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"No Pets Allowed" and other stories

Vincent P. Swann

The University of Montana

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"NO PETS ALLOWED"
and other stories

by
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The Story of My Life

Through venetian blinds I saw in slits the distant lights of the city, telephone wires drooping under the falling snow, the fenced-off swimming pool, sagging evergreens, cars, smog, and the neon sign lighting up the cold hillside: SUNSET MOTEL, and pulsing on and off in red, VACANCY VACANCY VACANCY. And under that, painted: COLOR TV and, sure enough, NO PETS ALLOWED.

I must try to tell how I felt then. It's the story of my goddam life.

* * *

The A. C. T. A. Paper

"Good afternoon, and welcome to the third session of the American College Teachers' Association Convention. Our first speaker this afternoon comes to us from Indiana University. He is Harold Angsman, associate professor of English, who is stepping a little outside his chosen field today, but not outside his area of competence or interest, to read us his paper, 'The Advantages of TV Lectures in the Mass Education of the Undergraduate.' Doctor Angsman."

There is more applause than for all the other speakers so far. I sip my last bit of water and walk to the podium. I can see hundreds of smiling faces through the smoke.
I read the final paragraph with the appropriate vigor:

"Those who would attack the use of TV lectures in the undergraduate curriculum simply on the grounds that it is impersonal are, to a small degree, justified. But they must not remain blind to the magnificent advantages I have cited herein. Impersonal? Perhaps, in a way. But TV lectures are also the most efficient, inexpensive, and ingenious method yet devised by modern technology for the transmitting and disseminating of knowledge from one person to thousands of others who are anxious to pursue with all of us, the Truth."

More applause, even louder than before.

But I may have to change that ending, I think. In spite of the applause it would surely get.

* * *

The Grinning Cashier

After the first session I walked sullenly up and down the unfamiliar, hilly streets of downtown Seattle, looking in windows, daydreaming, thinking of my lecture.

Every girl I saw was terribly beautiful. I sensed that some of them, one of them at least, was probably bored and lonely like me, lost in a strange city, simply seeking company. I even thought of stopping some of them, "Excuse me, I'm new in town, here on a convention, and I was wondering if you'd like to have dinner with me and then
maybe go back to my motel for a drink and some simple company."

Outside a cheap bookstore I took off my glasses and hunched up my coat collar. Casually, as if I did this every day, I went in and thumbed through several girlie magazines. I felt self-conscious. But I also felt free; no one here would recognize me and I could finally, without fear, satisfy my old curiosity as to just what was in some of those magazines I had never opened before. It was all pretty much the same, and I liked it, in a way.

Toward the rear of the store a little sign was posted: ADULTS ONLY, NO MINORS ALLOWED BEYOND THIS POINT.

There were pictures of things -- freaks and activities and positions -- I had never even dreamed of before. I was revolted, but curious, and put my glasses back on. Much of it was downright perverted (a word I normally don't like), and much of it, I am sure, was only trick photography. For instance, the picture of the man with the sixteen-inch pecker.

As bored looking as I could, I came out from behind those shelves and noticed the cashier grinning at me. Calmly I bought something more my speed, a Playboy. "There's a good interview in here this month with Paul Newman," I said.

The cashier, still grinning, made my change and said
nothing.

* * *

A Picture is Worth 1,000 Words

The post card of the Sunset Motel is not very sat­is­fying. The picture was taken summers ago and the colors are typically exaggerated. The sign in front did not read COLOR TV, only TV, and apparently pets were tolerated then.

I sat down to write my wife and children a note on one even though I knew I would be home before it arrived. When I looked at the picture again I realized it gave no hint of how far away Indiana is, or of the fence around the swimming pool, or the telephone wires all around drooping under the snow or the cars or the smog or the sad lights of the city below the hill.

Instead of writing the card I turned on the color TV. Everyone was green until I adjusted the tuning knobs. Then everyone was purple.

I could have read the **Gideon Bible** or **Playboy**, but I decided just to watch the purple people laugh and sing and answers questions.

* * *

The Good Samaritan

Through the venetian blinds I saw the shivering dog trudging aimlessly through the snow. "Here, pooch," I stage-whispered to it. It trudged on. "Here, girl!" At
that she turned and cheerfully bounded into the room.

"Hi, Girl," I said, brushing the wet snow off her coat.

After she investigated the room, sniffing, and ate the crackers and cheese I gave her, she joined me on the bed where I was watching the purple people laughing and singing and answering questions. I fixed her a bourbon and water and she slobbered it down.

"You know, Girl, I have a dog at home that's just like you, only bigger and older. She curls up at my feet when I'm reading the paper at night and just lays there. And you know what? She's the only person in the world who really understands me. She knows things about me no one else knows. We communicate without words. A dog is a man's best friend, you know."

Girl was sound asleep, but she knew.

* * *

Why Bob Picket Wants to Commit Suicide

One morning I met Bob Picket, a colleague of mine, in the library and he said, "Hello, Harry." "Hello, Bob," I said. "Nice day," he said. "Yes it is," I said. "Well, have to be off now. Busy busy busy," he said, walking off as if nothing had been said the night before, as if it had only been a dream. I just stood there, staring.

I told the whole story to Girl:

"I was up late one night grading papers. My wife had
already gone to bed and I was interrupted by my next door neighbor, Bob Picket. I got him a beer, as usual, and we sat on the couch to enjoy the break. He was up grading papers too.

"Martha is up reading some novel. I saw your light was still on and figured you were still up grading, too, so I thought I'd come over for a quick beer."

"There was more to it, I sensed. We talked, as usual, about football, how slow the freshman class seemed to be, the weather, some local gossip, and so on.

"Is Blanche asleep?" he finally asked.

"I think so."

"Harry," he began, slowly, 'you're a good friend, aren't you?"

"Sure," I said.

"Then I can trust you. Listen, Harry, I'm scared."

"Scared?! Scared of what?" I was taking it lightly.

"He reached out and held my hand. "I mean it, Harry."

"Okay," I said, 'Scared of what?"

"Harry, I want to tell you things, things I've never even told Martha. I've never been able to bring myself to it. Aren't you ever scared, Harry? I mean so scared you don't think you can tell anyone?"

"I think I know what you mean."

"I think you do, too, Harry, and that's why I'm
telling you all this.' He was getting very choked up. He was whispering now, and still held my hand, even more firmly. 'I need to express myself, my fears, my most honest feelings.'

"'I think we all do, Bob.'

"'Yes, but we don't. We don't ever want to become too vulnerable. But listen, Harry, I can't stand not talking to anyone about this. I want you to know how I feel, how I felt tonight, grading those goddam papers. Harry, it's the story of my whole life, for Christ's sake.'

"He was starting to cry which made me feel terribly awkward. 'God, Bob, I know exactly what you mean.'

"He sat up straight suddenly and cut off whatever tears might have been ready to fall. 'Harry, that's just it, you don't know what I mean. No one ever does. No one ever knows what anyone means. But, Harry, maybe you know that I mean what I mean even though you can never really know exactly what I mean. And that's enough for me, Harry, you know what I mean?'

"'Sure, Bob.'

"After a long silence, he raised his red eyes to me and spoke through the lump in his throat. 'I go for long drives at night sometimes, Harry. And sometimes, when I'm driving very fast down a country road, I think of driving straight into a large tree. I even think of it
when I'm sober. I used to think of it only when I was bombed, but now I think of it often, even driving to the University."

"'I think we've all thought of suicide at one time or another, Bob.'

"'Suicide. Suicide is nothing, Harry. We all think of it from time to time, and that's why it's nothing. It's why I think of it that's important. It's that mystery, which I have never even told Martha about, that's important.'

"'Can I ask what it is? Do you want to tell me, I mean?'

"'Harry, we've been neighbors now for, what?, three years almost. Well, in all that time, have you ever noticed --' He was starting to cry again, and shake, and grip my hand vigorously when there was a knock at the door. 'Oh, Jesus,' he moaned, and ran quickly to the bathroom. "'It was Martha. 'Oh, hi, Harry. Say, is Bob here?'

"'Yes, he's, uh, in the bathroom.'

"'Oh,' she said. 'Well, my my, I just finished Love Story. Have you read it? I thought it was just marvellous. Especially the scene between Oliver and his father, the sonofabitch, at the end. My my. Have you read it?' Her eyes were red from recent tears.

"'Yes, oh yes, I have.'

"'Didn't you think it was marvellous? Oh, no, you probably didn't, being a literature man and all. You've
probably read much better novels, but I just thought it was, well, such a nice story, if you know what I mean. It wasn't real deep or anything, but I like that, for a change. And it was so clean. None of that dirty stuff we've all had too much of, don't you think?'

"'Sure, Martha."

"Bob re-entered the room. He did look like he had just gotten off the pot.

"'Oh, Bob, I just finished Love Story. It's so marvellous. And don't you think it's getting awfully late, dear? Harry probably has a lot more papers to do, too.'

"'You're right, hon.'

"'Besides, Bob, after reading a book like that, I can't wait to get you home.'

"'Thanks for the beer,' Bob said. There was no trace of the tremor in his voice, no lump in his throat.

"'Oh, sure, sure, any time, you know that.'

"As they were leaving I hesitated and then said, 'Oh, Bob, we'll have to finish our discussion some time.'

"'Sure,' he said.

"'What was it about, dear?' I heard Martha ask.

"'Football,' he said.

"And, Girl, do you know he never brought any of it up again? It was as if we had a silent agreement that nothing had ever been said.

*     *     *
Grocery Shopping

After the first session I walked sullenly up and down the unfamiliar, hilly streets of downtown Seattle, looking in windows, daydreaming, thinking of my lecture.

I followed one girl I saw for about three blocks. Finally I summoned the courage to stop her. "Excuse me, I'm new in town, here on a convention, and I was wondering if you'd like to have dinner with me and then maybe go back to my motel for a drink and some simple company." She did.

We undressed nonchalantly, occasionally glancing at each other coyly. She unhooked her bra and slipped it off slowly. Her breasts were as big as canteloupes. She was beautiful, like an ancient Scandinavian goddess, like the ones I had often lectured about in World Lit courses. Now this goddess was sitting on my bed, pulling off her panty hose, her canteloupes bobbing. She noticed me staring at them and asked if I was pleased.

"Yes, I've always been a breast man myself." When she stood up, all naked, I added, "The rest of you is nice, too."

When I finally pulled off my underpants I knew she was looking, but without looking back I explained, "I know it's not a sixteen-incher or anything, but it's always been able to do the job."

"It's very nice," she said. Then it felt sixteen inches
long.

"I hope you don't mind if I keep my glasses on?"

She didn't.

* * *

Back Home in Indiana

We lay on our backs, breathing deeply, regaining strength. She asked me where I lived.

"It's a small town not far from Bloomington, where Indiana University is. It's a typical small Indiana town. It's off the highway a little, the nicest houses up on a hill barely visible from the highway. Most of them are unpretentious and fairly old. They're situated near the lake, along the north shore. The church used to be the center of town, but the grocery store, since it expanded and became a postal station and a gas station, has gradually become the center. There's a bar across from it, on the corner. The road up from the highway forks off there at the grocery store. You can go right and go toward the older, neater houses by the church or left where the 'newer' houses are, the ones with aluminum awnings and bird baths in the yard and such. I live down the road to the right.

"There's the usual amount of gossip. For instance, I have heard from reliable sources: John Matthews, who is believed to have shot his first wife back in Oklahoma,
is now living with a woman from Georgia to whom he has never been legally married. And she has been seeing an awful lot of George Reed while her husband is out of town on business. But George's wife doesn't mind, because that leaves her time to entertain her next door neighbor, whose wife is dying of cancer in a bed upstairs. Their son hints about the goings-on, but never says anything definite because he is seeing little Geraldine Kirsch, the girl with the limp from when the horse kicked her, and she says openly that Fred, that's the son, has made love to her many times out by Fox Point, on the other side of the lake. She has to be believed, even though she is not a pretty girl, because she has been seen headed that way with Fred close behind more than once. On the other side of town things are even shadier. There it is believed that Mabel Swanson poisoned her first husband to get his insurance and that she has poisoned each of her next three husbands because they never measured up to old Ed, her first husband. Also, it is said that John Wilson was never really killed in Viet Nam, but that his parents have that black flag in the window so that no one will ever know that he is really alive and well and living in sin in Sweden. And Fern Fuchs is believed to have gone to bed with every man east of the store. People even say that she has been seen coming and going from the Mathews' stables at night."
"And so on."

* * *

17 x 365

We made it again. Freida gave me an anticlimatic kiss and rolled over. I lay there thinking of what Blanche had said to me the night before I left for Seattle. We had just had some very nice sex and, rolled over, nearly asleep, she whispered, "Harry, do you remember when we first met and you used to bring me a red rose every day?"

"Yes, Blanche, I remember."

She said nothing but I could feel that her eyes were still open, waiting for me to continue.

"Blanche, I didn't even know you then. We were kids. If I gave you a flower every day now, do you know how many dead flowers we'd have. Do you know we've been married over seventeen years, Blanche? Multiply that by 365 red roses and you have an awful lot of dead flowers."

"I know, Harry. I didn't mean that. I just wondered if you remembered."

"You know symbols can lose their meaning, Blanche, if they're used too much." That was a line from a lecture on The Nature of Symbolism.

"Yes, Harry, I know. I guess we just have to find new symbols."

"I suppose so."
"Things just aren't the same."

"Of course not." Now I rolled over to face her. She rolled over to face me, too. "Well, like tonight. Tonight was one of our best sex nights ever, right? But after 17 years, it's nothing special, nothing like those first clumsy, self-conscious, ignorant, pre-marital nights. But is that my fault? God, Blanche, what do you want, a life full of first dates?"

"No, Harry," she said. "Just some new symbols, I guess." (Some nights she asks, "Will you still love me when I'm old and gray?" She's a songster at heart, Blanche is. "Of course, dear," I usually answer, "I'll be old and gray then, too.") We kissed and rolled over and I looked through the thin slits of the venetian blinds at the falling snow, wondering, "What new symbols, though?"

* * *

Reading Into Things

"What's the matter?" Freida asked, breathing into my ear. She snuggled close and listened. I was facing the ceiling and being very philosophical.

"I was just thinking. I'm having a hard time figuring things out. You see, I'm an English professor, associate professor, and I have learned my lessons well: I know just how far to take the star symbolism in Romeo and Juliet. I know all about the Grecian Urn. And I even know what
Camus' plague means and what it doesn't mean. But in my own life I can't read the symbols very well. I would like to live just on the surface of things, to have all meanings always clear, but I know that one thing often means many other things. For instance, the post cards they give you here. They look like the Sunset Motel, but there's always more than meets the eye. The surface isn't everything. The fact that I thought your boobs were like canteloupes -- that says something about me, but I'll be damned if I know what it is. And that dog: is she an omen, did she come here because she knows I have a dog like her at home, is she Cerberus in disguise, or is she just a stray dog, pure and simple? And today I was in a bookstore and the cashier was grinning at me; what did that damned grin mean? I just don't know how far to read into things. Do you know what I mean?"

"Who is Cerberus?" Freida asked.

"A big dog with three heads. He sits at the gate of Hell, just on the other side of the River Styx."

"Oh. Well, this one only has one head," she giggled. Ready to go again, she put her arms around me.

* * *

Toiletry

My moaning bothered Girl and she jumped up on the bed. "Down, Girl," I told her.
I turned off the purple people laughing and so on. Through the silence I could hear the couple in the next room. They were giggling and talking lowly. I couldn't make out the words, hard as I tried, but they were having a good time. I could hear the bed squeak rhythmically at times.

I took off my clothes and went into the bathroom and took a shower. I got my magazine and returned to the bathroom.

Brushing my teeth, I looked in the mirror. I never recognize myself in the mirror any more. I am always surprised -- not at the wrinkles, the few gray hairs, the circles under my eyes. At the face, the look on the face. It's just not what I expect.

I sat on the pot and Girl came in and curled up on the towel at my feet. The infra-red light was on and she enjoyed that. I read the magazine and Girl watched me, her head tilted, while I beat off.

* * *

Blanche Would Never Understand

Not many people make obscene phone calls, I guess, but at the time it seemed an interesting thing to try, all alone in a strange city. I dialed the number of the first woman's name I found in the phone book.

I really had no idea what to say. "Hi there, beautiful.
I've been watching you at night through your window, and
you know, you've got a great body. So do I. How would
you like to get them together some time, Big Tits. I just
learned some new positions today in a book store and I
thought maybe you and I..."

"Okay, now listen, Garbage-mouth, you call me again
and I'll have you traced and arrested, hear? Then maybe
you can try your heavy breathing routine on your cellmate."
She hung up.

I decided to stop this foolishness and call home.
"Hello."
"Hello, Blanche?"
"Harry!"
"Blanche, I can hardly hear you. I think we have a
bad connection. Can you hear me?"
"Yes, fine, but I'll speak up."
"There's a terrible humming sound. It sounds like you're
in a tunnel a million miles away."
"How is the convention going?"
"All right. Same old thing. You know. How are all the
kids?"
"Fine. Did you get a room at the Hotel?"
"No, it was full. I'm staying..."
"Harry, I told you to make advance reservations."
"I'm staying at the Sunset Motel. It's on a hill over-
looking the city. It's got color TV and a swimming pool and the room is pretty nice. There's even an infra-red light in the john."

"Is there someone else there, Honey? I hear voices."

"I just turned on the TV. It's the TV. All the people are purple."

"What?"

"I said, 'All the people are purple.' On TV. The color's not working right."

"Oh."

"There is somebody else here, though. A dog. She was passing by and looked cold and lonely so I invited her in. She's a lot like Hildegard. Say, how is Hildegard?"

"Fine. She misses you. So do I."

"I miss you too."

"Have you been practicing your lecture, Harry?"

"Yes, I'm going over and over it."

"Good luck, dear. I'm sure it will go well."

"Honey, I'm scared."

"Scared? Scared of what?"

"I don't know. One thing, though, I think I'm going to change the lecture. I don't believe it anymore."

"Harry, one of the kids just fell out of bed. I better go."

"Okay."
"Thanks for calling. Mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmu."

"Mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmu."

I laid down again and gradually remembered Freida. She put a hand between my legs and I squeezed one of her breasts as if it were a canteloupe in the supermarket.

"Freida, Blanche would never understand this. Inviting a beautiful young girl like you back to my room and making love, what is it now, four times?"

"Five."

"I don't think she'd understand at all."

"But Harry, I'm not a whore or anything. You know yourself I was a virgin. And you love me, don't you?"

"Of course, but that's just exactly what Blanche would never understand. This is just for tonight. I mean, I won't love you when you're old and gray."

She said something about heaven and this one night together and we made it again.

* * *

Fuck You And So On

"Freida, I've decided to change my whole lecture tomorrow. You know what I'm going to say? Girl, do you know what I'm going to say?" Girl woke up and looked at me. I stood up on the bed and assumed my lecturer's voice.

I moved to the podium. "Ahem. Thank you, Mr.
Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen, Colleagues and Friends:

"Not one word of truth has been spoken here at this convention so far. All you have done is come all the way out to Seattle to listen to each other say what a wonderful job we're all doing. All you bastards are just sitting around patting each other on the back. And I came prepared today to read a paper that would do the same thing. I came today to tell you what a fine job we're doing with TV lectures. But I say now that that is bullshit. And I say to those of you who think that we're all doing a fine job teaching: fuck you!

"There probably aren't five people in this audience today who can really call themselves teachers. Maybe five really do lead learning. Maybe five really inspire students. Maybe five really communicate at all with their students. Maybe five.

"And what do the rest of us sons of bitches do? We tell the students what they've already read in the textbooks and make sure that they can repeat it to us, to buck us up, to convince us we're doing a great job. We make a game out of which-student-can-accumulate-more-bits-of-disorganized-knowledge and we put a goddam gold star on the forehead of the winner. We treat our students like slaves and we pretend to them that we know everything. We read them our old notes and test them to make sure they've been
impressed by our damned brilliance. We won't really allow dissent, we evade the real questions, we hold grades over the kids' heads and treat them like shit instead of like persons.

"And that's why all the goddam TV lectures do just as good a job as we do. Because we can all be replaced by machines and monitors and computers. Because none of us communicate anything, anything but facts, to our stifled, bewildered, cheated kids. We're not persons, we're fucking television sets! It makes me sick that all the speakers have been telling you how marvellous you are. I say fuck you!"

I sat down on the bed again. The couple in the next room applauded.

"Are you really going to say all that, with all the fuck you's and so on?" Freida asked.

"I'd like to."

And there will be applause, wild applause from the hundreds of humbled but penitent teachers. And they'll carry me off on their shoulders, shouting, "Angsman! Angsman! Angsman!" And my speech will be in all the papers and students will rally my support all over the country and pretty soon there will be real teaching going on and real learning and real communicating and everyone will say, "We owe all of this to Harry Angsman,
because he had the balls to speak up."

* * *

What Bob Picket Learned From Experience

"Freida, I'm going to tell you another story. I was up late one night grading papers. My wife had already gone to bed and I was interrupted by Bob Picket, my colleague and suicidal next door neighbor. It was the first time he ever came over like that, for a break from grading papers. We've practically made it a custom now.

"Anyway, we got to talking about teacher-student relationships and Bob got very serious. 'You can't trust students, you know,' he said.

"'You can't?"

"'No, you can't. Listen, Harry, I've been noticing a few things and I've been meaning to talk to you."

"'What things?"

"'Well, the way you handle students outside of class. I mean how chummy you are. It's dangerous.'

"'Dangerous? What do you mean?'

"'I mean you can never trust them. I mean you never know their motives.'

"'Oh, I think I've gotten to be a pretty good judge of when someone is brown-nosing me, if that's what you mean.'

"'You think you have, but you can never be sure. I
know.'
"'Oh?'
"'From experience.'
"'From experience?'
"'From experience. I've seen them, the supposedly
touchy kids who just want to talk. Most of them are really
after grades. Some of them are after letters of recommend-
dation. Some of them are even trying to subvert the
necessary classroom rapport that must exist between the
Teacher and the student. They want to deal with you as
a person, they say. But what they really want is to reduce
you to their level, to make you one of them, to limit your
power over them in the classroom. And you have to be very
careful, Harry, so that never happens.'

"'Bob, I think you're overstating yourself. There are
some damn nice kids who just want you to ...'

"'Damn nice kids, huh? Harry, don't let them fool you.
Even the nice ones, the ones with no ulterior motives,
are just psychological cripples in need of a father figure
away from home. I'm telling you, Harry, you have to be
careful. My advice to you is this: Maintain a Professional
Relationship. You never know what a student will try.
Especially girls. I know from experience, Harry. They just
want to get you in the sack and then you're the Teacher
no more.'
"'Oh, Bob.' What I meant was, there isn't a co-ed in the University who wants to get you in the sack.

"'I'm just warning you, Harry. Maintain a Professional Relationship, that's my motto. If you don't, I'm telling you, you'll get hurt.'

"I've thought about that conversation for a long time now, Freida. And I've come to this conclusion: Bob Picket is full of shit."

* * *

Teacher's Pet

I had my own office now and my own secretary had her own office. I had my own secretary because there were so many letters to answer from supporters of the Higher Education Reformation, of which I was Chairman.

Patsy Carey, a buxom Anthropology major, walked into my office one morning and sat down. Her eyes glowed at me and she sat there speechless, just looking into my eyes.

"Can I help you, Patsy?"

"Yes, Mr. Angsman, you certainly can."

"Is there some kind of problem?"

"Yes, there is. You see, Mr. Angsman, I'm in love."

"And?"

"I'm in love with you."

"Oh, uh, well, gee, Patsy, I, uh...."
"I mean ever since your speech in Seattle I've just thought of you as so honest, so concerned, so human. And you're such a good teacher, Mr. Angsman."

"You can call me 'Harry,' Patsy."

"Ohhhhhh, Harrrrrrry."

Bob Picket came in with some extra H. E. R. posters. "Oh, sorry, Harry, I didn't know you were counseling."

"It's okay, Bob, just leave the posters here on the floor. Thanks."

Before he closed the door behind him he hesitated and looked over his shoulder at me. I didn't know how to read his look: it was either jealousy or an admonition to Maintain a Professional Relationship.

"Now, where were we?"

Patsy came over here and sat on my lap and put one arm around my neck. "You were telling me to call you 'Harry.'"

"Oh, that's right."

"And I was saying what a wonderful job I think you're doing with the Higher Education Reformation."

"Thanks."

"And I was saying what a wonderful teacher you are, what a wonderful person. What a man."

"Well, I just believe we need more communication, that's all."

"Me, too," she said. "And Mr. Angsman, I mean Harry,"
I just don't know what to do about my problem."

"What problem?"

"Harry, I love you." And she kissed me.

"Well, ahem, you see, Miss Carey, the H. E. R. does not really encourage..."

She pulled her sweater off over her head. She was bra-less and her breasts were as big and ripe as Freida's and, Christ, before I knew what was happening we were rolling around on the floor and we made it right there on Bob Picket's extra H. E. R. posters.

* * * * *

Why I Want To Commit Suicide

"Is your next door neighbor really a suicidal?" Freida asked, laying on top of me.

"Well, he has suicidal tendencies. I was telling that story to Girl before."

"Do you think of suicide?"

"Of course I do. I always do. And I'll probably do it someday when the time is ripe."

"When will the time be ripe?"

"Well, that's a long story."

"That's all right. I love stories."

"I know, I know."

"They're a nice break." She rolled off of me and lay there, taking it all in as I told the fantastic story of
why I want to commit suicide. It goes like this:

I think I have figured out the meaning of the universe. When I'm sure, I'll know it's time to kill myself.

It's actually very simple. It occurred to me one day while watching Walter Cronkite. He mentioned Red China and I suddenly realized that Red China may not exist at all. I have never seen it. Was I to accept Walter Cronkite's word on everything?

After that it was all very logical; Red China exists only in my mind. When I go there I will will it into existence. If that's true, maybe everything exists only in my mind. Nothing really exists outside of myself. Which makes me God. Or a God.

This is how it began, I figured: God, being lonely, created another being -- myself -- a spirit with free will, capable of arriving at Truth and returning to him to love Him. Once created -- with an intellect, a free will, an imagination, and an intuition -- I could do as I pleased, but God hoped that I would somehow reason back to His existence and love and return to Him.

What I did was to create a world I could hold onto, as it were. First I created my body and then all the things necessary to sustain it the way I had imagined it: a bed, a mother, milk, food, a house, a father, a yard, brothers, sisters, neighbors, vegetation, pets, other
animals, and so on.

I didn't know I was imagining them all, of course. I was sure everything really existed. When I tried to figure out why things are the way they are I got everything pretty complicated. I wanted to be better than my brother while still being his equal, and that meant strife, elemental strife, and ever since then things have gotten more complicated. Now the whole world is pretty much of a mess."

"Then why not kill yourself," Freida asked, probably just playing along.

"I'm not sure," I said. "I thought of it once and went out into a field and began to will everything out of existence. But when I got to my wife and kids and the dog I decided I wasn't so sure, so I willed everything back into existence. And when I walked home everything was still there as usual, complete with Walter Cronkite talking about Red China."

"If I was as unhappy as you and if I had created this whole mess and if I could just decide to be with God, I know I'd do it."

I rolled on top of her again. She was beautiful. "I don't know," I said. "I guess I just want to see how it's all going to work out."

* * * *
No Pets Allowed

There was a knock at the door and Girl jumped to her paws. It was the manager of the SUNSET MOTEL.

"Good evening, sir. I'm sorry to bother you, but it was reported to me that you have your dog in the room, sir, and I'm afraid I will have to ask you to leave it in your car."

"She's not my dog."

"Oh. She's not?"

"No. You see, she was just passing by. She was cold and lonely, and, like a Good Samaritan, I let her in so she could warm up and have some crackers and cheese and a drink with me."

"Well, I think that's very nice, sir, but we do have a policy, sir, that says NO PETS ALLOWED. It's on our sign out in front."

"Oh."

"And if our guests see one person bringing in a pet, they feel they should be able to bring theirs in."

"I see. You're making an example of us."

"No, sir."

"Well, Girl, I guess the jig is up." I extended my hand to her, but apparently she had never been taught to shake hands. "My dog at home shakes hands," I explained to the manager.
"Mine, too," he said.

He snapped his fingers and Girl dutifully followed him out. She hesitated at the door and turned around to look at me. I had trouble reading the look; it was either one of "Thanks, old pal" or "Why doesn't he throw you out and let me stay?"

"Goodbye, Girl," I said, affectionately. There was a little lump in my throat, detectable in my voice. She was a damn nice dog.

The manager and Girl stood at the door and looked at me as if I were crazy. The manager shook his head and closed the door.

That's when I sat down and stared out through the venetian blinds and saw in slits the distant lights of the city, and so on.

I flopped down on my pillow wishing I could find new symbols, wishing I could read into things better, wishing Girl knew how I felt.

* * *

There, There, There

Good old Freida patted me on the back and said, "There, there, there."

"It's the story of my goddam life, Freida," I said into the pillow.
"Then maybe the time is ripe."

"Oh, Freida, Freida, Freida." I rolled over and looked her in the face. "Look, Love, don't think that my life, for all its frustration, has been miserable."

"I know just what you mean."

"Let me quote Bob Picket to you. He's my favorite philosopher."

"Maintain a Professional Relationship?" lovely Freida asked.

"No. Bob Picket once said: 'At least you know that I mean what I mean, and that's enough.'"
I sat in front of the canvas, my pallet in one hand, my brush in the other, waiting for inspiration. Little did I know the lemming-people were headed our way, destroying everything in their path, rushing madly to the sea.

"I'm weary," Joy said. "I think I'll lay down."

"I'm going out for a walk then, okay? I might even go to the movies."

I crossed with the lights. I passed the automobile factory, the packing plant, the plastic factory, the Easter egg coloring kit factory, the power plant, the clothing factory, the ammunition plant, the tractor factory, the paper plate factory, the roundhouse, and the adding machine factory.

Animals were squealing when they were run over by the cars. The cars were squealing too. The factories were empty but the streets and alleys and freeways and bars were full.

The theater billboards boasted of Bazooka Joe:

"Magnificent!" -- Chicago Tribune

"* * * *" -- Minneapolis Star

"Ralph Schwartz's portrayal of Bazooka Joe is stunning!" -- Washington Post

"A rip snorter -- one of the year's ten best!" --
"It makes 'Massacre at Blood Gulch' look like kids' stuff!" -- Christian Science Monitor

"It's got everything! Sex and Violence and Comedy!" -- Variety

"Just the sight of Patty Young's tits is worth the price of admission -- whatever the price!" -- Playboy

"Patty Young is a new star on the horizon!" -- Fortune

"My, what a delightful two hours!" -- S. F. Chronicle

"Entertainment is here to stay!" -- Look

"Far out!" -- The Village Voice

"This one you must see! It is a sensitive portrayal of another world, very different from ours! It is the fantastic story of Bazooka Joe in far-off, exotic Africa where the naked native women give themselves freely while the men fight for survival in the bloody turmoil of civil war! There is beauty here -- and fantasy, warmth, comedy, and love! You have never experienced anything like it!"

I got in line. When I finally reached the ticket booth I noticed that the ticket lady looked exactly like and may even have been Pope Paul. I put my hand through the little hole in the window and the Pope unscrewed one of my fingers, gave me the papal blessing, and said I could go in now. I bought some popcorn and
candy and a non-nutritive, artificially-flavored, artificially-colored, artificially sweetened dietetic beverage.

When the rip snorter about Bazooka Joe in darkest Africa began, the crowd suddenly hushed. But before the MGM lion had even finished growling at us, the film caught in the projector and burned up. I expected everyone to throw popcorn and Jordan Almonds at the screen and to hiss and boo, but no one did. Instead, someone stood up and put his hand in the light from the projector and made a shadow figure on the screen. It was an alligator. Everyone laughed. Someone else made a rabbit shadow. Someone else a bird. Then fish, giraffes, dogs and cats, cows (with marvellous five-fingered utters), snakes, llamas, camels, deer, insects, butterflies, baboons, ostriches, lions, and so on. Finally a man in the back row made an elephant shadow. Because he was in the back row, his elephant was much larger than the other animals and had no trouble squashing them all. Everyone laughed heartily and the triumphant elephant lumbered off the screen.

The storyteller arose in the crowd and began to tell a story. "Once upon a time," he began, "there was a young man." At that point someone rose and made a young man shadow on the screen. From then on the
The storyteller's whole story was enacted by shadows on the screen. It went like this:

The young man was lost in a zoo. When the zoo closed the zookeepers spotted the young man and chased after him telling him he must leave the premises. The young man, however, decided to stay and hid on the mountain goats' island. While the zookeepers hunted for him frantically, the young man amused himself sexually with several of the goats (which was a marvellous thing to see enacted by shadows). Soon the zookeepers discovered him, but the young man eluded their grasp and hid in the miniature forest where he continued to amuse himself with rabbits and peacocks and all the other animals that the audience could project on the screen. The national guard was called in and the young man was eventually found atop a Gallapagos turtle. When they threatened to kill him he dismounted and the zookeepers hurried him to the gate. But before they were able to get him out he noticed that all the animals were slowly turning into human beings, (a feat more easily portrayed in shadow theater than movies). It was then he realized why the zookeepers had been so anxious to evict him from the zoo: the animals weren't animals at all, but people all dressed up like animals.
The police came and took him away. A marvellous courtroom scene followed in which the young man was convicted of trespassing, littering, walking on the grass, breaking the zoo curfew, and rape. He was sentenced to die in the electric chair.

A minute before his execution word came from the governor that the animals had learned of his fate and had sued to have the rape charge dropped. The young man was then asked to pay a $1,000 fine to cover the other crimes and was set free.

Back at the zoo the animals voted to make the young man their honorary friend and night watchman. He graciously accepted, returned to the zoo, and they all lived happily ever after.

Everyone clapped and whistled and cheered at the wonderful show. The storyteller bowed and all the shadow figures appeared on the screen to take their bows too. The clapping and whistling and cheering went on and on. Soon the storyteller arose and began a new story. It began with a young girl working in a brassiere factory that was going broke, but I was tired and didn't stay.

Outside it was very dark. The Pope was counting her fingers and didn't see me leave.
There was a strange sound in the distance, as of a gigantic army approaching, leveling whole cities in its path, and eating trees. I thought nothing of it and walked home.

"How was the movie?" Joy asked.

"There was no movie. The film burned up, so they had a shadow show instead."

"Isn't it too bad that art cannot survive in a technological society?" Joy asked.

"It was a double feature, too, but I didn't stay for the story of a young girl working in a declining bra factory."

"Have you heard the news?"

When I said "No," Joy turned on the radio for me to hear:

"A mad scientist in Omaha has successfully extracted from millions of lemmings the hormone that makes them march frantically to the sea and has been infesting our water systems with it for the past two years. It is expected that 98% of our population will be effected. The march to the sea began late last night in Omaha with several thousand people headed to the Pacific and several thousand others headed to the Atlantic. At last report 75 million people have joined the march and millions more are being swept into its frenzy every
hour. The lemming-people are so numerous that they have leveled nearly everything in their path and have eaten most of the vegetation. They are travelling in cars, planes, freight trains, and even bicycles. Traffic on all roads is at a virtual standstill and cars are now driving over fields and through forests. Millions have died in traffic accidents and in the crush trying to board sea-bound trains and planes. Dr. Schwartz, the Omaha scientist, who has not drunk any water in over two years, called his experiment a success today, claiming the march to the sea began exactly on schedule and that none of his lemmings, now without the sea-crazy hormone, have exhibited any desire whatever to march to the sea.

"I'll be back with sports and the weather in just one minute."

I ran to the theater to warn the audience of what was happening. Running past the factories and crossing against the lights, I began to see myself as a prophet of doom. What could I tell the theater-goers, after all, that would really do them any good? The doom was inevitable. All they could really do is join it. Still I thought it was my mission to forewarn them.

When I entered the theater the shadow show had reached the point where the hero was dropping napalm
on Peking. Everyone was making sound effects and the screen was filled with shadow fires and shadow children dying in the streets.

I ran home and collected the material to make a gigantic loudspeaker system outside the theater. I assembled four fifty foot scaffolds and positioned one at each corner of the building. Each scaffold was equipped with fourteen speakers, so all together there were, I figured out, 112 woofers and 56 tweeters. All of them were wired to a microphone I held in my hand and everything was plugged into an extension cord that stretched a mile down the avenue to the power plant. When everything was ready I climbed to the top of one scaffold and began my prophet of doom speech. "Ladies and gentlemen!" The sound was magnificent. But I could see on the horizon millions of marchers coming our way. There was no time for explanations, so I began yelling, "The lemmings are coming!" over and over. Inside the theater everyone was laughing at the announcement. I kept yelling "The lemmings are coming!" anyway, until the first wave arrived.

Then there was no choice. I climbed down the scaffold before it was toppled by roaring racing cars which led the march. When I looked at the drivers and saw their
sea-crazed eyes and heard their wild panting and heard the millions of feet across the earth, I was overcome by the same passion to plunge into the sea and joined the march.

I began by running and was joined on the streets by everyone who looked in the faces of the anguished marchers. Thousands of people piled into and onto their cars and soon the roads were choked with massive and bloody wrecks. The cars and cycles quickly abandoned the roads and made their own paths through parks and yards and farms. The noise — from screaming victims, from cars and trucks, from toppling houses, from horns and whistles, from starving passengers — was incredibly loud and unfathomably horrible.

A KEOKUK FIRE DEPARTMENT truck was stopped at a gas station and several exhausted people had fallen off. I grabbed onto a rung of the ladder that I could barely see beneath the pile of desperate hangers-on. Filled with gas again, the truck sped away flinging off those who had lost their grip and indiscriminately running over whoever had fallen in its path.

Through all of the noise I yelled to the man below me, "How long?" meaning "How long have you been riding this truck?" "Too long," he gasped back. I didn't
know, though, if he meant he had been riding too long or the rest of the trip was going to take too long. Either way, I believed him. We were both too exhausted to speak anymore. Not long afterward he lost his grip of the ladder and an hour or so later he finally was shaken loose from the pile and fell to the ground in the path of several Hell's Angels motorcycles.

It was only eighty miles to the sea, but our path was so strewn with wreckages and bodies, it took us nearly three hours to get there. When we arrived the shore was piled with vehicles of every description and with bodies that had been washed up on the shore. From overhead hundreds of people were leaping from planes into the surf and the planes were diving into the sea behind them. The water was filled with wreckages of planes and in several places the surface of the sea was all aflame.

Our truck piled into the heap of cars about a half mile from the water. Everyone leapt off, several getting trampled, and hurried frantically to the sea. The water, in spite of the wrecks and bodies and fire and oil and blood, was the most welcome sight I had ever seen. I climbed over planes and cars and bodies with great vigor. My eyes burned at the sight, my ears
rang, and my heart beat uncontrollably.

We thrashed wildly in the shallow water trying to make our way past the debris to the deep sea. The noise was unimaginable and the louder everyone screamed the more frenzied we became and the more loudly we screamed. And the sounds of panting throats clogged with salt water and oil and blood made death seem like a blessing. Not far down the shoreline I saw hundreds of people joyfully plunging to their death from a high cliff.

Many of us swam on, the rage to be in the sea only growing more intense. Only after several days of frantic swimming did that rage diminish, and only half way across the Atlantic was it fully satisfied. Then an opposite passion drove us forward: the will to survive.

When I arrived in France I found that it had been burned to a cinder in a nuclear disagreement. The ground was still smouldering. Only one building still stood.

It was a theater. Pope Paul was in the ticket booth and she waved at me with a hand full of fingers, hundreds of them. She told me the show had already begun and that I could go in.
The film had burned up, so the audience was amusing itself by making shadow figures on the screen. But they were in need of a storyteller, so I stood up and said, in French, "Once upon a time there was a young artist sitting in front of his canvas, his pallet in one hand, his brush in the other, waiting for inspiration."
I sat on the edge of the examining table, all naked, humming nothing. Rather than try to prepare myself for the worst, I merely looked at all the office paraphernalia without thinking: framed diplomas, sand-filled ash-urns... When the doctor finally came in he raised the white disc from in front of his glasses so that he was looking at me with three peering eyes. He gave me the ominously ambiguous and incomplete diagnosis and the temporary stomach-settling prescription I had expected.

I walked sullenly back to my apartment. I remember nothing of the walk except that I concentrated only on not stepping on any sidewalk cracks.

In my apartment a dull array of everyday objects began to taunt me. Hundreds of books. You couldn't read all those books in fifty years, much less by Christmas. Oh, Christ. And records, all neatly filed in two old Noilly Prat boxes. A candle my mother had sent two or three Christmases ago you've never even lit. Art prints, not much less awful than the ones in the doctor's office. Some bananas on the table, browning slowly. Dying. Ash trays
full of ends of cigarettes you never really enjoyed. A cup of half-drunk coffee. God, look at all the things I've taken for granted -- never appreciated -- just existed among. And now there's so little time. Soft chairs.

I turned away and headed toward the bathroom, automatically swallowing my feelings. Sentimental bastard, I never knew you had that kind of crap in you. In the bathroom I flipped the light switch. The bulb flashed on and quickly off and I could smell the darkness, I could hear it and taste it. Shit! -- it figures. I lit the candle and looked at my face in the mirror. "You're dying, you bastard." The reflection in the mirror scoffed back at me, "You're dying, you bastard."

The medicine cabinet held nothing to cure the gnawing pain in my stomach but it was filled with all the regular accumulation of junk: a can of Band-Aids, mouthwash, an old can of shaving cream, an old adjustable razor, a new electric shaver, a plastic pack of emery boards left by the former tenant years ago, a few dirty combs, a fairly clean one, old toothbrushes, old bottles of worn-out pills from former ailments, Q-Tips, a dusty jar of Vaseline Petroleum Jelly, some sticky bottles of leftover cough syrup, a bottle of crumbling aspirin -- Aspirin, that what I was looking for. I filled a glass with water and quickly took the pills. Jesus, now
you're getting attached to old combs and Vaseline.

In the mirror I saw an entirely different face than before. It was even more frightened at the thought of approaching death (probably), now a little disgusted at my sudden sentimentality, and desperately saddened at What have you been doing with yourself the last thirty-one years? That was the first time I had ever asked myself that and the reflection in the mirror seemed to insist, "Welllllll?" I blew out the candle and tried not to think at all.

It rang and it rang and it rang and it rang and it rang and it rang and it rang and it rang and it rang and -- Of course he's not going to answer his damn phone. Your friend, the only person you've ever let yourself get really close to, and you forget he's going on vacation. Christ, he's probably gone already. Maybe there will still be time to see him off at the train. 4:30. Yes, there will be time, if I hurry.

I drove to the depot thinking all the way of what I ought to say. I finally composed and rehearsed the following speech, a farewell address dripping with honesty, sincerity, even sentimentality, and guilt -- but a speech that, at long last, finally said what I had never faced before: "John, I'm
dying. They ran a lot of tests on me today at the clinic and they didn't tell me for sure, but I know it's cancer; it runs in my family. I probably won't last till Christmas. If you're gone three weeks, I might not even see you again. And feeling death so close has really made me think about a lot of things I've never faced before. John, I love you. I've never said that before -- to anyone. It was never true before about anyone else, because I never allowed myself to love anyone -- I just didn't want to get involved, to be known, to be hurt. I was afraid because I knew it could never last forever and I didn't want anything less. So I've cut myself off, John, from everything -- people, even objects. But there's not much time left and I'm going to change all that. I've got to. How can I die when I've never lived? What can they put on my tombstone? 'Here lies Alfred J. Stone!! That doesn't mean anything to anybody.' And John, I just don't want you to get away without my telling you, face to face, that I love you."

The depot was crowded with passengers and well-wishers probably preparing speeches as soupy as mine and there was a great deal of activity, of life, of people running about, standing in lines, waving good-bye, hugging hello, porters carrying bag upon bag, little baggage cars pulling little
trailers stacked with luggage and gift-wrapped packages. I was only standing there taking it all in. I hadn't even begun to look for John's train. Everything was rumbling with volcanic energy and I recalled the framed diplomas, sand-filled ash urns stuffed with half-finished cigarettes, a magazine rack filled with month and two-month old magazines, colored bottles of pills and fluids, dusty medical books, a round jar of tongue depressers, an empty box of Kleenex, a jar of cotton balls, file cabinets, a calendar with x's marking off the many days gone by, a device for reading blood pressures, hard chairs, venetian blinds, and discolored prints of unnatural landscapes -- all on display to re-assure the nervous patients that everything will work out fine. A group of frenetic tourists were huddling around their guide. And you've never been outside the state. Saving money for a trip that's never come. And the entire station was alive with emotion -- honest, expressed emotion. But you're too tough for that, too cool, aren't you.

Three men were struggling with a long, clumsy casket, trying to lower it from a baggage car on to one of those little trailers behind a one-man baggage-mobile. They finally managed to drop it on the trailer with a little thud and then one of them got in the baggage-mobile and drove it to an out-of-the-way spot near where I was standing. And he left it to sit there on the trailer, unattended and alone. Imagine the
darkness, the motionlessness, the silence. Especially the silence. People talking and crying, bells ringing, train whistles blowing, air-brakes hissing, loudspeakers blaring -- noise all around you and you hear nothing, nothing at all. And you see only the darkness. I noticed a little ticket tacked to the lid, but I didn't go over to read it.

From a distance I saw John boarding the train and I ran to where I might get a glimpse of him through a window. The engines were running and steam was roaring out from under the cars when I finally found him luckily seated by a window on my side. I reached up and rapped on it and by the time he had turned his surprised face toward mine I could feel my sallow face automatically drain itself of all emotion so as not to let on how I really felt. John was excited and tried to find a way of opening the window. I can't tell him all that sentimental crap about love and cutting myself off and not wanting to be hurt. After all, maybe I'm not even dying at all. I'll just tell him I wasn't doing anything so I thought I'd come down and see him off and say goodbye. "Have a nice trip!"

The train began to pull away before he could get the window open, though, so we merely waved and smiled a little. He gestured to mean that he was sorry he couldn't get the
window up. "Have a nice trip!" I shouted. But I stood still and didn't walk alongside the train as other well-wishers did. And you might be dead when he comes back.

I looked in the grave succession of windows as the train passed me by. Behind each window I could see the blithe and eager faces of strangers on the move, passing me by, shielded from me by the glass and the iron wall. And each of them I could have known, perhaps. All potential friends and now they're passing me by. Children with their noses up against the fogging glass, women straightening their hats or hair or whatever was out of place, businessmen burying themselves in the Wall Street Journal, soldiers staring straight ahead.

And I could see myself reflected in each successive glass, each one distorting my lonely, stricken face a little differently. And which reflection is really you? Or do I really change that fast, change with each person that passes by? Oh, to be behind those sad reflections, to be inside those images of myself and know what lurks within that hollow face.

The second last car was empty and I stared into the darkness behind my empty face.

And in the last car I saw people preparing to eat, healthy people enjoying a little meal with friends or new acquaintances, and I saw more reflections of myself, flashing by
more quickly and more distortedly than before, but I was still able to see in my constricted face the painful attempt to hold back tears that had never learned to flow.
She approached me as she might a unicorn in a garden, all eyes, on cautious tip-toes, barely breathing, and sat down next to me on the bench, never letting her sympathetic, liquid eyes wander from my face. I felt she wanted me to notice her, but I pretended not to. She was beautiful. She was slight and had long auburn hair that hung down over her shoulders to the ends of her warm, un-bra-ed breasts. Her face glowed with a creamy softness and was highlighted by her almost imperceptible make-up. She wore a plaid, three-piece suit that only a girl with her perfectly trim little figure could wear. The jacket was unbuttoned and in a glance I could see her soft breasts bobbing very gently under the sweater and pointing up at my widened eyes in a sensuous, beckoning way.

Between them on a silver chain, almost like a warning sign, hung a plastic, possibly glow-in-the-dark crucifix. Christ never had it so good.

It had moved a little in my Jockey Shorts until I noticed Christ hanging there with his hands outstretched to either side. Not a nun?

"You're not thinking of suicide, are you?" She was shy and seemed to move back from me a little on the bench.

It was suicide weather, for sure. The soft, chilly mist sifted through my clothes and chilled my clammy skin. My
disposition had long since gone down with the sun into thick, charred clouds and my gloom had become one with the heavy, polluted night air. But it was not the weather that had so sullened my spirits and brought my body to sag in a heap on this abandoned park bench. It had not been the weather at all. I had chosen to go out into the evening fog because I was depressed, more depressed than I had ever been. For it was only that day that I had come to fully realize the vast indifference of the universe, to comprehend the essential absurdity of life, to finally accept the random, unplanned nature of all things, and to at long last see the impossibility of ever being understood. All my studying in college so far had finally brought me to a foggy bench where I might lament alone my disillusionment and despair. But suicide? It had never entered my mind (though, I will admit, I probably did look like it had). But if there is nothing beyond this life, as I now believed, why end the only one I have? And what if, just what if there really will be an old gray-bearded, white-robed man to meet me at the Pearly Gates with an account book listing my transgressions? What could I say? "Well, I'll be damned" is all.

"No, I'm not."

"I thought I might be able to help." The voice transported me back to grade school and to spit-balls and to giggling over farts in the back of class and to ballroom dancing class... There is an unmistakable ring in a nun's voice. They all have
it. It's a soft quality, a shyness mixed with religious fervor, and you can almost taste the naivete.

"Are you a nun?"

Nuns are part of the whole problem. By their very existence they pretend, like organized religions do, that things ultimately make sense. They have bought, hook line and sinker, the rationalization that this whole mess is all part of a Divine inscrutable plan and that everything will work out fine if we just follow God's will. They have bought it so much that it even effects their voice.

She flushed elegantly, bowed a little, and admitted with her warm eyes and a nod that she was.

I have nuns pretty well figured-out, especially these "new" ones, the young ones in contemporary dress: they all want the security that convents so well afford and they will give up sex to get it because they all have fantastic imaginations anyway and they all believe that being a Bride of Christ means that someday God Himself will put it to them in thanks for not admitting mere mortals. I bet their dreams are wildly erotic, too.

"But don't let that bother you," she hastened to advise. And coyly added, "I'm a person, too."

We were rolling in the foggy grass, slithering around and giggling as I tried to gradually push her skirt up, one hand "Bother me? Oh, no, I won't let it bother me." Slithering,
giggling, my hands busily

"When I saw you sitting here you looked so low that it well, it startled me. I don't know why, I just thought maybe you were thinking of suicide."

I wanted to convince her that I wasn't. Her deep, sensitive awareness of my human condition sickened me. It fed my already full-grown, red-eyed Disgust with Churches and their self-sacrificing victims and with do-gooders from all walks of life. It bothered me to the point that I wanted to get back at them all -- not just Churches or their victims, but all organized schemes that try to make sense of things, all systems that had deceived me for twenty-one years -- historical theories, psychological systems, scientific hypotheses. All willfully deceiving people into thinking that the world is not really run by Random but by some inscrutable Plan. Today I was ready to screw them all and this coy little nun had unwittingly come to symbolize for me all those gay deceivers. Screw them all!

Screw them all.... Now there's an idea! How perfect. How perfectly ridiculous. Here was my chance to return the vast deceptions and to screw the goddam systems. I would seduce this lovely sister and have her, right here in the Grant Park grass -- at least I would take her as far as she would go. I had finally decided on a course of action: I must grasp this absurd and random reality, soak it for all the non-sensical sheer fun it offers, not try to make every
action profound and meaningful, but if a given moment offers only lies, return the lies and screw it for all it's worth. It happily moved in my Jockey Shorts again. My blood was gushing and rushing and chanting to me, "Yes yes yes yes yes yes..." Now we really were rolling in the grass moaning and sighing, her jacket flung open, my hands

"Well as long as you've stopped and shown such real, human concern," I will return you lie for lie "yes, I was thinking of suicide."

"You were." She seemed both relieved and delighted that her guess had been a bull's eye. I am convinced that her delight derived not from her realization of my "misery" -- though that was certainly part of it, she being a nun -- but mainly from the fact that she had so accurately guessed it. I'm sure she saw herself as a very perceptive, a very compassionate person -- and I would prey upon that with lusty vigor. I was holding her hand, sniffing a little, occasionally looking in her sympathetic eye. Beginning to throb

"Yes, you see, I've given up hope. I've given up on people." Dramatic pause. "Maybe I've expected too much of them." A doe came into the clearing and I slowly raised my rifle. She stood there grazing, oblivious. On cat's paws I quietly began to stalk my prey, my rifle held in readiness. "I've expected a little" I looked in her eyes and then away "...understanding, not much, a little
gentleness, a little...love." She tilted her head, melting toward Empathy. Her hair swung out slightly away from her smooth, dimpled cheek. Her hair was flung out wildly in the wet grass, her head weaving sweetly back and "But I've always found friends so disappointing. I think they understand me, I think they love me -- and then... I don't know, they always disappoint me. I guess I just expect too much of them." My hand up under her sweater, my lips distracting her

"No you don't." Dripping with sincerity. "I understand." And she unfolded her white little hands and reached out and held one of mine. Sitting in the boat for hours, waiting with my fishing rod extended out over the still waters and suddenly -- chomp! -- and the hook sank sharply in its jaw. Yes yes yes yes yes yes

"Do you understand? Oozing hope. "Do you really?"
Gushing, rushing. Like riding a galloping horse into the sea. And she, purring like a great lioness in the grass

"Ohhhhh, yes." Ohhhhh, yes. I had them, had them all -- all the grand liars, the enslaving, tyrannical systems. "That has happened to me, many times. In the convent," I was running from cell to cell, all naked, panting happily, the sisters all sighing and "where we should all be sisters, I am disappointed many times. But you must keep trying."

"I have tried and tried." I took her hand, setting the hook, "And now I have no where else to turn. My family has
rejected me" I have rejected them, really "and my friends have all deserted me," lies, lies, get back at them all, return them all lies for lies "and the only girl who could have saved me, who would have saved me" was I going too far now? "is gone forever." I solemnly bowed. She melted a little more and bowed to look in my eyes for an explanation. "Yes," turning away, pouring it on, "dead." She slunk slowly on the bench and reverently looked away, probably recalling her Love Story tears.

I put my arm around her shoulders -- even they seemed virginal -- and she resisted not at all. I was reeling in slowly, cautiously, careful not to break the line. "I need someone." It was almost a whisper, and it worked. In the clearing, grazing peacefully, beautifully

"We all do." How profound. Yuk.

"I don't even know your name." I have a weakness for wanting to know the name of whomever I'm putting it to.

"Michael. Sister Michael."

I almost blew the whole thing by laughing outrageously, but I swallowed my guffaw and quickly lied to keep myself going. "So is mine. Mine is Michael, too."

I stared into her eyes hoping to convince her of my appreciation for all she was doing for me. I tried not to laugh and to look as mesmerized by her beauty and compassion as I could. "Do you have a last name?" she whispered.
"Schwartz" was the name that came to me, at random, out of nowhere. Schwartz? Sure, a nice Irish-looking Schwartz.

"Schwartz?" she was stalling, perhaps?

The time had come for the Big Question. "Michael -- I can call you just Michael, can't I? -- you know that you've probably saved my life by talking to me right now, I guess."

She loved it and flushed. "Michael? May I kiss you?"

She tilted her head back a little, closed her eyes absolutely shut, and puckered her lips like she was sucking on a lemon peel. A beginner. And I kissed her.

"I've never kissed anyone before."

"Really?" I asked, with all the incredulity I could muster. "Well, just relax and be natural. Trust me. After all, I don't kiss just anyone -- I mean it has to be a very special moment with a very special girl. I don't want you to think I kiss just anybody who sits next to me in the park."

"Oh, I knowwww, I knowww." Ah, she didn't, she didn't.

"Michael, you're a ... wonderful ... compassionate ... and very perceptive person." And I kissed her again. And it moved a lot in my shorts.

I was pushing her skirt up and tugging at her underpants as inconspicuously as I could, my other hand fondling her face, kissing, breathing loudly. She leaned back to speak but I raised me index finger as if to say, "hush, don't ruin this
wonderful moment with mere words, kiss me again." And I held her close and kissed her more vigorously. Her mouth unpuckered and softened, moistened. I knew I was taking a chance, but I slowly opened my mouth and touched her lips with my tongue. I could feel her eyes open in surprise she's never? or is she lying to me and taking me for all I'm worth? but I kept right on, hoping to convince her by my persistence that this little french was all right. She closed her eyes again and with utter caution opened her mouth so our tongues could slightly touch. I was in, gushing away, rocking, riding. She moved back slowly and her face was the face of a child who had just taken her first lick of vanilla ice cream, filled with simple awe at the wonders that awaited her tongue. But soon something else came drifting across her face like a cloud -- some sort of fear, and she began to look all around her.

"Don't be afraid, nobody can see us in this fog."

"Oh, no, it wasn't that," though it was. She could hardly catch her breath to speak.

"I need you, Michael, very much." She forgot her fears for a moment and looked back in my face. The doe raised her head and looked around. I stopped and poised my gun, ready for the kill. I undid my belt and unzipped my pants and
"Oh, Mike," she swooned, putting her arms around my shoulders, my gun poised. We kissed again and I slowly reached my hand in her jacket and cupped my hand around one of her sweet, sweatered breasts. She began to resist and I quickly put both my arms around her and, to win her back, sighed, "I need someone to love, Michael, Sister Michael. I need someone to accept me as I am." I aimed and put my finger on the trigger slithering and sighing and her hair flung wildly in the grass my hand up her skirt and

"I knowwwww," she re-assured. I reached my hand back to her breast again and began to kiss her wildly, and more wildly and to squeeze and rub her breast.

Out of the dark void, like the condemning hand of God coming out of broken clouds, with all the religious fervor of the Popes and St. Paul and Bishop Sheen, from nowhere, from a random place at a random time, her sleek bright hand came whistling through the fog and slapped me powerfully, indignantly, and at random, right across my startled face. My withdrawing hand tangled in the chain around her neck and we awkwardly disengaged.

She jumped to her feet and stood confronting me with her vivid, livid face. Would she say "What kind of a person do you think I am?" or "Who do you think you are?" or "And after all I've done for you!"? What would she call me, "bold,"
"brassy," "a beast," or "a masher"? Or would she simply ask her God to forgive me?

None of these. Unable to find just the right remark, just the right name, she wheeled on her heel and was off, huffing and puffing.

As she disappeared into the indifferent fog, vigorously straightening her clothes, I shook my head, chuckling, and breathed, "Well, I'll be damned," and thought of the wonderful dreams that would fill her convent cell that night.
Eliot Moore rarely thought of himself, and so his driver's license expired. He read the Montana Driver's Manual, preparing for his test. As proprietor of the Restful Arms Senior Citizens' Home he read carefully the section titled, "Your Car and Survival":

Your car may be the tool that will save the lives of you and your family if this country is ever subjected to a nuclear attack by a foreign nation.

Montana is subject to an enemy attack, not only because of the important military installations within its borders, but heavy industries, electronic and otherwise, making it very important to the progress and survival of the nation, and therefore, important to the enemy. Your car will be the tool to move you from the target areas or population centers into the vast land and shelter areas.

We have areas of concentrated population and lots of land area where this population can be moved to, away from possible target areas. The only way to move this population if the need arises is in private automobiles, your automobile.

Now you say -- "What shelter areas?" Surveys have been made and existing shelter has been found to take care of a goodly percentage of the state's population. At this very moment shelter supplies are funneled into these shelter areas and the marking of these shelters will soon be accomplished. Public signs will be posted. Some of our mines throughout the state will provide excellent shelter for large groups.

Keep your gas tank at least half full when you are using your car for routine activities.

Common sense and pre-planning will save the citizens of this state -- not panic and confusion. Have you ever sat
down and discussed with your family just what action you would take if we were to have an attack on this nation with or without warning?

Do you realize that it might be days that you would have to rely on yourself for survival? Is your car stocked?

Your highway patrol, local police services, sheriff offices and government agencies will move into action to assist and direct you as best they can, but don't lose sight of the fact that these, too, are people just as you and I and are not immune to the same hazards as you and I.

Be kind to yourself and plan to be kind to your automobile and survive; be kind to your country and live!

Eliot was moved. He posted a sign on the kitchen bulletin board: WE WILL HAVE AN EMERGENCY MEETING OF THE GENERAL COUNCIL WEDNESDAY AT 8.

*    *    *

Eliot Moore's father had made his fortune in prophylactics and Eliot, living proof of the fallibility of MOORE'S FOOLPROOF PROPHYLACTICS, inherited a large sum of money at the age of thirty five. But Eliot had no business sense, thought there was no meaning to his life, and was a lover of mankind. So he bought a big old house and began to take in senior citizens who had no money, no family, no illness he couldn't treat, and a feeling that they had no meaning to their lives. He called it the Restful Arms. He had a grin like Stan Laurel's and
when the first guest arrived, Eliot met him on the front porch, grinning, and filled with meaning.

At one time there had been twelve "guests" living at the Restful Arms, but when Eliot's money began running out, he decided he could only afford to continue operating the home until all its guests had died. Then he would sell the home and find some other work, though he was not certain what. He knew he would not take the job near Billings at Montana's largest pig farm which he'd been offered. ("The job will be waiting for you," its owner said; his great uncle had been the home's only suicidal in its six-year history.) Eliot was a lover of mankind and could not see himself pampering pigs.

There were five guests still alive:

Harry Ballinger was eighty, but ascribed to the philosophy that "You're as young as you feel." His only other philosophic saying was, "Normal is what's normal for you." (Both these sayings were stolen from laxative commercials.) When he first arrived at the Restful Arms, his vulgar language was bothersome, especially to the ladies. They tried to discourage his use of filthy language, but nothing they tried worked -- demerits, grounding (no Sunday
drives), locking him in his room, threats of expulsion, even starvation. Finally at a General Council meeting, they decided to ignore this idiosyncracy and accept his justification for his language: "We're all fucking creatures of habit." Harry was passionately in love with Polly Schwartz.

Polly Schwartz had not spoken in more than two years, since the night she wrote on her door, in lipstick, NOW THAT I KNOW THE TRUTH, IT IS NO LONGER NECESSARY TO SPEAK. She communicated, however, with winks and smiles and frowns and waves of her hand. After only a year she was able to carry on marvellous conversations and would sit with anyone for hours and jabber on and on, telepathically. She wore no underwear whatever. This was common knowledge ever since she had fallen down the stairs a few weeks after writing on her door. She was also the chess champion of the home. Whenever she would get into a bad position she would sneeze vigorously, blowing all the pieces to the floor. When she played Harry Ballinger, a far superior player, she would feign sleep and he would lovingly re-arrange the pieces to her advantage. It was a game they played.

George Washington Schwartz (no relation to Polly) was the oldest guest, 88. He was forever making sure that his funeral arrangements were in order: his gravestone
was carved (except the second date) and in place, his eulogy was written and re-re-re-re-written, the mortician was paid in advance and had a special room reserved, and the florist had his order on file: there was to be a large horseshoe of carnations in front of the casket at the wake with a note reading, "Good Luck, George, From All Your Friends." Moreso than the others*, his memory was failing, making it very hard for him to play chess, to vote at General Council meetings, and to find his way home from the drugstore. He said the pledge of allegiance every day at noon.

There was a large box of sawdust compound on the back porch. Bertha Gluck, 87, had fought in both wars in the old country and in the Second had survived every fire bombing of Dresden. Her favorite war atrocity stories were about that and she would tell them with great enthusiasm and glee and before she ever finished, she would launch into a fit of puking, usually when she got to the part about finding charred bodies beneath the rubble. That was what the sawdust compound was for. To complement her penchant for throwing up, she was addicted to Almond Joys, Dr. Pepper, and orange sherbet. She was crazy (not dangerously), but well-liked.
Maria Avila, a bird-like little woman, was a recent religious fanatic. Only God's will, prayer, and miracles had kept her alive this long. This she knew for a fact because Our Lady of Guadalupe had told her so, personally. Only Eliot Moore rivalled her kindness, her love of mankind, and her appetite for meaning.

* * *

Above the dining room table, where the General Council meetings were held, Eliot had hung a sign that read: BE KIND TO YOURSELF AND PLAN TO BE KIND TO YOUR AUTOMOBILE AND SURVIVE; BE KIND TO YOUR COUNTRY AND LIVE!

"The meeting will now come to order." Eliot was the chairman. "A matter of great concern has come to my attention, a matter which I regret having overlooked all these years."

"What the fuck could it be?" whispered Harry.

"We have never sat down and discussed just what action we would take if we were to have a nuclear attack on this nation with or without warning. Let me read to you from the Montana Driver's Manual. He read "Your Car and Survival."

Following Robert's Rules of Order, George raised his hand, was acknowledged by the chair, and then spoke "It's true. I'm the oldest here and I know. I've heard on the radio that the Communists are preparing
to launch a new offensive any day. Any day! I say, to arms! To arms!"

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph," Maria muttered.

"I survived the fire bombing of Dresden. I know. I fought in two World Wars in the old country and I'm ready to fight the Third one in the new."

"In the nude?" (Harry was hard of hearing).

"Order. Order." Eliot exercised his control. "The reason I have called this emergency meeting is to determine just what we ought to do to prepare for an attack." He had a plan, but hoped they would arrive at it themselves, through logic.

"Well, I don't think we can rely on those municipal air raid shelters. If they get too crowded they'll throw us old people out first." George, the oldest, was in many ways the wisest, too.

"The fuckers," Harry said, "and then we'll get the shit bombed out of us."

"I say lets get a shelter of our own. A secret shelter! Then our bodies won't get charred!" Bertha, excited and her memory racing, rushed to the bathroom to puke.

"But where?"

Everyone sat wondering. Everyone scratched their head. Gradually they turned to Eliot for advice. Eliot sat at the head of the table grinning like Stan Laurel.
He knew where.

* * * * *

It was a small abandoned mine up in the mountains.
On their Sunday drive Eliot took them to it. It was about two hundred yards from the road, a fairly easy walk except for a narrow, shallow stream to cross.

Eliot claimed that no one else knew the mine was there, only his dead uncle. It was only a half hour drive from the home and everyone agreed that it was a perfect shelter. Even Polly nodded her approval.

Eliot got a copy of the County's "Community Shelter Plan: Where to Go! In Case of Nuclear Attack" and carefully went over the "Checklist of Needed Shelter Supplies":

- canned food
- water in milk cans
- container for human waste (he'd dig a pit)
- toilet paper
- soap
- first-aid kit
- battery powered radio
- a light
- infant needs
- needs for invalids (what did that mean? crutches?)
- bedding
- bed rolls
- blankets
- extra clothing
- towels
- paper plates
- silverware
- cups
- newspapers
- napkins
- paper or plastic bags
sanitary napkins
diapers
candles
tools
sewing kit

Faithfully he began stocking the cave, making several trips a day. Certain items were unnecessary, like infant needs, diapers, and sanitary napkins. There were other items, not on the county's list, that they would need: books, a chess set, and a vomit bowl. Some of the items they could manage to bring with them on the day of the nuclear attack. That would give each of them a sense of responsibility, meaning.

Eliot made a door for the cave; it was light enough to move and heavy enough to keep out most of the gamma rays. He also dug a deep hole for human waste.

* * *

At the next regular meeting of the General Council Eliot made his happy announcement: "The Restful Arms Nuclear Attack Shelter Station is in readiness."

Everyone sighed and voiced their relief and exultation and feeling of security. Polly nodded and smiled and applauded quietly.

In the six years that Eliot had managed the Restful Arms, he had never blushed with so much pride. It gave him infinite pleasure to think that these supposedly useless, unwanted, ridiculous persons could find so
much joy and hope and meaning under his care. He began to cry.

He cried for about half an hour while everyone voiced their relief and exultation and feelings of security.

Finally Eliot spoke through the lump in his throat. "We ought to practice."

"Practice what?" Maria asked.

"Practice our evacuation. For the nuclear attack."

"That's right! At Dresden if everyone had practiced more we could have lived and kept up the war for years!"

"Right! And you never know when those purple-pissing commies will attack, the fuckers."

"Have they attacked already?" George could not remember.

"No, we're going to practice for the attack."

"I don't think that's necessary at all."

"Why not, Maria?"

"Our Lady will let me know if we're going to be attacked. She always does."

"Well they can bomb the shit out of you, I want practice!"

"When are they coming? I have to see about the flowers."

"Be kind to your country and live!" (Bertha was a patriot where ever she lived.)
Eliot had visions of everyone helping out, everyone pitching in, everyone working together for a common goal, everyone in charge of something to bring to the shelter. It would be an adventure, a picnic. "A Ritual," he said, "is exactly what we need to bring everyone together. Nothing builds community better than ritual!" He began to cry again.

"Why don't we practice for an air raid as long as the shelter's ready?"

"Oh, George, that's what we've been talking about."

"I don't think it's necessary."

"Let's put it to a vote of the General Council. All in favor of practicing for our nuclear attack say 'aye.'" Everyone but Maria and Polly said "Aye." Polly waved her hand.

"When should we have it?"

"I say Friday, right after lunch."

"You think the commies are going to wait till we finish lunch when they attack? They attack when you least expect it. I say we should practice when we least expect it."

"That's right, George. I say we set a time alarm and let it go off whenever it does."

"You think the commies will wait till we finish our
tea and crumpets?"

"I will set an alarm. I already have an air raid horn." Eliot was trying to restore order.

"I'm the oldest one here and I know these commies. They won't wait for any tea and crumpets."

"That's what makes them fucking commies fucking commies. You never know when they'll turn around and bomb the shimmering shit out of you."

"What about the canary?"

"They won't wait for tea and crumpets!"

"Practice isn't necessary anyway."

Sometimes, like this time, Eliot was unable to enforce Robert's Rules of Order and control the meeting. This one went on and on like that for hours. At one point Mrs. Avila spit at Mr. Schwartz for calling her a commie sympathizer because she didn't want to practice. Polly was sound asleep through most of it, oblivious to Harry's overtures. Bertha, in her excitement, had to leave several times to puke. Eliot, in spite of the commotion, was beside himself with joy over the idea of the ritual evacuation, and cried several times.

* * *

A sign by the front door reminded everyone of what they were to bring to the shelter:
George: crutches
Harry: silverware
Bertha: radio
Maria: flashlight
Polly: chess set
Eliot: Fritz

(Fritz was the canary.)

Eliot set the time device, filled the station wagon with gas, and hung the sign reading BE KIND TO YOURSELF AND PLAN TO BE KIND TO YOUR AUTOMOBILE AND SURVIVE; BE KIND TO YOUR COUNTRY AND LIVE! above the front door as a constant reminder.

The Restful Arms was filled with an air of anticipation. But the effect of the planned evacuation was not what Eliot had hoped for. The guests were not excited or thrilled; there was no feeling of going on a picnic. Instead, eagerness changed to anxiety, excitement turned to tension. There were several arguments, many harsh words. Everyone was filled not with security, but fear.

* * *

It was almost 1:30 in the morning. Everyone was still up, in pajamas. No one had gone to bed before three in the morning since the alarm had been set. Bertha Gluck was sitting by a window with a radio on her lap listening to the constant humm of the civil defense station. She muttered stories of war atrocities to herself and guzzled Dr. Peppers and gorged herself
on Almond Joys and orange sherbet. Maria Avila paced back and forth in front of the TV, crying over an old movie and praying for the Poor Souls in Purgatory during the commercials. Harry Ballinger and Polly Schwartz played chess, but with a difference: Harry refused to re-arrange the pieces when Polly feigned sleep and was not content with an early checkmate; instead, he was gleefully taking all her pieces, trying to take one on every move. As usual, he winked at her often, patted her leg, and tried to kiss her, but, as usual, she always averted his attempts with a turn of the cheek that said, "Now that I know the truth, kissing is no longer necessary." Up in his room, George scanned the skies for enemy aircraft and exposed himself to passing cars. Only Eliot was eager for a picnic adventure.

* * *

The air raid alarm whined at 1:35.

George pulled up his pajama bottoms and ran downstairs looking for the crutches.

Eliot turned off the alarm yelling, "Stay calm, stay calm!," grabbed the canary cage and ran to the car.

Maria fell to her knees screaming brief prayers.

Bertha threw up on the radio and her pajamas and sighed, "Now I have to go change."
George yelled at her while he searched for the crutches, "You think those sneaky commies are going to wait for you to change your clothes?"

Harry quickly gathered the silverware.

Polly picked up the chess set and without disturbing a piece, carried it calmly to the car and sat with it on her lap, contemplating her next move.

Bertha yelled, "Underground! Underground!" (an exclamation used at Dresden) as the car sped off toward the mountains.

Eliot drove like a madman.

"Faster, faster, here they come!"

"Those mother-fuckers! They'll bomb the ever-stinking shit out of us if we don't get the fuck out of here."

"Jesus Mary and Joseph!"

"Here they come, those sneaky commies!"

"The purple pricks!"

Eliot noticed a flashing red light in his rear view mirror and called for "QUIIIIIIIIIIII-EEEEEEmEEt!" The sound of the police siren filled the night air as Eliot pulled over.

The deputy sheriff leaned over to look in the car. Polly was crying softly. Bertha was biting her hand so she would not cry. Maria was muttering prayers. Harry
stared straight ahead, holding a dinner knife in readiness. George scanned the skies. Eliot tried to look sheepish.

"Where's the fire?"

Bertha, reminded of the fire bombing of Dresden, began crying hysterically and sobbing and flailing her arms.

"There is none, officer. I just got carried away."

"Where you headed?"

"Wouldn't you like to know," George whispered.

"The mountains. We're going for a drive in the mountains, to get some fresh air."

"The commies are coming," Harry whispered.

"What?"

"They're going to bomb the shit out of us if we don't get the fuck out of here."

The deputy sheriff looked at the crutches, the canary, the silverware, the chess set, the radio, and the terror in all their faces. "Well, where ever you're going, you don't have to be in such a hurry to get there."

"Yes, officer, sir, it won't happen again, sir."

'As the deputy left, George explained the whole thing: "It's all part of the plot. The police are in on it, too. Just trying to slow us down so they can bomb us off the face of the earth."
"The fuckers."
"We're only practicing, George."
Everyone leaned forward, toward the mountains, and was very quiet.
Finally Bertha spoke. "Stop at that gas station."
"We have enough gas, Bertha. I always keep it at least half full now. Don't worry, stay calm."
"I have to go to the bathroom."
"You think those commie bombers are going to wait for Bertha Gluck to go wee-wee?"
"George is right, Bertha. We have to pretend this is the real thing. You'll have to hold it."
"My husband used to own a Standard station just like that," Maria moaned, "and every time I pass one I start to cry." They all knew the story by heart. "I think I see Ralph out there pumping away and it breaks my heart. Ohhhh, Ralph."

Bertha peed and quickly Harry felt the warm wetness seeping into his pants. He started slapping her head yelling, "Bertha! Jesus Christ! What the fuck are you doing, goddammit. That's worth five fucking demerits, peeing in the goddam car."
"Oh, Bertha, really."
"Now I forgot again. Where are we going?"
"To the shelter, George, goddamit. The puss-pissing
"commies are coming."

"Fritz is frightened. Please be quiet back there."
They drove on into the mountains.
"It's a lovely night for an air raid, the full moon and all."

"How much longer, Eliot? When will we get there?"
"Do you think they'll be Russians or Chinese?"
"Or college students?"
"Could their radar pick us up, do you think?"
"I'm scared, Eliot, I don't want to die."
"God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven."
And so on, until they arrived at the path to the mine.

*       *       *

They scrambled out of the car, shoving each other.
It was dark, but Eliot had worn a path and led the way.
Bertha followed until Maria pulled at her, ripping her pajamas. "Let me go next!" Bertha wheeled at her and knocked her to the ground with one blow. Eliot turned and begged for quiet. Everyone stumbled along, scratching their faces on branches, muddying their pajamas, freezing their feet in the stream, cutting them on rocks. Everyone stumbled but Polly who walked calmly, still carrying the chess game intact. She fell far behind.

"Stop! Everyone stop!" George had heard something.
"What is it?"
"Listen."

In the distance a dog was barking at them, but there was another sound, gradually growing louder, more distinguishable. It was a plane.

"They are coming!"

"It's no fucking practice, the fuckers are coming!"
"Underground, underground!"

Maria grabbed Eliot's leg, sobbing and asking Ralph and Christ to forgive her. Eliot, struggling to carry Fritz, forged ahead, dragging Maria.

Everyone began screaming.

Polly clutched at her heart and screamed a chilling, terrifying scream, and fell headlong into the stream, dead, the chess pieces falling into the water.

Harry dropped the silverware and ran, stumbling, to his beloved. The water was rolling over her and her nightgown was hiked up exposing her bare, wrinkled bottom. Harry gathered the body in his arms and sobbed. George knelt in the stream gathering the chessmen and when the plane passed overhead he stood up and threw pawns and knights and bishops and kings and rooks and queens at it, screaming. Bertha grabbed Polly's foot and dragged the body away from Harry and over the rocks.
and tree stumps toward the cave. Harry followed slowly, moaning heavily while George threw anything he could find at the plane: knives and forks, rocks, water, spoons, the chess board, sticks and stones.

"You'll get demerits," Maria warned him.

Bertha dragged the body vigorously and threw up on it several times. Harry threw rocks at her.

Eliot was struck dumb and stood staring at the spectacle, thinking of the pig farm near Billings, and his father's prophylactic fortune come to this.

A small dog was at the mouth of the mine. When it saw this odd group of trespassers approaching, it ran to each of them wagging its tail.

George swung the crutches down on it and killed it with one blow. He then knelt down and beat it frantically, muttering, "Commie bitch, commie bitch...."

Inside the mine Bertha accidentally dropped Polly down the hole Eliot had dug for human waste. Harry moaned.

Maria began screaming saying that God had just told her that this was all His judgment on his sinful people, that God was a communist anyway, that only Hell awaited sinners and only Heaven those who prayed.

Eliot was struck dumb and stood staring at the spectacle, thinking of the pig farm near Billings and
his father's prophylactic fortune come to this.

George, still outside, threw the dead dog toward where the plane had flown by.

Bertha tried to reach Polly's body in the pit.

Eliot lit a match and watched.

Maria went on and on.

George entered the mine panting wildly and yelling, "They'll never bomb the shit out of us, will they? We're safe, safe!" He sat on the ground and began laughing triumphantly, hysterically.

"Where the fuck is the flashlight?" Harry asked. "Where's the good old EverReady flashlight?"

"I forgot it," Maria said. "It was God's will."

Harry picked up a crutch and swung it toward her voice in the dark and buckled her legs and she began to cry. Bertha grabbed Harry before he could hit Maria again and wrestled him to the ground, biting him.

The match burned Eliot's finger. He lit another.

Without the good old EverReady flashlight, it was very dark.

"What's going on?" Harry asked, weary of fighting Bertha and no longer aware of Polly's death. Bertha stopped biting him.

"We're practicing for an air raid," Eliot, the
chairman, said, "In case we are ever attacked."

Bertha, sitting on Harry, threw up Almond Joys and orange sherbet all over him. Harry winked at her and she leaned down and kissed him.

It went on like that for weeks. Eliot made several trips to town for bandages, bird seed, orange sherbet, Almond Joys, Dr. Pepper, toilet paper, sawdust compound and so on. He thought it would be better to keep everyone at the mine until things were back to normal.

Maria went on and on about God's judgment and Ralph's Standard Oil Service Station. Harry hustled Bertha. Bertha hustled Harry, telling him stories of Dresden and throwing up. Eliot buried Polly, dug a new pit for human waste, cooked, washed, treated Maria's broken leg, and thought about his father's prophylactic fortune come to this.

One afternoon when Eliot returned from town he was met outside the mine by George. He was still naked, but briefly he had lapsed into a moment of lucidity.

"Eliot, I'm sorry. We're all sorry. We've ruined your picnic."

"It's okay, George, really, it's okay. I understand."

"You still like us then?"

"Of course I do," Eliot said, tears coming to his eyes.
"I love all of you, very much." He put his arm around George's bare shoulders. "And in a few days we'll all go back home again."

"You're very good to us," George said.

Eliot looked at his naked friend and grinned, just like Stan Laurel.
The first time I saw Sonny Adamson play he became a hero of mine. Having grown up in St. Louis, I had worshipped (and still do) greater players than Sonny -- players like Stan Musial and Harry Brecheen and Red Schoedienst and even a few bright lights of the old Browns, like Vern Stephens and Ned Garver -- but Sonny did something to me that none of those others did: he reminded me of the great joy I had taken in playing the game as a boy. When the ball bounced toward him he grinned so gleefully that even his gums showed. He pounded his glove with great gusto and when the ball stuck there you could almost hear his skin tingle. And when he threw to first he looked like David must have looked as he confidently, ecstatically, boyishly slung that stone at Goliath. There was nothing routine about any ground ball hit to Sonny -- partly because he was such a fine juggler of even the high hop, but mostly because he so completely enjoyed it. And at bat he was equally enthralled. He ran to the batter's box when it was his turn and he smiled at every pitch. The ball coming toward him filled him with delight and when he hit it, even foul, he glowed like a child who had just found the loveliest Easter egg.
You have to have played the game and loved it, as I did in Little League and Pony League and American Legion, to know the deeply sensual joy that comes from even holding a baseball, from catching it in an old, familiar glove, from hitting it with the meat end of the bat. Girls don't know the feeling, I am sure, though it's something like making love.

* * *

I admit that baseball is an absurd pursuit. For its players to sacrifice the most vigorous years of their lives to running after baseballs, swinging bats at baseballs, the endlessly repetitious throwing and catching of baseballs, and to standing for uncountable hours in the hope that the baseball will be hit in their direction, is incontrovertibly silly. For its fans to escape into its ever-changing yet never-changing realm of statistics and standings and rosters, to virtually worship its ridiculous heroes, to lay awake at night praying for its fortunes to change, to argue its unanswerable questions, and to pay for its perpetuation is -- again I admit it -- absurd.

But absurdity doesn't bother me much any more. I have come to realize that there are few if any pursuits that are not inherently, patently, and irreversibly absurd. I have been a philatelist, butterfly collector,
mortician's assistant, bank guard, proofreader, camp counsellor, railroad switchman, insurance investigator, free-lance photographer, steel mill worker, tobacco harvester, pornography peddler, Fuller Brush man, used car salesman, and soda jerk. My very first job was as a shit-shoveller in the circus. I would like to be a fireman, lawyer, movie actor, golfer, sports-writer, wild life photographer, baseball player (of course), and, as you see, writer. So I have learned a great deal about absurdity ever since I shovelled shit in the circus.

Hence my unashamed interest in baseball.

* * *

The first game I saw him in was in Winston-Salem near where I was working on a tobacco farm. I was immediately attracted to him and was able to enjoy, right along with him, the thrill of the ball coming toward us. He was a showboat, a grandstander, the likes of which I had never seen. Early in the game he hit a home run and once it was certainly over the fence he continued his romp around the bases skipping. When he stepped on home plate he stopped, doffed his hat, and bowed to the cheering fans. They loved it.

Midway through the game, with Raleigh ahead by eight runs, he threw out one runner with a behind-the-
back toss. As it turned out, that so intimidated Winston-Salem that they rallied ferociously late in the game and tied it. In their half of the last inning they had gotten a runner to third with two outs. What I saw then I have never forgotten. An easy grounder was hit right to Sonny; he pounded his glove and showed us his bright teeth and his gums, but then he performed his famous juggling act, fell to his knees, juggled the ball out of his reach and fell flat on the ground. The image of him sprawled there in the dirt, the ball just inches from his hand while the winning run scored, endures.

*   *   *

Six years later I had made my way back to St. Louis and was supporting my authoral aspirations by peddling pornography and investigating traffic accidents for an Insurance Company. I had followed Sonny's career as closely as I could in the *Sporting News* and even saved the clipping about his unassisted triple play in Tulsa in 1967. During those years I saw him play a couple of times with Jacksonville and again with Tulsa and on TV when he was with the Cards. But whenever I saw him it was the image of him sprawled there in the dirt, the ball just inches from his hand while the winning run scored, that endured. I thought
of it many times and knew precisely how he'd felt.

At the end of the '69 season the Cards brought up their minor league hopefuls, Sonny among them. I went to watch him the first game he played. The Cards were all but mathematically out of the reach of the Amazing Mets, so Sonny was given a chance to start. When he made his second error early in the game, the man next to me muttered, "God damn that kid. Who is he, anyway?"

"Sonny Adamson," I said, with unexplicable pride.

"Who?" he asked again.

* * *

ARTHUR DOUBLEDAY ADAMSON
("Art" or "Sonny")
Born June 14, 1936 at Oneonta, N.Y.
Height 6.01 Weight 175
Throws and bats righthanded
Hobbies: golf, old movies
Attended Capital University, Columbus, Ohio

executed unassisted triple play, August 26, 1967
led Pacific Coast League in sacrifice hits with 26 in 1967

tied Major League record for errors in one inning with four, June 5, 1968

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Major totals: 120 314 37 69 3 32 219 137 238 44

*sold to Fresno (St. Louis organ.), December 8, 1959

I include this file not because it tells who Sonny is, but because it efficiently supplies the facts about him. There is much more about him to be known, however, much more than can be revealed by these statistics (which, if read properly, do show Sonny's hitting potential, his penchant for errors afield, and his perseverance).

As a boy in Oneonta he'd take a bus to Cooperstown and visit the Hall of Fame. He'd stand in front of the showcases full of bats and balls and gloves and look at his dim reflection in the glass, dreaming of the day when something of his would hang in these halls immortalizing him. Also in golden plaques he would stare at his bright reflection, confident that one day, when his race was done, he too would live forever in Cooperst-
town and record books and fanatic memories.

I don't know any of this for a fact, of course, because I have never spoken to Sonny, never heard him speak, never been able to find an article on him in any sports pages. But facts -- like all those statistics -- don't reveal much truth. Besides, I am not really interested in the facts about Sonny; what interests me is that he smiles when the ball is bearing down on him and that he bobbled that ball in Winston-Salem and felt like I do.

* * *

Sonny forever hoped that a perceptive scout would see that flash of greatness he still had, that he'd be traded, moved up to the parent club, and excel again as he knew he could. Nor was this an idle dream; there had been moments of greatness with the Cards and there still was some greatness left. He had not given up on the majors, nor even on the Hall of Fame.

And so it came as a surprise, one afternoon in June with Richmond, when he was lifted for a pinch hitter, a kid fresh from his high school graduation, late in a game in Columbus.

He descended the ramp from the dugout to the clubhouse solemnly. A single bare bulb lit his way.
There was no one around, no kids lining the wire fence near the clubhouse door, everyone intent on the game. His descent was slow and the sounds of his spikes on the cement filled the air beneath the stands.

He stripped and sat all naked on the bench in front of his locker. In the little mirror taped inside the locker door he stared at his grave reflection, wondering what all of us wonder from time to time, asking himself questions we have barely the courage to face.

What do I do now?
Does this mean what I think it does?
What am I, then?

Above him the fans were chanting and clapping, religious in their fervor.

"Perseverance is everything," Sonny finally said to his reflection and his reflection said it back. He slammed his locker door defiantly and turned on a shower, hot, and full force. "I alone know my own worth," he thought, "and I'll not give in till it's proven." These, he thought, were the sentiments of heroes, of players like Nellie Fox and Satchel Paige, who struggled a long time before they ever made it.

Above him the crowd moaned and the chanting and clapping stopped.
Soon Rosco Green, the lanky black rookie, closed the clubhouse door behind himself. He was shy and scared and his body drooped in disappointment.

"What happened?"

"I struck out, sir."

"Jesus, kid, don't call me 'sir,' like that. Call me 'Sonny' or 'Art,' okay?"

"You're Art Adamson, aren't you, the man who made the unassisted triple play?"

"Right. And you must be Rosco Green, who just graduated from high school today."

They shook hands and Rosco stripped too. His body was magnificent.

"I sure never saw no curves like that in high school."

"You'll get on to them. In no time you'll be hitting major league stuff."

"I sure hope so."

"Persevarance is everything," Sonny almost said. "You alone know your own worth," and so on. Instead, he went to his shower without a word.

Rosco followed. They shouted through the steam and the roar of the water.

"There a lot of chicks around?"

"For you there sure will be."
"You mean black stuff?"

"No. I mean because you're new and young. Promising. And you're in good shape."

"I sure hope so."

* * *

Oh there had been girls, especially when he was with the Cards, especially since he was single. In almost every city. And not just whores, either, but girls with a head on their shoulders, with charm and class. Not just one night stands, but girls who cared for him, who believed in him and encouraged him. Who waited.

* * *

"Think maybe you could introduce me?"

"I don't get around much anymore. I hope there's no future for me here, if you know what I mean. Besides, I've got a steady girl now, met her when I was with the Cards. A model in New York. I'll see her when we play in Rochester. But don't worry about getting introduced anyway. A kid like you, they'll be waiting in the parking lot for you."

"I sure hope so."

* * *

Standing in the shower, Sonny replayed in his mind his parting speech to Gloria:
"Gloria, please stay by me. I'll make it. I'll be back. Lots of guys are sent back down for a year or so, just to work on a weakness. I've just got to improve my fielding a little, get the butter off my fingers, if you know what I mean. I'll be back. And I'll be in the big money, you'll see. I love you, Gloria, and I need you to stick by me. Will you? I do love you, you know. You're the only girl for me now and I'll be back. I promise. I will.

* * *

"Tell me about the triple play," Rosco said.

Sonny turned off his shower. "It was nothing much, really. I was in the right place at the right time for once, that's all. It was a hit-and-run situation with runners breaking for second and third. The batter hit a liner to my right, I dove, and caught it just before it hit the ground. I got up and stepped on second and the runner from first thought I had trapped it, so he slid right into me and I tagged him. It all happened in a second. I could hardly believe it."

Often when he was alone, Sonny would relive that moment and his skin would tingle as he recalled the roar of the crowd. Deep in his throat he would hold an "h" sound, reconstructing the noise that followed.
him to the dugout and that greeted him when he came to bat. As a boy in Oneonta he had often dreamed of such a moment and now it was as bright a memory as it had once been a dream.

"That musta been a thrill."

"It was. It was." The two players were drying themselves while above them the crowd was chanting and clapping again. "But you know, kid, it was lucky. There's a lot of luck in this game. Good and bad. Sure I made that triple play, but I got a lot of bad hops too, and I made a lot of errors. And there's luck in being on the right team at the right time, just when they need someone like you. I was lucky the Cards needed someone who could sacrifice that year. Not many guys are willing to learn the art of the sacrifice bunt, you know, but I was the best bunter they had, probably the best in the league. But I had some bad luck in the field."

"I guess there is a lot of luck."

"Sure there is. You're not in control of much out there. You're at the mercy of a general manager who might trade you to Duluth for all you care. You're at the mercy of a manager who might play you where you've never played before. You're at the mercy of the weather, the lights, the umps, the foul line, the sun, even the
pebbles on the infield. Sometimes I wish I was a pitcher so I'd have a little control of things, but I was born an infielder, I guess."

"I never looked at it that way before, I mean being at the mercy of so much luck."

"Yeah, but there's no sense getting fatalistic about it, though. You gotta keep trying, keep pretending you're in control of things."

"You know, you'd make a good coach."

"Maybe, someday, when I'm through as a player. But I'm not ready to quit yet. I'm really not."

"But you've got what it takes, you've got that will to win. My coaches in high school said I didn't have it enough, that I won too easy. But they all had it. Man, they loved to win. They were dying to win."

* * *

I remember thinking, when I saw him sprawled there in the dirt, that he must have been dying to win. I knew what he felt like, his face pressed to the ground, his fist slowly pounding the ground. When I was younger I, too, played at many games and was dying to win, but I have lost at many games since then. And won, too, now and then.

"That's bullshit." Sonny said.
"It is?"

"I'm not dying to win. I don't care at all who wins. It's a game I play, this pretending to care if we win. I play like I'm dying to win because then I play harder and then I enjoy it more. But it's the game I enjoy, not the having won."

"No wonder he never made it big,' he's probably thinking," Sonny thought.

Above them there was a sudden roar that lasted very long and soon the clubhouse was filled with jubilant Braves. They slapped each other on the back and slapped each other's outstretched hands and hugged each other and laughed and shouted and carried on. Rosco and Sonny, still naked, joined the celebration.

* * *

Sonny walked beneath the dark stands and thought only of himself. It made little difference to him that Richmond had beaten Columbus.

The walk to the parking lot was a labyrinth of beams and posts and pipes. The concession stands were locked shut, their grills cool, the lights off. Hot dog wrappers and paper cups littered his way. He thought of Gloria in New York, of young Rosco Green, of Pauls Valley, Valdosta, St. Louis. He recalled his walks in
the Hall of Fame.

With years of practice he steeled himself against the temptation to hang up his spikes and call it quits, and slowly, with renewed strength, ascended the ramp.

The sun still shone on the parking lot.

* * *

When he got to his car, a rugged middle-aged man was waiting for him. Steve Stoneman introduced himself as the athletic director at Capital U. Since Sonny had been there as a student -- how long ago? Sonny wondered, sixteen years? -- Stoneman thought he might take the former major leaguer out to dinner.

"Sure, fine."

"I'd like to be able to talk to you, Sonny, old buddy," Stoneman said, still shaking Sonny's hand vigorously.

"What about?" Sonny wondered while they drove to the restaurant, exchanging small talk. He wants me to give a talk, to tell all about the triple play and encourage kids to participate in games and tell them all that I've learned about sportsmanship and teamwork and perseverance and life. Or he wants me to conduct a baseball clinic some afternoon. Teach the finer points of the sacrifice bunt, of pivoting on the
double play, of hitting the curve ball. Or perhaps he only wants to talk to me. Maybe he is simply a sadly frustrated jock, a would-be athlete who now has only the occasional acquaintance of a star to sustain him. A dullard looking for a chance to drop a name -- "I had dinner last night with Sonny Adamson." A man, grey with years of losing, who finally turned into an athletic director because he was only able now to talk of victory.

From just that moment in the parking lot, from just the image of that vigorous handshake, Sonny was able to imagine not the facts about Stoneman but the picture of him sitting at his desk thumbing through record books, planning schedules, figuring out the financing of scholarships and staring out his window at the empty playing fields where he had once struggled so fruitlessly.

* * *

Near their table, suspended from the ceiling, hung a slowly revolving sphere covered with squares of variously colored mirrors. Its hundreds of reflections circled slowly around the room and, looking carefully, Sonny occasionally glanced fragments of himself, now in green, now red, now blue.
"It's called a mirror globe," the waitress had explained. Sonny and Stoneman sipped wine while they waited for their dinners. Still they exchanged small talk.

Finally Stoneman's face became earnest. He rested his forearms on the table and leaned closer to Sonny, who still searched for fragments of himself in the mirror globe. "Sonny, let me get right to the point." Sonny looked at him. "The reason I asked you to dinner tonight is that I have a proposition for you. Have you ever thought of coaching?"

"Sure, when I'm finished as a player."

"I mean now. At Capital U. Look, I've been coaching the baseball team this spring, but it's just too much for me." He continued, saying something about what Capital U. needs, about salary and responsibility and settling down and working with kids, but Sonny heard only some of the words and only as sounds. He looked back at the mirror globe and saw parts of himself spinning around the room, never coming together, never completing the image. He tried hard to see himself as a coach.

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I have been to Cooperstown and seen these little boys, their eyes big with dreams and expectations.
I have looked in the showcase windows and the golden plaques.

It is the image of him sprawled there in the dirt that endures.

"God damn that kid. Who is he, anyway?" the fan next to me muttered.

What does he do now, I wonder.