THE TRANSLATION & OTHER STORIES

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THE GREYHOUND AND THE FIELD MOUSE

It loomed up suddenly out of the blackness. One did not think it possible here where the stars form an unassuming dome over great, flat plains.

Ike drove his fist through the air for emphasis. "That's a hump for you, all right."

Ike touched his grey bow tie carefully, then shrugged. "Never know where you stand. One minute doing all right, the next...'' He made a sound with his lips.

Before them stretched the great darkness.

Tiny stared straight ahead. Never did he look to the side. They called him Tiny because he was a tremendous, thick-necked man. Tiny Balls they called him; his last name was Balsam. When Tiny spoke, he pronounced each word with exactly the same emphasis, for exactly the same duration, with precisely the same pause between. "Know what you mean," he said. Naturally, Tiny was the fleetest driver. He sat behind the wheel majestically.

Ike thumped the back of Tiny's cushioned seat. "Some-
times you just have to rush forward with your head down."

"Know what you mean."

Onward they drove into the great darkness. Cigar smoke curled through the dead air. Toward the rear, a young boy broke into a paroxysm of sobbing.

The story Ike told is as follows (five years are sometimes nothing):

Ike takes the room. The large brass bed squeaks as he flounders up and down. He wonders what to do this first yawning day of vacation in the Big City. The sun is still low in the sky.

By coincidence, at the coffee bar Ike bumps into grey-clad Emery Lynch. "Ike ole boy, you're in luck!" Emery knows a woman. By God! he would take her himself if only he could. She is visiting briefly; she is rich, has big hips and is alone. He adds slyly, "You know how these rich women are...heh?"

Back in his room, Ike picks his teeth with a two-colored toothbrush and plots to himself. It is all settled. On the phone she don't sound half bad. But then a small cloud passes; Ike wonders if this is not a prank after all. "That Emery Lynch, always one for a laugh." It is an uncomfortable feeling to be made a fool; even more so if you sense it coming and do nothing.
Troubled, Ike flops on the bed. Squeak. The sun is growing hot in the blue sky. With both hands folded beneath his head, Ike stares into the whiteness of his room. Now exactly how could that Emery Lynch know a rich woman?

In the hallway that smells of rotten canteloupe, Ike again dials the number written on a scrap of napkin. "Mildred Trimborne? Ike, ma'am. You see, I'm afraid, well, I opened my suitcase and, well, I've only this grey uniform..."

Mildred speaks in an unctuous voice. She loves to shop. She will come by threeish and they will buy Ike some suits. It will be fun. She hangs up immediately.

"Never bite the hand of fate," Ike says aloud. His eyes gleam and he rubs his hands together greedily. Each day the world belongs to one man, and on that appointed day, he feels invincible. Ike slaps after-shave onto his armpits and onto the back of his wizened neck, which he stretches in all directions. Never has there been a finer day! He pulls on his bleached T-shirt, which fits snugly and makes his torso seem of white marble. With loud snaps of a dry washcloth, he buffs his black shoes.

A larger cloud passes. "Whoa! Now wait a minute." What if he must collect the tab? Hell, now he's done it.
"Some women don't lift fingers from their loaded bags. Against their nature, laws of gravity, or something."

Never plunge headfirst blindly, he thinks. In the hallway that smells of rotten asparagus, Ike pushes a dime into the slot, hesitates, then speaks into the black receiver, cool against his chin:

"Mildred Trimborne? Ike, ma'am."

"What is it." Her voice is lush, but now betrays a slight perturbation.

"I'm afraid, you see, well, I've realized my checkbook..."

She said they would have fun, didn't she? No worries. Nothing else? Good. She hangs up.

Outside, the torrid sun glints off silver skyscrapers. Ike is pleased with himself and whistles unconcernedly into the bright glare of his room. The heat presses in on him; the world is in motion around him, but where Ike stands it is calm. It pays to be careful, he thinks.

At 3:10, and without a worry, Ike descends to the lobby.

"Ike?" the desk clerk asks. "Note for you. You bet. And if you don't mind my saying..." The clerk gestures with both hands, "Mchh!"

My Dear Ike,
I am fond of decisive men. They do not trouble with trifles. The world belongs to those who act; nothing can stop them. Occasionally, I meet a man like that...but not this time.

M.T.

Ike waved his fist, still holding the note for Tiny Balls to see. Tiny Balls did not look. Before them stretched the great darkness.

The young boy's sobs grew more violent. His mother slapped his face, leaving a white palm print that slowly ripened. Cigarette smoke languished in the hurtling air.

"Know what you mean," Tiny said in his gruff, unswerving voice.

In the next instant, it zoomed into the blackness of an immense night, a blackness that closed behind it like water around a stone. Speculation might arise it had not passed at all were it not for the field mouse squashed onto the highway.

He had thought: I will be safe; no one can see me in this darkness.

And he had not a second thought.
THE TRANSLATION

I

The afternoon sky was vast; Carl squinted at the sidewalk.

He was eating scrambled eggs. Liz burst in, drunk again, and made her way to the table where she lifted her cotton shift and displayed the tiny red heart tattooed on her ass. By accident, Carl knocked his eggs to the floor.

"Why?" he screamed. "Why this time!"

"You don't like it then get out!" Liz said, her face slipping into her vindictive smile. Her hair, the color of natural sponge, poked wildly into the air. "And you know what else?" She reached over jerkily, pulled the pen from his shirtpocket and, straining, snapped it before his face.

Carl clutched his leather briefcase tightly to his chest with both arms, like a jealous father, and scurried through the afternoon streets. Intense white daylight blinded him. The cliff behind his cottage casts early evenings across the valley...he will wait beside the globe shaped rock, wait while thinking of her lips, thick and red
and moist, and uselessly scrape the ground with a stick...

unless...

Carl had not tried to stop her. He said nothing. Quietly, he lay on their small bed, his face to the wall. Occasionally, he dug at the plaster with his thumbnail and breathed lightly while he listened to the night breeze blowing briskly through the streets below. The blinds, with their broken slats, rustled pleasantly like the rattling of bamboo wind chimes. Later, when the night had become quiet sounds, Liz slipped into bed and pressed her warm body against his back.

"He was just a sailor. He wasn't any good. Sailors are crazy."

She lit cigarettes for them both, blew smoke out through her nose, and propped his head against her shoulder. There are times when principles count for nothing...all was silent, except the dull drumming of rain against the window. Gradually, the room filled with soft, gray light; upstairs, someone moved about, dropped heavy boots on the floor and flushed a toilet, but it was all in the distance, muffled and hazy, like the dim shoreline that was disappearing while Carl swam off, stroking wearily into sleep.

It had rained all night. Inside had still been dark when Carl slid from the damp-smelling sheets, dressed silently in the corner, then hurried outdoors. Puddles glinted like knifeblades. A pained, hollow feeling grew within him as if a tremendous bubble were trapped in his
chest and slowly expanded. He could barely catch his breath. Just off the curb lounged an old woman, her stretch pants pulled taut around her belly and into the lips of her crotch. Clean black shadows cut the streets into oblongs of light and dark. Carl cupped one hand over his eyes and clasped his briefcase with the other.

At last, and with a long sigh of relief, the deep undeliberate sigh of someone who has escaped a threat safe after all, Carl climbed the wide granite steps and disappeared into the library.

II

The aroma of brewed coffee spread throughout the apartment. Liz, her kimono open, slapped the French toast with her spatula, then flipped it over amidst a flurry of sputters, humming peacefully, wiping tiny splats of grease from her bare chest. She squeezed a fresh orange for Carl, sucked her moist fingers one by one, then checked the coffee again.

Carl sat at his writing desk, his small fingers pressed into his shaggy rust-colored hair.

It was at a loud party. Liz sat alone in a kitchen. A half glass of Scotch shimmered by her elbow while she cracked walnuts and piled the shells in a pyramid before her. When Carl entered and closed the door behind him, the outside din hushed to a murmur, like the sound of
water washing up in a cave. He had slipped there to escape. When he turned, he saw Liz; her blouse, deeply unbuttoned, exposed rich, brown skin. He said nothing; leaned his back against the door and merely watched, staring helplessly until she looked up at him, then offered him her drink. He blurted:

"Come home with me."

One morning, as they lay in bed, she said, "Life is like the Panama Canal." When he gave a burst of laughter, she rolled on top of him and held her head so that her hair brushed his face, dangled in his mouth, became moist with his saliva.

Liz flipped the French toast onto a plate, then padded barefoot over to Carl and lay her hand lightly on his shoulder. He did not look up. Patiently, she waited, massaging his boyish shoulders with tender pinches. Her expression was soft and indefinite. Finally, she whispered in his ear:

"Come eat with me. Let's not go out today. I poured your coffee already."

Carl brushed her off. "Shhh! Not now; not now."

"But your..."

"Shhh! dammit, not now; not now."

He flipped through his translation, always excited

*Leiden und Freude, Ernst Hoffmann, 1774 (originally published: Weltanschauung). Carl's idea was to translate and render it
by the almost immediate irony in which young Hans says cheerfully:

How glad I am to have gotten away!

Or the way young Hans reaches out toward the moon after his meeting with the irascible Lady M and shouts effusively:

Never have I sat in such an enchanted garden!

Later, Hans writes of the same garden:

The shadowy path, lined by beechtrees and tall, prickly shrubs, ends in a dark enclosure, sad with the aura of loneliness...

Carl pushed a stick of gum into his mouth and then slowly massaged his temples until the tension drained out of him. A tremendous red sunset burned out the western sky in the painting on the wall above him. Stacks of reference books, like paper walls, hived him in a niche, where his work was spread around him in a semi-circle. Things had not been going well.

A librarian with plucked eyebrows and a high, shiny forehead, beamed a twisted smile at him while she sorted books. As she bent lower from the waist, her skirt slid upward on her splayed legs. Steel blue panties locked her thighs together. Embarrassed, Carl tried to think of Hans. The air smelled of stale books, unused, putrescent; he

in the present tense. "The immortal present," he called it, "where an action never dies, but is and reverberates for all eternity."
must get outside.

A long narrow cloud glowed red across the evening sky like a scar. The ground was dark with dull shadows. Warm air flapped like a carpet hung on a clothesline and swirled the slight fragrance of ivy and geraniums around Carl as he sat in Bryant Park beneath an arcade of lush green trees. His bench felt hard beneath him; his briefcase lay across his lap. "Pleasant out here. Nice to get away," Carl thought, and casually drummed on the metal clasp of his briefcase. He yawned deeply.

At that moment, when the water cleared from his eyes, he noticed the woman for the first time; she had been sitting there all along, but now, inexplicably, she had come to life for him and he could see nothing else. Her gray streaked hair was pulled back in a tight chignon; bare, white-skinned arms, long and slender, folded in her lap where a metal case, grasped tightly, glistened in her hands. Discreetly, she pushed back a lock of hair blown loose in the breeze, then slipped her hand back to her lap with a graceful movement. There were dark rings around her deep black eyes.

She rose and approached him.

"I would like a light," she said, sitting on the edge of his bench, holding her face toward his. Her voice was melodious, almost sing-song with the affected diction of an elderly actress.
"Sure," Carl said, trying to act composed. Her words had stolen his breath. His entire hand groped inside his baggy pants pocket.

She looked directly into his face, but through it at the same time.

"If your hand would stop trembling I'll light this," she said. Her sweet perfume aroused him.

"It's just you startled me," he said, then wished he hadn't. He asked shyly, "Sit here often?"

"I'm waiting. For someone..."

She looked toward the street with a sidelong glance. Her face now seemed distracted; impatient. She held her cigarette between two erect fingers, but did not smoke it. Her hand nervously pushed back that lock of hair which had blown free again, then slid to the bench beside her where it stopped, her elbow straight; she seemed held there only by some secret determination.

As her lips moved to speak again, a limousine pulled to the curb opposite them, blasting its horn. She jumped up touching her hand to his knee, and said quickly, "Be good."

Carl studied her through the park's iron grating until she disappeared into the blackness of the car's back seat.

The horizontal slats of the bench pressed into his back again and he shifted his weight. It was then he noticed her silver cigarette case; he sniffed it, inhaling
that sweet smell of lime perfume, and as he ran his finger over the case, as if to buff the livid sky reflected in it like a luminescent puddle, it sprang open into his lap, empty, except for her name embossed on the cloth lining.

When he rose, spitting out the gum he had kept tucked in one cheek, and walked toward home, a new energy pulsed through him, a momentary feeling of flight, and he clutched his briefcase vigorously while the transparent evening dissipated into hot, city night.

III

He turned off into a dark neighborhood where large, foreign cars lined both sides of the streets. A taxi discharged two couples to a doorman, as imperturbable as his building, then hurtled into the night.

Carl imagined himself a trapeze artist floating nimbly above a dark void, his every step precise, calculated; a Houdini escaping the tightest traps without mussing his hair; an... Overhead, a blueberry-colored sky expanded limitlessly; small dim clouds fled before a high turbulent wind. He walked quickly, excited by curiosity, the palms of his doll-like hands moist, and by a touch of revenge. Down the block, a somber canopy jutted to the curb.

Carefully, Carl pressed a buzzer. The pug-faced
doorman, his hands clasped smugly behind his back, stood
beside a fountain in which an alabaster figure poured a
stream of water from a tiny white jug, and eyed Carl
suspiciously through the glass partition.

"Who is it?"
"Carl."
"Who?"
"I have your cigarette case."
"Oh...bring it up."

There was a loud, strident buzz.

She was wearing a plain housedress when she met him
in the hallway, her hand extended in an eloquent gesture
with which she brought him inside, touching his elbow.
A grand piano, majestic and detached, loomed in the center
of her living room, with a silk manilla shawl spread over
it. There was a darkwood mantel over an unlit fireplace,
and on it was a pair of bronzed toddlers. In the corner
stood a barren clothestree. The scent of lime was every­
where; pleasant, relaxing.

"I hope I haven't disturbed you," he offered.

"Nonsense. Here, sit. Sit. I just couldn't imagine
where I left it. Can I bring you a drink? Some cold
wine, yes? Good." Her eyes shone fiercely as she moved
about.

"By the way," she called from the kitchen,"please,
call me 'Maggie'."
Carl was sunk into her plush sofa with the meekness of someone unable to determine his own actions. He noticed his shirt was buttoned in the wrong holes, but left it. He watched her return to the room tugging on a corkscrew until it popped. "Oh that's fine," he said, but then sank back into her sofa. Folds of her dress bunched around her thighs as she stacked several records on a turntable; she caught eyes with him for a moment, but turned away to look through more records.

She bent over him, folded down the one side of his collar that had been standing up, then sat beside him.

"Tell me something about you," she said.

He made a few guarded remarks, but later, when he said, "I see you like magazines," nodding toward the stacks in one corner, she turned on him with impatience.

"I collect them. There's a difference," she said reproachfully, but then immediately stopped herself and laughed expediently, as if excusing a private joke, acting warm and supple again with her knee touching his as she sat angled toward him, and laughing again amusedly, she tossed her head back slightly.

He was aware of the slender neck exposed to him. He reached for it; no, he could not. He cupped his hand deliberately and coughed. He felt a crippling timidity; a sort of terror.

"What? Yeah...oh that's fine," he said and tipped
the wineglass immediately to his mouth.

Maggie talked aimlessly, her voice dancing with its sing-song quality, while over and over, she refilled their glasses and each time pushed the bottle back into the slush the ice had become. Carl lit a cigarette, then lit another from it. For some reason he began to think of Hans, how he had sat childlike before Lady M_, who had been coy and distant, a silk handkerchief first in one hand, then in her other, her every movement discreet and graceful. And Hans. Defying the squat fist of fate; the stand of heroes! The heavy drapes quivered from a sultry breeze. Another record plopped down.

"A toast," Carl blurted suddenly. His exuberance gushed without context and hung awkwardly in the air.
"I shall make one! To this music, my favorite. Entzückend!"

He raised his glass so enthusiastically wine splashed onto his mouth and ran down his chin in thin streamers. He clinked his glass onto the coffee table, huffed his soft cheeks and sank back into a cushion of the sofa, exhausted.

Maggie studied him with an odd, distant expression. She touched his hair; a delicate, curious stroke. With a slender finger she wiped wine from his chin in a motherly way. Carl was lying in a meadow with tall grass swaying over him, the thick loam breathing beneath his horizontal body, moist air heavy on his skin; the smell of lime, of
beech. She smiled down into his pale mute face with a warm ethereal gaze and then, in one of those moments on the point of delirium and ecstasy, she pressed his hand to her small round breast — and he saw himself convulse with delight...

IV

To escape the pandemonium he had begun to feel, Carl plunged into his work.

...I cannot imagine the consequences. If I have told you before of women for whom I would die, then now have I found one for whom I would live. Yet, I am torn. I cannot forget that recent gathering at which her friends... but I have written you already about that. You see, I am helpless. At times, my hopes seem insincere. Oh, my friend, would that I may step outside this fragile form...

One morning toward the end of summer, Carl stayed in bed. He sat with a book unopened on his lap, his back against the wall, the single sheet tucked around his waist. The air was hot and thick. Flecks of light jostled over the bed, disappeared suddenly, then reappeared. Bathwater droned in the other room, from which seeped the sweet smell of soap. Carl thought of Maggie, of her long, graceful arms, and decided it was time for a talk with Liz.

"Can never find a goddamn thing," Liz muttered as she rifled the cabinet. She slammed the door shut impatiently
two or three times. Each time, it sprang open again. She stood amphora-like, hands on her hips, and looked about the room. Her unbrushed hair, which she had recently cut, rippled in wild tufts. At last she found her roll of amber paper, but then she lingered, as if all along she'd known she wasn't really looking for the paper, and eyed Carl for a moment thoughtfully. She tossed the paper up and down, sauntered to the bed and sat beside him. Her lips were slightly pursed; playfully, she slipped her hand beneath the sheet.

"This afternoon, let's walk in the park. And we'll spend all evening together. I quit my job, y'know."

"Ummm," Carl said absently.
She walked two fingers up his leg igglety pigglety.
"And in two weeks, we're visiting my friends. In the mountains. I wrote soon as I knew. It's all settled."

He stared at his exposed gangly feet. The book slid from his lap while he fumbled with his thoughts.
"Just think, escape this hole awhile. Cold nights. Lots of old army blankets to snuggle under." She withdrew her hand. "But we'll have to quit smoking."

She waited for his reaction.
"Carl, damn you, you're not even listening."
He raised his leg that had fallen asleep and rubbed his knee. "All right. Liz, listen..."
"No, now you listen."

The sheet bunched in wavelets as she slid closer. Her face grew sober. She looped her hands tenderly around his knee, then spoke slowly. "We're going to have a baby."

His back peeled from the wall like adhesive tape. He glanced at her flat stomach, then over her shoulder. What a magnificent sight the white light filtering through the blinds. He. A father! Suddenly the whole world filled with meaning. He understood the scratched and uneven mahogany highboy standing across from him with its old mournful air, and he understood why cigarettes had burned the arms of the heavy wingchair, and a smile started at the corners of his mouth, stopped like the first lurch of a train, then began again, raced across his face, hot and flushed, and echoed throughout his body and in that moment, all of which passed before he pulled her over and began rubbing his hand around and around on her tawny stomach, from the dissatisfaction and confusion of his life, there precipitated order: one, simple, illuminating, eternal order. He bit her neck and Liz, laughing, lashed the air with her feet until she screamed abruptly, then dashed to the bathroom. The drone of running water ceased with a clanging of pipes, but in the next instant he was vaulting into the tub, flames
of water splashing out around him. Carefully, Liz followed. And Carl, pink and radiant, began rubbing her belly again, like Aladdin with his lamp...

An autumn sunset glowed from behind a high-rise while Carl passed through a deserted courtyard.

In the wholesale meat district, greenhead flies buzzed over blood and grease caked between cobblestones. The old El, gray and dispirited, crossed between city and sky like a heavy, squalid fence beyond which a tugboat sounded, long and deep like a moan. Occasionally, a drop of water fell from the unused tracks and resounded from the awaiting puddle, brown with rust.

He continued walking, both hands buried deep in his pockets. He thought of the silk manilla shawl and how once he had picked out a tune with a single finger while Maggie had stepped out for a moment. He emerged from the corridor formed between housing projects and crossed the small circle of grass, a brown color in the sinking light.

A beautiful girl stepped from a red MG. He followed her for a short distance until she turned off into a doorway.

There was nothing he could say, he thought. It was pointless. He had responsibilities.

Neighborhood men in bleached T-shirts intervened when a grown man backed a young girl against a wall in a
subdued struggle. Carl passed the fringe of the commotion. The man turned out the girl's father. The fresh smell of pastries drifted from a bakery while from a half-open window, music played, old and scratchy.

Once, she had leaned her face against the window, her long white arms held high over her head, her bare flesh pressed flush against the pane. The nighttime city spread before her while the blinking red light from a police car parked below laved her frail body like a statue in an amusement park. She had said:

"It's odd how long ago that seems now. Pity. Every day the world dies a tiny bit." When she turned to Carl, her eyes focused on some point only she could see and she mumbled something unintelligible. The room seemed dark with an aura of loneliness. For a moment, he had not known who they were.

In the distance, an ambulance screamed; it flared closer then passed and died away. Human forms lay like shadows on the hard concrete floor of the corner playground; it hurts to be misunderstood every second of your life. The sun dropped over the mauve horizon. Somewhere, music played from a transistor, distorted and tinny.

Two rows of parked cars lined the street like a set of unending hyphens. He crossed over. In Washington
Square, tourists frenetically clicked Instamatic pictures while confabs of seedy men bent over concrete chess tables. Transients sang and clapped unconcernedly on the stone coping around the dry fountain and panhandlers leaned against art nouveau lampposts. Litter lay scattered all about with the same despair as confetti the morning after a party.

Carl raised his collar against the opaque night, which had become chilly with the quiet scent of autumn, and turned toward home.

V

Without transition, as if some magician had performed a trick, the long winter bloomed into spring; large black puddles dried into dust while a bright disc of sun straddled the city. Pointed red buds appeared on park trees and thrashed toward life in the warm, gusty breezes.

Inside, Carl huddled over papers arranged neatly before him, his head cocked on one hand, his slender legs crossed beneath his desk. His translation was nearing completion.

It has not been used in years, but there is still the smell of sulfur and of potash. It is heavy in his hand. Peering through his window, Hans contemplates the white moon, dull against the deep black sky. "...soon. Yes, very soon..." He taps the cold barrel.
against his pale cheek while imagining himself growing larger until the valley seems to recede beneath him, as under one who has been climbing, and the white huts seem like stones. There is a field beyond the ledge. But he is not yet ready.

Quickly, Carl rinsed two potatoes left on the drain, then thrust them into the oven. "Exactly 400; everything's under control," he said aloud, not doubting himself for an instant. "Plenty of time." He juggled more than he should have carried, and sang in a mock-raspy voice while he peeled carrots and chopped onions:

"...don't want no room at the Biltmore
Ain't got no carpet on my floor
Said don't need no carpet on my floor."

Occasionally, as he scuffled about, it struck him his feet seemed childlike in the purple slippers that Liz had knitted for him, but he did not dwell on it. From the copper kettle, he measured a small amount of steaming water to dissolve gelatin for a dessert. "She'd better not be late," he said while he stirred.

The windows fogged gray against the darkening evening. Calmly, with his legs tucked beneath him, he slouched in the heavy wingchair, which he had pushed to one spot, the hassock to another until everything fit some imagined order. The smell of baked potatoes wafted in the air. He closed his eyes restfully and tried to imagine Liz's movements through the streets, creating every step.
Three times she reached the door. "It's getting late," he thought, and each time moved her back to a different beginning. He began quickening her pace through streets that had grown colder and darker until there was something frantic about her movements. On some blocks he lost sight of her completely, only to catch her again on other blocks moving jerkily past dark buildings and dead alleys paled by thick shadows where he imagined ruthless men lurking beside garbage bins. Carl lit the burner beneath a pot of fresh broccoli. "Plenty of time," he said. The oven had made the air hot and unbreathable. His fingers groped for the catch, until at last, he flung open the window. Fresh, cold air rushed in against him as if he had broken a vacuum. In the distance a car screeched; the hollow sound echoed through the narrow street until a loud blast of horn pierced the emptiness like a skewer.

And then finally he spied Liz's heavy form trundling flatfooted up the walk. "Hurry!" he yelled down to her breathlessly. "Hurry up!" He slammed shut the window, which had unfogged, and anxiously lit the candle he had centered on the table, his shadow dancing tall across the wall and ceiling in a flickering circle of light. "Perfect timing," he gloated, his eyes bright with the burning candle.
Liz tossed him her bulky cardigan as she lumbered to the table. And she laughed, "Those pigeons can all go to hell."

"How'd it go today?" he called from the closet, standing on a stool, folding her sweater away.

He poked his head out and waited for her answer, a lick of yellow light gleaming in his eyes.

VI

The sun sank in a red blaze.

What a glorious day! Noontday sunlight streamed between skyscrapers and glinted off black plate glass while the streets swelled with the colorful paraders, loud and ingenuous, who merged and noisily forced themselves up the wide avenue, past knots of waving bystanders. Spirits soared; all things were possible. And that boy. When he pressed his face against the cab's half-open window, Liz squeezed Carl's hand, which she'd already clasped on the small suitcase perched before her tremendous stomach, and laughed toward Carl, her other hand to her face.

The evening shadows grew longer and broader. Proudly, Carl skipped down the smooth marble steps. They had sent him home, patting him on the back as if he were a hero,
telling him not to worry. As he walked through the streets, silhouetted by the diminishing light, he seemed larger than he actually was. His steps were lighthearted and even, and their rhythmic beat echoed through the almost empty streets. A solitary laugh sprang from a dark stoop and its sound lingered in the air until Carl's steady pace again sounded through it.

He was drunk with himself; when he passed an old man, who scooped confetti into a pail with slow, pained movements, Carl blurted in a loud voice, "Have a cigar, friend!" and continued his walk into the night, stride unbroken, his shoulders tall and squared.

Later, he stood on his rooftop where the brisk, fluid night gently sucked at his clothes which flapped quietly, like flags. He gazed down on the dark streets, his streets, where couples strolled or paused while yellow headlights streaked past. At that moment, all was his; inviolate; determined. He breathed the black air deeply, filling his lungs until they were ready to burst, then triumphantly went down to sleep, full of dreams of Liz, and of strength.

Sometime during the night, Carl awoke. Several days passed; Liz came home. She cried it had kicked her stomach. She had felt it. She said it was the silence made her weep.
After dinner, he pulled on his slippers. The floor had felt cold and damp.

When he crossed the room, he was uninvolved with his actions, like a somnambulist, moving with a weary resignation. He leaned over his writing desk, his face half-illuminated by his single lamp, but he could not make himself lift the pen. There was a hulking silence. Liz sat propped in bed, watching nothing in particular, occasionally biting a fingernail, as if waiting; impatient. Carl's luminous shadow spread throughout the room. Later, when he clicked off the lamp, he remained by his desk, motionless in the dark, listening to the hum of an electric clock, and to the sporadic 'ping' as water dripped from the faucet into accumulating water. The room seemed vast. So this is what I have come to, he thought. Finally, he climbed into bed beside Liz, who had already fallen asleep.

When he awoke next morning, he sprang up suddenly. For some reason he felt energetic. Today he would do things! Liz lay in bed, eyes open, unspeaking. Excited, he rose, pulled on his slippers and paced about the apartment.

"You getting up today?" he asked her, scooping dirty dishes from the table and piling them into the sink. He looked at objects, noticing one then another with sharp
jerks of his head, as if he had just moved in. Liz turned over restlessly and yanked the sheet, but said nothing. He threw cold water on his face, then, with soapy beads still dripping from his chin, set about repairing the blinds: closed, a soft dusk palled the room; open, shafts of light tore across the bed and burned into the wall.

"Goddammit! Must you do that," Liz said.

"I thought I'd...."

"Well don't!"

Disgusted, she rose from the bed, her cotton nightgown moist and clinging, and threw herself into the stuffed chair, slamming her feet onto the hassock.

For a moment he was confused and hurt. He wanted to tear the purple slippers from his feet, which he thought gawky and ludicrous. Instead, he began to wash dishes. There was a deep hollow sound when water gushed into the large aluminum pot.

"Damn you, why don't you go to the store!" she said. She threw her unlit cigarette on the floor, looked up at the ceiling, then down at her nails. "I can't stand you puttering around. Always puttering. Always!"

When her fingers fumbled too long for the last cigarette, she crumpled the pack and flung it at his desk.
He walked out.

Down front, the red tip of an usher's flashlight glowed through the darkness like a hot coal. Suddenly, there were shots; a loud shot. They fired out of context; Carl's thoughts had drifted toward Hans, toward his lush garden; toward his simple cottage; Hans, whose existence was enormous. A sun waxed warm and deep. His hand reached toward a white moon that seemed dull in an implacable sky. Someone laughed shrilly. He must finish his work. Another shot pierced the darkness; a silver sharkskin suit slumped beneath a boardwalk while surf thundered onto an intensely white beach. There was a murmur of laughter. "I'll finish it once and for all..."

When he left the theater, night had fallen; he did not expect it, and felt uneasy. The black sky was empty and expressionless; his steps were fast, but uneven.

When he huffed onto his landing, he froze. At the end of his long hallway, a narrow rectangle of light glowed from his doorway.

In the next instant, he was pushing past the door. The room lept at him. Two or three slats had been ripped from the blinds and dangled on one side from the ribbon. The heavy chair lay overturned; drawers hung open with clothes spilling over the sides. And there -- off to the side -- lay his briefcase, twisted and listless like a dead
animal. For a moment, his heart stopped, then pounded again so violently that his head throbbed. A heavy pressure clamped around his chest and he could not catch his breath. Either he ran madly about the room, or he walked directly into the bathroom where he found the last two soggy scraps of manuscript still floating in the toilet.

He re-entered the apartment. Liz slouched in the wing chair wearing her pernicious smile, holding a cup of hot tea that scorched the air above it. No; he returned to the other room.

And then something odd happened. He felt a strange buoyancy; a sort of exhilaration. He ran about the perimeter of the room, one finger touching the wall.

And then he raced into the streets. Turkish music with piercing clarinets skirled from a doorway that smelled of whiskey and broiled meat. Beneath a blinking movie marquee, florid faces were taped to the wall. A bald man with a dome of a head peered into a pink-lit topless bar. Boldly, Carl pushed him aside.

He ran on, unaware of his spurting breath. He turned off into a dark, silent neighborhood. Beneath a somber canopy a door was closing and he scooted through. An alabaster woman, whose toga clung delicately around her hips, poured a thin trickle of water into a blue, tranquil
pond. He did not hear the doorman yell after him. Calmly, he climbed the stairs, his steps echoing down the narrow stairwell, then stood with his finger pressed against the bell.

The door opened a crack. A woman's face peeked out cautiously. Her worn, lusterless eyes showed no surprise as she continued to stare.

"You look terrible," she said at last, in a wispish, sinking voice. "Come in."

Warily, she held open the door. He watched her face, thinking, "Her lips are moist and thick and red..."

Inside was warm. A fragrant breeze rustled the fringe of the silk shawl on the piano. The furniture, which was close and plush in the semi-light, formed a path to the open window, beside which was an upholstered rocker.

Maggie leaned against the divider and held her frail arms about herself. She clutched a tissue in one hand. "Well...what do you want?"

He brushed past her and sat in the rocker. Silently, he peered through the window at a flat, white moon and began to rock slowly back and forth. The chair creaked quietly and gave him a gentle, unassuming air. His muscles, which had been tense all this time, relaxed, and he felt a sudden rush of warmth.
Maggie rubbed the fingers of one hand against her cracked lips and then pensively traced a line in her cheek. "You're shivering," she said, but made no movement toward him.

"I'm glad to have gotten away," he said. His breath came to him easily now. There was a soothing breeze as he leaned his forearms on the windowsill and looked into the night. He felt contented, as if the entire world had become a motionless pond over which he stood and gazed.

There was a long silence.

Finally, Maggie asked in a voice that seemed confused and slightly afraid, "Away from what?"

But he did not hear her; he imagined himself rising, rising and growing full of strength, and when he saw the iridescent glow of a distant streetlamp, he rose and stared intently at its tremulous circle of light until it seemed to recede into a long, dark void. He shivered. Maggie's mouth contorted into a single, terrified 0, but he was only vaguely aware of her as he leaned deeply out the window, an unnaturally tranquil expression on his face, and imagined himself climbing onto that high, contoured meadow, dusting himself off as if brushing the dark pall from his life, the constellations close and bright, the white huts like pebbles far below.
BETWEEN DARKNESS AND LIGHT

I

Mr. Chaimis, using his soiled sleeve, wiped sweat from his dome of a head and listened to another train escape into the distance, fading inexorably (like that dot of light in the center of a picture tube) until Penn Station returned to its late night stillness. He crossed his legs at the knees so that his transparent taupe socks and hush puppies hung pendulously, almost ridiculously, from his pants, tapping a beat to some imaginary tune, and read again the destination billboards, posted beneath each track number, announcing small town sounding names (Morristown, New Oaks, Bird-In-Hand: Change at Pleasantville) decorated by asterisks and an indecipherable code of numbers or hours. He sat alone on his long hard bench, fanned occasionally by the hot foul air.

That afternoon, Mr. Chaimis had told Mr. Romberg this night, when he went to Penn Station (Mr. Chaimis went frequently for he was fond of Penn Station, where everything seemed on the verge of becoming something
else) he would board one of those trains and escape somewhere into the distance. He was determined.

A montage of silver images flashed through his mind, a long slender hand with brown liver spots below the knuckles, a woman on all fours spitting blood into the shadows...

The floor shook again as another train slowed to a halt with a moaning screak of brakes. As all trains did, it sat below indefinitely, hissing gusts of air, waiting. The dispatcher changed the numbers on a board one level up, his balcony breaking the smooth contour of the rotunda.

II

(A few words in confidence.) George Chaimis was immured securely within his own surface. He was ineffectual (so far as the 'real' world was concerned) and paralyzed by confrontations, when his schoolgirl composure tottered between an hysterical outburst and an insane silence where his small dark eyes (they seemed almost absurdly too small for the size of his head) darted wildly about in their sockets, following some alembic phantom. For Mr. Chaimis, only a loud retord could sound like "bombastic foolishness" and only a motor response contained the haecceity of "idiotic
retreats." Unless he had prepared some witty remark beforehand, he would smile blandly, or look blankly at his playful foot bouncing up and down from the ankle, or read some bright advertisement high on a wall, thinking that, in the long run, it was the only salubrious response.

Mr. Chaimis lacked the two qualities that create a living world: desire and decision.

"Assert yourself, but meekly" he would say each morning from behind a mask of lather, or else, as he dressed in his quiet apartment, with a ray of light illuminating a streak of dust between window and floor, he would say, "George, my friend, be sure of your appearance. That's all there is in this life," and, with saliva on his thumb, eliminate the scuff on his otherwise shining shoes. Over his bulbous head he would stretch some once fashionable hat (he had begun sporting hats only since his appointment as Assistant Day Manager, and only in the daytime, which he supposed was a humble way of denoting authority) and, if inclement weather demanded an overcoat, wrap his burgundy checkered silk scarf about his neck, before leaving for work. He would arrive only moments later, impeccably scoff-free and indefatigably cheerful.

"Madame, it's been our pleasure. Come again!" he
would articulate to whining old ladies with puckered faces so distinctly (emphasizing every other word) that they would think he was leering and hurry through the revolving door, while Mr. Chaimis, raising one hand like a Roman orator would declare with childish elocution, "Another job well done by the Doubleday men of action!" His face would convulse once or twice in that consuming twitch of his (whether it was a flash smile or a precipitous grimace was indeterminable, but always mimicked to great effect in the stockroom) and, for a moment, he would feel proud, with infantine triumph, and, hiving his beaming smile, fidget behind the counter until he would regain his composure, after which he would re-emerge, ready to tackle another difficult customer. What did it matter he had written charge plates incorrectly, or had recommended another bookstore who might stock the book, he would, as his favorite song chorused, "keep the customers satisfied."

At times (excruciating moments which threatened his bubble of appearance) he was forced to reprimand staff members. The plethora of insecurity, when, after a staff had been insolent with a customer who in retaliation sought "The Manager here!" (Doubleday Law I dictated all affluent customers were right), Mr. Chaimis would of necessity say, "I'm absolutely surprised. Now...
no more of That or out the door with you!" No one took that rebuke seriously (even though he had faked calmness admirably), least of all the summer help. But, should someone commit the ultimate crime of revealing to a phone call inquiry a publisher's name other than Doubleday, the truculent wrath of Mr. Chaimis (all defensiveness on his part, for he occasionally committed the same offense) would become alive, twisting upward with a life of its own (all acting, of course), his eyes darting furiously in all directions, "Never! Never! The end. Think I didn't hear? Never again. Understand?" His dome and back of the neck would be suffused with sanguine flushes as he walked back behind the counter, escaping the demeaning looks. Later he would tell Mr. Romberg, trying to restore the surface appearance he was sure he had destroyed, "Axel, I can ignore the general, but not the particular."

(Occasionally he would send home a salesgirl whose dress was too short, or who wore no stockings: "Want people to think we're running a brothel here?").

Assuredly, it was no accident the astute management of the Doubleday chain had placed impeccable Mr. George Chaimis in the Fifth Avenue (by Central Park) shop, with its austere, sheer business-like orderliness, more like an exclusive hosiery shop, with shag carpet and stylish 'undies' blinking an imperious hello, or Fifth
Avenue dressshop, with rigid aristocratic salesgirls and regimented racks, than the bookshop it was. Mr. Chaimis, with his florid features, pink cheeks (always looking as though he had just emerged from a warm soaking bath), and redolent odor of baby powder from under his collar, was placed second in command, but first in view of the door. A brilliant stroke of management. One can almost imagine the innocuous delight over a cooler cup of grape juice when the neat, effeminate personnel director first slapped his thigh in jubilation, "By George, we've done it!"

However, Mr. Chaimis had a furtive side to his existence (as everyone has some subterranean world where dark thoughts are backlogged and secretly expressed). Frequently, when the desuetude of his life would seep into his late night cup of tea, always with lemon, he would feel somewhat bitter, or lonely, and take the bus from his upper westside apartment (leaving his deciduous hat behind) down to Penn Station, where he would sit alone on a long, recently shellacked bench, and listen to trains rumbling beneath the floor. His tyrannically retentive appearance would subside, he would cross his legs, he would pat his large forehead with a soiled sleeve (a habit with him, perspiration or not) and bestow pro­nouncements on all the occluded conversations of the day.
"Damned asses" he would say and morosely smell the foul air of the station, and feel the floor's vibrations, which would massage his tired feet, and and transmit the echo which resounded around the hollow rotunda. Sometimes, he would think how, as a child, he had loved to be near books, hiding between the stacks in the library, quietly holding his breath, thinking of all the bravery performed in those stout, morroco-bound classics. He hated books now.

Occasionally, while Mr. Chaimis would sit among the deserted rows of benches, only his large head protruding above the furrows (looking like some ambulatory mushroom), he would, while blotting out everything around him, disinter images of the three women (the three lovely women in his tired forty-two years) before whom he had fallen impotent, and who would appear in vague scenes, choppy and broken, like an old, silent movie.

Then, he would say (quite seriously), "One day, I'll board a train. Just like that."

Afterward, he would leave Penn Station, walk past the Greek and Arabian nightspots, with their photographs of dark bellydancers taped against windows curtained with hanging beads (but which always had clarinet music tumbling into the street), past the dishevelled and surly Spanish
women, who stood leaning against doorways, with young faces peering through the fire escape bars above playing Spanish music softly on transistor radios, until he would reach Twenty-third Street, where he caught the bus back to his sober apartment (which offered the familiar security in which he recomposed himself). Another cup of tea and soft music would end the evening.

Next morning, Mr. Chaimis would awake, with a clean pate, and report for work as usual: as cheerful and dignified as a French maitre'd.

"And how are you this morning, Axel?"

III

Up the shaded side of Central Park South, along the black wrought iron bars over which park trees dangled their limp branches, Mr. Chaimis and Mr. Romberg walked (it was intolerably torrid afternoon) until they reached the Columbus Circle walkway, guarded by that gawky equestrian statue (the bleached marble type which grace most parks: aroused snakes, corpulent horse, rider's sword frozen in air...) by which the two men entered Central Park.

Lunchbreak in the park, like a refreshing dip in a calm green lake, was always very pleasant at first,
but ultimately, offered no relief from the tacky heat. Mr. Chaimis buffed his forehead with his sleeve so frequently that he seemed almost a mechanical toy geared solely for that action. Far off on the left, a hooting band of raffish young boys threw stones at a hansom with tourists (whose angry driver shook an angry whip) and then formed a 'train', screaming (like Indians in a cheap cowboy movie) while they ran down the gray stone path, one behind the other, knocking sun-hats off all the old men scrambling hopelessly to avoid them, until (leaving only a fading din and several old fists being shaken impotently in anger) they wound beyond view around a granite hill.

"Axel, I sat in Penn Station again last night."

Mr. Chaimis stopped to buy Cracker Jack from a park vender (dressed all in white with a shiny blue strap circling his waist and coming down over one shoulder), while Mr. Romberg, a frail nervous man, hitched his head up, adjusted his silk bowtie and pulled at the lapels of his seersucker jacket. A faint hot breeze rustled the trees just enough to make Mr. Chaimis aware of an ineffectual stir.

"And I've made a decision. Occasionally, when I sit there, like last night for instance, quite alone, I think of my death...I think how could I bear to take
a final breath while living a life like this... I feel I must get away from my life now... Then, I become very thoughtful, but not sad, and walk to my bus home."

Mr. Romberg scooped several Cracker Jack with his long lissome fingers and crunched amiably, while Mr. Chaimis lifted one and pinched it into his mouth, as if it were a juicy grape. Several pigeons strutted behind them in jerky imitation until the two men found a bench in the shade. Mr. Chaimis crossed his legs, dangling those long ankles of his, and tossed some sticky food to his followers, who cooed and hopped around with a loud flap flap. The heat had created a dreamy atmosphere where almost all conversation seemed warm and prudent, and it was lovely in the shade, with scintillas of argent sky and bright sun occasionally springing into view through the trees.

"I have often told myself, and goodness knows how many times you too, that with the right stimulus, the right provocation, we all need a single excuse to pin things on, don't you think, but because of the right incident, I would board one of those trains... Well Axel, the other night it happened, and now I'm absolutely determined."

Mr. Romberg seemed attentive (but as silent as ever) as he leaned back and placed one arm on the bench
behind Mr. Chaimis, while the other hand readjusted his bowtie (which was his favorite, given him by Mr. Chaimis the Christmas before, together with a bottle of Johnny Walker Red, also his favorite). But for a moment, there was an embarrassed silence (the slight embarrassment which always occurs when someone is obviously about to drop another someone into that void of private confidences, even though there is a nod to continue) so, with a typical Chaimisian feign, Mr. Chaimis moistened his thumb and leaned forward to remove the scuff from his shoe.

"Usually, I'm no more concerned with people than I am with the weather...you know that Axel...but sometimes we're forced to take notice." With his soiled cuff, Mr. Chaimis wiped his perspiring dome, then pulled his tweed cap, with the short brim, further forward on his head.

"Two nights ago, when I left Penn, I walked toward Twenty-third Street. Absolutely consumptive neighborhood. Everyone cankerous or intoxicated. Well, I had just passed one of those 'girlie' doorways when I heard someone skip down the stairs. I turned around to catch a few loud words between them, and stepped back under that large billboard so they couldn't see me -- no, the undertaker one, 'Walter B. Cooke: We
Understand' — But Axel, then the man punched her, the filthy pimp, he punched her so hard she fell and cracked her head on the stoop. She started screaming, then spitting up and gagging. But as if that wasn't enough, that, that bastard kicked her. She tried to scramble in the doorway, on all fours, senseless, but he kicked her over again and again. My god those were the most awful screams I've ever heard. Finally, a few police cars...

Mr. Chaimis paused while an elderly wrinkled man, in sun helmet and khaki shorts, brushed by them, one hand holding a book at chest level, in which he was thoroughly engrossed, while his other hand gripped a tennis racket, firmly, with old but prehensile certainty. When he passed beyond hearing, Mr. Chaimis continued:

"Axel, I don't understand it. When that officer threw her pimp to the ground, she attacked the officer, as senseless as she was, scratching and biting him until he hit her with his club and dragged her off into his car. They threw the pimp into another car... absolutely brutal scene."

Mr. Chaimis stopped again, morosely palpating the almost empty box in his lap. The dull breeze and distant yelps of ball-playing or pigeon chasing children were washed into a myopic softness; his eyes had scumbled
the park before him into mere green and gray hues. He pulled the foil wrapped bauble from the Cracker Jack box and tossed it, without opening, into the wastebasket beside the bench; his face twitched once or twice.

"Axel, I watched that man beat her and I was part of that scene. I still feel part of it...I'm guilty but I don't want to be. At night, I can't even hold my cup of tea."

Mr. Romberg pinched at the freckles on the back of his hands, brown spots adumbrating age, as if he might coerce them into fleeing. Slowly the pinched whiteness turned mauve then brown again. With perspicacious leanness, Mr. Romberg managed a staid, "George...my dear George...how can such a scene cause these..."

"Cause, Axel? Cause? I've lived in a city long enough to know there are no causes, only effects. Tonight I will board a train. No longer will I just listen. No longer." With an abrupt motion, he held the Cracker Jack box over his face and let the last few salty peanut flakes slide into his mouth. He had an impulse to blow into the empty box, (as he had when younger, to make that loud rasping toot) but instead crossed his legs in the opposite direction, and tossed the box into the wastebasket. His shirt clung to him in large wet areas and he was thirsty. He was aware
Mr. Romberg glanced at his watch.

"George, we've got five minutes. Last day or not, the Assistant Day Manager should never be late."

The two men walked through the circle of pigeons, who ambulated around their food in loud confusion (without deserting it), while an auroral breeze picked up, shaking the stippled green leaves with a cooling "hushh," and swirling colorful litter in a circle. The breeze evaporated. A park attendant continued spiking the garbage. Back on Fifth Avenue, the familiar Double-day letters, large and red, flickered their lugubrious greetings from their metallic creases, while a black Cadillac (with polished chrome and dark-tinted windows) coruscated silently past the bookshop and down the Avenue until it was swallowed into the tumult and noise of street traffic.

IV

Penn Station. Down the slow moving escalator from street level rode a shabby, tremendously fat, Mulatto woman (with limp, watermelon breasts). Her face was disfigured from drunkenness. She stumbled at the bottom of the escalator, but only her brown shopping bag from
Mayfair & Co, plopped on the tile floor with a rumpled thud while she caught herself on the handrail and stood catching her breath (hands palm outward on her large hips). She surveyed the large seating area, and locked eyes with Mr. Chaimis, who wiped sweat from his pink head (ignoring the few sprawlers who lay scattered about, some with arms hanging onto the floor while others dozed uncomfortably in the heat, sporadically coughing loudly and licking their lips).

Mr. Chaimis watched the woman trundle toward him, her stockings rolled down around her ankles, hoping she would change directions (but hoping in the way one cringes before inexorable fate). He looked up at the Bowery Savings cartoon high on the rotunda wall (a typically inutile Chaimisian feign) while pronouncing to himself the names of small towns, soundlessly tapping his foot. He hated scenes.

Finally, what seemed an indeterminable moment, she stood directly above Mr. Chaimis, with haughty obesity, blocking his view so that he was forced to look into her face, and at her tumified purple nose, grotesque and repugnant, like a decomposing plum. Beneath that, a green lipsticked mouth. With a loud sigh, as if all her massive weight had chugged to a halt, she sat beside him, so closely, their thighs and elbows touched.
Mr. Chaimis, growing continually more frantic and feeling pressure in his chest and neck, turned his head away, his little dark eyes circling wildly and catching glints of light from exposed fixtures and shiny brown benches. Something was said but the words were unclear. (He felt on the verge of an hysterical outburst; a visceral surge of defensiveness.) He would beat her. He would sink his entire arm into her swollen face, with a blinding celerity, and shatter her yellow eyes, which had no moisture in them and seemed like glass marbles.

A subtle breeze circulated the foul air. On the opposite bench, a half-folded newspaper flipped slowly to an open position, then lay motionless again.

She thrust her face almost flush against Mr. Chaimis', and repeated herself, louder, and more angrily, as if she thought him to be withholding something valuable from her.

A "you" and a "ture" syllable were distinguishable in nightmarish clarity. He wanted to hide.

He could not understand. (The damned ass.*) An inveterate, pristine hatred swelled. He must leave.

At last, she fell full back into her seat, exhausted or disgusted, and slid stubby fingers down her square neckline of dress until her forearm disappeared and pulled her large breasts upward, with exasperated grunts.
Mr. Chaimis twitched (that full facial convulsion of his) so that his pink cheeks pulled back, taut and sallow, exposing his white teeth. With a soiled sleeve he wiped sweat from his dome of a head, and felt the not necessity of decision.

In one more moment, he would board the train (still hissing and moaning impatiently below), or else, quietly leave Penn Station (a clinking glass of ice tea, or else hot coffee and cinnamon, at home, with soft music) for this night, but return again (absolutely, and by all means) the next night, having suffered (because of this vile woman) only a temporary delay in his long determined (yes) plan.
SEEMS SO LONG AGO

As we left the closing theater she turned to me with her face puffed in anger and asked with her biting voice how dared I tell the end of that movie, and, no slouch, I answered tartly, while tossing a tangerine up and down, I hadn't been telling, merely speculating, like an old golddigger, and she said well I ruined it Dammit I ruined it, but when I asked, assuming my romantic mask of Rodin contemplating the Thinker, if she went to movies to let her mind be snatched like a cheesecake by a hungry Director or did she go to reflect on the images, without a sound she withdrew her arm from mine, like a ferry sliding away from its mooring, and with both hands, wrapped her blue shawl tightly around her chilled, slightly hunched shoulders and, sulking, trudged ahead while I dragged behind like a lonely lifebuoy, thinking the moon's a white beacon shining across the cold sea and this tangerine I'm tossing is really her Fate.

Later, over steaming Constant Comment, rye crackers and cheese, when my glasses fogged and I couldn't see
so far as my bookcase, she laughed and said in a ventriloquist's tone, you're such a kid you know, and with that fragrant candle sending up its string of smoke into the warm twilight bedroom to which she had only recently been introduced, I was beaten simply beaten so how could I hold a grudge.

The candle waxed and waned and threw spider webs across the ceiling until an orange sun laid to rest our fragrant tropical night.

* * * *

Contemplating Me
with my white
terry towel
barely saronged
around
her soft wet flesh
we know why she's here.
"A morning shower's the cleanest."

Later
from my greenroom
She,
like a gardener
or horny lizard

whose lover's gone to sea
calls
"Your geranium's grown a new bud!"

I must see
this masterpiece
like all the rest.

* * * *

"The male deep-sea angler is a parasite, attaching himself to the female so completely his eyes and digestive tracks cease to develop."

In time, I began to understand.

* * * *

Every night now
we observe the Black River
gushing and rising with spring

Change is in the air.
Every night now
we observe the Black River
a thousand moons reflected across

Like silent white lepers
we huddle in the cool night air
and want everything
to be away from here.

* * * *

We are together now all the time and it seems
there has never been anyone else, but sometimes, when
she is peevish and there is snow heaped along all the
curbs of all the narrow backstreets we walk down, when
I wear the bronze scarf she has knitted for me coiled
snugly around my neck and it has been six months
since tangerines were in season, I wonder if the
labyrinth in which she struggles will ever coincide
with mine.
"Ah! My kids!" Claire screamed with delight. She clutched the sheet over her hospital gown and extended one frail arm. "Come here. Sit. Sit." She patted the bed.

Anne kissed her. "You should've written sooner."

Claire flicked her hand evasively. "Wynn, you've lost weight - those jeans are like pipes around your legs."

Wynn smiled, exposing an upper row of perfect white teeth. During the flight, he'd bet Anne that Claire would mother him. He was thirty-six. Anne had pouted about his insensitivity. "It's from running," he said. He poured icewater into a paper cup, then paced to the chair by the window. "When I'm thin as Anne I'll quit."

"Running," Anne repeated. She pushed a bronze hand through her short brown hair. "Every afternoon he's outside weeding around the anchor or fooling with the shrubs. Look at his face. That's the fifth bad sunburn this summer."
His hair, the color of talc, was brushed straight back. Claire adjusted the pillow behind her shoulders, her small dark eyes burning. "And how is your house?"

Anne cut Wynn off. "It's like that summer house at Boone Lake. A large porch, two cedar shingle gables... our bedroom's in a turret. I have my own sewing room and Wynn his study." She looked at Wynn, then placed her hand over her mother's. "And Ma, it's going to be a permanent position this time.

He glanced about the room. The black-and-white tiled floor was waxed, and the green walls smelled of recent paint, which shone over the lumps. Hadn't he told her it was unlucky to make premature announcements? An orange dusk illuminated the dust encrusted window, and made the gray curtains on the runner around the bed less dreary. He remembered with a pang another room cluttered with sensitive equipment. But he asked lightly, "So when do you leave here?"

"Next week," Claire said. "Sue Rogoff promised to pick me up."

"Sue Rogoff?" Anne howled with laughter. Miss Rogoff had lived next door in the co-op. All her life she had worked in the garment industry, and every Christmas made Anne a pointed felt hat. Anne had never failed to send a 'thank-you.' "Remember she drove us
to Montefiore, and knocked the door off a police car?"

Claire laughed with restraint. They fell into a pleasant silence. Wynn peeked at a clock in the hallway, then returned to his chair. He crossed his legs and rubbed the stain on his hushpuppies. Then he opened the magazine on the ledge.

"And how is your father?" Claire asked.

Wynn flushed with momentary resentment. He placed his empty cup on the ledge. "The same as always, I suppose." He regretted he'd never rebuked them.

Claire said reproachfully, "You should know."

She wiped tiny beads of sweat from her upper lip. "It's not right that you don't."

Anne interceded. "You might just as well ask about his class."

Several lights were clicked off in the hall. Wynn gathered himself to leave.

"So who will you teach?" Claire asked.

He hesitated. "The expatriots."

Claire drained her cup of water. "Did you ever tell him about Mr. Olson?"

"No," Anne said. She patted her mother's hand affectionately. "Who's taking care of all your plants?"

"Who else?" Claire rolled her eyes. "Sue Rogoff."

Wynn rose. They had been travelling since six that
morning. For an instant, he despised the two women holding hands on the bed. Anne tucked the sheet snugly around Claire. In the elevator, she took his arm.

From their room on the fifteenth floor, Wynn gazed over Manhattan in the direction of the ocean. Yellow lights formed a haze over Queens and gave his view a sense of vastness.

Anne moved the suitcase to the bed. The single nightlamp cast the room in a somber tone, barely illuminating the red velvet stripes of the wallpaper. She unfolded her nightgown, then contemplated him. He had pulled the settee around to face the glass doors to the terrace, and above him hung a rich swag of drapery. The summer rain had ceased as suddenly as it had begun, and the red beads of water glistening on the glass highlighted his form. Her heart beat rapidly.

She touched her fingers to the nape of his neck.

"The lights are flickering on the Trade Center," she said.

He leaned forward. "It's from the heat."

His hair had a silky texture. She pressed his head to her hip then ground a strand of hair between her fingers. Cars streaked around Columbus Circle and
through the gridwork of streetlights. "I wish we could live in New York again. Don't you?"

He glanced at her disdainfully. "No."

She pushed his head playfully.

He crossed to the darkwood dresser then took a cinammon doughnut from the plastic bag. There was an ochre, porcelain pitcher and basin on the doily, and he leaned his vial of eyedrops against it.

"You tired?"

His sudden eagerness surprised her. "A little. Why?"

"Let's go out."

"Now?"

"Sure. It's only ten. We'll go to Murphy's. You can look in Capezio's window."

She glanced at her nightgown on the bed and tried to think herself into looking exhausted. Her tanned gaunt face was more appealing than expressive. "I'd rather stay in."

He acquiesced. In the dark obscurity by the closet wall, he flipped off his shoes then tread across the thick carpet to the terrace doors where he dropped into the settee with a sigh. Absently, he brushed the cinammon powder from his shirt.

"Did you remember to lock all the windows before
we left?" he asked.

She laughed at his train of thought. "You're such a kid." Sliding her thin body beside him, she placed her chin on his shoulder. "Don't worry, your house'll be there when you get home."

"Our house," he corrected her.

"Our house," she agreed lightly.

The sloshing sound of traffic drifted through the glass, and his face, illuminated by the cityscape, was speckled with the shadow of raindrops. She moved her hand to his narrow chest and toyed with the button. "Do you mind? I mean not going out?"

He felt himself slipping into a desolate mood, as if he were swimming, his pockets laden with sand. He shrugged.

In her mellow voice, she said, "I wish she'd called us sooner."

For the second time this evening, he remembered a sullen room cluttered with sensitive equipment. He had flown home from Buffalo. A nurse led him down a long, underlit hallway that had the cloying stink of disinfectant. There was an odd, undignified silence. When he entered the room, his father rose stiffly, the aluminum screech of his chair hanging in the air. He wore his wrinkled dark suit with a vest, and his
blazing red hair was pressed back from a cap. His soiled white shirt was buttoned to the collar without a tie, and he stared at the tweed hat he twirled in his glove-like hands, which flexed with the strength of his young boxing days. Wynn listened to his mother's erratic breathing. The once plump woman, who had always set milk on the breakfast table in a porcelain pitcher, now looked like a chicken that would hang in a butcher-shop window. Why didn't you call me sooner? There was a silence augmented by the dull hum of machinery, then his father looked up with his pale meeching eyes, and formed words on his puffy lips which Wynn did not so much hear as register the disagreeable sound, I didn't want you should worry. Your mother said, 'Dave, please call Wynn.' I say, 'There is time yet. Do you want he'll fail out of school?' You are the first Simons to go to college. I take responsibility. Wynn glanced once more at his mother, thinking, the marrow has already crumbled; if I touch her another bone will collapse. He sprinted into the park whose dense blackness and feeble lamps were like a Van Gogh nightscape. Anne slipped her hand beneath his shirt, laying her fist on his moist stomach. She listened to another cascade of rain splattering on the terrace, and trembling inside huddled closer. "It's too bad you never spent a
summer at Boone Lake."

Her voice had grown softer, and he could see the faint blonde moustache on her upper lip. He thought her very beautiful. "What was it like?"

She moistened her lips. "During the week, my mother and I were alone. It was quiet. The nearest neighbor was over three miles. We made chokecherry preserves and jam. Every night we swam, and without clothes. She said the night was more peaceful. We were very close for awhile. As I grew older, I realized how beautiful she was." She looked up at him, her dark eyes wide with concern. "That's why I worried so. It's difficult for a woman to lose her breast. Don't you think she's taking it well?"

He pressed his stockinged feet against the glass doors. "Very." Rain made him restless. Anne placed her bare feet onto his. The patina of the nearby hotel's mansard roof had a sheen from water coursing down, and reflected the neon of a half-lit sign. "What happened weekends?"

She nudged his arm until he cupped it about her shoulder. Often, after she had lost the baby, she had felt cold and hollow with him, but now she luxuriated in the warmth rising in her like a gull into a summer sky. "Weekends? My father came up. He was friends with the
his office bookkeeper. Mr. Chatterton."

"British?"

"No..." She paused, then slumped her head until it fit between the cushion and his arm. "He was a funny little man with big funnel ears and a bald head. When I was very young, I'd make knots in his tie. He didn't even mind when I pinched his thin moustache. Once, I was twelve or thirteen, there was a party. Of course, like all my father's parties, everyone got terribly drunk. People would splash in the lake all hours. I was upstairs in my bedroom, reading. I listened with one ear to the loud crashes downstairs. And then suddenly, Mr. Chatterton leaped through my window from the maple outside. I was startled. And he was completely naked."

Wynn laughed quietly. He drew a picture in his mind of Anne at twelve. "What did you do?"

"My father had come upstairs just then. His face turned crimson. And poor Mr. Chatterton. He was so mortified. My father dragged him in a headlock to the lake and dunked him until someone intervened."

He gazed again in the direction of the ocean, where his father still lived. During a college intercession, he had cross-countried in an evening rainstorm. The bone-white sand had been pounded into small, firm mounds,
water gleamed down his nose and rain filled his eyes with cool blurred vision. Over the ocean's black tumult, his father's distant shouts keep going keep going pushed him and panting, he ran, imagining his mother watching from the window and ran more until he burst onto a dune and cried through lips caked with sand.

Wynn turned down the air conditioner, then stepped over the valise whose stainless steel clasp shimmered with the dim light of the single lamp. The doughnut bag was empty. Hungrily, he rifled the suitcase, beside which lay her yellow nightgown. On an impulse, he grabbed the shaving kit, then, with his palm, scoured the bathroom wall until a sudden sterile incandescence blinded him and he closed the door.

"What are you doing!" Anne called.

He did not answer.

She opened the door. His face was lathered like a lily. He pressed one thumb to the tip of his chin and raked the safety razor down his neck in a straight, unbroken line.

"Your sunburn," she said. "You're crazy."

She left.

A spot of red appeared on his cheek and blossomed instantaneously. He dabbed it with cold water. "Tomorrow," he yelled, "Convince your mother to come back with us."

He held the washcloth to the spot until it sealed
then saw the stained cloth of tonight's old derelict crucified on the curb. Leave him alone, she said, but he dragged the old man from the cone of blue light, his copper head lolling onto his tattered gray jacket, and uprighted him against the park's retaining wall. Glass shattered. The hip flask, Wynn snapped, the hip flask while the old man glared through condemning yellow eyes and Anne stamped her foot and thrust her hands into her pocket slits, Forgodsake, Wynn. But he coiled his handkerchief around his quaking fingers, gently rolled the old man to his side and kneeling, explored the hip pocket for shards of glass, repelled by the folds of emaciated flesh. With the last splinter he noticed a stain, but a dull, festered brown, and re-inserting his handkerchief deep into the pocket, he took Anne's arm and left.

He stood in the doorway.

She had slipped into bed. The darkness of her hair and eyes and the shadow of her soft long neck bounded the purity of her face so that it floated above the nightgown hugging her hard shoulders.

"I'll tell her," she said," but she won't."

He dropped into the settee. The room was as cool and cluttered as their first night in an hotel when one by one on the white sheets he had murdered the violent
thumps of his father's fist, those sanctimonious crashes on the small kitchen table. Absently, he rubbed the smooth flesh of his forearm.

"When did you sell the house?" he asked.

"I was seventeen." She propped herself against the rosewood headboard. She thought for a moment, then asked, "Want to hear about Mr. Olson?"

"Why'd you sell it?"

"Oh, I don't know... creditors. Exhorbitant nursing bills."

He fell into a calm quietude from the long day's journey. His face tingled. Above distant skyscrapers, several stars appeared in the southern sky. "Did you ever go back?"

"Once." She drew her legs up and tucked the sheet beneath her hips. "An old, red-faced lumberjack with a surly retriever had owned it. He let it run down. It was very depressing."

"Is he Mr. Olson?"

"The lumberjack?" She laughed, "No." Then she paused. Wynn's crop of white hair protruded over the settee like a spot of light in the semi-darkness. She noticed the porcelain pitcher and thought tomorrow, she would buy flowers. "The month my father spent in the nursing home, his roommate was Mr. Olson. He scratched his head
and strut about the room muttering. He looked like a young chicken. I asked what was wrong, but his speech was terribly garbled. Once, in frustration, he squeezed my arm. It must be terrible to be trapped inside. My father, when his speech didn't return as it was supposed to, used to do that too."

Anne thought again about her father. His first stroke occurred at their summer house. The parties had ended because since he had taken over the business it had steadily failed. His dark face had become very hardened, and he had steadily lost weight until the bones of his face were imprinted in the flesh. During a Sunday dinner, he had hardly touched the roast chicken, instead tracing concentric circles on the linen table-cloth, he suddenly rose, like a porpoise leaping from the sea, clutched both hands over one eye, then collapsed like a folding chair.

The following spring, she read to him from Ulysses. He made her understand he wanted to walk by the river. She wrapped his burgundy scarf around his neck, placed his woolen cap onto his head then helped him with his overcoat. She slipped into her own trenchcoat and slung her leather bag from her shoulder on a long, slender strap. They watched the tugboats, and when he mumbled, she did not understand. He mumbled again. Furiously,
he gripped her arm. She could feel his trembling. She made believe she understood him. At the foot of the pier, he collapsed again. While she held his hand, the chill wind rolled his cap into the river. He did not recover.

She continued in a quieter tone. "One evening, Mr. Olson's son, Arthur, burst in. He had rakish black hair and thick black brows. He was an actor and looked magnificent. He shook my hand warmly, as though I was the one caring for his father."

"How old were you?" Wynn asked distantly. His disembodied voice drifted into the air.

"Seventeen."

"Oh yeah...and he?"

"Around forty."

"Mr. Olson?" he said.

"No. Mr. Olson was very old. At least seventy."

There was a short silence. Wynn heard her rustle the sheets.

"After visiting hours, he asked me to join him for coffee. We went to a small cafe downtown. He had been on the road with his troupe for a long time, so he was very worn...and very lonely. I still remember the way he stared at his thick fingers, almost embarrassed and said he missed the family he never had. His voice was
very deep and rich."

Wynn leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, his spine arched. Beyond the 72nd Street entrance there was a small-leafed Chinese elm, beside which masses of gray rock revealed the striations of the glaciers. He had gone there to lose himself, into the profuse darkness. A slow, muffled resentment was rising in him.

Anne picked a dark thread from the sheet and twirled it between thumb and forefinger as if examining a strand of hair.

"He lived in a railroad flat. You know, each room in a line. There were books and posters and photographs everywhere. On the stove, there was an iron frying pan filled with four large stones. He put on a classical record, and then he said, 'Tchaikovsky wrote, 'The music of Mozart makes me glad to be alive.' Sometimes...I understand.' I looked up from his scrapbook and he was on the verge of tears. I thought him the saddest man in the world.

"Arthur became terrified when the phone rang. Somehow, Mr. Olson had escaped. Can you imagine — a tiny bird of a man, unable to speak, roaming New York, in slippers and a flimsy robe. I pictured him wandering onto the subway; and then I imagined him on the waterfront, where my father liked to walk. The sound of
water against the piles is very peaceful.

"But we waited. It's odd to feel so helpless. Finally, we cruised the streets in a cab. I remember my fingers felt terribly cold, even though it was a hot night; I sat on them. We couldn't spot him by the river. We drove through the park, down Fifth, up Madison -- all over. Nothing. Then Arthur gave the cabbie a Harlem address. I didn't understand. The cabbie was reluctant.

"But we went. It was an old tenement. Boards were nailed over the windows and doors. The Deli on the corner was locked-up tight. Arthur pointed to the third floor. It was crumbling. He said he'd grown up there. Thankgod the street was deserted. We got out of the cab. And then we saw him, curled up in a ball in the shadows on top of the stoop. When we woke him, he didn't even recognize us, but Arthur hugged him as though he were the son he'd never had. In the cab, Mr. Olson kept squeezing our arms with his boney little fingers and Arthur cried like a baby he'd get a nurse and keep him home. All in all, it had turned out a happy reunion."

The last word lingered in her mind. She saw her own father's woolen cap blow into the choppy river and then she imagined again the grip Mr. Olson had had on
her arm, his four fingers pressed into her forearm, his thumbnail innocently dug into her flesh. She looked at Wynn. His slender frame was doubled over, poised so that his forehead almost touched the glass. She saw the flickering lights of the city beyond him, and distinguished the faint sound of traffic in Columbus Circle. She said, in a hushed voice that was a gentle reprimand, "Wynn, don't you ever think of your father."

He rose. 200 yards beyond the Chinese Elm, encircling a softball field, lay the half-mile cinder track. In perfect sprinting form he raced past the Elm, past the large trees whose roots clasped the rocks of the moraine, past a bath house and patch of dried mud streaked with bicycle tracks, and stooped, panting, one knee on the cinders, the ball of one foot backed against a starting block, and tensing, saw his father, in wrinkled black suit and soiled shirt buttoned to the collar, extend his tremendous tired hand, his red hair ablaze, but like a shot was off again running, chasing a shadow that was first in front and then behind, the distance ticking off in his mind, the cinders crunching beneath his strides like dried bones. He pushed the settee into the corner as he charged toward the blue shale cliff, racing across sand the same beige
color as the finger of smoke that rose from the pulp mill in the Bitterroot Valley and then lept onto the cold stone with a thud, and climbing, he inhaled the smell of fish from the nearby pond and there, below, appeared his father, gesturing _come down, come down_, but he climbed faster, his fingertips bloody and spurting, and slipping -- the growl in his throat from the trap that had been sprung on the life fighting to a surface of darkness -- slipping, he took a deep breath and saw above him, on a thick rod like an ebony flagpole, the glint of a protruding nail. He windmilled his hand, palm outward, and slammed it onto the spike. With the dazzling flash of pain he dropped the red swag of drapery to block out the city, and as he knelt toward Anne, his face half-illuminated by the austere yellow light of the single bedside lamp, he said, "Yes... often," and placed his palm behind him onto the cool white sheets.
UNINVITED GUEST

Now that he sensed a promotion, and tenure at last, he was more afraid than ever Gillian would leave again. As he paused at the top of the stairs to catch his breath, the razor tucked to the soft flesh of his palm, he thought of reading Arthur's letter aloud, and Gillian's unchanged expression. She had clasped her hands between her long, carelessly spread legs and leaned her head back on the davenport. There was a silence, and then she sauntered to the kitchen, her posture poor as always, running a thin hand through her short brown hair. He had never understood her silences. But after dinner, after she had clattered the greasy dishes into a stack, she suddenly wiped her hands on her hips and said, "Wynn, why don't you find our yearbook." She looked past him, and her gaunt face, more appealing than expressive, was a warm sunbrowned color, but it struck him that had he touched her cheek just then, it would feel cold, like glass.

The attic smelled putrescent, and was dry with summer heat and dust. Wynn pushed his glasses up with
a frail finger to the bridge and lit the single bulb dangling on a cord. Cartons were heaped in a semi-circle, some had been bound with hemp since his marriage, right after college, and lugged along from house to house, joined by later cartons. Carefully, he slid the razor across a cord. Then another. And another. In one, he found his paint spattered pants and cap alongside several of Gillian's old dresses. He held a dress to the length of his body and ran his hand down the front. It draped over his sandals. Once, wrapped in her borgazia coat, she had waited for him at the top of her stoop, and he remembered the excitement he had felt as she slowly descended to him. They had strolled through New York late at night, and when they stopped at a coffee counter where an electric train delivered their hot cups, he had feverishly stroked the neat beard he wore then to hide his acne scars and spilled his dreams over her, all the stunning criticisms he would write, all the famous names he quoted, and she had laughed while heat shimmered over her coffee.

He sliced another cord. He found their yearbook, but beside it was an old textbook on the tropics. He tried to focus on a color engraving. It was a lush, tropical cove. Thick foliage hung close over water that reflected the blueness of the sky while an outrigger cut
across thin white caps toward the beach. And then without looking through the yearbook, Wynn clicked off the light and went out, bumping his shoulder against the doorframe, forgetting the razor.

There were two glasses of ice tea on the coffee table. He handed Gillian the book, but instead of sinking into the davenport beside her, he ambled to the kitchen and ran cold water, then wandered onto the back patio, listened to the din of crickets and insects in the line of trees behind his property, then climbed into the hammock strung between the two maples in his yard. He watched moths flutter against the nightlight and tried to visualize Arthur Hutchison's face. It was through Arthur he had met Gillian; she and Arthur had been dating. When they had broken off suddenly, Wynn found himself following her, calling her, asking her for dates. As he swayed in the hammock, he could see Arthur's kinky black hair mounded boldly on one side of his head, but that was all. He would like to think Arthur had unappealing funnel ears and thick, almost Negroid lips, but he couldn't see them. What he remembered was Arthur's flippant smile.

Gillian screeched a redwood chair across the patio, pulling it beside him on the grass. She studied him a moment.
"Don't you think it'll be nice?" she asked.

"Gillian, what would you say to a trip— together? Someplace tropical. Hawaii. Or even further?" He spoke anxiously, but without looking at her, and in the silence that followed he could hear her long legs opening and closing, her knees tapping together, like the sound of a bird flapping in slow motion.

It was out of the question, she said, they couldn't afford it. But when he reminded her of the promotion he expected, she replied, well, there wouldn't be time, that he would have to teach again in less than a month.

"Besides, I want to see Arthur again."

Then, absently, still tapping her knees together, she pushed the hammock as if it were a swing, or cradle, and he closed his eyes, unable to object.

That night, after Gillian went to bed, he thumbed through some books in his study, the smell of his leather chair filling his head. There was a fable about a rich Chinese merchant whose daughter ran off with a poor suitor. The merchant, furious, chased them until, when he finally caught up in a forest clearing and angrily raised a whip, the two lovers changed into quail and flew away. A nice story, Wynn thought, love triumphant, and yet, he understood how much the merchant wanted for his daughter. Abruptly, he shut his book and went to
his metal filing cabinet. In the back of the bottom drawer where he always stuffed his personal mail, he dug out the dozen or so letters from Arthur, clumped by a rubber band. One was as recent as five years ago, the first year Wynn had taken this house, in which Arthur had announced his second book publication. He hadn't answered, and no more had come. Until today.

"Don't stop dreaming now that you're hitched," one early letter said. In another, Arthur joked, "Congratulations on your article. Very erudite. Very stuffy. Just like you. Will there be more?" The fact of the matter, that was his only article. The next letter made him cringe. "Terrible shock. Will you adopt children now? My best to Gillian." He had grown to almost hate Arthur. And why was it Arthur made only the most casual references to Gillian? And she rarely spoke of him, either, as though each held a secret communion. The few times he'd asked her why she broke off with Arthur, she'd said, "Oh look at those jealous eyes." And he was jealous. "Now don't be silly," she'd add, slipping behind him, sliding her arms about his chest and kissing his neck, but with her face buried so he could not see it. He imagined himself a pathetic old man sucking soup from a small blue bowl, and he was terrified now that after Arthur's visit, she would go
off again, but this time not come back.

"I didn't know you saved these," Gillian startled him, leaning over his shoulder. Her breast jiggled against him beneath her nightgown, and she smelled of sleep when she draped her arms over his chest and said, "Come to bed now. We'll look at these tomorrow."

As he lay beside her in the dark bedroom, he heard his blood throbbing in his ears, and he felt slightly nauseous from the fish at dinner. She cupped his face in both her cool hands and slid her leg between his in a sensuous way she had not done in a long time. "Now you stop this moping. Arthur is going to come here, he's going to sleep in the guestroom, and we're going to show him about town until he leaves for his lecture. All right?" She kissed his nose. There were so many things he wanted to ask, but she let go his face and turned over, and finally, so did he, tucking the sheet around his shoulders.

Next morning, chipper as a bird, the phone rang. The sky was a rich cloudless blue as he looked out the picture window. It was Otis Phelps, the chairman. He was throwing a barbecue the following Saturday. No, a week from the day after tomorrow. An informal sort of thing, but it was important Wynn come.

He almost danced around the living room. He tapped
the console t.v., lifted and closed the lid of a bronze candy bowl, and whistled a long falling sound as he ran to the kitchen. His face was a blotchy red, and he licked his upper teeth with his tongue.

She wore a sleeveless summer dress, the straps crossed on her bare back, her sunburnt legs folded beside the table. The shallow lines in her face gave her a serious look as she wrote on a small pad.

"This is it!" he screamed. "This is it!" He babbled about his promotion — tenure. "With a capital 'T'," he sang.

Without looking up from her pad Gillian said, "That's wonderful." Then she asked, "Do you think he'd like the old wooden bridge?"

"Who?"

"Arthur. I better take a run over later."

Wynn filled a bowl with Rice Krispies and spooned in fresh strawberries. "Just think Gill, we won't have to move ever again." He poured milk with a bold gesture and said, "Unless we want to, of course."

"Ummm...and I think I'll make new curtains for the guestroom," she said. "Voile. That'll be nice. Do you need the car today?"

"What? No."

Around noon, Wynn watched her drive off, her chin
tipped up high over the steering wheel. With Gillian gone, the house seemed large and empty. He thought of that quiet tavern he'd been to once or twice in the old section of town. A little personal celebration was in order! And he liked the cedar shingle houses, some over 150 years old, the air of permanence and the massive hardwood trees. He strapped on his sandals and set off to Dan LaBar's. The blacktop road seemed spongy from the afternoon heat and bright sunlight quivered above a corner sandlot, but he imagined that in time, when the elm saplings became shade trees and the landscapings greened out, it would all seem very solid indeed. It excited him to think he would be around to see it.

He rounded another curve and was overcome with dizziness, but with the cool August breeze, and the thought of a quiet beer, he finally made it to the log cabin tavern, and crossed the wooden porch to inside.

It was just as he remembered it! Along one side were knotty pine booths with red cushions. On the wall over the bar there were mounted fish, all caught locally, a deerhead, and several quaint placards, like "Why the hell you looking up here?" The jukebox was in the same corner, and the bathrooms were still marked, 'Pointers' and 'Setters.'
"One cold beer," Wynn mumbled, setting himself on a high stool, blotting his flushed face.

"Pretty hot out there," the bartender, Dan LaBar, said in a concerned voice. He was a robust, redhaired man with brown freckles on his forehead. The only other customers were two squint-eyed old men with backwoods accents. "Yep, it was mighty big, all right," one drawled.

"Nice, quiet place you've got here," Wynn told Dan. Dan slouched over the bar on his elbows, yeah, but it got a bit rowdy Saturday nights, what with the college kids and them motorcycle fellas. But mostly Dan listened, adding, "That so?" while Wynn pattered about becoming a permanent resident.

Wynn overheard one of the old men mention his granddaughter had run off with some fella. "Probably wanted to find herself," he said, taking his glass and moving closer to the old men. "Reminds me of a story about a bunch of writers. They wanted to find themselves, you see, so they decided to take a boat to Tunisia, and when they got off, sure enough, there they were."

There was a confused silence, then one of the men said, Yep, and drank his beer.

"Hey, hi Nellie!" Wynn called to the woman who had trooped from a back room where a t.v. blared. He felt
proud he had remembered her name, overhearing someone use it once.

She nodded, filled her glass and tramped out.

Wynn sucked the last of the foam from his glass, wished everyone a good afternoon and went out, loosening his belt. He was pleased with himself. Nice bunch of old men. He was in a buoyant mood when Gillian met him at the door.

"Arthur just called. He sounds wonderful, Wynn. Just wonderful. He's coming a week from Sunday."

From his chair in the living room, he could hear her humming an old tune while she prepared dinner.

"He says he's looking forward to seeing you too," she called from the kitchen. "I told him how you look now and he laughed and said, 'I knew it!'"

At dinner, Wynn tried to concentrate on his fingers picking at the casserole so he wouldn't hear her repeating over and over how she had a million things to get done and how she'll make a roast beef, with a mushroom, sour cream and sherry gravy.

Later, he glanced through the newspaper, then threw it aside. He flicked from one t.v. channel to another. "Hey, Gill," he said suddenly, turning down the sound, "What would you say to a game of checkers?"

She deferred. She had a million things to do now.
She tread from one closet to another, sat with her sewing basket on her lap, got up again, sat down again—all done in a dream-like way. The headache over his eye had returned. Sunken in his chair, he massaged his forehead and tried to imagine her exact thoughts, hoping that in that way he might control them. Her bare arms looked fragile in the blue light from the television, and he wished that somehow, he had been more for her over the years. He thought of how at night he had traced those delicate lines of her face, of how soft her flesh had felt, and he almost cried out to think how coarse his scars must seem to her. He wanted to ask her again about those times she had gone off by herself, returning as if anxious to see him, speaking as if she had never left at all. He wanted to ask was it punishment for not giving her children, and did she meet other men. But he said, "Gill, I think I'll go to bed now."

"You go ahead," she answered threading a needle. "I'll be up later."

He lumbered into bed and in his drowsiness groped for a subtle way to call off the visit, but none came to mind, and finally he slipped away from himself into sleep, still waiting for Gillian, his listless hand over the depressed area where her hips would lie.

* * *
The afternoon of the barbecue, Wynn buttoned on his plain sportshirt and wondered why Gillian hadn't laid her things out on the bed yet. He poked his head into the sewing room. She was still wearing a houserobe.

"Shouldn't you get ready?" he asked.

She stopped feeding cloth to the machine. "You'd better go without me."

He almost panicked. "What do you mean go without you!"

She said well for his information a guest was coming tomorrow and the floors hadn't been waxed yet nor the curtains finished...

"To hell with the curtains!" he screamed. "What'll they think you don't come?"

Calmly, she fed cloth into the machine again.

"Now don't be silly, why should Otis care if I'm there? I'll invite what's her name for coffee next week and everything'll be fine."

When Wynn stormed from the house, he cursed her for always pulling this kind of stuff at important times. The sky was pallid with a hot afternoon sun, and several times during the half-mile walk, Wynn stopped to blot his face.

Otis Phelps lived in a ranch-style house with a
large grassy yard enclosed by a solid wooden fence. Otis was fanning coals in the cinderblock grill when Wynn arrived.

"Well, come on in, Wynn." Otis wore stiff new blue jeans that formed cylinders around his short legs. "Bit early. Where's Gillian?"

Wynn laughed an old friend was coming. "You know, women want everything to be perfect."

Otis understood. He motioned for them to sit in the pair of lawn chairs and cheerily asked about the old friend.

Wynn could not stop himself giving curt, evasive answers. His defensiveness made them both uncomfortable. After a short time, Otis said, well, he better get back to stabbing the coals again. He gave an awkward laugh.

When Geneva Phelps waddled from the house with a tureen of potato salad, she handed Wynn a beer, and asked the same questions. Wynn answered politely. "But she said she wants to have coffee with you next week." Geneva smiled her wife-of-the-chairman smile, and went indoors.

Gradually, his colleagues arrived. They called hello to him, or simply waved, and walked directly to the grill where they formed clutches.
Actually, Wynn preferred to sit by himself at faculty gatherings. He liked to find an inconspicuous seat and mind his own business. In fact, it was only people with whom he had nothing in common, like at Dan LaBar's, that put him at ease; they didn't examine his every word. Wynn found another beer, returned to his seat and watched his younger colleagues clown with a rubber football.

Wynn passed the afternoon thinking of Gillian, trying not to be angry with her. He was even proud that she should want their house to impress Arthur. And after all, Arthur was just an old friend. He smiled at the thought that tomorrow, he might even leave them alone for a few moments, then return suddenly to see if he could detect anything. When the long shadow of Otis' house fell across his lap, Wynn moved his chair into the sun again. He wondered when Otis would take him aside, and rubbed his throat anxiously with one hand.

When Sarah Dunkle finally arrived, everyone gathered around her. She retired recently and was soon to move away with her daughter. Wynn had always got on with her. When she leaned her flaccid face from the shoulders forming a wall before her, Wynn waved. Sarah waved back. Then he fixed himself a hamburger, took
another beer and returned to his seat.

The shadow from Otis' house filled the yard, and the sky was the mauve color of a scar. Wynn was growing impatient. He wanted to get home to Gillian. Just be with her before Arthur came. Perhaps take a walk tonight, holding her hand. Or she would take his arm as she used to and press her long body to his. He remembered the way her hard fingernails pinched the soft underside of his arm. The football hit suddenly in his lap. He tossed the ball, yelling, "Here y' go," but his throw was too short and it bounced off in the wrong direction.

At last, with the first hint of darkness, Otis clambered onto a redwood table and asked everyone's attention.

Wynn stiffened. He hadn't dreamed Otis would make the announcement to everyone.

"I have a confession to make," Otis began. "In case you haven't realized, this barbecue was not planned just for fun." Otis coughed as several young faculty made frivolous groans.

Wynn nervously cleaned his glasses. He eyes were pink, and were helpless without them. It would be just like him to go to his moment of glory with a smudged lens.

"I hadn't mentioned that before because I didn't
want word to leak out. Well, to get on with it, as you all know Sarah is leaving us. California. I envy her. Anyway, so she shouldn't go off like this and fret about the vacant seat left behind..."

At that moment, right on cue, Geneva waddled from the house carrying a small plastic case.

"So on behalf of the entire department, Sarah, we'll give you something to think about."

Geneva took a gold pendant watch from the case and affectionately slipped it over Sarah's head.

"We'll miss you, Sarah. We really will." Otis stepped from the table and kissed her cheek while everyone applauded.

Shortly afterward, guests began leaving. Wynn lingered near Otis until it was almost dark, finally announced to Otis he must be going, and, when all hope seemed gone, quietly left.

There was a large, unfamiliar Oldsmobile parked in Wynn's driveway. Up close, Wynn read the out of state plates. How could Arthur come a night early! Wynn glanced at the house. Dull light spilled from the picture window, but he couldn't spot anyone inside. He imagined Gillian poised on the davenport holding both Arthur's hands, the photo album spread on the coffee table, but neither looking at it, laughing. No, not
laughing, just looking at each other, Arthur trim and manly in a black banlon shirt, his kinky hair mounded on one side of his head, and Gillian in tears, yes, apologizing for something, for everything. He couldn't go in there when Gillian would ask, how'd it go, and he would have to smile casually, shrug and remark, oh nothing this time, maybe next, and Arthur would jump up saying, well how's it going, ole boy, to cover their embarrassment.

Wynn turned. All he could think was a quiet beer at Dan LaBar's would stop the pounding in his head. The beer and hamburger from earlier repeated in his throat with a cloying taste. In the darkness, the blacktop road seemed a void between curbs, a gash in the earth, but then a car with college kids whizzed by hurling beer cans at him. Wynn leaned against a telephone pole to catch his breath, wiping spittle from the corners of his mouth.

From a half block away Wynn could hear the music from Dan's. There were dozens of cars parked around the log cabin tavern. Rowdy footsteps echoed from the wood planking of the porch, and when Wynn saw the young couple entwined on the hood of an old black car, he thought of Gillian. Maybe it had been planned. Arthur might be taking her right this minute, but she would be
thinking of Wynn, of their first date, those long nights he had spoken boldly of dreams, of her long legs tucked tightly around his buttocks.

Wynn peeked from the doorway. It was packed with college kids. Dan and Nellie shuffled about the bar filling glasses and mopping the counter. Dan trudged to the fan, redirecting it to clear out the smoke. Wynn couldn't go in there either. He turned quickly to leave.

That was when he bumped into the four motorcycle toughs who had come up behind him.

"Hey watch it, old man," the one in the turquoise muscle-shirt said. He was tall and boney. The other three were heavyset, wore coarse denim jackets with the sleeves cut off and grinned derisively.

Wynn looked down and tried to push past them, but was swirled around. He faced them again on the dry, chalky lawn.

"Hey listen, old man," the same one said. "My friend here needs a buck."

Wynn tried to hurry off, but was twirled around again.

"Hey, you don't understand me, scarface, my friend here needs a buck."

Wynn reached for his wallet. A livid network of
veins showed through his splotchy red cheeks. He was pushed violently from behind. Then he was pushed again, jolting his head.

He dropped his wallet and cried out, "Stop it! Stop it! Leave me alone." His high pitched voice cracked and his face flushed a crimson color.

But they pushed him around in their circle, laughing grotesquely, pulling him by his thin wrists, until one slapped Wynn on the back of his head and they all slapped Wynn on his head until his glasses flew off and he fell to the ground unable to distinguish anything but vague human forms.

The same voice said, "Here, scarface, we don't want your wallet." He smacked Wynn hard across the face with it and walked off with his friends.

Wynn's face felt on fire. His labored breath came in spurts and, as the dust he spit from his mouth dribbled thickly down his chin, he tried to sense in which direction his glasses had flown off. He gathered himself to his knees, but as he strained to rise, his vision exploded in a painful red blur that started deep over one eye and spread instantly, like a match tossed into gasoline.

Wynn sensed a crowd around him, but was unable to open his eyes or move his arms when he heard Dan LaBar's
concerned voice. After an indefinite time he heard an ambulance pull up and felt himself being slid inside on a stretcher. Wynn ignored the attendant who was talking to him as they drove off, and then, uncontrollably, he urinated, the warmth relaxing him. He imagined himself deep in tranquil water, waving calmly to the outrigger slicing toward him across rich blue water, the lush tropical foliage sweet-smelling around him, a single toucan perching on a thick limb.