pretty, young lady. In the sunlight they
ought to catch some of the green colors around here."

He told Cassandra that I'd been raised on this farm, and that it belonged to my father. He had never spoken about this, at least in front of me, since my arrival on the farm, and I thought the dinner enjoyable for everyone. I took Cassandra outside to show her around the place.

I showed her a faded scar on one of my nostrils and pointed out that I had run into a wire fence around the pasture, and had nearly torn my nose off at the time. She wanted to touch the scar, and we walked arm in arm to the fence. The bright sunlight jumped like small pencil-lights from her twirling earrings, putting down rainbows on her bare shoulders, and though she said little she stopped to study every ditch, fence, and field that we passed. She lost one of her shoes when the thin-spiked heel sunk into the grass bank of a ditch full of slow, sun-sparkling water. I described the layout of the farm, and what my father had started.

"I didn't know that you loved this farm so," she said when we returned to the driveway under the branches of the elm tree.

"Maybe it's the love for my lost youth."

"Isn't it all the same? Lost youth, a lost love, a loss of anything, - farm, parents?"
She thanked my uncle and aunt for the dinner. We drove back to town, and we were both silent until we reached the main highway.

"Why did your mother sell the farm?" she asked.

"She needed money, I suppose, or to get away. I don't know."

"Couldn't you have farmed it?"

"I think so. But she had other plans. I can't explain her. She lived 25 years on this farm, and she left it as if she'd lived on it for one week-end. Many farm women feel the same way, you can't tell, maybe even my Aunt Carmen. But it takes an event - like my father's death - to make some of them realize it. But how can I explain my mother? I can't."

"I think you belong on a farm or a ranch," she said.

"Everybody does. And ever since Gary Cooper did his job so well for the movies, millions think the only place to have a ranch is in Montana, but I'd rather have one here - in this state." I thought about the promise Mary's father had made, that Mary's husband would one day take over his ranches. I changed the subject.

"What a dress you're wearing," I said to Cassandra.

"Like it? It's sexy alright. I was thinking just now that we should make this leopard outfit our very private
going-out dress, especially for our farm dinners."

"Especially for Sunday farm dinners."

She drove off the main highway with all its heavy traffic and headed onto a narrow county road toward the mountains. The cheatgrass was brown, and the thistles were blooming as she drove another 20 miles into sagebrush country toward a grove of willows and cottonwoods that lay below the rimrock that shot up to the mountains and levelled out toward Nevada. A creek came out of the rimrock somewhere and we parked near the willows on its bank. Native grasses were thick where we walked. We spent the afternoon there, and most of the hour of dusk when the chilled air caused me to build a circle of rocks with a fire in it. She gathered small stones in the creek, keeping the ones she thought had silver. Eventually the mosquitoes drove us off.

There was a quality of childlike summertime about everything we did, and it was a time of song and healing for me. Sometimes our passion spun the plot, but so did her honesty. I knew that Cassandra was now waiting for me to decide what would become of us. I didn't tell her that I was receiving Mary's letters, and that I answered the last one. But I was considering a move to California with Cassandra after the harvests to find a job on a small, weekly newspaper.
Shortly after the second cutting of hay was put up, I received a letter from Mary's father. His letter, the "Senator's" letter, stirred up the water.

He wrote that Mary left Italy and was flying home. She knew she was wrong to leave me, and her father must accept this, or reject her.

"Under the circumstances," he wrote, "and the fact that Mary has at least tried to follow my recommendations for a separation period of one year, I feel obliged to give in to her wishes, and yours I assume, and present you with my blessings. Even though your separation from each other hasn't been for a year's duration, as I preferred it would be, you both acquiesced against your natural desires to the demands of a perhaps senile and foolish father. In gratitude that you honored me in your time of stress, my former offer to give you the biggest wedding this state has ever witnessed still stands. I'll have the governor there, and your former publisher if you wish, the deans at the university, the art department, ranchers, cowbelles, and hosts of others . . ."

I didn't like his letter. As if a wedding for display mattered, and as if his organization and political influences were important. And who said I agreed to any separation. That was strictly between Mary and him. I was the weed in
the field at the time. I read on. He wrote that he'd drive Mary down here, to visit me, probably next week.

Now what? I remember walking across the fields where my uncle and aunt couldn't see me to sit down on a ditch-bank under the long row of silver-green Russian live trees and some black locust trees. The trees were planted there for a windbreak. Red-wing blackbirds on the trees cried out to each other from the branches. They have four or five different songs, each for a different message. I had none. I had no feelings now, or too many to know what I thought.

First it was Mary. Then Cassandra. I owed my life, perhaps, to Cassandra. Because of her, I quit drinking, some wounds were less painful, and mystery and wonder about life was restored. She was exciting, painfully honest, lovely, and utterly trusting. No giving her up.

Then Mary. She was loyal after all. She had reached it painfully too. She knew me in a different role in society, a role I would likely accept again after the summer. She too was exciting, artistic, honest, lovely, trusting. Her approach to life was respectable. She knew a little more about our generation, or was more attuned to it, than Cassandra's, and I to hers. She had also won over her father, and he was a strong influence in her life.
I didn't think I could reject her now. Her father would say, "I was right after all to urge the temporary separation. Better learn now than too late."

Cassandra drove out to the farm that evening, cool and beautiful, talking with my aunt and uncle about our cool, fresh nights in the summer. She was more relaxed, mature, and more in bloom, like a girl who has entered womanhood truly. I didn't know yet what to say about the letter I had received from Mary's father, or how I was going to handle it. We drove to town in her car, and then she drove me back to the farm later. Each night that week she drove out to see me for awhile, sometimes visiting with my aunt and uncle or just sitting beside me on the lawn swing in the backyard and listening to stories about crops and cattle.

Then, I received the telegram from Mary, she was home. She could hardly wait to see me.

She arrived with her father the next Friday afternoon, driving so quietly into the driveway that when I saw them it seemed unreal. Cassandra worked that night and Saturday night, so there was some relief in the timing.

Mary was lovely, affectionate, and bubbling. She was sure the world turned properly on its axis. Her father, a short chunky man with white hair, was outgoing and he got
along well with my uncle and aunt. He told them Mary and I were engaged. My uncle watched me all afternoon when he thought I didn't know it. I walked with Mary around the barn and the steel granaries to the feedlot just to get away from the others. I still cared deeply for her, for what she thought and felt. I enjoyed walking with her, watching her in the thin yellow summer dress she bought in Rome, the purple sandals she picked up in Paris, and the green-blue bracelet on her wrist that she said she bought from a silversmith in Spain, but which she suspected was made in Mexico.

"And my perfume," she said, tracing with her finger the marks in the corner post that I had carved this summer, the big C, "comes from the drugstore at home. Now tell me what you've been doing all summer besides helping raise these wonderful crops. Whom did you see, or meet? You never wrote to me until I was ready to come home."

It wasn't the time for speaking about Cassandra. "Oh, I just worked hard and went to town for a little drinking now and then."

"Are you still drinking?"

"No, I quit."

"You always did have a lot of will power when you made your mind up to anything," she said, and I felt like I'd
told her a big lie, even though she said it.

She looked around at the hay stack, the cattle which she understood as thoroughly as many ranchers, and the fields of the adjoining farms and the far-off hills to the south.

"So this is the farm you were raised on. Show me around?"

I wasn't up to it. "Not now, let's just sit a while."

We sat on bales of hay that had fallen from the top of the stack, and I asked her about Italy. Of course, I told her that I cared for her, but I avoided any talk about marriage. I suggested we return to the house.

We came out around from behind the old milk barn to the open yard, when I saw Cassandra's car turning off the road to enter the driveway. She must have noticed, suddenly, the other car under the elm tree, and then seen me walk out into view with my arm around Mary's shoulders, because her car came to a sudden jerky stop, and the motor went dead. She got the engine going again, and backed out on the highway with a loud roar of the motor and almost backed into the path of a loaded grain truck. The truck had to swerve to avoid hitting her, and it almost went into the barrow pit before coming back on the highway, honking angrily. Her car sped away faster and faster, and then around the truck, passing it, on her way back to town.
"What a foolish thing to do," Mary said, laughing in almost hysterical relief. "That girl must have remembered something awfully important, to back out so recklessly."

I had to get in touch with Cassandra, and talk to her. The near-wreck jolted me and showed me how she felt - but every time I went to the phone, the party line was busy, or Mary's father was in the house. And my uncle and aunt insisted that Mary and her father stay with us in the house for the weekend. That night I went to town, but it was with Mary and her father, the senator. We wined and dined at the supper club, and I kept excusing myself throughout the evening to get to the public pay phone. But the Blue Lounge was so noisy that the night bartender could hardly hear me, and he was too busy to call anyone to the phone he said. I called again, and when I did get through to him, he refused to call her away from her work to the phone. I insisted, and then the bartender became angry enough to hang up on me. When I called another time, he shouted that I was wasting my time, and if I called again, he'd hang up again. "We're too busy for the likes of you," he shouted. Yet, I should have gotten through. If I wanted to get through more strongly than I did, I'm sure I'd have found a way.

Mary was with me the next day too, and Sunday. She
never left my side, taking her drawing pad along when I went out to irrigate. In one sketch, she drew me with a kerchief around my forehead so that I resembled a peasant-farmer. In another, she drew me sitting on the ditchbank, holding the shovel between my legs, and looking down at an open book on the ground, with Latin on the open pages.

"Why the Latin book?"

"Oh, just an idea to convey the religion in everything, the crops, fields, hard labor, and in you."

When I awakened early on Sunday morning, desperate to make a phone call to Cassandra, I got a few rings through, but no one answered at the motel switchboard. Then Mary was downstairs with her father. If it weren't for her father, I believed I'd have told her, but I didn't want to humiliate her, upset her.

She left with her father early Monday morning. It was assumed I'd be up to see them in two weeks, or they'd be down.

At noon, I rushed to town without eating lunch with my uncle and aunt. I had to catch Cassandra at the motel before she went on the afternoon shift at the Lounge. I didn't know how I'd explain the weekend, but I assumed the bartender at least told her I called. She was in the apartment, listening to records, polishing her fingernails, and dressed in a short slip. She was playing the Beatles'
"Let Me Hold Your Hand." I turned it low.

"And so here's my lone stranger," she said, not even looking up at me when I entered the room. She rose and went to the dresser where she brought out a pair of black, mesh hose.

"I tried to call you many times this weekend," I began.

"Really? What did you want to know?"

"I want you to know about this weekend, Cassandra, and us - ."

"Oh, I think I know all I need to." She explained that she had to keep moving to get dressed in time for a celebration she was going to have at the Blue Lounge that afternoon. She was back on the night shift.

"Did the bartender tell you about my phone calls?"

"No."

"I kept calling you, but he wouldn't bring you to the phone."

She shrugged and wouldn't let me explain. She was in a hurry, she kept saying. She went to the telephone and gave the front office a number to call.

"Jim? I'll be a bit late. Can you come by here and pick me up in your car instead of meeting me at the club?"

She looked at me after she hung up.
"That was Jim Wilson. He was one of those boys waiting outside that night in the rain. He's got plenty of his father's money to spend, — and he's about my own age!"

So there it was, full circle. Our differences in age. She had a powerful weapon in that. Oh, the men and women and the arguments, and techniques. The roles change often in games of love and sex.

"Cassandra, for hell's sake! You've got to listen to me."

"Why? What do you have to say to me now? I didn't hear from you all weekend when I needed you and wanted you more than anyone ever wanted you in all your life. I just wanted a few words. Something! Anything! A few crumbs! Like 'I love you', or if that was too much to ask, then, 'I'll see you.' But nothing. Nothing at all. I guessed you had your precious Mary by your side when I drove into the driveway, and I prayed anyway you'd call, or rush to town to see me, to explain. Do you know I didn't go to work till 11 o'clock on Saturday night? I was waiting here, and when I couldn't stand it, I drove around town to do something before I went crazy or out of my mind. And I'd come back, and ask at the desk, 'Are you sure there weren't any phone calls for me while I was gone?' And I'd..."
go out again, and again to the desk, 'Are you sure?'
I annoyed that woman so much, she deliberately insulted
me by taking a long time to answer the phone when I called
from my room, and she'd sigh, 'Yes, now what do you want?'
It was horrible, and I called her from the club too,
asking the same question, 'Any phone calls for me' till
finally she'd pick up the phone and answer before I
spoke into it, 'No, no phone calls for you; why don't you
wait till tomorrow?' She made me feel like I was getting
kicked while I was going down. I hated it. I don't ever
want to go through this again, and I'm not going to."

"Cassandra, I called you every chance I could -.
"Did you say anything about me to Mary?"
"I couldn't. There was her father -.
"Didn't you say anything about me to Mary?"
"No, I didn't! I couldn't. Not this time."
She stared at me, then shrugging, turned and walked
away. "So what else is there for me to know about, Clell?"
"You've got to let me talk. I'm not giving you up -.
"Yes you are. You already have." She turned to
face me. "You can stay here if you wish while I dress but
then you're going to leave."

She went to the book shelves in the headboard of the
bed and came back with a sheet of looseleaf paper with
writing on it. "I wrote a poem for you, or whatever you wish to call it, this morning. I was going to mail it, but won't have to now. Read it here, take it with you, but leave me alone. I've got 15 minutes to get dressed for my date - with someone my own age, like I said."

There it was again, deliberate, the attack that I had no defense for, that divided us further. She went into the bathroom to dress.

I sat down at the table in the half-kitchen, to read what she had written. - I have this loose-leaf sheet open before me now -.

"What did I do while I waited for you last night? I went drag-racing on Main Street Alone ... It was a clear night And the Neon Signs on Main Street were glowing like Soft fires without flame. I out-dragged two other Cars, fleeing ... between rows of parking meters (my life Too is measured, I feel ticking away, a nickel an Hour), no more than that ... .

I think now of how I sat with you at her stools ... and By the cold stream near the willows and the cottonwoods, And in cars, but think no more of running naked with you in the rain ... .

Not now. I don't think of you now ... only of the time
I went naked in the rain.
I was a young girl then in the dark lane Behind a yellow house my father rented Out in the country, when my father was home. O, I wish I had known you then, and you me. You might have written me love notes. I wrote poems only then, young girl's poems, Silly I suppose ... not in prose ... .
But oh how numberless were the wonders of the world then ... .
Telephones and bells were two-way then, Clell. Goodbye ... and hail to Mary ... .
I read her poem at the table again and again, ashamed, stupidly pleased, stunned, feeling finality but refusing to accept it, and I would have tried to stop her but someone was knocking at the door. Cassandra came rushing out of the bathroom, dressed, wearing the leopard-spotted dress. She opened the door. Her date was standing there. He was a good-looking young fellow, already half-drunken, hair wet, a black string tie on his pearl buttoned white shirt, a white stetson hat in his hand. I recognized him as one of the young bucks who drove behind us that night in the rain. She didn't invite him into the room.

Silhouetted in the doorway, she turned toward me, hesitating, long legs shifting, the short orange dress with black spots bought for that Sunday dinner and pledged to our private farm dinners only, and to places like the fire near the creek and the cottonwoods where the mosquitoes had driven us off. The dress was no longer a private thing. She was wearing it now for the public.

"Goodbye, Clell," she said softly. "It was just too much for us."

"I'll wait here for you," I said, standing up.

"I wouldn't. I can't promise when I'll be back."

"I'll wait anyway."

80
She was gone. I waited in her apartment for hours, reading what she'd written a half-dozen times, and then I drove back to the farm. I called her apartment and the club later that night. I called the next day and the next. At the club they didn't hear from her either. She was reported finally in Nevada by the angry bartender. I didn't call again. A week later I was in Yellowstone Park with Mary. I worked hard on the farm through harvest and then said good-bye to my uncle and aunt. I promised to write. I haven't visited the farm since nor the town where I met Cassandra. She may be the mother of one or two cowboy children now, or a barmaid, or a shill somewhere. I don't know. I care but I don't know.

Wedding plans for Mary and me were completed; my former publisher was invited along with many others. I called it off. It was very unpleasant for the Senator but Mary understood; she at least knew that I cared deeply for her even though I couldn't marry her. She doesn't know yet about Cassandra. I didn't tell her.

-V-

It is a sign of despair, I think, that in my mind is a huge tapestry, with Cassandra in the center of it, large, naked, pale golden, her head turned slightly to the side, lithe, just like she was that first night in her messy
room. Her arms are folded under her bare breasts, and she looks off pensively above my head and beyond me, with her earrings hanging down alongside her long pale neck to catch the colors of the velvet greens, reds and blues of the other designs and scenes on the tapestry. She is the central figure, almost a sculpture come alive on an otherwise wine-dark tapestry of car wrecks, cattle crowded in a line in a chute, war flashes on ridges and rice paddies. Sophie Carter, water in rows between plants, weeds, Mary and her sketches, her father and his absurd power. - And at the bottom, centered under Cassandra's bare feet, the comic mask of laughter.

-VI-

Geography changes. I went to California. Not as a shabby, despairing speck, but self-respectful, acceptable. I didn't go to work on a small weekly newspaper. Instead, in public relations. Our largest account is a firm of management consultants. They have money. Big money. The clients are industries and public institutions. They research their problems, and then advise their clients about implementing the findings. They have sensitive attitudes about their clients, and I help work out detailed public relation programs for them. My current assignment is to work with one institution about marriage relations.
I have charts and slide sets. I speak with authority.

I have an expensive apartment looking out on the ocean bay, and I attend many lively meetings and cocktail parties. Sometimes I can taste burrs in my mouth. But I don't drink too much at these affairs for fear of losing control of myself. I wonder often if Cassandra didn't wear, that last day in the motel room, the leopard-spotted dress just for me, really.

# # #
He awakened each morning that winter while it was very dark—about 4 a.m.—and too early for his schedule to milk his cows. He remembered that. Then he'd tread softly, sure of himself even in the blackness in the hallway, softly by the bedroom doors so that he didn't disturb anyone else on the way down the narrow stairs. His wife, Theresa, needed the sleep. She had stayed up after midnight, typing his material, and she'd be tired. His two-year old boy stayed up always past his bed-time, enjoying popcorn, discovering what lay hidden behind everything else in the closets and cupboards, or standing on his head against the backs of the soft chairs, and he'd be tired. Yet at every change of pressure and squeak of floor board he'd awaken usually as if his day depended on seeing his father go out to the barn to milk.

He didn't worry about his five-year old daughter stirring this early in her bed. Every night she hated to go upstairs to her bedroom, protesting and delaying the climb up as long as her parents didn't lose patience, but she enjoyed her bed too much in the morning to think she had to see her father off to the barn.
It was idyllic in some ways that winter.

The view from the kitchen window was always a good one, even at that early dark hour. He'd switch on the kitchen light; the kitchen was small, as were most of the rooms, put gas fire under the coffee pot, and lean over the stainless steel sink to peer through the window into the darkness. First, the light would fall out across the dark lawn and on the snow around the posts that held the smooth wires on which hung a small throw rug. Then the light fell on trees, the now bare trees he and Theresa planted behind the bare lilac hedge - crabapple trees, Siberian elms, two willows, an ash, two birch and beyond the reach of the kitchen light the blacker rows he planted to black locust trees and beyond those the outlines of the row of Russian olives near a sod ditch, almost aglow with a line of snow.

Down the hill and across his fields and across fields below that, he could see that his neighbor was up milking. He knew this because the yardlight high on that battered red barn which he couldn't see was twinkling out of a halo in the blackness. His neighbor had only some seven or eight Brown Swiss cows. A strange man this neighbor. He'd inherited the farm from his wife who had died two years before, and for the first time in years you didn't hear her voice loud across the fields shouting at him from their yard or across the ditches where he'd be fixing fence, rain or
shine.

Now that the wife had died, this neighbor was never outside fixing fence, and last season he wasn't even out farming till it was time for the second cutting of alfalfa.

Elsewhere out in the darkness beyond this neighbor's place, at the next mile road which he couldn't see but where he knew three farmsteads faced each other through tall willows and taller lombardy poplars and across the rock-piled, rip-rapped banks of Rock Creek, neither house lights nor yard lights were aglow. Darkness there. Those neighbors didn't own dairy stock and they'd sleep later than those farmers who did. And beyond, miles beyond the generally sloping lands in crop production instead of in sagebrush because of the irrigation water out of the Snake River, was Twin Falls. Above the town of 25,000 people, the largest in a radius of over 100 miles of desert and canyon and mountain was the reddish glow on clouds gathered above town, as from a glow out of a furnace, or pit. He liked that town, had understood it.

He liked his neighbors, knew them well, and respected each for a good farmer and for friendliness and courtesy. He was 34 then, perhaps a year older, vigorous enough to milk a large herd of cows and farm his land for row crops. Not every neighbor was as young as he, nor worked as hard in season, and he didn't understand the neighbor below for farming fewer acres of row crops now that his wife died. He suspected his neighbor was milking his few cows this early in the darkness because he was going on a trip again,
still looking for another wife. A balding thick-set man of 55 years with a high shrill voice, so that he was called "Squeaky," he had travelled for a month that winter to different Indian reservations, perhaps into Mexico, looking for some young Indian girl for his wife. But for one reason or another the search came to nothing; perhaps his neighbor had a change of heart. A strange man, who didn't reveal too much since his wife died. Who knew?

Leaving the window, he went back to the table and sat down with a hot cup of coffee. He studied the top page of the material Theresa had typed for him and had stacked near the typewriter. It was another try at a story.

He remembered that story. He remembered too that he had picked up pneumonia that winter for the first time, and a check stub filed with the tax records for that year reminded him of the large size of the drug bill and of the family doctor they had then.

The story his wife had typed was also about a doctor who bought a farm as an investment, and of the doctor's relationship with the veterinarian who was called out to treat his sick cattle. A doctor of humans, and a doctor of animals; he had liked the subject of the story, and he remembered one scene where the family doctor, frustrated by the silences of the veterinarian and trying to help herd some of the cattle
into a holding pen, stepped right out of his overshoes, first one foot and then the other into a layer of deep, soupy, wet manure, and then stepped out of his shoes.

He appreciated the way Theresa was urging him on to write again, at least to give it a try till the farm season began again with a rush. He wouldn't have started writing again if Theresa hadn't coaxed him to do it. Perhaps it was all the publicity about the Great Man up at Sun Valley, perhaps not, but it happened just at the time that he'd gone to rereading the collection of some famous short stories.

He looked at his hands. It was hard for him to write again. Mechanically, his hands were swollen from years of labor, from handling a shovel all day at the irrigation ditches or from grasping tightly the levers and wheels on the tractors when he was plowing, cultivating, harvesting, or in changing the implements and gripping wrenches on large tight nuts. It was hard then for him to use a thin stem of a pencil or to have the control and the sensitivity in each finger to hit the typewriter keys quickly, so he wrote in long hand, slowly. Theresa almost had to decipher his hand-written copy line by line. Further, the words came to him slowly. Lots of flab. Of the first 100 pages he composed, not one had a usable page of writing on it, and it left him exhausted and frustrated. But he was glad of his efforts, and by the end of the winter he had a few stories he thought
might have some merit. He even liked writing in the small store-room upstairs that they converted into a "study" just by rearranging the footlockers and stored items.

What enticing power, he decided since, must have been conceived then, however vaguely, for the future. There was the promising future for the children, for him and Theresa, for all of them. And there was the future of each day and the future of the years ahead and this must have given deep refractory power to the thought, acts, and moments of that winter, which made the real illusory, the illusory real and, even now that he had lived and survived into that future and he was now closer toward his own black and white infinity, and as he struggled with thoughts and memories, through the red angers since of wild shoutings and his accusations and the departures each from the other, he was somewhat unsure, as he lifted memory from the years, like from rubble to that time, what was it that gave then that soft glow that each had, as he recollected, each in their movements around that house and that farm? They were beautiful then. Was that when it all changed?

Then there was the Great Man, the world-known stylist and story-teller, who had been forced to leave Cuba and was supposed to be writing on a novel up at Ketchum, in a rented cabin. Perhaps the best of all American living writers, he was a bit tarnished though; news stories appeared in the
daily paper about his appearances in Ketchum, about the pearl buttons on his western shirts, as though this shirt would win him western friends and perhaps it did, about his words on the Hungarian pheasant and Chukar partridges and there was always a photograph of him with a huge chest, a barrel stomach, Sourdough whiskers, a shotgun.

He wondered if the Great Man awakened ever at 4 a.m. to think about the future of stories. He doubted if he needed to. An article in the Sunday newspaper delivered to his mailbox out on the rural road reported that the Great Man wrote every day from 6 a.m. to noon. But somehow he didn't believe that. The article was written by a reporter out of Salt Lake writing for the whole intermountain region, a vast farming area, and it just wouldn't do for the farmers to read that this Great American writer, who was going to live among them, slept late and wrote after. Oh no, it just wouldn't do. No, it was only that 6 a.m. sounded better for the farm readers. He'd have believed it that winter if, say, Somerset Maugham or Evelyn Waugh, who were alive then, said they wrote from 6 a.m. to noon. Their approach seemed to be more disciplined, with regularity. But not the Great Man, at least that was his feeling after studying again the Great Man's short stories and some of the longer works and reading about him in the newspapers.
He wondered if he'd ever get up to Ketchum while the Great Man was there. Theresa thought he should go because he'd been talking about it for weeks now at every meal when he wasn't writing. He was over his attack of pneumonia and he could take the trip easily. It was a short way up there. The road north across the Snake River and north between the brown wastes of lava rock, then sagebrush and into cow country that would be open and fast to the Sawtooth mountains and he could drive the 150 miles in two and a half hours. After milking he could eat, shave, and be up at the mountain town of Ketchum before 10 a.m.

But he knew he wouldn't do that either. He decided the Great Man would be writing by that hour. He'd be sitting at his table of thick planks in front of the large window view of Mt. Baldy, looking up at it when he stopped writing to think about a word, a character, a previous scene, an itch in his foot, or about people he once knew in Spain, a bull fighter, a Lady Brett, a Falangist, or the laughter of Gertrude Stein as she finished reading a story he showed her. Or did the Great Man think about these or about anything except booze or his own younger years; or the income from anthological stories.

No, he thought, he couldn't drive up to Ketchum any morning because the other would be writing then, even if he didn't begin at six a.m. And he thought, too, that even if
Theresa wanted to meet his wife, the lady Miss Mary, how did he know but that the Great Man might refuse him an entrance into the cabin at anytime. And he feared even more than the Great Man's refusing to see him at the door, the open resentment and annoyance that the wife might show, even if he was inside, at this intrusion to their privacy at the lonely cabin below Mt. Baldy. One never knew about these things.

He quit thinking about Ketchum and sat listening to the tick of the small white clock on top of the refrigerator. He didn't hear anyone stirring in the bedrooms upstairs; not even his son, but he did hear the wind humming through the bare trees outside on the lawn. Looking up, he saw the sky through the upper half of the window, cloudless, wine-blue with the stars fading. The darkness was receding. He went into the laundry room at the end of the hall and dressed in his levis and a blue work shirt and when he looked out the window again across all the fields in the valley he saw yard lights twinkling palely wherever there were trees around a farmstead. Everyone was out milking, feeding cattle, or back in a kitchen eating breakfast. He thought of all the kinds of people there were in this irrigated desert country. The grey-headed neighbor to the north with that feedyard filled with a thousand head of fattening steers and a labyrinth of feed bunks who told him he worked to get rich only because of a hate. The chunky braggart with two
cadillacs and a grain elevator who told him he'd like to see small farmers go broke and out. The renter with the buggered leg who told him he wanted to build his herd of milk cows up to fifteen, and couldn't in all these years. The frail old farmer with a worthless ranch across the river who told him he'd trade two sections straight across for his 100 acres, "just to help a young man out." The young shoe clerk from town who rented a shack down the road and put his family in it and who told him he wanted a place in the country so his young, registered police dog would grow up healthy.

He didn't know that he'd ever write about these people, but he could extract bits from each of what he knew and write them up into a story one day, if he kept on with it. He regretted that soon he'd have to quit writing and get to farming. Yet too, he'd feel better in his lungs when he shovelled irrigating ditches and the sun warmed and he watered the alfalfa fields green and the grainfields tall before they headed out and all this before he planted beans in warm wet soil in June.

But the regret was the stronger feeling now as he saw snow only on ditches and fence rows in long thin white streaks like borders around the idle fields. Only last week the snow was thick on open fields and on highways, and the ski bus had travelled by the front of the house loaded with young high
school students out for a day's run at Magic Mountain. Now the roads and fields were bare, the foothills to the south were brown, and the snow receded higher up the ridge to the tops of the mountains.

He was jumpy thinking about it. Everytime he saw a tractor roar down the road in front of the house and then roar up the next hill on the way to a farm, repaired now ready for spring work, he got jumpy. He was reminded of the gearbox in the grain drill he hadn't repaired this winter because he took up writing again, and of hoses and couplings of the hydraulic system in his large tractor he hadn't replaced and of the sprockets on the shafts in the manure loader he hadn't checked, and he got more jumpy thinking about it. Of course, he had had pneumonia, and that didn't help matters.

He decided to put in longer hours to get out one more story before he went to farming. Only he did wish all the same he had a way to approach the Great Man before winter ended, and he kept thinking about it until he did his outside chores and milked his cows.

II

After chores and his breakfast, he went upstairs to the small storeroom where he was working. The children were playing "Dodge City Saloon" in the living room, drinking out of the water glasses as though these were jiggers and spilling
these on the dog's head or tail, and going "bang bang" at the imaginary bounty hunters behind large rocks and he had to go upstairs away from their noise if he wanted to write the rest of the morning.

He was thinking about the opening for a story when his five-year old daughter came up the stairs into the small store-room. His writing table, once in the kitchen at his mother-in-law's house, was pushed against the white plaster wall between two old green footlockers, away from window drafts, and he didn't hear her until she came up behind his chair and poked her finger into his spine.

"Stick-em-up, chickyl" She giggled. "Daddy, are you writing stories again?"

Startled, he jerked about in his chair and said, "Don't do that ever again. Didn't I tell you kids not to come up here when I'm busy writing?"

He was sorry after he spoke to her this way; now the smile on her young girl's face withdrew into a look of quiet and fear. He had frightened her and he watched her face change as she stepped back away from him toward the doorway. She was hearing many sharp-spoken words these weeks he'd been writing, and Theresa cautioned him not to be impatient. The little girl wasn't used to him this way. She would never get used to him this way, not ever. And too, she was impatient in turn with her younger brother. They learned to pass on
what they picked up from their elders, sometimes in double
strength back again, as the scene repeated itself many times.

He smiled quickly at his daughter, before she could
flee down the stairway.

"Come back here, Jeannie. Please. I'm sorry I was
impatient. Even when I'm sharp with you, you want to remem­
ber I'm not right and that I always think you're a fine
little girl."

She brightened up at once and came back to him at the
chair. Then she slipped into his arms and leaned forward
on his writing table. She picked up a sheet of paper and
looked at it, unsmiling.

"Why are you writing stories, Daddy?" she asked quietly.
She wanted to know because she'd known only that her father
was a farmer.

He smiled at her holding the sheet of paper.
"I don't know," he said. "Because I want to, I guess."
She held the paper close to her nose now, smelling it,
her eyes wide open.

"I like this smell," she said. "I also like the smell
of that new magazine we get in the mail box. What makes it
smell so good?"

"The newsprint," he said, smiling at her. "It's the
smell of newsprint. And the paper itself smells good. I
like the smell too, though I never thought about it before."

"Why didn't you think about it before?" she asked.

"I don't know, I just didn't," he said.

Then he was impatient with her again. He didn't want to be impatient but he didn't want to get badgered either with the attack of questions she'd ask him in a moment if he allowed her. Last night there'd been that business about seeds. She knew all the time that a seed grew in a mother's stomach into a child, but last night she wanted to know about two seeds. She trapped him before he knew it after the television program while they were eating popcorn.

"Daddy, does the man have to have seeds, too?"

"Of course."

Now here she was again in the store-room, asking about his stories, asking about the words he pencilled out and why he wrote in new ones. She clapped her hands when he said he'd tell her, but only if she left him along after that, and he gave her one of his pencils.

"Sometimes I cross words out, Jeannie, because they aren't needed," he said. "And sometimes I cross words out to put in new words I like better. Do you see? Now here on the top line I crossed out the word "grass" and changed it to the word "lawn" so that you'd know the man and woman were near the house and not out in the grass on top of the ditchbank, but in their yard. Do you see, Jeannie?"
She looked up at him, stared at him, hugged him as best she could and then burst out, "Daddy, I love you."

And as he sat at the table, surprised, overwhelmed, her face still before him, she went tripping in a hurry down the narrow stairs, then back up again for the pencil, and down once more, calling out to Theresa, reaching her to tell her what she had learned, repeating so much as he could hear from where he sat, word for word, repeating that about "grass" and "lawn" and why he crossed out some words in a story.

So long as his mind worked for him, so long as he continued to search for life in and out of himself, so long as he lived he'd remember that movement of hers as she hugged him and turned to run down, up, and down the narrow stairs, unable to contain her joy and how he sat quietly listening to her. Whatever and wherever he searched his own childhood in manner, thought, or recollection, or wherever he went - stressing his own absurdity - searching for his youth, nothing could go beyond that moment, in discovery, when he confided some knowledge as she asked for it and in return, in her trust, gave him, the father, her wild, innocent love. It would have made no difference then, had he known, that in the future, the future in which he now lived, and information or knowledge he offered to share, perhaps in what he thought was in the same manner, was going to be rejected, with scorn,
boredom, and even hatred. What really, he wondered, was the
difference in his information, or in his intent, or in
himself, between the time that winter when she was five
years old and the time she was 15, and 18? And there was.
A triple-vision of events, of three ages he could look back
to at one time and which baffled him in part even as he
recognized each clearly. And the fights, oh the fights.
Supposing he had concentrated only on the farm? Or suppose
the Great Man remained in Cuba and hadn't arrived in Ketchum,
accessible to him?

But what, he wondered, would happen if he did show his
stories. Would they bore the man? Hadn't that man read
stories handed him by publishers of many young writers,
writers who showed literary promise at a more meaningful,
younger age than his? The thought made him want to hold
back, to be cautious, to drive up to Ketchum without his
stories and talk about other things. He'd have to prepare
his questions in advance. And what could he ask him?

He could ask him about the Cuban revolt. But what the
hell did he care about Cuba, even if the Great Man did.
One bunch out, another bunch in, the despots all bring their
loots to Florida and New York, and then sail on to the
Riviera where they doodle away their time perusing historical
forces and collections of paintings, statues, and pornography.
He would ask him about literature, like any new college instructor preparing a lecture series on modern fiction. What do you think about the function of modern fiction, the technique of modern fiction? The non-hero in fiction, or the wildness of modern fiction? Of society in fiction?

Or should he ask him about contemporaries—what did he think about T. S. Eliot's late marriage to his secretary and William Faulkner's boozing and Pasternak's astonishing guts and Floyd Patterson as a short-term champ?

And should he get bolder and ask him about Kilimanjaro, Paris after World War II, and Paris after World War I when perhaps he worked hardest, the lake and woods in Michigan, Spain without bullfights and with sheepmen, and Spain before Franco, about writing stories situated everywhere but in the U. S. ever since he'd matured, and about the use of relative pronouns in several stories, and adverbs after the verb and before the object, and why he maintained the philosophy of courage into his older age and as if there were nothing else for men his age to do but talk about fornicating as if he were bragging, and talk about conquering fear from behind a rifle. This bothered him as he read about the Great Man at Ketchum in news-story after news-story.

Or would it be useless to ask? What if he were addicted to wine or hard liquor and took to the woods above Picabo he loved in the afternoon, half-potted, half-glowing, and so
ending his days with alcohol.

But would he know if he didn't go up to meet him?

He decided then to mail up to Ketchum all the stories he had written since the middle of December, and trust them to luck. He got up from the table and stepped across the footlocker to where he had a pile of large manila envelopes on a varnished plank he used for a shelf in the corner of the small room. He'd put his stories in an envelope, enclose a short note, and mail it out. He was sure they were good stories, each stronger than the one before, and they were better too than the disorganized things he'd written ten years before. Then, he had been too intense, too filled with war images of swollen, blackened soldiers laying in the muddy footpaths of the jungle, while he ate C rations, and he had lacked technical skill to know what to do with those images. And then, too, he had to go back to Korea to fight again, only this time in mountain snow. No, he had it wrong. His memory rearranged itself. Before Korea, he and Theresa had separated; he for the bankroll and an actress friend in Georgia, and she for his army friend, the corporation's young rising lawyer who went up to Alaska to sit in on airplane contracts. Then he had gone to Korea. That was the order in which things happened that stopped him cold from writing. But that was behind them now.
He went down the stairway to eat lunch, hoping it would be soup. He was too nervous in his stomach to eat anything solid. Besides, since he had gone back to writing, and was not outside in the weather as much, he had lost his appetite. He used to eat a long loaf of bread in a day, now he ate only a slice, and he wanted soup most of the time.

The kids were in the living room, shouting and wrestling the big police dog who had just been allowed back in the house, teasing the big dog, blowing in its ears, poking their fingers up its nose, pulling on its tail, and then hiding behind the sofa. He glanced at them all and then went into the kitchen where he sat down at the kitchen table, quiet.

Theresa was at the counter near the sink fixing salads with cottage cheese and Elberta peaches which he liked. The light from the sky came brightly through the window where she was standing. She looked at him and she knew something was wrong.

"Would you like some soup?" she asked.

"Yes." He sat quiet.

He had a thought, and he went back upstairs to look at a few books on the shelves. He opened a book written by the Great Man. The story was The Undefeated. He turned pages to the Killers. To The Snows of Kilimanjaro. All the words were in place, he thought, the points of view crystal-clear.
The stories were handled with absolute control. Then he opened Hawthorne, Conrad, D. H. Lawrence, Somerset Maugham. In these he found adjectives and adverbs that might have been left out, and he felt better. He found paragraphs with more than one point of view in them. He even found what might be considered mistakes here and there in language structure. He felt better. He opened Faulkner, and he felt better yet. He went back downstairs.

"Anything wrong?" Theresa asked him.

"No, not now."

He watched her dump a can of beef noodle soup into a pan on the stove and then waited for her to pour water out of the can into it. She was wearing long plaid pants and her light brown hair was pulled back behind her ears in a pony tail because it was convenient for her. Her eyes were a bit tired, shadowed, and her face was pale from the typing last night. But her skin was smooth and she looked relaxed and she moved quickly with the body grace of a tall person who doesn't mind being tall. Her hair was the same color as the little girl's but her eyes were a paler green. She had taken a lot from him a long time ago when he was a college student and trying to learn to write, and the wonder of it all was that she coaxed him into writing again when she knew what it could do to him for a time. She knew he wanted to write again even though he'd been trying to kill it for ten years and so she
had coaxed him. He thought she had a lot of courage. More than most women who stick to their husbands because it's easier for them to do that than to let go. He knew she'd leave him in a minute, really, if she wanted, and that the trouble that begins when he's writing had no bearing on her sticking to him or on her leaving him. It was still a matter of love and the bed for both of them and also of a long acquaintance, and two wars and the separation. It was a cinch that it wasn't for money.

"Why don't you write him a letter?" she asked, knowing what was on his mind. "And then you can go if he invites you up."

"No, I'll never write a letter," he said.

"Why not?"

"I just can't." he said. "If I was 20 years old or younger and dumb about it all I might, but I can't now."

The kids were screaming in the next room and the dog was growling and howling in play, and he wished they'd all shut up while he talked to Theresa. All winter long they were screaming and bawling and he wished he could take them to a warmer country where it was summer all year so that they could play outside.

"Think of what that guy goes through," he said. "He comes to Idaho to get away from people but here's what must happen. The women's groups in the state read that he's in
Ketchum and every club from the AAUW to the Writers Group to the literary associations, let alone local Toastmasters Clubs, Knives and Forks, Chambers of Commerce, Wildlife and Game, - all go after him to speak to them some night. And then there are the letters he gets, representatives from churches and juvenile groups, reporters, and other jokers are always knocking at his cabin door. So how am I going to get to him?"

"Well, that's true," Theresa said. "You kids go wash," she called out. "We're going to eat, - but I still think you ought to see him."

"It's funny how I think about him," he said. "I don't think of him the way I do most writers. When I read his stories I think about him behind them. I don't quite think about Faulkner that way, or Kerouac, or Bellow; when I read his story about hunting in Africa, I see him in Macomber, not in Wilson, but in Macomber. Maybe it's because he wrote about the feeling of fear in the stomach. Fear occupied his mind a lot. Maybe it still does. Then when he wrote about the champ in Fifty Grand, or about the bullfighter in The Undefeated, with that same feeling of fear in his stomach, I saw him there too. Of course, I also saw him the writer, putting something of himself into those characters, making them bigger men than they were, really. It's a hell of a way to look at literature, you know. I felt he personally was a fake too."
"Yes, I know," she said. "Now you kids go wash those dog hairs off your hands or I'll be after you with a stick," she called out to the kids screaming in the next room, never stopping to hear her.

"What was that last thing you said?" she asked him.

"Remember what they taught at school? Don't look biographically at the man behind the art form. You remember that stuff - a work of art must stand on its own legs without outside help. You remember - get the man Shelley or Byron out of the poetry. It's true alright, but I bet nobody knows what to do about Pasternak and the Russian climate, and how to judge Zhivago without thinking about the author and the Soviet Union. But anyway, getting back to the Great Man and his books, how do you keep him out of your mind in his Snows of Kilimanjaro? Or any of the Nick Adams stories? Or even The Old Man and the Sea?"

"I don't know," he went on, "what would I do if I did go. Sure he can show me things that could save years of fumbling, just as he had Eliot and Pound and Stein - but I don't know. In the first place he isn't the kind to go in for literary cliques, and I can't blame him. And second I'm such a damned deadbeat with people now. I can't put out unless I have a few drinks, and it's been years since we did any drinking - I'm not sure it would help anyway. It didn't help New Year's Eve when Nadine and Bob came over with a sack
full of beer. All that happened was a talk about price supports, wheat and beet allotments, and then we sat looking at television. Oh the hell with it!"

"Well, suit yourself," she said. "But I'd like to meet his 'Miss Mary' if you want the truth about it. And I bet Papa," she laughed at this, "would be glad to have someone like you see him in this country rather than an insurance salesman."

"I don't know," he said. "I think he'd rather have a good hunting buddy talk to him, and I'm not much of that."

"Don't be silly. Many farmers aren't good hunters. They don't all go in for it. My Dad never hunted a deer in his life, but he was earthier and more of an outdoor man than all of his hunting friends put together."

With a shout, one behind the other, the kids came into the kitchen. First the little boy, with a toy pistol on his shoulder and his pants wet down to the knees, and then the girl, marching with a stick on her shoulder.

"Did you wet your pants again?" Theresa said. The boy was over two years old and he didn't want to be housebroken. Bawling when she grabbed him by the hand, he stumbled behind her into the bathroom.

"We were playing soldier, Daddy," the little girl said, small drops of perspiration on her nose. Behind her in the
doorway the police dog watched with his mouth open, tongue hanging.

"Now you get in the bathroom and wash." he said sharply. "Your mother's been calling you for half an hour. And you," he said to the dog, "get back in there and lay down."

Showing the hurt on her face, the little girl walked away and then ran for her mother. She cried in the other room and he was sorry for it. She had too much vitality and intelligence, and she'd grow up best where there was more sunlight and cheer.

She came out again, watchful and clean, followed by her brother and they sat down at their places, watching him, and smiling when they looked at each other and their mother.

He ate in silence wondering what the Great Man's next novel might be about. The Old Man and The Sea had been a close-in piece of work, and the writing recorded with great care the sorrows of a battered old man. Though the story, or experience, in the story was familiar somehow, the prose had that marvelous clarity. And there was all that familiar, old, but astonishing writing aimed at making the reader see and feel, the sensuousness. The disciple of Joseph Conrad, as well as of others.

But where Joseph Conrad wrote about the world of terror, finally, in the *Heart of Darkness* where life is not clear but scumbled, full of suggested horror, unfinished, the
Great Man ended his stories about people down and out, but undefeated, "looking good". Really, he wondered then, even then, why hadn't the Great Man gone over the edge of clarity into the darkness of terror. That's where his great contemporary, Faulkner, was better. The deeper he went into the heart of darkness, into the defeat of a way of life, the obscurer he wrote, abandoning himself finally to passion perhaps, so that when at the end his passion was spent, his prose became imitative of himself.

At least, the Great Man up in Ketchum was not guilty of that, not so much. He didn't convey the impression that he was imitating himself, yet, just telling another story. He was a story teller first, a man of language too, a man of ideas last. He was different than Faulkner. Faulkner was a man of emotional ideas first, and this was another basic difference between the two. But in a way, they were alike in that violence was always center stage.

He finished his soup and Theresa set a cup of hot water before him and the jar of instant coffee. He stirred the teaspoon into the darkening cup and his daughter slid off her chair and came over to smell it.

"I like the smell of coffee," she said. "Can I smell it?"

The little boy came over, behind his sister. His eyes barely made it over the table top and he stood watching his
"Me 'mell," he said. "Me 'mell too."

"You want to smell the coffee too? Here," he said, holding the cup of steaming coffee under the boy's chin.

"Ginks!" the little boy said, making a face. "Ginks!"

"It doesn't stink," Jeannie said. "It smells good, doesn't it, daddy?"

"Ginks!" the little boy screamed at his sister, then giggled.

"He doesn't really mean it stinks," he said to his daughter. "He just means that the coffee has a strong smell. When he says 'stink' he doesn't mean the smell is bad, just strong. He likes the smell of shaving lotion but he says it stinks too."

In front of the little boy who was now calm and wide-eyed, his little girl stood straight, staring at him. Finally, "How do you know what he means?"

"I just know," he said, "because - because I'm a daddy. When you grow up you'll know about these things too."

She smiled at him then, and at her mother, sitting across the table and watching it all with affection and pleasure. Theresa pulled the boy up to her lap.

"When I grow up," the little girl said, "I'm going to know everything in the world."
"Of course." He looked past her to the little boy who made a face and said softly, "Ginks."

"What will I do when I know everything, daddy?"

"Oh, anything. Anything you want to do."

"Anything?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"You can read books, and be a nurse, or know how to farm, roller skate."

"But God doesn't really let us do everything, does he?"

He looked across the table to Theresa. She shrugged. He didn't know where the girl picked up all these thoughts. He never took her to town much, and his wife wasn't visiting the neighbors often this winter.

"No, nobody gets to do everything," he said, "no matter how hard they try."

He hoped she was satisfied. She was only a little girl, and it was good for little children to find their own security. When she'd grow up, he knew then, she wouldn't find it in her father. She'd even go through years afraid and ashamed of him, in front of her friends. It was a tune played by generation upon generation. She might even feel hostile because he was a farmer, or a writer. He did become her fiercest enemy between her 15th and 18th years, but even now he wondered, how did that happen? At least, how did it
happen to him?

"Are you going up to Ketchum?" Theresa was asking.

"No. I can't."

He went into the small living room, where the dog was curled on the rug against the front door, and picked the last Sunday's paper out of the magazine rack. He came back into the kitchen to reread the skimpy article in it about the Great Man.

"Then why don't you write a story for him," she asked.

He laughed. "Quit kidding. What should I say in it, 'unseen, while the Great Man at Mt. Baldy was' . . ."

"Don't be silly."

"I'm not silly."

"Then forget about it."

"I will."

"Who is that man?" asked his daughter.

He had the paper open to the article, and to the picture taken of him by the photographer. The Great Man was wearing a plaid shirt, a vest sweater and over these a loose, sleeveless, open jacket that might be suede. He was holding a double-barrelled shotgun, broken open, one hand gripping the stock. He looked like he enjoyed posing, and it was disappointing. His eyes in the picture were glazed, and his mouth was stretched across his teeth in a broad, fixed grin, as if he positioned his face for the photographer till the
shutter clicked, and beneath the wide growth of white whiskers the neck was hidden under the chin, shrinking it seemed with increasing age. The barrel chest and thick shoulders were still there, and perhaps it was the fault of the photographer, one couldn't tell, but it seemed that spirit and gusto had departed even as you studied him looking at you.

"Who is that man, Daddy?" his daughter asked again.
"A Great Writer, honey."
"Does he write stories?"
"Yes."
"Does he write stories like you?"
"Better, much better."
"Better than you?"
"Yes. When you go to school and then to high school, you'll read stories he wrote."

The little girl looked closely at the picture in the paper.
"Why doesn't he shave?"
"I don't know. He might not enjoy it anymore. And then maybe it's because his father had whiskers. He wrote about his father in a story once and he said his father had sharp eyes and whiskers."
"He looks like Santa Claus."

He laughed. "He does, I suppose. But he isn't Santa Claus."
"I know he isn't, Daddy. You want to know how I know it?"

"Yes."

"Because he writes stories, and if he writes stories he gets mad, like you. And Santa Claus never gets mad."

"You're very observant for a little girl who doesn't see many people."

"But I like him anyway," she said. "I think I like him."

Finally he went outside to do a little work. The sky was cloudless, pearl colored, and pale-green where the mountains dropped away to the distant, flat sagebrush desert. A cool wind blew in from across that desert toward his farm. He hooked his tractor to the tongue of the hay wagon and drove it around the barn, swinging between a hay stack and the corner of the corral. He drove around the corral to where a large golden stack of straw made a windbreak on the south side for the cows. He piled bales of straw three high up on the wagon, fifty-five bales to a load, and then he drove in through the gate and up across the wet yard to the pole frame loafing shed. The cows went wild when he began to split the bales open up on the wagon and tossed the straw down on the manure where it scattered. Some cows bumped heads and pushed into each other; a few trotted around and around the yard, bodies arched, high-headed, their udders
slapping from side to side and splashing milk out from their teats. He hated to see that. It was a waste and it could end up in mastitis. One cow bucked around him and the wagon in a circle, enjoying itself.

When he spread all the straw, he drove back out, and the cows went nosing through the straw for grain and green stuff. Then he went back to the house where his wife pulled straw out from under his shirt.

"Are they bedded?" she asked.
"yes."
"Maybe you ought to forget about writing for a while."
"Maybe."
"Relax for a few days, don't think about it." She leaned in close to him.

"I'll try." he said.

But he knew he wouldn't forget, not at once, not even if it'd be more pleasant for his wife and his kids. He'd put in two months of it, and he felt like he'd been on a two-month jag now. The smells of pencil and paper, the excitement, scenes and stories, the kick of trying to put the right words at the right places, he couldn't forget these again. He hadn't been trying like some Sunday writer, and he'd given it everything he had. He'd have to slow down when he went out to farm again, but not at once. He was glad that the first weeks in March would be hit with
snow flurries. He didn't want to stop writing.

Eventually he drove up to see the Great Man in the Mt. Baldy cabin but ran into him instead in a cafe in Ketchum. Two men were with him, both quiet but watchful. He wrote him after that, but he didn't receive an answer. It was dismaying. Not till later did he learn about the Great Man's illness, the hypertension and destructive self-doubt, the trips to Mayo Clinic, and then he read one morning how the Great Man had blown his own head off, perhaps with the same shotgun that he had posed with for the newspaper.

It was peculiar, almost worth a long belly laugh as he got drunk and talked about it, that while he was thinking about the Great Man, and wanting to dedicate stories to him, wanting him to judge his stories, the Great Man was suffering deeply, irrationally, suffering from fears of the kind he had never written about after all. There was a lot about fear he didn't know after all, and that was a bad joke, but a joke.

The children didn't think about the Great Man then and they have read in high school since some of the stories. But he himself is their enemy, they think, and maybe they were correct when they were each 15 years old. They remember the farm. They remember many things about the farm. He found an essay his daughter had written for an English class when she was 16 years old. It was an essay on reality.
In part, it read:

"Reality is so different in each portion of your life. One of the best portions of reality, I have found, is childhood. If I were a child again, the whole world would seem to be without war, poverty, or racial problems. There would only be, for me, a world of beauty where a house was twice as large as it was when I saw it last year, where the places we visited as a child were so magnificent and spectacular that no place on earth could equal them. Anything was possible then. Not only Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny, but the whole world's goodness. My childhood was so magical, when I think back, and it was at the same time real. The house we lived in was big when I was a small girl, even though it is small now that I am older and a junior in high school. In my childhood I faced reality, but a different kind than now. Now I face things as they are good and bad. When I was small and young, we faced everything as it seemed to be then - good. It was a real world. We lived in a world of innocence."

What was baffling, even as her essay pleased him, and even as he looked around the large house he and his wife now lived in, the huge yard and the creek below the bank, just why he felt good sometimes even though it wasn't possible for him after all, as for his daughter and perhaps his son, to "go back in time" to find the present and the future.

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