1977

Collected stories

David L. Wurtzebach

*The University of Montana*

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COLLECTED STORIES

By

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This collection it will be clear, can be divided into two parts. The first four pieces have a Romanian setting while the last three take place in America.

There is a second item which separates these two sections, and that item is style. In the Romanian stories the plot line and endings were known before the actual writing began, and, as a result, the stories follow a fairly straight narrative line. The American stories, by contrast, were simply begun by choosing a character and a particular tone and style of language. These things were used to generate the story and take it where they would. (Of course, these delineations of story determining language vs. language determining story are simple and general, but they do give an indication of the approaches used.)

As for why these stories belong in the same collection, considering the size of their differences, the answer to that is theme. All these pieces (save "The Exile") share the same theme: all are concerned with the affairs of the human heart and with that strange organ's search for meaning in this world.
The final story, "The Exile", was written solely as a parody of William Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*, and it is included here out of unabashed admiration for the language skills.
"So tomorrow you go to serve in the army, eh? Well, you must put in your time there." Ioan Benescu smiled, his lips sliding back over his big, well-spaced teeth. He shook Titu's hand and then with a sweeping gesture asked him to sit down. The older man left the room for the dining room and returned with two glasses and a decanter of brandy. "A little farewell drink, no?"

"A farewell drink yes. Why do you think I came? I plan to visit everyone in the village and that way get drunk for free."

"In that case I'm leaving tomorrow too, so I'll come with you tonight."

"I don't think so. You are far too old for the army . . ."

"Ei--" Ioan grunted, straightening in his chair and pretending to look indignant.

"And I don't think you'll want to go to Chenciu's where I am going next. He's never forgiven you for the time you covered the yellow paint spots on his hens with green paint, and the afternoon you crept into his hen coop and painted the eggs green too."
"All right, all right. I won't go. But you know, it's not because I'm afraid of the old sow's tirades. It's just that I can't feel good about his lack of humor. When somebody goes and paints his hens so the world can see who they belong to, you know he takes the world too seriously."

Ioan poured the brandy and the two clinked glasses. After a quick toast, they each swallowed half of their drinks. Any prune flavoring in the liquid was almost totally obscured by the drink's sixty percent alcohol content, but neither man shuddered as he drank. Titu sat back in his chair and realized that he would miss this place. The Benescu house had been a second home for him to grow up in and, in many ways, had been a more comfortable place than his own.

"So the time has come already?" Ioan said, asking no one. "What do you know?"

"Well, I know it is better that I leave," Titu replied, thinking a response had been called for. He finished his drink in another swallow. "I love Pripas and the people in it, but if I stayed here, I would soon be old."

"Ah, and you are young," Ioan said with a gentle mock in his voice.

"Yes." Titu's seriousness was undiminished. "I need new things to grow from. If I stayed I would only be what I am now. There are more interesting things in the
world than a peasant's life."

"And what about Maria? Don't you think you could live with her and be happy here?"

Titu sighed and gazed out the window. The question was not one he sought to avoid, but one he'd never been able to answer in the dozens of times he'd asked it of himself. Certainly Maria was the sole attraction in Pripas that had any chance of keeping him there. She was a remarkable girl—one who was so content with life that she rarely had dreams or wishes. She loved nature, her family, and had no desire to leave the village. Moreover, her parents were old and would increasingly need help in the coming years. It was a task she understood and which, through affection, she looked forward to. That she leave Pripas was a consideration that never entered her head even though the one thing she did hope for was to marry Titu.

Outside, the last rays of sun had left the eastern hills above the village, and twilight had settled in the hollow. Ghenciu was leading his blind old cow home down the newly paved road in front of Benescu's. Refacing Ioan, Titu finally shrugged his shoulders in response to the question. "Maybe," he said.

"You are probably too young to know."

"Does age matter?" Titu smiled. "What about old Breaza? He's almost as old as you, and he still doesn't know if he can live happily with that wife of his. Some-
times they're happy and get along for the longest time. But other times they take to beating each other over the head with sticks and calling each other porks."

"But you know," the older man said, "I think they are happy when they do that."

"Yes, sometimes they are," Titu agreed. "But then again sometimes when they are treating each other with something that approaches tenderness, they are both miserable."

"Who's miserable?" Maria asked the question. She had just come into the house and had passed through the kitchen to the room where the two men were talking. She smiled at Titu. She had been expecting him to come by, and so she had come home early from the visit she and her mother were making at her aunt's house.

"The Breazas sometimes," Ioan answered.

"Yes, sometimes they are," Maria laughed.

"And how is Vera today?" Titu asked, wanting to switch the conversation to a new line.

"Fine. She gets better everyday. Tonight she was tapping out different beats on her cast and having us guess what song it was."

"Oh lord," grunted the farmer.

"And she told us again how she got hit. She has the car going 50 kilometers per hour now."
Both men chuckled. "At 50 kilometers per hour the car would have ended up in a ditch or through somebody's fence before it got halfway through Pripas," Titu said.

"Yes, it's a good thing for the car that it hit her and had to stop," Ioan grinned.

"Father!" Maria scolded.

Ioan lifted the brandy bottle from the table and filled his and Titu's glasses. He offered some to Maria, but she shook her head.

"Mama said she would be coming after awhile. She wanted to stay and visit a little longer," the girl said. "But she also said she wants to see her favorite son before he leaves for fourteen months."

"It will not only be for fourteen months," Titu said calmly.

"What?" Maria already understood Titu's meaning; he had told her before of the probability of his leaving for good. But always before there had been hedging and indecision and enough room for her to believe he wouldn't really go. The tone of her voice carried as much genuine surprise as it did anxiety.

"As far as Pripas is concerned," he replied, "I will have died in the army."

"Don't speak foolishly!" she said in anger.

"I'm not. What I mean is that after the army I
will be going to Timisoara to live."

"I thought you weren't speaking foolishly." Her eyes were moist and flashing. Titu had to laugh.

"Now, Maria," Ioan admonished his daughter, "It doesn't particularly seem to me that Titu is the one who is speaking foolishly."

Maria did not look at Titu, who was smiling at her with amused fondness, but rather stared straight into the eyes of her father. "But Papa, he is. What kind of life could he have in the city? With what he knows he can only end up pushing along nuts and bolts at the tractor factory there . . . tractors which will then be sent out to the cooperatives which he dislikes so much."

This time both Ioan and Titu laughed. Ioan was in silent agreement with his daughter and did not feel uncomfortable in her glare. He was pleased that she could feel with such intensity, but at the same time he was unhappy over the sadness she now felt and the greater sadness she would feel tomorrow. "Maria, you know that's not the only job he can get. Tell me," he said, turning to Titu, "what are your plans?"

"My uncle has written that he thinks he can get me into the television repair school there. If that happens, I'll be in fine shape."

"It's good work," Ioan nodded.
"You'll stay there to live?" Maria asked.

"If not in Timisoara, at least in some big city. One has to live where the work is." Maria's tone had further begun to unsettle Titu. The sadness that had gotten him to laugh nervously before now induced him to chatter. "Of course one has to go where the work is. I couldn't possibly make any money from the five sets in Pripas or even the thirty-five in Armadia. Now, from the thousands in Timisoara I could become a rich man. I'd have a car, an apartment; I'd live like the old aristocrats. And when I'm well-off, you can come and live with me there and be my wife." The words slipped out and Titu was disgusted that he could be so careless. He cared more for Maria than for anyone else, and there were times, days when he even knew for certain that he loved her. He hated himself for speaking so lightly on the subject.

"I will never leave here," Maria said simply. Her intensity was something the men found hard to adjust to, and they could think of nothing to say in response. Instead, they sipped their drinks.

"Can't you tell him why he should never live there, Papa?" Maria finally asked.

Ioan scratched his forehead and after a moment answered, "I would only tell him that although he would be happier in the city because that is where he wants to be, he should be happier here."
"What?" Titu laughed, grateful for the nonsense quality of Ioan's statement. "What are you trying to say?"

"All I'm saying is that you and all the other youths in the village want to leave for what you think is the excitement of city life. Because you have that desire, it is better that you leave. But it's sad because you are leaving behind more than you know—you are leaving the land, the hills, your family, your life . . ."

"For a new one," Titu interjected. He said it matter-of-factly and was not upset that the man he loved disagreed with him.

"And perhaps you are suited to that new life, and I am only being old and sentimental. I don't know. It's only that it seems to me there are some things in life which mean more than others. Making one's family and friends happy and letting them make you happy is more important than setting out to conquer the world or even to conquer the matter of finances."

These were words Titu had heard before, and he was neither convinced nor impressed. He shrugged. "Why can't I do both?"

"Because you are leaving," Maria said quickly.

"So I can't do it here." He shrugged again. He was beginning to feel exasperation at her sadness. "But in Timisoara I will have new friends, and with them I will be able to do both."
"But it won't be the same. Your roots are here and what you have now you will not be able to replace so well or so deeply."

"No, my roots are elsewhere." To Titu this was a statement of truth above all questioning, and he felt no need to speak any less simply. "And I am going to seek them."

"Oh," said the girl, "and I suppose the roots of a flower aren't really its roots because the flower never chose them?"

"That might be," Titu laughed, "I hadn't thought about it before."

In the silence that followed, Titu stood up and looked about the room. His eyes fell on objects he remembered well: the footstool he'd carved for Ioan, in the bookcase the glass bowl filled with colored eggs he and Maria had dyed in onion skins, the rugs he'd watched the Benescu women weave for hours. "I'd better be going," he said. "There are a few more folks I should call on tonight."

Ioan jumped to his feet. "What about Mama? She'll be coming in a few minutes, and she wants to see you before you go."

"No. I can't stay any longer. Tell her I will come by tomorrow to see her before I leave."
"You can't stay for even a little more brandy?"
The older man swung the bottle in front of Titu's eyes.
"No."
"For the sake of heaven," muttered Ioan. He strode over to Titu and embraced him, kissing him on each cheek.
"For the sake of heaven," he said again, only this time he roared it and grinned like mad. "May you have good fortune and a long life, and for the sake of heaven you vagabond son of a gypsy, come back often!"

"With pleasure," Titu grinned. "And if I don't come back for awhile, I'll write and tell you how I've done. Then you can tell everyone how big I made it."

"It won't be a story worth telling," Maria said sharply, though she hadn't wanted to say it at all.

"Maria!" Ioan's humor had vanished.

"It's all right, Papa. Can I say goodbye to you outside, Maria?" She nodded.

Titu and Ioan embraced each other once more. "You must come back any time," Ioan smiled. "We will always have a place for you."

Titu took Maria by the hand and lead her throughout the kitchen. They reached the porch door just as Elisa Benescu was entering. "Titu!" she shouted, immediately withdrawing her hands from her apron pockets and throwing her arms around him. "You aren't going now are you? I
didn't mean to stay so long. It wasn't until the part where Vera tells about how she should get some kind of medal of honor for being the first in Pripas to be hit by an automobile that I realized it was getting late."

"I'm sorry, Mama, but yes I must go. I will come and see you tomorrow though before I leave."

"Oh." The disappointment showed in her face. "That will be all right then. I will make some walnut cakes for you tonight so that you can take them with you tomorrow."

"Okay, Mama." He kissed the older woman. He loved her and was grateful to her. She had never demanded anything from him, just as she did not demand that he stay longer.

Titu and Maria went out the door and stood on the porch. The evening was cool with the beginnings of fall. It was calm and animal smells rose up from the yard. An occasional gust of wind would come down from the hills and bring with it the fresh smell of hay. Though they weren't cold, both Titu and Maria shivered slightly; both felt a quiet, unrelieved sense that events were already decided. Neither one knew what to say.

"Will you ever come back here to live if you find you don't like Timisoara?" Maria finally asked.

"I don't plan not to like it." At first the question had seemed silly and Titu had to work to keep his answer from sounding harsh. As he looked at her sad face,
he saw that the question was not silly at all and that she was really saying something else by those words. "Yes, if I don't like it there I will come back," he said.

"You know the people won't be the same there."

"What do you mean? People are people—they'll be the same."

"Of course they're people. But I mean their thoughts and considerations. Their considerations are different."

"Are they?" Titu once again lost the meaning of her words. He was troubled by his own ache of being the source of her sorrow. He sought to wound her. "Well, yes, they are. People in the city have more so they aren't like us poor peasants who want what they have in the city."

Maria ignored the cutting tone in Titu's voice. "Will you be satisfied when you get what city people have?"

"Yes." He spoke absolutely. "Maria, do you want me to go mad here?"

She reached for his arm and squeezed it. "I want you to be happy here."

"Then you'd want me to be a lunatic because that's the only way I could be happy."

Maria threw up her hands. "Then be a lunatic!" Someone should have beaten you with a stick until you were happy here."
Titu had to laugh. Then he said, "You know, I've thought about what you said about a flower and its roots, and about that you are right. But where you are wrong is that I am not yet a flower but only a seed. I have yet to be carried by the wind; and where I land, there will my roots begin. The way I differ from other seeds is that I get to choose when to leave and what wind will carry me."

"No, you are wrong. You are already a flower. And you are wrong about the wind; the wind is something which nothing can control. You were carried by it already, before you could even know it—for a seed can know nothing—and you were dropped here. Your roots are here and I am here."

Titu could have argued further, but when Maria had finished, he knew there could be no point in it. He took her hand again, and they walked down the steps. They passed through the yard and paused at the gate.

"What about me? What am I going to do?" Maria asked quietly. "Who is going to walk me home from Aramadia, from school and dances? Or who is going to come over on winter nights and talk and listen to the radio and make ugly little carvings out of our firewood?" Maria saw all these things as she spoke. "And who is Mama going to cry and fuss over when he gets drunk and knocks himself out by running headfirst into a post while chasing after a chicken?"
Titu smiled but answered somberly, "Michael can do all those things."
"Yes, Michael can do all those things. And who will I tell I love"
"You will find someone."
"I already have someone."
"But you won't live in Timisoara?"
"No."
Titu breathed in deeply and then exhaled a long, tired sigh. "I guess there's nothing more to say. Will you see me off tomorrow?"

Maria almost said yes. For a moment she felt hope and that seeing him in the morning would be important; but then she knew it wouldn't matter. They would only have to go through another awkward goodbye. "No," she said.
"I'll miss you, Maria. I'll write."
"Goodbye, Titu. May you always have good fortune."
Titu kissed the sad girl quickly and hurried out the gate. He stopped as if he might turn around, but instead blew out the air in his lungs with one long, gusty oath. Then he ran down the road.
"You are a fool," Maria said aloud as she watched him go.
George gave us three good reasons for getting out of Bucharest: one, our conversations were no longer anything but gossip (repetitious and malicious at that); two, the fall colors were right at their peak (Gangbusters!); and three, in the village of Lipsa there lived a once internationally famous "writer or philosopher or something" who loved to talk and who told good stories.

Lipsa is a small village just off Highway 1, roughly halfway between the cities of Sibiu and Fagaras. From the highway, the Fagaras Mountains to the south seem an impenetrable barrier as they rise abruptly out of the plains to a height of around 8,000 feet. On moving closer though, one sees the range is not the solid wall it appears; there are openings in different places where the Arpas, the Porumbacu, and the Breaza rivers come rushing out. Lipsa is located on the Arpas and sits up flush against the mountains.

George talked both Williams and I into going, but Williams already had plans for the weekend. Rather than wait until he was free, I decided to go by myself, I cut language class Friday morning, tossed a few items in the
green day pack, and caught the 9:43 towards Sibiu.

It was good to be rolling again, particularly on such a beautiful October day. The countryside those first 60 kilometers north of Bucharest aren't much—all just flat farmlands and villages and then the oil fields and refineries around Ploiesti. Not long after that, though, things get nice: foothills and the Prahova Valley begin. The trees begin too—beech, elm, maple, I don't know exactly what. They were all yellows mostly with greens and reds thrown in. The colors bleached out briefly around Comaric due to the cement dust in the air, but after that they came back stronger than ever. The valley also got narrower and the sides of the mountains steeper.

(It occurred to me briefly—I don't know why, perhaps it was the presence of so much beauty—that this was the same route on which Iorga was murdered over thirty-five years ago. It was late November, 1940. Nicolae Iorga, ex-Prime Minister, historian, one of Romania's few truly universal men, was dragged from the train by his beard and shot by the fascist Iron Guard. History as more color, I guess, of a more reddish, darker nature.)

The train continued north, past Sinaia and Predeal, and into Brasov. From Brasov it turned west into the southern flatlands of Transylvania and ran parallel to the Fagaras Mountains. It pulled into the town of Fagaras at 1:30 P.M. I got out and hitchhiked the 30 kilometers to the
town of Arpas, and then, following the river, walked the last five or six kilometers to the well-promoted village of Lipsa.

Asking directions from a peasant in the road, I was directed to Professor Moldovan's house at the back edge of town. His property lay just east of the river and was surrounded by a low wooden fence. Inside the yard I noticed a shack for chickens, one for tools, and in a far corner a third which no doubt was an outhouse. The rest of the yard was taken up by a vegetable garden and a large patch of dahlias growing six or seven feet in the air. The house itself was made of brick covered over with whitewashed plaster, and rust-colored tiles formed the roof.

The professor himself answered my knock. He was a short man with thinning grey hair, a slight grey mustache, and was wearing clothes similar—a long linen shirt, white wool pants, and boots—to those worn by the peasant I met in the road. I explained that I was a friend of George's and had been told I might drop by and pay a short visit.

"George?" he said, looking confused, but then recognition immediately relaxed his face and he smiled. "Ah yes, George! There's a fine lad, you know. Talks a bit fast but a fine lad. Please come in. I suppose he told you all about my museum of regional folk art?"

"Yes, he mentioned it," I said.
"Good. If you come with me, we can go take a look at it."

We went into the so-called "museum" which turned out to be a small room that at first glance appeared to be nicely decorated but hardly extraordinary. It did not seem jammed with treasures as I had expected. On each wall there was a shelf at eye level which at intervals held antique, hand-painted ceramic plates and pitchers. Small embroidered rugs were then hung on the wall above the plates. Also, in the room were wood carvings, a sculpted wooden chest, muskets made of bone, and some very fine icons painted on glass. From the oak chest Moldovan pulled out old pistols and trick locks for strongboxes which had been devised to foil highwaymen in centuries past. At the bottom of the chest were his favorites: ancient national costumes—the fabulously embroidered skirts and blouses made from homespun cotton fabric and the leather vests also embroidered with the same bright colored threads. He spoke of the thick, calloused fingers of the men who made such vests and the strain on the eyes of the women who made such dresses.

After a quarter of an hour of inspecting his display, Moldovan asked if I were a folk artist or anthropologist. "No," I said, "I study literature."

"In that case your interest in these things is probably only casual, is it not?"
"That's right."

"Good. I always insist that guests see my collection but not that they linger over it. If you want, we can go into the dining room and I might find something more to your taste."

In the next room he told me to sit at the table while he went to the buffet and extracted two bottles and four glasses. He poured out our drinks and grinned. "I hope you don't mind these being a little on the sweet side. I'm rather partial towards currant brandy and raspberry wine."

"They're very good," I said, tasting both.

"Excellent. I can see we are going to get along just fine. You look like a young man whose interest is passing time in pleasant and interesting ways. Do you think I'm perceptive?" he asked, noticing my eyebrows raised. "It's nothing at all. I spent over 30 years in the university; students are not hard to understand. Of course," he paused to drain his brandy and then laughed, "neither are professors. They love to talk. You have done me a great favor by coming here. I hope George told you that I was interesting."

"Depending on one's mood, he said you might be," I answered, laughing too.

"Yes, George did have a good sense of humor. It was pleasant talking with him. Conversation with foreigners is
always so enjoyable that in a way I regret not living closer to the big tourist towns. I hope you won't feel you came all this way for nothing."

"That won't be a problem."

"Well then, what would you like to talk about?"

"Tell me about life in your village."

"The village? Hmmm, really it's just an ordinary place. There are about 800 people here, most of whom work on the collective. We have a mill in town—you might have seen it on your way here. It's one of those quaint ones which uses river power to make it go. We don't use it much anymore, though. Maybe only one or two days a week. There are some interesting folks here however."

"Who's the most interesting?"

"Most people would probably say I am." He said this with a kind of serious modesty and then looked into the bottom of his wine glass to keep from laughing. The plan didn't work and his pose shattered anyway; he looked boyish. "To tell the truth," he laughed, "I'd be tempted to vote for myself too."

"All right, let's start with you."

"Why not? Perhaps George told you I was once world-famous. Semi-world-famous would be more accurate. Well not even that. Let's just say a few people in other countries knew my name. This was all years ago when I was a young man. My two passions at that time were philosophy and—"
should blush to say it—to be famous. A philosopher want­ing to be famous. Vai! What a combination!" He had to stop and laugh some more at the thought. "Anyway, in 1937—I was 28, I think—I published a paper expounding an idea which, for lack of a better name, I called Christian nihilism."

"You called it what?"

"Christian nihilism—an impressive name, yes? But it was just an idea I had. The basic doctrine was this: God exists but His existence has no meaning. How can any­thing have meaning which never dies? If you are willing to accept that premise as true, then it is easy to understand why God might create mortal beings. Through death life might be made valuable and exquisite. Now to suppose further, if God actually were trying to resolve this dilemma along these hubristic lines of mine, then he necessarily found out He had miscalculated; that humans, contrary to plan, only found despair in their mortality, that death rendered their lives meaningless—are you with me so far?"

"I think so, keep going."

"As a result then of man's sense of emptiness, God sent Jesus as a means to relieve man's suffering. If some could grasp onto Jesus as their savior, they could find some relief and even happiness. Sending Christ was not an act of love so much as an act of pity—though of course
love had to be involved in such a genuine act. The point though is that a true historical resurrection of Jesus means as much as if it had never happened; finally that neither means anything at all."

"Anyway, that arid and windy business was more or less my idea. I wrote it up, sent it out, and it got published in different countries. It received a fair amount of notice, and I was pleased that some of it was quite favorable. In certain circles nihilists, existentialists, even some anarchists greeted it as an interesting thought. They referred to me fondly as 'that Romanian peasant.' In other circles however—notably the religious ones, as you might guess—it was received less well, denounced in fact. Heads of churches took to calling me, rather disparagingly I thought, 'that damn Romanian peasant.'"

"Of course I was flattered; that sort of thing is always good publicity. And in a way it wasn't wrong. Though I've never technically been a peasant, I'm not above playing that role when it suits my purposes. Like now as I see our glasses are empty."

As the professor filled each of the four glasses to the brim, I let my thoughts settle by gazing out the window. Outside some crows were sitting on the wooden fence, and two women were walking along the river with baskets of clothes on their hips. Turning again to Moldovan, I asked, "Do you still want to be famous?"
"No," he laughed, "those days are past. That sort of thing is better pursued by younger blood. These days I'm just a quiet pensioner living out his years with his old wife, I read, write a little, grow flowers. My wife, by the way, is down in Bucharest staying with our daughter. She'll be coming back this evening with a flock of grandchildren who will be spending the weekend with us. Unfortunately I won't have any room to put you up or else you would be more than welcome to stay with us. I apologize for not being able to offer you a bed for the night."

"Wait a minute. You have nothing to apologize for."

"No? Anyway, I would just enjoy the company. It's nice having people around to talk to. . . . Say listen, I have a good friend who would be glad to put you up if you want to stay. You will be obliged to drink with him until you pass out, but other than that it will cost you nothing."

"That sounds good," I said grinning, "but I've already made arrangements to stay with friends in Brasov tonight."

"You can always change them."

"No, but thanks anyway."

"Okay, whatever you want. Do your friends happen to be young ladies?"

"Yes."

"Ah."
We clinked glasses and each took a swallow of brandy. At some point Moldovan's mind shifted back to the original point of conversation. "Now where were we?" he said, putting down his drink. "Oh yes, interesting people."

"From a distance, I suppose, not many here would seem very curious. The young are at school or perhaps working. Most likely many of them are hoping or plotting to avoid the life of working the fields like their parents. And the parents—they work the collective, drink evenings, maybe watch television if they have one. Many I'm sure don't read. It's a simple life. To find them interesting you would probably have to follow them around—getting a sense of the order of their lives, their quirks and humors. In general they are neither contemplative nor articulate... no, that's not true. Many of them tell fine stories. Old Violeta tells good, scary tales of her midwife days, tales of difficult births, strange-looking babies, and her methods for inducing abortion. She's had rich experiences in her life, and some girls even today prefer her to doctors and hospitals."

"Let's see, who else? There's my best friend Puiiu. He's the one I told you about, the one you can stay with tonight if you change your mind. Actually he is not so interesting as he is jovial and gregarious. He's the one who introduced me to the joys of entertaining foreigners. "Eh, they come here to make memories,' he used to say,
'fine, I'll make them some memories they'll never forget!' Though sometimes I think he made them memories they would never remember." Moldovan winked at me as he reached for his brandy. "Unfortunately not everyone is quick enough to keep up with him when he plays the madman."

"And then . . . then there is Grangur. It would be criminal to not mention him. Grangur is not his real name incidentally but a gypsy word meaning big shot. We call him that in jest but he's rather flattered by it. He knows everyone envies him. He's the one man in the village who has managed to get by with no job to speak of. He can do this because everyone likes him and is willing to look out for him. In order to eat he does light chores around the village. Now, for instance, he's helping those people with small orchards collect their apples and walnuts. He's paid back in food--fruit, cornmeal, vegetables, sometimes a bit of pork. He doesn't need much and gets along very well. He also has an accordian which he plays like a genius. One of my major regrets is that he lives on the far side of the village so I don't get to hear him practice as much as I'd like. Occasionally I try and coax him into moving closer to me so I can listen more often, but he just laughs. He tells me to move closer to him. He knows what he's worth. In the summer in the evenings he will often hold a concert or dance by the well in the middle of town. If you would be
interested in hearing him play, there is a wedding coming up next month at which he'll be one of the musicians. And as you know, Romanian weddings are very interesting."

I grinned at the gentle pins he put in the word very. "Yeah, I'd like to see that," I said.

Moldovan didn't respond to this but instead filled our glasses yet another time. Resuming conversation, he began, "I am taking this opportunity to pour our drinks now. The story gets good here, and I'd rather not be interrupted by any digression. Is that all right with you?"

"Fine."

"Good," he smiled and then plunged right in. "I'm going to give you a little of Grangur's history. He's always been one of my favorites as he's had such a colorful life. He used to be one of those gypsies with a trained bear. There used to be many, years ago of course—you probably know about them; they would camp on the outskirts of cities and towns and charge admission to the people who would come out—but Grangur's act was apart from that; his bear was something special. In fact, you may have heard of him: Schmecher, The Magical Bear. This was in the late 1940s and early 50s . . . no, I don't suppose you would have heard of him. Anyway, he was a bear of talent. Perhaps that is a quality strange to think of in a bear, but if some people have it, why not some bears? And Schmecher
definitely had it. He had been tamed and trained as a cub by Grangur, who in those years was a young man himself. The gypsy was amazed at how the cub took to dancing and balancing act as if he were born to them. Then, as the bear grew, new tricks were continually added to his repertoire; he learned to do imitations of young brides, bureaucrats, and old women, and his imitations contained moments of real understanding. His best comic effect was to juggle one Indian club, yes, just one, but at the same time to move his paws as if there were five or six. The audience would laugh, and the bear would somehow look deeply pained. The timing of this trick was perfect for immediately after Schmecher would go into his card routine. He had a deck of over-sized cards which he could shuffle in three or four ways; by hooking his claws, bending his paws, or slapping the cards, he could get them to fall in place as neat as anything. After the juggling, many would think it was only a trick deck, and someone would usually holler out that the cards were somehow strung together. At this Grangur would turn red with fury, grab the cards and throw them at the loudmouth. In mid-flight the deck would come apart and the cards scatter like leaves in the wind. Everybody would laugh. Those who had wanted to shout but didn't would turn and glare at the one who had. Schmecher, for his part, would look about indifferently."
"At this point let me put the story into a historical perspective. Grangur and Schmecher began their act sometime in 1943—the war was on of course—but in spite of that, within a year and with no formal publicity, the bear was known through all Romania. People would come from all over just to see him. It was not uncommon to see even a few Bucharest aristocrats at a performance."

"Now what you may or may not know, is that in '43 and '44 Romania was fighting on the side of the Axis. By mid-'44 though, events did not look propitious at all. The Germans had begun losing on the eastern front and the Russians began winning. It became imperative for Romania to switch sides; this seemed a simple matter of survival at the time, though finally it probably made little difference one way or the other. No doubt you have heard of the reparations demanded by the Soviets—they were extreme to say the least."

"Anyway, when the war ended, things were in great confusion; the political and economic structures of the country were in shambles. Of course there were power struggles, but surprisingly the communists did not immediately win out. Somehow Sanatescu became the new premier at the end of '44, but, as he had no popular base, he was ousted within three months. Radescu succeeded him and lasted even less. Then Groza came in and the communists were here for good; though it's true Groza himself petered
out. Perhaps you heard there were those who had hopes and expectations that the Americans would be coming through with the Marshall Plan, and things would be fine. But you Americans didn't come. Then, in December 1947 the king was finally forced to abdicate. By early 1948 the Communist Party had the government and a new constitution to back them up."

"With this, new times began in Romania. What happened was that the government began taking over the ownership of the means of production and the ownership of the land. They also took over a few other things that caught their fancy."

"Perhaps you will not understand this, but a strange mentality was involved here. The new leaders felt an intense need to prove their legitimacy. They were insecure. They knew they had seized and were maintaining power by intimidation and force, and second, that they were about to deny the peasants the only thing the peasants had ever wanted in their lives: their own land. The government, as a result, was desperate to make itself look good. Anything that looked good, the government sought to make it its own." Coming to an abrupt halt, the professor looked at me and flashed a sly smile. "Have you guessed?"

"The bear?"

"Exactly," he said, laughing at my amazement.
"The leaders thought Schmecher would be useful as a bit of low key propaganda. They sent word down that the bear was to be nationalized."

"Now, as often happens in state matters like this, there is a time interval between when the order is made and when it is carried out. You see, a lot of things were going on and it took awhile before the government actually appropriated the bear. It was the end of 1949 before they finally got around to doing it. With their usual impeccable timing it turned out to be Christmas Eve the night they switched the ownership."

"As it happened, I was there myself that night. Schmecher was performing in a tent just outside of Sibiu. As the show began, three men in leather trench coats and pointed shoes, and five or six policemen in their blue and grey wools, entered and stood along the back. It was clear what they had come for. Still, they were kind enough to let the show finish."

"And what a show it was! Everything glowed. For some reason the bear reached into himself and came up with a concentration and a conscious comic sense he'd never shown before. He seemed to be seeking laughs, not in hopes of fruit or honey, but rather for the joy that could be found in laughter itself. Obviously something special was going on. The gypsy swore later that the bear had even made up some
new tricks: that Schmecher had never been taught to hang by his knees on a horizontal bar nor to walk about primly with the Indian club balanced on his head. I almost believe that story as Schmecher never did repeat those tricks. For that matter, he never matched the excellence of that performance again . . ."

"Ah, you must excuse me for a moment," the professor said, reaching for his wine with one hand and rubbing his throat with the other. I watched distractedly as he drained the glass at one pull; images of the bear ran through my head. Outside by the river two geese were honking. "I was beginning to need that," he said, wiping his mouth on his sleeve."

"And the bear?"

Moldovan grinned at my impatience. "As I said," he continued, "Schmecher never did reach such artistic heights again. Whether he wasn't able to or simply didn't care to, I have no idea. Grangur, however, has some very nice explanations as to why that show, and no other, was so grand. As I remember, he has three different versions which he will vary depending on whom he's talking to."

"If he were here now, he would probably give you the explanation he loves the best: that somehow the bear sensed it was to be his last night as a free performer. By some means of animal intuition he realized that he would be
performing for the glory of the state from then on, and that his own fame would be something secondary. Knowing this, the bear was filled with a burst of energy released, as Grangur says, from a breaking heart. I really am sorry that man isn't here; he uses much more dramatic and tragic tones than I."

"As for his second interpretation, it's not one likes all that well because he thinks it rather conventional. Still, he is happy to use it if he thinks his audience has strong Christian ties. He will tell them that Schmecher was filled with a holiness, it being that holy night of Christ's birth. The bear, in his own way, sought to relieve man's suffering that Christmas Eve."

"And finally there is the third which is an explanation I have heard Grangur use more and more in the years that I have got to know him. Sometime later someone told him that there had been a boy in that audience who was soon to die from a blood disorder. In fact, he did die a few weeks later."

"This boy had sat through the show in rapture. His eyes and face radiated a vitality and hunger for life which those around him could feel. His skin was so white and translucent that it was painful to look at him. Someone told Grangur that his bear had seen this child shining in the crowd, and understanding, had given his performance as
a present to the boy."

My host's voice tailed off, and in the pause that followed, I asked, "Which explanation do you prefer?"

He shrugged. "Why choose? They are all fairly good. Anyway, I suspect I love ambiguity as well as anyone, and the coincidences of that night make a fine meal to simply muse over."

"What happened to the bear?"

"Ah, what am I doing! I really should tell you about the rest of his career. One ought to be fair. The curious thing was that Schmecher was better off as a charge of the state than he was with Grangur. As occasionally happens in the communist system, the right man was chosen for the job. Schmecher's new trainer was full of love and devotion, and the bear responded to this by giving generally better performances than he had under the gypsy. Grangur had sometimes been an indifferent, even selfish trainer. As a result, Schmecher would sometimes put on an indifferent or mediocre act. Of course with such a bear even mediocrity is something one can appreciate."

"Anyway, the bear served the state well until he was finally retired, with honor, in 1956. But as I say, in those last seven years he never did match the supreme quality he'd achieved on that one night."

In the next pause which followed, I noticed the
afternoon shadows had grown long. As I spoke of leaving, Moldovan grabbed my arm and said, "Here you can't leave without seeing the view. You'll miss the best that Lipsa has to offer."

Outside, he led me through his yard and upstream about a hundred yards. Then he began scrambling up the steep hillside. He was nimble and I was in a sweat to keep up. Luckily we soon came to a spot where the slope leveled out. To our left was the gorge the Arpas comes tumbling out; below and to the right lay the village and its trees, and then further, the farmlands of southern Transylvania. Colors of yellow, brown, and green dying in autumn—and reviving a bit in the dying afternoon sunlight.

We enjoyed it in silence for awhile. Then Moldovan, playing the tour guide, threw his arm around me and said through his, "Mighty pretty, no?"

"Mighty pretty."

As we began walking back down he asked, "How long have you been in Romania?"

"Over four months."

"Do you ever get homesick?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I never really think about home as being any one place," I answered. "Wherever I am seems home enough for
me. And if for some reason it doesn't, I know with a little
effort it will."

Moldovan laughed for some reason he didn't explain. He did say, "Yes, that's a nice feeling. I used to feel
that way myself. Enjoy it while you are young and still have it."

"Does age make a difference?"

"Perhaps not necessarily, but in my case it did. Somehow I discovered age makes one take life's experiences
more personally."

"When did you lose the feeling?"

He looked toward the farmlands and then he looked at me. I had the unsettling feeling that the man had re­
vealed his heart to me without my even realizing it. What he said I felt later I should have been able to see coming
miles away.

"I lost it when my son died."

"I . . . I'm sorry," I said in a rather confused and embarrased way.

"Yes, it's sad," he answered, nodding and sounding a little distant. "At first it seemed such a horrible waste—
it still does. Yet in another way it isn't. Mircea's death, like no other, had meaning for me. It was the event
which showed me the silliness of my intellectual postures and my fondness for fame. It was enough to make me renounce
trying to understand unknowable things."
"Instead, I settled down. I fell in love with my family and fell for my students. I tried to be an indirect influence for what's good and moral when I knew how and when I could."

"I bet you did that fairly well."

"Eh, who knows," he smiled.

We followed the path back to his gate. Reaching it, he offered once again to find me lodging for the night. I said no, there were other friends I was to look up.

"In that case, have a good journey," he said, shaking my hand, "and good luck with the ladies."

"Good luck to you." I took a couple of steps down the path before I stopped and refaced him. "I'll see what I can do about sending by another American in a week or two for you to be interesting with."

"Fine," he answered, laughing: "I'm not going anywhere."
CHAPTER I

ROMANIAN MEMOIRS

"The exile leaves America from what unsympathetically would be called pure laziness. . . . Whether he admits it or not, he is enjoying to the full the privilege of indulging his natural-born indolence and procrastination."

Alex Small, Paris Tribune
September 20, 1929

"Unfortunately, not everyone can handle it."
Peter Carson
June 10, 1975

"Screw you." Walt Putnam, the same day.

"No, one year is enough time to spend in this life of dissipation. One has to get on with serious living."

Peter Carson had said that as early as January when I first asked him what he thought about our applying for extensions for our grants. I applied for mine and kept after him to do the same. But he continued to give me the same answer up through the middle of June, two days ago, when he left.

He took the train out of Gara de Nord in Bucharest and headed toward Greece. He would take his boats and planes from there to southern Italy and then up to Belgium. From Brussels he'd fly Pan Am to his home.
What he thought he was going home to, what action he thought he'd find there, I have no idea. Though he seemed to think he'd find something stimulating going on, all I could gather that would be there specifically was a job as an organ grinder that his father's ad agency was holding for him. I told him he was getting too excited about the job—what if the monkey didn't like him. "Of course he'll like me," Pete had answered, "everybody does." Which is true, and which is why he will make a great organ grinder. The job is to last at least 90 days and perhaps a year. After that, his hopes are to enter law school.

Thinking back, I now see it was half facetiously, half seriously that he spoke of our year in Romania as dissipation. Seriously because it was true enough—true enough that a second year would have bored him—and facetiously because wherever he was going next, it certainly wasn't to begin "serious living."

So. He is gone and I remain. The difference between him and me this year is that I am not without purpose; in fact I have two. One purpose is to write about last year. Second, a serious problem somehow managed to confront us during our foreign idyll. Pete answered this problem to his own satisfaction, but I have not. I've worried, pondered, delayed, and, in short, not satisfied myself. This is the other reason I have remained. I do not know which of the two is more important.
(I see I may have just dug a minor literary hole for myself. The reader perhaps feels in that last paragraph a blatant, if vague, attempt to pique his interest. (Not a bad assumption.) But listen: about that so-called "problem" . . . I will explain it fully but not resolve it. At the moment I simply do not know how to. Moreover, my business here is solely to write about last year. The ending of this book has already been written and it ends with Pete's leaving. If that happens to differ from the ending I'd originally hoped for . . . but enough: reader-warnings have been posted . . .)

Last year really began almost two years ago. One evening in early September Pete and I returned to our dorm room after having taken out two of the better-looking, newly-arrived freshman girls. And we were feeling old for having done it. Their company had been physically and pleasantly stimulating, but their opinions on any given topic had been so full of absolute certainly that our amiable and careless senior minds were a little dismayed. Stretching out on the lower bunk and speaking to the mattress overhead, I asked, "Were we ever that young?"

"As I recall, you used to have a certain innocence about you," Pete had said. He was busy playing with the tuning knob of the radio, and his slowness at finding a station we wanted meant he'd most likely begun some line of
pointed, Carsonian thought. After a couple of minutes of not speaking, he resumed, "You know, I think you've still retained a good part of that innocence, Walt. You're just better at hiding it now."

"Wouldn't being able to hide it imply the loss of it? You know, the idea of conscious manipulation and all that."

"That's an interesting question, but, uh, I really don't want to get philosophic at the moment." As if something had just become clear to him. Pete shut off the FM and put Merle Haggard on the stereo. "What I really want to talk about is next year. The sad thing about tonight, other than the fact we didn't get laid, is the realization that we have just about outgrown this place. Look around and then tell me how many new experiences we're likely to have around here. It's just this last year and that'll do it for us."

"Do you think that's a fluke, or do you think maybe the universe is really precision-timed?"

"Walt, I'd like to be serious, if you think you can handle it. What I want to know is: what the hell are we going to do next year?"

I glanced over at Pete and was surprised to see lines in the corners of his eyes. I'd never known him to worry about anything in the long run. He sometimes had immediate money or girl worries, but never anything as far as a year away. Things either took care of themselves, or else
Pete would come up with a plan on the spot—premeditation as near as I could tell. "What are we going to do next year?" he asked again, though this time I thought the imperative in his voice sounded a bit staged.

"Work," I shrugged, not having given the matter much thought either.

"What kind of job will a B.A., in lit. get you? Or a B.A., in history for me? If you ask me, our only real choice is to find some way to elongate these wonderful adolescent lives of ours. We're going to be working the rest of our lives," here a slight gagging noise caught in his throat—I felt a lump in my own too—"so why start right away?"

"What do you suggest?"

"That's just what I've figured out."

I looked over at him, now lounging in the room's one easy chair, and I felt again my old wonder, expectation, and love for this strange creature whose eyes caught fire so easily. I also felt that old, slight regret over leaning on him so often for direction and impetus.

"Here's what we do. Tomorrow we go the library and check out all the available scholarships in foreign countries which we qualify for. We pick the ones we like best and apply."

In the morning we went and did our research. All grants to Spanish, French, and German-speaking countries
had language requirements and were out of our grasp. English-speaking countries were available, but the competition was a little steep—800 applicants for fifty spots. But then, "glowing dimly as dirty gold," as Pete would say later, we found the Eastern European countries.

Poland, Yugoslavia, and Romania had no language requirements and considerably fewer students applied. Of the three, Romania rated highest. Not only did the name sound of and look like romance, but for the previous year there had been only thirteen applicants for twelve scholarships. The final bonus was the reasonable proximity of Greece where we both wanted to spend some time.

The single real problem we had was to come up with suitable projects to put on our applications. Pete had to get out and work at his. Knowing nothing at all of Romania, he began reading some history. When that proved laborious, he somehow made contact with a genuine Romanian in town. How he met this guy, Titulescu, Pete never did explain, Nor did he think it particularly remarkable that Titulescu be a professor of 19th century history. What was important was that Titulescu had been happy to help. That evening when I saw Pete, he had come away with a dandy little proposal: the role of the peasant in the revolution of 1848 and, especially, how folk art was used for propaganda at that time. I told him it wouldn't fool anybody. He assured me I was wrong,
that it would fool everybody. The Romanian government was eager for foreign students to come and study; and if a student was researching something that was in support of Romania's historical development, then that student would have clear sailing. "And any American interviewing committee I will face," he said, "will probably be totally ignorant of Romanian history."

My own program was much simpler. I wanted to go as a writer. My fear, though, was that the Romanian government would not care to have some footloose observer roaming the countryside, poking his nose wherever he chose. I supposed the regime to be too secretive for that. To play it safe, I said my interest was to write stories specifically about peasant life. This was not a lie. Just about any humanities major would harbor romantic notions of the simplicity and goodness to be found in a peasant's life. I wanted to see for myself.

We mailed our applications on October 15th, the deadline, to New York. A week later five professors at our college interviewed us singly in order to make recommendations to the national selection committee. Pete was right. The interviewers were ignorant of Romania. They were more concerned about our sincerity than anything else. Pete told them he wanted to begin work toward a masters in Eastern European studies, and the present opportunity was the richest
he would ever get. Then he laid on heavily the little knowledge of the country that he had. As was his skill, he made it sound like a lot. The professors were impressed by the academic nature of the inquiry, the tidbits of Romanian information they received, and by Pete's silver tongue. "Snowed 'em," he said, coming out of the room.

My interview was somewhat trickier. To a degree, the committee was sympathetic to my position. As professors who had had fellowships or would seek them in the future, they could appreciate my desire. On the other hand, they were a little distrustful of recommending a non-academic project. Even more, they were familiar with writers' general fondness for indolence, daydreaming, and unearned monthly checks. It was clear that they found Romania a curious choice for one to go and do some writing. "Why there?" they asked. "And why peasants?"

I began answering by conceding the validity of the committee's attitude. From there I went on to speak of how Romanian culture was presently in a fluid and dynamic state as the economy was right at mid-transition from agrarianism to industrialism. What this meant, I thought, was that Romania could be a living model, or a window, of our own past. If this premise were true, then it would be a chance to see for once where I, we, came from. And even if the premise weren't true, it would still be a chance to see the
pressures on and the fears of Romanians at this time. Would they see their lives changing for the better or somehow diminishing in value? In any case, they were a people caught in a state of flux, and that by itself was enough to make Romania an interesting place to sit and observe human nature.

And how was I to write about this—like Hemingway, an American in Romania? I said I didn't know. The form would have to be determined by the material I gathered. I did assure them I thought myself capable of minimizing my own presence in the writing. My goal was to write about Romania as objectively as I could, using a fictional, narrative, journalistic manner in order to bring Americans a picture of this country about which practically nothing is known.

The funny thing about those interviews is that we had gone with the intention of snowing the committee. And we did; we heard later that we'd been given outstanding ratings. But while we had gone to the committee lacking serious goals, we had spoken so convincingly that we emerged with concrete projects we could pursue if we wanted to. Of course we knew we would never want to. Yet it was nice having something solid, to have meaning back there somewhere, in case we should ever want it.

There was nothing else to do but wait. Winter quarter we dug up a language tutor to show our good intent.
Other than that we took it easy and enjoyed our senior year. Pete was always organizing parties, dodging some girls, selling himself to others, burning to climax his last college year. I found myself seriously involved with a girl for the second time in my life. The year went by quickly. The last days got to be painful. At the end of May we heard that we had been awarded study grants by the Romanian government.
CHAPTER VII

We had wanted to be in Suceava for New Years, but inertia and bad weather kept us from getting there. The parties and folk rituals in the villages of that area are said to be especially grand, but we foolishly settled for a boring, besetting Bucharest soiree. It was a mistake both of us regretted. I ended up going home to bed early, and Pete roamed the streets with two stolen bottles of champagne which he shared with guards in front of the Presidential Palace.

On January 5th we finally left for Suceava. Landing at the airport there was almost like landing on the moon: for miles in all directions the fields were flat and snow-covered; only in the distance were there a few barren trees. We took the airport bus into town and checked in to the hotel next to the terminal. That afternoon we passed the time looking over the two fortresses which were located at opposite ends of town. In the morning we set out to visit the numerous monasteries of the area.

Our first stopping place was the Orthodox Church in the tiny village of Putna, up by the Soviet border. Nothing would distinguish the village or the church if they did not happen to be the burial place of Stefan cel Mare. Stefan
the Great, one of Romania's few historical lions, was a great warrior 500 years ago. The man had given up adoles­cence at age fourteen to lead the Moldavian people for fifty years against the Turks. He had fought thirty-eight battles, losing only two, and built thirty-eight churches. Seeing his cement coffin in the Putna monastery, we felt even more respect for the old soldier. He hadn't been five feet tall.

Leaving Putna, we bused to Suceavita and began a walking tour of the painted churches of northern Moldova. These buildings—Suceavita, Moldovita, Humor, and Voronet—are said to be unique in the world. Their exteriors were painted in fresco 400 years ago, but the paintings have bested time, weather, and vandals to remain much intact today.

It took us four days of leisurely walking to cover the circular route outlined by the four churches. As Pete and I expected, our interest in these religious art objects wasn't large—we spent a half hour or less at each—but they were not our sole reason for visiting the area. The churches rested in the beautiful, low-hilled region to the east of the northern Carpathians; and if the countryside were so pretty in winter, we couldn't imagine what it was like in spring.

The afternoon of the fourth day was surprisingly warm and sunny when we arrived at Humor. Entering the churchyard, we were pleased to find the place deserted.
Suceavita and Moldovita were still occupied by nuns, and at Voronet we had had to share the place with a bus-load of tourists. Humor, by contrast, had a nice, abandoned air about it. After giving it a cursory examination, we were content to rest our backs against the west wall and face the sun.

After ten or so minutes had passed, we saw a short man, dressed in white wool pants and shirt, come out of a nearby house and begin running towards us. We guessed he was the caretaker and about to bawl us out for leaning against a national treasure. We were right on both counts, but the reprimand we received was the mildest possible. The caretaker had just finished lunch, had prune brandy on his breath, and was in a friendly rather than officious mood. Directing us over to the oak bench by the well, he began telling us random facts about the churches: that the peculiar, tranquil shade of blue which so dominates at Voronet was now a lost secret which no one had been able to reproduce; that at Humor the frescos on the east and south walls were preserved while at Voronet it was the west and north walls—could we but raise one church and drop it on the other, we would have a complete visual record of the Bible and Christian history up through the fall of Constantinople; that Romanian law stated men cannot join a monastic order until they reach the age of fifty-five, nor women until
age fifty-two.

Upon leading us inside the church itself, the caretaker promptly apologized for the interior's evening-like darkness. The walls had not been washed in over a year and were smudged a dark grey from the smoke of thousands of burnt candles. As for the lamps, they had run out of oil the day before and had not been refilled. The only real light in the building was the sun shining through the small, solitary window of the nave. To help us see, our host grabbed a nearby silver platter, turned it over, and used the bottom to reflect light on any paintings we might care to look at. We had no curiosity that way, but Pete wanted to see how well the guy could handle the platter. He pointed to a picture on a far wall and said, "Tell me, what's that?"

The light immediately followed the direction of the finger. "Christ's temptation."

Next, Pete chose a painting high up in a corner, "What's that?"

A quick flash and, "Jesus walking on water." Then another corner, this time the finger aiming down by the floor. "What's that?"

Shine, "uh, Christ washing everybody's feet."

Another corner, at an arc of 180 degrees, turning, "What's that?"

"Everybody talking in tongues."

Pete was frantic. Behind the alter, "What's that?"
"In the garden."
The guy was a genius. On the ceiling, "What's that?"

"The ascension."

Toward the middle of the month we went to Iasi to look up an American friend, Harry Lipsomb, who was teaching English at the university. We found Harry in his office which apparently was a lucky occurrence. Usually he was nowhere near the place as it was also the same office for the entire English faculty, twenty-seven professors in all. We had no trouble talking Harry into going downtown for coffee.

Our friend was in a good mood and spoke in pleased tones about his year. One of the big reasons for his general, agreeable humor was that for the first time in his career he was receiving immense respect, not only from his peers, but from his students as well. Whenever he entered a classroom the latter would rise, and they would stand again when he left. Also, he found his opinions were listened to with regard and, ostensibly, were valued. That this flattering attention carried with it a grain of salt didn't really bother Harry. He freely admitted it probably had as much to do with his being a western capitalist as with anything else. "A gas jockey from a corner Shell station," he laughed, "would probably receive as much."

As for negative aspects, Harry did have a list of
things which made him weary. He said that generally speak-
ing, his students were lazy and afraid of discussion and
writing. They were lousy at original thought too. The only
students of his who showed genuine energy were those few who
had a chance to become professors—and these were often the
aggressive, the opportunistic, and the largely unpleasant.
Finally, Harry spoke of the woes of being a married man.
Like Bucharest and Cluj, the best-looking women in the
university were English majors.

We met Moldovan in the Iasi Culture Palace. We
were in the folk costume rooms, and Pete was studying a
photograph of an old man embroidering a leather vest. "Wish
I could do that," he said.

"Why don't you?"

Startled, we turned around and saw a genial old man
smiling at us. He was of slight build, but the bulky wool
sweater he wore made him seem larger. Rubbing the tip of
his grey mustache, he asked again, "Why don't you?"

"Because I don't have the time it takes to become
really good," Pete told him.

"Why not? You're young; you have all the time in the
world. What could be more important?"

For some reason Pete took the guy seriously. I
would have laughed and let the matter drop right there.
"Working to improve man's lot for example," Pete answered.
"And these beautiful vests don't?"

"Well, of course they are pretty to look at. And it makes you feel good to do so. But you also have to think in terms of what they cost."

"What do you mean?"

"Well . . . take a look at the history of your country. Through centuries Romanian peasants have sat in their tiny houses making their lovely folk art while at the same time the country gets overrun by Turks, Hungarians, Germans, and Russians. The peasants even let themselves be serfs to Romanian landlords."

Though this argument sounded a little specious to my ear, I thought Pete had a valid point. The old guy was less sure. "So tell me," he said, "what exactly was the cost?"

"Freedom."

"Was it? I don't think I agree. You are talking about political things which, by nature, are artificial. How can something like freedom be based on something artificial?"

"Now I don't understand."

"All right. say you are the Soviet Union. What have you won by dominating Romania? Well, economic advantage certainly. . . ." Moldovan stopped abruptly and began to chuckle. He seemed momentarily lost in consideration until the chuckle grew into a vigorous laugh and then grew more
until it ended in a snort. "Ah, yes," he said as he wiped his eyes, "the bastards did indeed get that. You've heard, of course?"

"Yes."

"But tell me, what else did they gain? Not one thing. Our hearts, our souls, our thoughts—they still belong to us. And if you are Romanian, what have you lost?"

"Your right to speak freely, to travel."

"But those are things governed by political barriers. When people find themselves most frustrated, it is precisely because they have defined themselves in terms of political limits. We all would do better to look less to the exterior world and more to ourselves to find out who we are."

Pete realized that there was a difference in definitions and beliefs going on which was beginning to split the conversation into two unconnected halves. He decided to let the matter ride, saying only, "You speak of a different faith from what we usually hear."

"It's only a good peasant faith," the man chuckled. "Better articulated, of course. You always hear peasants say 'such is life' upon the arrival of hard times. I imagine you westerners are appalled at Romanians' passivity towards what is. Only now have we begun to join the Industrial Revolution. Finally! Progress! But what the hell is that? Central heating and electrical appliances? They're
nice, comfortable—but I hear western culture is less hospitable than ours. New vaccines, psycchoanalysis? Ah, I must admit to weakness here. Anything that lessens suffering I'm a sucker for. But generally, I'm a great believer in the peasant outlook. How many outer trappings does a man need?"

"One might accuse that philosophy of being a necessary expedient," I ventured. "Since Romania is small and has been continually dominated by more powerful neighbors, your philosophy is the only way to achieve peace of mind. Or perhaps it is simply the easiest way."

Laughing again, the man answered, "Or perhaps it is the other way around. By being small and unfortified, we have not the blind of power to block our vision. After all, Romania survives. Several foreign conquerors have come and gone. The peasants still sit embroidering vests."

"Not so much anymore," said Pete.

"That's true, I'm sad to say." The man paused, thought, and went on. "Actually it isn't sad at all except in a sentimental way. I don't mean to mislead you. I don't mean to differentiate between Romanian culture and American culture by saying ours is better than yours. I wouldn't be so foolish as to claim that any one culture is superior to another. My stand is that of the transcendentalist—what is, is, and if it's okay with who or whatever created all this confusion, then by god, it's okay with me. And as for governments, bah, they're all artificial and can't be taken
seriously."

"How is it you haven't been put in jail yet?"

"Well you know, I had my chance many years ago, but I decided to keep my nose clean. You lads haven't heard of Nicu Moldovan by and chance?" We shook our heads. "I thought not. I'm Moldovan. Anyway, at one time I was well-known. I'd published an existential paper on the meaninglessness of God and had received some public exposure. I was popular as a professor and even spent a year teaching at the Sorbonne. That was in the late thirties."

"In the forties, as of course you know, Romania went communist after the war, and we suffered under extreme times. This country was being drained economically by the Soviets, and we were being squashed under the Stalinist thumb. People were thrown in prison for looking sideways at a Mercedes and for less."

"As I happened to be known and respected at various foreign universities, the leaders of the regime thought it would be wise to sound out my opinions in relation to themselves. In the fall of 1950 a couple of large, fleshy men—exactly like the party power men of today; for some reason those guys never change—came to visit me. They began by telling me how fine my paper of thirteen years earlier had been. Communists, as you know, have no use for God, and they were impressed. After that, they outwardly remained
pleasant, but they began squinting their eyes and saying things like, 'Tell us, Professor, what do you think of our present government? Our new leaders?' In response, I smiled, nodded, and said, 'fine, fine.' I was gratified to see the goons looking sincerely pleased over this answer. They wrote a few things in their notebooks, we drank a coffee, and they left satisfied. Luckily they hadn't asked about anything else. Had they asked what I thought about the U.S., say, or fascist Spain I probably would have given the same answer and then nobody would have been happy."

"So you deceived them?"

Moldovan roared. "Of course! What do you think! But I never fooled them as much as they themselves. Say, you guys want to go for a beer?"

"What time is it?"

"Nearly six."

"Sorry, but we have to be going. We're supposed to be at the university at six." We quickly shook Moldovan's hand and left the museum.

On the tram up to the Copou section of town I told Pete that Moldovan's philosophy reminded me of Zorba's. Like Zorba, he was far beyond kings, democracies, communists, or countries.

"I was just thinking," Pete replied, "what do you say we go to Greece for a month?"

At the end of January we flew to Athens.
"So go see him!"

"All right," and she left, pointedly not slamming the door. As she hurried down the steps and across the yard, she felt a startling bit of clarity: she was confused, had been for some time, and not realized it until that moment. Robert apparently hadn't realized it either. In the past when she would bait him for one reason or another, he'd simply raise his eyebrows, whistle, and say, "whooohoo, what is wrong with you?" It was an effective method, and she had no qualms about using it when the roles were reversed. Now she couldn't remember when either of them had used it last, both having developed a preference for letting the blood roil freely in their veins.

Robert was good at arguing, good at getting her agitated, she thought. Her fingers were having their problems getting the key into the ignition. She was thinking of when she'd ask different people why they love someone else, they always answered by listing things—good-heartedness and understanding would usually be in there somewhere, followed by a number of personal idiosyncrasies—then they would end by saying, "but that's not really it; I just love him or her, that's all; no real reason under the sun." But she
knew exactly why she loved Robert. He was gentle, kind—his good-heartedness was embroidered red on every sleeve he owned—a good, if somewhat clumsy and rustic lover, a painful lover of truth. Added to this, he was erudite, color-blind, and percipient (his word choice).

It was this last, during the arguments which had begun within the last month that he used with so much adroitness. If he felt threatened, he could be cruel and attack her on her weaknesses; other times he could be just as insidious, if hurt, by playing the role of the sensitive being abused. Whichever way he played it, always he was right on the money.

That evening she had come from work in the worst possible mood. It was one of those givens—the monthly Lipmann planning session with its accompaniment of penurious haggling and raving by her boss—and both she and Robert knew she'd arrive at the apartment cross, tired and bored. In hopes of offering her some relief, Robert had prepared a pitcher of margueritas and deep fried some chiles rellenos. He couldn't help but smile when she entered the kitchen looking thoroughly out of sorts. "Bad day?" he asked.

"Bad," she responded. She poured a marguerita, got three aspirin from the cabinet, and went into the bedroom to lie down.

When she got up an hour and a half later, her mood
was not much improved. As they sat down to eat, she noted Robert was frowning slightly over the delay in dinner she had caused; she noted too her indifference to the fact. "You didn't have to wait for me," she said.

"I wanted to."

"Thank you," she replied blandly. Taking a bite of the rellenos, she made a face. "What is this?"

"Come on," he said, snorting a laugh, "You know what it is."

"No I don't."

"It's chiles rellenos."

"No it isn't."

"Stop it, Sarah." His voice finally carried the notes of resignation and hurt that she had seen in his eyes when she had mouthed her thank you. "I had to use bell peppers," he went on, "you know Kienow's doesn't have poblano chiles."

"Well I can't eat this."

She got up and went to the refrigerator for the pitcher of margueritas. She thought he would be angry now, but that he would have the sense to let it drop by saying "Then don't!" But apparently he was more bothered than she thought.

"Why not? You can easily add more hot sauce." His voice had now acquired a reciprocal goading edge.

She crossed the kitchen and scanned the books on the
shelf by the dining room window. She took down The Complete Book of Mexican Cooking, with obvious deliberation underlined two lines of page twenty, and then handed the book to Robert.

"Bell peppers can be substituted for poblano chiles although there is no use in pretending they are half as good."

When he finished reading, he looked up and stared at her. She was standing by the sink, holding her glass next to her right eye, and looking back at him from just above the green liquid. She saw his eyes change color in the instant before he picked up the book and threw it at her. "So go see him!" he said, not quite shouting.

She drove down Morrison and took the exit onto 5, heading toward the Fremont Bridge. Whenever she was upset or depressed, she always liked to drive over the Freemont; it was a long arching glide, high over the Willamette, and through nothing but a wide-open sky heading toward the thick green of the northwest hills of Portland. The time of day couldn't have been better. It was a little after nine, but the sun had only just set. "The long days of summer," she thought, "Goddamn him!" She'd not thought of Malcom for months, prior to the last two days, nor had she spoken of him, yet Robert had known—he could be amazing sometimes—had known almost immediately when that old name had once
again re-entered her head.

The distance from the Virginia Cafe to the corner of Salmon is three hundred and eighty-two steps. From there it's another fifty-four to the front door of the Roosevelt. Nine months had passed since she'd been in the Virginia, and she was surprised at the sharpness of her memory. Exactly four hundred and thirty-six steps to the Roosevelt. It was one of those absurd facts he insisted on knowing, and like the giant trash-bin load of all his absurdities, he had a serenely reasonable-sounding motive for knowing it. "You never know. I might be blind someday," Malcolm had said, as she led him, he with eyes closed, back to the hotel at 2 A.M., "I would have to know this."

Malcolm had reasons for everything. She remembered too how he had been the one to choose the Virginia for their late night coffees. He had been drawn to it by the big front windows and the light spilling out into the street. Inside and on the right, a formica counter ran two-thirds the length of the cafe; on the left were vinyl and wood booths with little stained glass windows set in the paneling. As soon as they had entered, Malcolm had inhaled deeply and said, "Ah, take a whiff. This may be a working class place, but they spruce it up real nice. I like it. If I were the salt of the earth, I know I'd come here to get out of the rain, eat pie a la mode. I think I will anyway." Then turning to her, he had raised one eyebrow and added,
"You're going to find out I'm very sentimental at heart."

They had only met that evening, but sentimental was one thing she knew he wouldn't be. She wouldn't have approached him otherwise. A few hours earlier they had both been attending a champagne reception for the art museum's newly acquired Corot. She had been in the mood for a small, unencumbered affair; and when she saw him in a blue pin-striped suit and white bow tie, she knew he wasn't anyone she would have to take seriously. Catching him by the painting and referring to it, she had asked, "Don't you find those little dots of color annoying?"

"No. Do you?" She had thought his tone was purposely condescending.

"I think they're silly," she answered.

"So are the bubbles in your wine, but I notice you like them well enough."

"Well, aren't you observant?"

"Not really. Looking around this room earlier I saw you and said, 'there's a woman who knows art.' Now I find out you only came here to get drunk. You still haven't made the connection."

"What connection?"

Bringing the long-stemmed glass up to his eye, he replied, "The reason Corot put in those little dots is that he saw the world through a glass of champagne."
"Is that what he meant?"

"That's it. I bet you thought those speckles were flowers."

"I really did," she admitted. "Do you want to go for a walk?"

They had left the museum, strolled down to the river and across the Hawthorn, and bar-hopped on the way back. Coming up 8th Malcolm had been drawn by the light of the Virginia, and they had gone in for coffee and boysenberry pie.

For an hour they talked of Corot, of nothing. As they were finishing their second coffees, Malcolm asked if she would spend the night with him.

"I don't know," she had answered. A nascent sobriety had begun creeping up on her. She could begin to remember the nagging distaste which she had developed within the past few years, a distaste for those mornings when she would wake up and have to deal with a strange body on the other side of the bed.

"If you don't, it's all right. I'll still call you up again. But if you stay with me tonight, it will help us cut through a lot of nonsense and save time."

"Save time for what?"

"For the relationship we're going to have."

"We're going to have one of those?"

"Yes."
"And you're in a hurry for it?"

"I have to be. I'm only going to be in Portland for three months."

Even now Sarah could recall the feeling of a wind blowing through the cafe when he had said that. She had felt something warm blowing on her cheeks, and it had smelt of freedom.

"You will leave, no matter what?"

"No matter what."

She had grabbed both his hands in hers and said loudly, "Good!"; and he had sat grinning like a doltish adolescent.

After that she had taken him by the hand and led him up to the Roosevelt, where he took her to his rooms on the top floor. He rented the same suite every summer. He was content to use the hotel's old, comfortable furniture, but the management had seen to it that Malcolm line the living room floor three-deep with Persian rugs to blot up the noise of his occasional parties. After she had quit her job managing the Blue Eagle and began staying with Malcolm every night, she had insisted that they sleep out in the living room on those rugs, lying beneath the large windows looking out over the park blocks.

The other room with a view was the one Malcolm used for his work. He had had the hotel remove all the furniture, and in its place he had brought in his lamps, three drawing
tables, and his reams of giant sketch pads. "Are you a cartoonist?" she had asked, both amused and surprised by the room. And he had mumbled, "Sort of." Three months a year he spent four hours every day in that room designing caricatures and logos for t-shirts "for the masses" and also exotic prints for the bed sheets of the rich.

"Ah, you are a serious artist," she laughed.

"A successful one too. I make enough doing this to go back to Monterey for nine months to gouge little chips out of perfectly good marble."

"And do you do that well too?"

"Superbly. It's embarrassing."

She had never seen any of his sculpture, but she guessed he probably was good. As for his ever being embarrassed, she knew he lacked whatever that sense of self-dignity it was which caused people to feel that discomfort. He hadn't shown the least sign of distress when he'd been approached by bums on Burnside, or outrageously propositioned by tall, black, blonde-wigged whores in Hung Far's, or on that awful afternoon when he and she had been caught making love in the choir loft of the Episcopal church.

"More coffee?"

"Please."

She wondered at her hesitation. Confusion and delay were never things she had been practiced at. Even at those
times which had great potential for indecision and a kind of lostness, she managed at least some degree of clarity by pointedly seeking out their opposites: by striking poses, by acting. On the very day Malcolm had flown back to California, she went out looking for a job. That evening she'd gone to the Refectory and propositioned the first man who looked intelligent and capable of handling an ill-motivated affair with a certain amount of grace. ("You should always assume loss from the very beginning," Malcolm used to say; but even knowing that, she had thought, didn't keep one from feeling the loss when it finally came.)

The man she picked up that night in the Refectory lounge was Robert. He had been sitting at the bar smoking a pipe and ruminating into his beard. He filled the air around him with a kind of ponderousness. She disliked beards and hated pipes, but he still struck her as someone who seemed as if he could serve as a solid, comfortable wall. He also looked like he could give her the one item which she demanded in her relationships with men, to leave untouched that kernel or island where her sense of life, her freedom lay, and more, to accept whatever that thing was without explanation. Robert, she guessed, owned remote islands of his own and would not care less about hers.

"Are you a medievalist?" She had asked as she sat down beside him.

"God no! I hate old cathedrals," he had answered,
and immediately both knew some agreement was about to be reached. (It wasn't until later that he understood she'd been in earnest about that question, that she really thought he looked like some forlorn archivist. On learning he taught English lit at Portland State and that his doctoral thesis was on Thomas Hardy, she had exclaimed, "You are a medievalist after all!"; and he had been pissed off for days.)

The agreement they reached was that each would offer the other, as they were able, a pleasant companionship and a partner for social events. Sarah was happy to discover that going with him to faculty cocktail parties or dinners cost her nothing, that they were not that frequent to be tedious, and that Robert was a surprisingly good companion for weekend trips to Vancouver or San Francisco. Another thing she learned, though it was something she had known would happen, is that as she increasingly spent time with him, Robert became fleshed out in her mind, and fleshed out in such a way that she could value him, love him for being the creature he was.

Pushing aside her cup and opening a new pack of Camels, she smiled as two more reasons came to her which she could add to the list of why she loved him. Actually it was just one reason made up of opposing halves. Robert was really a shy man with a genuine, mild sense of inadequacy
that he was worthy of anyone's affection. On the other side, there was his sometimes outrageous vanity that he should be asked to endure anything less than he was getting or even less than he wanted.

Sarah shook her head and said aloud the word "Contradictions." A couple in the next booth glanced over at her. She took her newly lit cigarette and stubbed it out. A kind of weariness came over her as she realized the cigarette was from her fourth pack of the day. She had resumed smoking in the last two months, and she held Robert responsible. What had happened is that he had changed from a stoutly independent man into one who had decided it was time to get married. Sarah had been so relaxed in their easy and comfortable affair that she hadn't foreseen this change coming. She was completely taken by surprise the first time he proposed.

They had gone for a drive one night after dinner; and after riding along in silence for twenty minutes, Robert had turned to her and said, "Let's get married."

She had laughed and given him a funny look. "What are you talking about?" she had answered. She thought the whole thing was some kind of aberration and would soon go away. She discovered she was mistaken however. Robert was serious and he didn't let the matter drop.

It was a position she hadn't been in for years. Portland had always been a town full of thirty-two year old
men who were lonely or unfulfilled: men who thought the way to shout away that feeling was to marry and father children. She knew what a trap that sadness could be, and she had always sought to stay clear of it. Now she didn't know what to do. Robert was asking something of her she couldn't give; and on the inverse side of that, he was not someone she wanted to walk away from.

He had pleaded with her for over a month. Often his appeal was full of a longing sweetness, and she would be grateful. "Sarah, I don't understand you," he would say. "You are usually the first to rebuke the world for its shortage of tenderness, but then you refuse the measure of it I offer."

At such times all she could do would be to take his head in her hands, kiss his lips, and sigh, saying, "Robert, no."

Other times though he would be harsh and demanding, and they would begin arguing. She remembered the horrible afternoon she had tried throwing his beloved Hardy back in his face. They had been making love, and when they finished Robert again brought up the topic of marriage.

At first she had been more weary than angry. "You have no sense of timing, Robert," she had said.

"No, I suppose not," he had retorted. "It's bad form I know to bring up our future when you are feeling so
good."

"Will you drop it please?"

"No, I won't. I want to talk about it right now. I want to hear your post-coital objections."

"They're the same objections as any time, and you know full well what they are."

"Then tell me."

"Because you're a shithead," she said, keeping her voice as cold as possible. Then sitting up in bed and shaking back the hair from her forehead, she added in a staged voice, "'How hopelessly vulgar an institution marriage is.'"

"'How hopelessly vulgar an institution legal marriage is.' Well well. I thought you hated that book."

"I do. It's three hundred pages of silliness written by a man. I thought using it would be a great ironic blow."

"Except it isn't. If you remember, at the end Sue Bridehead completely breaks down."

"God, what a name. Yes, she breaks down but for no reason. In intelligence, in emotions, she was always head and shoulders above Jude. If she is destroyed at the end, it's only because of Hardy's stupid need for tragedy. In real life she never would have come unglued."

She had said those words in anger, and when she finished, Robert remained silent for half a minute. When he finally spoke, he answered in slow, measured tones. "Oh, I
see. What you mean is that you would never have come unglued?"

"That's right."

"If you ask me, Sarah, your problem is that you take these things too personally."

Too personally. She could again feel her disgust as she recalled the smugness of his voice when he said that. That was Robert all over.

"Are you saying that I'm taking your proposal of marriage too personally?"

"You are, Sarah. A ceremony wouldn't change a thing."

She had grabbed her hair with both hands and given a yell of despair that both had known was not purely faked. It was one of the last times either had spoken the word marriage. For the last month they had replaced it with silence or with the arguments over nothing at all, the arguments at which they had become so adept.

"More coffee?"

"Oh . . . just a half cup please."

The waitress was not one she recognized, but she had no trouble recalling the slight acid tang of the Virginia's coffee. "One of those small, sour things to remind you you're alive," as Malcolm used to say.

She had saved that little comment of his. Saving remarks was a trick she had learned when she was thirteen,
and one she had never stopped doing. Whenever anyone she liked would say something revealing and tidy, something that represented them in an essential way, she would roll the remark up and store it like candy, putting it in some pocket for later in the day. If the Malcolm in her pocket was someone she hadn't pulled out and looked at for months, she knew the cause for that. "Things" for Malcolm didn't need to be small or sour to remind him of his mortality; they could be sweet, painful, monstrous, joyous—it didn't matter to him. All that mattered was the intensity, and finally it was intensity which separated him from everyone else. He had power, yes, but if he weren't in the vicinity, somewhere in the state where she could feel the waves of that power, then he almost necessarily became something synthetic.

She remembered the last evening they'd spent in the cafe. She had been sad and full of a sense of loss. The image in her head had been that she and Malcolm were standing on an empty dock. Earlier there had been a boat sailing for warmer waters, but they had just missed it. Now Malcolm was catching a plane, alone, and flying south.

"You know, when this started, I was happy because I knew exactly when we would say goodbye," she had told him. "Now I don't know if that was right or not. Don't you think that when you set up fixed boundaries around an affair you have diminished the possibilities for surprise, for things we might have had?"
He responded with a look of feigned surprise, but when this made her frown, he became serious. "I don't know, Sarah. The way I look at it is this. Suppose the people in this place now were a cross-section, say, of terminal carcinogenics. If you were to poll them about the time-bomb that's been pinned to their chests, sure, some are going to squawk that their lives have become depressing as hell. There will always be a few though who have found a certain amount of savor has been added when they wake up in the morning and find out they really are awake."

She had liked that answer. If it had been at all possible for her to feel there was a game and one could be ahead at it, she would have let the conversation drop. Instead her sadness persisted and she asked, "Will I see you next summer?"

"You might," he had replied, "but I don't know if you'd want to."

"Why not?"

"Next July 12th I turn 35, and on that day I kill myself."

In a way, it occurred to her now, that really was one of his charming features: Malcolm was always involved in games, but he never knew exactly when he was ahead and when he wasn't. She had sighed in disgust and said, "Let's get out of here. You shouldn't flatter yourself that you aren't boring."
A large group of people entered the cafe, laughing as they came through the door. Sarah looked up startled; she had flashed on the premonition that Malcolm would be among them. Scanning the faces quickly, she found he wasn't. She was surprised at how upset this fact made her. From the pounding in her chest, she realized for the first time how excited she was about the prospect of seeing him.

She got up and paid her bill. The clock behind the counter said 10:30. She had no idea so much time had passed.

Walking quickly toward the Roosevelt the first thing she noticed on rounding the corner at Salmon was the doorman standing under the hotel's awning. He was dressed in a green summer livery with gold braiding. As she approached, she recognized him as the same doorman she'd befriended the previous year. As she came up to him, she extended her hand. "Hello, Maurice," she said, smiling.

"Why hello, Miss . . . Morrow. It still is miss, isn't it?"

"It still is."

"Boy! I'll tell you something. I don't understand what is wrong with the men in this town when they let a beautiful woman like you walk around unmarried."

"I don't understand it either, Maurice, but then again they don't always have the last word."

"Yes, that's the way of it." He took off his cap and ran his fingers through the short fringe which covered
an otherwise bald head. "Don't always have the last word, and not often besides."

They both laughed. If their old familiarity was not something they felt, at least it was there where they could recall its former strength.

"So tell me Maurice, is the notorious Malcolm M., staying here now?"

"Yes ma'am! He moved in last Friday with his tables and trunks. They say he's brought along a four foot bronze elephant with him this time."

"He would. And did he bring the case of aspirin for the staff?"

"You know we don't let him stay here if he doesn't."

"That's right. Do you happen to know if he's in right now?"

"Ah, no, Miss Morrow, he isn't. He stepped out about half an hour ago."

"Oh . . . and I suppose there's no telling when he'll be back?"

"You know him better there than I do," the doorman said. He gave Sarah a soft, quizzical smile.

"Well. . . ."

"Was anyone on his arm, Maurice?" She asked this quickly though she was aware she already had known the answer even before she'd asked the first time.

"Yes. A tall, sort of curly-haired blonde."
"I see." She looked away and to the left. Lights were shining through the trees of the park blocks and she felt they were staring at her. Turning back to the doorman she asked, "And how was he looking?"

"Ah, he was looking champion; there's no other word for it. You know how he gets, Miss Morrow. Whenever he dresses to the teeth, he looks just champion."

She felt herself smiling broadly and meaning it, but she also felt the return of a weariness behind her eyes. "That's good," she said. "At least I'm glad for that."

"It always makes me glad too. What would be the point of having butterflies if they weren't so pretty to look at?"

"None, absolutely none. Well, Maurice, it's been nice talking with you. I think I'll just slip into the lobby and use the phone."

"Sure, Miss Morrow. Drop by and say hello any time."

Walking into the hotel, she realized she felt a touch of gratitude for the doorman. He no doubt wanted to offer his condolence, and he had, but he had done it in a gentle and unobtrusive way. He had always been one of the main reasons Malcolm was so fond of the Roosevelt. Maurice had a constancy and a lack of vanity which put one immediately at ease. She remembered the time he had been standing on one side of the glass doors and she and Malcolm on the other. Malcolm had been in formal dress. Pointing his
white gloved hand at the image through the glass, he had said, "There you see one of the most human men in the world." At that time she had had no cause to argue, nor had she any cause now. Maurice probably had turned away dozens of women, men, who no longer had the power to gain entrance to an old lover's rooms. Through the years he had become as deft as he was kind.

Malcolm had said something else that day as well, had appended another clause to his first in order to form another of his perfect Malcolm paradigms. "There you see one of the most human men in the world," he had said, "and here you stand talking to the most vacuous man on earth." Of course he had laughed; his need to be absurd had been served.

She took two dimes from her pocket and dropped them into the slot of the pay phone. As she did so a thought came to her. It was either something she had never known or else something she'd long forgotten. "Nobody is the most vacuous man on earth," she told herself as she dialed the number, "nobody is, but everybody is void somewhere." As for Malcolm he was a being who tried to fill his empty space with noise and art. His vacuity just might be large enough that in the end he would prove to be a great artist.

"Hello."

"Robert?"
"Well, well, what happened? Did the Great Poblano throw you out?"

"Robert, listen. I've been sitting in the Virginia Cafe drinking coffee and thinking. I realized I didn't really want to see Malcolm. What I'd rather do is go with you to Carnitas. I haven't had dinner yet, and I'm starving."

"All right. I don't mind watching you eat." His voice was reserved, but she could hear him smiling. "If you're as mellow as you sound," he went on, "maybe we'd do better if we got something made with bell peppers at Taco Time."

"Don't be a dildo," she laughed. It was okay, she would go along with his game. "You know I only go after the real thing, and as it happens, tonight I'm going after you."

She could feel the smile grow larger. "All right, lady," he said. "In that case, let's make a night of it. We'll get a lot of tequila and beer to celebrate."

"And after that, buster, I'm taking you home and screwing your eyes out."

"My eyes?"

"That's right. If you have any sense at all you'll memorize the floor plan of the apartment and the number of steps between the bathroom, the fridge, and the bed."

"It's done already. Pick you up in ten minutes."

Hanging the receiver back in its cradle, she had the sense of replacing something much heavier. A calm feeling
had come over her that things, for no particular reason, were as they should be. Tonight they would get drunk, yes, and she would screw his eyes out. And then in the morning he would go off and teach his Hardy of Wessex horseshit: "Elizabeth-Jane might not be much of a heroine, goddammit, but she did know one thing—'as the lively and sparkling emotions of her early married life cohered into an equable serenity, the finer movements of her nature found scope in discovering the secret of making limited opportunities endurable.'"

Ha ha. How he could quote that, and worse, how she could have remembered it amazed her. Lights had flickered on in her head. She might not be much of a heroine either, goddammit, but she at least knew two things. One, in the morning she would finish with cigarettes forever. Two, if her life was at an in-between time, and even if it had been stalled there for awhile, for awhile longer, tonight anyway, she'd willfully abandon herself to that.
THE SORROW IN WRITING FOR THE NEW YORKER

Dear Sirs:

Last Tuesday it was. I was walking with a friend down the hall of his apartment when all of a sudden he moans "son-of-a-bitch." He'd spotted a manila envelope sticking out halfway from under his door. He knew what it was; he'd seen them before. It was an envelope with his own handwriting on it. You guys had returned his story.

I told him I was sorry. He bent down and picked up the envelope and then unlocked his door. We walked in. "Don't be," he said, "it's nothing." And though he was still a little letdown, he meant it. I could see he was filled with a quiet, powerful resignation. "You know, I really feel sorry for the editors of good magazines like The New Yorker," he said. They must get a lot of really good stories which they have to send back because they haven't space or else the subject is a little off." This is how he consoled himself. He may be right. I haven't read his stories, but they probably are good. He's a perceptive guy.

But this has got me to thinking. Why didn't he take it harder? He sweats like a pig over his stories; why wasn't he more upset? I think I know.

...
Who are your readers? Perhaps someone picks up the magazine in a doctor’s office and reads an article or two. Or else he just glances at the cartoons and those little ad-eundems. And he knows, ah, that this thing speaks to him. Or possibly a friend, a literati, reads it, so the other tries it and ah . . .

So you get most of these people together in your circulation listing and who are they: sophisticates, people who like good wit, witty people, professional people (not only doctors), people who enjoy perception on the sly side.

I suspect they are also something else. They are people who possess varying degrees of what Dostoyevsky called "acute consciousness." That is, the knowledge that human action is meaningless, absolutely. That is, a man of "consciousness" may take action, but he can only pretend it is important.

This is getting messy. Let me use my writer friend as an example. I know for a fact he is a man of "consciousness" (and that he reads The New Yorker). He often sighs and says, after he sees a pretty adolescent girl pass, "A man can only diddle a 19 year old girl while he is still in his early twenties. For later it is not the same." In a way he’s right. Later it isn’t the same. But still, a forty year old man, making love to a 19 year old beauty, could be
filled with pleasure. He could also be filled with emptiness. IF HE THOUGHT ABOUT IT. And my friend would think about it, I know. So why think about it?

... 

Is it fair to lump all your readers in this category? Hardly. It's unscientific, not to mention invidious.

Why do it? I'm convinced it fits.

I've read your magazine. When I left my friend's apartment, I went to the library and read several issues. (I admit to being entertained. I like the way you poke fun.)

But to prove my point, take a look at your story writers. Take some of the more important ones (the ones appearing more often)—Updike, Borges, and Barthleme. Who are these guys?

Updike writes beautifully. Cataloging details and essences of differing ages—youth, young fatherhood, middle-age, (and probably a thorough look at old age when the time comes.) Explaining as exactly as he can what we have felt. With him one has the learning tools of dissection and the microscope. Learning through observation. ("Ah, now I understand;" gratifying the consciousness.) Sometimes there is a sad glance backwards. Sadness at growing old. And more, with Updike there is a sense of his losing faith, reaffirming it, then watching it dwindle away again, while all
the while, writing, writing.

In Borges, there is the monumental inventor. His stories are rich in complexities and deep tricks. What better way can one intrigue someone who believes in everything as charade than to produce a giant at cleverness. (I think his stories are excellent. Do not misunderstand me on that.) And added, there is the bonus that Borges' philosophical infinity, though full of vast geometrical devices, is formless.

Barthleme, in his wild stories, speaks even more directly to the people I think are your audience. He writes with amazingly direct verisimilitude of being strung up over a "sea of hesitation." How can a man of "consciousness" possibly know how or when to act? Oh, oh yes!

I don't know these three men. But their stories are in your magazine so your readers probably read them. My friend does.

...

My friend tells me Van Gogh told someone, everyone, that above all he should guard his naivete. My friend thinks this is good advice. I didn't know what to tell him in return. I couldn't bring myself to ask him how one is to go about doing that.

Before I lose my way entirely, I only want to say it's kind of sad to write for The New Yorker.
So I offer you this now, without sadness. Instead with audacity and a little humility. I am not a writer. Hardly even a reflective person. But please consider it. My wife’s birthday is coming up, and I would like to get her something a little special. I could use the money. I love her dearly.

yours truly,
THE EXILE

He coulda said scum. For the folks listening, the ones who really cared—not the ghouls, the spittle-lipped voyeurs—but the mothers, either personally broken-hearted or vicariously shattered. But he didn't. He had himself to think of. These judicial types have themselves to impress necessarily. Otherwise the courts in America would collapse . . . shortage of methane gas. No not scum. He said dung . . . "Ahn egexample of the ahkitypal dung, the miniscule a-nal leavahns of a roden' . . . that somehow manages to egsist in the greatest of ahll manshions."

No one was fooled. Obviously he'd achieved that metaphor while sitting on the crapper. (Note: Gallup and Harris took samplings of judges on the toilet . . . Gallup, 61% of the judges wear their robes during; Harris, 64%. 4% of both surveys had gotten crabs from courthouse toilets, and 4% stand on the seat while defecating.)

To tell the truth, you can't live six months in a home run by Charleston's finest and not have it restore you to the infantile thrashings of logic. I wanted to ask, after a "ooooo bitter and vitoop . . . how cum we never catch da rodent? Rat poison is always smarter dan rat genius."
Of course I didn't. If anything, this is IT to respect in this land. Vision . . . vision and foresight. The judge had had the bailiff slap some black electricians tape across my mouth . . . "Ruhmove that an' yourh in contempt."

My lawyer, ex-yalie like me, made no protest. Feared my advances. The fool. Hadn't heard Rubella's maxim: "Leave the virile scratchy faces to the queens. Nothin like rimmin a peach . . . less its being sucked by one. Simultaneous like." Admired Rubella. Had to. Couldn't see and barely hear, no use to his hands. But he could overload his senses like a coke rush . . . sensitive too . . . tried to return same. Poor R. Missed his death. Shot by his pet in the heart . . . poor lad couldn't take the ribbing of the beauty boys. Called him Goodwillie . . . fucks the handicapped.

I refused to touch the tape . . . the only thing they could get me for. Felt for em really. Nine counts of statutory and none of them sticking. No way to know the lads, upper middle class all, would refuse to point the dirty finger. The one found with semen up his butt said he'd been bending over, looking for the previous day's b.v.d.s when he felt the dog . . . doing something weird on his back.

Funny how it was . . . of course it was semen, you can't mistake the stuff. So they never did a lab test, just
took some glossies . . . imagine the embarrassment . . . a kid who loses his dirty shorts and of course the german shepard had to be put to sleep.

Luckily that kid was the anomaly. Butt fucking's no longer the favored m.o. Not since Benway's invention, the so-called Third Ball. (Note: this invention consists of joining a plastic tube to the penile urethra below the prostate. This tube is then connected to a miniature sac externis to the body. The sac may be filled with essences of one's choice. The pressure and suction of the rushing seminal fluid is sufficient to draw much of the essence into the urethra. For best effects, however, manual pressure is advised. When the sac is empty Benway recommends an alcohol flush to guard against infection. Personally I don't like to do this. Too much pain. Just attach a new sac. The essences are boiled pure and the sac hermetically sealed.)

The other eight liked it in the mouth . . . loved the raspberry. Was partial to it myself . . . bought it with pips . . . single shot or machine gun . . . through the urethra it takes your head off.

So how did I even get picked up? Impossible to figure until I see the pics . . . ah Franklin sweetcheeks . . . camera buff and momento fetishist. Couldn't kiss the joy as it flys nor find a better hiding place than under his mat-
tress. To his credit a lousy photog and an accomplished liar. The pics blurry and "it might be me but it's not him on the other hand it might be him and not. . . ." Hear he's in the state asylum buggering the jissom out of the geriatric ward.

And the judge looks a cuckold. Can't send me to the chair nine times. Or even fry me once. Bye bye governship. Hence the "dung" epithet. Wondered about slander by my lawyer doesn't even raise his eyebrows. Judge does. "You look foruhn to me. Can't convict you but ah can call you a *puhsona non grahta* . . . an' order you deepohted. . . ."

"He's from Grass Valley, state of Californy," says the diaphram brain on my right.

". . . to a country sufficiently duhpraved. Some­where with A-rabs or Nigrahs . . . or maybe both with a few slant-eyes tossed in. I duhclare you unda' house uhrest till we 'range for yourh passage. Yourh loyah can appeal aftah yourh gone."

My passage would take awhile. They were dredging up the transatlantic cable. Planned to stretch it tight above the water . . . tie me crotch to cable and belay me across. Lots of laughter. "That ought to give the fairy a fine case of lover's nuts." Several chapters of the S.P.C.A., demanded cable be vasalined inside the twelve mile territorial limit. "Too bad this isn't Peru," said friend Bill Lee. "It's two
hundred miles there." (Note: Peru has no transatlantic cable.) And in an aside he says, "Escape if you can."

Seemed sound. Felt straight enough to disguise myself as a right thinking hetero and sashayed right out past the guard. Lest he be suspicious ... propositioned and fucked a matron right on the street. Remembered why my predilections lay elsewhere ... a bit dank and musty ... more sebaceous tissue than is my taste. What can you do? One never escapes servicing society entirely.

Many men are agog at freedom. Not me. Judge, even with a used condom for a thought processor had right idea. The places he named were good, but I knew one better ... my dream actually ... flew to England ... acquired gainful employ as a janitor in a boys' school. You can't imagine.

Was popping buttons in the closet the other day. With me dust-bin mate. Says he, "What's a yank like you doing this for? You in exile or something?"

I: "self-exile."

He: "Ah, one can be self-exiled but never exiled from self."

Friggin' psychopomps. Find 'em everywhere you turn, even in the janitor's closet. I say, "Okay, okay, BUTT ... will be surprised if I don't find a little surcease up an eight year old asshole tonight!"