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"Nada" and other stories

Dennis Douglas Gordon

The University of Montana

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NADA
AND OTHER STORIES

By
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Chairman, Board of Examiners
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The hunting dogs are playing in the court­yard, but the hare will not escape them, no matter how fast it may be flying already through the woods.

Kafka
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When the clock buzzed just before nine, Aly Jones choked off the alarm. He hadn't slept. Already the heat waves rising off the asphalt below Uncle Ozzie's fourth floor apartment, had shifted sideways up over the curb to lap the base of the tall brick structure. Once attached, they clung to the pores in the wall, sucked their way upward to the open window; stopped and rolled silently inward engulfing Aly, naked upon the bed. He pushed his fists into his eyes, trying to block the sweat funneling off his forehead. But it did no good. As the stinging increased, he cursed and rolled to the edge of the bed.

"Goddammit, ain't it ever gonna stop? Three weeks this crap's been going on. Every day just gettin' hotter and hotter 'til there ain't nothing left a' me and I evaporate. At least back home the nights cool down, but not here. Not in this stinking hole."

He knew there was only one place to go where he could seek relief from the heat. It meant fighting the crowd to reach the water and he felt certain he wasn't up to that. But as he sat on the bed, his head throbbing with pain, he decided to try the beach again.

Aly parked his uncle's overheated Studebaker beside a faded Packard sedan. He released the clutch to quiet the
chopping engine, opened the door and stepped into the sun. The steam in the radiator whistled past the cap blending with the hotdog vendor's distant wail. When he reached the boardwalk, Aly moved to the railing, and shielding his eyes with his hands, he squinted downward.

Below, narrow patches of dirty sand lay exposed between thousands of swarming figures, and like multi-colored mushrooms sprouting out of a dung hill, beach umbrellas erupted everywhere. A slight sea breeze filtered through the crowd, stirring the stagnant air and pushing it up to Aly. When it reached his nostrils, he swallowed hard and gripped the rail tightly before him. He stood there for a moment, reeling slightly, the afternoon sun drumming strong upon his back, watching the waves of flesh lash and churn below, break forward, then spill into the urine-colored water. He made the decision then, the apartment was too far away; he hadn't the strength to return to it now. He turned and walked wearily down to the beach.

As soon as Aly entered the churning mass, he was immediately reduced to an insignificant eddy, trying desperately to break through the lashing tide that blocked him from the sea. He kicked out angrily at squirming flesh, at beach balls and innertubes, until he broke through the barrier before the yellow water. Aly walked into the dirty foam until it touched his knees and waited for the lapping waves to carry coolness to his trunks. As the gentle swelling of the tide rocked him back and forth, he looked across the peaceful water
and wished he was back home. Three years had passed since he left Sweet Prairie on that early morning bus, and for a moment he shut out the noise behind and wondered if it was still the same.

Everybody'd be down by the river now. George, Henry, the Brodie girls. Anna too. Shucking their clothes back in the brush. Giggling and trying to see each other. And that water. Slow moving. Deep and cool running just a little bit away. And making such fine sounds against the bank, you can't hardly get your trunks on for anxiousness. And then you're in that tree. That big old cottonwood with its branches spread wide and strong. Standing on that limb and listening to the others taunting you to jump, from below. And then you do it. Don't think. You just jump. 'Cause if you think, you're gonna be there all day. You just let go. You push out hard and wait for the water to meet ya. And all the way down. Maybe twenty feet down. You keep wondering how you're gonna hit. And then you're in it, plunging deep before you even know you're in it. And it's cool. Good and cool. God, it's so cool you don't never want to come back up. But you do 'cause you have to. Your lungs say you have to. So pretty soon you start working to the surface.

A heavy woman in a drooping bikini slammed into Aly Jones, hitting him hard against the shoulder as her fingers groped for the strap of her suit. Dazed, Aly turned away from the water trying to spot the perpetrator, but the woman had already faded into the heavy throng and was now ten feet
Aly found an empty space to spread his blanket midway between the toilets and the water line. It was just wide enough for him to stretch out on if he kept his hands close to his body. When he bent down to spread the blanket before him, Aly didn't look to either side, for he felt that they were watching him and he feared their unfriendly faces. He dropped to his knees, flopped on his stomach and wiped his face across the blanket; then lay still without further movement as droning voices numbed his mind. With his face buried deep in the woolen surface, he tried to forget he was totally surrounded, but the sweat on his face filled the depression beneath his mouth making it difficult for him to breathe. Before long a feeling of suffocation gripped him, filling his mind and lungs with fire, until the pain became intolerable and he was forced to turn his head to the side. Aly rubbed his burning eyes with his forearm to clear them of the sting, but even after he had done it, all he could see was a deep, glowing red. He raised his head toward the sky and when red finally passed to blue, he realized his vision hadn't been at fault. He was looking at a man's enormous stomach.

Aly's irritated eyes traced the slope of the huge belly, climbing the summit then plunging downward, stopping abruptly at the base of the thick neck then over to the melon shaped head. A battered homburg covered the forehead and a pair of dark glasses rested on a flattened nose. The fat man's lips were purple and scorched and the underlip, the larger of the
two, had been bitten recently. It was coated with dried blood. Again Aly turned his eyes to the crimson stomach, following a line of coarse hair down the ridge to the swim trunks. Below, two narrow legs jutted out stiffly.

He felt an immediate urge to poke the mound with something sharp to see if it would burst, but his attention was diverted by a shrieking child running between the fat man and himself. A strap from the child's dirty bibbed swimsuit flopped behind his legs and in his left fist he clenched an ice cream cone, spilling down his arm in sticky white streaks. Aly turned his head to the sky, ignoring the boy in hopes that he would leave, but the urchin only read Aly's inaction as a sign of passive approval. Boldly, he stamped on the edge of the blanket, screamed with glee and scurried by; turned, grinned, licked the ice cream, and mounted his third assault. When he was half way by, Aly kicked him to the ground. The child hit the sand in startled disbelief as the cone flew from his fist to the top of the fat man's stomach. The boy lifted himself to his knees, crawled lowbelly to safety, stood up and ran screaming to his mother. She pushed him aside and continued her conversation with the woman seated beside her.

There had been no reaction, not even a quiver, when the ice cream hit the huge figure's scorched flesh, and even now, as part of the cone ran into his navel, still the man didn't move. Aly waited intently for something to happen, seeing the mess turn gumgy under the sun. Three minutes later when
there was still no sign of life, Aly knew the mound was dead.

He studied the figure lying next to him with fresh interest and curiosity, for he had only seen one dead man before and hadn't gotten a good look at the corpse. He had been very young then and only the face of the deceased had lain exposed through a window in the coffin. Someone nearby commented on the man's past importance, but Aly had only noticed the appearance of the skin. It was turning yellow and puffy.

By now the outer edges of the ice cream had hardened, but its center was still soft and mushy. A large fly landed on it, injected its proboscis and rubbed its hind legs together. After a brief taste, it hopped to the stomach, crawled down the slope and onto the thick neck, then up and around the sagging chin and into the open mouth. Aly half-expected the jaws to clamp shut, but nothing happened and the fly soon returned, sampled the dried blood on the underlip, buzzed its wings and lifted itself into the air.

Aly hadn't noticed the watch before because a roll of fat hung off the side of the enormous belly covering the slender arm. But when the sun reached a direct angle with the metal, it caught it and made it sparkle, refracting its rays off the surface into Aly's eyes. He studied the flex-band protruding from beneath the flesh then glanced around to see if anyone was watching, and seeing that no one was, he quickly reached out and drew the forearm to him. The arm was still limber and offered no resistance as Aly dragged it across the sand, and even though the skin appeared to be smouldering, he was surprised how soft and cold it felt. He
stretched the watch away from the wrist then bent over the scratched crystal face. He had to look closely to see the time. It was fourteen minutes past three. Aly turned the scored face toward the fat man's wrist, finding an inscription engraved on the back. He followed the words with his lips. TO MY BELOVED HAL, MARY.

So that's what your name is, Aly thought. I kinda figured it was something like that. You even look like your name should be Hal. He grasped the cold hand and shook it firmly.

"Pleased to meet you, Hal. The name's Aly Jones."

At first he was shocked at the sound of his voice speaking to the dead man, but he felt an immediate need to talk, and for the first time that he could remember, he found someone who would listen.

"Who's this Mary, Hal?" Aly spoke softly. "She the one that give you the watch? What for? Twenty-five years a number one service? Don't imagine you'd be good for much more than that. Ever wonder if maybe she's what killed you? Probably thought you still had it in you and egged you on. And you listened to her, didn't you? 'Cause you had to prove you were still a man, knowing damn well that the strain'd be too much for your heart. Where is she now, Hal? Where the hell is she now with you lying out here dead among all these animals?"

Aly turned over on his back and folded his hands behind his neck, squinting his eyes against the glare.
"You know something, Hal? I had a girl once, too. But we never did get married and she never bought me any watch. Besides, we were too young and it would have messed up my art. I was destined to be a famous artist. Maybe I'm laying here brushing elbows with greatness and I don't even know it. But no, I doubt it. You look like you eat too regular, and in order to be a famous artist, you gotta have that hungry look. A fry cook would be more like it. Ever hear of a fry cook being famous? You got the qualifications. Here's your big chance. If anybody can do it, it's gotta be you.

Maybe when somebody comes to claim you, they'll put you in a big tomb shaped like a chicken leg or a New York steak. And on the outside they'll mark your name in big gold letters saying for everyone to see: HERE LIES HAL, THE MOST FAMOUS FRY COOK THE WORLD HAS EVER KNOWN. And underneath it, they'll put your best recipe for hash or something. Then on a certain day all the big important people from all over the world will come to honor Hal, The Famous Fry Cook. And after the words are said, they'll all sit down at a huge table, say grace, and commence to eat you and your tomb. God, what an ending, Hal. And they won't forget you. At least not 'til they get over their indigestion."

A sharp pain bit into Aly's thigh and he quickly sat up and turned to the right, seeing a muscular youth with a pock-marked face trying to adjust himself on top of his girlfriend. He had kicked Aly in the side as he wrestled with the girl, now writhing under him and pushing against his weight. A
large medallion dangling from the man's neck brushed across the girl's face and into her mouth. She immediately started to gag and rolled her boyfriend off on Aly. Aly shoved the bulk away and got to his feet.

"For Chrissakes, man. I don't want to interfere with your love life, but how about staying on your own blanket."

Startled by the shove, the man lay on his side looking up at Aly. When he saw the slender form confronting him, he stood up reassured.

"You wouldn't be talking to me, would you fella?" He expanded his chest and looked threatening, kneading a rubber bell in his right fist to make his large forearm pulse.

As Aly watched him he felt his knees weaken. He hoped the man wouldn't see them shaking. "Well, who the hell do you think I'm talking to?" He shouted the words so his voice wouldn't waver.

The man glanced back at his girl, then stepped forward onto Aly's blanket. His breath was heavy with sen sen.

"Just keep it up, fella, and your going to get hurt."

"Don't think so, man." Aly jacked a thumb across his shoulder. "See that big guy laying there? He ain't about to let you touch me."

The boyfriend lowered his eyes to Hal, studying the huge figure closely. There was a brief silence, he took a hesitant step forward, but before he could move again, the girl grabbed him from behind. Tugging weakly, he let her pull him away. She whispered something in his ear. With a show of
reluctance, his biceps flexed for emphasis, he turned away from Aly and picked up his blanket. The girl grabbed him by the hand and pulled him through the thinning crowd. He looked back occasionally with an angered sneer. Soon they were out of sight and Aly squatted down on the blanket, rolled over on his side and propped his head with his hands.

"Thanks, Hal. By God, if you don't come in handy. I knew you wouldn't let me down. Probably would a whaled the piss out a me if you hadn't a backed me up."

As Aly spoke, he studied the fat man's face. Its scorched complexion had faded to a dark blush and the upper lip was beginning to whiten. The fly had returned, bringing another one with it. They walked side by side on the swollen underlip, taking turns going in and out of the gaping mouth.

"You know, Hal. I been thinking. Maybe I was a little too tough on you, saying those things about Mary and that fry cook business. It ain't right for me to lay here making smart ass remarks especially after what you just done for me. But you know. Sometimes a person gets so damn tired and disgusted, he says things without noticing who he's hurting. And even when he says it, he knows he's gonna be sorry, but he goes ahead 'cause if he can't he's gonna break."

Aly flopped on his back and blocked out the sunlight by covering his eyes with his arm. The heavy heat had made him groggy and his body felt numb from many nights of restless tossing. He had to fight it now, fight hard to stay awake when it would be so easy to drift away. If only he could
be sure that no one would bother him, he would willingly let go.

"Hal, I was wondering if you'd do something for me," Aly spoke softly, his lips barely moving. "I know you already done me one favor today and I hate to ask you for another one. But it seems I'm all pooped out. Just can't keep my eyes open. So if you'd be willing to keep watch for a few minutes. I think I'll lay back here and kinda stretch out and catch myself a quick snooze." Aly mumbled something else but he didn't hear it. He was already falling asleep.

When he opened his eyes, the first thing Aly saw was a yellow wispy cloud, riding the currents high overhead across the stark blue sky. He followed it a short distance watching the sunlight shoot pencils of gold through its surface, until at last it became so bright, he was forced to turn away. He sat up and looked around the beach to the people now leaving in clusters, to the piles of garbage they had left behind, then over to the water line. The tide had gone out. He turned to Hal watching flies crawl across the stony lips. The stomach seemed larger than before and Aly tried to imagine it getting any larger than it already was. He remembered the horse he had seen dead by the road after a speeding tourist had hit it. He was very young then but he still clearly recalled walking by it every evening after school. For a week he passed by it watching its belly bloating in the sun. The last time he saw it, the hide had split and the guts hung out like spaghetti. He detoured around it after
that because he couldn't stand the stink.

"Let me tell you something, Hal," Aly began again, this time talking hurriedly because he knew he would have to leave soon. "When I was going to school back in Sweet Prairie I made a drawin' of an old roan mare. My father owned a little grocery store and when he saw the picture, he thought it was real good and he hung it in his front window. Everybody used to come by and tell my father how good a drawin' it was, and when he heard 'em, he'd give 'em a little extra sugar or meat or beans. So you can imagine there was a mess a people commentin' on how nice my picture was.

"One day it went to his head and mine too, I guess, 'cause I let him talk me into coming here and joining my famous uncle in the paintin' business so I could become a great artist like my Uncle Ozzie. They put me on the bus one mornin' in my best suit a clothes and sent me here to learn.

"When I got here I looked him up and come to find out he isn't a famous man after all. You know what he does that makes him so important back home? He works in a factory stencillin' letters on orange crates. I guess he did have talent once, but he waited 'til it was too late. Now the only time I see old Ozzie is when he comes home from the corner bar. I can't stand to be around him then cause he gets so drunk, and when he gets drunk he starts rememberin' how old and worthless he is. He starts blubbering like a little kid and it makes me so sick, I feel like I'm gonna puke and I have to go somewhere 'til he sobers up. I want to go back
home. I went to forget about him and this beach and the whole goddam world. But how can I tell my father that his only brother is a flop. You see what I'm up against, don't you, Hal?"

The sand surrounding the two lone figures now lay empty and silent and the only sound to break the stillness was the lapping of the waves. Far away, the western sun slid gently into the sea, painting a bloody path across the water all the way to the shore.

"Well, Hal, it looks like everybody's gone. You and me, we're the only ones left. I better get going before they come here to run me out and pick you up. It'd sure be nice if we could lay here forever with all this quiet, and just talk and listen. But the trouble is there ain't no time for that anymore, so I guess we'll have to live with it."

Aly reached over and clasped Hal's hand. He held it firmly for a moment. Then he slowly released his grip, picked up his blanket, and walked to the car without looking back. The only time he moved his eyes from the sand was to glance at the watch on his wrist as its band briefly caught the rays of sunlight filtering across the water.
Harry Edwards watched his wife turn again to the bedroom door. Three times in as many minutes she had looked that direction and he cleared his voice loudly hoping she would hear him and turn back. He was about to try it a second time when Agnes Johnson finally spoke.

"Oh, Emily, look at this one. Isn't she a darling in that dress? Only two years old, can you imagine that? And already the little boys are chasing her."

Agnes leaned forward and held out the photograph. Her features obscured as she moved away from the lamp. A pencil of light shot through the lampshade exposing her teeth and the wetness of her lips. She resumed her commentary, her voice grating sharply like a piece of broken chalk jerked across a blackboard.

"Look closely, Harry. Now be honest. Don't you think she's really fine?"

Harry bent forward as if studying the photograph. He answered Agnes's question without looking at it.

"Yes, Agnes, fine. Really fine. You sure do have a cute kid there."

The words flowed mechanically out of his mouth. He was only slightly aware of saying them at all. His concern now lay with Emily's hands writhing violently in the middle of
her lap. It was as if they were two separate entities no longer attached to her body, twisting and gnawing in a tightly locked ball in a final attempt to devour each other. He knew Burt Johnson, seated beside him, must also be aware of Emily's hands. Before his guest's surprise turned to suspicion, Harry acted to end the struggle.

"Emily!" When he spoke to her that way she always heard him. She snapped her head up and found his eyes. She read them for a moment, watching them narrow, then her hands unlocked and slowly died on her lap. Her legs swayed gently back and forth until the hands tumbled onto the couch. She buried them under the folds of her dress.

Oblivious to the others seated around her, Agnes had been thumbing the stack of photographs for a particular shot. When she found the one she wanted she pursed her lips and thrust it into the center of the group.

"Oh, everybody, here's my favorite. My own little mermaid in her itty bitsy bikini. See, she's swimming below water in the Hanson's wading pool. This was taken the day little Billy Hanson had his birthday party. Here's one showing the two of them together. That's Billy standing beside my Pammy giving her a great big kiss." Jiggling shrilly, Agnes looked at her husband. She put her hand to the side of her face.

"Should I tell them, Burt?"

He nodded mechanically.

"He's my little Pammy's beau."
Harry found the out he had been desperately searching for, some way to switch the conversation away from the pictures. He turned his eyes from Emily, forced a smile and looked over to Burt Johnson.

"Hey, Burt. Which Hanson family is that? The Hanson of Bentloe, Hanson and Masters?"

"That's right. Yes sir, that's the one. You know the contract we were trying to get signed?"

Harry nodded.

"Well, I think we may have it in the bag thanks to Pammy's help. You know, it's really surprising how much kids can accomplish by becoming friends with the right people's kids."

When Burt finished speaking, he winked at Agnes. She smiled broadly, expressing her approval. Their gestures went unnoticed as Harry quickly decided what he would say next to keep hold of the conversation. But Agnes wouldn't let him. She picked up another photograph.

"And this one was taken at the Phelps farm. Bill Phelps is my mother's brother," she explained. "There's little Pammy with the rest of the relatives out in front of the cattle barn. See how she stands out among the other children." Agnes pointed her finger for emphasis. Without waiting for a reply, she passed on the photograph and brought up another one.

Harry tried to count the remaining pictures lying in Agnes's lap. He saw that there were at least enough to last
out the hour. He looked across to Emily. She was turning again to the bedroom door.

"Hey, old buddy," Burt grabbed Harry's arm and tugged it to get his attention. Harry looked over. Burt was smil­ing stupidly.

"Hate to interrupt, but my glass is empty. Is there any chance of getting a refill?"

The request caught Harry unprepared. The mix was in the kitchen and that meant leaving Emily alone with Agnes. But he had to comply to avoid suspicion. He decided to say yes and then try to hurry.

"Sure, Burt. I could use one myself. How are you girls fixed? Ready for another?"

"Well," Agnes giggled, "I don't know. The last one really went to my elbows."

"Aw c'mon killjoy," Burt prodded. "One more certainly won't hurt."

"How about you, Emily?" Her head was cast down now. She answered very quietly, very effortlessly.

"I don't care, Harry. It doesn't really matter. If you want to fix one, it's all right."

Burt moved toward the women and gathered up the tumblers. He walked back to where Harry was standing. "Well that makes it unanimous. Lead the way old man."

Harry started for the kitchen, but just before he reached the door, he stopped abruptly and turned around, forcing Burt to swerve to the side to avoid walking into him. He
looked at his wife's hands. They had escaped again from under her dress and were fighting fiercely in the middle of her lap.

"Agnes, I just remembered something. While we're fixing the drinks maybe you could explain to Emily how that camera works. She was talking about buying one the other day. You might be able to show her what to look for."

Emily lifted her head. Her eyes met Harry's. They seemed puzzled and disturbed.

"Oh, I'd love to Harry. Here, Emily, let me show you. This is one of the best you can buy. But it's really very inexpensive. Much less than you think. Go ahead. Tell me how much you think I paid for it."

Harry pushed the kitchen door hard unaware of its weight against his arm. Once inside the kitchen, he stepped to the refrigerator, reached inside and removed the ice tray. He placed it on the counter and lifted the handle, breaking the cubes free in the small tin squares. He spilled some of the cubes onto the floor.

"Sorry, Burt. I guess the ice isn't ready yet. Do you want to hold off for a while?"

"That's all right. We can use it the way it is. You know, Harry, I should apologize for barging in on you like this. We didn't even call to tell you we were coming over. And the pictures. My wife must be boring you two to death with them."

"No," Harry lied. He poured the slushy ice into the
glasses. "You really do have a cute kid there. You have every right to be proud of her."

"Well, thank you, Harry. But just the same. I think Agnes went a little overboard."

Harry poured the liquor into the glasses, stirred them with a spoon and handed one to Burt. Burt lifted the drink to his lips. He swallowed.

"Mmm, that's great. The way I like it. Very smooth but good and strong."

"Good. Then let's get back to the living room."

"Just a minute." Burt moved close to the counter. "There's something I want to tell you. I have a slight confession to make."

"What is it, Burt?" Harry tried to hide his anger. He had to get back and check on Emily. He filled the ice bucket, grabbed the bottle and hurried to the kitchen door. Burt yanked at his arm to hold him back.

"I usually don't get serious, Harry, unless I'm a little drunk. I guess that's good testimony for your booze. I know it was kinda rotten for Agnes to bring those pictures over with Emily's loss so fresh and all. But maybe Agnes was right. Anyway, I agreed with her. We thought if you saw the pictures you might decide to do something. There are a lot of good adoption agencies in the city. You know Emily can't have anymore children. Face facts, Harry. Neither one of you is getting any younger and I'll tell you for certain you're missing out on a lot. Sure there's pain and
heartache in fatherhood. But there's also a good deal of happiness to compensate for it."

Harry had to shut Burt off, to get back to the living-room. He told him what he wanted to hear.

"I know that Burt, I really do. Just the other day Emily and I were discussing that possibility. We've already made plans to adopt."

"Say, Harry, that's great. That's really great."

"We like the idea ourselves. But don't say anything about it for a while. Keep it to yourself until everything's definite."

Burt wrapped his arm around Harry. He smiled. "You know I won't say anything. Your secret is safe."

"Good. Let's get back to the livingroom. The women are probably wondering what happened to us."

Burt held the door open and let Harry step through. He followed him out.

"Here's the drinks girls. Sorry we took so long."

When he saw the couch, Harry stopped abruptly. Agnes was sitting alone with her camera. Burt walked around Harry and handed his wife a drink. He sat down on the couch beside her. Harry remained still.

"Agnes, where's Emily? Where did she go?"

Agnes sipped the drink and smiled at her husband.

"Agnes!" Harry shouted. "Where is Emily?"

"Oh, I'm sorry Harry. She went to the bedroom. She said she'd be out in just a sec."
The door of the bedroom opened slowly behind the couch where the Johnsons were sitting. When they heard the door open they turned around and watched Emily re-enter the room. Emily clutched a bundled blanket tightly in her arms. She was smiling. Agnes Johnson was the first to speak.

"What do you have there, dear? Is that a baby blanket? Why, it is."

When Harry saw Emily with the blanket, he knew immediately what she was doing. He had to stop her before she reached the Johnsons, before she could show them and ruin it all. As she started toward Agnes slowly opening the folds, he emptied his arms and moved quickly to his wife. Emily swerved away from him but he caught her by the shoulder, his face locked in an expression of anger and fear. He yanked her violently in the direction of the bedroom trying hard to hold onto her as she squirmed to free herself.

"Stop it, Emily," Harry barked hoarsely. "Damn you, stop it."

Emily's face was now a constriction of pain as her husband's hand bit deep into her shoulder. When she started to whine Burt moved away from his stunned wife, intending to free Emily from her husband. But just then she broke free and ran over to the Johnsons. Harry lunged in a final desperate effort. It was already too late. Emily quickly opened the blanket in front of her guests.

Agnes peered inside, screamed hysterically, burying her hatched-like face into her husband's shoulder. Harry backed
away defeated, and dropped his hands to his sides, his ears ringing with the hysterical woman's screams. Burt Johnson pushed his hand against the back of Agnes's head attempting to quiet her as he spoke to his hosts.

"My God, Emily. What the hell is going on here? Is this some kind of a practical joke?"

"Why, no," Emily answered quite calmly. "Why would you say something like that? This is my Harry. My dear little Harry. Doesn't he look fine tonight? Oh Agnes, please look. Isn't he grand? Maybe he could also be your Pammy's beau."

Burt Johnson leaped out of the couch and rushed his wife toward the door. He pulled their coats out of the closet sending hangers scattering across the floor. He helped Agnes into her's then thrust his arms into his sleeves, pulled the coat over his shoulders and pushed his wife out the door. He stopped briefly to glance back at Harry.

"My God, this is incredible. I never could have imagined you--Good God, you people are really sick."

Harry shoved Emily aside and walked toward Burt. He rubbed his fists against the sides of his legs.

"Just a minute, you. Before you start calling anybody sick. Nobody asked you to come over here with those damn pictures of yours."

"What about the pictures," Burt cut in. "So now you're trying to put the blame on us when all we were trying to do was to help out."

"Help out?" Harry smiled angrily. "When my wife just
lost her baby do you think those pictures would help us out? Now you listen. You either get the hell out of here or I swear to God I'll knock you down those stairs."

Burt stood still, glared at Harry and Emily, then turned quickly, stepped outside, and slammed the door behind him. In a moment they were gone, their car fishtailing down the street, a thick cloud of snow trailing behind them.

Long after they had left Harry stood by the window, his face pressed flat against the glass. The outside cold passed through the glass gradually removing the flush from his cheeks. Slowly he turned toward the red vinyl chair, walked across the room and fell between its arms. Harry fumbled under his sport coat and found a cigarette. His hand wavered as he brought it to his lips. He turned to Emily who was standing in the shadows in a distant corner of the livingroom. He watched her wipe the dampness away from her face. She started to speak in a hesitating voice.

"Harry...Harry. Are you still angry. Please don't be angry with me Harry. I don't think I can stand it. Please. I'm sorry."

Harry brushed the ash off his cigarette on the edge of the porcelain ash tray. He focused his eyes on the large picture window.

"Why, Emily? Why did you bring it out after I've warned you against it so many times? How can I explain—what do I say at the office. I'll probably lose my job over this. You know that don't you?"
Emily started to interrupt but Harry cut her off with a wave of his hand.

"You promised if I let you keep it here, you wouldn't bring it out. But no. You have to show if off the first damn time someone comes over. They won't understand. They can't. Now they'll all know. Damn it, Emily."

"Please don't shout at me Harry," Emily begged. She sucked at the wetness filling her nose. "I know I promised not to, but I just couldn't help it. Oh, Harry, I was so jealous I just couldn't help myself. Don't you see? I had to go against you to show her. To show her I had one just like her's."

Harry listened to his wife's words leave the darkened corner. He shook his head slowly and brought his fingers to his eyes. He turned and faced Emily barely visible in the shadows, his eyes searching for her unseen face.

"God, Emily. Won't you ever understand. Damn it, it's just not the same."

"Oh, it is. It is!" Emily repeated emphatically. "I wish you'd stop saying that."

Harry pushed his hands into his eyes then pulled them hard across his face. It was impossible to argue. She would never see it.

"Please, Emily, go to bed now. It's getting late. We'll talk about it later."

For a long moment Emily didn't move. Harry thought she was going to cry. He was relieved when she didn't, she broke
through the shadows, her eyes fixed on the bedroom door. When he heard the door shut, he ground the cigarette out leaving a pile of shredded tobacco in the bottom of the ash tray. He reached above his head and snapped the light off. He folded his arms against his chest.

Harry Edwards. You stupid fool. What the hell are you going to do now? They'll all know by tomorrow morning. Jason. Bob. Everybody. Maybe if I don't go. If I mail them my resignation. Might be easier that way. But where do I go from here? I'm forty-seven years old. Too late to start over again. It's all gone now. The position. The house. Sure to lose everything now. Thirty-thousand dollars and all those years of saving right down the tubes. And for what? For nothing. For a crazy wife who can't even realize.

A sound from the bedroom entered the livingroom pulling Harry away from his thoughts. He looked at the door and waited for the noises that would come.

There she goes right on time. That's it all right. The liquid's sloshing. Must be sitting in the rocker now holding it on her lap. Even tonight. Even after what happened. She's still gotta go through with that crazy ritual.

Harry sat still, the anger building within him, listening to the sounds pour from the bedroom. He tried to block it out. He pushed his hands against his ears, but even his pounding heart couldn't cover up the noises.

He reached behind his neck, pulled the yellow pillow from under his head, and taking it in his arms, began imi-
tating his wife—imitating those actions he had seen her perform so many times in the bedroom. "Oh, doesn't mommy's little darling look nice tonight. So fresh and clean and precious. Yes you are. Oh, yes you are." Harry held the pillow to his chest, stroking it spasmodically.

"Did you have a bad time in that mean old closet? Oh, my poor baby. I'm so sorry. You know Daddy makes me do it and Daddy is the boss. But I'll make it up to you now my poor little child. Now it's just you and me and nobody to bother us. Would you like mommy to sing you a song."

Harry began to sing softly, his voice echoing the sounds from the bedroom. "Hush little baby, don't say a word. Mommy's gonna buy you a mockingbird. If that mockingbird don't sing. Mommy's gonna buy you a diamond ring." The pitch of Harry's voice rose with his anger. His fingers raked the back of the pillow, strumming it and clawing it with the same violent motion. "If that diamond ring turns brass. Mommy's gonna buy you a looking glaaaaass."

Harry punched his fists into the pillow, grabbed it in his hands and tore at the seams. He jumped up, hurled the pillow against the bedroom door, the strains of the lullaby pouring out of his mouth.

"If that looking glass don't shine--Don't you see what you've cost me with your damn crazy ways? Emily, can't you see what you've done?"

He waited for her answer to come from the bedroom. His eyes followed the trail of down leading to the doorway. She
waan't even listening--she hadn't heard him. Exhausted, he fell back into the chair.

For a long time the sound of Emily's voice filtered into the livingroom. When the house was finally quiet, Harry pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and mopped the sweat off his forehead. He shook a cigarette out of the half-empty pack, lit it, and puffed on it slowly. He looked out the picture window. It was snowing again, the flakes looking like steel shards below the street light. An occasional flake reached the window and was immediately transformed into a drop of water. Somewhere in the distance a dog started barking.

I should have known what she was up to. Everything pointed to it. None of this would have happened if I'd gone ahead and had her committed. It might have looked bad at the office with Emily put away like that. But it would have been a lot better than the way things now stand. If it wasn't for that one thing no one would know. If it just wasn't for that one hangup. Well, I can't blame myself except for being stupid. At least I tried. When she was told she couldn't have any more children, didn't I try to get her to adopt one? We could have adopted the whole damn orphanage with the money I was making and the new house and all. But no, no it had to come from her. Nothing else was good enough. Well, now she has one. By God, if she doesn't. And everything's blown up right in my face. Burt Johnson and that wife of his. They had to ruin it. They had to bring those pictures over
and spoil it all. And stand there at the door calling me sick when he doesn't even know what's going on. If anybody's sick it's my dear sweet wife and...Ch, Christ. What's the sense.

Harry pulled on the cigarette between his lips. He turned to the door and checked its bottom for light. The rug was in darkness; his wife was in bed; he turned his head away.

She sure had me fooled though. I'll give her that much. Two attempts in one day and then nothing for three weeks. And me thinking, well maybe it's all right now, maybe no more hiding the medicine and making sure that everything sharp is locked away. She even looked better and I thought that shrink must be some miracle man. And when she asked me to let her walk to her appointment, I called him up and he said it might be right to start trusting her. Two hours later he called me back wondering where she was. I asked her about it that night after dinner—said she decided to take the bus and had missed her stop. I believed her but when she skipped the next appointment, I had to find out where she was going. The third appointment was made for that Saturday morning and I told her I had some business at the office. But after I left the house, I got into the car and drove to the end of the block. A few minutes later she left the house and got on the East Avenue bus. I followed her. When she got off again it was at the Medical Center.

Harry stood in the lobby watching the yellow lights
flash the floors the elevator was passing. When it stopped on the eleventh floor, he moved his eyes to the chart searching quickly for the corresponding number. Except for 1110, the Medical Museum, all other rooms on that floor were private offices. Harry felt sick. His hand reached for the button to bring the elevator down. And then it was in front of him before he was ready, before he had time to decide. When the doors started closing, he moved sideways between them and the taut cables pulled him up.

My God, what'll I do if I find her there (he watched the flashing digits). What if somebody from the office sees us. What will I give for an excuse. Better be prepared to say something. Could say I just came up for a physical. No. Nobody would believe that. Don't think they even give them here. Maybe I'd better stop right now. Stop this damn thing and go back down.

Harry reached out to press the button for the upcoming floor. His hand wavered uncertainly.

No, dammit. I have to find out now. I have to know what she's doing up there. Have to be certain what she is doing before I can do anything.

The door snapped open in front of Harry exposing a green wall and a large black arrow. Behind the arrow pointing west up the corridor were stenciled numbers 1108-1110. Harry bent his head into the corridor carefully looking both directions. When he saw no one, he stepped out of the elevator, turned to the right and walked quickly past the first two doors. He
halted in front of the third door, checked the hall once more then reached for the knob. He turned it gently and pushed in with his arm opening a gap the width of his thumb. As he moved his eyes carefully across the room, the pungent odor of formaldehyde bit at his nostrils.

Rows of glass jars with black plastic lids filled the walls of the spacious room with the gallons on the bottom shelves, the quarts in the center and up on top the pints and smaller. And inside each jar, preserved in clear liquid, was the progression of life to follow and study; from a sixth month fetus looking much like a frog to a fully developed child of possibly two. Harry searched for his wife down the glass-lined wall to the end of the first, passed the corner, to the second.

In front of the curiosities with three arms and two heads, some with no ears or no bodies at all, with six fingers on one hand or four stubs on another, Emily was standing before a child. She turned her head sideways and Harry saw that she was smiling. The sound of her voice broke the stillness in the room. She said something about playmates, "How wonderful they are," then reached for the jar to pick up the child. And out of her coat pocket she brought a handkerchief of white to dust off the glass, then the soft spoken kiss. A glance at the clock, the sadness of leaving in her face; back up on the shelf to fill out the row. "Don't worry little Harry. My dear little Harry. Soon, very soon it will be all right. And then you will be with me for ever and ever
Well, I let her keep it. I knew it was there and all the time pretending it wasn't so. But I was sure, as sure as I had been about anything that she had brought it home the very next day. And that time home from work, that time unexpected when I caught her holding it and singing that song. Even then I wasn't surprised. I didn't do a thing. Just crept away and kept it to myself. And I thought, why not just let it be? Can it really be that bad? Hasn't it made her all right again? Isn't it worth it if no one knows? If no one knows. God!

Harry pushed himself out of the red vinyl chair, his legs feeling wobbly and very numb. He walked to the picture window, his hands thrust into his pockets, watching a gusty breeze pick up and carry the snow. A little later a small shivering dog trotted uncertainly down the far side of the street. Occasionally it would stop and sniff the air as it brushed passed the modern houses and the large shiny cars. It seemed confused by all the sameness. Harry hoped it would soon find home.

I have to get rid of it. That's the only thing to do now. It's the only way she can ever be saved. Everything's gone now. She's all I have left. If she goes too there won't even be hope. I better do it while she's still sleeping to give myself time to decide what to say.

Harry turned and slowly walked back across the room.
In a moment he was at the door twisting the dull brass handle. He opened the door quietly and entered the darkened room seeing Emily asleep on the bed, the jar in her arms. Harry held his breath and moved to the bed, then bent over his wife and gently lifted her arm. She hadn't stirred, he picked up the jar and backed out the door closing it quietly behind him.

With the child in his hands, Harry walked across the carpet, his mind seeking some way to rid himself of his burden. He fumbled in the darkness to find the chair until he finally felt it against his leg. He moved sideways and sat down between its arms.

For a long time afterwards Harry held the jar on his lap, looking inside it to study the child. Sometimes he would bounce his knees up and down, gently disturbing the liquid inside the glass. And with this action the child would live, its little arms waving slowly within. Its face was smiling, its grey body dancing, brought on by the motion of a father's knees. But as it turned, rotating in the liquid, the other face appeared, the sad, tragic one. And Harry looked at the other face and held it over his heart and spoke to it in a soft, painful voice.

"My God, what can I do with you? What can I do with you, my son? What can I do with you? What can I do?"

Outside the house a street light was burning casting its light through a large picture window, revealing a man in
a red vinyl chair crying over a large glass jar.
Clara Waverly, civic leader, part-time nurse and childless widow, prided herself on her efforts that had made Granville such a fine model community. During her ten years participation in its affairs, she had helped the town acquire many awards; first prize for the civic symphony in the regional music meet; the state blue ribbon in garden competition. But there was one laurel she had not yet secured for the town, the silver trophy from the state chapter of the Red Cross. And Clara knew that all past honors would mean little without this symbol of brotherly sacrifice.

The pedestal on which the trophy was to rest had already been constructed in the Town Hall lobby. Clara, herself, had organized the drive, spending many long evenings collecting donations. But as she now stood in the lobby examining the marble structure (her forehead furrowed with concern), she thought of the rapidly approaching deadline and wondered if all that time had not gone to waste.

The Red Cross had set the blood quota for Granville at one hundred fifty-three units. Because Granville was a quota buster community, having donated more blood per capita the past three years than any other town in the state, it would only have to maintain that rate for one more drawing before the silver trophy could be awarded. Ordinarily, the
number would have easily been reached because of the generosity of the townspeople, had it not been for a hepatitis epidemic which had hit the community making ineligible many past donors. In a last minute drive, with the help of the women's auxiliary, Clara had secured almost enough pledges to make up the loss. Still, it was not enough. The bloodmobile would arrive on Wednesday and she could only pledge one hundred-forty pints.

Clara turned her eyes from the pedestal to the clock on the wall. The meeting was to begin in less then a minute. As she hurried down the corridor to the council room, she could hear Florence Walker rap her gavel.

Florence looked relieved when she saw Clara at the door and she motioned her inside to the seat beside the podium. Clara stepped across the front of the room and sat down.

"All right, girls. Let's have your attention now. We have to solve a very important problem today. The bloodmobile will be here next Wednesday and we must locate more donors if we are going to be awarded the trophy. Mrs. Waverly and I discussed the problem over tea yesterday evening, and I think we may have come up with a workable solution. Clara, would you tell the girls about it?"

Clara patted the back of her hair nervously. She spoke from her chair to save time.

"Well, ladies! Florence adequately related our problem so I won't go over it again. As you all know, we must turn up more pledges if we are going to meet the quota. Since
we've exhausted all possible prospects in the community proper, the situation calls for more drastic measures. I'm afraid there is only one thing left for us to do." Clara paused for a second. "I propose we search the Northtown annex for eligible donors."

Ordinarily any proposal submitted by Clara Waverly would have been immediately seconded and passed, but this time it was met with shocked expressions and voiced disbelief. As the room erupted with noisy clatter Florence Walker picked up her gavel, and pounded order back into the meeting with three strong raps on the podium.

"All right! You girls listen to me." The disgust in her voice intimidated the group. "At least you could show Mrs. Waverly enough courtesy to keep still when she's trying to talk. Now, you have all heard the proposal, and you know the problems confronting us. So I don't see why this meeting should go on any longer. If there are no objections!" Florence waited. "All right. Let's stop wasting time and put the issue to a vote."

The proposal passed quickly without dissension and the remainder of the meeting was spent dividing Northtown into sections. Each woman was to take a designated block, to comb both sides of the street for prospects. There were two blocks in excess and Clara volunteered to cover them along with her original allocation. The area rested on the farthest most edge of town between the railroad tracks and the cemetery.
Clara awakened early the next morning, anxious to begin the search. She dressed quickly, skipped breakfast, and left the house. By the time she reached the Town Hall parking lot, she could see that most of the women had already arrived and were huddled on the sidewalk in a protective circle against the morning chill. Florence Walker stood on the outer edge of the group, and she turned and smiled when she saw Clara's car, making a comment about the weather which Clara only half heard. But when Clara joined the circle Florence's attitude turned serious as she quickly took command of the women, doubly checking all assignments and making sure that each person knew exactly what she was to do. If many of the women's faces expressed their apprehension at going to the Northtown area, they kept still rather than bring Florence's criticism upon them and left silently when she dismissed them.

Because it was Saturday morning, traffic was very light and Clara soon reached the underpass. She turned on her headlights before entering the underpass, seeing that its bottom was covered with black ice. She steered carefully across the ice heading for the mouth of light at the far end of the shaft. The headlights of a car caught her rearview mirror, but they dropped out of sight as she climbed the slope into Northtown.

The first thing that struck Clara about the Northtown area was its filthy streets. Brown oiled lanes with black gummy pools veered off the main road in zig-zag patterns.
The main road itself was little more than a cinder track and its outer boundaries were lined with garbage. Shards of glass covered its surface like salt sprinkled over a thick layer of pepper. Clara tried maneuvering her car around the larger chunks of glass, feeling them crunch under the weight of her tires. But she found that it was impossible and drove on ignoring the noise as her eyes squinted at the faded street signs. Whenever her eyes rested on one of the run-down structures facing the dirty street, Clara would suddenly feel nauseous and overly conspicuous in her late model car.

There were cars in Northtown, many of them sitting in yards beside tumbling facades, with their hoods gaping open as if to attack the houses standing before them. But for most of the cars it was an empty threat as they rested wheel-less on grey weathered blocks, their lights knocked out and their bodies dented and spotted with rusty patches.

The houses in Northtown, with a few exceptions, were of modest construction and design. They had been built for practicality rather than beauty and had served well in that capacity. But on occasion one could find more elaborate structures, usually in the middle of each block, with hand carved doors, stained glass windows, support pillars, and cast iron fences. Even the yards bore relics of the past, marble birdbaths and hitching posts, and in one instance there was a carriage house and the remnants of a gazebo. But these symbols of a lost age now seemed similar to the
more modest houses beside them as the years of decay gradually stripped all the finery from them.

It is said that the big houses with their faded magnificence had once been the property of eastern speculators who had dawned the role of lumbermen, making their wealth selling railroad ties. But the demand for railroad ties dropped off markedly by the turn of the century. It was then that operations were converted to produce material for the booming construction industry. Northtown sprang up around the lumbermill and was quite prosperous until 1937. In the winter of that year the mill burned down and wasn’t reconstructed until just after the beginning of the War. In 1967 the mill was again leveled by fire and again there were no plans to rebuild. Granville was quite pleased when many of the people moved away, for with them went a tremendous tax burden and a source of embarrassment.

When Clara spotted the sign indicating the street she had been assigned to cover, she slowed down and made a left turn. A young girl, in laceless shoes and in pigtails, stood below the sign observing Clara suspiciously. Her arm was hooked around the signpost and she was wearing a dress similar to the kind used by flower girls at expensive weddings. The dress itself was made of white satin and was now spotted and dirty. Fine lace lined the cuffs and hemline and a green velvet sash was wrapped around its middle. The sash was held in place by a safety pin and pieces of it had been torn off to bind the girl’s pigtails. A little farther down
the block a very old couple was sitting on a battered couch. The man's hands rested on a briar cane which served to support his palsied head. His wife was wearing a pair of glasses with the right lense frosted over and she cocked her head like a turkey, following Clara's car with her good eye. Clara drove on.

When she reached the seven hundred block of Engle street, Clara guided her car into the curb. She shut off the key and breathed deeply three times, having read that the extra oxygen produced a calming effect. She felt better, but was still hesitant about stepping out of the car and was debating whether or not to come back later, when she saw a familiar figure on the other side of the street in the block just ahead of her. It was Mary Ashley, one of the ladies who had been at the parking lot with Agnes.

Clara suddenly felt foolish, remembering how she, herself, had made the proposal and was now probably the only one not working. She kept up the self-rebuke to give herself courage as she got out of the car and walked to the right side of the block. The first house was a two-story structure with warped pine siding and a blistered coat of yellow paint. There was a porch on the front of the house and on the west side a small room had been added on. The outside of the room was covered with tarpaper and lathe strips and the shell of a washing machine rested on the porch. Clara slipped the Red Cross armband over her coat sleeve, thought of the quota and stepped down the walkway.
By noon Clara was exhausted. She had covered the houses on both sides of the street; had been allowed inside six; the rest were deserted or the occupants not answering. She had received a maybe from a World War One veteran who said he saw the importance in what she was doing. He related war stories to her over cold coffee and she listened long enough to get his answer.

That afternoon Clara fared a little better, scoring a definite yes in her second sector. It came from a middle-aged woman with a huge goiter hanging from her throat. Because of the goiter, Clara was afraid that the woman might be physically ineligible. But at least it was a yes and she drove home thinking of the trophy and feeling a little better.

Clara and Florence decided to have dinner together to discuss the day's progress. The dinner had become a custom with the two women since the death of Clara's husband. It had been terribly lonely those first two years after the highway accident, and Clara knew if it hadn't been for Florence she couldn't have made it through the ordeal. Before the tragedy she had often done charity work with Florence at the hospital and was very much attracted to her sense of humor and her lighthearted attitude. But it wasn't until after the burial of her husband that the two really became close as Florence guided Clara through the hardship and back to a semblance of normality.

Florence had never married and in this way her condition
was common with Clara's, alienated socially to the people in her age group who only mingled with other couples. But if their condition was common their physical appearance was quite the opposite, Florence being very plain with deep red hair and masculine features. While Glare had a finely structured face, soft brown eyes and hair that was almost black. Even at forty-two, three years younger than Florence, Clara was still very beautiful. Since the death of Harold Waverly there had never been another man.

It was dark when the two women arrived at the restaurant. A light snow had begun to fall. Clara parked her car in front of the restaurant and she and Florence went inside and ordered dinner. The waitress brought them coffee and they talked while waiting for the dinner to be prepared.

"I don't know, Florence." Clara stared into her coffee cup. "It all seems so impossible now. Only ten possibilities after working all day and most of them will be ineligible."

"Yes, I know. The conditions are appalling over there. But!" Florence reached across the table and patted Clara's hand. "Don't you worry, girl. We still have a few days left and we still haven't canvassed half the area. I just know we're going to get that trophy. You wait and see."

She smiled. "Clara, it'll work out."

Clara felt better after listening to Florence, as always so strong, so positive about everything. She was fortunate to have such a good friend, someone she could count on.
She sipped her coffee. The waitress brought their dinner and the two of them ate in silence.

The following morning Clara drove again to the Northtown annex to cover the area between the cemetery and the railroad tracks. The conditions of the houses in that area were worse than the ones she had visited the preceding morning. They were fragile looking one level structures, lacking porches or any other additions that might break up their monotonous lines. The houses were clustered together, a couple of feet separated one from another, and there were no automobiles either on the street or in the yards. Clara soon found out after covering the right side of the block that all of the houses were uninhabitated. All of them lacked the facilities for plumbing and electricity. Disappointed, Clara turned around and walked back to her car. She drove to the end of the street to swing the car around, but when she reached the intersection, she pushed on the brake. Smoke was coming from the chimney of the last house on the left of the next block. If there was even the slightest chance, one could very well make the difference, they were so close to the quota now. She couldn’t afford to overlook even one prospect. It would only take a few more minutes and then she would be done.

When Clara stopped in front of the house she noticed that it was different from the others. The structure was still plywood, but the knots had been speckled over and the
surface painted a light green. The yard was free of any debris and there was a small tilled patch beside the door, dotted with little clusters of withered stalks now covered with snow.

Clara knocked. As she waited for someone to answer, she petted the back of her hair, wishing she had remembered to check her make-up before leaving the car. She heard movement inside, readied herself, yet it was still some time before the door opened. When it did, she was met by a man with greying hair, light blue eyes and an unshaven face.

"Hello!" She saw now that the man's hair was deceiving. She judged his age to be no more than thirty-five. She thought him quite handsome. "My name is Clara Waverly. I'm representing the women's auxiliary, and I wonder if I could have a moment of your time."

She waited for him to invite her inside, but he seemed reluctant to move away from the door as if he was using it to shield himself from her, to keep her from seeing his body. Then she felt his eyes on her, studying her face, and she clutched the top of her coat. She met his eyes and didn't look away until he stepped back and pulled the door open.

"I didn't mean to keep you standing in the cold. Come in, please."

She stepped inside and held out her hand. He took it and pressed it softly. "I hope I'm not interrupting you,
"Anderson. Bill Anderson. No, certainly not," he motioned her to a chair.

Clara sat down pulling her coat around her and waited for the man to be seated. She noticed his embarrassment. He still hadn't moved from his position behind the door. After a moment's silence, she watching him closely, he finally closed the door and moved across the room pulling a box-shaped shoe along the floor behind him. A rollerskate had been attached to the bottom of the crippled foot. It added to his mobility. But as he fought to reach the couch he made many of the wasted gestures of a half-crushed insect. Clara was sympathetic.

By the time he reached the seat opposite Clara, the man's face was a constriction of pain. His breath came heavy and his forehead and chin were beaded with perspiration.

"Mrs. Waverly, is it?" He sat down spreading a striped blanket over his bad leg.

"Yes," Clara nodded.

"Well, Mrs. Waverly." He leaned forward and smiled.

"What is it I can do for you?"

Before beginning, Clara tried to look concerned. She widened her eyes to hold the man's attention.

"As I said, Mr. Anderson. I'm representing the women's auxiliary. We are out canvassing the area. As you might have heard, the Red Cross is having a blood drawing next Wednesday and we are hoping to have a good turnout. The unit
level is quite critical at our hospital, so you can see it is very important that everyone do his part. Especially when there are so many tragic accidents happening on our highways."

"Yes, of course. Your right." He seemed fascinated with her eyes. "Blood drawings are very important right now." When she caught him staring, he turned his eyes to the floor. Clara smiled.

"If only more people had the same attitude. Generosity is such an admirable virtue, but it's so seldom practiced anymore... Then I take it," Clara hesitated. "Would you be willing, Mr. Anderson, to sign one of our pledge cards?" She opened her purse and removed a stack of cards fastened together with a rubber band. She looked across to Bill Anderson and saw that he was staring at her again. She took a deep breath, letting her coat fall open. He watched her for a long time and she was about to repeat the question when he finally spoke.

"I don't know, Mrs. Waverly." His eyes moved from the cards to the spot between her coat to the floor. "It's. Well, I." She watched him flush. "Well, you see it's this leg of mine."

"What's wrong, Mr. Anderson?" She cut in. "There isn't something wrong with your health?"

"Oh, no! I don't think so. It's just that I don't get around too well and the pain, it gets pretty bad sometimes. When it starts hurting real bad, I move sorts funny and
sometimes people laugh. I can stand the pain all right. But the laughing."

Clara looked shocked; her expression turned angry; she said nothing for a moment, when she did her voice was low and cool.

"Mr. Anderson, let me tell you. Anybody who would laugh at another person's pain is...is something less than human. To think that anyone could be so cruel-Oh, I could," she struck her fist on the chair arm. She bent forward.

"If you decide to sign the pledge card, I promise you I'll come out the day of the drawing and personally drive you into town. Then we'll see if anybody tries to laugh. Nobody would dare."

By the time she finished, Clara knew she had impressed him. She caught him watching her again. She saw how strongly he was attracted to her, easily reading his emotions through all those clumsy gestures he tried to hide under. Now she was certain, as sure as she had been about anything, certain that he would sign the pledge card. She held it out to him. He reached out and took it without looking at it, his other hand cocking the pen.

When it was finished, Clara remained long enough to appear cordial, using the time to discover some facts about Mr. Anderson. She let him talk, she answering him with gestures that kept his eyes always upon her. He had been a contractor, the one who had built the plywood houses and had hoped to rent them out to the millworkers. But after the mill
burned down, he had gone to work for the railroad as a switchman and it was then that his foot had been mangled. He now lived on a small disability pension and was waiting around to see if the mill would be rebuilt again. He told Clara that he doubted if it ever would, but that one could never know.

On the drive back to Granville Clara amused herself with thoughts of Bill Anderson. It excited her, remembering how he had looked at her, staring then trying to hide it. Other men had done it, watching her until she faced them, then nervously turning away. But this time it was different. Oh, she had been certain of the desire. Still, there was something more. Something she couldn't quite put her finger on or lacked the words to express. She only felt it from his voice, the way it sounded hollow and empty. It was after he had told her he had never been married that she had really sensed the feeling. And that is why she now wondered if it had been there at all or if she was just projecting it upon him. Anyway, he was funny.

Clara parked her car in the garage. As she walked to the door, she could hear the phone ringing inside. She unlocked the door, pushed it open, and hurried to the bedroom. She picked up the phone. It was Florence Walker. She had been trying to reach Clara for over an hour and was angry at being kept waiting. Her voice sounded excited.

"Well, I guess that's it. All the sectors have been covered and your's is the only one not checked in. I hope
you had some luck with your's or I don't think we're going to make it."

"How many, Florence?" Clara looked worried. Give me the total count."

"Well, I hope it's enough. I've tabulated every sector. One hundred and forty-seven units."

"Oh, my God! Florence, are you sure?"

"Positive. I've double checked the figures. Then...it's not enough?"

"No. Oh, no! I only found one. My God, we aren't going to make it." Clara's lips began to tremble. She bit the lower one. This time Florence didn't reassure her. It was too late now and whatever might be said couldn't change that fact. Florence asked Clara if she wanted her to come over. She said no, that she was tired and wanted to rest. When Florence mentioned that it wasn't good for her to be alone right then, Clara said she was all right and hung up the phone. Then she removed her coat and fell back on the bed and cried for a long time, her mind flashing fast like a speeded up projector over the incidents of the past week. Somewhere in that maze she must find the solution. Clara the problem solver. Hadn't Harold always called her that, the good wife, the problem solver? She hated him for it, the tone in his voice, the stupid smile when he said it. It could have been different if he had left the road when she had asked him to. But no, gone all week with his damn sample
case then thinking generous because he allowed her his week­ends and complaining all the while that she gave too much of her time to charity affairs. That night before he was killed he told her about the other women, holding her against the wall and spitting it out in her face. Two days later, beneath a black veil, she smiled over his coffin.

Her mind now cleared, Clara thought. She remembered Bill Anderson. The answer was there. She would drive out that evening and see if she could find it. She ate dinner alone, showering afterwards and slipping into a short dress. A zipper ran up the front of the dress and Clara had a hard time keeping it up. She walked over to the mirror, put on her face and spread her hair over her shoulders. She was happy with the results. She left the house and drove out to Bill Anderson's.

Clara easily found Bill Anderson's house. His was the only light in the darkened sector. She parked her car and after reaching the door, she knocked sharply. A moment later Bill answered, looking both surprised and happy at seeing Clara on the steps. This time he quickly invited her in.

As soon as Clara entered the house she unbuttoned her coat. Bill helped her remove it, folding it over his arm and motioning her to a chair by the stove. Clara pushed her hands down her hips, pulling her dress tight against her body. She sat down.

"Well, Mrs. Waverly," Bill stammered.
"Please call me Clara."

He waited, "Clara."

"See," she smiled. "It's not so hard, is it?"

"No," he grinned over his embarrassment. Clara thought him childlike. He reminded her of the boy who used to follow her home every afternoon from grammar school. For a long time she never spoke to the boy, but one day she stopped and called him to her. From then on they walked home together, he proudly carrying her books.

"I really hope you don't think bad of me for stopping by so late in the evening. It's just that I couldn't think about anything else but the conversation we had this morning."

"No, not at all." Bill looked flattered. He pulled a chair up to the stove opposite Clara's. There was no electricity in the house and two kerosene lamps supplied the lighting for the room. One of the lamps was suspended from the wall to the right of Clara, catching her shadow and enlarging its lines on the wall. Bill watched the lines. He fidgeted and stood up.

"Mrs. Wa--, uh, Clara, I just had an idea. I have a bottle of brandy in the cupboard. Would you be interested?"

"Certainly. Why not." Clara moistened her lips with her tongue. They caught the lamplight like a mirror. "I can't remember the last time I had a drink. It was before my husband's death."

"Then you're not. You haven't remarried." He watched
her lips.

"No," she laughed. "I'm still a widow." She said it like an offer.

Bill smiled. He got up, pivoted on his skate. He skooted into the kitchen. When he reappeared he was holding a bottle and two glasses and was sweating from the pain in his leg. Clara took one of the glasses and held it against her thigh. His hand trembled as he filled it for her.

"Thank you, Bill." She smiled up at him. Her fingers touched the hemline of her dress. Bill seated himself opposite her and gulped down most of his drink.

As the evening progressed, Bill became drunk and Clara equally bored. She hid it well though as she acted out a succession of sensual movements and gestures. Her dress floated up exposing much of her thighs and the zipper on her dress slid down. When he limped toward her she locked her mind on the trophy to keep from showing her disgust.

"Oh, Clara. Please." He slurred the words, his breath smelling of cheap liquor. He put his hands on her, rubbed them across her shoulders and up the side of her neck. She trembled, swallowed, forced her breath hard to sound excited for him. When he heard her, he slid his hand into her dress and underneath her bra. Then he was groping, taking her flesh and caressing it between his fingers. She let him unzip the rest of her dress before she finally stopped him. She didn't do it by anything she said but by crying on the back of his neck. When he felt the tears he immediately
pulled away, his face a picture of remorse. He tried to apologize but his tongue was heavy and he stammered and destroyed the words. He bent his head to the floor and skooted around the corner and a moment later Clara could hear him crying. Now he owed her. If she needed it, it would be there. She went out into the kitchen to comfort him.

After the apology, she cradling his head on her shoulder to make it easier for him to say, Clara spent the rest of the evening hearing his confession then ended with plans for the next day. She would have him over for her special dinner, a spaghetti dish that she said she loved to prepare, and afterwards they could listen to music on the stereo.

Clara and Bill spent the next afternoon together talking through a soft music background. To her surprise, she discovered him well read on a variety of subjects although his formal education hadn't gone past highschool. Whenever she brought up a point or raised an issue, he would nod his head in agreement, and she thought he was being stupidly condescending until he carried the discussion far beyond her own level of knowledge. She excused herself momentarily, walked into the bathroom, dabbed herself with perfume and checked her face. When she returned she said nothing. She nodded and listened and looked very beautiful.

After Clara took Bill home, she called Florence Walker. She asked her again if the probable count still stood at 147 units and was happy to discover that it had gone up by two.
But Florence said that was definitely the final figure and that there was no way they could get the 5 units needed to go over the quarts. Clara said there still might be a chance. Then she told her about Bill Anderson.

When Wednesday, the day of the drawing finally arrived, Clara knew that Bill was in love with her. They had been constantly together the past two days, every moment that Clara was free. She knew she hadn't disappointed him for one moment out of all that time. She watched the loneliness empty from his eyes and the pain slacken in his leg.

Clara left early to pick up Bill. He met her at the door in a worn, but neatly pressed suit. Greeting him with a kiss, she helped him down the stairs, making sure that he didn't hook his skate. She kissed him once more before steering the car away from the curb, and he held onto her arm as they drove into town.

The drawing had begun at eight o'clock in the basement of the Community Hospital. As Clara drove toward the hospital she saw a big white sign with a cross painted on it. Above the cross were the words BLOOD DRAWING TODAY, with an arrow pointing the direction. Beneath the cross in smaller letters: Give So Others May Live. She circled the block seeing the bloodmobile in the alley(a delivery van with a canvas cross hanging from its side), and she drove around the front of the building and pulled up against a parking meter with a white bag over it. She shut off the key, looked over to Bill, smiled and squeezed his arm. He smiled
There were close to twenty donors in the basement, five on the drawing table with the rest being queried or eating nourishment. Florence, in her nurse's uniform, was standing beside a woman injecting a needle into her arm that led to a tube and a bag. She saw Clara. When she finished, she walked over to her, smiling and looking at Bill.

"Well, girl. This must be Mr. Anderson. You certainly know how to pick the handsome ones."

"Why, thank you, Florence." She squeezed Bill's arm. "Bill, this is Florence Walker."

"Pleased to meet you." He blushed. He took Florence's hand, his face sweating from the pain in his leg. The roller skate had made it quite difficult to get down the stairs to the basement.

Clara noticed Bill's discomfort and she took his hand and escorted him to a chair beside a table. She introduced him to a woman behind the table, explaining to him that the woman needed to make some preliminary tests before he could donate. As the woman began taking down Bill's case history, she excused herself and walked off with Florence.

"Have you ever had malaria, cancer, hepatitis, been out of the U.S. in the last six months?"

Clara and Florence walked over to the refreshment table. They both poured cups of coffee.

"How is it going Florence?" Clara brought the cup to
her lips.

"Right on schedule. Those being rejected are exactly the ones we thought. It'll be very close though." Florence sipped the coffee.

"Your sure the official count won't take place until tomorrow morning?"

"Yes. I'm positive."

"All right. Call me as soon as the drawing is over. As soon as you have completed your count."

"I will."

"Good." Clara put the paper cup down and walked back to Bill.

A volunteer nurse had just finished checking Bill's blood pressure and temperature and was now checking hemoglobin and coagulation. When the results were found favorable, Clara took Bill's hand and led him to one of the drawing tables. The bearings in his skate clicked as he rolled his bad leg across the floor. People looked and smiled, but not when Clara could see them.

Bill lay down on a table and Clara beside him. They would both donate together. A volunteer nurse, whom Clara had worked with before, inserted the needles into their arms. The pain was negligible. The nurse taped the clear tube to Clara's forearm. A blood pressure gage was then wrapped around her arm and inflated to regulate the flow of the blood.

Fifteen minutes later the plastic bags were filled.
The nurse walked over to a black steel tray for a pair of scissors. She stepped over to Clara, cut the line, tying it off just above the bag. Then she went back to the tray and returned with a swab and removed the needle from Clara's arm. She did the same thing to Bill. Two women came over and took their arms and guided them over to the table for refreshments. Clara ate a doughnut and Bill had a tunafish sandwich. They both drank coffee.

On the drive back to Northtown Bill told Clara what she had known all morning long. He told her he loved her and thought she was very beautiful and said he hoped she wasn't mad at him for saying it. She smiled at him, told him no; said rather than being mad, she felt honored and very pleased. Inwardly, she felt a kind of warmth brought on from his words. She let him off with a promise to call him later that afternoon, her excuse for leaving being that she had to help out at the hospital. She kissed him before leaving and as she drove away, she watched him in her mirror as he hobbled toward his house.

Florence called Clara as soon as the drawing was finished. The final count was 150 units. That's what she had figured and she asked Florence to meet her later at the Hospital. She drove out to Bill Anderson's.

When she knocked on Bill's door, she didn't wait for him to answer. She stepped inside and ran across the room into his arms. He kissed her and held her tight against him,
and she could feel his beating heart against her face. A moment later, her body shaking, she broke out sobbing against his chest. He quieted her down, as if gentling a kitten, until she could tell him what was wrong.

"Honey, are you sure there's no way you can get it?"

He dabbed her cheeks with his handkerchief.

"Yes," she said softly. She laid her face on his arm, and he touched the top of her hair.

"Well, there must be some way. Surely there must be four pints around. I mean," he laughed seriously, "one person could donate that much."

"Oh, Bill. No. It's too late. Only four pints away, but it might as well be a thousand." Clara sat up. "And we worked so hard on it. So hard."

"Listen, Clara!" His voice sounded commanding now. "It's only four pints. I could do it for you. Clara, I'd do anything for you. I owe you so much for these last few days. It's been wonderful."

"And it'll never end." She hugged him. "Never," bringing her lips to his mouth. Bill kissed her.

"Clara!" he said firmly. "I want to do it. I want to give you the four pints. Listen. How many pints does the human body hold? Twelve, isn't it?"

"Ten to twelve. Oh Bill, please."

"Clara, no! I'm going to do it. It means a lot to you, I don't want you to worry about it. From now on I don't want you to think about anything but me. Understand?"
Florence was waiting for Bill and Clara when they arrived at the back door of the hospital. She let them in, and they followed her to the basement door, which she opened with her key. The room was dark but everything was prepared, and Bill removed his coat and lay down on the drawing table. Clara and Florence stood on either side of the table. Clara took Bill's hand as Florence thrust the needle into the vein. She taped the tube to the forearm, then she pushed another needle underneath the first one and did the same thing to the other arm.

Clara sat down beside the table. She kissed Bill, calling him her "brave Frederic Henry." He, mocking serious, whispered "my dear Cat" and they both laughed quietly together. Florence paid no attention to what either of them had said as she kept her eyes on the blood pressure indicators which she was using as tourniquets to regulate the flow of blood out of Bill's arms. She knew she could kill him if it came too fast.

An hour later the four bags were filled, looking like bloated wingless bats. Florence cut the lines and tied off the bags as Clara removed the needles from Bill's arms. He had been sleeping lightly, but he awoke when the women started moving above him. He swung his bum leg over the side of the table and sat up. Clara was shocked at the whiteness of his face, even in the darkened room.

"Is it finished?" he smiled.

"Yes. Do you feel all right?"
"I think so." Bill lowered himself to the floor. Little blood dots formed over the punctures in the veins and they overflowed and ran down his arms. He stood up, staggered, gripped the table, but righted himself before she could notice.

"Clara?"

"What is it?"

He weaved back and forth. "I think I had better go home now."

"Yes, of course. Just a moment. Florence?"

Florence re-entered the room and walked over to Clara. She had been depositing the blood with the rest of the units in a large refrigerated vault. She had locked the vault and it would not be re-opened until the official counting in the morning.

"I'm going to drive Bill home now. How about the count?"

"Just enough," Florence grinned.

"Good. Are you ready, Bill?" He said nothing and they started for the door. Part of the way up the stairs, his skate slipped out from under him, and he fell against the hard surface. The women reached for him, but he grabbed the banister and pulled himself upright before they could touch him. His face looked very pale. Florence and Clara took his arms and guided him to the car.

On the drive back to Northtown, Clara kept looking across
to Bill Anderson. His head lay against the side window and it moved back and forth with the motion of the car. Just before the underpass, he asked her if she loved him. She took a long time in saying yes. He was blind and very cold, but when she said it, he felt all warm inside.
Henry Duncan drew his fingers through the moisture on the bedroom window. He wiped a small circle in the vapor, then raised his eyes to the tops of the buildings. When he saw again that the sun did not come to break up the heavy engulfing clouds, he became afraid, afraid that the spring, now long overdue, had been maliciously killed. His eyes dropped to the darkened courtyard, counting the grey patches on its dirty surface. Even as he counted another bird spiraled to the ground and tucked its head beneath its wing. Henry watched the bird rock on shaky legs until it pitched forward into the snow; then flutter in uncontrollable spasms as the blood rapidly drained from its beak. When it finally lay still, Henry lifted his eyes and studied his reflection impressed on the glass.

Only his lips, heavy and cold, gave the slightest hint at any life, quivering like two bloated leeches upon an otherwise colorless face. The weakened eyes, opaque orbs, lay hidden behind a pair of dark glasses and occasionally registered shocked concern as a slender hand prodded the flesh. The hand had slipped beneath a purple shawl drawn tight across his naked shoulders. It groped the distance of the sagging body in careful search of signs of rot.

A clock ticking on a fractured table caught Henry's atten-
tion and brought him back to the room. The table was one of three pieces of furniture inhabiting Henry's meagre apartment. The other two, a bed and a wicker chair, had been pushed into a darkened corner, a corner once papered with yellow roses long since stripped from their green trellis background.

Since the adoption of the schedule, Henry had never been caught unprepared. And seeing that he had only half an hour to leave the building unobserved, he moved quickly to the closet. After locating his clothes, he jerked the purple shawl from his shoulders and flung it clumsily toward the bed. Henry slipped into a wrinkled shirt that was badly frayed at the cuffs, and after he had fastened the last button, he squatted to the floor and grasped a tattered suit in a mound at his feet.

During the fifteen years Henry occupied the room, he had never seen any of the other tenants. Only the landlord's wife, who arrived at the end of each month to collect the rent, was an infrequent visitor to his door.

There were nineteen other doors on his floor, and Henry always tried to make a point of knowing when the rooms behind were occupied. He had learned long ago that he must watch carefully to avoid the mocking eyes waiting to catch him in the hallway.

Although he fought against it, sometimes he would remember brief flashes of that awful time when he had been
trapped in the corridor. It was all so confused now, the
laughter, the darkness, the mocking noises coming at him from
the doors. He could never quite remember what had really
happened, although pieces of it kept coming back to recon­
struct themselves in his memory. A feeling, a sense, sensing
something, something watching, something critical. Immedi­
ately aware of his ugliness; trying to hide it; running terr­
rified to the door. Then exhaustion. Total exhaustion.
Shuffling in the darkness to meet the yielding bed. Drawing
the blanket over his face. Dreaming nightmares in the si­
lence.

For a long time afterwards he had remained in his room,
alone, cold, and very afraid. Rationing out, then nibbling
to nothing what bits of food he had stored. Later, when the
gnawing became unbearable he rolled against the wall and
feverishly clawed the printed roses off the paper trellis.
He crammed them into his mouth, ravenously devouring them
until his shrunken belly was stuffed with glue. Then, clutch­
ing his stomach, he bent over the edge of the bed and vomited
onto the floor.

But he had learned from that experience. Now he had the
schedule formed from some hidden will to survive. And al­
though he rarely ventured out of his room, when his monthly
check arrived he dared a trip to the grocery store.

It was on one such trip in the middle of September that
Henry had first discovered Andrea, standing beautifully on a
pedestal in the middle of a soap display. Many times after he joyfully recalled every detail of that first meeting, how he had blushed and fumbled in the presence of her beauty like some awestruck schoolboy. And the feeling after when something let loose to erupt within him, spreading warmth and desire from his innermost self to the distant regions of his body. And later how it all would become a craving, unfamiliar, yet willingly freed, conquering his hesitancy and creating a boldness that had never before existed.

Twice a month through autumn and winter, double his usual journeys, Henry had risked visiting Andrea to halt the constant loneliness he felt away from her. He thought the time would never arrive when he had saved the needed money to bring her home. Even today, having decided to risk visiting her again, he was still far short of the purchase price.

The checks were quite small, barely enough to exist on after the monthly rent had been paid. And only by depriving himself, did he put away the small amount he had saved. But at least he could see her, draw hope from her, and for now he would settle for that. It would keep him going until the moment arrived when he could take her home with him.

Henry looked at the clock again. He found himself dressed and ready to leave ahead of the departure time. He would wait. He moved to the corner, his eyes straining in the darkness for the outline of the wicker chair. He found it, picked it up, carried it to the table, then seated him-
self upon it. He rocked back on the legs, locked his fingers behind his head, and closing his eyes, he thought of Andrea.

He liked to imagine what their lives would be like after he had finally succeeded in bringing her home. He would do everything for her, all those servile tasks that made a woman's lot so dreary. That way she could devote herself to him entirely. To the part that no one wanted. That part bought off by the monthly checks lying perforated in a box by his bed. The box now held fifteen years of his life, one hundred and eighty scraps of paper; all there but the framed letter that hung on the wall directly above the table. Its paper, now yellowed and streaked with rust from an overhead water pipe, was no longer legible to any other eyes but those of Henry Duncan. He had placed it there to serve as a reminder of his sacrifice, how in a moment's carelessness, a long time ago, he had traded so much away. As he looked at the paper again, his lips mouthed the words, unconsciously, silently.

Dear Mr. Duncan:

We are happy to inform you that we have received the signed contract, that you are a member in good standing and thus qualify for our monthly benefits. You are about to embark upon a new style of living where you will at last be safe from those who wish to harm you. We hope in some small way we have been at least in part responsible for putting your mind at ease, and look forward to a long and fruitful relationship between yourself and our company. One word of warn-
ing, however: If at any time you try to establish a relation­ship with another human being, your contract will be
voided, your checks will cease, and you will be asked to
leave your apartment. As a necessary precaution, you will
be watched periodically, very discreetly of course, to make
certain that you live up to the stipulations laid down in
the document.

Thank you, Goodbye, Good luck.

Henry Duncan opened the door wide enough to peek into
the hall. When he spotted nothing suspicious, he carefully
poked his head into the light to take a more deliberate look.
Still seeing nothing, he pulled the door open and quietly
slid into the corridor.

Once outside, Henry's actions turned catlike, knowing
his escape route was sealed behind him. He crept toward the
stairway, weaving back and forth, his eyes scanning the
floor for weaknesses in the wood. He carefully avoided the
weak areas and was making excellent progress toward the
stairs, when he stopped abruptly as his alerted ears picked
up a sound. Instinctively, snapping his head back and forth,
he flattened out against the wall. Although he saw nothing,
the distance to safety seemed to have increased as he count­
ed the number of doors before him. Shaking nervously, he
checked the doors behind and found that both numbers were
equal. Retreating to his room was now no longer an alterna­
tive, but the greatest danger lay in remaining motionless.
A door would open; someone would enter the hall; Henry would immediately be discovered.

Without further delay, he fixed his mind on Andrea, closed his eyes and dashed blindly toward the stairs. Grabbing the railing, he hurtled himself downward, throwing open the door with his forearm. Only after tasting the cool air, on the sidewalk among the shuffling crowd, did Henry find anonymity amidst a group of unconcerned faces.

The late March morning was unseasonably cold. Henry folded his arms against his chest for warmth. His buttonless coat offered little protection against the snowy gusts brushing past his body. Occasionally a sudden burst of increased velocity forced him to lean forward to maintain his balance. He slanted his hands outward above his eyes as a shield against the biting load. When its force was spent, Henry stopped and wiped a sleeve across his glasses, hesitantly searching for a familiar bearing through the film that distorted his vision. Completely confused by the vague surroundings, having no definite notion of his exact locality, he let the crowd jostle him forward until its motion ceased at a pedestrian light. He pushed himself out of the crowd, removed his glasses and wiped them clean. Then he rotated in a crude circle, squinting through the snow for something, anything relatable.

He found the grocery store across the street, barely visible through the snowy mist being churned up by the morning
traffic. He smiled. He immediately rejoined the crowd to wait for the changing of the light.

When something familiar moved before the store, it drew Henry's attention away from the light. He raised himself to his toes and looked over a pickup, catching sight of a balding man in a butcher's apron. With some difficulty, Henry recognized him as the owner of the store, and he watched him with interest as the man looked dejectedly toward the sky. A light now had begun to fall again. The man shook his head in defeat, then unfurled a yellow awning from the face of the store.

When he heard the walk light buzz, Henry jumped forward, meeting and passing the oncoming crowd right after it had entered the crosswalk. He mounted the sidewalk to the left of the crosswalk and forced himself to slow down to disguise his excitement from the balding man who was just entering the store.

Henry waited until the man was behind the counter before he reached for the knob and pushed inward. A brass bell tinkled above his head as the top of the door brushed across it. With a subtle nod, the man in the apron acknowledged Henry's presence. Henry returned the gesture then reached for a grocery cart to maneuver in the direction of Andrea.

Inside, the store was quite small and somewhat awkward, but its meagre space had been properly used. Four carefully placed lanes ran perpendicular to a produce rack directly
opposite the cashier counter. The store had been kept free of modern renovations with the exception of two disk-shaped mirrors, from which the balding man, by watching closely, could readily detect any suspicious action.

Henry's movements were trapped by the mirrors as he turned down the aisle toward the soap display, where, after an intolerable month of separation, he was to be reunited with Andrea. He felt his legs stiffen nervously and he had to strain to keep them moving. Hurrying, he momentarily lost his balance and he almost fell to the floor. But he quickly righted himself, and clutching the grocery cart, he coasted the remaining distance.

With his head bent to the floor, Henry let go of the grocery cart and shyly approached the soap display. His underlip was locked between his teeth. He bit it hard but felt no pain. He found the pedestal. He stood very still, folded his hands behind him, and allowed his eyes to follow the graceful spirals up its elaborate trunk. But they stopped immediately at the final curve, the peak of his visual zone hitting him with the knowledge. Andrea was not there. The pedestal lay vacant before the cardboard shrine.

He did nothing for a moment. When he did, it was sudden. His fists shot up against the sides of his head. He turned and ran toward the front of the store, his coattails knocking products from the shelves. Henry scrambled passed the grocery carts and, trembling visibly, he came to an immediate
halt before the counter. He locked his eyes upon the balding man who had been studying him in the mirrors. The man displayed no emotion. Henry opened his mouth, trying desperately to speak to him. But his lips mercilessly beat back any coherent sound until, only a faint croaking escaped from his straining vocal cords. Stretched like steel wires across his throat, they strangled his attempts to force the sputtering syllables across his tongue. Deeply frustrated, Henry refilled his lungs. He forced the air out again and again. Finally, a steady drone of uncontrolled pain burst forth from his open mouth.

The man behind the counter, his face fixed rigid, seemed unaffected by the steady wail. He waited for it to stop. When it did, he reached under the counter and brought up a box. He nodded his head, signaling for Henry to remove the string and open the lid.

Feeling threatened by the man's sudden actions, Henry pushed away from the counter. Once out of reach, he studied him closely, trying to draw meaning from his expressionless face. It was then that the balding man, as if recognizing himself to be the source of Henry's discomfort, leaned back against the wall and assumed a nonchalant stance.

After briefly analyzing the situation, Henry adjudged it relatively safe. Haltingly, he reapproached the counter and positioned himself in front of the box. He waited for a second sign of affirmation before placing his hands upon the
string. When the man nodded his head, Henry broke the binding, removed the lid and spread open the wrapper.

When his eyes touched the object folded neatly inside, he cupped his hands to his mouth and hissed. Before him lay a shriveled face between two narrow deflated legs, and although flat and wrinkled, it bore a distorted likeness to the features of Andrea.

Seeking a reason for this mockingly cruel trick, Henry lifted his face toward the balding man. With slow gentle gestures, the man assured him that it was her and that by a small effort on his part she would again be the same. To demonstrate his point, the man reached to the shelf behind and brought out a balloon. He pressed it to his lips and inflated it, knotted it at the end and bounced it off his fingers. He waited as if to make sure that Henry had understood, then he stepped to the counter and replaced the lid to the box. He rewound the box with a fresh length of string, lifted it up and held it out.

At first Henry misunderstood the balding man's gestures. Again, he cringed a safe distance away. But after realizing that the man had previously offered him no threat, he stepped forward and took the box from his hands. His mouth bent into a discernable smile as he made an effort to express his gratitude. But it quickly faded when he remembered that he had only enough money for the purchase of the groceries.

The man seemed immediately to recognize what had caused
Henry's despondency. He assured him, through gestures, that the package was not to be purchased but, was rather, a gift. Henry smiled again and moved to the door, momentarily forgetting the grocery cart. He was almost to the door before he remembered. He turned back, embarrassed, and brought the cart forward to be itemized. When the goods were sacked and the purchase price paid, Henry lifted the bundles to his chest. The man caught the door. Henry nodded and stepped outside.

Halfway down the sidewalk, if he could have looked back through the window, Henry would have seen the balding man, his face resting heavily against the counter, howling in ragged thrusts of laughter.

With the bundle pressed tight against his heart, Henry made his journey homeward. He was oblivious to the presence of those around him, to the weight of the groceries, to the bitterness of the weather. Happiness was all. Happiness and lightness floating him ethereally down the sidewalk. And with it a warmth that had begun from his chest and was now radiating to every part of his body.

But it came. When it did, it caught him on the last step of the corridor, chopping through him like an ax. Smashing deeply into his brain with hot and burning strokes. Through improper timing, through an incredible fluke, all the doors to the rooms lay open. And standing in the openings were the occupants of each looking hollow and terribly afraid. Stunned, immobile, they confronted each other, the
reality of a past felt presence. And beside each, dangling from a trembling hand, was an inflated form with rubbery features. Everyone the same: fixed crimson lips, auburn hair, and pale green eyes.

After an endless span of time, the terrified ones broke free of their rigid positions, and jumping back to their rooms, they slammed their doors, sending a quake through the entire structure. It triggered the final action that hurled Henry toward his room, the groceries discarded, the bundle tight in his arms.

The apartment was totally dark. Henry lay on the bed, his deflated Andrea covering his body. He had entwined his arms around her form and had sucked part of her face inside of his mouth. His eyes were very wide, and they peered over her shoulder toward the unseen ceiling. He could not hear the sound of his breathing above the pounding in his chest.
Abe Weed scooted the chair under the desk with a strong backward thrust of his legs. He fastened his eyes on the woman's mouth, closely following her broken words. When she had finished speaking he pulled the cigarette from his lips and ground it into the bottom of the ash tray.

"Then he didn't pay no attention to what I said after all that time I spent talking to him?"

The woman felt the sharpness in the sheriff's voice. When she answered the words left softly from her mouth.

"At first he did, Abe. At first he did. But then he started it all up again. And I had to watch him every minute to make sure he didn't get to the girls. God, Abe. Nobody could say I was denying him. I've been availing myself to him every day. Lately I've spent so much time in his bed, I haven't been able to get any work done at all. I even started bringing him to Miss Josie's on Saturday hoping her women could take care of him, figuring at least I'd have one day a week to tend to the things that needed doing."

The woman stopped, bent her head downward, her right hand catching the wedding band and rolling it around her finger. She pursed her lips. When she raised her head, she focused her eyes on the yellow wall.
"Oh, Abe. I feel so dirty, so disgusted, telling you all about it like this. But there's nobody else. Just nobody else."

The sheriff saw that she was going to cry. He held the sharpness out of his voice.

"I know, Hannah. The strain'd put anybody under. But what's important now is to keep him from getting to your little girls anymore. And in order to do that I gotta know what went on, so try to tell me about this morning. Did you actually see him assaulting Rosie?"

Hannah reached down and opened her frayed purse. She searched inside for her handkerchief. When she found it, she brought it up to her face and dabbed the wetness from her eyes.

"Yes, Abe. I did. It was after I got home from Mrs. Jamenson's house. I've been cleaning there once in a while trying to make a little extra money."

She inhaled deeply, holding her breath for a second. She released it and began again, her voice husky.

"I finished my chores early this morning, and I drove right home because of the girls. I went into the house, and when I opened the bedroom door, that's when I caught him in bed with Rosie." Hannah's eyes dampened again. She lifted the handkerchief. "When he saw me come in, he jumped out of bed real quick. He ran to the bathroom and he locked the door. Abe, I didn't wait for nothing. I grabbed my girls
and ran and as I was leaving I could hear him crying through the window. Soon as I got to town I came right here. There just wasn't any place else to go."

The sheriff waited until the silence in the room became embarrassing. When it did, he shoved the chair back from the desk and stood up.

"You did just right, Hannah." He leaned over the desk. "Now listen, I gotta get moving on this. I want you to take your girls over to the hotel, get a room, and charge it to me. I'm gonna call Roy Davis and see if I can get him over here. Then I'll drive out to your place and straighten things out with Carl.

The woman stood up. She looked into the sheriff's face, quickly reading, then feeling his security. There had always been something about him that made her feel that way, like standing in the shadows of a huge rock wall.

She bent forward, and placing her delicate fingers over his big calloused hands, she looked unwaveringly into his eyes. Her face reddened slightly. This time when she spoke, her voice sounded girlish and quietly shy.

"Thank you, Abe, for trying to help. For taking care of everything like this."

The hands trembled with the words, and Hannah suddenly realized that they could take her and hit her and leave her bleeding and hurt with pain. But no. She knew that they wouldn't. They might have once. But now they neither had
the courage nor the will to do so. She held the big hands and caressed them for a moment, watching the sheriff until she was sure he knew that she wasn't afraid. Then she turned quickly away and moved to the door.

"You're welcome, Hannah," and then she was gone and he stood behind the desk watching her through the window. "You're certainly welcome." He almost whispered it. When his view was blocked by a passing truck, he reached for the telephone to call Roy Davis.

Twenty minutes later a large grey van pulled up in front of the sheriff office. Its sides were covered with heavy steel plates, and aside from the standard cab, it looked much like an armored truck.

Inside the cab, a man in a conchoed hat killed the engine and opened the door. He jumped to the ground, brushing off his worn levi pants which were too long for his stunted legs. He walked quickly around the front of the truck and was soon inside the office, stopping in front of Abe Weed.

"Game as soon as I could, Abe. You got some kind of trouble?" When the little man spoke, his jaws worked hard on a bulging plug. Juice spilled down the side of his chin.

The sheriff scooted the chair away from the desk. "None to speak of, Roy." He stood up. "It's that bastard, Carl. He's at the girls again. I told Mrs. Loomis I'd go out and check on things."

"That so?" Roy Davis's jaws mashed down on the plug.
They stopped to let his fingers dig a string of tobacco from his teeth. When it was freed, he swallowed it and removed his fingers.

"Thought you took care of that," he began again, his eyes following the sheriff across the room.

Abe Weed said nothing. He reached for his hat and coat, and keeping his back to the small man, he put them on.

"You gas up the cage?"

"Gassed and ready to go."

"O.K. Now listen." He turned. "I'll be back around suppertime. Until then, I want you to stay close to the radio. If something comes up and I have to call in, I don't want to catch you out back sleeping."

Roy Davis wanted to ask the sheriff why he was taking out the cage truck and why he wanted him to stay by the radio. He didn't. He nodded his head, and trapping the plug of tobacco between his teeth, he ripped off a large chunk as Abe Weed stepped through the door.

The Yellow Branch Road was still wet from a week's rain and was pocked with deep basins of chalky water. Bare trees lined both sides of the road. Their limbs were oscillating gently in the afternoon air. A short distance off the road lay the empty farmhouses with rotted grey sides and broken porches, and as Abe Weed choked the steering wheel in his hands, he knew they were there without looking for them.

A mile from the road he had lived as a child wearing bleached overalls and sometimes shoes. And the two things he
remembered best about that time was an inquenchable thirst and Hannah Wilson.

Only when it rained did he ever feel cool and he remembered as a boy turning his face to the sky. Then stripping off his clothes in a parched corn field to wash away a month of accumulated dust. And Hannah, standing beside him, herself a young girl, just beginning to show signs of what was to come.

After the rain had replenished their bodies, they lay in the furrows and discovered each other; searching gently with inquisitive fingers until their mothers called them for supper.

An acre of land separated the two shacks. A communal well bonded the families together. It was shared without bickering until it went dry. When it did, they united and dug another.

But of all that past time, the most recalled was that summer. The summer before he went to Korea. He was seventeen then and Hannah was with him. Walking together on hot breezy nights. Until they reached the grove and the rust colored branch hidden deceptively under the darkness. After a time of listening to the water he settled to the ground and removed his shoes, placing his feet in the darkened flow, no longer sure what color it was. Then she was beside him. Her dress was gone and he could feel her nakedness against his arms. She reached for his hands and cupped them under her breasts and pulled him gently down to her. He felt her heavy
breath upon his face. He could feel her shaking as he rubbed her body. Short spasms at first, then violent thrusts. Then tossing and churning and nausea. Finally, she was screaming, her nails ripping hot, tearing deep crosses into his back. Then the hands below, mocking hands; taunting words numbing the mind. Laughter. "There's nothing there." Laughter. "There's nothing there at all. Such a big boy and nothing to offer." Laughter. Anger. Hurt with the anger. "Hannah, shut up. Shut up. Shut up." Slowly rolling off her and onto his back, a long time on the sand letting it sop the blood from his back. Then all the way home feeling the laughter through the quiet, letting it burn a mark deep and permanent.

That morning when she had first come to his office seeking his help. He had been surprised. All those years with Carl hadn't changed her that much. Body still firm and the face a little lined now, but very pleasant. And the two together, by God she knew how to use them. Get a man all confused and not knowing what to do. But that was last month. Anger created confusion. Anger because she dared to come to him after all that time. Now it was different. Now he knew what to do. It felt damn good knowing what to do.

A small rutted lane split off the main road. The sheriff shifted down before the cutoff. He pressed the brakes and turned the wheel, maneuvering the van between two gate posts. There was a house in the field. A breeze had caught
the screen door and was slapping it back against the siding.
One of the windows was partially open. An obscene prayer had
been scribbled on the glass. Something moved behind the lip-
stick lettering, catching Abe Weed's eye as he brought the
van to a halt. He turned off the key and walked the short
distance to the porch, mounting the two steps before the door.
He knocked.

"Carl." He said it without emotion, directing the name
toward the open window. "Now you know who's here, Carl. We
got some talking to do, so you better get over here and open
this door." He rapped the door hard with his fist. "I ain't
settling for no foolishness."

The sheriff waited, listening for movement inside the
house. When he heard none, his hand hit the handle and he
slapped the door open. He stepped through the doorway, and
squinting into the darkness, his eyes sought out and found
the spot above the hearth. The shotgun was still there. He
thought it would be. When he heard a noise from the bath-
room, he walked quietly across the room. He stopped in front
of the closed door.

"Goddam, Carl. Now you know why I come out here. I
ain't in no mood to play games with you. So you get your ass
out here, you here me now?" He waited.

"All right, Carl. You got three seconds before I kick
this door flat in your face." The sheriff started his count.
At the count of two, there was a sudden scratching noise on
the other side of the door.

The latch uncocked and the door opened slowly as a bony face peered out through the widening gap. The eyes were puffy and nervous. They jumped in fear.

Abe Weed grabbed the edge of the door. He pushed it wide, looking down at Carl Loomis kneeling naked in front of him. The man shuffled forward, his face tilted toward the sheriff's. His hands were upturned and he was crying.


"I know you did, Carl." Abe patted the man softly on the head. "I know you did." He waited a moment for Carl to stop crying, his hand resting upon his shoulder.

Carl Loomis looked up to the sheriff. He had stopped crying and his face showed surprise. "It's all right then, Abe? You're not mad?"

"Hell no, Carl. I ain't mad." The sheriff immediately saw the relief in the man's face. He tried to make his own show compassion and understanding. When he felt that he had seen it, Abe Weed brought his knee to Carl's face, knocking him violently back against the bathtub. He leaned against the door sash, and pulling a cigaret from his pocket, he cupped it with a match between his hands.

"I'm just a little disgusted, Carl," he inhaled deeply, looking down at the blood pouring from the man's nose. He was sobbing again, raggedly now, from deep inside his throat.
"I'm sorry I had to do that, Carl. But you went back on your word after all those promises you made to me. Christ-sakes, Carl. Being an ex-preacher and all. You know it ain't right to go around planking your own kin. Specially not them little girls a yours what don't yet know right from wrong." Abe Weed brought the cigaret to his lips. "Now I know we all got our own little excentricities. But I'd say this is carrying a good thing too far. You know the Lord don't look kindly on such actions. So why do you persist in doing them?"

The man wiped a streak of blood across his forearm. He pressed his palms tight against his eyes. Blood and tears had mixed on his chest, giving the hairs the appearance of rusty wire.

"Please, Abe. Don't!" Carl wiped his eyes dry. "God, I've tried to stop myself. But the burning. The need. It's always there until it about drives me out of my mind. I know it ain't right. My God, I know that. Dirtlying up the souls of those little innocents. I prayed and prayed for the strength to stop. But it didn't do any good at all. Maybe," Carl got to his knees again, "maybe if I was like you, Abe. Like how she told me. But I'm not. And once she opened it up inside of me, there was no way of stopping it. God, I wish I could have been like you."

"Shut up, Carl." The sheriff's voice wavered with anger. "That's enough. That ain't the issue here. Now I told you last time what was gonna happen if I had to drive all the way
out here again. I told you if there was anymore such goings on, I'd throw you in the back of that cage truck there and hawl your ass back to town. Guess I shoulda done it last time. Woulda saved myself an extra trip. But I thought for the girl's sake maybe you'd straighten out. So get yourself up now. We're gonna make that ride to town."

"Please, Abe. Wait." Carl Loomis moved away from the sheriff. His dry mouth slurred the words. "Don't you think I realize what I've done. I've damned my immortal soul to the deepest pits of hell. I know that's small-enough price for my sins. But please don't take me in like that."

The sheriff pulled heavily on the burning cigaret, crushing it between his fingers as he exhaled the smoke. "You shoulda thought about that long before now, Carl. I figger I been fair with you. I give you plenty of warning. Least ways the way I see it now, there just ain't no other way."

Carl Loomis clutched the porcelain sink between his hands. He pulled himself painfully off of the floor. "There is one other way, Abe. And it'll be easier for you. Much less trouble. I just need a few minutes to get my clothes."

The sheriff pushed himself away from the door sash. He looked at Carl for a moment before his fingers dropped to the brass chain leading to his pocket. He brought out the large watch and looked at the time. "O.K., Carl. I'll give you five minutes to finish it. If you ain't done by then, I'll drag you out." He shoved the watch back into his pants and
left the house without looking back.

Outside the house, the autumn sun had tinted the lane a dirty bronze. It would be mealtime in an hour, and the sheriff heard his stomach grumble as he climbed into the van and shut the door. He removed his sunglasses from the jockey box, then drove sixty yards away from the house. He shut off the engine and lifted his feet to the dash, placing his back against the door. With the watch laid on his lap, he lit another cigarette, then he focused his eyes upon the house. He waited between puffs of smoke. Four minutes and twenty seconds later Abe Weed heard the explosion. He finished the cigarette before going back to the house.

Orville Ames, the barber, wasn't the first to hear the siren. But he was the first one to the sheriff office to tell Roy Davis. He had been locking up his shop when he heard the wailing, then he saw the throbbing light floating slowly down the road. It was the first time to his knowledge that it had ever been used.

A crowd was already gathering in the street by the time the barber reached Roy Davis. He flung the office door open, startling the man behind the desk out of a heavy sleep.

"You better come quick, Roy," his voice cracked with excitement. "Looks like trouble outside."

Half awake, startled, the small man pushed himself away from the desk. "What do you mean, Orville?"

"The sheriff's coming in lights flashing and siren on."
When Roy Davis moved the barber moved with him. He was the first one out the door. "Well by God, Orville, I believe you're right." Reflexively, his fingers shot inside his shirt pocket. They groped inside for the plug. He bit off a large chunk, waving the rest of it toward the crowd now spilling over the sidewalk and into the street.

"You people step back out of the way now." The small man spread his arms and forced the crowd back to the sidewalk. Hannah Loomis was standing in the middle of it. Her face showed concern.

"What's wrong, Roy?"

He held himself erect and barked over the crowd. "Don't know Miss Hannah. Don't worry none though. If it was serious, Abe woulda called me on the radio."

The large grey van was moving slowly. It took a long time to reach the sheriff office. When it stopped, Roy Davis ran over to the door and opened it before the sheriff's hand touched the handle.

"Anything wrong, Abe?" His jaws worked on the plug. He said more, but it was blocked out by the noise of the siren.

Abe Weed said nothing. He pushed the small man aside and walked around to the back of the van. The key was already in his hand. He thrust it into the lock, swinging open the iron doors on the back of the cage.

Roy Davis looked inside. He staggered back into the sunlight, his face white except for the tobacco spilling down
his chin.

"For the love a sweet Jesus. For the love a sweet Jesus. There ain't nothing left between his legs."

"That's right," Abe Weed said dryly. He grabbed Carl Loomis's cold feet, sliding the body out easily across the blood. It hit the ground with a puff of dust directly in front of Miss Hannah Wilson.
The small gray-haired man in wire glasses looked up at the prisoner then over to the deputy.

"How many, Freidman?"

"Three days and ten dollars."

"What for?"

"Drunk and disorderly," the deputy said. "The fine's paid, but the judge says he's gotta do the time."

The man in wire glasses looked back at the prisoner. He pulled a sheet of paper from the desk drawer.

"Empty your pockets and remove your belt and shoelaces. When I get everything recorded, you put it in here." He handed the prisoner a shoe box. "One brown wallet. A dollar thirty-seven in change. A pocket knife and a comb. Your name?"

"Jack Williams," the prisoner said.

"And your age, Williams?"

"Twenty-seven."

"Height?"

"Six-three."

"Weight?"

"One-ninety."

"Place of birth?"

"Cody, Wyoming."
"All right, Williams. Sign here. Then go over to that wall and spread out so Freidman can check you."

Williams signed the paper. He moved to the wall, waiting as the deputy frisked him.

"He's clean," Freidman said. He was a tall man with sloping shoulders and a nose that had been broken and set crooked.

The gray-haired man stepped from behind the desk and walked over to a large iron door. Snapping the lock, he pulled the door open, and the prisoner started through.

"Hold on a second, Williams."

He stopped in front of the small man.

"A piece of advice before you go inside. Don't cause no trouble. You behave yourself and you'll be out in those three days."

The prisoner nodded. Although his face didn't betray him, he had to suppress the urge to tell the little man off. But he had been in jail before, and he knew that you did easy time by keeping your mouth shut and quietly serving your sentence. The judge, he felt, had been too severe when he had given him the three days in. But you didn't argue about it. Better to take the days-no nonsense-and get back to the tie gang early Tuesday morning.

When the door rolled shut Jack Williams turned around, seeing two tiers of steel cages reaching to the ceiling. The high walls and the long narrow ceiling had been plated with dull steel sheets which trapped the August heat within the
jail, raising the temperature to an oppressive level. Immediately Jack felt the sweat bead on his skin. His shirt clung to the small of his back. Ahead in an open area an Indian stood under a makeshift shower working a soapy lather over his body. Jack looked around, first up to the barred windows directly opposite the cages, then through the doorway and down the steel corridor of the lower tier. It was the end of a bad fire season and the jail was packed. Prisoners were clustered everywhere—talking, exercising, playing cards, hugging the bars at the windows.

Jack decided to find an empty bed. He hadn't slept the night before. There were two men a short distance from him, one tanned, the other pale, just inside the doorway at the end of the lower tier. He would ask the tan one, the man who was shaving, where a bed was. The pale one had seniority. He had been in a long time. He might take offense if a new man spoke to him.

"Hey!" Jack called, leaving no doubt whom he was addressing. "Are there any empty bunks on your floor?"

"No." The tan one said, mopping his face with a towel. "The only one I know of 'd be upstairs at the end of the tier."

"Thanks." Jack turned. He grabbed the handrail and began climbing the steel stairs, each step sounding like an empty oil drum as his feet made contact. When he reached the upper tier, he moved down the metal hallway, looking off to the left through the flat mesh bars. The cages were to the right, small rooms with bunkbeds on either side of the wall.
Groups of men were dispersed across the lower bunks in various forms of activity, while up above them other men lay sleeping and reading. Jack stopped in front of the last cell. Two men were inside, both on the lower bunks, one holding a book, the other rolled against the wall.

"Hello," Jack said. He kept his voice friendly.

The man with the book glanced up. He was bald and had a protruding forehead. His body was too long for the cot and his feet hung over the end of it.

"Hello," he replied.

"A man downstairs said you had an empty bunk in here. Is that right?"

"Up there." The man tossed his thumb toward the bunk above and across from him.

"Since it's not being used, do you mind if I take it?"

"No," the man said. "Suit yourself."

"Thanks." Jack said. He pulled himself up to the bunk and stretched out, immediately feeling an increase in the temperature. Soon wet rings formed under his arms. It was hard for him to breathe.

"They transfer you from the city jail?" It was the man with the book.

"Ya." Jack said.

"When'd you get picked up?"

"Last night."

"Mind if I ask what for?"

"Drunk and disorderly. I sure don't remember doing it,"
but they said they caught me in front of some hotel taking a piss on the sidewalk."

There was a chuckle from below followed by a moment of silence before the man spoke again.

"Name's Web Pierce."
"Jack Williams."
"Getting hot."
"Boy, you know it."
"You just off the fires?"
"No. Railroad. Say, when do they feed around here?"
"Bout an hour and a half ago."
"That's damn nice. And the next time?"
"Five."
"Five! Jesus Christ, no lunch?"
"No lunch."

Jack explained to the bald man that the last time he had eaten had been the previous afternoon. Web Pierce listened sympathetically, then he pulled an apple out from under his cot and tossed it up to Jack.

"Thanks," Jack said. "I'll pay you back soon as I get the chance.

"Don't mention it," Web said.

Jack sunk his teeth hungrily into the apple. After eating it his stomach felt better. A little later he met the other occupants of the cell, one of them the Indian who had been in the shower. Jack found out from Web that the Indian was awaiting transportation to McNeil Island to begin a term
for auto theft. He was called Bumbe. Some years earlier his
tongue had been cut out. The other man, the one in the bunk
below Jack, had blond curly hair, wore glasses, and was in
his early twenties. He had been tagged Rapo by the other
prisoners when it was discovered he faced a second conviction
for child molestation. Web Pierce, a common drunk, had been
arrested twenty-seven times in the past three years.

By mid afternoon all physical activity had stopped in­
side the jail. The prisoners lay around, as in an opium
stupor, sucking at the heavy air. Tempers were short. Dur­
ing the past hour there had been half dozen near fights.
The heat before noon, a source of irritation and dis­
comfort, now drummed violently against Jack's temples. The
cell had become a furnace filled with the stench from the
broken toilet outside the door. Jack felt the tightness.
It was everywhere, and there was no getting away from it.
That bothered Jack more than the heat. Knowing there was no
getting away from it. Outside his furnace was a larger fur­
nace. The Hapville County jail. It's best, he thought, to
not think about it. To try to get some sleep.

"It's chow time." Web shook Jack awake. It was a lit­
tle cooler now. Jack rubbed his eyes with his hands, re­
moving the blurriness from them. His clothes were saturated,
and they clung to his body like a second layer of skin. He
dropped to the floor and he and Web walked down the hall to­
gether. Below, the chow line had already formed. Jack was
the new man. He took his place at the end of it. He and Web
were the last ones served.

Dinner consisted of lima beans, two weiners and a slice of stale bread. The beans were undercooked and the portions small.

The men walked back to their cell and ate their dinner in silence, watching Bumba, seated beside Rapo, suck his food. He finished first, carrying his dishes to the sink in the hall to wash them. When he returned, the others had finished eating, and he pulled himself up on his bunk, rolled to the wall and was soon asleep. The others went out into the hall to clean their dishes. When they had all returned, the Rapo brought out a card deck and began dealing three-handed pinochle. He played skillfully and won all games but two, one each going to Web and to Jack.

At nine o'clock two deputies entered the jail to lock the cell doors. This time two men came with them, dressed in brown suits, the officials from McNeil Island. The deputies shut and bolted all doors in the upper tier except for the one holding the Indian. They stopped outside the door and Freidamn, the deputy who had searched Jack, entered the cell.

Startled, the Indian turned from the wall and sat up. Seeing Freidman, he lowered himself to the floor and thrust out his hands. One of the men in the suits handed a set of cuffs to the deputy and he clamped them over Bumba's wrists and steered him into the hall. The door was bolted. The men
listened to their footsteps against the metal corridor.

"He was a strange one," Rapo said.

"Ya," Web replied.

Jack lay on the upper bunk, his clothes glued to his body, overpowered by the heat. The jail was silent now and after a few moments he fell into a troubled slumber. Twice through the night he awoke with a start, not remembering where he was.

Toward morning Web wet himself. The sickening odor filled the cell. Jack tried hiding from the stench by placing his hand over his face, but the room was too hot and the air too heavy for him to keep it up. He became dizzy and almost passed out and had to remove his hand. The rest of the night he breathed through his mouth to escape the heavy odor and in the morning when he awoke, his tongue was dry and tasted of copper. As soon as the deputies opened the cell doors in the morning, Web got up and showered. The smell of urine clung to the room until late morning.

Breakfast was brought into the jail. It consisted of oatmeal, toast, and one boiled egg. After the men had been served, they retired to their cells and ate their food slowly, knowing that they would not receive another meal until five o'clock that evening. In the cell at the end of the hall, Jack, Web, and Rapo spooned the cold cereal into their mouths, tasting it for flavor and swallowing slowly. Web cleared his throat, breaking the silence.
"Sure hope today's cooler than yesterday."

Jack turned toward the barred windows below. "If outside's any indication," he said, "it ain't gonna be."

The others turned, following his gaze.

"Ya," the Rapo said. "It is awful bright for this time of day. Might even go better than a hundred by late morning."

"I hope not," Web said, dragging his shirt sleeve across his forehead. "Yesterday about boiled me out."

It was a hundred degrees by late morning. The boredom and inactivity began to wear on Jack. The inside of the jail had become intolerable as the sun climbed across the sky. Jack tried reading to forget the heat, but he couldn't concentrate on the words. He went out into the hall and began walking up and down the cell block, trying to rid himself of his restlessness. He glanced at the other prisoners in the tier as he paced up and down the hallway, seeing the tension in their faces, hearing it in their voices. Tempers flared over petty reasons, then over no reasons at all.

When a man stumbled into Jack, he almost grabbed him, and he would have, probably beaten him too, were it not that he had now served half his sentence, and he would do nothing that might extend it.

There was an incident in the chow line that night. It had started over nothing. Two prisoners had exchanged words and finally punches over a position in the line. Before it
could develop into anything serious, the large steel door rolled open, and four deputies, carrying shotguns, charged into the jail. Immediately, the prisoners were herded into their cells, many without having taken dinner. When everyone was by his bunk, the hydraulic emergency handle was thrown which simultaneously closed all the doors before the cubicles.

At first the men were stunned by what had happened, but their confusion soon turned to anger. The meal was lost, and most of them had not eaten since breakfast. With the discomfort of hunger added to the heat, the men began reacting, first singly and then in groups, by shouting and banging their eating utensils against the cell walls. In a short time they got results. The four deputies re-entered the jail, this time accompanied by the man in wire glasses. He talked quietly through the noise, forcing the prisoners silent to hear what he was saying.

"...So go on. You men make all the noise you want. Go ahead. Get it out of your systems. But when you're done, you listen good to what I have to say, because I'm only going to say it once."

He waited. There was complete silence.

"So you think you can raise hell in my jail. Well let me tell you. There isn't going to be any more dinner tonight, and if this crap keeps up, there isn't going to be any breakfast either. What's more if you boy's don't start
settling down, I'll see to it that the judge gives you all an extra five days. Now you all understand that?"

The silence held. The small man stood rigid, looking individually at each cell door. Without notice, he turned and walked out the large door, the deputies close behind him.

When the door rolled closed, the prisoners looked at each other. Rapo, in a low whisper, spoke first.

"You think he means it?"

"I don't know," Web whispered, "but I sure ain't gonna take any chances. That boys got tight shoes on. It'd probably be best to stay off his shoes."

"You know him?" Jack said.

"Some," Web said. "He used to be assistant jailer. Heard some bad things about him from the other boys, but I thought it was just bunk until now. Jesus, I already got eight days left to serve. I sure don't need another five. The way this heat is, it'll be enough of a chore just getting through tonight."

Web's words again made the heat foremost in the men's minds, having forgotten it in the action of the past minutes.

Jack pulled the sweaty shirt away from his body, fanning it between his fingers.

"I'm like you, Web. This mouth's staying shut. I'm over halfway home."

The cells in the Hapville jail measured eight feet long, seven feet high, and six feet wide. With the steel mesh doors open, it was uncomfortably hot inside. With them closed,
At nine o'clock three deputies had passed through the large door carrying a man between them. They had placed him in the only cot available in the jail, the one vacated by the Indian. He was an older man in rumpled clothes, and Web could tell by his sallow face that he had sterno poisoning.

It was eleven p.m. For the past two hours the cell had been filled with the old man's screams—sharp piercing cries that cut through the men like saws drawn across exposed nerves. Now, for nine minutes, the man had been still and the prisoners, soaked and exhausted, waited for the next scream to come.

"Jesus! We gotta do something." The Rapo looked up through the darkness to where Jack would be in his bunk.

"No," Web said bitterly. He was in the bunk across from Rapo. "We stay put. We gotta wait it out."

"But what if he dies?" The Rapo's voice was tight.

Just then it came again, long and high pitched, hanging endlessly in the darkness. Jack shuttered violently. He clutched the sides of his bed, his eyes staring through the holes in the door past the smell of the toilet. He knew Web was right, and he prayed that the last scream would be the end of it.

In the morning the old man was dead. Jack didn't look at his face. The following morning was Tuesday and he left the jail. He got drunk that afternoon. He was still drunk
Friday when his friends came in and took him back to the gang.