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Zerubbabel

by

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Zerubbabel

by

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Donald Ellis Secreast. Zerubbabel (Under the direction of John Foster West.)

Zerubbabel is a Hebrew name which means "a stranger at Babylon." This novel is an attempt to explore, through its major characters, the themes of alienation and estrangement. However, it is the central character, Dost Shustum, who is the main vehicle for the exploration of these themes. Alienation is treated as an objective condition. Actual physical removal creates alienation because it does create an alien. In a more cosmic sense, alienation also occurs when the soul moves or is moved. Estrangement, on the other hand, is an individual's reaction to his state of alienation. When a man views himself as being an alien, his feeling toward himself will be one of estrangement. What ties these two themes together is a third, unifying theme: captivity. The native who sees the alien, and the alien who sees himself estranged--both these observers realize that it is captivity that creates alienation. Anytime a person is displaced, either physically or spiritually, he must necessarily be re-placed in a different environment. This new place will be, until the alien is assimilated, a land and even an attitude of captivity.

With his eyes closed, Dost thought of the stove as a black dragon squatting in the middle of the room with its tail sticking into the chimney. It blew its hot breath on him, trying to melt the side of his face. It was really too small to be a dragon, but it was black, and it did make the room dizzily hot.

Dost looked at the stove that sat defiantly in the middle of the room like some fat midget in a dark suit, and he hated it. No. He didn't hate it. It was a sin to hate. If you hated something, you would be sent to Hell when you died. There you really burned. It was a lot hotter there than in this room with just the stove burning.

The boy wondered if people were as hot as stoves when they burned. It must be a good thing to be a stove he thought. The worst thing that can happen to a person is to go to Hell and burn, but a stove burns all the time. It doesn't have to worry about Hell. Suddenly, Dost felt a deep admiration for the stove. Admiration. Yes. That's what he felt. It was a good, big word, and he knew what it meant. Mrs. Justine had told him and the rest of the class what admiration was. Admiration was when somebody could do

something you couldn't do, but you didn't mind. He felt admiration for Lee Fang, too, because he had cleaned out the big circle last Friday and then busted three boys' noses because they tried to keep him from taking the marbles he had won. Mrs. Justine had told them what envy was too. Envy was a sin. It was okay to have admiration, but you couldn't have envy. Then they had cookies and sang "Sunlight In My World Today." Dost was glad that he had gone to church and didn't have to worry about Hell--not much anyway. The stove didn't have to worry about Hell either--not even as much as he did. And it didn't have to sing "Sunlight In My World Today." Singing made his throat sore, but the cookies were good. The stove grumbled and ashes rattled into the ash pan and the wind outside squeaked the chimney cover around and the stove settled down to its nasal consumption of fuel.

The sound came to Dost like a single, indrawn snore. It was the sound of his father sleeping. The breath of sleep coming muffled through a wall. A one way snore. Since he admired the stove, it should now be his friend. Inside, the fire looked out and beat against the mica windows. Once, he had found a fish. Its eye (the other had been eaten by ants that jittered like bits of nervous licorice) was dull like the window of the stove. It was all dried up. Skin all tight feeling like crumpled wax paper stunk and made him sick. But it was hot that day the way it was hot in this room. Fish couldn't be your

friends. Neither could a stove. But it was hot and the room was hot.

Dost closed his eyes again. They felt hot. His mouth was like his eyes. Only bad people were supposed to burn. Dost wondered why he felt like he was burning when he was good. It was really hard to be good. There were so many things to do that were bad. God always warned people when they were on the road to utter destruction. Preacher Mosey said utter destruction. That meant going to Hell. He said that God tried to tell people when they were not good enough. Somebody would die or get hurt in a car wreck or be sick for a long time and if they knew what God was trying to do, they would be saved. Having hot eyes was like being sick, but what had he been doing wrong? He didn't hate anything. That was about the worst thing you could do. Now, something besides the heat began to creep into the corners and into his skin. Maybe he wasn't safe after all. But what could he do? He had been told to sit still until Granny had been visited.

Granny was good. Everyone said she was. Even Preacher Mosey said so. She didn't have to worry about Hell either. When a preacher says you're good, you are. Preacher Mosey had never said, "Dost, you are good." Why aren't you good? If you don't do bad things, how can you be bad? Thinking bad things is like doing something bad. What does Granny think about?

He could see Teense as she lay in her bed. Even though

the door was shut, he could see her room. Grandpaw would be sitting close to the head of the bed. His chair had sat in the darkness of that bedroom for so long that it was no more than a shadow to Dost. It didn't have any color, shape, or size. It was just a dark thing that somehow held Grandpaw's . . . what did it hold? His Grandpaw was like his chair--something he had seen since he could remember coming along the dirt road that clawed into the woods on both sides in the summer when it became one, long weed garden. Grandpaw was like a cough. Yes, a cough you cough when dust gets in your nose. Grandpaw's eyes were now colorless. He didn't have a mouth, and his hands only came out when he wanted to pick the bumps on his face or when he wanted to blow his nose. No one had ever seen a cough, and no one had ever seen Grandpaw since he got old. He was probably the only person who could sit in that chair of his. He didn't have any arms and the chair didn't have any arms. No legs on Grandpaw; no legs on his chair. Grandpaw was a cough wearing a flannel shirt. The chair was like a cough too. When you run at night and swallow too much dark--that kind of cough was like the chair. One cough sitting on another cough. One was dry as an old man's hair. A cough of dust and too much sun. The other was like metal. It hurt too. The pain of cold water on a bad tooth. Bad things always seemed to hurt. A light cough sitting in a dark cough. Preacher Mosey never said Grandpaw was good. Grandpaw didn't look like he cared where he went

when he died. Did he ever worry about it? Granny did. Granny always said that God would take care of her, and she would sing in Heaven and not singe in the other place. The other place. That was Hell. But Granny never said Hell. She always said "the other place." Did Preacher Mosey ever say Hell? No. He said utter destruction. Thinking about killing somebody was as bad as killing somebody. Maybe thinking about Hell was as bad as going there. "Oh God, don't let me be in Hell," Dost prayed half-aloud to himself. "I won't ever say it anymore dear God. Just don't let me be there now or when I die."

Leaning his head against the window, Dost shivered as the coolness of the pane touched the tip of his ear. His ears were small for his head, but what they lacked in size, they made up for by the way they were stuck to his head. They fanned away from his skull so that when he was looked square in the face, he was also looked square in his ears. His nose, too, had the same habit of growing in an odd direction. While his ears leaned toward his cheek bones, his nose was turned up as though it were, in someway, attracted to his forehead. Two years ago, he had taken an eye examination. His were the worst eyes of all four third grade classes. It was a distinction he would never outgrow because two years later, he still had the thickest glasses in the whole school. Two years had passed since he had seen his eyes without the distortion of shatterproof lens. When he tried to look at his eyes without his glasses,

he had to get so close to the mirror that his eyes would cross. Through his glasses, his eyes looked smaller than they really were. In fact, the whole area of his head that fell under the influence of his spectacles looked all sucked in. Between his forehead and the top of his cheeks was a small canyon that produced an illusion of a very prominent forehead and a very pronounced cheekbone. This illusion was heightened by his seemingly small eyes. They were supposed to be blue, but they were really more like the shadow of something blue.

"Grandpaw built this house," Dost said to himself as his eyes wandered around the room. He helped build Preacher Mosey's house too. There is this room with the stove and the cupboard. The stove sits on the right. Is that right? Yes. The stove sits on the right, making noises like an empty stomach and not having to be afraid of Hell. My head is leaning left against the window. And next to the window, night is falling. Where does night fall from? It didn't look like it fell. It grew from the tops of the trees across the road. Yes. Now night is growing all across the sky and is beginning to push against the windowpane. Straight in front of me is the door to Granny's room. It is gray and old and faded and so is Granny. Behind the door is a room like this one except it doesn't have a stove. In the corner is a fireplace. On the other side of the room is Granny's bed, but she will not have her teeth because they are in a little tub on the mantel. Granny is

sick and wrinkled and dry and so is her door. Both of them make the same kind of noise when they try to talk. Like the sound you make when you try to break a piece of green wood. New wood and old doors and dry Granny--same noise makers. Her teeth tub is pink glass. It has four angels who hold it up, and its legs are their legs. Sometimes, if you look hard enough, you can see the teeth smiling through the angels' wings. Because she dipped snuff, the teeth are stained brown, but Granny doesn't use her teeth much anymore so no one worries about her messing up her false teeth. How many people are with Granny in her room now? Grandpaw, Uncle Rob, Aunt Helen, Daddy, Mama, Dove, and Nelly. That makes seven people. Grandpaw is in his chair; Uncle Rob and Daddy will be standing. They always stand and talk in low voices. Uncle Rob is bigger than Daddy, but he stoops more. Uncle Rob is like Grandpaw. You can never really see his face.

The door which Dost had been studying opened and Nelly slipped through it in such a way that she appeared to have her semi-circle of a nose glued to the door's edge. Taking one last look into the sickroom, she gently closed the door and turned to face Dost. She had never had any particular shape that Dost could remember. He had once seen a bundle of old clothes tied up in a sack. Since then, Nelly had always reminded him of that bundle. Her hair had once been long and yellow, but Dost had only seen it as it was now--colored like a very old photograph

and clinging close to her skull like some giant, withered hand.

"Has Loan come yet?" she croaked as her eyes searched beyond Dost and into the small kitchen that adjoined the room where he sat.

"No," answered Dost, knowing the answer would make Nelly more nervous than she already was.

"I told him to be here. I told him to be here," fretted Nelly.

Uncle Rob came out of the room in much the same way Nelly did. He didn't bother to close the door.

"Are you going to be sick, Aunt Nell?" he asked in a voice like water running slowly from a spigot.

Dost wondered if he talked the way he did because of his nose. It looked like a pointed potato.

"I told Loan to be here. He knows good and well this is supposed to be Teense's last night."

"Well, look. I'll go out to the house and call--see if I can get in touch with him. You go on back in with Mama."

Nelly crept back through the door, keeping her nose close to the edge as she did when she came out.

"You getting along okay sport?" Rob asked Dost.

"I guess . . ." began Dost, but he was interrupted by a yawn.

"As sleepy as you are, you ought to let me take you out to the house. You can sleep with your cousin--help him

baby-sit with his liddle brother."

"I'll just wait for Mama and Daddy," answered Dost, feeling more hungry than sleepy.

"They're going to be here a good liddle bit," warned Uncle Rob.

"That's okay," lied Dost as he felt the wooden chair get a good liddle bit harder and a good liddle bit straighter.

"You want to wait for your Mama, don't you? Well, do what you want. I'll see you a liddle later."

Rob picked up his windbreaker from the table where Dost was sitting and went out through the kitchen.

When Dost sat in the room that served as living room, dining room, and den, he felt as though he was at the bottom of some hole. The only source of light was a single, naked bulb that glared like a dying sun. The corners of the room were only visible during the day. As day faded, they darkened into roundness, shrinking the room until only the ceiling around the bulb could be seen. Sitting in one of these rooms at night was like sitting in a well, looking up at the sun. Just as Dost was getting ready to go join the people standing around his Granny's bed, even though his father had told him to stay out of the room, he heard the kitchen door open.

"You mean she ain't dead yet?" Loan asked, more to himself than Dost.

"No," replied Dost needlessly.

"What they got you waitin' out here for, Preacher?"

Teense would want you to be in there by her bed."

"Daddy told me to stay out here," replied Dost, not liking the way Loan called him preacher.

"You know, you're just about to let the fire go out, Preacher," observed Loan. He enjoyed pointing out the boy's failings. "Course, your job as preacher is to keep things from burning instead of makin' 'em burn. Right?"

"I don't know."

"Well, not being a preacher, I can keep the stove lights burning." In the process of closing the stove door, Loan held on to it just a little too long, blistering his finger. "Damn stove," he muttered.

It always made Dost afraid when people talked the way Loan did. "Uncle Rob went looking for you," he said, trying to stop Loan's cussing.

"He didn't find me," replied Loan; noticing the fright in Dost's voice, he added, "Damn him."

"Where was you at?" asked Dost, trying to sound friendly.

"I was with this girl . . . no, by God, she was a woman," Loan remembered aloud.

"Was she pretty?"

"That ain't important. Willing. She was willing. That's what's important."

"Willing to do what?" asked Dost with real interest.

"Fuck," replied Loan simply, knowing what such a word would do to such a boy as Dost.

He wasn't disappointed. Dost, although he didn't know exactly what the word meant, did know that next to cuss words, it was the worst word you could think about. It sounded evil and dirty. It was the sound you made walking in black mud. It was the sound you made when you broke a jar of spoiled mayonnaise playing in the garbage dump. It was the smell of spoiled things thrown away where, when the jar broke and the mayonnaise ran out, it was white and yellow and flies buzzing and mud that worried your feet and made you tired and worried your head and made you want to close your eyes and pray and be safe.

"Do you know what that word means?" asked Loan.

"No," said Dost, not wanting to claim the evil of the word.

"Let me tell you, Preacher," began Loan.

"No," choked Dost. "I'm hungry, Loan," he continued frantically.

"Preachers ain't supposed to be cowards."

"What do you mean?"

"Never mind," said Loan, tiring of his game. "Go see what you can find in the cupboard."

Dost rose from the chair weakly and went to the corner where the cupboard stood stretching to the ceiling.

"Quaker Oats is all I see," said Dost timidly.

"Then Quaker Oats is all you'll eat," mimicked Loan.

"Is it okay to eat 'em raw?" asked Dost.

"Well, I ain't gonna cook the damn things for you," whispered Loan indignantly.

"I--I didn't mean that," stammered Dost, quite frightened of Loan's pretended anger. "It won't hurt me to eat 'em like this will it?"

"I'm gonna hurt you if you ask me anymore questions." Shakily, Dost started to put the oats back on the shelf.

"You said you was hungry," accused Loan.

"I know."

"Preachers ain't liars. If you don't eat, you'll be a liar."

Lifting the lid off, Dost looked at the brown flakes.

"Don't stand there in the corner like some kinda damn orphan. Eat at the table."

Dost sat down at the table and stuck his hand into the cardboard cylinder. They were very dry--like little flakes of brown dust. But he felt Loan's eyes watching, so he put a handful into his mouth. There was the almost tasteless sweetness of oats, but the dryness seemed to draw all the moisture from the very top of his head. As he fought an impulse to gag, the door to his grandmother's room opened and his father snapped, "Get in here, Dost." Choking and swallowing, Dost obeyed his father.

When his grandmother had become bedridden, she had insisted that no electricity be used in her room. She

insisted that the smell of it made her sick. Two kerosene lamps lighted the room, holding their flames like shivering butterflies. One sat at the head of the bed on a small table. Its light barely touched old David Shustum's head. All Dost could clearly make out about his grandfather's head was his hair. It rose from the darkness of his collar like a thread of smoke from a chimney. Drowsily, it floated up, following the contour of the old man's head, and finally, it swirled around the crown of his head, the way smoke swirls flat on a cloudy day. The tip of his nose was illuminated by the lamp's glow. Briefly, Dost thought of a three-quarter moon that he had once seen floating, watching the smoke crawl from a smokestack of Morning's Furniture Factory. The other lamp sat on the mantle and illuminated the pink box holding Granny's teeth. Everyone stood in the shadows, and the false teeth were the only things that smiled. A hand he recognized as his father's led him by the shoulder to the side of his grandmother's bed.

"Your Granny wants to talk to you, Dost," he heard his mother say.

The room was silent. Granny Shustum spoke so quietly she almost didn't disturb the silence, "Dost?"

With his mouth full of what felt like paste, Dost gargled, "What, Granny?"

"Dost?"

"What, Granny?" a little louder, but still gargled.

"Dost?"

"What, Granny?" still louder and even more gargled as the oats seemed to grow into a larger wad.

"Get closer so she can hear you," ordered his father, "and stop making that noise."

Dost bent down by the bed and touched his grandmother's arm.

"Dost?"

Remembering his father's warning, he swallowed--trying to force down the dough-like mess in his mouth. Half went down, but the other half paused and then entered his windpipe as he started to answer. He buried his head in his grandmother's blankets as he was shaken with a spasm of coughing.

"Stop crying, Dost, you'll upset Teense," his father said in a harsh whisper.

Dost wished that he was crying but the oats floated down into his chest like snowflakes with razorblade edges, and he coughed until tears did burn his eyes.

"Oh, sweet Dost," murmured his grandmother. She tried to put her hand on his head but succeeded only in scratching his ear with her thumbnail. Dost's father laid the old woman's hand on top of the boy's shaking head.

"Don't cry, liddle angel," she whispered. "Your Granny's just fine."

Drawing his first clear breath since he had put the oats into his mouth, he looked into the old face. His face, still wet with tears, shone in the lamplight. Granny Shustum

opened her eyes for the first time in three days, and they were just shadows moving like dark things swimming at the bottom of a river. Dost saw this, and she closed them again.

"You really love your Granny, don't you," she said. "Don't cry for me. I'm on my way to Glory. Oh Jesus take my hand. Dost, you're going to be a preacher. That's good. Heaven is waitin' for me--the gates are bright and open. Dost--me and you will be there together. Dost, you're a good child. Stay with God. Always love Him. Don't let people change you. They'll try. The old Devil's always trying to get us. He's got Loan. Loan's mean. Stay away from him. God will deal with Loan. You just stay the angel you are."

No one spoke for a little while.

"Is she dead?" breathed Nelly between sobs.

Dost's father leaned close to the bed. He looked up and said, "No. I guess she just doesn't have anymore to say to Dost."

The next night, when Dost's mother and father came home from Granny's, his mother's face was all red, and she didn't speak to him.

The day of the funeral was warm--unseasonably warm for the middle of March. Unhappy that such a day had to be used for a funeral, Dost sat thinking beside his mother.

Today, Granny will be buried. Here Granny will be buried. Over there under that tent where the flowers are

all tumbled together is where her grave is at. Put bunches of roses all over my coffin. Roses to deaden the clods as they fall. Roses to deaden. Roses to the dead. Rose from the dead. Rose dead. Dead roses. Red roses.

"Mama, can I take off my coat?"

"No. Now sit still."

My sweat makes me tickle. What did Mama call warm that tickles? It crawls down my side dragging a feather. What did she call it? Prickle. Yes. That's it. Prickle heat. I've got prickles and my skin is wiggling. Are there little bumps on my stomach?

"Mama, can I take off my coat?"

"No. Now be quiet. Here comes your Granny."

The casket with Granny inside. There's Uncle Rob, Daddy, and Dick on one side. Uncle Andrew, Troy, and Loan on the other side. Why Loan? Nobody wanted him.

"What's Loan doing there, Mama?"

"He's a pallbearer."

"Granny didn't want him. He talks dirty."

"Ssssh!"

Dost was outraged. Loan would try to mess things up. He had no right to be here.

"Why's he up front with Uncle Andrew?"

"Ssssssh!"

Everyone watched as the casket was carried to the grave. The tattered edge of the funeral canopy hiccupped with the breeze that fanned the uncut cemetery grass and

carried the smell of carnations and ferns to where Dost sat. It was the smell of Nelly and pink teeth dishes, and to Dost, it was here and grassily scratching away from him. He watched as the six men and their burden approached the hole. Flowers crowded under the canopy, and some of the larger arrangements had been blown over by the wind. Loan put his foot through one of these toppled wreaths. It worked its way around his ankle and banged against his other ankle when he tried to walk. He began to stumble. The other five men didn't seem to notice the young man's difficulty, and it wasn't until he had knocked over a large spray of pink carnations in the shape of a heart that they realized they were on the verge trampling him in an arrangement of geraniums. Loan stuck out his hand, searching for some support, but all he did was punch a hole through the side of the funeral home tent. In desperation, he heaved the casket back, ripping his suit and blanching his face. Preacher Mosey, who was beside the grave, caught the loose edge of the casket before it knocked the struggling pall bearer in the head. Loan fainted.

It didn't take long to revive him, and when he did come around, he said he was feeling pain.

"Did you break anything?" asked Preacher Mosey.

"I don't know. I hurt down in my gut," replied Loan.

"Can you walk?"

"Help me up, and I'll see."

Preacher Mosey and Uncle Rob lifted Loan to his feet and walked him towards a chair.

"Nothin's broke, but it sure as hell hurts to walk," Loan grimaced to Rob.

"You got a real problem," replied Rob, nodding his head.

The whole episode held Dost spellbound. He now knew why Loan had come to the funeral. It was a miracle. The Lord works in mysterious ways. Preacher Mosey said that many times. Mysterious ways and wind combed through the grass showing its dry stalks, and it brought to Dost the smell of carnations and ferns and old women in black dresses until all the smell had been blown away and there was only the noise of the old, felt canopy, hiccupping with the breeze.

Dost shifted in the pew, and he felt his head begin to hurt. He did not want to think about God or Jesus or why he had stayed for preaching service this day. Keeping his thoughts under his tongue so that the Almighty could not see them, he wished--wished so hard that his body ached--that he had never talked to Winky Bynum, that he had never gone to see Uncle Rob's new house with his cousin, that he had never opened the basement door while looking for his cousin.

Winky Bynum, better known to the Redbriar adult community as Sylvester Bynum, was the child prodigy of

Redbriar. He was not a musician, or a painter, or an athlete. Sylvester Bynum was more in the category of a child miracle than a child prodigy. Sylvester had been called to preach when he was in the fifth grade, and before he had mastered long division, he had mastered eternal truth, eternal life, and eternal happiness. A year had passed since he had first stood shaking behind the pulpit. His voice had cracked that day of his first sermon, and he had cried as he gave the invitation for sinners to come home, come home. The whole congregation had been moved by the pudgy child whose red hair had flashed like flames as he shook his head in denial of Satan's lies and the world's damning pleasures. As the invitational hymn was sung, Sylvester stood with just his heels on the edge of the pulpit, his face glistening with tears and sweat, his hair seeming to glow as if he were the son of some Sun. Then he lifted his hands slightly, and slowly, he raised his arms and beckoned all to come who would.

Sunday morning found Dost sitting on the front pew. He had talked to Sylvester as they walked home from school on Friday afternoon. He told Sylvester about what had been happening to him all week.

"It always happens when I think about things I'm not supposed to think about or do something I'm not supposed to do," he explained to Winky.

Winky was silent except for the crunch of the peanut butter and crackers he was eating. "And you really get so

you can't see?" he asked.

"Aw, I can see a little. I mean things don't go black. They go white. Do you know what I mean?"

"No," answered Winky. "What's it like?"

"I don't know. It's like a piece of light right in the middle of where I see."

"Still don't know what you mean."

They walked on in silence, and Winky pulled three Oreo cookies from the canvas-colored notebook he carried.

"Want one?" he asked Dost as he unwrapped the wax paper and held his notebook under his arm.

"Yeah," said Dost. "You want to do something after supper?"

"Nope. I've got to work on my sermon for Sunday."

"You preaching Sunday?"

"Yep."

"Why don't you do your schoolwork like you do your sermons? You never get your homework done. Mrs. Snark would be real surprised if you could do arithmetic the way you preach."

"You think so?" asked Winky, unimpressed by Dost's description of his potential.

"Sure. How can you preach so good but make such bad grades?"

"Because school ain't heaven, and Mrs. Snark ain't God," replied Winky as he swallowed the last of his Oreo.

"Maybe something's wrong with your eyes," said Winky,

resuming consideration of his friend's problem.

"I just had my eyes checked last week. Besides, I only can't see for a few minutes and then the other things happen."

"You're right. Eye trouble wouldn't make your head numb."

"My tongue gets numb too."

"Well, that's part of your head."

"And my hands get that way too."

"I never heard anything like that. Ain't there any way you can tell me how you can't see?"

"I've only done it twice. Monday was the first time. That's why I didn't come to school. Mama thought I was getting the flu or something, but when all I got was a headache, she thought I was just watching television too much."

Behind them, the school buzzer droned an electric honk, signalling to the teachers that it was now time to release the children who rode the buses. Dost looked over his shoulder at the school. "I'm glad I walk instead of ride the bus."

"Me too," agreed Winky. "Ten minutes is too long to stay in school after the first bell rings. I've got better things to do than to listen to Mr. Grady call out bus numbers."

The windows of the two-story school building formed a geometrical universe of reflected suns against a background

of brick. Each pane glared upon the dandelions that grew with the wild onions and puff balls in the stretch of green that served as the school's front yard and as the stage for May Day activities. Stern and unblinking, like the stare of an angry old woman, the sun-reflecting windows burned into Dost's eyes as he looked at them.

"Winky, look at the school windows."

"Okay." Winky glanced over his shoulder, holding a licorice whip between his teeth and dragging the loose end of it across his shoulder. He looked at Dost and asked, "Now what do you want me to do?"

"No. Look at them for a long time," instructed Dost.

"Oh," said Winky, stuffing the six inches of black cord into his mouth. He turned, facing the school, heaved a deep breath, and stood staring at the glare with his hands on his hips and his notebook still under his arm.

"Now look at me," said Dost. "How do I look?"

"What do you mean?"

"Don't things look speckled?"

"Yeah. Speckled."

"That's the way I got Monday. I didn't see but one speckle though. You know, it was like I had looked at a light bulb for a long time. That's what it was like. It's like that light you see after you look away from the light bulb."

"Yeah. I've done that before, but it never just happened. I always had to look at a light bulb before I

could see anything like that."

"You think it might be God trying to tell me something, Winky? I mean that's what I figured since it only happened when I thought bad things."

"What bad things did you think?" asked Winky.

"Well, Monday, when I got up, I didn't have my homework. I knew Mrs. Snark would get mad so I got mad and I--I wished . . ."

"What'd you wish?"

"I wished she would get killed or die before she got to school so she wouldn't get mad at me for not doing the work," sputtered Dost, bowing his head with shame.

"Um," mumbled Winky, pushing his eyebrows into the top of his nose so that he looked like the angel kicking Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden.

"I didn't really mean it. Honest, Winky. Really I didn't. I was sorry when I thought it then; only before I could ask forgiveness, my eyes got the way they did. I didn't pay too much attention, but when my head and tongue and hands got numb like they were froze, I got scared."

"Why didn't you tell your Mama about it?"

"She doesn't understand how God works, Winky. I mean she believes in Him and Jesus and heaven, but she doesn't understand Him. She has too much work to do to worry about stuff like that," explained Dost.

"Oh," replied Winky, not sounding too convinced.

"The second time it happened was Wednesday. We were

outside. You were absent Wednesday."

"My sinuses were infected again," said Winky with the air of one who has a condition that no one else quite understands.

"We had to hang around the swings because the ball field was muddy, and I was watching people swing. Jody Mander was swinging closest to me, and she was wearing a dress and when she swung frontwards, I could see her underwear," here Dost broke off, very ashamed once more.

Winky had stuffed his lower lip under his upper lip so all that was under his nose was his upper teeth and his chin. "HMMMMUUHH," he breathed through his chin and teeth. "And you got blinded again when you saw her like that?"

"Not just then. I wondered what it would feel like to touch her there, and then I knew I was thinking something bad--real bad. I got nervous and that's when the light came again."

"Did you go home?" asked Winky, rubbing the saliva off his lower lip with his finger.

"No. I sat down under a tree, and I got better before recess was over. Except my head hurt, and it still hurts when I shake it."

"You may be like Saul of Tarsus. It's funny because that's what my sermon's going to be about on Sunday. God might be calling you the way he called Saul." As he said this, Winky opened his mammoth notebook and pulled out one of the Gideon New Testaments.

Dost always felt uneasy when Winky showed off his righteousness. Winky's holiness squeezed something inside of him--maybe his lungs. He was afraid of Winky's goodness in much the same way he was afraid of Loan's meanness. His friend seated himself on the upper lip of a ditch that ran along the side of the road. He was thumbing through the onion skin pages of the New Testament.

"Here it is. I've got it marked in my Bible at home," explained Winky, looking through a red crescent of hair. "I am reading from the Acts of the Apostles, chapter nine, verses one through nine: 'And Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest, and desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, that if he found any of this way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem. And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven: And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks. And he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do. And the men which journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice but seeing no man. And Saul arose from the earth . . . ' Now get this,"

interjected Winky solemnly, "' . . . and Saul arose from the earth; and when his eyes were opened, he saw no man; but they led him by the hand, and brought him into Damascus. And he was three days without sight . . .'" In this phrase, Winky emphasized three as though the whole universe turned on that word. When he read "without sight," he raised his eyes to Dost, feeling as if this was proof of Dost's kinship with Saul. He ended his verse in a matter-of-fact voice with the line, "' . . . and neither did eat nor drink.' You ain't a Christian are you?"

"I go to church," pleaded Dost, beginning to feel that fear that Preacher Mosey would call conviction.

"But you ain't confessed that you believe Jesus to be the Son of God, have you?"

"I believe He is though," Dost said a little desperately.

"I know that, but to prove you really mean it, you got to make a public confession."

"Why?" whined Dost.

"To show you ain't ashamed of what you believe. If you're ashamed of Christ, He'll be ashamed of you. You never know that you really believe Jesus is your Savior until you tell the whole world. You can't deny Christ without Him denying you."

"I'm not ashamed of what I believe," Dost declared weakly.

"You're staying for preaching Sunday, ain't you?" questioned Winky.

"Well . . . yeah, I guess so."

"Then that'll be your chance. It'll be easier if you sit on the front pew. That way, you won't have to worry about walking so far. The first step is always the hardest, but the closer you are, the easier it is to make it."

"Okay," agreed Dost, feeling the scalp of his stomach turning to frost.

"Don't worry about anything, Dost. I'll be praying for you," said Winky as he pulled a mashed Moonpie from his notebook. "You want half?" he asked between his teeth and the paper of the wrapper he was trying to bite open.

"No," said Dost, whose whole stomach had now turned to ice.

"Want to come in?" asked Winky as they crossed into his grandparents' front yard.

"I guess I better get home," answered Dost, wondering how he would live with himself until Sunday.

"Maybe I'll see you tomorrow sometime," said Winky as a farewell.

"Yeah," returned Dost.

I know you can't be ashamed of Jesus, thought Dost as he crossed the plowed field that separated his house from Winky's. I and my Father are one. He that believeth in me believeth also in Him that sent me. He that confesseth me before men, him will I also confesseth to my Father who art in heaven hallowed be thy name thy kingdom come thy will be done--Lord, what wilt thou have me do on Earth

so I can get to heaven give us this day give me a chance our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses so we won't be prosecuted by being sent to the place of torment as we forgive those who trespass against us and lead us not into temptation so we won't be afraid to make that first step or not even go to preaching service at all but deliver us from evil, and death, and burning after we die, and dark places for thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory for ever and ever, Amen, Amen, Amen, Amen.

Saturday had come and gone and Dost had resolved to follow Winky's advice. As he made his way down the hall that led to the church auditorium, he met his Uncle Rob.

"Dost, are you getting along okay?" he asked.

"Yes sir."

"I was just wondering. Your cousin Roger told me about you falling into the basement. That's a good liddle ways to fall."

Dost shivered, remembering last Sunday how he and his cousin had gone to look at the new house Rob was building. Roger had suggested a game of hide and seek.

"Well, I'm glad to hear that you're okay. It did shake you up a liddle didn't it? Roger said you were pretty scared."

"It was just dark down there and"

"Well, you're lucky that we hadn't poured the concrete for the floor. I'd just about bet money that that red dirt floor is a sight softer than concrete," he laughed

through his potato nose and patted Dost on the shoulder as he left.

Remembering where he was headed, Dost turned to the double doors leading into the auditorium, and for a moment, he wished that religion didn't have to work the way it did. He clinched his teeth as he went through the doors, held his breath as he walked past the pulpit, and he didn't start breathing again until he was seated on the end of the center, front pew where he stared at his shoes. The smell of lilies lifted his head, and he saw old Mrs. Bynum, Winky's grandmother, fixing the flower arrangement on the small altar table that stood in front of the pulpit.

Satisfied with her work, she turned the way most old women turn, moving first her shoulders and then following them around by taking small steps with her feet.

"Dost. How are you?" she asked in a voice as vagrant as the scent of the lilies.

"Fine, Mrs. Bynum."

"I was talking to your Aunt Nelly. She is awfully proud of you. She tells me you're going to be a preacher too."

"I don't know."

"We're awfully proud of Sylvester. We're happy he made the choice he did," said Mrs. Bynum, forgetting briefly that there was anyone in the auditorium with her.

For a while there was a silence that only the lilies seemed to be comfortable in. Dost looked at the white bugles

blowing out their smell, and looked at Mrs. Bynum, who looked like she might have once smelled like the flowers she grew instead of sounding like them. But now, her skin was the color of a book-preserved carnation, and it was all pulled down below her chin where it hung and dangled and jiggled with each movement of her head. Her forehead and her cheeks suffered the strain of having the flesh pulled to her chin because her skull seemed to be straining to pop out of its cover. Her cheeks appeared to have been polished by a dirty cloth. They were glossy, but the colors were too smeared to really shine.

She rubbed her hip and said, "It certainly is a blessing to see young people like you taking a real interest in God's work. Bless you, Dost."

Dost appreciated the blessing; he felt like he needed it. You can't have too many blessings, he thought. Sitting on the front pew isn't so bad. Maybe too many people won't be here. No. It's wrong to think that way. You should always want the church to be full. It's not far to the pulpit. Ten feet? No. Not that much. Eight feet. Seven feet. Yes. Seven feet. That's about right. I can just about fall that far. If I can't walk when the time comes I'll just fall. Seven feet isn't too far to fall. I fell ten feet last Sunday. It was probably more than that. Twelve feet or thirteen feet. Got to be careful not to hit the altar table. Me or it might get hurt. Don't break the lilies. And the offering plates are on it too. Four wooden plates

with green felt in the bottom so the money won't rattle when people drop it in.

Preacher Mosey, who looked more like a used car salesman than a minister, took the four steps that led up to the pulpit in two strides that revealed his nylon socks. They were thin, and Dost could see Preacher Mosey's skin underneath, but some of the elastic strings were darker or thicker than others, and they crept across his ankles like burst veins. The blue of his socks over his skin gave his ankles the appearance of having been beaten until they were bruised blue with ruptured veins. The preacher's face looked like it had been beaten too, only it was the color of an over-ripe strawberry. His ears and jaw were covered with splotches that were shaped like young mimosa blossoms. Dost had once asked what the marks were made by--he couldn't remember who it was he asked--yes he could. It had been his daddy. He had been frostbitten in the war. That's what had made the marks. He had asked his daddy because he had the same kind of marks on his ears. Frostbite.

Whenever Preacher Mosey just talked and didn't preach, his voice sounded like two crumpled up paper bags rubbing together--a coarse rubbing and scratching of brown paper bags. He had once had an operation on his throat. They had taken a tumor out and now his voice rustled like paper lunch bags filled with wax paper and cracker crumbs. He was reading the announcements for the coming week.

". . . and Sister Nelly Shustum has made a special

request that we remember her son, Loan, in prayer. He's fixing to undergo surgery for the third time this year since he had his accident at Sister Teense's grave. I'm sure all of us will want to remember Loan in our prayers.

After Preacher Mosey had led the congregation in their opening prayer, he announced, "We have a special treat for you today. We got Brother O.D. Podges to come and sing for us today. Some of you probably haven't ever had the pleasure of hearing him sing, but we finally got him here to bless us with his wonderful music. The Lord works in mysterious and wonderful ways." When he had said this, Preacher Mosey turned to the piano that sat in the right-hand corner of the auditorium. Hidden by the piano, so that Dost could only see the tops of their heads, was O.D. Podges and his wife. He had a guitar that looked as though a person could get splinters from it. It was held around his neck by a broad strap that was woven by some Indian who apparently was very fond of red and blue. Had the strap not been grimy and faded, O.D. Podges would not have been let into the church because it was more heathen in its color and design than it was Christian.

His wife, dressed in a seersucker dress which was too old to make her of any interest to the ladies in the congregation, led him by the elbow to the pulpit steps. She whispered into his ear, and he put his foot gingerly forward--toe first, working up and down as though he expected the four steps to bite him. Taking the steps one

at a time, with his wife still holding his elbow, he got to the top of them and waited while Preacher Mosey strode over to him. Without thinking, Preacher Mosey put his left hand on O.D.'s shoulder and extended his right hand. O.D. just stood there, both hands clasped to the neck of his guitar. His wife cleared her throat, and talking to the floor, she mumbled, "Shake hands, O.D.."

Leading him to the center of the pulpit, just to the right of the rostrum, the minister asked, "What are you going to sing?"

"I'm gonna sing two songs, Preacher Mosey," answered O.D., looking vaguely over the heads of the people in the congregation.

O.D. Podges resembled a frog. He was not green, but his face had the wide, simple look of a frog. His clouded eyes rested roundly on top of smooth cheeks that melted into his jowls. He had no nose to speak of, and his mouth was as thin and long as the brown hair that curved greasily across the top of his head. He was shaped like a frog, too. His blue suit--too large by ~~three sizes~~ or more--hung on him like dark, shiny flesh.

Dost watched the man as he tuned his guitar. His hands were the color and texture of a clump of broomstraw. He had fingers like knotted cords of hemp. The congregation began stirring as O.D. continued to tune. Obviously, some of the sounds reached him because he smiled, still looking blankly ahead and said, "I'm sorry to take so long about

tuning up, but you know what the Bible says: If thine A offend thee, pluck it out, and that's what I'm standing here trying to do."

There was a murmur of chuckles led by the minister of music.

"Well, I guess I'm ready," O.D. decided aloud. "I'm going to sing 'Just a Rose Will Do,' and I hope to be playing the same song on my guitar as I sing."

O.D. Podges was left-handed, and he had never been told that most guitars were made for right-handed people. At least, that's the impression that he gave. Instead of changing the strings or learning how to play right-handed, he compromised his ability with his instrument. He played right-handed with his left hand. This was accomplished by putting his left hand over the neck of the guitar instead of under it. His strings were more like rubber than metal, and they vibrated with a soaring twang. He sang with the voice of a lovelorn side-show barker--a voice of people crowded together trying to walk in different directions. It was a melodious holler with the tempo of a Gregorian chant.

His mouth and his hands were the only things that moved as he sang. "When time shall come for my leaving, When I bid you adieu . . ."

At the end of the first verse, O.D. flicked his thumb and there was a soggy chwang chimed out.

"Don't spend your money for flowers, Just a rose will do."

A flick of his thumb and another chwang was heard.

"I'll go to a beautiful garden, At last when life's work is thru . . ."

Another chwang, in a chromatic key this time.

"Don't spend your money for flowers, Just a rose will do."

The chwang to the chorus was followed by a final thwump of his thumb against the body of the guitar to indicate to those who might not know the song that verse one and chorus had just been sung. He followed the same pattern throughout the rest of the song.

After the hymn, the "amens" were controlled mainly by the members of the choir, but the front pew begrudged that right to them since they felt it the proper place of the choir to praise the music portion of the sermon.

O.D. rubbed his cheek with the side of his thumb, and for the first time since he had stepped into the pulpit, he closed his eyes as if some great pleasure was sparked by the touch of his hand against his face. As he placed his hand back upon the neck of his guitar, he opened his eyes slowly to once again stare through the parts in his audience's hair.

"Said I was going to sing two songs. I don't want to be found out a liar right here in the middle of this wonderful church, but I'm going to ask your choir director to sing with me. I can't do the bass part without sounding like I got inner-tubes for lungs." Think you can follow me

in 'Just A Little Talk With Jesus'?" O.D. asked Mr. Maker, the choir director.

"I'll sure try," Mr. Maker added, laughing.

The duet began, and Mr. Maker adjusted himself to the occasional chwangs that O.D. inserted to let the congregation know where they were in the song.

"Praise God!" shouted Preacher Mosey as he embraced finger-flexing O.D. Podges when the duet was over. Somehow when the preacher pressed the blind man to his chest, one of his coat buttons wedged itself between two guitar strings. In all the history of the Redbriar First Baptist Church, a minister had never been tangled up in two guitar strings, so it was understandable that Preacher Mosey was at a loss as to what to do.

"Er--Brother Podges . . ." began the minister uncertainly.

"Yes sir?" answered O.D., not quite sure what was happening.

"Well--first, I want to tell you how much all of us enjoyed that performance."

"I'm awful glad to hear that."

"And we all want you to come back."

"I'd be mighty glad to come back."

"Everybody here who feels like they got a genuine blessing from Brother Podges' being here today say 'amen,'" instructed the minister to his congregation.

"Amens" rang throughout the auditorium, but the minister was still buttoned to his guest. O.D. turned slightly in an effort to return to his seat, but he stopped when he felt the tug at his guitar.

"Shucks. What's wrong?" he asked, turning slowly back to look over the cowlicks of the congregation.

"Well . . . um--Brother Podges," explained the minister.

"What's happening?" questioned O.D., making a face that looked like a frog who was eating flies but didn't like their taste.

"It seems, Brother Podges, that we're stuck together," said Preacher Mosey.

"The last time I got stuck together with somebody in a church was when I married my wife," smiled O.D..

"I hope I can get along better with you than I do with her," he continued.

The blind man's calmness in the emergency brought a chuckle from the congregation. Slowly, as if the button was lodged in some vital organ rather than his guitar, O.D. slid his finger along the strings until he came to the point of union.

"You're about the most caught-up in my guitar playing as anybody I ever saw," joked O.D. as he loosened one of his strings.

When they were finally disengaged, Preacher Mosey walked O.D. to the edge of the pulpit, where Mrs. Podges took charge of him. Dost noticed that she had a strange

smile on her face, like maybe she knew something about her husband that no one else knew. O.D. had the same kind of smile.

After the offering had been taken up, and the ushers had shuffled with Sunday-suited swishes back down to the front to consolidate what had been collected, the congregation readied itself for the serious business of listening to a Sunday sermon.

Preacher Mosey rose from his chair to the right of the pulpit rostrum and strode to the microphone. "The men aren't out of the prayer room yet," he informed the church. "Brother Maker's gone back to see if they'll be much longer."

Looking down the length of the front pew, Dost tried to count how many more people could sit on it. Until Preacher Mosey mentioned the men in the prayer room, Dost had felt like the pew had an awful lot of space. He remembered now, however, that there was a handful of deacons who met a few minutes before the service to pray for lost souls and the success of God's Plan. All those men who met in that room were not just ordinary deacons-- they were prayer-room deacons. And since they were special deacons, they had to sit on the front pew. The front pew was more theirs than it was anybody else's.

Four more, thought Dost. Four more can sit on this pew. Vince Herman will be one of them. He's pretty tall, but he's skinny; he won't take up much room. Mr. Wineberger

is another one. He's not too big. He can use the space that Vince Herman doesn't use. Who else will there be? Fred Kirkle. He's big, and he runs the store that sells auto parts. His brother is big too and he's probably back there too. He is the dry cleaner. That's four but there's probably more back there. Room for four but there's probably more back there for prayer. Usually five come out. Or six. Or seven. Or eight. And they'll all want to sit here on the front pew. They always do. They stand around looking down at you smiling and holding their Bible in both hands until you scrooch up so they can have enough room to sit down, and then when they do sit down they have to put their arms on the top edge of the pew so there'll be enough room. They look like the boxers on television when they sit like that, and you can smell their sweat and see where their shirt is wet, but they don't care because they're deacons and good and going to heaven and everybody knows they believe that Christ Jesus is the Son of God.

Preacher Mosey had just finished a sentence that Dost was only dimly aware of. He had been staring intently at the red light that glowed on the metal box underneath the altar table. He had once asked the janitor what the box was. The janitor, a very short man with large arms and a broad chest, told him that the box controlled the microphone. When the microphone was on--he flipped a switch, the red light would be on. Dost looked up from the light to see the prayer room men come in through the door that the

head usher had taken the offering through a few minutes earlier.

One, two, three, four, five, six, and Winky makes seven, observed Dost. Only Winky won't be sitting here. He'll go to the pulpit. Here comes the other six though. The dry cleaner Kirkle is going to sit beside me. He looks like a dry cleaner.

As Dost thought, he became more and more aware of the thoughts he was trying to cover up. Like wrinkled blankets under a thin bedspread, his dread of what the service would bring out in him became more and more wrinkled as the spread of superfluous observations became thinner and thinner.

"I have said many times," began Preacher Mosey, "that the Lord works in mysterious ways. Many times those mysterious ways are very wonderful ways. He calls everybody to come to Him, but he also gives a special calling not everybody receives. We all know it's every Christian's job to witness to the world, but there are witnesses and there are witnesses."

Sylvester Bynum crossed his legs as he sat in the chair that Preacher Mosey had vacated for him, and he looked as if he might be embarrassed about what the preacher was saying about him. Dost wondered how anybody could be embarrassed having someone talk about how good they were.

"One person who has been called and who has answered is little Sylvester Bynum." Here Preacher Mosey waved his

right hand in Winky's direction. "He may still be young in years, but he has grown greater than a lot of people in spiritual stature since he started delivering God's Word . . ."

Looking back at the minister, Dost saw that Preacher Mosey was adjusting the microphone for Winky. Winky stood up and pulled at his pants leg because everytime he wore his knee-high socks, his pants did not want to hang as low as they were supposed to, and he did not like his pants hanging high when he was preaching.

Finally, he succeeded in getting his pants legs in their right places, but he looked as if he might have pulled his socks down in the process of getting his pants straight. Being dedicated as he was, however, he decided to stop worrying about such earthly matters and to direct his thoughts to higher things. As Preacher Mosey and Brother Maker moved the two chairs from the pulpit platform, Sylvester scratched his nose and unbuttoned his coat. When both chairs were removed, Preacher Mosey sat in the pew behind Peanut Nesvin's organ, and Brother Maker sat beside the homely piano player.

Buttoning his coat back up again, Sylvester settled himself behind the pulpit rostrum which came just about even with his chest. He opened his Bible, turned to where the pages were marked by thin metal bands, and looked out at the congregation from under the microphone that hovered

in front of his face like a large gnat.

"Well, here I am," began Sylvester. "I don't want anybody to think I don't like people to sit up here with me when I preach. Preacher Mosey and Brother Maker aren't sitting up here like they usually do because I've just got to move around. But you all know that the devil is everywhere--even in this pulpit. And he'll do everything he can to slow down somebody who is moving for Christ. And you know, I think that's what he tried to do to me three Sundays ago. I believe he tripped me when I was doing God's work. I'll tell you that he made me fall, but everybody else will tell you that I just wasn't watching where I was going."

Dost remembered his mother telling him about Winky falling down during his sermon. Winky gets excited when he preaches, thought Dost. The first time he didn't do it too much. He just cried a lot. Now, it's like he goes a little bit crazy. Not a little bit crazy--a whole lot crazy. Mama said Nelly had gone to the church where Winky was preaching and the regular preacher was sitting in the pulpit and Nelly said he was, Winky was, shouting that death was a'coming and hell was a'moving and if you had God on your side, you could swing through hell on the end of a rotten shoestring and that he was bound for the glory land only he was really headed for the chair where the regular preacher was sitting and he fell all over the chair and the regular preacher. Nelly said Winky's

Bible flew out of his hand and hit the preacher in the eye. So now they get the chairs out of his way. He didn't go to the doctor when he got hurt. None are open on Sunday-- just like the eye doctor when my glasses were broke. Closed on Sunday. See you in church. I've never seen the eye doctor here.

" . . . now I want you all to pray for me as I read Acts Nine, verses one through nine," concluded Sylvester.

I'll pray for you as you read Acts Nine, verses one through nine, thought Dost. But I don't know why because you don't need to be prayed for because you already know that you're going to heaven. All the preachers say pray for me as I do this or as I do that. They're not the ones who the light suddenly shines around from heaven. They can fall to the earth without that happening because they're not ashamed to pray in front of people or tell them they know Christ is the Son of God. They don't have to worry about going blind only not really blind but not able to see because it's like you looked too long at the sun. Saul saw the Son of God and I see the sun. Saul sees the Son and I see the sun. Only I'm not blind very long but Saul was blind for three days neither did he eat nor drink. Did his hands and tongue get numb when he was blind? Maybe that's why he didn't eat. Why persecutest thou me. If you don't accept Christ, you reject Him. If you don't love Him, you despise Him. Despise Him. That's like hating Him only worse and every blessing is also a

curse and persecuting is like despising someone. So if you don't love Christ, you persecute Him

Dost sank into an incoherent but powerful muddle of guilt, but some of Sylvester's sermon filtered into Dost as he sat worrying about where he would wind up spending eternity.

"Now when Christ appeared to Saul, Saul became afraid. Fear is what every man should feel if he must face God alone. A fear that must be so strong that it takes the strength from a man's knees. Look what happened to Saul. It says that he fell to the earth"

I fell to the earth last Sunday, remembered Dost. I didn't even know Uncle Rob's house had a basement. I thought that door was a closet. That's exactly the kind of place Roger would hide because he's not afraid of the dark and I am--but only sometimes--not all the time. Roger's never afraid of the dark though and that would be just the place he could hide and fear is what every man should feel and I felt fear when I opened that door and saw it was black as the iron stove that used to sit in Granny's living room only Granny's not living anymore--she's not even dying anymore because she's dead but she went to heaven so she's better off than me because I'm in the middle only there's not any middle just a breath and being afraid but not wanting Roger to know I was afraid because it was daytime and what was there to be afraid of except the dark but I knew Roger was probably hiding in

that closet only he wasn't hiding in it because it wasn't a closet--it was a door to the basement. I've never seen such a dark basement, but I thought it was a closet and I thought Roger was hiding in the dark . . .

"It's only natural to be afraid of God if you're his enemy. And that's exactly what Saul was. The highest officials of the land had given Saul permission to go out and search for Christians so that he could bring them back to the prison in Jerusalem. He was as much an enemy of God as old Lucifer himself. He was doing the devil's work. If you've ever wondered who can frighten man the most, here's your answer. For when Saul, filled with evil and hatred, came face to face with Christ, he fell to the ground trembling and astonished"

I trembled when I hit the ground too, Dost said to himself, feeling his head get a little dizzy. I put my foot in the closet and put my hand out to grab Roger if he tried to run away and there was nothing to touch. No Roger, no closet, no floor. There weren't even any stairs. I might not have even fell if the stairs had been there, but I just put my foot out and I kept on going over and then down headfirst like being cast into hell and the dark and going down with my legs kicking over my head like I was doing a somersault with my hands in front of me feeling nothing and not seeing anything until I hit the slimy floor. It was like somebody hit me. Stopping all at once like that. Thought I was going to fall forever until

the back of my head jarred--yeah, that's a good word because I rattled when I landed. Then my legs came down on top of my head. One of my shoes hit me in the forehead--like somebody was throwing rocks at me and I couldn't breathe so I laid there tangled up like a briar bush on the slimy floor in the dark, dark, dark, and finally I had to breathe but my chest was as hard as the way I landed and it wouldn't move enough to let me get a breath. It would move just enough to tell me that I couldn't breathe and it was dark and slimy and my head felt all swelled up like it was a new balloon just blowed up. I tried to breathe--did I make a noise? I must have--but maybe I didn't because nobody came to help me. Falling all on top of myself like I did must have kept me from making too much noise--and I didn't even know I was scared until I started seeing little speckles and at first I thought they were eyes looking at me but I still couldn't breathe. I was just laying there with my feet around my ears and my arms--my arms. I didn't even know I had them with me--maybe they had come off when I felt the floor was not in the closet--that couldn't be right though because I remembered stretching them out in front of me or down below me as I fell. Maybe they had broken off when I hit the ground but I couldn't really be sure. That made me more afraid to think of my arms laying away from me in the dark with those little eyes winking at me from all around. I would have screamed if I could have breathed. Just a breath that's all this life

is and I couldn't breathe then so it was like being dead-- dead and in the outer darkness of hell--without a hope, without faith, and without a prayer. There was no middle ground and I couldn't breathe so I wasn't alive--I went to hell and those eyes were fiends from hell looking at me-- black and silk and blinking. God don't let me die and go to hell . . .

"Every man must fall. We fall in all kinds of ways," shouted Sylvester as he paced the full length of the pulpit. "Adam fell from God. With that fall came all of man's downfall. Now we fall to every sin that comes our way. Now we fall to every illness that comes into our bodies. Now we fall to the death that waits for every man born into this world. Will you make that final fall after you die? That fall that lands you right in the middle of the lake of fire? Even though we've got to fall to death, our final direction can be up instead of down. Up to heaven."

Saying this, Sylvester took off his coat, threw it into the choir loft and began loosening his tie. His face was flushed, and the red quarter moon of hair was hanging above his eyebrow. He pointed in the general direction of heaven with his left hand.

At first, Dost thought that there was just another light on the microphone box in addition to the red switch light. Barely had he noticed it when he realized that it seemed to grow larger. From a pinpoint of brightness,

it grew into a less bright nail head. From the nail head, it kept spreading until Dost was all but blinded by a rug of dull light. Around its edges, he could still see.

Brother Kirkle's ear here, a lily there, Peanut Nesvin's foot here, Sylvester's upraised hand there. His arms got that sluggish awkwardness about them, and his tongue had exactly the same feeling as if something heavy had been sleeping on top of it. He became scared. He knew that this was surely a sign that God wanted him to humble himself.

When the invitation was over and the closing prayer had been said, Dost stood from where he had kneeled in front of the altar to confess his sins, and he was now ready to receive the right hand of Christian welcome. This meant that he had to have his hand squeezed blue by every man and woman in the church.

Sylvester was the first to shake his hand, and he was all sweaty from the work of his sermon and all smiling from the success of his sermon.

"Praise God," he said to Dost in a tone that made Dost feel like a converted Saul.

As he and Winky crossed Shoat Bridge, Dost paused to watch the cars as they came shimmering through the heat waves that wiggled broadly from the road. He wished that water flowed under the bridge instead of a highway, but hoping was not having. There really was not too much

one could do with a bridge that straddled a highway. A few years ago, he had amused himself by spitting on the cars as they went underneath, and sometimes, he would drop a rock or two. Now, he knew that such things were wrong so the bridge was little more than an interesting thing to look at, and it had little to no value as a source of amusement. Despite its seemingly worthless, Dost enjoyed crossing it. Something about the rough concrete and the millions of glittering pieces of quartz embedded in it made it almost alive. It had a personality--like a human being. It was not an interesting personality, but it was a friendly one.

Three months had passed since Dost had decided to spend eternity in heaven. It was July now. Winky had immediately adopted his convert and was teaching him the tools of the trade. Every religious function Winky attended, Dost attended: prayer meetings, revivals, fellowships, memorial services, more prayer meetings, and many other anti-sin and visitation concoctions. Still, almost three times a week, the light would come into Dost's eyes, and for a few minutes, he would feel like Saul on his way to Damascus. When he asked Winky why he still had his affliction, Winky told him that he was probably being warned of possible sins.

That made Dost feel very special. Eventually, he fully believed that his disorder was a gift from on high--a rattle put on his snake of sin. Chosen--that was how he

felt--chosen like Saul, like Mary, like Moses, like Joshua, like Joseph, like Daniel, like David, like Solomon, like the Apostles, like Winky. Winky had told him about sin being like a snake--only he was different because his snake had a rattle on it. That was about two months ago when Winky had counseled him concerning his blind spot staying with him. The bridge quivered like a cat's spine when one of Morning's furniture factory trucks groaned across it. It reminded Dost of what he had to tell Winky.

What'll he say? wondered Dost. What'll I say? That's a bigger question. I'm his disciple. His only one. Who'll go with him when he goes to witness? What'll he say? Winky can get pretty mad when something happens to work against his work for God. What'll I say? Maybe I shouldn't tell him until after we're moved. Daddy is going to be transferred--is that the way to start--maybe he won't know what transferred means. I didn't when I first heard it . . . if it's not in the Bible, Winky probably won't understand it

"Up there's Ray's store," Winky mentioned to make conversation. "We can get something to eat before we start our visitation."

Ray and Winky were close friends for two reasons. First, Winky helped Ray find his way to heaven, and second, Winky also helped him find his way to profits. He stopped at Ray's twice a day at least five days a week. When starting out on a pilgrimage to visit the sick and the

sinners, he would stop for prayer and refreshments, and when he returned from his trip, he would stop to return thanks and for refreshments. Winky would eat a complete meal while in the store, and when he left, he would be carrying another meal in his arms and pockets.

After the customary prayer, Ray asked, "Where you gentlemen going today?"

Dost never knew. He was only a disciple and not a navigator, so he just shrugged his shoulders.

Winky, after finishing his first chewing of a ham sandwich, replied, "We're going to stop at Mrs. Japerson's first. She's still sick"

"I didn't know that," replied Ray, hopping up on his counter with a concerned look. "I thought she was getting better."

"So did everybody," answered Winky, sitting down on a wooden drink case.

"You going to spend the whole day with her?" asked Ray.

"Nope. We can't stay too long with her. Visiting gets her tired," answered Winky, starting on the other half of his sandwich.

It gets me tired too, said Dost to himself. Am I wrong to say that? If I am, forgive me God. Ray sure has a lot of flies in this place. I'd like to drink another Pepsi, but it makes me use the bathroom if I drink too many. I wonder if flies ever use the bathroom. Mama says they're

nasty, and I know the jarflies bite you, but do they use the bathroom? I've never seen Winky use the bathroom either. Winky doesn't use the bathroom. He never goes at school. Winky doesn't use the bathroom. How would a fly use it if it did? I don't think it sits down. Maybe it lifts its leg like a dog, but if it did that, it would have to find a tree, or a light pole or a telephone pole, or a car tire. And then, which leg would it lift. A fly has so many. And when it did finally decide which leg to lift, it would still have to find that pole or that tree, or that tire. Those would be a little big though for a fly. Flies probably don't use the bathroom anyway. Neither does Winky. Winky don't--flies don't. Winky flies. What would a fly use to use the bathroom if it did? It doesn't really matter if you have anything to use or not because a frog doesn't have anything to use, but it uses the bathroom all the same. I'm not sure where its water comes from but it does come because the one I caught that day used the bathroom on me.

"Where else you going after you leave Mrs. Japerson's?" inquired Ray.

"You know where old Mr. Grayson used to live?" asked Winky, opening another Pepsi.

"Is it on down the road from Mrs. Japerson's?"

"Yeah. You know you go for about a mile till the pavement runs out then it's on down the dirt road for another mile or so."

"Why, that's a real old place--does it even have electricity?"

"I don't know. Probably not unless he got it put out there since he moved in."

"Since who moved in?"

"A fellow by the name of Loan Swal."

"Loan Swal!" exclaimed Dost.

"Yep," replied Winky between a chicken salad sandwich. "You know him?"

"He's my cousin. Who told you about him?"

"Preacher Mosey always gives me a list of people who have been mentioned by some church member. I think it was Mr. Swal's mother who wanted somebody to witness to him so she told Preacher Mosey, and he told me."

"Nelly told about Loan?" Dost asked himself more than the other two.

"If she's his mama," suggested Ray helpfully from under his avalanche of jaw muscles.

"What kind of good cakes have you got, Ray?" asked Winky, feeling ready for dessert.

"All my cakes are good," answered Ray, pulling a biscuit from his lunch bag.

"But what kind have you got?" asked Winky again, shifting his position on the drink crate.

"Well . . ." began Ray, leaning back to inspect his stock of cakes, "how much did you plan to pay for one

this time--five cent, ten cent, or fifteen cent?"

"You know, Ray," observed Winky, "we go through this every time I eat something here."

"Then you ought to know what I got by now," replied Ray.

"But I'm always hoping you'll have something new," Winky pointed out.

"Well, I don't," admitted Ray.

"Okay. Give me an oatmeal cake," said Winky.

"Fifteen cent one?"

"Yep."

"You what!" stormed Loan, in a voice unbecoming to a man talking to his mother.

"I told Preacher Mosey that I wanted somebody to come and talk to you."

"Somebody from the church?" asked Loan unnecessarily.

"Yes," answered Nelly, standing up and looking around for her pocketbook as she adjusted her bra strap.

"Mama, what the hell did you do that for?" Loan almost whined.

"That right there's one reason I did it," replied Nelly almost viciously. "You talk like you was brought up in that pool hall--heaven knows you spend enough time there to have been brought up in it--but you come from a Christian home, Loan."

"That right there's why I left home--because it

was Christian," returned Loan. "I got tired of it. Damn tired of it."

"Somebody ought to bust your mouth for talking like that," Nelly said, on the verge of a snarl.

"Now that's not the Christian way," Loan replied.

"Any way that'll straighten somebody like you out is the Christian way," rumbled Nelly deep from within her body and her convictions.

"If I was meant to be straightened, I'd have been straightened when I was in the hospital. I suppose you'll tell me that that was God's doing," challenged Loan.

"Don't you blaspheme, Loan."

"Why? Will He put me in the hospital again?"

"That's not anything to take lightly, Loan. You were sick. Real sick."

"And it came from heaven?"

"You were just being warned. It could've been a whole lot worse. A whole lot worse."

"You're telling me God ruptured me because I'm on my way to hell?"

"Don't you blaspheme, Loan."

"And all this time I thought I was ruptured because that God damned casket was too heavy."

"Loan, you shut your mouth if you can't open it without cussing!"

"Tell me, Mama, did He kick me or hit me with a stick?"

"Just shut your mouth, Loan, or you'll find yourself

sick with something else."

"Ain't it enough that a man's got to burn forever and ever. No. He's got to have his balls busted so he has to stay stooped over or harnassed with a truss."

"Somebody's got to talk to you, Loan."

"You told me already, and you've seen to it that somebody will."

"It's for your own good, Loan. I've tried. All the angels in heaven know I've tried, but you just won't listen. You never would listen to me or your Daddy."

"Maybe if you'd have hit me below the belt with a stick I'd have listened. That seems to be the way they do things in heaven."

"I'll pray for you, Loan. I hope you change before it's too late."

"Who brought you over here? Rob?"

"Yes. He's worried about you too."

"Well, he's worried about you right now," answered Loan. "He's blowing his horn for you."

"I guess I'll go then."

"You didn't really tell Preacher Mosey that you wanted somebody to come and talk to me--did you, Mama?"

"You're the one who jokes about God's work--not me."

"Damn, Mama," worried Loan, exasperated, "do you think somebody'll come?"

"They always do--especially when somebody needs talking to as much as you do. I told him you was in real bad need."

"When'll they come? Can you tell me that?"

"Rob's blowing his horn, Loan. I've got to go."

"Will Preacher Mosey come?"

"Not this week. He'll probably tell Sylvester Bynum. Preacher Mosey's visiting at a revival in East Redbriar, and he's been gone this week."

"Sylvester Bynum!" Loan exploded. "He's a child. A God damn kid. What's he going to tell me about sin? He's not old enough to even know what it is."

"You don't have to kill somebody to know murder's wrong," advised Nelly.

"You was bad enough, Mama. That's why I moved out here to this rat hole of a house. I don't like carrying water in from that damn well. I don't like stumbling around in the dark after the sun goes down. I don't like picking splinters from my ass after sitting in the outdoor john-- but I'd go thirsty, I'd break my neck, I'd shit in my pants before I'd live another day with you and your self-righteous bunk . . ."

"Loan . . . !"

"No. At least you've got something to be self-righteous about. You've slept with a man. You brought another sinner into the world. Me. And I'll go to the devil before I let you or a cradle-crawling red-headed, self-righteous, baby-fatted, heaven bound, raving Christian child tell me the error of my ways . . ."

Loan was raving himself, and his mother was speechless.

Rob, who had become worried about Nelly and about the drain his horn-blowing would have on his battery came through the fragile screen door that trembled insanely if opened with too much force. He heard Nelly say something understandable from where he stood, but he saw that she was speaking to a red-faced, panting Loan.

"I've been waiting a good liddle while. Is there something wrong?" inquired Rob.

"Why don't they send Rob to talk to me?" Loan asked his mother. "He's slept with a woman . . ."

"What?" asked Rob, knowing he had missed an important part of the conversation.

"Why he even smokes . . ." continued Loan, a little mockingly.

"What is this?" Rob asked, not liking to have a finger pointed at him.

"Sylvester Bynum ain't even old enough to masturbate-- much less anything else. Why him?" Again Loan seemed on the verge of pulling his hair.

"Hold it down a liddle bit," advised Rob. "Calm down a liddle bit," he added.

"Shut up that kind of talk and all that yelling," Nelly further added. "Rob, take me home. I can't talk to him. He hates me."

"Now, Mama . . ."

"Now, Nelly," began Rob.

"Aw, take her home, Rob," said Loan. "She hates me."

"Aw, Nobody hates nobody under this roof . . ."

began Rob.

"He hates me!" threatened Nelly.

"She hates me," echoed Loan.

"Let's go, Nelly," said Rob, defeated.

"And give me two Moonpies . . ."

"The five cent ones or the ten cent ones?" interrupted Ray as he finished his biscuit of sardine.

"Couple of the ten cent ones," mused Winky, fingering the change in his pocket.

"Anything else?" asked Ray, wiping his hands on the legs of his baggy, brown pants.

"Yeah. Another one of them oatmeal cakes and a nickle's worth of fireballs," Winky answered.

"You want something else?" Ray asked Dost, trying to remember his name.

"No thanks," replied Dost.

"I guess we'd better get along," decided Winky.

Outside the store, the sun felt like it was coming down in one continuous sheet. The pop bottle lids that paved Ray's driveway clacked tinly as the two boys walked on them. Dost looked down and saw that where there weren't bottle lids there was oil that was squirted there to keep the dust down. It was darker than snuff, but about the same texture, perhaps a little more moist--like slightly damp snuff. Dost remembered how the oiled ground stuck to his

bare feet, and it seemed like a very long time ago that he was not obliged to wear shoes since it would not be dignified for two representatives of the church to visit sick and sinners barefooted.

Creosote, thought Dost. Creosote is what I smell. You can always smell it better in the summer than you can in the winter, but I don't know why. And we've got to go talk to Loan. And I don't know why. Because he's lost that's why. Like I was. He's a sinner who's got to be helped. Creosote. They put it on telephone poles. Rob says that creosote makes the poles last longer. It keeps them from rotting. Why don't they use it on people--dead people, I mean, to keep them from rotting. That's a good idea. If it keeps poles, it ought to keep people. Maybe Winky would know. He's preached at some funerals.

"Winky," said Dost.

"Yep," answered Winky, tugging at the wrapper of his Moonpie.

"Why don't they use creosote on people?"

"What kind of soap?" Winky asked, putting the corner of the wrapper into his mouth.

"Not soap. Sote. Creosote."

"What's creosote?"

Dost was amazed that Winky did not know what creosote was, but then he remembered that Winky was omniscient only in matters of religion.

"Creosote is stuff that they put on telephone poles

to keep them from rotting. You can smell it when you get around telephone poles."

"And you want to know why they don't use it on people?" asked Winky, more interested in the freshness of his Moonpie than in the preservative qualities of creosote. "Why would anybody want to use creosote on somebody else?"

"To keep them from rotting. It keeps poles from rotting, so why not use it on people?"

"Offhand, I can't think of anybody who's rotting."

"I mean you could use it on dead people so they would last longer. Maybe that's what the Egyptians used to make their mummies. Remember, Mrs. Snark told us that we can't make mummies like the Egyptians did because nobody knows what they used to keep the dead people from rotting."

"What's so great about mummies?" asked Winky.

"Well, gosh. I don't know. But maybe creosote would make a person keep from rotting. It works on poles. Why wouldn't it work on people?"

"Because people ain't poles," Winky concluded.

Because people ain't poles, thought Dost. That's bad English though. Because people aren't poles. Because people are not poles. People are not poles. People aren't poles and poles aren't people. People aren't poles that stick in holes, and poles aren't people that sit under a steeple. But Winky is right even if he didn't know what creosote was. I had to tell him what it was because he didn't know. I'll probably have to tell him what transferred

means too. He won't know. How can he be dumb like that in some things and smart in other things. And my feet hurt, and I think I drank too much Pepsi. Winky's right though. People aren't poles.

Mrs. Japerson's sister met Winky and Dost at the door. Winky left his oatmeal cake on the porch and stuffed the fireballs deeper into his pocket.

"How is Sister Louise?" asked Winky in a gravel whisper.

"Oh, she's bad. She's not in condition to see anybody," replied the sister, glad to have someone to talk to besides herself.

"Oh, if she can't see anybody . . ." started Winky.

"'Cept you, Brother Sylvester. 'Cept you. She wants to see you. Doctor said she could see you because she raised such a fuss. Well, she raised a fuss the last time she come to, that is. It makes me so nervous when she gets quiet like she does. But she wants to see you. She told the doctor right out, 'I don't care who I can't see as long as I can see Sylvester Bynum.' She said that when she was getting her shot. Mercy, she gets so many of them things. And some of them make her so quiet--and still. And then I feel like I'm all alone in the house with everything so quiet and still. I'm not a young woman anymore either. 'Course Louise is older than me. She was always good to me though--even though I was years younger than

her. But now she's so quiet and still. It's unnatural. She'll rouse every once in a while and talk like nothing at all was wrong. Them shots they give her. That's what does it. I think she'd be okay if they wouldn't give her so many of them. They keep her bouncing around like a rubber ball. One minute she's frisky as a pup and then she gets so still you can't even tell she's in the bed. She's fell off so much too. She was always little and slight. Even though she was older than me--did I say that? Sometimes I repeat myself--but even though she was older than me, I was always bigger than her. Not that I was big--landsakes no, I wasn't big--Papa used to say that you could put me and Louise both in a pillowcase and still have enough room for the pillow. But she was always little--tiny. She was like a little doll. She looks so bad now--slight and fell-off--but she wants to see you Sylvester . . ."

"It wouldn't hurt if I went in and prayed with her . . ." began Sylvester.

"Oh, she's unconscious now, Sylvester. She won't be able to pray with you. Go in and see how quiet she is, and she's like that most of the time, and I get so fretful with just myself to talk to," said the old woman with a weak laugh.

"Well, it wouldn't hurt if I went in and prayed for her," resolved Sylvester.

"That would be just fine because she's dead to this world--oh dear, why did I say something like that?"

I didn't mean anything at all by it . . . you know what people mean when they say something like that . . ."

"We sure do," responded Sylvester in a consoling voice. "Dost, you stay out here. We'd better not have any more people in there than we have to."

"Okay, Wink--Sylvester."

Sylvester disappeared with the old woman, and Dost was left alone. It looked like she could use some creosote, thought Dost, as he remembered Louise Jpaerson's sister. But people aren't poles. Poles don't have hair for one thing, and Lynda Wisprin has about the longest hair of anybody. Red, but not red like you could color with any crayon or water paint. And straight. Like a waterfall from the top of her head. It shines like it's been waxed and it looks like it'd be cold as ice. Not a red like you can color. Sharp too. Like you could cut your fingers if you touched it too hard. Cherry wood. That's what it looks like. With waves of dark crisscrossing under where the light hits it and the way it piles up on her shoulder and bunches around her neck is nice. Warm. Warm and still cold and her neck is white. It's not really white though. It just looks white because she's got so many freckles. Winky should try to heal Louise Japerson--laying on of hands to heal the sick. Where do you put your hands to heal the sick? Where would I put my hands? I wouldn't put them in their hair. If they had dandruff, you'd stir it up--but what if that's what they wanted healed--you'd have to put your hands

there. Maybe that's it--maybe you put your hands where they need to be healed. If they're blind, you put your hands on their eyes. If they've got a stomach ache, you put your hand on their stomach--I wonder if Lynda's stomach is as white as her neck--if they've got a cough, you put your hands on their chest--what would Lynda's chest be like--God forgive me for thinking evil thoughts! You just heal people. You don't feel them. Please forgive me God.

"Are you ready to go, Dost?" asked Winky, catching Dost as he winced out his silent plea for forgiveness.

"What are you doing with your face all frowned up like that?"

"I was praying," answered Dost, hoping Winky wouldn't ask what about.

"That's what you ought to be doing," Winky replied.

"Let's head for Loan Swal's place," he added.

Dost tried to hide his anxiety, but it crept to the corners of his mouth and tried to get out.

"You praying again?" wondered Winky.

"Kind of," replied Dost, not completely truthfully.

"You sure make some faces when you pray," Winky observed.

"Winky," began Dost, not too sure of what he was going to say.

"Yep," replied Winky, chucking a fireball into his mouth.

"Uhhhh--why didn't you heal Mrs. Japerson?" blurted

Dost, asking the first question that came into his head.

"I didn't know I was supposed to," answered Winky, beginning to suck air through his teeth again.

"I mean, everybody else used to heal the sick people," Dost pointed out.

"Who everybody else?" asked Winky, taking the fireball from his mouth.

"Jesus and Peter and Paul and Elija and . . ."

"You mean everybody then--not everybody today."

"Why not today?"

"God has changed His way of doing things."

"I thought God never changed."

"He don't."

"But you said . . ."

"I said he changed his way of dealing with people."

"Oh . . ."

"Look. Say we're going to Loan Swal's house right now. Okay?"

"Yeah . . ."

"Now say you know one way to get there and I know another way. Okay?"

"Yeah . . ."

"Well, say we decide to take your way because it's shorter and not as dusty or hot. Okay?"

"Yeah . . ."

"Now when we get to Brother Swal's house, we're the same people as if we'd gone my way ain't we? We've

not changed one way or another just because of the way we decided to use to get to where we was going."

"I see what you mean," Dost said, nodding his head.

"Sure as heaven is high, God don't change, but man does."

"Yeah," added Dost. "But could you have healed Mrs. Japerson if you wanted to?"

"What do you mean if I had wanted to?" questioned Winky, returning the fireball to his mouth.

"I mean, if you had decided that you wanted to heal her, could you have put your hands on her and said, 'Arise and walk,' or something like that?"

"You got it all wrong," explained Winky. "I don't decide what I'm going to do or say when I visit somebody. I leave that up to God. He moves me to talk with this person or pray with that person. You've got to mash the clutch on your own will and let God choose the gear to start off in."

"Does He always do that for you."

"Yep. I never worry about anything like that. If He wanted Mrs. Japerson to be healed by me, she would have been. Take Oral Roberts for instance . . ."

"God moves him to heal people?" Dost ventured.

"Now you got it. It's just a matter of what a man is chosen to do--not what he chooses to do."

"Yeah. I see what you mean. It's still too bad Mrs. Japerson's sister doesn't have somebody to talk to though."

"Aw, things work out. There's a purpose in that too. People shouldn't worry about things that God sees fit to leave alone. If something needs changing, it will be changed. I've seen a lot of pitiful things since I started working for God, and if I didn't put all my trust in Him, I'd probably be crazy right now," confessed Winky as he took the fireball out of his mouth.

"Hey, it's finally turning gray!" exclaimed Dost.

"High time, too. I feel like I'm wearing out my jaws by taking this thing out of my mouth so much," complained Winky.

"This yard's got to be mowed," muttered Loan to himself as he settled into a chair on his front porch. "I'm not up to it yet myself though," he continued. "Well, I've got to figure out what to do. Sylvester Oliver Bynum, boy missionary and good ol' cousin Dost, child Christian, are going to come to save my soul. Thank you, Mama. Damn. How can you talk to people like that? You don't. You just listen, and listen, and listen. Shit. If you can last through one of their sermons, you don't have to worry about dying. Their damn holiness is deadlier than any kind of disease and it takes them forever to tell you about it. If they'd just come out and say Loan Swal, you're a damn bastard, black as a grizzly bear's ass and you're going to burn for the better part of eternity because of it so you'd best get down on your knees and save yourself . . . but oh no,

they don't do that--not when they're talking to you face to face. Then it's all sugar and honey and fire and brimstone, but you can't see hell for the brother this and the brother that. Oh, they'll damn you quick enough from the pulpit. And they'll damn you twice if you look like you need it, but let them get to talking to you face to face and you'd think that damnation wasn't such a bad thing after all. Sylvester Oliver Bynum and Dost. Now that's a pair to lead me to heaven. 'Course I owe it all to my Mama. Thank you Mama. It wouldn't do any good to be gone. They'd only come back some other time. Oh damn. Maybe I could make a deal with them. I'll listen to their sales pitch if they'll mow my grass. That'd be the most Christian thing they could do for me. No. That wouldn't work. I don't have anything to cut it with. I guess I'll just have to let it grow. Maybe I could just not answer the door. No. They'll know I'm supposed to be here. Mama probably told them I've not gone back to work yet. That's another thing I've got to take care of. I've got to let Mr. Willer know when I can be back in. I'll give myself another week. Yeah. Another week ought to be reasonable enough. I could just tell them to leave me alone. I'm a sick man, I could say--or I've been a sick man, but no, that'd just convince them that I needed talking to that much more. Thank you, Mama. Maybe the old Romans didn't have such a bad idea after all. I know I'd be pulling for the lions all the way. Sylvester Oliver Bynum. Damn. Why

me? Because Mama thinks they can get me to heaven. If there wasn't somebody standing around all the time saying this is right and this is wrong, things would be better. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Then why don't these Christians leave me alone? I sure as hell want to leave them alone. I don't think they would want me coming to their house trying to convince them that it's better to sleep with their neighbor's wife than it is to sleep with their own. They're all crazy. The scientists will tell them that. When Sylvester Oliver Bynum comes with his apostle Dost, I'll just give it to them straight and level. I'm an atheist I'll say. They probably won't even know what that is--no--they probably will know what it is too. For a Christian not to know what an atheist is--that'd be like . . . that'd be like a whore not knowing what a dick is--that's a good one. I'll just say I'm an atheist and you don't need to talk to me about your religion. Just because you got to make up something to believe in don't mean I've got to do the same thing. Yeah. That's what I'll tell them. They probably never met a real atheist before. After I tell them that, they'll go and tell Preacher Mosey. And then what'll happen? You live and you die. That's all there is to it. There can't be any more. First, you're not, then you are, and then you're not anymore. It's that simple and anybody's a damn fool who tries to clog up the works by putting a heaven here and a hell there and a God over there and a

devil over here. A damn fool. It's not bad enough they've got to do it to themselves, they've got to mess up everybody else. They're crazy if you ask me. Crazy. Crazy Christians. I cracked my nuts carrying a casket. But no. Mama's got to arrange it in her head that God did it to me. That means that Teense died just so I could get ruptured carrying her casket. That means she was born just so she could die so I would get ruptured carrying her casket. I wonder how Rob and the rest of them would feel if I told them that their mother was made just so I could get my nuts cracked. They'd shit. Then they'd probably burn down my house with me in it. But that's what Mama's saying. She just don't say it like I say it. Sylvester Oliver Bynum. He's coming to save my soul. And will I sit here like I believe what he's saying? I don't think I could stand to hear him call me Brother Loan. I'm almost old enough to be his daddy. Wonder how long it'd take me to cut the grass with a sling. I don't think I'm up to that yet. What I need is a woman. There's never one around when you need one; 'course I don't know if I'm up to that yet either. All I get is Christians telling me to behave myself. Behave myself. That's a laugh. I don't even feel up to sinning and they're coming around to tell me I need salvation. Humph. The way I feel now, I could probably be a real good Christian. It'll be good to get back to the funeral home again. Mr. Willer--now there's a good man--was real nice about me being gone for so long. 'Course I am the best ambulance driver he's got. He knows it too. He couldn't

afford to let me go. God I feel horny--I wonder if that's possible--it's got to be because I feel stiff. Sitting around so much--that's what does it. It gets that way just out of boredom. I think I'd mow this yard if I just had something to do it with. Don't know of anybody to borrow one from. Maybe I could get Dost to loan me theirs if I promised to come to church Sunday. No. I'd either have to lie or sit through an hour or two--probably turn out to be three if Preacher Mosey found out I was there--if he gets you in his jaws, you're not going to get out till he's chewed you up and got you into his heaven and his church. No. I couldn't take that and just as sure as I'm sitting here wanting to beat my meat, they'd send somebody to get me. They may be stupid, but they're not fools. They'd send somebody just in time to get me out of bed and ready for church, no matter how much I dragged my feet. You might be able to lie to a Christian, but you can't cheat them, especially when it's your soul they're after. I'm happy just to get some tail once in a while, but these good people have got to get your soul. They're hypocrites. They act like they don't ever get hard--the men that is, and the women act like they don't ever get hot but they still get married so they can fuck and not worry about it. I bet more Christian crotches come together in this country in a year than any other. Hypocrites. They want to do it just as much as the rest of us. But it's dirty unless you give your soul and your house and your car and everything

else you've got to the person you want to go to bed with. Then after they get tired of that, they go out and try to get other people to see things the way they see them. Maybe after they get tired of whoever they married, they think they will feel better if they can make somebody else as bad off as they are. Christians are worse than doctors. I guess that's why Mama gets so mad with me. I remind her of when she used to worry about things besides how her soul was feeling. Hypocrites. And Sylvester Oliver Bynum is coming to tell me how I can be a better person. He's a kid. A kid. And Dost. I don't know about him. He's always acted funny, but he makes a good Christian. He is a natural born Christian. Never did have much backbone. Damn, how am I going to handle this. Thank you, Mama. She's going to make me as sorry as Daddy if it's the last thing she does. Why can't she just leave me alone? She's a Christian. That's why. They can't rest unless they got everybody else as pure and guilty-feeling as they are. God. What a way to live. Being sick and poor and tired ain't enough for them. No. They got to invent sin so they'll have something to worry about when they're not sick, or poor, or tired. They're crazy. Crazy."

Feeling a little restless, Loan got up and stepped into his yard. The grass was already several inches above his ankles, and he walked through it, listening to the weeds swish and snap like cracking whips as he drug his feet through them. His mind wandered over the memories of

the pictures he had been looking at in his magazines. He felt irritated that he still found himself hiding them when his mother dropped in on him. He had been doing it since he first became interested in the opposite sex.

"Some habits you just don't break," he said aloud.

High in the sky, he could see a hawk carving wide, lazy circles in the air.

"I wonder if that's a Christian hawk up there," Loan said to the weeds.

They did not answer him, so he held his head back and followed the hawk's flight. A light feeling of dizziness settled into Loan's brain. He laughed to himself and took a few unsteady steps forward, still holding his head back. Half-way across the yard, his foot came down on something that was not rock or weed. At first, there was a hint of resistance to the pressure of his foot, but when his full weight came down, the resistance changed into a reluctant sagging

"A damn hose," Loan grumbled aloud, bringing his head down so that it looked straight ahead. "A God damn hose," he added, looking around to see if someone had just then thrown it in his path, but then the hose seemed to quiver--Loan was perplexed. He tilted his head without looking down. Damn, he thought. That don't make sense. The hose quivered again--a little more strenuously. This more obvious movement prompted Loan to look down at his foot.

"I'm standing on a snake--Good God, a snake!"

When he realized completely that he did have his foot on four feet of snake--a snake struggling to free itself--and not a nervous piece of hose, Loan removed his foot as quickly as his brain could change the message into a jerk of his leg, and for a moment, he simply watched the snake crawling away.

"A damn snake. Six feet at least, A God damn snake."

For a few minutes, Loan kept repeating this over to himself. It took this long for him to react properly. Obviously it was his duty to kill the serpent before it did any damage.

"What'll I kill the damn son of a bitch with? It'll take something big for a snake seven feet long. An axe, that's what I'll use--no, I don't have one. I don't have anything. That's all I need now is to have a snake running around loose all over this place. A hoe, no. Ain't got a hoe. And the two Christians ought to be here before long. Maybe if I'd put up a sign Beware of the Snake, they'd stay away. No. Snakes are right down the Christian's line. God, I won't sleep tonight, and I had my foot right on top of him. Brrrrrrrr. Snake. That's all I need, and me just finally getting better, and I've got to get jumped on by a snake. Wonder if it'll try getting back at me for stepping on it. I hear they try to do things like that. It's not because they're so smart or anything, it's just that they don't like being stepped on and they remember who does it. Smell or something like that. I

guess it's either me or it. I don't even have a shovel--rocks. Why don't I just mash its head in with rocks. Rocks, rocks. There's not any rocks around here big enough to constipate a piss ant--damnation what am I going to do? A snake . . . right here in my own yard. Christians--what good are they? Just make a man worry till he walks up on a snake almost eight feet long--what color was it. It didn't look like a copperhead--I know it wasn't a rattlesnake. What else could it have been--a water moccasin--no, it was too big to be a water moccasin--they don't get that big around here--or do they? Damn snakes--what good are they--a good dog can do anything a snake can--except make baby snakes--and that's just one more thing in favor of the dog. Oh fuck that snake. He's gone out of sight anyway. Damn snake.

"How has God told you to deal with Loan?" Dost asked.

"He hasn't told me yet," replied Winky, crunching the dissolving fireball between his teeth.

"When does He tell you?" questioned Dost, beginning to worry.

"I don't usually get any kind of messages until I start talking," answered Winky, feeling in his pocket for another fireball.

"I . . . I'm . . . I'm afraid Loan is going to be a hard one to talk to," confessed Dost.

"I can only do what God tells me to do."

"Winky . . ."

"Yeah--you know this one's not half as hot as that other one was," observed Winky, removing the second fireball from his mouth and inspecting it closely. "It's not half as hot," he repeated for his own benefit.

"My daddy is getting transferred--he's going to work down in South Redbriar at Morning's Furniture Factory."

"Really?" Winky spoke in the direction of his fireball.

"Yeah, and he's found a house he likes better than the one we've got, so we're going to move from up here to down there," Dost winced inwardly as he finished this sentence because he knew Winky would call down the wrath of God for forsaking him in the middle of his crusade to bring salvation to North Redbriar.

"You still have them spells where you can't see?" Winky asked thoughtfully.

"Yeah . . . yes," answered Dost, wondering what that had to do with anything.

"Maybe that's the answer then," suggested Winky mysteriously.

"What?"

"You see, even after you made your decision, you still had those spells. I thought at first that maybe I had told you wrong, but then I said no, God just wants him to do something special so I took you to all the meetings that

I went to to kind of let you get some training . . ."

"Training?"

"Why sure. I work here around North Redbriar, but it's too far to go to South Redbriar, so God is sending you down there. I know it's only about five or six miles from here to there, but there's a lot of people in between. That's why you still have the spells. I bet as soon as you get settled in down there and start witnessing to the people around where you live--I bet you'll stop having them blind spots and headaches--I just bet that's what'll happen."

They came within sight of Loan's house and Loan too. He was just making his way around the side of the house that could be seen from the direction the boys came. Loan hurried up to get to where he was going. Once inside the small building, he unbuckled his belt, pulled down his pants and underwear and sat down in the weather-beaten gloom of his outhouse.

"Looks like I'm trapped," Loan mourned to himself. "I wonder if they'll tell me this is a sin too. Leave it to them to find something wrong with everything."

He sat in the small building and thought of how nice it would be to have a little more light in the place than he did--of course, he thought to himself, there was something very comforting about the musky darkness--something that made a body feel secure and completely free. The whole atmosphere of the outhouse was one of

security. Loan felt as if he were in a fortress of stone and steel, instead of a john of rotting wood. No longer did the thought of his confrontation worry him--he felt secure and serene. The two Christians, he felt, were at his mercy. He couldn't have been more content, had he found the Garden of Eden among the weeds of his backyard.

The swishing of the grass outside told him that his two visitors had come.

"Brother Loan Swal?" inquired a voice that was husky but still boyish.

"Yes sireee," answered Loan, feeling a delightful sense of power creep over him.

"Are we bothering you?" asked the voice, sounding as if it did not matter whether they were or they weren't, they were still going to be heard.

"Bother . . . me? Oh no. Good God, no. I would ask you in, but it's already crowded with just me . . ."

"Oh, that's all right . . . a man's got to have some privacy once in a while," laughed Winky, glad to find a sinner who was not bitter toward someone trying to help him. "We'd like to talk to you as soon as you're through," continued Winky.

"Well, that might be a while," mused Loan, "You see, I've been in the hospital--I damn near died--do you know about me being sick?"

"Oh, yes, and we're thankful to see you up and around," said Winky.

"Well, I'm not up and around that much yet," Loan informed them. "You see, when you're in the hospital, everything's done on schedule. You eat, sleep, take pills, bathe, you even shit when a nurse tells you to. If you can't--or won't--they'll give you a shot or a pill so that you can or will. After a while, it gets so you can't take a crap when you feel like it--only when they want you too--ain't that hell?"

"It does sound mighty uncomfortable," replied Winky.

"As soon as you get out, you've got to adjust to life being regular--you know, doing something when you feel like it. Well, that's kind of like building a new house where an old one is standing. You've got to tear down the old one first. That's the way it is with being so regular for such a long time. You got to tear all that down. And that's where I'm at right now. Everything's tore down. My brain ain't started building yet. I never know how long I'm going to stay in this place. But it's not ever less than three or three and a half hours."

"That's okay, God's not particular as to where a man is at when he hears the Word . . ."

"Is Dost out there?" interrupted Loan.

"Yes," answered Winky.

"Hello, cousin Dost," shouted Loan amiably, "been getting any lately?"

"Getting any what?" asked Dost, regretting his

curiosity. It never paid to be curious around Loan.

"Tail--pussy . . ." began Loan.

For a few seconds, Dost found it hard to breathe and impossible to talk.

"We've come to invite you to come to church," shouted Winky, letting Loan know that they didn't care to talk about things like that, because even though neither of the two boys could tell just exactly where or what Loan was talking about, both knew that the words were not in keeping with the nature of their visit.

"You have?" Loan asked as he scratched his leg.

"Yes . . ." began Winky.

"Why?" asked Loan.

Dost could tell that Winky was getting edgy. Loan had a way of getting to people when he really wanted to. No matter how much charity a man might have in his being, Loan had a way of getting around it.

"Are you right with God?" asked Winky point blank.

"No. I can't be right with Him when I'm in here. It's almost too little for just one. Ain't he right out there with you?"

"You're lost and in need . . ." started Winky.

"No. No. That's not right. I know I'm pretty damn dumb, but I can find my way out of this shit house easy enough not to be lost. Now, if God's not in here with me, and he's not out there with you, it's not us that's lost but him, and I'll agree I'm in need--I'll tell you what I need . . ."

"Just shut up if you're going to talk that way. That's blasphemy--black, soul-burning blasphemy, and I won't listen to it," Winky mouthed his words fiercely, and Dost could see his good nature flaming away in his face and around his ears.

"Then, just leave me alone. God damn it. Let me shit and worry about where it falls," Loan shouted back.

"I'm going to pray for you . . ." breathed Winky.

Before he could continue, Dost touched his shoulder and pointed to the side of the age-blackened outhouse.

The snake that Loan had stepped on had been lounging around, trying to find a place out of the direct sun and out from under any more feet. The outhouse seemed to be the logical location. Dost and Winky watched, spellbound, as the black length wiggled into the small building.

"You're not by yourself in there, Loan . . ."
Dost managed to say.

"Ain't you gone yet? Well, who's in here with me--the Holy Spirit?"

"No, a . . ." began Dost.

"Snake!" Loan finished for him. "Snake!" he repeated in a voice less human than the first time. "A God damn black crawling snake!" he screamed, becoming more verbal but less understandable.

There was a lot of moving around in the small closet--Loan was doing most of it. His jumping around made the snake nervous, so it headed for a cavity in a

far corner of the booth. Out of necessity, it had to cross over Loan's left foot, and this agitated Loan considerably. He made a leap and went through the back of the john--making a hole big enough for cross-ventilation when the door was opened. The snake got away as fast as its underside would carry it, and Loan picked himself up--unhurt but still wearing his pants and underwear in their outhouse position.

As Dost and Winky approached Ray's store on their way home, Winky ate his oatmeal cake.

"Was that a sign from heaven?" Dost asked.

"The snake? I don't know. It'll probably set him to thinking though," Winky mumbled through his cake.

August drowsily came with its family reunions, back-to-school sales, thunderstorms in the afternoon, and tent revivals. Tree frogs and crickets had grown three months older, and one could just about hear the difference in bass notes when they sang at night. Although the days were the hottest of the summer, the breezes of the night seemed to blow from September. Already, the broomstraw and cornstalks were becoming more hoarse in their breathy exclamations when anyone walked through them. The sky looked like an over-ripe peach each evening when the sun was going down. That's the way late August is--like an over-ripe peach--soft and fuzzy.

These were the kind of days when Dost felt his

happiest and his saddest. He liked the way the days rolled over and over lazily like he did in the morning when he was too awake to sleep but too asleep to be awake. But down below in his mind--somewhere in a place he had not been able to light up with his six years of education or his commitment to God or both of them put together was a hole or a crack which leaked out a velvet soft dread that something might--no, not just might--something would come along and step on that over-ripe peach day of August. Dost took a deep breath inward through his nose and listened to the slight rustle that echoed through his nostrils. He tried to think of a word for the sound. Sitting on the small, stone wall that held back his mother's flower garden from the rest of the world, he continued to suck air in through his nose. Dizziness caused him to open his eyes and clutch at the wall.

Dost was interrupted in his thoughts by the rustle of somebody walking in the grass beside him and also by the rustle of what sounded like a candy wrapper.

"I'm glad I got here before you left," puffed Sylvester Oliver Bynum.

" I thought you were preaching somewhere tonight."

"No, not tonight. But a revival is going on down in Sumter, South Carolina, and I've been asked to preach at it for a couple of nights. Me and Brother Kirkle are leaving to go down there in a couple of hours, but I wanted to come and say goodbye to you."

"You still think I'm supposed to be kind of a missionary in South Redbriar?" asked Dost.

"I'm sure of it. How are your spells?"

"I've not had one for a couple of days. Do you think that means anything?"

"I'm not right sure. Have your parents said any more about them?"

"Once they said it was probably my nerves. But that's what they said the first time I told them about it. They've been too busy for the last few weeks to say anything really."

"I guess moving can be pretty busy work," commented Winky as he finished his Zero bar.

"Didn't I tell you about their trip?" questioned Dost.

"No," said Sylvester, producing a five-cent pack of jaw-breakers from his inside coat pocket.

"They're going to Germany about two or three weeks after school starts, maybe earlier if Daddy gets his schedule worked out."

"You going with them?" Sylvester asked as he selected a grape jaw-breaker. "Want one?" he continued, holding the pack out to Dost.

"I thought I was--at first," Dost answered finally, squeezing a yellow globe out of the cellophane.

"Then you decided not to?"

"No. Mama and Daddy decided."

"You going to stay all by yourself?" Sylvester asked.

"Naw. Aunt Nelly is going to move in till they get back."

"Think you'll like living in South Redbriar?"

"I don't think so. I wish I could just stay here and be a missionary with you."

"Well, it's really not for us to decide. At least you're not going to be swallowed by a whale."

Dost laughed uncertainly and shut his eyes against the sourness in his mouth. "I don't think this lemon is ripe yet. It's sour enough to be green."

"Anybody moving into your house?"

"I don't know. A lot of people have been around to look at it."

"Where is it in South Redbriar that you're moving to?"

"You know where the Morning furniture factory is, don't you?"

"Yeah. I've been on visitation down there a lot of times--not in the furniture factory but to the factory houses on that street behind the factory."

"Did you see an old house at the end of the street?"

"Two stories?"

"Yeah--and brown and white."

"Is that where you're moving?"

"Yep. Is something wrong with it?"

"No--if you like brown and white two-story houses."

"It's not really too bad--I don't think."

"But the street is so ugly," Sylvester pointed out.

"Judge not . . ." began Dost.

"I'm not judging the works of God," Sylvester argued, "I'm judging the works of some man--a man who didn't know how to build streets--not pretty ones anyway."

"We're living at the end of that street," affirmed Dost, "At the end of that ugly street," he added.

"Think you'll like it?" Sylvester asked, crunching the remains of the candy between his teeth.

Shutting his eyes, Dost wanted to tell Winky that he had already asked him that once already, but instead, he thought of the street where his new house was. Ugly? He asked himself. No, he answered, still to himself. If it's ugly, I won't like it.

"What did you ask me?" he said to Sylvester. "I'm awful sorry," apologized Dost, "but I was trying to figure out if I was going to like living in South Redbriar. That's what you asked me, wasn't it? I don't know. Why do you think it's ugly?"

With his fingers still wiggling in his pocket, Sylvester brushed back the crescent with his un-pocketed hand. "Oh, the longest part of the street has those factory houses that look just alike. They're old-timey, and some of them are run down and most of their yards are just dirt--no grass. And the only kind of tree on the street is poplar, and I've always thought that kind of

tree was ugly. There's something about them that's like a piece of old, torn cloth."

"Those are mill houses," Dost remarked.

"Cotton mill houses?"

"Uh-huh," said Dost, "and . . ."

"Then what are they doing behind a furniture factory?" interrupted Sylvester, his pocket fingers still wiggling.

"That's what I started to say. Before the factory was a factory, it was a cotton mill. And the mill houses were built for the mill workers when it was still a mill. Only now, some of the people who work for Mr. Morning live there now. The rent is lower or something like that."

"Oh."

"I feel sad," Dost confessed, ". . . and afraid."

"You've got to trust God," Sylvester counseled.

"We can't always understand why He does what He does."

Quite suddenly, Dost realized that he had heard that advice before--many times. Quite unthinkingly, he mused aloud, "I wonder how many times that's been said."

"What?" asked Sylvester, standing up and rubbing his rump to sooth its creases.

"Trust God."

"What kind of a question is that? It don't make sense," declared Sylvester. "If you're going to work for the Holy Spirit, you've got to show a little fire in your soul--in how you act--in what you say."

Dost watched Sylvester as he stepped down from the rock wall. He half realized that all of Sylvester's opinions seemed to have a vague sort of halo attached to them.

"What I mean," continued Sylvester, voicing an interior monologue as he settled back down on the stone wall and looked into the black pines that stood along the gully of the far side of the highway, "is that Christians should be special people, and they should let other people know that they're special . . ."

So he wants me to act like I know everything and like I'm not afraid of things. Like him. Dost realized, with some deepening of his own feelings, just what Sylvester was trying to say.

"Do you think you can remember what I've taught you?" asked Sylvester, unaware that his friend's attention was not, for the moment, concentrated upon his lessons.

"Sure," answered Dost with the easiness that comes from being totally ignorant of the question asked him.

"I'm glad to hear that. I was getting a little worried," confessed Sylvester.

"Do you know anybody who lives in South Redbriar?"

"I know a bunch, but none of them live around where you do. Mostly they live in that new housing development. Let me think. Oh yeah. There's one person who lives in one of the factory houses--can't remember exactly which one though. They all look so much alike."

"Do I know them?" asked Dost with interest.

"Well, I only know him part way. Brother Kirkle and I took him home after church once--back earlier in the spring. Him and his wife visited our church. He played a guitar that day. O.D. Podges is his name. He's kind of odd. Probably comes from him being blind all the time. Didn't even offer to invite me or Brother Kirkle into his house . . . and his wife didn't speak hardly at all"

"Him!" was all Dost could manage to say, but that's all his emotion needed. "Now I don't want to move," declared Dost.

"When it comes right down to it, though," Sylvester pointed out, "you really don't have much choice."

"Could I live with you?" asked Dost. Immediately, he regretted his proposal because Sylvester's way of life revolved around a discipline whose core was founded on a daily Bible reading. Being a missionary was still new to Dost; being a monk was an impossible way to live, Dost suspected.

Seldom was Sylvester sluggish about answering questions. Even more seldom was he sluggish about saying something about a question whether he could answer it or not. It was obvious, however, that one of those seldom times had come up.

"What are you talking about?" challenged Sylvester in a voice which indicated he really doubted Dost's appraisal of his situation and desire. "We can't do anything

like that. Both of us are still kids. You can't leave your parents just because the street where you're going to live is ugly. Christians have got to suffer. Besides," continued Sylvester, opening another vein of conversation, "Brother Podges is probably a good man."

"How do you know?" asked Dost, grabbing for anything that might give him hope.

"He played at our church, didn't he?" answered Sylvester in a voice that left no room for further questions. "Do you know what he does to earn money?" asked Sylvester, using the same tone of voice.

Dost tried to think of what a blind man with a guitar might do to earn money. His lack of experience in the job placement field was wide to the point of total ignorance, but he would have liked to answer Sylvester's riddle because Sylvester did not like it when someone could answer his questions.

"Have you gone to sleep?" asked Sylvester, looking at the Elgin wristwatch a small church had given him as a love offering.

"What does he do?" asked Dost, giving up.

"He sings commercials in front of that group of stores up town," replied Sylvester as if he were telling his friend where to find some undiscovered Dead Sea Scrolls.

"I don't understand," Dost said.

"Well, I've never seen him myself," confessed Sylvester, "but the way he does it, from what some people have told

me, is like this: like the biggest store is the A&P. Well, they tell Brother O.D. what they've got their specials on and then he makes a song about it and stands out in front of the store and sings his song so that people will know what the store is selling."

"And the store pays him?"

"That's what people tell me. And what's more, he has a tin cup tied to his guitar and people can put money in it if they want to. That way he gets money both ways. 'Course, I guess he'd be happier if he didn't have to be blind to do that."

"What's he like?"

"O.D. Podges?"

"Yeah."

"Like I said before, I don't really know him. He don't get out much, I don't think. I just don't know him."

"It's about time for me to go," Sylvester declared, taking a sucker from his coat pocket.

"Aw, you don't have to go yet," said Dost, beginning to realize how much he needed his friend's presence.

"I wouldn't have said it if I hadn't meant it," Sylvester argued.

"No, I don't guess so."

"I'll pray for you," said Sylvester, "and you do the same for me."

"Okay," answered Dost dumbly. "Goodbye," Dost said

said as Sylvester walked toward his house.

Sylvester turned around as if he had not understood him then he said matter-of-factly, "I'm sorry you can't stay with me."

"Yeah. Me too," answered Dost, growing angry with himself for not being able to say anything better.

When the children of Israel were taken captive, they must have felt this way, thought Dost. Seeing everything being left behind. They could have probably thought of more to say than just goodbye--goodbye, goodbye, goodbye, goodbye, goodbye, goodbye, goodbye, goodbye, goodbye--it doesn't even make sense--goodbye. Good pie, good eye, good sky, good fry, good lie, good tie, good guy--guy. Goodbye. When I left old Egypt land, locust in the sky. When I left old Egypt land, Pharoah fairly cried. Goodbye pharoah, goodbye pharoah, goodbye pharoah goodbye. Winky's gone. I'll be going pretty soon. We've all got to go some-time.

Sylvester's rambling figure disappeared over the horizon of the weedy lot that rose between their two houses. The vapor of thought that Dost had been lost in dissolved as he saw Sylvester top the hill.

It feels like there's a balloon inside of me. And it's being blown up, he thought. That's what makes my throat feel choked. Yes. That's what makes my throat feel choked.

Dost began breathing deeply through his nose again, listening intently to the sound he produced.

Dost's mother was getting ready to close the dining room window when she heard strange noises coming from the direction of her son's head. Since he sat on the stone wall just below the window, the sound was quite distinct.

"Dost, is that you?" his mother asked.

Her questions sometimes had a tendency to confuse her son. Around her, he sometimes felt as if one of them was talking in his or her sleep--it was either she for asking such an odd question, or he for not understanding it.

He decided to take the easy way out and answer the question without trying to understand it. "Yes, Mama. It's me."

"What are you doing?" she asked.

Dost, who did not realize how noisy his concentrated breathing had become, was even more baffled by this question. Feeling more lost, he again chose the easy way out.

"I'm just sitting here."

"What's that noise?"

"I don't hear a noise."

"I mean that noise just a minute ago. It sounded like you were having a stroke."

"Oh. I was just breathing."

"Well stop that. It sounds awful."

"Okay."

He heard the window wobble shut, and again he was left to deal with the evening by himself. All the easiness of the summer twilight had been squeezed away during his

conversation with Sylvester. There was something about Sylvester that made him feel like Judgment Day was the day after tomorrow. Dost closed his eyes and among the half-lights and shadows that wavered like sheets hung to dry in the wind, he could see the star that signaled the beginning of his divine communication. Becoming very still, he could tell that the star, as always, was beginning to grow. From a very small star, it grew to a very large star and from there Dost accepted the progress of his God's communication.

Not my will but thine be done. Looking at a light bulb for a long time and then looking away--that's what it's like. Only this light lasts longer. What wilt Thou have me do? But not much longer.

Opening his eyes, Dost was surprised to see the evening still as light as it was. The numbness had left his tongue and hands, and the light was beginning to get smaller. It was much faster in going away than it was in building up. Soon, all that was left of his message from God was a suspended headache that would stay in his head for almost a day after each message. It hung from the top of his head like a clapper in a small bell. If he moved it too quickly or too far, a dull ache clanged throughout his brain.

Behind him, the dining room window groaned open again, and his mother said, "Do you think you can find your way to the new house?"

"I guess so," he answered.

"Well, you'd better," said his mother, ominous as thunder on a sinful night.

"Why?"

"Your daddy just called and said Loan was going to help us move the grandfather clock as soon as he gets a truck. I can't go because I've got to wait for him to come back and get our lamps. He says Loan knows about where the house is, but you're going to have to show him exactly where the street is."

"Aw. Why didn't he let the moving men take that anyway? Loan doesn't like me," complained Dost.

"Now you know that's not so. Besides, the movers, so your Daddy says, can't be trusted with antiques or clocks."

"But why Loan? What's he got to carry a clock in? He doesn't have a truck."

"He's going to borrow one. If you want to get moved tonight, you'll stop whining and try to help a little bit," advised his mother, who was not always in her best mood on moving days.

Dost tried to command a defiant silence, but with his small frame and thick glasses, he could only achieve a defeated gloom.

Dost's father, Cain Shustum, was wondering if his cousin's injury had not done something to his head. After

all, he thought, when a man thinks about . . . how would be a good way to put it? When all a man can think about is shooting a gun, you can't mess up the man's shells without messing up his mind.

"What's gotten into Loan?" he asked his rear view mirror as he pulled into the Bonnie Mist Car Wash. "I ask him to help me move a clock. Fine he says. Be glad to he says. And then when it's time for him to help, he calls and tells me to meet him here. He cracked his mind as well as his shells."

From behind one of the stalls, Loan appeared. He was wearing his white uniform. Although the shirt was short-sleeved, it was made out of heavy cotton, and Loan raked his finger across his eyebrows as he approached Cain's car. He flicked the sweat onto the pavement.

"Nice day for moving, huh?" asked Loan, leaning on the side of the car.

"The first half of it was, yes," replied Cain, emphasizing the was.

"You know, Cain, I'll probably get sick getting as hot as I am," declared Loan in a voice that believed his cousin might really care. "It's getting damn cold, and here I am sweating like a whore with her crack sewed up."

"What've you been doing to get so hot?" Cain asked, knowing he couldn't hurry Loan when he wanted to talk about women or his health or sometimes a combination of the two.

"That's why I had you meet me here," explained Loan.

"I just got back from a call up in Duley Town."

"Duley Town?"

"Yeah, yeah. The niggers up there have started killing each other."

"Killing?"

"Well, not really killing. Violet Duley--you might know her--she used to be housekeeper for your boss."

"No. I didn't know her."

"Well. I'm not really surprised. She just finished spending three years in jail. She cut up some man with a broke bottle and almost killed the poor old son of a bitch, so they thought they'd give her a little while to think about it. It seems she did think about it. And hell, the more she thought about it, the madder she got. So yesterday, she started looking for the man who was a witness against her. She found him today. God, she's mean, Cain. And big. And a nigger. And you know damn well that that's a bad combination right there. But along with being mean, and black, and big, she had three years of nursing a grudge. Today she found him . . ."

"You said that already," interrupted Cain, hoping to sound as if he was in a hurry.

Loan just looked at him blankly.

"And accidents," Cain said to himself, staring blankly back into Loan's face. "You can't hurry him when he wants to talk about women, his health, and accidents. Women, health, and accidents," he repeated mentally.

"Anyway, she found him today," began Loan with a look in his eyes of a starving dog that has to do a trick before it's allowed to eat. "God, she's a big black, Cain. I saw her before she went to jail, and she must've weighed two hundred pounds then. And little old Stan-- that was the guy who witnessed against her--he's as little as she is big. He works over in the rub room at Mornings. He's kind of like a little rat--boney and all. Violet tracked Stan down, and her, being even bigger now than she was three years ago, just backed Stan into a corner and she says, 'I know who got me sent to jail.' I heard old Stan just stood and stared up at her like a little boy getting hell from his mama. After she said, 'I know who got me sent to jail,' she smacked him right up the side of his head. And they said he just stood there and so she smacked him again . . ."

"Are you sure you can get that truck you mentioned?" asked Cain, conscious that he had broken his personal commandment concerning Loan's stories.

Again there was the brief, blank stare, and Loan continued, "So she smacked him again. Now Stan is a dumb bastard, but he probably figured out that if she kept on hitting him like that it wouldn't be too long before he'd be beat to death. So he says, 'Leave me alone, Vi,' but she let him have it again. 'I'll go to the police again, damn you,' he says because he's beginning to get mad. It sure as hell took the shithead long enough to get mad, didn't it?" Loan remarked.

"Yes," replied Cain aloud as he silently repeated the magical list--his women, his health, and his accidents."

"I guess that was just what old black Violet had been waiting for because she drew back to hit him again only this time she reached back into the bun of her hair. She had a single-edge razor blade stuffed in that bun . . ."

"A razor blade?" exclaimed Cain, anticipating what would happen next.

"Yeah. A razor blade. Lots of the nigger women wear razor blades in their hair--especially the ones like Violet Duley. Well, she gets it in between her first two fingers and then swap! Old Stan is smiling from ear to ear--on one side of his face, anyway. Only Stan's not smiling. What he's doing mostly is losing a lot of blood. I had to go answer when they called it in."

"But what's that got to do with meeting me at this car wash?"

"The ambulance got dirty while I was there. It's dusty as hell up there."

"Aren't you taking a chance?"

"How do you mean?" asked Loan.

"Well, what if there was to be an accident. Wouldn't it be pretty hard for you to get there with the ambulance stuck in one of those stalls?"

"Oh. Oh," replied Loan. "I don't have to worry about that. Old man Willer has two ambulances. I'm on the day shift, and Bill Worslip is on the night shift . . ."

"So you don't have to worry about getting called to an accident in the evening."

"Oh, I could get called," said Loan with practiced carelessness, "but it's not happened but once or twice in the three years I've been driving. My afternoons are mine, so I can do pretty much as I damn well please."

"Did you get the truck?"

"Not yet. I'm going up to George's house and get it just as soon as I finish here."

"Do you know where Morning's old house is?"

"Is it anywhere around their new one?"

"It's behind it on the old Mill Street about a quarter of a mile away. It's an old two story house. Two-tone brown and white."

"You can see it from the back of the new house, can't you?"

"I suppose you can--yeah. You're right. The new one sits on one rise and the old one sits on the hill across the cow pasture behind it. How come you're so situated around the new one?"

"I answered an ambulance call there a week--two weeks ago. One of the girls--the youngest one--had hit her mouth someway--damn near knocked her teeth all out. I don't know what they did for her at the hospital. She seemed a little on the quair side. Her older sister's odd too, but she's stacked to make up for it. God damn, she was wearing one of those . . ."

"Then you will get the truck?" said Cain, once again forgetting his list.

"Hell, Cain. I said I'd get the fucking truck, didn't I?"

Cain just looked at him. "Tell you what to do. When you go to get the clock, take Dost with you. He can show you the exact street."

"You go on and do what you have to do. I'll get the damn pick-up."

George's pick-up was not parked in its usual place. Loan noticed this fact with a half-voiced curse. George's wife, looking as if Search For Tomorrow had not turned out too happily, blinked as Loan described his situation and the role that George, or rather his truck, was supposed to play in it.

"George got off from work at twelve and went fishing. He won't be back till tomorrow."

"Well, shit," Loan said, looking at the corner of the porch where a mongrel puppy with rickets was urinating.

"George can be a real bastard if you give him half a chance," said his wife.

Loan didn't answer. He just started down the steps toward where the Willer Funeral Home ambulance was parked. "George can be a real son of a bitch bastard if you give him half a chance," he muttered. "Amen. A real son of a bitch, bitch, bitch, bastard."

George's wife noticed that it was not an ordinary stationwagon that the man had come in.

"That an ambulance?" she called to Loan across the yard.

"Yeah," muttered Loan.

"Damn," she replied with a touch of awe.

God damn George, thought Loan, with a touch of anger.

Realizing that the rock wall had suddenly become very uncomfortable, Dost eased to his feet with reluctance. It was as though his rising would be taken as a signal for the sun to complete its disappearance behind the mountains. From the creek that snaked its tangled and viney path through the woods, the frogs and crickets began their impromptu nocturnes. The woods themselves seemed to radiate from the banks of the creek. Along the banks, grew birch trees, briars, and morning glories. This collection of vegetation constituted the core of the woods which was frequented most by Dost. After the birch trees, briars, and morning glories was a small shell of hardwoods which was surrounded by miniature fields of gray weed that grew from the ground in desperate curls and rolls. Long ago, a road had run where the small fields now were. It had always been a mystery to Dost, and once, he and Sylvester had found a pen on the very edge of the fields. It had been made out of a few boards nailed to four trees. There were pieces of women's clothing flung across some of the

boards, along with several pairs of stockings. For a reason he couldn't explain, the place held a pagan-like fascination for Dost. Sylvester had observed that the woods was no place to be drying clothes, and some of the clothes hanging there should not have been hung anywhere. Although neither of the boys had been in that particular part of the woods too many times, neither of them could remember ever having seen the pen before that day. As they had walked away, Dost thought that he heard noises coming from where they had found the clothes, but Sylvester, who had opened a box of Cracker Jacks, claimed to have heard nothing. A few days later, when Dost had managed to get back to the place, all he found was the pen and a pair of stockings, and a thing that his friend Alan Bann had told him was a rubber. As to its function, Alan was unsure. He was certain that people used them when they were married because he had found some in his father's dresser drawer one day. When Dost had asked him to ask his father what they were used for, Alan had declared that he could not do that because his father did not like for him to talk about them. He had tried to get his father to tell him about them when he first found the container of them in his drawer. All his father had given him was a smack in the mouth for his curiosity. Since that time, Alan Bann had devoted part of his life to collecting the mysterious marital tool. Alan told Dost that he probably had ten times as many as his father had, and the best thing about his

collection was that nobody knew about it except himself and now Dost. When Dost asked Alan if he would like the ones left at the pen, he had said "no" since the people might not be finished with them. The field where Dost and Sylvester had found the pen was surrounded by scraggling black pines. These pines made up the largest part of the forest on one side of the creek--this was the side that was closest to where Dost lived. On the far side of the creek was a rise that eventually rose into a small mountain covered with oak and maple trees.

Dost paced around their front yard, taking a mental inventory of everything that he was getting ready to leave.

I wonder if Loan has ever had to pick up anybody in his ambulance who couldn't get their breath. Hey, that's something good to talk to him about because Daddy says most men always like to tell you something about their work. So there's two things I can talk to him about to keep him from talking dirty. That might be even better than talking about the rubber since he would probably know what it is, but I don't know. I'd kind of like to find out what they are so I could tell Alan. Winky might have known what they are but no, I guess if he didn't know the names of them he wouldn't know what they're used for. I can't think of anything that Mama and Daddy do that they would use something like that. They were pretty stupid looking things anyway. It could be that they were used to hold coffee or some other kind of drink.

They looked like they might be waterproof and Alan said they stretched like balloons. Maybe they're some kind of cup or glass-liner so that you don't have to wash dishes. But it's beginning to look like Loan won't be getting here before it gets all the way dark though. Maybe he had to go to an accident a long ways off or something. Probably he would have let Mama or Daddy know

As if in answer to Dost's doubt, the red and white Willer ambulance glided down the road as only ambulances can glide, like their tires are inflated with ether. That the driver was his cousin did not dawn on Dost until the ambulance had turned into his driveway.

"Ready to move, Sport?" yelled Loan from the ambulance as he turned off the motor.

Feeling as if his blood had just turned to hot dust, Dost could only murmur, "I guess so."

"Well, I'll be damned if I'm not here to help you," said Loan.

Dost decided to confront Loan with the facts and get it over with, "Loan, have you been saved?"

"From what?" asked Loan quite honestly.

"From hell," said Dost.

"Now look . . ." began Loan, but he was interrupted by the sound of the dining room window groaning open.

"That you, Loan?" asked Dost's mother.

"Most certainly is," he answered, "and I'm ready to move that clock of yours."

"You must be ashamed to help your relatives," Mrs. Shustum joked from the window.

"Why the hell do you say that?" asked Loan.

"Well, look and see for yourself," Mrs. Shustum expounded. "You wait till it's the dead of night to come and pick up that ticking piece of furniture."

"Now that's a dad-burned lie . . ." began Loan, chuckling.

"Well, it certainly looks like night time out there," Mrs. Shustum observed.

"No. That's not what I mean . . ." Loan began again.

"What do you mean?" asked Mrs. Shustum.

"Well, you see, there was a fight up in Duley Town . . ." began Loan, warming up to his favorite topic.

"What in heaven's name are you doing up in that place to begin with?" accused Mrs. Shustum.

"No, that's not . . ." began Loan hopelessly.

"And then fighting up there too . . ." continued Mrs. Shustum, ignoring Loan's denial.

"No, that's not . . ." breathed Loan, knowing he was just going to have to ride her attack out.

"What's your mama going to say?" concluded Mrs. Shustum.

For a moment, there was a three-part silence and then Loan said, "I wasn't the one fighting. I just had to take one of the people who did fight to the hospital."

"Oh," responded Mrs. Shustum.

"He was cut . . ." started Loan.

"Well, just as long as everything turned out all right, and you're here now," said Mrs. Shustum.

"But let me tell . . ." Loan tried to make one more effort to elucidate upon his newest adventure.

"I'll let you move a grandfather clock from North Redbriar to South Redbriar."

"Shit," Loan mumbled just barely under his breath.

The inside of Cain Shustum's house had that feeling of fresh vacancy that is unique to a house which has just been emptied. Only three articles of furniture remained: a grandfather clock and two matching lamps that had been a gift from a half-remembered aunt; however, a friend of the family who was a dealer in antiques had set a high value on the lamps so they had become first generation heirlooms. The clock was a puzzle to anyone who could not understand the workings of Mrs. Shustum's mind. She was a collector, but her specialty was salt and pepper shakers. A pawnbroker might have figured out why she picked up the other odds and ends that she did.

Mrs. Shustum opened the clock and fastened the pendulum with two pieces of wire that were wrapped around two screws that were sunk into the back of the clock.

"Is that the way the pendulum's supposed to be fixed?" asked Loan.

"That's the way we've fixed it ever since I can remember," replied Mrs. Shustum.

"Does it keep pretty good time?" ventured Loan.

"It might," answered Mrs. Shustum, securing the second piece of wire.

"Is it broke?"

"No. Cain doesn't like to hear it tick and neither do I, so we just don't let it run."

"I don't see too much sense in having a clock around that takes up so much space as this one if it don't keep time."

"For all I know it does keep good time," replied Mrs. Shustum, emphasizing the "good," "but I just don't care whether it does or not. And as for it making good sense or not--I care about that less than I care about whether it keeps time. It's not what the clock keeps--it's what I keep that matters and I want to keep the clock because I want to keep it. That makes good sense to me."

She spoke this little speech with a weariness that might have sprung from her working all day to get moved or from her dislike of being questioned as to why she collected the things that she did.

"How we going to get it outside?" asked Loan, studying the clock as if it were an accident victim.

"We'll have to get it stretched out flat. You can carry the top end, and Dost and I will carry the bottom end," explained Mrs. Shustum patiently but wearily.

"Well, let's get to it," said Loan.

He approached the clock with the awkwardness of a

man who was getting ready to dance the first dance of his life. It was obvious that he was almost afraid to touch the thing.

"Look, look," said Mrs. Shustum. "I'll just tilt it over, and you catch the top and then Dost and I will lift up the bottom and we'll take it out the front door so we won't have to go down the basement steps. Okay?"

"Anything you say," agreed Loan, becoming less masculine by the minute. He braced his hands against the top of the clock and stood poised as if he was afraid that he would not be able to stop the tilting once it got started.

"Who's tilting this thing, you or me?" asked Mrs. Shustum.

"I just thought . . ." began Loan.

"It's not really heavy," Mrs. Shustum informed him.

Loan relaxed slightly and said, "Okay. Tilt it."

The clock went over easily with sounds of metallic indigestion. Deep inside, something began to vibrate.

"Come here," Mrs. Shustum commanded her son.

She moved over to one side of where she had picked up the base of the clock and nodded with her head toward the part of the clock that she wanted him to take. Dost had some trouble finding a place that did not feel like it would wear through his fingers before they got to where the ambulance was parked. Dost noticed that sometime during her conversation with Loan, his mother had slipped on a pair of gloves.

"You got a good hold?" she asked her son.

"Yes," he answered simply.

"Now, Loan, if you'll just back up a little bit and move over to the right some, we can get you headed out the door."

Loan did as he was instructed or ordered, and he soon found himself backing down the several steps that led from the front porch down to the front yard. All three of them moved with a strained awkwardness--not because the clock was heavy but because all three of them had a different idea of how fast they should be moving. Loan was in no particular hurry and he was consciously feeling with his feet each step that he took. Mrs. Shustum was in a hurry to get to her new home--not necessarily because she could not wait to get moved but largely because she just wanted to be done with it. Dost had realized as soon as they had started moving that he would probably lose at least three fingers off of each hand before they got out the front door. He was more concerned with the pain in his fingers than he was with how fast he moved.

When they got down the steps, Mrs. Shustum looked suddenly at Loan. "I'd forgotten all about your operations. Is it all right for you to be lifting something like this?"

"I hope to high heaven it is," replied Loan.

"Let me know if the strain gets to be too much," she advised him.

"I'm pretty sure I can make it to where I'm parked.

After all, I had to get a man into the ambulance all by myself today up in Duley . . ." Loan began pointlessly.

"Just don't let your end drop so low," interrupted Mrs. Shustum. "That pendulum looks like it might be trying to work loose."

For the first time since Loan had arrived, Dost's mother recognized just exactly what it was that he had arrived in. Also, for the first time since they had picked up the clock, all three of them made the same speed together--they stopped, but it was Mrs. Shustum who had the idea originally.

"What's that?" she asked, nodding her head at the ambulance.

"It's an ambulance," said Loan.

"I see that it's an ambulance," lectured Mrs. Shustum.

"Then why did you . . ." began Loan.

"Why did you bring an ambulance?" questioned Mrs. Shustum.

"I couldn't get a truck . . ." began Loan.

"How the devil are we going to carry a clock in an ambulance?"

Now it was Loan's turn to interrupt. "It carries people just fine, so I don't see why a piece of wood should be any problem."

Mrs. Shustum was silent. She did not like for people to interrupt other people when they were talking, especially if she was the other people who was doing the

talking. Finally, she decided to make do with what was available. "How do you plan to keep it from bumping around?"

"Let's get it down there, and I'll show you," he replied.

The three struggled the rest of the way to where the ambulance was parked. They struggled not so much against the weight of the clock as they did against the motions of one another. Loan held his end with one hand and opened the doors to the back. Next, he shuffled around until he could rest the top of the clock on the floor of the ambulance.

"Can you hold it there for just a minute?" he asked the other two movers.

"I suppose so," answered Mrs. Shustum, "but hurry."

Loan climbed in the back and pushed out a stretcher that had two sets of wide straps along its edge. Jumping out of the ambulance, he wheeled the stretcher the rest of the way out and set it on the ground.

"Now all we do is set the clock in the stretcher, strap it in, and tote it on down to South Redbriar," Loan beamed. "That's better than a truck now, ain't it?"

Mrs. Shustum licked her lips and squinted against a sun that was just beginning to rise on the other side of the world. "Oh, that's good. But why didn't you bring that stretcher on into the house, and we wouldn't have had to torture this poor old piece of wood as much as we have."

Loan picked up his end of the clock then manuevered so that they were able to lay the clock like an injured thing upon the stretcher.

"Okay, it's all strapped in and couldn't get out if it wanted to. You hold the back of the stretcher while I lift the front up into the ambulance."

Although he had lost his masculinity to the personality of Mrs. Shustum, Loan was still efficient in his handling of a stretcher.

"What'll keep it from rolling around in the back there?" asked Mrs. Shustum, still wishing Loan had brought a truck.

"Aw, the wheels lock, and I'm going to let Dost ride back there and keep his eye on it. He can give me directions from back there. You can make yourself heard from back there, can't you, Sport?"

Dost squatted awkwardly beside the clock on the stretcher and laid an arm over its middle.

"You're damn lucky," yelled Loan over his shoulder. "Ain't many kids your age ever got to ride in an ambulance without being sick or hurt." In answer to the silence that came from the back, Loan continued, "You've never rode in one before have you?"

"N-no," stammered Dost.

"Hell, don't be so chickenshit afraid," comforted Loan, regaining some of his masculinity. "I'm used to

driving this thing a lot faster than I am right now. Eric-- that's the boy who usually rides with me--just about shits when I really let this thing out. I've even scared my own fucking self a couple of times, but hell, there's nothing to worry about now."

His radio light blinked and a brash buzz echoed throughout the cathedral-like interior of the ambulance.

"God, what does he want?" groaned Loan, picking up the microphone.

"Where you at, Loan?" asked a voice that coagulated from the static of the radio.

"Just passed 503 Third Avenue heading south," replied Loan, beginning to pale.

"Good. A kid's been hit about five miles west of where you're at. It's right where Grove Street intersects with Third. You're going to have to answer the call."

"Damn," complained Loan, continuing to pale. "Bill's supposed to be working tonight."

"I know," answered the radio fuzzily, "but that damned idiot was backing into the garage and forgot to close his door. Ripped the whole God damned thing right off its hinges. He can't answer any calls till we get him another door, and it's coming out of his check too. Now go on before somebody else gets there."

"Damn shithead," growled Loan as he floored the accelerator and switched on his siren.

"Uh, Loan . . ." began Dost, picking himself up

from the blow of the acceleration.

Loan looked over his shoulder and seemed to realize just what kind of problems he did have.

"Damn shithead," he repeated. "That's the second time he's done it too!" he yelled at Dost.

Things could have been much worse--for Dost anyway--since the accident was five miles away, he really did not have too much time to worry. He had started to get down on his knees to pray but Loan shouted at him, "What the hell are you doing back there?"

"Praying," replied Dost.

"Damn it, get the hell up!" screamed Loan.

They got to the scene of the accident. Already, there was a small huddle of people crowded under the glow of a street light. A highway patrolman strutted menacingly around a bent bicycle that rested in a ditch. The huddle of people watched without making a sound. Loan pulled to the side of the road where the patrolman was strutting.

"Where's the . . ." began Loan.

"Gone," replied the patrolman without letting Loan finish his question.

"Gone?" asked Loan.

"Yeah. Whoever the son of a bitch was that hit the kid, turned around and picked it up. Couple of people saw the whole thing."

"Well, I guess we won't be needed around . . ." began Loan.

"You might. Pull over right over there. The guy might decide to come back."

As Loan eased by the patrolman, the patrolman caught sight of a piece of equipment that he had never seen before. It looked a lot like a grandfather clock strapped to a stretcher. Although he was not sure, it also looked like a small spectacled boy was holding grimly onto it.

"Hey," he shouted with an official carelessness to Loan.

"Yeah," replied Loan.

"Is that a clock you got back here?" he asked, tapping the back window of the ambulance.

"Clock?" asked Loan, almost jumping. "No, no. It's not a clock. It's a new respirator."

"Awfully big ain't it?"

"Well, yes, it is big but it's more reliable. It's more automatic, and it's got controls that you can set for special accident cases and that way you don't have to have an attendant fooling around back there."

"What's that back in the back with that . . . respirator if you don't need an attendant?" asked the patrolman slightly skeptical.

"Oh," said Loan, looking back at Dost. "He's not an attendant for the accident victims; he's an attendant for the respirator."

"Kind of young, ain't he?"

"Well, he's an orphan you see. And Mr. Willer has adopted him and is teaching him everything there is to know about running a funeral home. He's bright and already he's made at least twenty trips with me. He's bright. And guts--he's got guts. Why, he went with me just today up to Duley Town to answer a call maybe you heard about it. You see . . ."

The patrolman walked to the back of the ambulance and opened the door. "I want you to do me a favor," he said to Dost.

The patrol car was about twenty yards from where Loan parked the ambulance, and between the two automobiles and a little to one side was where the huddle of people still stood silent and increasing in size by the minute.

"You just stand here," said the patrolman, "and when you hear the voice on the radio say seventy-eight, you let me know." He then walked back to the ambulance to talk to Loan.

Dost looked at the radio and listened to the garbled midget voices coagulating out of the unending static that seemed to flow like two pieces of sandpaper rolling against each other. The silence of the crowd was broken by the single clack of a bicycle stand being put down. Dost looked at the crowd for the first time and realized that many of the faces were turned toward him. One of the faces was freckled and framed in a glow of red hair.

Lynda Wisprin is here, he thought then he heard,

"Seventy-eight. Come in seventy-eight. Seventy-eight."

His position was very difficult. When the patrolman had told him to let him know when the radio said seventy-eight, he had not told him how to let him know. Was he supposed to yell across the twenty yard chasm of night or should he leave his post and walk to where the patrolman stood?

"Seventy-eight. Seventy-eight. Come in seventy-eight," continued the radio like an ugly parrot.

Afraid that he would not be heard, Dost frantically decided to leave his post. Walking past the crowd, he heard a voice say, "Does he work with the highway patrol or the ambulance service?" Then he heard a girl's voice reply, "We were in the same room at school"

Before the sentence was finished, he had walked out of hearing range, but he knew that he was in a position that he had never been in before, and these strangers but one were looking and talking at and about him instead of Sylvester. His back had grown a little stiffer by the time he reached the patrolman.

He tapped at his back and said, "They're calling seventy-eight."

The patrolman went back to his car without speaking, and Dost started back to the patrol car. The patrolman had already picked up his microphone and was nodding into it.

"Well, you can tell your buddy that he doesn't have

to wait anymore. The kid was just delivered to a hospital."

Dost nodded his head with a professional weariness and turned to go back to the ambulance. The red-framed face was still looking at him. By the time he reached the ambulance, he had begun to swagger pretty noticeably.

"We can go," Dost informed Loan. "The victim is already at the hospital."

"Thank God," breathed Loan. "You can just get up front with me instead of riding in the back."

Dost took one more look around to make sure everything was under control then he opened the ambulance door. Now, despite all of his brightness, there was one important thing that he did not know about ambulance doors. From the hinge to the handle, they are the same as a car door, but from the handle to the door post, the door is at least a foot and a half longer than a car door. The extra-wide ambulance door swiped him a glancing blow to the left side of his head then seemed to embed itself in the left side of his nose before it swished on to knock his glasses askew. Dost did not look to see if anyone had seen him, and he did not see Loan until he asked, "Now that was some excitement, wasn't it?"

"Yeah," answered Dost. "Some excitement," and pride goeth before a fall, he thought.

Dost regained his composure enough to glance at Loan. Apparently, he had not noticed Dost's encounter

with the ambulance door's deceptive width.

"How'd your first ambulance trip feel, Preacher?" asked Loan. "I mean, besides the excitement, how did it feel?"

"I'm not exactly a preacher," Dost replied, rubbing the scratch on the side of his nose.

"Then what are you exactly?" ventured Loan.

"I'm going to be more like a missionary . . ."

"God, what!" exclaimed Loan, unduly surprised at his cousin's seriousness.

"Me and Sylvester talked about it," Dost began, using Sylvester's name with the faint hope of making Loan more respectful.

"And he decided that you're going to South Redbriar to be a missionary?" questioned Loan in a rising voice.

"Well, yes . . ." replied Dost, wondering why Loan found it so hard to believe.

Loan began laughing and pounding the steering wheel with his left hand. "I don't believe it. I don't believe it. One of you kids, or both of you kids is crazy. Raving fucking raving crazy."

"That's not true," argued Dost indignantly.

"Well, I don't think it's you, Preacher. Why, me and you are family. And saying that you are crazy would be like saying our family is crazy which would be saying that I'm crazy. And I know I'm not crazy even if my Daddy is."

"You're not supposed to call anybody crazy," Dost moralized.

"Shit, why not? Especially when there are so many people who fit the name? You know why you said that?" challenged Loan.

Dost did not answer. He looked out the window and wondered if they were moving too fast for him to jump from the ambulance.

"You try to be nice to people because you think that'll make them be nice to you. Now ain't that so?"

"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," responded Dost, finding strength in his ability to remember the appropriate verse.

"Just exactly what Sylvester Oliver Bynum would want you to say. That fat little Bible-beater has brainwashed you. That's why he hangs around Frank Kirkle . . . he's picking the drycleaning trade so he can give twenty-four hour brainwashing service to the whole town." Loan regained his composure long enough to pass two cars that were going too slow to suit him. "Now if I wanted to, I could turn on the lights and the siren and really make 'em get out of the way, but there's no reason to do anything like that."

Dost stared at the two drivers as they passed the cars. The first one looked like he might have been a clerk in some hardware store. His glasses were pulled into his face by one of those elastic bands that basketball players use. He did not seem to notice the ambulance until it was almost completely past him. When he did notice it, he slowed down, as if he did not know what he was doing running side

by side with the emergency vehicle. The second driver was older than the first and his face was more crumpled up. He had been watching the ambulance's approach in his sideview mirror, and he looked at it like some men might look at a woman in a falling dress.

Without thinking, Dost asked, "Why is this man looking at us so funny?"

"Ah, most people don't realize how damn dull their living is until they see an accident. Most people don't separate an accident from an ambulance. They don't think we come out unless some blood has been spilled somewhere. That excites them. Some of them would rather see a car wreck than have a good fuck." Loan glanced in his rearview mirror. "Yeah. That guy looks like somebody who'd get his rocks off watching me pick up the pieces of somebody who'd just gone off an eighty foot embankment."

"That doesn't sound right," Dost commented.

"Perverted is what it is," Loan clarified. "I do it because it's my job, and it's a damn fine job, but hell, I like my women smelling good and healthy. That guy back there probably likes to screw in an iron lung. Give me a motel with air conditioning any day."

Dost was trying to trace the pattern of the floormat when he noticed a spot of light between his feet. At first, he thought that the ambulance might have had some sort of inside light on the floor. However, when he looked at Loan, he saw the light--the same light--glaring from

Loan's ear. It was his second message from God in the same day.

During his blind spell, Dost asked himself what Saul would do in such a situation. And he was three days without sight, Dost quoted to himself. Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste any thing: let them not feed, nor drink water, arise go to Ninevah, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me and Loan's wickedness has come up before me which me? Me or God? I and my Father are one. This do in ambulance of me help me God to speak to Loan now that my tongue is awake . . .

"Did you ever go to church, Loan?" Dost blurted, hoping it was divine inspiration.

"Everybody's been to church, Preacher," Loan replied in a surprisingly mild voice.

"But you don't go anymore," ventured Dost.

"Why no," Loan said, rubbing his forehead, "I don't believe I do."

"Uh, don't you ever get lonely? I mean, you get to meet a lot of people--good people and friendly people--in church . . ."

"Fuck 'em."

"You always say something like that . . ." Dost argued.

"Only because you always say something like you do. Jesus H. Christ, every time I get around any of you it's

'How's your soul,' 'Didn't see you in church,' 'Read any good Bibles lately,' 'How long's it been since you last prayed.' Don't you people ever think about anything but what you know nothing about? Religion is pissed out, Preacher. Just kids like you and S.O. Bynum go around believing in it. Just kids and old people who don't know anything else."

"You just say that . . ."

"I just say it because it's true, but you wouldn't know anything about what's true. That red-headed Bible-beater, that Bill Graham Junior has stuffed you so full of red-letter shit that you . . . why the hell do I argue with a kid? You've not got any more sense than Mama."

"Nelly is a Christian, and Sylvester is an evangelist . . ."

"Let me tell you about Sylvester Oliver Bynum, Preacher. I know more about him than you do . . ."

"That's not so!" shouted Dost, wondering why Loan frightened him so much.

"You don't know why he lives with his grandmother do you?"

In the distance, Dost could see the water tower which landmarked where Morning's Furniture Factory stood. The street where Loan was supposed to turn was right beside that water tower.

"Up there's where you turn," Dost pointed out, trying to change the subject.

"Has Mr. S.O.B. ever mentioned why he lives with his grandmother?"

"I don't care why," shouted Dost, "just make sure you turn left when you get to that water tower up there."

"You see, Preacher, old boy, Sylvester Oliver Bynum is a bastard in real life--by right of his birth. His mother was, and still is, I suppose, an A-1 whore . . ."

"Don't talk like that about Winky!" Dost screamed.

"Yes sirree. Old Granddaddy Bynum threw her out years ago. I don't know what S.O. Bynum tells the kids at school on PTA night, but it would make mighty interesting listening if he told the truth. Sylvia Bynum is her name, and she's not as young as you usually like 'em to be, but she's still good--hell, she's had it exercised enough to where it ought to be in shape."

Dost was frantic; his head felt like it was filling up with warm water, and he knew he had to do something to get Loan to stop talking about Sylvester.

"Loan, do you know what a rubber is?"

It was the first question that came to his mind, but the effect was exactly what he had hoped for. Loan was silent. At first, Dost thought it was because he was involved in making the left turn.

"You cut back to the right at the first street you come to then just follow the road. That'll bring us right to the brown and white house where we're supposed to be moving."

"Why do you want to know about rubbers?" Loan asked suspiciously.

"I've found some out in the woods, and a friend of mine collects them, but he isn't sure what they're used for either."

Loan turned right at the first street he came to then he began whistling "Mack the Knife." He chuckled to himself and said aloud, "Maybe there is a God of some sort after all."

Although Morning Street had been freshly paved, it seemed--to Dost--to be narrower than it really was. Sylvester had been right--poplar trees were planted in the front two corners of each house's rectangular plot. The houses themselves were two-story box-shaped affairs with tall, slanting roofs studded with a single curved window eave which jutted from the roof's slant like a cycloptic toad eye. Grass grew sparsely in the yards which were dominated by the poplars in the front yard and by sagging clotheslines in the back yard. Since the length of the rectangular yard was made up mostly of the front and back yards, there was very little space left on either side of the house to have a side yard. There was perhaps twenty feet between each house, and the side yards between each house were designated by a scraggly row of hedge running between the two houses. These hedge rows ran all the way from the road's edge to the soybean field that was behind the houses on the left side of the road. Behind the houses on the right side of the road was a spacious cow pasture

which was fertilized twice each summer. Because the fertilizer was a totally natural mixture, the odor was always very powerful for the first few days after it was spread. The second fertilizing had occurred just two days earlier, so the smell was still very present.

"Boy, smell that cow shit!" Loan exclaimed.

"Does it smell like this all the time?" Dost asked, seriously concerned.

"Well, you get used to it, Preacher."

"I don't think so . . ."

"Oh yeah. It's not so bad after a while," Loan continued. "Some people say that the smell keeps you from getting colds."

"I'd rather have the cold," Dost replied earnestly.

Loan laughed and said, "Me too, Preacher. You're not such a bad sort when you're not talking about God. I think that Sylvester Oliver Bynum is a bad influence on you . . ."

"No, he's not," interrupted Dost. "He helped me save my soul. We have Bible study together, we went visiting, and he could heal people if he wanted to only he doesn't want to because God doesn't want him to."

"He told you that, I suppose."

"Yes. Once when we visited Mrs. Japerson at the first of the summer, I asked him about healing, and he said . . ."

"That wouldn't be Mrs. Louise Japerson who lives down the road from where I was living would it?" asked

Loan, his face lighting up.

"She's sick, and her sister is keeping her," clarified Dost.

"Yeah, that's the one," Loan agreed. "Why I bet I've done more for her than your friend Sylvester has."

"How?" Dost asked with a slight challenge in his voice.

"I sold her burial insurance. Her old man was buried by Willer Funeral Home."

"I didn't know that," Dost admitted, trying to charm his cousin.

"Well, he was, but that was a long time ago, right after World War I. Anyway, her sister called up about a month ago. Seems like the doctors don't believe the old woman's going to last the year out. But anyway, the sister calls and tells me that the old woman wanted the same kind of service that her husband had when we buried him--of course that was way back when Mr. Willer's old man was running the place. Well, Mr. Willer was out of town so it was up to me to check the files and sure enough, I found the burial contract that old man Japerson had drawn up back before he died. It was so old that it was turning yellow--but it was there--the Willers really know how to keep their books, but there was a place where his wife had to sign so I drove out to her place and got her sister to sign for her, and that was my first burial insurance transaction even if it was just getting a blank filled in

which should never have been blank in the first place, but now it's all signed and sealed, and we'd get to bury her now even if she lived forever. As Mr. Willer says, 'She's one of ours now.'"

"What if you decide you don't want to bury her?" Dost asked, in order to keep the conversation going in its innocent direction.

"It can't happen like that, Preacher. You see, the contract works both ways. We've got her, and she's got us. There's nothing anybody can do once the paper is signed. Mr. Willer's not about to lose anybody. Body. Mr. Willer's not about to lose any body. That's a funeral home joke, Preacher."

"That's the house down there at the bottom of the hill," Dost pointed out.

"Gooooood Lord!" exclaimed Loan, ending in a whistle. "That's some house."

Even Dost had to admit that under the soft caress of the streetlights, the old Morning home was impressive. It was one of those old houses that never attached itself to a particular era. In its front yard were large magnolia trees whose blossoms were just beginning to snow oblong petals onto the grass. The rest of the yard was thickly populated by oak trees which stood around the house like guards who had just gotten off duty. Running entirely around the yard was a short stone wall topped with trimmed box shrub. Where the front walk divided its way between

the stone wall, two larger shrubs had been grown like column markers. They had been trimmed over the years to grow into the shape of large arm chairs.

Although the house seemed to shy from the direct light of the streetlamp, it was easily discernable that the house was two-toned. The second story was white, and the first story was a dark brown--two different shades which joined somewhere behind a large oak. Going all the way around the house was a porch. Half of it was open, and the other half--to the left of the front walk--was enclosed in glass to make a sun porch. There were very few windows on the first floor, but the few that could be seen from the front were extremely large--like double doors laid on their sides. On the second floor, the windows were regular--sized, but for each regular window, there were two smaller windows on either side of it. These smaller windows were shaped like diamonds, and they were made of stained glass.

"It looks like Cain has got it made. Your Daddy is now a success," said Loan. "Look at your house."

Dost had seen it before, but it had been raining, and they had not even stopped or even pulled into the driveway. This was his first chance to get a good look at it for himself, even though his father had told him all about it many times. Although he was spiritual in his values, he liked the feeling of having a house that could even impress the likes of Loan.

"I'd never noticed how big it was before," Dost admitted.

"Well, it sure as hell is big enough," complied Loan. "And look at them little windows on the second story. That's stained glass they're made out of. Just like church windows."

"Yeah, like church windows but North Redbriar Baptist Church doesn't have stained glass. It's just frosted."

"Well, I meant a real church--not a Baptist Church--especially not North Redbriar Baptist Church," Loan replied.

"They sure have a lot of glass."

"That's a fucking fact," Loan agreed.

In an effort to get Loan to stop his bad language, Dost tried to change the subject by asking, "What'd Mr. Willer say about your selling the burial contract?"

"Burial insurance," corrected Loan, as he switched the ambulance engine off--there were a couple of lights burning in the house. "Mr. Willer doesn't know yet. I want him to come to me and say, 'How'd you like to sell some burial insurance, Loan?' Then I'll say, 'Well, Mr. Willer, I like selling it just fine.' Then he'll say 'What?' Then I'll tell him. He don't need to know anything until old Mrs. Japerson gets almost ready to kick off . . . what's that noise? Do you hear that, Preacher?"

Dost stuck his head out the window. Outside were the mellow tones of a trumpet being played on a summer night. From the army movies that he had seen, Dost knew

that the song being played was "Taps."

"Sounds awfully sad, don't it?" observed Loan.
"Where's your daddy? He was supposed to be here. I'm driving an ambulance, and I don't have time to wait."

"He was supposed to be here," mumbled Dost, feeling abandoned. The thought crossed his mind that perhaps he had been tricked, lured to this place so his parents could leave him without a trace.

"Well, if he's around, I'll bring him to," growled Loan as he flipped a switch on the dashboard. The siren came to life, and the lights began throbbing into the darkness.

The night and the whole neighborhood seemed to gasp at the ambulance's gaudy outburst. Several dogs began barking, but as soon as Loan turned the switch off, silence sucked at the very limbs of the trees. The trumpet was silent. A light came on in the sun porch part of the house. But still, no one came out. It was like the house was waking up all by itself. For a moment, Dost was somewhat frightened.

"Looks like we're going to have to get the clock in by ourselves, Preacher," said Loan as he slid out of the driver's seat.

"But it's too heavy," argued Dost.

"Naw," shrugged Loan going to the back of the ambulance.
"We've got it on the stretcher. That'll make it a lot easier to handle."

As the man and the boy were working to get the stretcher out of the ambulance, both heard a rustle in the box shrubs to the left of the driveway where they were parked.

"Hey, is somebody hurt or something?" came a voice from the hedge, before a face could be seen anywhere.

"Who the hell is it?" demanded Loan, trying to get one of the stretcher wheels unlocked from its non-rolling position.

"I'm a neighbor," replied the voice. "Franklin Laney."

"Well get over here and give us a hand, Franklin Laney," Loan ordered.

"But I don't know anything about first aid. I'm in Boy Scouts, but I don't know any real kind of first aid . . ." stammered the voice, sounding like its owner might be retreating.

"Aw, we don't need first aid. All we need is a little muscle," Loan said in the direction of the rustling shrubbery.

A very square face appeared, spotted with two deep-set eyes which reflected the streetlight like polished acorns. His nose was broken and pushed to one side of his face like maybe it had been broken in a high wind which had blown across his face. Even in the dim light, Dost could make out a faint circular outline around the boy's lips.

"We've just got a clock that we need to get inside before somebody gets run over and I have to go get them," Loan informed the tall boy as he came fully out of the bushes.

"I guess I can help then," replied the boy, looking at Dost.

"You two grab the front end; it's the lightest. I'll take the back."

"Is this your ambulance?" the boy asked Loan, still looking at Dost.

"No, I just drive it for Willer Funeral Home."

"Does this clock belong to the funeral home?" the boy asked, taking hold of one of the stretcher handles.

Loan staggered to the ground with his end of the stretcher. "No, this belongs to Cain Shustum, who is moving into this house, who is the father of the boy walking there beside you. Do you work with the Census Bureau or something?"

"Nope. I guess I'm just nosey."

"Yeah. I guess," muttered Loan.

"I play a trumpet; maybe you heard me when you first got here. When I play, I can be heard all over the neighborhood."

"Yeah, we did," answered Dost with admiration.

"I only started this summer, but I've got 'Taps' down pretty good. I could be better, but I don't practice as much as I'm supposed to."

"I thought you sounded real good," replied Dost.

"Well, Mr. Podges is a pretty good teacher," continued Franklin.

"Not O.D. Podges!" declared Dost, half-turning to Franklin.

"Yeah, O.D. Podges. Do you know him?"

"Only from church," replied Dost.

"That's not the best way to know him," Franklin answered, shaking his head.

"For God's sake!" groaned Loan, "Will you two hurry up!"

But before they could go any further, Cain Shustum came out of the house and took over for the two boys.

"Let me have that before you tear up your mother's worthless souvenir, Dost," he said, taking charge of the front of the stretcher.

"So you're my new neighbor," Franklin observed.
"What's your name?"

However, before Dost could answer, his father shouted for him to come and hold the door open.

The next morning brought Dost down the strange stairway of his new house, but the sleep in his eyes kept him from noticing the carved fauns who stood in their oak stain holding up the bannister. He was moved mainly by the smell and the sound of frying bacon. Shortly after they had set up the clock in the hallway, Cain Shustum had sent his son up to his newly appointed bedroom while he and his wife, who had arrived just after Loan had pulled out of the driveway, spent most of the night unpacking. Both Cain and his wife preferred working at night, especially when it was the kind of work where results could be directly

seen. So it was, that when Dost found his way into the wormwood kitchen of his new home, he was greeted by the bloodshot, but accomplishing smiles of his parents.

"How was the new room, Dost?" his father asked.

Dost shrugged his shoulders, not wanting to commit himself, in front of his parents, to the odd pleasure that his room had given him. His room in the other house had the sheetrock walls of all the other homes in his old neighborhood. It was the first wherein the building contractor of North Redbriar had experimented with housing development homes and their prefabricated parts. Until last night, Dost had only seen imitation wood paneling. There was something about the mahogany panels that covered the walls of his new room that seemed to brace something up inside of him. Their rich darkness made him think of the trumpet playing "Taps." And for some reason, he could not get that sound out of his head.

"Now it wasn't that bad, was it?" his mother asked, turning from the stove.

"It's like everything . . . like everything . . ."
Dost held up his fingers and wiggled them, trying to express the feeling of the house, ". . . like you can feel everything or like you want to feel everything with your fingers."

"What you're talking about is texture," his father supplied.

"Are you suddenly a poet, or something clairvoyant?"

Mrs. Shustum asked, again turning from the stove--only a little more sharply than before.

"I could be, Etta," Cain mused. "I've always wanted a house like this. You know that."

"Yes, I believe I remember hearing you say something to that effect--every day for the past five or seven years."

"More like ten or twelve," Cain corrected. "But can't you see that even my son, who has lived in second-best presumption all of his young religious life, can tell the difference that quality makes."

"You sound like we just escaped from a mobile home park," his wife observed.

"Compared to this house, we were living in a mobile home," Cain answered.

"Well, if you like it so much, why are we tripping off to Germany just two weeks after we move into our dream home? Or is that the way the Great Cain Gatsby does things?"

"Getting the house is only part of the trick, Etta. Paying for it is the other part. Verlon let me buy this place as a personal favor. Going to Germany for him is one way of returning part of that favor."

"But a six months long favor," argued his wife.

"Look, that's cutting it short. It generally takes two years to arrange the machinery for a plant the size that Verlon is putting up."

"So I should count my blessings."

"Look," resumed Cain, "I'd like to take Dost. The

education from travel is supposedly more beneficial than what he'd get in a classroom. But one, Verlon Morning is paying for this trip, and another person, even younger than Dost, would blow the budget to hell. Besides this is going to be strictly business--strictly business for six months. We're going to be living on the road almost all the time. Even you're going to get sick of it, Etta. Besides, he's got a whole new life to make for himself in this place, and that's going to be more important in the long run. He's too young to get anything out of Germany right now--except maybe homesickness--which is what we'll get before it's over. Maybe we'll send him over there for a graduation present or something."

"Provided he doesn't get married first . . ." Etta calculated.

"Then it'll be a wedding present," Cain concluded. He grasped his son's arm and smiled at him--an unusually strong show of affection coming from Cain Shustum. "I'm really glad you've picked up on the texture of this house, Dost. It's one of the things that made me want it so much. I was afraid that you'd feel like we'd carried you off to Babylon."

That was the captivity, Dost thought to himself. Zerubbabel--a stranger at Babylon that's what the Bible dictionary said because the Bible does have a dictionary only we're not really captured like the Children of Israel because we didn't have our eyes put out and nobody burned

down the temple in North Redbriar or the First Baptist Church since we don't have a temple and there'd have to be a wall to tear down too but the only one we had was the rock one around Mama's flower garden. It didn't have any towers to shoot arrows from or to march under blowing trumpets on the seventh time around Jerico and de walls come tumbling down and fire burning red red like Lynda Wisprin with red hair redder than Winky's and thicker and longer without bangs like all the other girls would wear but all of it long all over sometimes falling from behind her ear where she has it pulled back and it closing across her face like a curtain silken sad uncertain rustling or the velvet ones on the auditorium stage long ago when Mrs. Tannbow tried to give piano lessons to some of us only my hands didn't like each other and one was always trying to slip off . . . what was it . . . yes, the keyboard and I could have done good--Mrs. Tannbow said so because I learned the scale before anyone else ABCDEFGA, ABCDEFGA, but only one hand knew it the other was too jealous to even try and learn but the lessons didn't last too long because Mrs. Tannbow got married and it was time for her to because she was getting along-- that's what I heard one of the teachers say in the lounge one day when they left the door open where I was dusting erasers on the electric duster with the mouth like the vacuum cleaner but before you get to use the electric duster you've got to learn how to dust them by taking them

outside and clapping them where it's really the most
 fun is across from the wall of the auditorium where you
 get an echo when you clap them only the teachers don't
 like you to do it there because when you clap them loud
 enough to get an echo, it disturbs the activity of the
 classroom just beside the auditorium. Don't clap, you'll
 disturb the activity. Clap activity. Clap activity. Claptivity,
 Captivity. Captivity into Babylon at the other end of the
 promised land over Jordan Roll Jordan. Moses could have
 trained it with his rod like he did the Red Sea parting
 down to dry land with Pharoah's army coming up like
 Nebuchadnezzar coming up to carry off to capture Judah
 after the rule of Solomon which was after the rule of
 David which was after the rule of Saul 120 years 40 years
 apiece and Absalom didn't count because his hair caught
 him in a tree and they threw darts in him Zerubbabel
 captive in Babylon captive in a tree captive in long hair
 red and Lynda Wisprin the ambulance light smacking blushes
 on her face shorts like fingers around the upper part of
 her legs--forgive me God if that's a dirty thought but it
 doesn't feel dirty what shall wash me white as snow nothing
 but the blood of Jesus red sea Absalom with darts his long
 hair snarled in the tree limbs long red Lynda Wisprin in
 the clapping ambulance light clap, clap, clap the upper
 part of her leg like the white chalk from the erasers
 puffing into their own echo captivity Zerubbabel red hair
 like red sea parted in the middle for armies to race

through red water walls Absalom riding through the forest
scared probably hearing people behind him his hair slapping
at the wind like ambulance lights number 78 Zerubbabel
the tower of Babel the tear of Babel the tire of Babel
with a clock caught inside of it pendulum swinging like
Absalom from the tree if he would have seen his barber,
barberlon, Babylon captivity in South Redbriar while they're
cutting up Solomon's golden temple in North Redbriar only
a jack knife has old man heat beat and there's never, never
a trace of red sea light hair--sealight hair, seahair
light, red lightsea hair, red hair light sea only Lynda
Wisprin has hair red as the sea and her legs light bulbs
soft like an answer that turneth away wrath great things
He hath done let the people rejoice neither eat nor drink
for three days just like Jonah in the whale who probably
didn't eat all that time just sitting there in the dark,
I guess, with ribs around him like wood paneling or bone
paneling I guess maybe as dark as it is inside Linville
caverns when the guide turns the lights out dark with a
texture like turning a rock inside out maybe a piece of
coal until you can't even feel your fingers it's so dark
dark behind it rose the forest rose the dark and gloomy
pine trees so Hiawatha kept his hair trimmed because
maybe he had heard about what happened to Absalom Absalom
son of David who played a harp but the harps were all broken
in Babylon because how could they sing when they were
captives in a strange land with giant grapes only that

was the promised land of my fathers who is going to Germany land with my mothers to buy machines like the conveyor belt that broke the man's arm or like the tree that caught Absalom by the hair so he could be a dart board keyboard ABCDEFGA, ABCDEFGA, Mrs. Tannbow clopping across the stage in her high heels everything smelling dusty like the old curtains or the piano keys pushing back on your fingers like it was trying to play you sometimes only we didn't have the little strings inside of us to make any kind of noise clopping across stage, clapping across stage to our music piano activity clapactivity, claptivity, captivity, Zerubbabel a stranger at Babylon, but I know that already please help me I'm a stranger in Babylon, only it's Stranger in Paradise by the same men who did Baubles, Bangles, and Beads stranger in paradise stranger in the basement with a dirt floor lucky not to be cement soft like legs in short pants white clapping chalk dust to echoes in piano activity with the soft curtains like hours hanging from a pendulum . . .

"How many pieces of bacon can you handle this morning?" asked his mother.

"Four," Dost replied, letting his parents come back into focus in his mind.

"What were you thinking about?" asked his father, squeezing his arm.

"Zerubbabel," Dost answered, hoping to impress his father.

"Where'd you get a thought by that name?" asked his father, again squeezing his arm.

"The last time I had Bible study with Winky--Sylvester-- I found it in the Bible dictionary on names. Transfer's not there."

"But what does it mean?" continued Cain.

"Oh, it means a stranger in Babylon," Dost replied.

"How terribly appropriate," his mother chimed.

"Oh, so you do feel like we've carried you off to Babylon," Cain observed.

"No, I was just thinking about it because you said it first," Dost explained.

"It's called the power of suggestion," Etta volunteered.

"But you're not exactly a stranger, Dost," Cain reasoned. "You've already got one friend; I practically had to run him off last night . . ."

"Oh, that was Franklin. Did you hear him playing a trumpet last night?"

"I heard somebody playing 'Taps,'" his father replied.

"Yeah. That was Franklin."

"Well, he seemed pretty friendly."

"Aw, he was here to see Loan's ambulance. When Loan turned the siren on last night, I guess it made Franklin stop practicing" Suddenly, Franklin's little speech about who his teacher was flashed into Dost's mind. "And do you know who's teaching him trumpet lessons?"

"Tell us," advised his mother, putting his breakfast in front of him.

"O.D. Podges," Dost replied.

"He's the blind musician, isn't he?" Etta asked.

"Yes," Cain answered before his son could reply.

"He lives up on the mill hill . . . or rather the factory street . . . Morning Street, I guess it's called now-- about five or six houses up. As a matter of fact, he grew up in the house where he's living."

"But I thought just factory workers could live up there," Etta said.

"No. That was so when they were mill houses, but ever since Morning's converted the mill, it's been just whoever will pay the rent."

"Do you know O.D. Podges?" Dost asked his father, slightly amazed at the prospect of the two men having any sort of social relationship going on which he was not aware of.

"I don't know him personally, but his name came up once when I was talking to Verlon. O.D.'s wife teaches drama at the college in Mason City. She's an actress too. O.D. teaches a course in folk music, but I don't think it's a regular class--just something he does when he feels like it. Mostly what he does is compose. And he must give a lot of private lessons. You said . . . what's his name, the boy who was over here last night . . ."

"Franklin," Dost supplied.

"You said Franklin takes lessons. Well, the reason O.D. came up in my conversation with Verlon was because his daughter, Asia, was taking flute lessons from him . . ."

"But I thought Dost said he gave trumpet lessons," Etta interrupted.

"Well, I'm sure Verlon said flute lessons," Cain argued, "because he was talking about how worried he was because she had just had some kind of accident, and they were afraid that she might have to give up the flute until she recovered."

"He plays a guitar, too," Dost added, "and he sings."

"He sounds like some musician," Etta commented. "I bet he looks like George Gershwin."

"He looks like a frog," Dost replied.

"Well, whatever he looks like, he's supposed to be pretty good at what he does. That's why Verlon didn't want his daughter missing any lessons--the man seems to know just how to get the most a kid has to offer. Verlon tells me that he's an old friend of the family, too."

"I didn't realize Verlon was such a conscientious father," Etta remarked.

"He's not really," Cain confided. "The man's a real puzzle if you spend any time at all around him. But he's big on the care and feeding of possessions. He once told me that you can't separate a man from what he owns. The more you own, the bigger you are, but he firmly believes that you've got to take religious care of everything that

belongs to you. With him, possession is as much a matter of quality as it is quantity. I can quote him about it: 'Own as much of the best as possible. And if you can't buy it as the best then develop it and sell it as the best.'

"What a noble sentiment," Etta commented, dumping egg shells into the garbage.

"Well, he's got a streamlined version that he uses when he's pressed for time: 'If you can't buy the best, then sell it as the best.'"

"Too bad I've run out of garbage," Etta replied.

"I'm sure you'll get some more."

"While I finish up the dishes, why don't you introduce Dost to the rest of the house," Etta suggested, rising above her husband's jibe.

"Please come this way, Dost," said Cain rising from the table, "and let me introduce you to your new estate in life."

Dost followed his father from the kitchen. As Cain passed an unopened crate, he picked up a cafe rod that was lying on top of it then he proceeded from the room, using the rod as a pointer.

"Built originally in 1924 by M.H. Morning from money he earned as a bootlegger--mind you, this was before bootlegging became fashionable in the larger cities, or maybe it wasn't--the house was acclaimed by all who came to visit it as circus spirit incarnate. According to the Ladies Quilting Circle--'Ghastly'--from the Garden Club--'Atrocious!'

Granted, to the conservatives, the house in its original form was a little bit on the gaudy side . . . ah, we come to our first point of interest--the dining room. Dining room, this is Dost Shustum. Dost Shustum, this is the Dining Room. When we get around to having guests and formal parites, we will entertain them here. Now, if you'll follow me this way, we'll meet the den. By the way, Dost--while we're dealing with introductions--you haven't met any of Verlon's kids, have you?"

"I don't think so, Daddy."

"Well, wait till we get to the den, and I'll tell you about them," Cain promised as he disappeared between two, heavy swinging doors.

Dost stopped in amazement because he had never seen double swinging doors in a house before. Cain noticed his son's attentive stare as he gingerly wedged his way through the doors.

"Pretty nice, huh?" he asked.

"I've never seen doors like that in a house before," Dost confessed.

"Well, pay close attention, son, and you'll notice that almost every door inside this house has swinging doors. M.H. Morning was either very lazy or very eccentric . . ."

"Eccentric?" Dost interrupted.

"Eccentric is being a little touched in the head so that you act funny. You might wear funny clothes like nobody else wears or talk funny . . ."

"Or build a funny house . . ." ventured Dost.

"Yes. Exactly. Or build a funny house."

"Are we eccentric for living in a funny house?" Dost further explored.

"I refuse to answer on the grounds that it might tend to incriminate me."

"Can a person be eccentric and be a Christian?" Dost asked, becoming serious.

"Some people maintain that they go hand in hand," Gain replied, becoming distant for a moment.

"But why swinging doors?" Dost asked, sensing his father's changing mood.

"Oh," his father mumbled, coming back to his original humor. "M.H. Morning maintained that turning all those doorknobs was a useless expenditure--a waste of energy. He said that every door you open you're going to have to push it--that's a necessity--but you don't have to unlatch everyone of those doors--that's a habit. So with the exception of the doors that lead outside and the bedroom doors, all other doors swing free as grapevines with hinges . . ."

"What about bathroom doors?" Dost asked, suspecting M.H. Morning's morality.

"Aha," breathed his father, sitting down in a leather chair that squatted in front of a darkened fireplace. "Very perceptive of you to ask about the bathrooms. This house has three--not counting the half bathroom in your bedroom . . ."

"It doesn't even have a door at all," Dost said.

"Well, that's because a servant used to have that room--actually it was M.H. Morning's best driver who lived there."

"Did Mr. Morning ever get sent to jail for bootlegging?"

"No."

"Why not?" Dost asked, wondering how a criminal could escape the sure judgment of the law.

"Because he turned into an honest man before anybody could catch him. You see, Dost, M.H. Morning got his start with bootlegging, but he was smart enough to know that . . ." here, Cain changed his voice to sound like Sargeant Friday of the New York Police Department, ". . . crime does not pay--enough. It was one of those rare occasions that came along for M.H. where he realized he could make more money in an honest business than in a dishonest pastime. Rumor has it that this was about the time that he was trying to get a certain Helen Heiner to marry him, and the same rumor had it that she was reluctant to marry a man who made his living off the vices of other people."

"And a woman could make a man change like that?" Dost asked, unaware of his own skepticism.

"Love is a many splendored thing," was all Cain would say.

For the first time since he had entered the room, Dost took his eyes from the swinging doors. A painting

hung over the fireplace, dominating the whole den. It was a painting of a ship. All of the waves rushed from the sides of the frame as if they were trying to swirl the ship into the fireplace beneath it. Even the sky took part in the painting's sabotage of itself--the wind seemed to push the ship with its flying sails down into the waves. The whole painting pulled at Dost.

"I've never seen anything like that," the boy said, pointing to the picture.

"Can you feel that painting the way you felt the texture of this house?"

"Yes!" exclaimed Dost. "That's what it is. It's not like it's a picture at all. It's like it's real--not like it's something you can hang on a wall."

"That's what a real painting is," Cain explained. "This painting came with the house. And it's signed by the artist in a secret way. Verlon said if I could find the signature I could have the painting for free--my first genuine piece of art--and I could get it for free if I could find the signature. Sometime when you don't have anything better to do, Dost, you might take a magnifying glass and go over this thing for me. Verlon has given me these two weeks before I leave to find the signature. After that, I'll have to pay him."

"Is it like in I Spy? Where it has to be in sight?"

"Yes. Verlon said you can see it--that it's not hidden by the frame--but it might be disguised."

Dost looked again at the painting. Attached to the bottom of the frame was a metal plate with something engraved on it.

"What's it say on that metal plate?" asked Dost, walking toward the painting.

Cain got up and stood beside his son. "It's a poem called 'Sea Fever.' 'I must go to the seas again, to the lonely sea and the sky,/And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by;/And the wheel's kick and the wind's song and the white sail's shaking,/And a gray mist on the sea's face, and a gray dawn breaking./I must go down to the seas again, for the call of the running tide/ Is a wild call and a clear call that may not be denied;/ And all I aske is a windy day with the white flying clouds,/ And the flung spray and the blown spume, and the sea-gulls crying./I must go down to the seas again, to the vagrant gipsy life,/To the gull's way and the whale's way where the wind's like a whetted knife;/And all I ask is a merry yarn from a laughing fellow-rover,/And quiet sleep and a sweet dream when the long trick's over.'"

"I must go down to the seas again," Dost echoed after his father had finished reading.

"The poem. I guess Verlon is an incurable romantic. I mean, have you noticed the lay-out of this room?" asked Cain, waving his arm.

Dost followed the motion, following the fingers that first pointed to the arched, exposed beams and the

bay window looking out over a large goldfish pond . . .

"Why, it's like the inside of one of those old ships like in the movies . . ." Dost realized aloud, turning to his father.

"Exactly. Although the house was built in 1924, it has undergone several complete remodelings. One of those times, Verlon made this room into a remodeled ship. It was just after he had taken up sailing as a hobby."

"Was that a long time ago?"

"Yes, a very long time ago. Since then he took up flying, lion hunting, and other sports that I won't mention except that in order to obtain his wife's permission to indulge in his latest hobby, he had to build her a brand new home."

"I don't think I understand," Dost answered.

"Well, that'll all come later. I was going to tell you about Verlon's kids. He's got two boys and two girls. All of them are older than you except for one of the girls. I mentioned her at breakfast--she's the one who had the accident . . ."

"Did she break her hand or something?" Dost interrupted, with visions of Christian visitation forming in his mind.

"No. She almost knocked out her front teeth, or rather, one of her front teeth."

"Ugh," commented Dost, imagining the pain.

"I'm mentioning her mainly for one reason, Dost. I want you to be careful what you say to her. They had to

put this sheath--this metal covering around her tooth until the roots begin to take hold again."

"But I wouldn't say anything to make her feel bad, Daddy," comforted Dost with the Golden Rule shining in the back of his mind.

"I just wanted to warn you because if and when you meet her, I just don't want you to be surprised. I mean the sheath, the metal covering, on her tooth is pretty apparent, and I just didn't want you to be surprised and make any slips. After all, she is a girl, and girls are very touchy about what you say to them. And she is the daughter of the boss."

"What about the other kids?" Dost asked, feeling competent to deal with the situation.

"Well, I can't remember the boys' names, but I hear they're pretty wild, and the other girl--well, her name is Darcus, and she starts to college this fall. Verlon tells me that she's been going out with the orthodontist who's fixing her sister's teeth. Verlon said he hopes that will keep his dental bills down.

"Is she pretty?"

"Which one?"

"The one with the metal tooth."

"It's not a metal tooth, Dost," Cain explained. "It's just a support--a kind of brace for a tooth that she knocked loose, and I don't know if she's pretty or not. I've not seen her. I have seen her sister though,

and she is beautiful . . ."

"What are their names again?"

"Asia is the one your age . . ."

"Asia."

"..... and Darcus is the one who's going to college this fall."

"She must be smart . . ."

"Well, she is odd if she isn't smart. She's kind of a beatnik . . . you do know what a beatnik is, don't you?"

"Yeah, we read about them in social studies."

"Well, she doesn't have a beard or wear sunglasses all the time . . ."

"Does she play bongo drums?" Dost asked, becoming intrigued.

"I don't know if Verlon would allow her to or not-- but then, they do pretty much as they please--to hear Verlon tell it."

Mrs. Shustum came into the den, drying her hands. "Dost, your friend from last night is at the door, and he wants to know if you'd like to come out."

"Yes, go out, Dost and let him . . . Franklin . . . show you around. Your mother and I have got to go get some shots anyway, and this'll give you something to do while we're gone."

Dost felt uneasy about meeting Franklin in daylight without Loan and his ambulance to make him more exciting, but both of his parents pushed him through the swinging

doors out to the sun porch where Franklin stood smiling.

"What do you think of the place?" Franklin asked, jerking his head in the direction of Dost's new home.

"I like it a lot," Dost replied, following Franklin through the hedge.

Once they had gotten through it, Dost found himself in the yard of a dark brown ranch house. The grass was very fine and springy. Large poplars stood like loiterers in the yard, casually dropping occasional leaves like one might drop an unfinished cigarette.

"You can visit me, since you're not moved all the way in yet," Franklin explained, sprawling down into a metal lawn chair whose back was a wrought iron sea-shell design. It was painted one solid color--the dark brown of the house--the same color as the two matching chairs which stood around the one where Franklin had seated himself. He propped his legs in the chair that sat across from him and motioned for Dost to take the other chair.

"Make yourself at home," he advised.

Dost sat down and surveyed Franklin's face. His eyes were still shining as if they had trapped last night's streetlight inside of them where it fluttered like a moth against a window. His breathing was very audible because of his broken nose.

"Does your father work for Morning's?" Dost asked, trying to be sociable with the same ease that Franklin assumed.

"Naw, he's a plumber. Does you father drive an ambulance?" Franklin asked, succumbing to the residue of his curiosity from the previous night.

"No, that was my cousin. My father's a mechanical engineer for Morning's."

"Do you always ride with your cousin when he drives the ambulance?"

"No. Last night was the first time . . ." Dost began.

"Well--what's it like?" Franklin pursued.

"What do you mean?" asked Dost, not certain if he could learn to get along with this neighbor.

"Aw, you know--shooting down the street making people jump out of your way, pushing cars off the road, passing police cars, running red lights . . . being able to go as fast as you want to and in either lane you want to and not worrying about anybody stopping you . . . just riding behind that siren chopping up the dark with the emergency light . . . it must be like jumping off a mountain knowing the ground was one big mattress underneath you."

Franklin smiled to himself, and Dost noticed a fluttering of his eyelids.

"Well, I wasn't driving . . ." Dost explained.

"But you rode in it, didn't you?" insisted Franklin.

"Yes, but it's just like riding in a big station wagon . . ."

"But what about the siren and the lights . . ."

"They only use them when there's an accident . . ."

"Was there an accident last night?" Franklin asked, slipping into a more erect posture in his chair.

"Yes," Dost replied, feeling very experienced about the subject.

"Well, tell me about it! Tell me about it!" Franklin insisted, poking Dost lightly on the arm.

Dost was not used to this physical display of acceptance from someone his own age. Somehow, it made Franklin seem more familiar than any of the kids that Dost had gone to school with--except, or course, Winky. Coupled with Franklin's familiar physicalness was his enthusiastic curiosity about Dost's adventures--these served to double Franklin's charm in Dost's eyes. He had never had anyone be enthusiastically curious before. There had been Sylvester's clinical concern for his soul, but that was an entirely different case.

All the way through his story about the ambulance ride, Franklin would stop him to ask for a detailed description of a particular scene or a particular sensation. Dost found himself exhilarated by Franklin's interest. For some reason, whenever he had talked to Sylvester, everything kind of settled down around Sylvester's experiences and his opinions of those experiences. In a discussion with Sylvester, he always managed to reduce everything to "If you ask me." Franklin, however, made Dost feel that everything centered around him. When Dost told him about the highway patrolman

asking Loan about the clock, Franklin asked, "Didn't that make you just want to crawl in that stretcher under the clock?" From there, Dost was able to explain exactly how he did feel. He would never have gotten that far with Sylvester.

Franklin was a perfect audience, and it was this quality that prompted Dost to tell him, though in a somewhat lower voice, about the ambulance door hitting him in the face. Franklin began laughing, but before Dost could feel offended, Franklin gasped between his laughing, "You know, I'd probably have done the same thing. That's kind of how I broke my nose. I mean I didn't break my nose with an ambulance door, but I once got on a horse and couldn't get off until he threw me off and stepped on my nose for good measure."

That was all Franklin said. He did not go into any scripture or draw any moral. It was just a naive statement of consolation--without divine co-ordinates. Although Dost did not note it as such, Franklin's simplicity was strangely refreshing to his tangled mind, and his natural need to depend on someone had already put out feelers in Franklin's direction.

It was in the midst of his exhilaration that Dost remembered his mission in moving to South Redbriar. Taking advantage of the momentum of the moment, he asked, "Do you go to a church around here anywhere?"

"Yeah, I go to the Redbriar Episcopal Church. It's

just a little thing about two miles from here--hey, maybe you could go with me some night when we have . . ."

"Well, you see, I go to North Redbriar First Baptist . . ."

"Shucks, most everybody's a Baptist around here, but you could still come when we have Boy Scout night--you might get to see me get a merit badge when we have Court of Honor--but that won't be for a little while longer. I'm only a tenderfoot, and we can't get merit badges until we're first class."

"I didn't know the Boy Scouts were part of the Episcopal Church," Dost marveled.

"They're not really," Franklin answered, propping his feet back up. "The Boy Scouts are just the Boy Scouts, but the church sponsors our troop and our Scout hut is behind the Episcopal Church."

"Do you have Bible study?" Dost asked, trying to get down to business.

"Not in Boy Scouts, but you can get stuff like citizenship merit badges, and they have this medal called the God and Country Award--but you can't get it until you're an Eagle Scout--there's a guy in our troop--Albert Long--and he got it a couple of years ago before I was in the troop only he doesn't come to the meetings anymore--maybe once every two months."

"No, I meant do you have Bible Study in your church," Dost continued, beginning to feel comfortable in his role as inquisitor.

"Oh, in church. Sure we have it every Monday night-- I go a lot--we always have a good time. But during the summer we don't have it on account of so many people going off on vacation and things like that--our church is really small. Episcopalians don't get as large as Baptists, I guess."

Although Dost did not approve of suspended Bible study classes for summer vacation, Franklin had such a way of presenting the practice that Dost found the Episcopalians beyond reproach. Since his neighbor was of another religion, Dost decided to not tamper with beliefs that he did not fully understand. It was obvious that Franklin was not a sinner, and he obviously had an upright spirit because he had asked Dost to go to church with him, so Dost decided to change the topic before Franklin suspected that he was trying to convert him.

"You're really a good trumpet player," Dost said, pulling his feet into his chair.

Now it was Franklin's turn to be charmed. All summer long, he had been isolated with his budding musical talent, but now, he had someone to confirm the high opinion that he had been developing of himself--he knew that O.D. Podges, as his teacher, was obligated to tell him how good he was--whether he was or not.

"I'm glad to hear that you think so," he said, turning to Dost and sitting up straight. "But actually my horn is a coronet--not a trumpet."

"Oh, I'm sorry--I didn't know . . ." Dost began, blushing.

"Oh heck, I didn't tell you that to make you apologize. They sound almost exactly alike. They sound alike to me--I guess the only person who can hear the difference is O.D., and they're even shaped pretty much alike except a trumpet is longer and skinnier than a coronet."

"I don't think I've ever seen a real live coronet," Dost commented half seriously, hoping that Franklin would pick up his hint.

"Then let me show you mine," Franklin volunteered. "I've only had it for a couple of weeks, but I really like it . . ."

"You mean you've only been playing for a couple of weeks?" Dost asked, further amazed with his neighbor's genius.

"No, I've only had this coronet of my own for two weeks," Franklin corrected. "Before then, O.D. loaned me one that he has. I've been playing since about the first of July."

"You sounded awfully good last night," Dost said, anxious to see the instrument.

"I can really play better. I've not practiced like I should this week and since I have a lesson in a couple of hours, I was overpracticing last night. Boy, it's hard on the lips," and as he said this, Franklin fluttered his lips, making a tight, flapping noise with them.

"Is it okay to bring it outside?" Dost asked, worried that Franklin might have changed his mind.

"Oh sure. It's made out of metal--brass--besides, I do most of my practicing outside. O.D. says that you get a better idea of your tone if you listen to yourself play outside."

Franklin sat scratching his leg and fluttering his lips while Dost sat watching him.

"What time is your lesson?" Dost asked in an effort to remind Franklin of the time.

"It's at eleven o'clock," He hesitated then asked, "Do you really want to see my coronet?"

"Sure, I want to see it," Dost answered in surprise. "I've been hinting for the past five minutes," he laughed.

Franklin laughed in return as he got up with excitement. "That's great. I really want you to see it, but the other night my mother told me that I shouldn't expect everybody to be interested in my horn. The first day I got it, I took it all over the neighborhood showing it to people . . . I guess that's what she was talking about." He started to the house. "Don't go away. I would let you come with me but my mother is mopping, and I don't want her yelling at my new friend." Franklin disappeared into his house through a screen door that snapped shut as if its hinges were green.

Dost leaned back in the metal chair and stared up through the grayness of the poplar leaves. The sunlight palpitated into his face as the clouds passed in front of

the sun with the regularity of respiration. It's like being able to breathe underwater, Dost thought.

"You'll get a crick in your neck if you sit like that for very long," Franklin laughed, sitting down and hefting a small suitcase across his lap.

Dost straightened himself up, already feeling the stiffness settling into his neck.

"You're right. I was already starting to get one," he admitted.

"I guess I got to you in the nick of time . . ."
Franklin said, still laughing.

"Or maybe in the crick of time," Dost added.

"Ha, yeah. That's good. The crick of time," said Franklin, slapping his small suitcase in place of his knee.

"Well, let me see your coronet," Dost insisted.

"Okay. It's in this case. I guess I should play a fanfare, only the horn that I'd play it with is inside the case here, but ta-ta . . ." Franklin pressed two buttons on either end of the front of the case and two latches sprang open . . . "here we are," Saying this, he quickly lifted the case lid.

"It was almost as if Franklin had timed the whole weather's activity for the showing of his coronet because just as he lifted the lid to his case, the sun came from behind the clouds like it was folding away a fan, and the instrument caught the sun broadly in the velvet lining of the case where it lay. Because Franklin had polished it

the night before when he had finished his practicing, the sun seemed to explode in a brightness that was almost audible. Immediately, Dost realized why brass was mentioned so many times in the Bible. There was something liquid about the way the metal bent the light into the roundness of the instrument.

"I can see why the walls fell down," Dost wondered, unaware that he was speaking aloud and that Franklin was giving him a puzzled gaze.

"Isn't it beautiful?" Franklin suggested as he pulled the mouthpiece out of its holder.

"It must have cost a fortune," Dost commented, quoting a line from a movie he had seen somewhere.

"Well, it did cost a lot," Franklin offered, "but it could have cost more, but I got this one second-hand, or rather, my father got it second hand--with O.D.'s help."

"But it looks and shines like brand new," Dost argued.

"Brass holds up good. Unless you know, like O.D., you can't tell the old from the new," Franklin replied, putting the mouthpiece back into its holder and closing the case.

"Don't I get to see it any longer than that?" complained Dost. "I didn't even get to hear you play 'Taps.'"

"Oh, I'll let you see it all you want," he promised, impressed with Dost's interest, "but my mother reminded me that I'm supposed to go to my lesson at ten today and

it's about that time right now . . . hey!" Franklin interrupted himself, " . . . why don't you go with me to my lesson?"

"No, I'd better not . . ." stammered Dost.

"Aw, don't be dense," Franklin explained. "O.D. likes company, especially company that's interested in music . . ."

"Well, I really am interested," Dost answered, feeling a desire--a strong desire--beginning to enter his mind.

"Then let's go."

All the way up Morning Street, Dost kept letting his eyes rest on Franklin's instrument case and his thoughts rested in the velvet, gleaming with the coronet and the way it had spun sunlight around itself like a comet trapped on roller coaster tracks.

From the road, O.D. Podges' home looked like all the other factory houses. However, once one started up his front steps, the house began to take on distinct characteristics. Instead of wood, the house's exterior was aluminum siding; the front porch was genuine mosaic tile--the first design that caught Dost's eye was the oriental look of the Podge's name spelled in jade-colored tile. The whole porch itself was oriental. An expensive-looking wind chime hung where most porch lights would have been situated. Three large wicker chairs were leaned, backs

outward, against the wall. If one passed the house in a car, the chairs, in this position, appeared to be three large mats standing against the wall. The glass in the front door was stained glass, and Dost thought it looked a lot like the stained glass in the windows of his own house, but he supposed that all stained glass must look pretty much alike. It struck Dost as odd that on such a hot day a man--whether he was blind or not--would have all of his windows closed and his doors shut.

"O.D. likes to know who's knocking, so he gives all of his friends a different code knock so he can tell who it is at his door," Franklin explained as he knocked twice, paused, then knocked twice again.

Instead of saying anything, Dost just nodded. Franklin repeated his coded knock.

"His doorbell used to work," Franklin pointed out, showing Dost where the button used to be, "but O.D. said that it had started going stale on him so he had it taken out after he found out that he couldn't get it to stay fresh."

"A stale doorbell?" Dost asked.

"It's his own term for when a note is not on pitch or when its tone is not pure--or a combination of both . . . "

"Pure?"

"O.D. has what musicians call perfect pitch . . . "

"I've never heard of that," Dost admitted.

"Well, it just means that he can tell you exactly

what note you're playing even if you don't know, and he can tell you if it's a pure tone too--even if it's in tune or not."

"Sounds kind of scary."

"Only if you're playing out of tune," Franklin laughed as he knocked again.

The door opened without the usual accompanying noises that must usually be heard when a door is opened. One minute it was shut and the next minute it was open, revealing O.D. Podges standing almost erect. He was dressed in white flannel trousers and a white polo shirt. His shoes were two-toned patent leather--for some reason, he looked less like a toad in his own home than he did in North Redbriar Baptist Church. Dost felt a haze of confusion settling over him.

"I'm terribly sorry, Franklin," O.D. was apologizing, "but I completely forgot about your lesson being moved up an hour. I didn't answer the door because I was putting a pad on Asia's flute, and I couldn't let go of it until the glue got halfway set."

"Aw, that's okay, O.D.," Franklin answered. "I'd almost forgot about the time being changed myself . . . by the way, O.D., I brought a friend with me . . . he wanted to hear me play."

O.D. turned in Dost's direction, and although he was wearing sunglasses, Dost could not help feeling that the blind man was looking at him.

"O.D. Podges at your service," O.D. said, making a bow. "To whom do I owe the pleasure?"

"Dost . . . Dost Shustum," Dost stammered--not sure if he was the one being addressed.

"Oh yes," O.D. responded. "I've heard of you. You're now living where Verlon Morning used to live-- beautiful, beautiful place--one of my very favorite buildings on the whole North American continent . . ." Although his praise sounded exaggerated, Dost had the strange feeling that O.D. meant every word of what he said. "Come here, Dost," O.D. said. "I want to take a closer look at you."

Dost looked at Franklin questioningly. Franklin smiled and motioned with his head for Dost to go forward.

"Don't worry, Dost," O.D. was saying, "I just want to touch your face. Do you mind?"

"I don't mind," Dost lied, thinking about what his new friend would have done if he had told the truth.

O.D. extended his fingers and at first, Dost thought he was going to try and tickle his face. He barely touched his skin. But the man's fingers were cool and there was the slightly musky smell of old velvet about them. After a lengthy tour of his whole face, O.D. once again touched Dost's mouth and his fingers traced the full outline of his lips.

"Do you play a trumpet?" he asked.

"No," Dost replied, an undefined hope almost choking him.

"You've got the mouth for a trumpet player," O.D. declared.

"So that's what a trumpet mouth looks like," Franklin observed good-naturedly.

"Yes, that's what a trumpet mouth looks like, clarinet lips," O.D. bantered. He turned to the sound of Dost's footsteps. "You see, Dost, when Franklin first came to me, I tried to get him to play a clarinet. He has the lips for a clarinet--thin upper lip with a rather thick underlip--good combination for a clarinet. With a trumpet, you need as much upper lip as you do lower lip because both lips work in a trumpet mouthpiece. But does Franklin Laney listen to good sense--ever? No. He's got big secret schemes. He wants to play a trumpet, and he's not going to listen to anybody's opinions."

As soon as they were in the house, Dost understood why the doors and windows were closed--the house was air-conditioned. The first room they entered from the porch was an extension of the porch's oriental mood. Rice paper water colors hung from the walls in large scrolls. The main occupant of the room was a large oriental rug populated with dragons and Buddhas. The only furniture was cushions scattered around the edges of the rug and a small teak wood table very ornately carved. On this table was a replica of a Chinese temple. Its roof lifted off and inside, sandalwood incense was burning.

"I hope you don't mind incense, Dost," O.D. explained,

"but even with the air conditioning, the finishing room of the factory will sometimes creep its smell into my home--not to mention that damned fertilized cow pasture. Anyway, when the factory or farm smell does creep in, as it did today, I must combat it with my own choice of fragrance."

The next room was a dining room filled mostly with a large walnut table. It was roughly hewn, but at the same time, its top was inlaid with black marble. It was the largest single piece of marble that Dost had seen, not to be on the floor or in a cemetery. The chairs--twelve of them--were the same dark stain but their backs and seats were of a straw weave. Close to the head of the table was a large cabinet. It was only after a second look that Dost noticed that the cabinet was connected to two sets of speakers--one speaker in each corner of the room.

"This table is where I sometimes work as well as eat," O.D. explained to Dost. "That cabinet that you've probably noticed, is my stereo and recording console."

There were also several paintings in the room--paintings of ships--that Dost found awfully familiar. There was something about the motion of the waves and the way the sails seemed to push against the motion of the water and the way the clouds seemed to watch the struggle and approve of it.

"We're almost to the music room," Franklin announced.

"I hope you're ready to do it justice, Mr. Laney," O.D. responded.

From the size of the room, it was obvious that somewhere a wall or two had been knocked out as well as another wall added on. At the far--very far--end of the room, Dost could see a work bench with several instruments in various stages of disassembly. An accoustic ceiling and a thick carpet gave the room a feeling of being wound around and around with silence. Even the grand piano in the center of the room lounged in an ebony hush. There was a small grouping of chairs in another corner of the room where obviously an ensemble of some sort gathered to practice.

"This is the music room," Franklin announced unnecessarily.

"Whose house is this, anyway?" O.D. joked, putting on a mock face of indignation.

"Excuse me," Franklin said, feigning meekness.

"That's better," O.D. breathed. "This," he said, sweeping his hand majestically, "is the music room."

All three laughed at the little farce, and Dost began to suspect that there was more than one blind O.D. Podges in the Redbriar community.

"You said you were putting a pad on Asia's flute, didn't you?" Franklin asked O.D. as he sat down in a metal chair and began assembling his horn.

"Yes, I said that--I believe I was opening the door for you when I said that."

"Does that mean that she's going to be able to keep playing it?" Franklin asked, more in a mood to talk than perform.

"Yes. We had a lesson yesterday as a matter of fact," O.D. supplied. "And she's as excellent as ever, but my God is she self-conscious of that sheath . . ."

Dost was caught off-guard by the cursing, but O.D. mumbled it more like a blessing than a curse. Dost had never heard anyone use God's name in vain in such an inoffensive way before. He found himself at a loss as to what to say to O.D.. Somehow, he felt that it would be in bad taste to reprimand a blind man. He felt himself resenting Sylvester for never having been confronted with such a problem.

"I seldom meet people I cannot fully understand," O.D. was saying as he paced the room totally unlike a blind man. "For some reason, I worry about her . . . something about her just doesn't fit into our universe . . . Diane has noticed it too . . ." O.D. fretted, going off into a mumbling tangent.

Franklin noticed Dost's amazement. "Diane is O.D.'s wife. She's mostly an actress, but she teaches drama at Mason City College, too."

Dost just nodded.

"Well, maestro," Franklin said in O.D.'s direction.

"Finally decided to have your lesson, eh," O.D. answered, coming out of his reverie.

"Name your poison," Franklin replied, wiggling his three coronet valves.

"As usual, let's begin with some scales . . ." O.D. instructed.

"I get awful tired of scales," Franklin complained, beginning to moisten his lips and lick the inside of his mouthpiece.

"Ah, not me," sighed O.D.. "I could listen to a good scale all day long."

Franklin finished one scale and began another one, then another one, and he kept playing different scales until Dost could not tell whether he was going up or down. Sometimes he played smoothly, but many times there was hesitation and wrong notes.

"You have not practiced, my pupil," O.D. charged. "You're not playing those scales any better this week than you were three weeks ago. What's wrong, are you tired of your coronet?"

"No. It's not that," Franklin confessed. "I'm just tired of scales."

"But I told you. They are the basis to everything that you'll ever play. Before you can really make music, you must train your mind as well as your fingers and lips-- and the biggest part of the mind is memory. Before you can be a musician, you must make your memory musical . . ."

"And scales are the best exercise for . . ."

Franklin continued for his teacher.

". . . putting notes in the memory . . ." O.D. stopped, realizing that his pupil was matching him word for word. He assumed a puzzled face. "What, have you heard this story before?"

Both student and teacher began laughing. O.D. was the first one to speak.

"Did you practice 'Taps'?" he asked.

Franklin stood up, put the horn to his lips and began playing. The sound came out rich and resounding, despite the acoustics of the room. Dost's mind reviewed all of the war movies that he had ever seen, and although the melody moved him deeply, he felt a strong desire to run over and pull the horn from Franklin's hands. He clinched his fists then tucked them under his arms.

"Know why I make Franklin do everything by memory?" O.D. asked Dost as soon as Franklin had finished playing.

"No, why?" Dost asked, coming closer to the blind man. There was something about the music teacher that attracted him, especially since he had watched and listened to Franklin playing.

"Franklin can't read music yet," O.D. responded, clapping Franklin on the back.

"But when I was taking piano, the first thing we learned was the notes," Dost replied.

"Well," O.D. answered significantly, "doing things backward is my trademark, I suppose."

"I'll go along with that," Franklin chimed.

"Look, Mr. No Improvement, if your health was like your practicing, you couldn't buy insurance--even from a brother-in-law," O.D. retorted in a nasal accent. He turned to Dost. "You took piano!"

"Only for a little while. I couldn't get both my hands playing at the same time," Dost answered, flattered that O.D. would take an interest in his musical exploits.

"A common occurrence among people with trumpet lips," O.D. comforted. "But you do read music, more or less?" he pursued.

"Just simple scales like we played for practice and only the top line . . . the uh . . . the top line . . . the uh . . ."

"The treble?" O.D. suggested.

"Yeah," sighed Dost. "Just the treble . . . clef?"

"The treble clef," agreed O.D. nodding. "Would you like to resume your piano lessons? Would you like to learn the piano?"

Dost knew that it was now or never so he took a deep breath and blurted out, "Not as much as I'd like to play the trumpet."

Franklin smiled, obviously pleased for reasons that Dost could not understand.

O.D. raised his hands to heaven, "Another brass blower," he lamented good-naturedly. "I'll have to talk to your parents," O.D. said, standing up and flexing his fingers.

"I'll get them to come by," Dost responded uncertainly.

"Oh, that's not the way I work things. I go by to see them. You see, I want to take this opportunity to welcome them to our community, and--like I said before--

I get great pleasure out of visiting your house."

Dost did not know what to say. He was not sure how his parents would respond to the idea, but he was afraid to hesitate because he feared O.D. Podges would retract his offer.

"Okay," he finally responded.

"Franklin, you come with us and show Dost how to lead a blind man down a busy highway without getting him run over."

As they were walking down the road, Dost found his temerity long enough to ask O.D. how much the lessons would cost.

"Well, you see Dost," O.D. replied, "I don't charge anything for beginners. I work with Mr. Long who teaches band over at the school. What I do is just get people used to their instruments. Mr. Long does the schoolroom music by teaching them ABCDEFGA . . ."

"And believe me, Dost," Franklin broke in, "O.D. is really worth his fee."

"How would you know?" O.D. asked. "You've not had a lesson since three weeks ago when you stopped practicing."

Not until they had gotten inside the house did Dost remember that his mother and father had gone to get shots for their trip. When Dost mentioned this fact, O.D. smiled as if he preferred being in the house without adult supervision.

"Do you mind if I look around?" he asked in Dost's direction.

where he signed his painting, but . . ."

Voices in the hall told Dost that his parents had returned from the doctor.

"My parents are here, O.D.. You can ask them about trumpet lessons now."

"I suppose I can," O.D. replied, his face changing to a suitable adult expression. "Lead me to them the way you saw Franklin lead me down the road," he instructed, holding out his elbow for Dost to take.

The conversation was surprisingly simple to Dost's way of thinking. O.D. was able to answer all of the questions that Dost's parents could ask. He informed them of the academic advantages of being in a school band and of all the other benefits that Dost would be subjected to once he mastered his instrument. After a formal outline was made of how Dost would enter the musical world, O.D. and Franklin left in order to let Cain and Etta adjust to the new commitment of their son.

"I'm really excited for you, Dost," Etta beamed.

"I was worried that you would get morbid with just Aunt Nelly to be with you in your new home. But trumpet lessons-- I do believe that it's just what you needed."

"That O.D. Podges certainly makes it sound advantageous-- as well as fun," Cain commented as he walked towards his den. "He almost had me wanting to join the school band."

"What he said made a lot of sense," Etta replied, following her husband into the den.

"I know the kids who were in the band at college really enjoyed themselves," Cain reminisced.

"Anything that'll get his mind off of heaven and hell and God speaking to him," Etta fretted, lowering her voice.

"Yeah," Cain agreed. "I was thinking the same thing."

Two days before Mr. and Mrs. Cain Shustum left for Germany, Nelly Swal arrived to take charge of the house and the small boy who lived in it, but it was almost a natural reaction for people to disperse when Nelly was present. Dost's parents were going on some farewell visits, and Dost was going to town with O.D. and Franklin to buy a trumpet that O.D. had heard was for sale in the North Redbriar Pawnshop. He had explained to Cain Shustum that it was far from a brand new one, but the price was also far from that of a new one. O.D. had further explained that with a little work, he could get the trumpet into excellent condition. After a week and a half of daily lessons at O.D. Podges, Dost was certain that he could handle a trumpet much easier than he could handle a piano. He liked the instrument that O.D. had loaned to him, but he knew he would like a trumpet of his own much better.

The two boys and their music teacher were to ride the bus to North Redbriar. Cain had offered to drive them, but O.D. insisted that he got more pleasure from riding the bus. While he waited for his traveling companions,

Dost was given the task of showing his Aunt Nelly his new home. It was a laborious job because Nelly had a habit of asking questions over which Dost had no control. In the dining room, she had asked why the bay windows stuck out so far from the side of the house. Upstairs, she had asked why stained glass was used when everyone knew perfectly well that no one could see through such circus glass. Each time they went through the swinging doors she had wanted to know if the man who had built the house did not know about locks and doorknobs. Dost was reluctant to take her into the den, but she insisted upon seeing every room.

It was in this room that Dost really looked at his aunt since her arrival. The exposed beams yawned over her as if she were their captive. But she stood in the center of the room in her peony print cotton dress, adjusting her bra strap with the hand that held her pocketbook. Dost noticed that her thick, flesh-colored stockings were rolled down unevenly just below her kneecaps. Her hair looked as if it had always been gray, yet there was something strongly resistant in the woman. It was like she did not have any bones inside of her. Instead of bones, she had cartilage. The same resilience could be seen in the blue of her eyes. She was passivity waiting for its chance to get even. She was meekness with a scorpion's tail. She was unaware of how the splendid room contained her.

"It'll be hard to keep this one clean," Nelly appraised.

"It's Daddy's favorite room," Dost cautioned.

"It wouldn't be if he had to clean it," Nelly replied. "But it's just like the rest of the house. You and me are going to have a hard time keeping this place clean. All this dark wood. Dust'll light on it like gnats on a sore. We'll be raving by the time we get the whole place just dusted--we'll be too crazy to mop and wax."

"How do you like your room?" Dost imposed, trying to sound cheerful.

"Well, it's not as dark as the others, but I just don't think I'll ever get used to that colored glass. It's just kind of eerie the way light makes that kind of glass glow. It just makes me nervous all over."

Dost had never thought about the stained glass in those terms before, but he could see how Nelly might have a point. Until she had pointed out the unnatural effects of stained glass, he had enjoyed the puddle of colored lights that the streetlamp threw through the stained glass at night. He did not appreciate the new interpretation that Nelly insisted on giving to the shine, but he knew that she had already made him a host of her mistrust.

"Dear Lord," murmured Nelly, looking over the top of Dost's head.

He turned in the direction of her stare, but all he saw was the painting.

"What's wrong?" he asked, half hoping she might need hospitalization.

"That terrible picture," she replied, turning her back to it.

"I think it's very good," Dost argued.

"I can't let it stay in this house," Nelly said as if she had not heard her nephew.

"Daddy likes it too," Dost asserted, wondering what powers of persuasion Nelly might use if she went to complain to Cain.

"That picture right there," Nelly asserted, half looking at it and Dost, "will make you go crazy. Sure as heaven it will. It'll make you go stark raving crazy. I know."

"How?" Dost asked, feeling his lip curl with distaste at the old woman's self-assurance.

"You just look at it long enough. Just stand in front of it and study it--like you was trying to memorize it all over, and after a little while, you'll hear something like a board creak. Then them white-painted sails will twitch--just a little at first, and the boat will kind of give a quick jerk kind of like how things jerk if you blink your eyes crooked. Then the creaks will get louder until it sounds like the whole floor is buckling and the sails will begin to flap, yes, flap and the ship will begin to rock and toss and you'll hear the water splashing and the wind blowing and before you know it, you'll feel the floor swooping out from under you but then it'll be too late. They'll come and put a strait jacket on you and

tell you it's a life preserve or something like that, but from that day on, you'll not be able to walk down the street without having your mind go back to that picture that's always moving but not going anywhere like spirits that are trapped in the grave and can't get to heaven or hell . . ."

"Ah, that's not true," Dost argued in a tight voice.

"I know for a fact it is true," Nelly maintained.

"What about the man who painted it?" Dost asked.

"He's probably locked up somewhere," Nelly replied.

"Most artists like that lose their minds before they die. That was in Reader's Digest . . ."

"But why would anyone do a picture that would make them lose their mind?" Dost pleaded.

"I don't know anything about that. I'm in my full and right mind, and I can't answer for the twisted goings-on of other people," snapped Nelly, pulling at her bra strap again.

She jumbled from the room, still unaware that it had chosen to let her leave. Dost let his eyes rove all over the room, with the exception of that wall where the painting hung. He could see the small spark of light which meant that God was beginning to send him a message. The boy sat down on the hearth of the fireplace and waited for the light to increase and the numbness to come. It had been two days since this had happened to him, and he resented that it should come when he was planning a

trip with Franklin and O.D..

My fingers feel numb kind of stiff like they're swollen up or something like the rolled down part of Nelly's stockings thinking the painting will make you crazy if that's true why didn't O.D. say something about it if it was true but he can't see so how could he know but he seemed to know about the painting and before he mentioned flags I didn't notice the big long flag flying between the two ropes at the back end of the ship and there was writing on the long flag--what do they call that long flag? a banner--yes we have no bananners, we have no bananners today--and there was some kind of writing on the banner, but I couldn't read it besides, Daddy said that it was probably Latin only he didn't look at it for very long because he said only a kid would play a cheap trick like putting his signature on a banner in Latin but he still didn't look at it too long it was too obvious a place he said but it looked more like the arab writing in the Bible's dictionary but then again it didn't look much like it either but I looked at the ship for a long time when I was trying to find the signature--why didn't I lose my mind then like Nelly said I would but how did O.D. know about the flags and the poem, he knew about it too and he recited it and I've been looking at this painting for a week and a half and I'm still not crazy but maybe I am and don't know it--please don't let me be crazy dear Lord--and my trumpet lips still get tired but O.D. said I'd get

over that I hope he's right because it really hurts when they get tired enough but I've got to keep practicing and get as good as Franklin because he doesn't even have the lips for trumpet like I do and now I'll have my own trumpet in its velvet case round and soaking into the fingers when you touch it but it'll have to have some work--not a whole lot--but just enough to get it into top band condition that's what O.D. told me but he wasn't afraid of the painting, he touched it and he wasn't afraid that it would suck him under that's the way he sees too and he stood for a long time in front of the painting feeling of the painting, looking at it, then he recited that poem Sea Fever like maybe he had a sea fever himself maybe he is fevered to see, see fever, that's pretty good, and so is O.D. when he plays piano Rhapsody in Blue he played then he played a record with a whole bunch of people playing then he played another record with that trumpet playing--what was it called--Trumpet Voluntary in D Major--that's one that he wants me to learn it's by Purcell--Trumpet Voluntary in D Major by Purcell played from memory by Dost Shustum on his very own trumpet--only that happens after I get used to the horn and the scales and "Taps" because Franklin wanted me to learn that for a secret reason he wouldn't tell me, and I can play it but not as good as he can and I have to leave out some of the notes but O.D. said I'd be able to get them soon enough but soon enough for what I don't know but Franklin told me he would let me know his secret and

O.D. will tell me about his clothes and I'll get my trumpet today and God has spoken to me again so that means I'm still special enough to get direct messages from heaven and maybe I'll ask O.D. about Sea Fever and what he thinks about paintings making you crazy when we're on the bus going to Redbriar on the bus a city bus which I've never ridden before but O.D. says he likes it a lot and Franklin says he likes it too and since it's such a long time before it comes back here--sometime after dark--we're going to see the old movie that they're showing at the supper show at the Central--I like Charlie Chan stories more than any except for Sherlock Holmes movies especially Hound of the Baskervilles where they put the spider in Sherlock's shoe but Charlie Chan is still almost as good and their hamburgers aren't so bad only Franklin said they used horsemeat and I'm getting used to the smell of my spit on my lips because you have to get your mouth all licked up so your lips can flap around more and I'll be about to play the Trumpet Voluntary in D Major maybe even before Franklin but I shouldn't bet on it maybe God wants me to practice some more maybe that's why he spoke to me maybe I'll be a musician like O.D. or Brother Maker and play my trumpet for churches Hey! why didn't I think of that before? Maybe--no, not maybe, that's why I was brought to this house so I could meet O.D. and learn to make music for heaven and for the glory of God--that sounds true and Christian so it must be right and maybe God was speaking

to me to get me to practice because I wasn't going to practice today but now I know I should because God wants me I know to be a music missionary maybe traveling around with Winky like George Beverly Shey travels around with Billy Graham, thank you dear Lord for making this known to me everything would be just perfect if Nelly hadn't made me afraid to look at the painting but I can't walk around in a house and be afraid of what's hanging on its walls or I will go crazy for sure especially at night when I don't see too well anyway and the only way to prove how wrong Nelly is is to look at the picture like she said not to--it'll be like taking the first step in church but when I see that it's not going to move then I won't be afraid and Nelly'll be wrong because she doesn't know what she's talking about in the first place--Dear God, please don't let the ship move . . .

After breathing his short prayer, Dost stood up and faced the picture. After a few seconds of nervous searching for any signs of movement, his eyes rested on the banner. Suddenly, Dost realized why, since he had first noticed it, that the banner kept catching his eye. It was blowing against the wind. The ship was being blown in one direction, but the banner was going in the opposite direction. Slowly, Dost began to trace the form of each letter--two letters almost at the end of the word were isolated from the rest of the letters of the word by two lines that hung from the rigging of the ship. Just before Dost could pass judgment

on the first letter, his father interrupted his thoughts.

"Nelly tells me that you and she have had a disagreement about the worth of this painting," he said.

"She says looking at it will make you go crazy," Dost explained, nervous about how his father would respond to this information.

"You know," Cain began, "she used to tell me the same thing when I would visit her and her husband."

"Did she have a painting like this one?" Dost asked, looking at the picture fearlessly.

"Well, it wasn't as good as this one--not as powerful, but it was a picture of a ship. It belonged to her husband, and he was the one who told her that claptrap just to tease her. Only the joke was on him, he did go crazy . . ."

"But" yelped Dost, his eyes getting large.

"But not because of a painting--he had a tumor in his brain . . . a growth--kind of like a mushroom growing on the side of a tree, and it was that growth that made him crazy--not his painting . . ."

"But Nelly thinks the painting did it because he told her that it would--then he loses his mind . . ." Dost reasoned.

"Exactly, she is a victim to the fallacy of false cause," his father agreed decisively, proud of his son's reasoning.

"Dost," Mrs. Shustum called, "Franklin is on the porch, and he says the bus is waiting for you."

"I'll be out of the room," he called.

As Dost ran out of the room, he asked his father, "We'll keep the painting then?"

"Even if I have to sell Auntie Nell to pay for it."

"Good," Dost agreed, making sure he had his father's check for the trumpet.

As the two boys rushed to the bus, Franklin asked, "Do you remember I told you I had a secret reason for asking you to learn to play 'Taps' like me?"

"I've thought about that," Dost replied. "I've thought about it a lot. Are you going to tell me today?"

"Yes, but let's get on the bus first."

O.D. sat near the front. He was wearing what looked like the casual counterpart to the baggy Sunday suit that he wore that first time Dost saw him in church. His guitar was partly in his lap and partly in the seat beside him. He looked like he had been dropped from the bottom of a pile of old mattresses directly into the bus seat. The boys sat down in the seat in front of him.

"From your silence, Dost," O.D. chuckled, "I can tell you must be quite taken with my ummmm . . . traveling clothes."

"Taken is the word," Dost agreed. "Breath taken."

"Ha, ha, very good. It's always wise to start a trip with a laugh," O.D. laughed. "Let me tell you about blind people, Dost. Blind people should let other people see what they want to see."

O.D. caressed, soundlessly, the strings of his guitar,

and smiled the way he did when he had on his patent leather shoes and white trousers which seemed to be his habitual dress when he was at home.

"Have you ever been to Mexico, boys?" O.D. asked after a long interval of silence where only the bus could be heard complaining to itself through its bouncing joints.

"I've not," Dost admitted.

"Me neither," Franklin harmonized, turning more directly toward O.D..

"I once went to Mexico. God, it was a long time ago--light years ago. But there's a town there about half way to Mexico City--it's right on the Gulf of California with white pavilions on the brown beaches and the brown people in their Aztec colors and the women with their black hair--that black which is a delight to see and see again and the sky folded overhead like a Roman senator had just finished wearing it in a heavy rain and all the buildings seem to be leaning over just a little bit like they're trying to see who is walking by. It's funny, too, how at night even the cheapest light bulb will pick up an exotic quiver--like the pulse in the vein of a woman's throat--have either of you ever noticed that?"

"No," both answered in duet.

"You will. But in Mazatlan, you want to wear white flannel trousers and walk upon the beach. If I were a porpoise, that's where I would go to die, after painting myself white and having my Sunday fins pressed as stiff as I could."

"What were those pavilions that you were talking about?" Dost asked, liking the sound of the word.

"The pavilions were large, open-air buildings where people could meet and talk or meet and plan another meeting, perhaps in a more private place. In some of them, you could sit and eat, and there was one which sat right on the edge of a bluff looking out over the Gulf. I sat there eating, and there was a storm out at sea--you could see--distinctly see--the clouds and the lightning flashing. And I sat there all evening long watching the miniature lightning bolts drop into the sea and it was wonderful to sit on the edge of all that sullen darkness but still be able to look straight up at the stars plinking their lights like precipitation into your face like a leaking roof, or read the menu by lamplight and order more tacos."

"Were you married then?" Franklin asked.

"No, I was happy then," O.D. laughed. "But seriously, I was single then and trying to walk to South America."

"Gosh," Dost marveled.

"When will Diane be getting back?" Franklin asked, wishing to talk about more pertinent topics.

"You're still after my wife, aren't you?" O.D. joked.

Franklin did not reply, but his change of color told Dost that O.D. knew where Franklin's weak spots were.

"She should be back in a couple of days. The drama club's tour is almost over . . ."

"Was the play a success?" Franklin chanced, sacrificing his modesty to his interest.

"Quite successful," O.D. replied. "Dost, you may not remember, but you saw my wife when she was trying out her make-up and character for the play that Franklin and I are talking about . . . it was that day when I played for your church meeting . . ."

"But how did you know I was there?" Dost asked.

"That was the same Sunday you, to use Preacher Mosey's expression, 'Made your decision for Christ.' I heard your name several times that day."

"Make-up . . . I don't understand," mumbled Dost.

"For Pete's sake, trumpet lips," Franklin said, somewhat exasperated. "Diane Podges is an actress, see? O.D. Podges, because he doesn't want people thinking he is a trouble-maker, is an actor too, of sorts. Church people don't like for freaks to try to act like human beings so O.D. and Diane act like freaks when they're in places where church people might see them."

Dost was confused by this type of logic, but he was beginning to understand why O.D. was two different people on two different occasions.

"Forget about that, for now," Franklin ordered.

"Let me tell you the big secret . . . is it okay if I tell him, O.D.?"

"Oh, please do," O.D. complied.

"Dost, old pal, I've got us a job where we can exercise our musical talents--and get paid for it!" Franklin was fairly shouting.

"What are you talking about?" insisted Dost, taking Franklin by his shoulders.

"I'm talking about 'Taps,'" Franklin began, counting on his fingers. "I'm talking about military funerals, I'm talking about my father who is a big shot in the VFW, and I'm talking about five dollars for each of us every time we play 'Taps.'"

"Five dollars for playing 'Taps'?" Dost asked, too thrilled to be coherent.

"Five dollars every time we play them at a military funeral."

"But we've just started. Why didn't the VFW get people who have been playing longer--like for three or four years, maybe."

"You weren't listening," said Franklin, holding up his index finger and tapping it with his other index finger. "I said my father is a big shot in the VFW-- a very big shot in the VFW."

"You just happen to know the right people, Dost," O.D. interjected.

"But why two? Couldn't you do it by yourself?" Dost argued.

O.D. spoke before Franklin could open his mouth.

"'Taps' is always more romantic--more touching--if there is an echo. Unfortunately, many funerals take place where you cannot find an echo--so you play it safe by always bringing an echo along with you . . ."

"You're going to be the echo, Dost," Franklin clarified.

"Are we about to Roundtree Hill yet?" O.D. asked.

"Just there," Franklin answered.

"I've never liked going down this hill," Dost complained, "It's got so many curves."

"Aw, this is not so curvy," O.D. grumbled, assuming his country dialect. "Out in California they got a road known as Corkscrew Hill. Way it got that name was like this: a man drove down that road once with a truckload of ice picks. When he got to the bottom, he had a truckload of corkscrews . . ."

Franklin and Dost laughed as O.D. stuck his thumbs into his overall suspenders.

"It's the glory truth, it is," O.D. asserted, picking a toothpick from his hatband and putting it in his mouth. "And you gotta be careful about driving down that road even if you ain't carrying ice picks. That road is so crooked and winding in and out and around, that it'll unloosen every bolt in your car if the threads go in the right direction. If it's a right-handed thread, you gotta go down backwards to keep from losing all your bolts. It's not safe for animals either. Man once went down Corkscrew Hill with a hundred or more crates of chickens. Wrung them's chickens' heads right off. Happened so hard and so fast that not even one let out a single squawk. Only one chicken survived and it turned out that it had had a bad

crick in its neck from where a snake had tried to strangle it when it was just a chick, but after going down that winding road its neck straightened up--grew to be long as a goose's neck. Only problem was every egg that chicken laid after that ride came out scrambled. One man got rich off the crookedness of that road though. He opened up an orange juice stand right at the bottom of it. He hasn't squeezed one orange since he went into business. Just has the driver come down Corkscrew Hill at about twenty miles an hour, and when he gets to the bottom, all that man has to do is drain the bed of that truck--juice is all squeezed out of them oranges, pretty as you please without even breaking their skins. Now that's how a curvy hill behaves."

The trip to the pawnshop was more uneventful than Dost would have liked it to be. It was crowded with that overhanging gloom of most places which represent the triumph of debt over human spirit. Vaguely, Dost sensed that the dominant mood of the Last Judgment would be that of a pawnshop. Despite the depression of the shop and the tarnish on the trumpet, Dost felt the completeness that comes with holding the essentials of a dream in one's hands. All he really wanted to do was go home and let O.D.--make O.D.--begin repairs, but his impatience was somewhat tempered when Franklin asked O.D. about his performance at the A&P.

"I'm going to do one song for them," O.D. answered.

"That'll get all three of us supper passes to the Central."

The three of them walked the short distance to the A&P--

all the while O.D. was half tuning and half untuning his guitar. He adjusted the tin cup that was wired to the top of his guitar.

"Can't be a blind musician without a tin cup," he informed Dost.

O.D. told the boys to stand out of the way after they positioned him in front of the motor driven pony ride. He began strumming his guitar and humming snatches of "Just a Closer Walk With Thee."

When he could sense that he had the transitory attention of the shoppers, he began singing: "When your money is all spent,/And you wonder where it went,/If you're in a hungry mood,/Then you'll know it went for food./Just a closer walk with thee,/That's the way with A&P,/If you're looking for a steal,/Buy from us to make your meal."

He sang variations of this verse until Franklin tugged at his sleeve to remind him that it was movie time.

It surprised Dost that a blind man could enjoy a movie as much as O.D., but O.D. explained, when Dost questioned him, that he had seen Charlie Chan when people still did not know if the Chinese fellow was trustworthy or not.

"Personally, I'd trust Charlie Chan before I'd trust that pointed-nose Sherlock Holmes," declared O.D. as he got on the bus.

After a long time of sitting and commenting about

the merits of Dost's trumpet and of Charlie Chan's performance on the stage of law and order, O.D. asked, "Did you ever find the signature on the painting, Dost?"

"Naw," Dost sighed. "The only kind of writing that I've seen is on that banner and Daddy says only a kid would do something like put a signature there . . ."

"Did you notice anything funny about that banner?" O.D. asked.

"Blowing backwards, you mean?" Dost guessed.

"Was there something on it, you say?" O.D. asked.

"Yeah, but it looks like a foreign word . . ."

Dost began.

O.D. squinted his eyes, and in his version of Charlie Chan, he said, "What sometime may look foreign is merely the backside of a familiar face, Shustum Son." Here he bowed. "Mirror can often twist truth from a dishonest reflection--old Chinese detective proverb." After saying this, he bowed again.

Since O.D. took Dost's trumpet home with him, Dost immediately set to work finding a small mirror that he could hold in front of the painting. His father found him just as he was trying to get a leg-hold on the fireplace mantle.

"What are you doing?" his father asked--more amazed than upset because he had never seen his son in such a compromised position before.

"I think I know where the signature is," Dost explained,

straightening himself up. "Hold this mirror in front of the writing on the banner and see what it says."

His father took the mirror and did as he was instructed.

"Who would've believed it?" his father wondered aloud.

"Who is it? Who is it?" asked Dost, wanting confirmation more than information.

"Well, the whole banner--the whole word on the banner says PODGES," his father answered, "and where these two lines from the rigging cross across the banner, they hedge in two letters OD. I guess that means the artist is O.D. Podges."

"He was the one who told me to try using a mirror," Dost admitted, as he pictured in his mind O.D. Podges sitting on the brink of a sullen storm darkness, looking up occasionally to see the stars dry and visible over his head.

Dost sat on the end of his bed staring into the dresser mirror. His message for the day had just left him, and he was breathing heavily and nervously. The messages were daily now and more intense. After they were over, the whole inside of his head felt bruised and touchy. However, he was glad that it had occurred before the funeral and not during it. Since his parents had left for Germany, the air that he breathed seemed to get thinner day after day. At first, he had taken the frequency of his messages as

signs of approval that the trumpet was his calling then he had realized that the messages were sent to him as a reminder to practice.

Practice was not something that he needed reminding to do. On his first day of school--three months ago-- he had been punched in the kidney by a boy who had resented Dost's inquiry into the state of his soul. Ordinarily, Dost would have gone straight to the principal, but Franklin, on their way to school that morning, had told Dost that the principal had lost both his legs in World War II and that he now walked on wooden ones. Somehow, Dost could not see how a man with wooden legs could handle the problem of assault, so he just stayed out of everyone's way. Each day, he retreated further and further into his trumpet playing. Because of the negative response he got from his evangelism and because of the increasing intensity of God's messages, Dost spent most of his free time practicing in the den, since it was now too cold to practice outside.

Dost looked at his face and puckered his lips and fretted; how long will it be before the man from the VFW gets here because I don't want to be late for my first military funeral we certainly had to wait long enough for it and having this headache is bad enough without having to get all hot under the collar because I'm late I wonder if Franklin would play without me, he might he doesn't like me as much as he did when we first met maybe because I've tried to get him to be more religious, but I've got

to do everything I can to answer God's messages because it's almost like he's yelling at me now with the way that light comes glaring into my eyes and leaving a headache behind it like it was burning out part of my brain only it's not really doing that all I have to do is practice more and the den is the best place to do that because that's the one place that Nelly won't come to bother me with her raving about this or that and when I'm in that room it's like I really am down in one of those old ships like the painted one over the fireplace that O.D. painted when he could see and Asia Morning said he was really good that he worked for her grandfather part time when he was studying designing furniture and that he actually almost married one of her aunts who lived with them but she just left and O.D. went chasing after her but that's how he knew so much about this house because he spent a lot of his time here when he was younger before he started going blind so he went back to school and learned music, how was it he put it--he wanted to train his ears to take over for his eyes, but he already knew how to play a piano anyway which is the hardest thing to play but if the man from the VFW doesn't come I won't get to go and Loan will be there, but Nelly has already gone because she wanted to see Preacher Mosey talk about Mrs. Japerson. Loan thought he was going to lose his job when he let her sign the contract for a military funeral but that was what her husband had and that was what she wanted like her husband with flags and

patriotism and Loan didn't know what kind of form--burial insurance that her husband had used but the newspapers saved his neck by giving a big story about how fine it was that an old woman could request such strange services and get them in the memory of her loving husband even Nelly cried and said there was hope for Loan after all but Asia sure knows a lot about O.D. but I'll never visit her because I'm scared of her sister and she's supposed to be in college but she's always driving home in her sports car . . . her Porsche which came from Germany which is where Mama and Daddy are only they told me in their letter that I must call them Mutter and Vater and Guten Aben, and Wie geht's, and Lieben and Franklin told me to remember that we're going to play "Taps" a little slower than we've been practicing it and all I have to do is follow him we never thought our first military funeral would be for a woman but it is and I'm going to be an echo all the same Loan's first sale and the papers write about what a fine thing it is and he is but he doesn't seem as bad as he used to be I like him better than the kids at school except for Franklin and Asia especially Asia and it's okay for me to say that I like girls but Asia is like fog or like in the mountains in the morning before the clouds have gotten up in the sky from sleeping in the valleys and Daddy says it's already snowing in Germany but it won't snow here for another month it's not cold enough it wasn't cold when I got off from school I'm going to like this business if I can get out of

school two hours early every time we play for a funeral something dark about funerals but there are lots of things that are dark like Asia's hair and the beams in the den and night and being blind like O.D. who lived for a while as an artist a painter in Mazatlan Mexico which is where he said it was because I looked it up in the library in an Atlas but it isn't spelled the way it's spoken but that's because it's a Mexican word and you can't depend on Mexican words I suppose or any foreign word like one spelled backwards on a banner or a ship that Nelly said would make you crazy if you looked at it too long like I sometimes practice making myself dizzy and it gets on Nelly's nerves and O.D. says I'm coming along great almost like the way Asia comes along playing her flute she doesn't know I saw her practicing maybe I'll never tell her how I hid in the grove of trees and watched her practicing in the field and once in a while it's almost like you can hear her out there, but it's too cold now to be practicing but her sister scares me but she must want to be an actress like Diane because she used to go with Asia to the field to listen to her practice and she stood up and her hair was the color of maple leaves falling off the trees she looked up where I was and first I thought she had seen me but all she did was start pacing around like she was kind of dancing to Asia's playing and she said something like what could she say to the fantastic foolybear and what could she say to brother and what could she say to the cat with

future feet and what could she say to mother and then some more that I can't remember I don't know what it means that I can remember but she must be smart being in college and driving a sports car but Asia is kind of like Franklin because she knows too many people and the teacher is always trying to get me to make friends but how do you make friends when nobody likes you but I can't tell her that besides I don't have time with my trumpet and God telling me to practice and I wish Asia would come to the funeral so she'd hear me play but a lot of people are going to be there anyway do they call off funerals when it rains it didn't rain on Granny's funeral so I don't know where are you VFW man Asia is so far away sometimes maybe that's why they named her Asia but she was just a baby when they named her they couldn't have noticed her being like she is when she was just a baby black black black is the color of my true love's hair that's one of O.D.'s favorites Asia said he used to sing it for her aunt she looks like her aunt I bet and I bet that's why O.D. likes her so much but she's a good flute player too but she's been taking lessons for a long time and she's the best player in the band even Mr. Long said that and it's true because she has been taking lessons for so long from O.D. and some day Mr. Long will say I'm the best trumpet player in the whole band and everyone will want me to like them and Franklin will be the echo and I'll get to play in front of all the people in my gray wool suit and black tie is it straight,

yes, it is--and Franklin will have to hide down in the woods so nobody can see him because you aren't supposed to see the echo you're just supposed to hear them--echoes should be heard and not seen but until then I'll do what Franklin says because I'm not the best trumpet player yet but I'm the only one that God tells to practice and Asia said I was the only person who she had ever told about O.D. and her aunt because she said O.D. liked me so much probably because I have trumpet lips or maybe because I like his painting and we talk about going down to the seas again to the vagrant gipsy life where the wind's like a whetted knife which is a sharpened knife has pretty teeth dear and he shows them pearly white it doesn't bother me knowing how good she is because she isn't like a regular person like she's a different--a different . . . a different instrument altogether--al-to-get-her--altogether--like everybody else is a clarinet or a trumpet and she is an oboe and she is like an oboe too O.D. says so too because he played that record and said 'This is what I feel when I think of Asia Morning,' what was it a swan of something, no the swan of something--The Swan of Tuonela how it starts off like almost a funeral the sad low--like crying almost or people talking about how good the dead person is and O.D. said that a swan represents death and there is this swan that carries people on its back when they die must be like riding on a cloud but the oboe comes in like it's explaining everything to the people who are crying and it

tells them about how there are different kinds of darkness singing to them with its dark mouth telling them like Christ that death doesn't sting or sink and it swan-swims in the dark water making a wake and you can hear the crying people's nerves vibrating and they are still sad maybe because they don't trust swans that carry off souls of their relatives and Asia is like that kind of music she is like an oboe which is like a swan swimming in dark water out from shore where you can't reach it without stepping into the dark water yourself and you can't see the bottom just the cattails and bull rushes like Moses floated on . . .

From his window, Dost saw the black Crysler pull into his driveway and a stocky man wearing an army cap and a blue suit came to the door. Dost jumped from his bed and trampled down the stairs with his trumpet.

"You must be Dost Shustum," the man observed.

"Yes," Dost answered, closing the door and locking it.

"You certainly look ready to go," the man laughed.

"I am," was all Dost replied, feeling his stomach get tight with the realization that he was actually on his way to his first public performance.

"I went by to get your partner first," the man said, indicating Franklin's profile in the tinted glass of his car. "His ride had a flat tire right at the last minute, so what with first one delay and then another, you two musicians will get there at the same time, after all."

"Oh," answered Dost, opening the door to the back seat.

Franklin situated Dost in an open field below the cemetery, so it was an ideal place for the echo to hide. The field's only drawback was that it was partially occupied by a large, humming transformer.

"If O.D. were here, he could tell us what pitch that thing is humming," Franklin remarked.

"Look at that cloud," Dost observed, worrying about getting his trumpet wet.

"Eighty percent chance of precipitation, nothing more romantic than 'Taps' played during a thunderstorm," Franklin judged as he started to the cemetery. "Remember, count three after you hear me start, then you come in."

"Got you," Dost complied.

While Dost waited for Franklin's first note, he leaned against the hurricane fence that enclosed the vast transformer. He blew air into his trumpet to get it warmed up then played a few notes softly just to make sure he would come in on pitch. A peal of thunder broke the sky over his head like a club, and briefly, he was tempted to go to the trees. Then he remembered how dangerous it was to stand under trees during a thunderstorm, so he pressed himself against the fence.

Shortly, the sound of Franklin's coronet came through the woods. Dost put his trumpet to his lips while counting to three. During this time the wind had jumped up as if it had

been lying camouflaged in the grass, waiting for the funeral to start. The trees, caught unawares, were twisted into gusty calisthenics, green leaves pulled from their limbs. It was as if the sun had been devoured by a pride of black panthers all growling. The sky was filled with their noise and darkness and their sleek tension.

Dost had finished the first three notes and was just getting started on the second three when he felt the side of his face turn into static electricity and stand his skin on its end. A clack came from the transformer which sounded like a train running over its tracks sideways but this sound was immediately followed by the mechanical groan of a machine getting the first electrical shock of its life. Before Dost could realize that the transformer had been struck by lightning, a piece of shattered insulation flew through the fence wire and bounced off his head. Because of the closeness of the lightning and the noise made by the transformer--not to mention the fact that Dost had stopped playing in the middle of a note--several people rushed down to check on the echo. They found him unconscious and bleeding. The most official vehicle close at hand was the Willer Funeral Home hearse, so Loan drove his cousin to the hospital while the police escort cleared the way.

Dost opened his eyes to carnations smelling from their pot which was wrapped in the tinfoil that florists

use as a compromise between common clay pots and sculptured vases. Dost knew that he had been in the hospital for three days and that they kept giving him shots to make him sleep. There was a bandage grasping the right side of his head, and he could but did not feel like moving. He remembered the doctor talking to him and asking him if he had any trouble seeing before his accident. Dost had told him no-- except when he took off his glasses or when God talked to him. Then the doctor had explained that those blind spells were not God but epilepsy--petit mal epilepsy. Then the doctor asked if he had hurt his head by falling down sometime before his first seizure. He seemed almost happy when Dost told him about falling into his uncle's basement. Their conversation ended with the doctor telling him not to worry; now that they knew what was bothering him, they would be able to give him medication.

Health threatened Dost. He felt like he was being taken away from something or perhaps like he had lost an important address or was an important address that had been lost. It was like getting to the Promised Land after forty years and being turned away because no reservations had been made.

His door opened unexpectedly, and Asia Morning walked in.

She looked at him as if she were going to buy him and was searching for a price tag then she said, "I was in town getting my sheath taken off, and everybody at

school is talking about what happened but I wanted to see you and let you be the first to see me without the metal in my mouth . . ."

"But I thought the nurse at the desk was keeping everybody out . . ." Dost began, not sure he knew what Asia meant or wanted.

"Oh," Asia replied, her green eyes embracing his weakness. "Darcus got into an argument about birth control with her so I could sneak in. I won't stay long because Darcus will hurt the nurse's feelings if I stay too long. I just wanted to do this . . ." she walked to Dost's left side and got so close that he could see her pulse in her neck then she kissed his cheek " . . . and tell you that I think we're a lot alike and that we're special. Now I've got to go."

She left like the swan, Dost thought, and hers were the first flute lips my own age to touch me where I can't even touch myself or take myself like a painting done by a blind man who can't see it anymore but who knows that his name is on it because it's part of the picture stranger sailing backward on his banner against the wind eighty percent chance of precipitation Zerubbabel only foreign is just the backside of the familiar like underneath the surface of a creek with emeralds in its rocks green under dark shining like O.D. seeing the edge flashing of his own storm of darkness but still sitting in the precipitation of stars where he had no relatives and order foreign food

from a foreign lamp but the light was still the same but
special Zerubbabel . . .