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These five stories, with the exception of
"Easily, Turk," are concerned with the problem of Will,
not in its freedom but in its exercise. The majority
of the characters in these stories are attempting to
posit a self-reliant existence for themselves and it is
the apparent success or failure of their personal
strengths that make up the theme of most of these
stories.

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis has been approved by the following
committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro:

A SATURDAY AT THE LAKE
AND OTHER STORIES

by

Thomas Hanley Barthel

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A Thesis Submitted to
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A SATURDAY AT THE LAKE

I

On a Saturday morning Alice Robinson checked again the brown roots of her blond hair in the yellowed mirror over the sink and looked, too, at her facial makeup and wondered why she bothered with mascara, powder and rouge. Walking out of the bathroom she went to her dresser, took out a brownish bracelet and put it on her wrist. She thought it very summery looking. The bracelet was made in Denmark and supposed to protect the wearer from anything harmful.

Outside her second-story window Washington Avenue was barely stirring in the noisy, early July morning. On the stoop some neighborhood children were singing "On Top of Spaghetti" as other children roller skated, the wheels clattering and clacking on the tree-uprooted sidewalk. In the rear of the apartment house, clothes-lines rattled and squeaked and groaned under the weight of innumerable polo shirts, dungarees and underwear. In the distance were the exhalation of the bus on Myrtle Avenue and the castinet sound of the subway.

Alice sat down on her bed and buckled on her imitation leather sandals she had bought at Kleins last November. "Just the right touch," she thought smoothing

out her wide-skirted, yellow dress. She picked up her large, orange plastic pocketbook by its two loop handles. It bulged with face cream, hand lotion, nail polish, sunglasses, a paperback book, cigarettes, a brown Army blanket and a wide-brimmed straw hat. She lightly flicked dust off the "Souvenir of Mexico" which was sewn in thick, red thread to the side of the pocketbook. She checked the apartment, pressed her lips together and closed the door, locking it behind her.

Even in the early morning the heat in the street was intense and Alice decided to take the subway, even though she rode it to work every day, rather than the bus. She didn't like the subway but the bus would be too slow and too hot today. No matter which way she travelled Alice did not like the Puerto Ricans staring at her breasts, then twisting their watchbands. "The greasy bastards," she thought, approaching the subway steps, "always on relief."

Soon after she sat down she noticed a man directly across the aisle studying the subway map on the wall of the car.

"Where do you wanna' go, mister?" she asked.

"Oh," said the man startled, "I want to go to fourteenth street, madam."

"Manhattan?"

"That's correct."

"Let's see. Uh, change at Hoyt-Scherhorn and get the "A" local at the upstairs."

The man grinned slightly then touched the brim of his hat and sat down. The Spanish chatter burst out and Alice thought she heard the word grande. "Godamn Spiks," she thought.

II

Alice Robinson was fifty-two years old and assistant manager of the Policy Claims Division of the Summit Life Insurance Company. She had worked for them, starting as a file clerk in 1934, for over thirty years. She was fortunate to have any job during the Depression. All the money she had previously earned she had brought home to her mother who lay in bed, as she had since 1931, adding to her dead husband's stamp collection. Alice remembered her father as a scowling man smelling of grease and shaving lather before the First World War and smelling of whiskey and with an arm missing after the war. She could remember wondering if her father used the sleeve as a funnel.

Her childhood's days and nights seemed to be full of constant argument between her parents. Her mother, hair escaping the grasp of bobbi pins after a day of work as a stenographer in the Brooklyn Navy Yard, began to cook dinner each night at 4:30. Her father, to

flood or inspire his despair, (Alice could never decide which), sat in a big, overstuffed armchair, eyes half-shut, a leg draped over one arm of the chair.

Alice knew, when there was this silence, not to ask her mother if she could go out to skip rope after supper. It seemed to her, at times, that the food and her mother boiled simultaneously.

"How was work today?" her father would ask.

"Work's great," her mother would answer, lifting off the lid from a pot that gargled food and water.

After more silence her father spoke as he slid his leg off the arm of the chair.

"Well, whata' ya want from me?" he demanded.

"Nothin' . . . nothin'," she answered without looking at him.

"What the hell good is a one-armed mechanic," her father finally shouted trying to fully open his eyes. "What the hell good . . ."

"Not much good at all, I guess," her mother replied snapping off the stove's burners. "Dinner's ready."

At other times, especially Sunday mornings, Alice, sitting on the parlor floor reading The Katzenjammer Kids or Barney Google, heard her father and mother yelling in their bedroom. The first few times she listened carefully, tip-toeing to the door of the bedroom

which had never completely closed. She could see her father, propped up in his bed with pillows, reading the sports pages. Her mother was getting dressed to go to church and, afterwards, to buy the cinammon buns Alice could smell cooling in the bakery across the street.

"Can't you ever put down that paper and listen, Fred? Fred!" Alice overheard.

"I'm listening," said her father, looking more closely at the paper to see a box score. "But Alice doesn't need to go to church."

For an instant Alice's mother looked at her husband as if he had read the sentence from the newspaper.

"I think she does need it."

"I don't. Now will you please get out of here. Go and pray with your Pollock friends!"

"Always with that, ain't you. Always," she said, turning from the mirror to face her husband for the first time in their argument. "Always, you shanty Irish bastard!"

Alice's father, accustomed to this particular curse, placed the paper carefully on the bed and turned the page slowly with his left hand. Her mother turned back to the mirror and deftly jabbed a hatpin through her hat and hair.

Occasionally, however, her father, crumpled and

sagging, slept on his armless right side Sunday mornings and Alice would be hurriedly dressed by her mother who, Alice remembered, smelled thickly of cold cream and rouge those days.

The Mass made little impression on Alice. She could recall how cold the floor felt when she genuflected beside the pew or how her mother grasped her face as if blinded after Communion.

The arguments continued but Alice learned to pay no attention to them. As the years passed she was left to choose her own games and the times to play them. Once, an aunt took her to the zoo in the Bronx and her father had promised to take her to the Dodger game. Alice never went far from home to play, even when older friends invited her to go with them to the Prospect Park Zoo. Still, Alice's friends envied her for her freedom. Alice knew it was only necessary to be home for meals, in time to go to bed before her parents and to chase after rare stamps or "jumpup," her father's name for illegal liquor. Her father didn't like to go to speakeasies.

One night, in the winter of 1927 when Alice had just turned twelve years old, she heard, waking up, the echo of a sound from the bathroom which was adjacent to her parents' bedroom. She discovered later the sound was a gunshot. Her father had blown

out the back of his head by putting the Army souvenir forty-five caliber pistol in his mouth and pulling the trigger. He had been seated in the bathtub.

When Alice heard the shot she got halfway out of bed to see what the noise was. She waited for something else to fill the sharply interrupted silence but she heard only the clattering of metal and the sounds of her mother turning on the bedroom light and the rattling withdrawal of rosary beads from the drawer of the bedroom table. In the darkness her eyes were attracted to the white lettering on the blue pennant which was stapled to the wall. The bum, outlined in white and brandishing a baseball bat, seemed to mock her. Her mother, in the next room, began to sob. Alice quietly got out of her bed and lay down on the floor, the pillow under her head propped against the wall.

Her mother found her that way, wide-awake, in the morning. She told Alice to get into bed until called. Her mother's obvious weariness frightened her and she obeyed. The coffin was delivered noisily as Alice dressed. When she came out of her room, men displaying World War I Victory Medals spoke to Alice's mother over the closed casket. As Alice ate breakfast the men commented that she was taking it well.

That afternoon the only priest who was ever in

the house said a few prayers over the coffin. Alice's mother cried. After the prayers the priest consoled the mother. He hesitated a moment and then, in a whisper, said something Alice couldn't hear.

"Yes, yes. I know," her mother replied loudly. "He'll be buried in the soldier's cemetery . . . a military funeral."

The next day Alice's aunt came to take her, again, to the zoo. The aunt helped her to dress. Alice's mother called to her from the bedroom. The aunt went to Alice's room for Alice's heavy coat.

"Here's some money, Alice," her mother said to her in the bedroom. "Try not to tire Auntie Sonia too much today. And you may have only two bags of peanuts this time." Her mother looked sinister in black but Alice said nothing. She nodded, put her hat and coat on in the parlor and then left with the aunt.

When she returned home the coffin was gone.

III

She stayed on the train that had taken her from the Atlantic Avenue station to Jamaica for Lake Ronkonkoma. Most of the younger people changed, though, for the train to Wantagh where they would take a bus to Jones Beach. Alice did not like the immense, un-

controllable crowds at Jones Beach and, although she would never admit it to anyone, the ocean seemed to her to be brutal and demanding. She preferred the Lake much more. At Jones Beach, Alice thought, the snotty college kids wouldn't give you a well-done hamburger. Besides, there were nice, gentle people at the Lake--people who would listen to you--and the gentle swells of the Lake never roared so loud that you couldn't hear yourself think.

Laughing couples surrounded her in the lurching car. Girls with long straight hair whose mask faces were completely free of makeup; boys whose gleaming faces reminded her of every movie emperor she had ever seen; dark Italian girls with hair piled so high it seemed to be trellised. "I usta' be prettier than that," she thought.

"Tickets, please. Have your tickets ready," the conductor droned as he slid the door closed behind him. Alice adjusted her straw hat. She reached through the jaws of her pocketbook, which she had placed on her lap, and took out her package of cigarettes. The yellow ticket was in between the cellophane covering and the pack. The conductor was now standing next to Alice's seat, shifting his weight from one foot to another, waiting for her ticket. Then he turned and reached to punch the tickets of the couple across the aisle. Alice saw this and purposely delayed. When

he turned to her again she slowly drew the ticket out.

"Here ya' are."

"Thank you, madam," the conductor answered and vigorously punched the ticket and gave it back to her. He mumbled as he passed along the butt-covered aisle collecting more tickets.

IV

From the day the coffin disappeared while Alice was at the zoo, there was never much money in the Robinson household. Her mother went to work only sporadically until she stopped working altogether. There was a little money from the Army and spinster Aunt Sonia helped. There was only a small amount of savings. Ever since her sophomore year in high school, it was necessary that Alice work, for by then the situation was critical. Every morning she walked across the Williamsburg Bridge to her job at a paper box factory on St. Mark's Place in Manhattan.

Her mother died soon after and Alice began work at Summit Life and moved into the apartment on Washington Avenue. For entertainment she went on an occasional boat ride to Bear Mountain, to Luna Park in the spring and summer and during the winter she often went to the St. George Hotel Pool on Clark Street.

It was at the pool that Alice had met Samuel Sterns.

The Army uniform he was wearing when they were buying admission tickets attracted her. He had been drafted shortly after Pearl Harbor and was stationed at Fort Hamilton in preparation to being shipped overseas. He had come to the hotel pool because he had never gone swimming in an indoor pool before. He had never swam much at all because, as he told Alice, he was part of the family restaurant business in Charlotte. He sweated over the steam table at lunch hour every day and supervised the cleaning of the restaurant each night when it closed. Whenever he had the chance he drove to Shuttle's Swim Club on Route 29. The "club" denied membership to anyone it pleased. Samuel signed his name "Fred Miller" in the club's books and that was the way his membership card read. He thought, once, that his father had discovered the card but instead found it, wrinkled and starched, in a freshly laundered shirt.

Alice loved the North Carolina Jew the minute she saw him. She loved his soft eyes and soft voice with its throaty twang. On their dates he kissed her with no demands and when she placed his hand on her breast, the night she splurged on a taxi, she had to look down to see if it was there.

Samuel never had much time to see Alice because he was ready to ship out and so their dates were always hurried. One night, on the stoop of her apartment,

Samuel told her he was going overseas within a month and showed her the Army's forms. He said he wanted to be married to Alice.

They married, as she suggested, the next week at Borough Hall because there was no time for the religious ceremonies and Alice Robinson Sterns lay unsatisfied but somehow fulfilled next to Samuel for two days and nights in the Madison Hotel. The hotel was near Alice's job.

When the telegram from the War Department came, Alice wept and tore it up. There were no rings and Samuel had left the license in the hotel. A year later she dropped Samuel's name.

V

The train swayed on toward Lake Ronkonkoma, a small resort town almost directly in the middle of Long Island. Past a point that begins at the Pinelawn station, there is little scenery flanking the railroad and that only endless miles of emaciated oak, pine trees and small wiry bushes.

The cars on the main street park head-in to the curb, giving the town a feeling of narrowness and listlessness. When it is winter the acned roads are too rugged for the town youths to speed on. Away from cold winds the Old Men sit in a small bar and discuss the honor of Allie Sherman.

But during the summer the Lake area explodes. The kids bore through town and race themselves on the nearby roads. The Old Men put their feet down very carefully on the hot sidewalks. There is a big place, just outside of town, where the kids can drink the too much they always drink and the next day they're seen carrying their kilt-colored jackets to the cleaners to get rid of the smell and the chinks of food on them. And, at times, the Old Men are asked by kids in bermudas, shower sandals and tee shirts that are some school's athletic association's property to 'get us a couple of six packs' adding 'we'll give ya' a can.' Middle-aged men wear the hats worn on deep-sea fishing boats--one with the exaggerated, green plastic sun visors--and their wives umbrella eroded complexions with great straw hats which have tiny sea shells sewn to them. Almost everyone has a white-salved nose. The Old Men appear late during these summer days and, for a while, go to one of the beaches. A little after one they meet in the same small bar in which they had spent the preceding winter to drink shots and beer and watch Rheingold, Tareyton and the New York Mets. As the people in the heat walk by, the Old Men remember Ping Bodie and Joe Tinker and John McGraw.

Alice Robinson was one of those people who walked in the heat but past a nearly empty bar because it was

just ten-thirty. She had a new bottle of sun-tan lotion and was anxious to get settled on the beach. She crossed the main street, her sandals almost absorbed by the dissolving tar, and walked toward the beach she had gone to since she had first come to the Lake. The Lake's frontage had been sold to private owners by the town and owners erected admission booths, refreshment stands and supplied lifeguards. After a short conversation with the woman at the entrance gate, Alice spread her khaki blanket in the middle of the beach.

Out on the lake, near a float, a young girl italicized her joy-terror with soprano shrieks as a young man swam after her. Alice ignored them and began to apply the sun-tan oil. She had no trouble spreading it on her arms and legs but she could never cover all of her back. She could feel the sun warming the part of her back not covered by the dress and unprotected by the lotion. If she wasn't careful she would get a burn that would last for days as she had many times before. Her sunglasses slid down her nose and she pushed them back up. Then she took out Spartacus, the book she was currently reading. She preferred historical novels, not knowing exactly why, but after reading Forever, Amber she was fascinated by them.

Soon there were many blankets down, more admissions collected and Alice, feeling the sweat trickle down

into the small of her back thought that it must be just about time for lunch. The young people had gone leaving "Fogey's Beach," as they called it, to the "fogies." The Old Men who could remember the Yankees playing in the Baker Bowl were leaving for the air-conditioned bar. Alice folded the corner of the book's page, put the novel into her bag and started for the refreshment stand, wallet in hand.

There was not very much skill used when the stand was built years before and hardly anything had been attended to since. The exterior paint was peeling and stuck out in large sheets like pages. The screens bellied inward and the door squeaked loudly. The interior had a long counter covered by formica and bordered by chrome strips which were loosely nailed on. All the napkin holders were empty. Rings and puddles of spilled soft drinks and beer, dripped mustard and catsup and bits of potato chips and pretzels disfigured the counter. In the greasy sweaty air obese flies zoomed chaotic flight patterns.

Alice tried to give her order but no one waited on her. A girl further down the counter poured warm soft drinks into paper cups and two other attendants talked casually in the rear storeroom. Alice shook her dress so that it would seem as if she were trying to get sand out of it but she was trying to fan some cool air against her warm legs. The blue wallet was slippery in

her hand.

"Hello, Lucille," she called to a black-haired woman near the door.

Lucille paused for a moment, then saw Alice.

"Hi, Alice. Warm enough for ya'"

She quickly pushed open the screen door and went out. Alice started to wave but the wallet began slipping out of her hand before she could raise her arm.

Lucille Conroy was one of the many city women who had heard about "Fogey's Beach" and had come there, as she told Alice, "to catch a nice man." Alice had met Lucille on the train some years ago. Lucille was talking vigorously to one of the young couples and Alice assumed that the woman was their mother. Later, when Lucille had started a conversation, she told Alice that she was a secretary in a modeling agency and that it was a good paying job. Every weekend she went to the Lake, she said, and on her vacation to the Catskills.

The two women had gone to lunch together often, even though Lucille worked almost fifteen blocks from Alice. Lucille thought that Alice's handsomeness might attract some men. Once, when they were discussing their jobs, Lucille asked Alice what she wanted.

"Well, I wouldn't mind moving to Personnel," Alice answered. "Of course, I don't especially like people but if it isn't Personnel I'll stay in Claims. You can

make big decisions there, ya' know. Like . . ."

"No, no. I don't mean that. Not jobs . . . I mean, like why do you go to the Lake every weekend?"

"I don't know exactly, Lucille," Alice replied as she lit a cigarette. "I guess I like the quiet. Ya' know, just to sit there on the blanket. The city's lousy on a Saturday."

"Don't you come here to get a man? God knows there's no place left except a golf course."

"No, I don't think so," Alice said almost immediately.

"But aren't you tired of living alone? Aren't you, really?"

Alice did not reply.

"I know I want a man to come home to me. That's why I come here. It ain't for the sun, ya' know."

Alice stared at Lucille unbelievably.

"You mean you want to cook and sew all day," she said to the younger woman, "for a guy who'll maybe want to screw you after supper and then fall asleep?"

"You don't believe me? Yes, that's what I want. I'm tired of getting pinched and being told all the dirty stories."

"Okay, okay. You don't have ta' shout."

"Well, what did you think I wanted? To turn off the Late Show and hug the pillow for the rest of my life? You want to know somethin'/? Every wishbone I ever

remember breaking I wished for a man to marry. A man, Alice. A man."

Alice remembered the conversation as she sat, legs folded under her, on the blanket while she ate a hamburger off a paper plate. The teary cup of Coca-Cola was twisted into the sand next to her. Alice knew she felt sorry for Lucille because she knew that having a husband would only make things more miserable. Lucille didn't realize it but it was true, Alice thought.

But she couldn't even get through to Lucille that you had to give up everything--everything you liked and depended on--to have a man. She remembered when she had spent a weekend with Mr. Guerrin from the Actuarial Section he had insisted on going to Trenton. That weekend, just after the war, convinced Alice that if she was married the man would make her depend on him for everything. She was too old to have children but she could picture Lucille sweating and throwing up in the morning. "I don't need that," she thought.

"Excuse me, Miss. I think you dropped this key," she heard a voice above her say.

She looked up, hamburger in hand, to see a man standing above her. He had a broad face and she guessed that he was much taller than she was. For a moment Alice thought it was Mr. Guerrin but she had told Mr. Guerrin, and the others, in her best sarcastic tone, that there

would be 'no more weekends in Trenton.' Then she noticed the man's bulging stomach and knew it was not the slender man she thought it might be. His bermuda shorts revealed very white and very hairy legs. She judged him to be in his late forties. Then she almost laughed at the crimson and red-flowered shirt he wore but instead looked quickly at the offered key.

"It isn't my key," she said. "Oh, yes. Yes it is. Thank you." She put the hamburger down and accepted the key.

"No, thank you. I've been wondering how I could meet you."

"Well, you've met me," she said sharply, "Now good-bye."

"Don't chase me, Alice. I just want to talk to you."

"How do you know my name?"

"Your friend Lucille told me," he said sitting down on the blanket.

"Not another one, Lucille," she thought. "For crissakes . . ."

The man tucked his legs under him in imitation of her.

"She's not my friend. Now leave, will ya'."

"She's a nice woman. A little hungry," he said with a wave of his hand, "but nice."

Alice was becoming annoyed. "Lucille still thinks

she's got all the answers," she thought.

"Look, Alice," the man continued, "I just want to talk . . . I get a little lonely sometimes and . . ."

"Then why don't you go talk to Lucille . . . besides what've you got to be lonely about?" She thought to herself, "Great, Alice. Start a conversation."

"Oh, I don't know. I just get lonely sometimes. Don't you ever get lonely sometimes, Alice?"

"That damn Lucille," Alice said, almost aloud.

"No, I don't," she said to the man. "Not any more . . . Look, why don't you get out of here? I'm not looking for a debate."

"When were you lonely?" the man persisted.

"If it's anything to you, when my father died."

"That must have been sad," the man quickly said.

"No, it wasn't, as a matter of fact. He killed himself," Alice answered, trying to be casual. "Killed himself. Nobody was going to push him around."

"What do you mean he . . ."

"Then my mother went nuts. She sat around all day pasting stamps and collecting holy cards . . . I was lonely then. But that's over with. Now leave me alone."

"Oh, I can imagine. You must . . ."

"Must nothin'. Just get the hell out of here. Go back to Lucille. She'll take you."

The man looked at Alice, shrugged, got up and walked

away. "Great, Lucille," Alice thought, reaching for her food, "just send people over to cry on my shoulder."

She took a bite of her neglected hamburger and spat it out. Drops of grease had run down her throat and were gagging her.

VI

The evening was very cool as Alice boarded the train. All around her people wrapped in blankets dragged their half-zippered beach bags up the stairs of the railroad car. "The Dashing Commuter" painted on the side of the car seemed incongruous among the sport shirts. The sun had almost set and the scrub oak and pine were merging with the darkness.

As Alice started to doze a priest, carrying a black satchel, came into Alice's car. Alice suddenly came awake. She wished the priest had sat down next to her. She wanted to tell him what she thought of him and all his statues and crucifixes. "He thinks he's gonna' help somebody with that black bag," she thought. "He thinks he's Ben Casey." She smiled to herself and then almost guffawed. "He stopped her," she said to herself, moving her lips as she spoke.

She turned to look again at the priest. "Look at him," she thought, "so smug. He knows all the answers. I ought to go back there and tell him . . . I oughta'

tell the whole gadamm car . . ."

The conductor came through the car announcing the next station. As the train slowed Alice thought, "I wonder what's on the Late Show tonight?"

BACK THIS WAY

Ray McClellan was a thirty-year old architect on his way, by train due to the airline strike, to Miami. He had a new position with a new firm whose work was more like the kind he was interested in. He was tired of building graceful boxes in New York and when the firm was pleased with his portfolio he sent his wife ahead to find an apartment.

As soon as the train left the station in New York, Ray went directly to the club car. The train left at ten at night and having a few drinks was the only way Ray could think of to relax and perhaps this way he could sleep late and avoid being bored during the twenty-two hour trip.

Entering the club car, he walked to one of the unoccupied red leather chairs and sat down. Directly across the aisle a stocky, red-haired man, just beginning to age, drank from a can of beer. In the booths in the rear of the car, three old ladies played bridge and cackled over their drinks. The pink cards flashed across the table like a fluttering of eyelashes. A father and his son solemnly drank cokes. The son knelt on the leather bench in the front booth and pressed his face to the window. The window above the head of the man across

the aisle reflected Ray's face back to him, the black night behind the glass and the light echoing off it making the reflector. Ray tried to see the growth of his beard but there was not enough hair to be seen at the distance. His eyes seemed to drop into the older man's and like a button pushed some unheard whirring machinery was set into motion. And it seemed as if the two simultaneously apprehended what was behind those eyes and agreed. But, as Ray removed his focus, he thought that what he had seen was something that the older man had accepted he had only suspected. Ray felt himself on display. The waiter came and took his order. Ray lit a cigarette. He was discarding the match when the attendant placed a napkin, a can of beer and a glass on the stainless steel table which encircled the ashtray. Ray flinched, looking at the very functional and, to him, very ugly table.

Ray poured the beer into his glass. The older man rose and, in one motion, snatched his can of beer in his long-fingered hands, crossed the aisle and sat down next to Ray. He said nothing.

"Newark, Newark," the conductor shouted, his body only partly into the car like a man in the stocks.

The father and his young son slid out of their booth, joined hands and left the car.

"That'll make it about ten-twenty," the older man

said.

Ray looked at his watch. It read ten-eighteen.

"I know you're not gonna ask me how I can tell time. Well, I didn't memorize the schedule, none of that. I just know . . . I know I'll get to Raleigh at six-ten tomorrow and I'll get off. You goin all the way?"

"Almost all the way," Ray answered, not really surprised at the ease with which the man could draw him into conversation, "just to Miami."

"James Fleck's my name. Mind if I ask yours?"

"No. Ray McClellan is mine."

They shook hands.

"Mr. McClellan, this is a long trip and there's things that make it go easier. Of course I say that because there's something I want to tell you. Something that just you'll know and I'll get off in Raleigh and that'll be the end of it."

"I found another of my kooks," Ray thought. He reached for his glass and felt its moistness. The waiter chatted with the bartender as drinks were being mixed for the three old women.

"No, I don't mind, Mr. Fleck. Go right ahead."

"Fine . . . waiter, a beer for Mr. McClellan here."

"You don't have to . . ."

"No, none of that, Mr. McClellan. My pleasure."

The waiter was hoisting his tray but then turned and

saw the brand of Ray's beer. The bartender punched the can open and rang up the sale on the register. A white receipt jumped out and he tossed it onto the tray.

Ray stubbed his cigarette out and poured the remainder of his first can into his glass. It was as if he wanted the moist throat. The waiter removed the empty can, the older man paid, and Ray poured some of the beer from the newer, colder can into his glass.

"I said my name's James Fleck," the older man began quietly, and continued that volume throughout the length of his tale. "I guess you don't remember hearing about me."

Ray had just finished lighting a cigarette and, as he spoke, clouds of smoke came out. He could taste the match's sulphur.

"No, I don't, Mr. Fleck. I really don't."

"Well, eighteen years ago I murdered my wife. Pretty quiet trial, though. For murder trials, I mean." He took a swallow from his can.

Ray felt an immediate fright but hoped he hadn't shown it.

"Maybe you've seen some of my paintings then?"

"No. I'm not much on galleries, really."

"Doesn't it seem odd to you, Mr. McClellan, that I said I murdered my wife and then I said I am a painter? Or I was a painter."

"Sure, but I guess you'll get around to telling me."

"Pretty certain, huh, Mr. McClellan?" the older man said with a slight smile.

"Not really, Mr. Fleck." Ray drank some of his beer.

"Good. I knew we'd get along."

They both fell silent as if both remembering their unspoken oath they had agreed on when their eyes had met only moments ago.

"No games then, fine."

"No games, no cryptic meanings, Mr. Fleck."

"Well, as I was saying, I murdered my wife back in 1950. I don't think the reason why matters especially. One morning I got up, shaved and then walked over to my wife's bed and stabbed her, just once, in the throat. I went into the kitchen, I had cut the telephone wires so there's no worry there. As I say I went into the kitchen, I left the knife next to the bed on the floor and poured myself some coffee. I did hear some noises, though. The bed clothes being clenched, I saw that later, but I knew she was tossing on the bed, and she made noises like you hear . . . what's that TV show . . . Flipper? . . . uh, the noises dolphins make . . . or is it porpoises? . . . anyway the noises they make underwater. The underwater sound was there, too. I guess she was either dead or beyond help by the time I left the house."

Ray crushed out his cigarette and wondered if he should just get up and leave. But he remembered the vague treaty. As he looked out the window, the train seemed to be riding into a funnel of trees whose branches almost touched the window. The leaves seemed to get closer and closer and they rushed on.

"Well, it took about two years to try me, I had very earnest lawyers, and I was sentenced to life in Raleigh Central. It was a much, much better place than the jails I had been in . . . all sorts of people coming and going in them. You never knew who the hell would be bunking with you. But Raleigh was a good slam--prison--although I really don't know. It's the only big one I've ever been in. The warden's okay, if a bit of a sob sister, and the screws aren't mean, especially if they know you're a lifer. I worked in the laundry, that's pretty corny, isn't it? And, oh, I went to the movies--played horseshoes sometimes--it was okay."

The older man paused for a swallow and Ray joined him.

"Anyway the guy bunking with me usta model clay. He was really pretty good. But he'd make models of his wife and the house he had lived in and I couldn't see any sense in that. The guy, Leary was his name, got out in '58. I got a new mate who wanted to talk sports all the time. I simply am not interested in sports, Mr.

McClellan. Back before I was convicted, the whole jail I was in went nuts when some guy hit a home run against the Dodgers.

"Well, with the hot work in the laundry and this guy talking all the time, I remembered when Leary was working he wouldn't talk to anyone and everybody left him alone, even the screws, when he was working. On his 'piece' he called it. So the next time the library cart comes around I ask if there are any books on clay modeling. The guy said no but he did have some books on sketching--the queens sure loved those anatomical sketches."

Ray nodded. He was drinking his beer much slower now.

"So I took two of the books on sketching and started drawing. Eventually I drew out in the yard during exercise period--it's funny how I've forgotten nearly all the slam talk. The guards usta watch me sketching the walls and the towers and then, oh around September of 1960, I was called in to see the warden. He told me the Prison Board had seen my drawings that the guards had taken from me and wondered if I'd like to try and paint. They said I could take correspondence courses. The warden also said I'd get time out of the laundry."

The three old ladies, supporting each other, left the car.

"Needless to say," the older man continued, "I grabbed it. So I started working with oils and I'm sure the Prison Board wasn't pleased with the first few I attempted. But after a while I became fairly relaxed with it and by 1963 I had a little show in Raleigh. I did the exercise yard and a few scenes from the laundry and one of a view from my cell which I'm told is quite good. None of that melting clocks stuff, though.

"So three years ago, after the Chessman business, petitions started to get circulated to get me paroled. And I was, in August of last year . . . a year and a half ago. The Citizen's Art Council of Raleigh paid my tuition and room and board at the Brooklyn Museum Art School.

"At first I kept painting prison scenes but they got worse and worse the more I became accustomed to being outside again.

"Finally one day my teacher called me in and asked me if I'd paint something else for him since he was accustomed to my content in the Pen pictures. He told me to stay away from classes for a while--he'd cover for me--and just paint whatever I liked and then come back and show him what I'd done.

"It seemed like a good idea so I took his advice. I bought plenty of food so that I wouldn't have to leave the studio I rented. I was determined to show that I could paint other things beside prison.

"Would you like another beer now, Mr. McClellan?"

"Yes, thank you," Ray answered. He felt the train slow down as the older man signalled the waiter.

"Almost to Wilmington now," the older man said.

"Club car closes in thirty minutes," the bartender announced. "Thirty minutes."

Again the waiter brought a beer.

"Where was I? Oh yes. So I got the studio and started working. For a while I just couldn't get the prison out of my head. Then one day I started working and before I realized it I was painting myself murdering my wife.

"It was the strangest thing. I never thought about it, even at the trial. Never. Even in prison, none of that. And do you know, Mr. McClellan, I wasn't able to paint anything else? Nothing. Nothing . . .

The older man paused and drank some of his warm beer. The train slowed more.

"Well, I just quit that school, just chucked the tuition, and tried working around Brooklyn. But it was hard for me to get a job with my record and besides my hands weren't accustomed to factory work anymore. I even tried a laundry but it just wasn't the same.

"That's not the end of the story, though.

"I told you I'm going back to Raleigh. When I get there I'm going to rob some store and of course I'll be

caught . . . so you see I'll be right back in the Raleigh Pen again. I truly am going to do that, Mr. McClellan, because there is really no sense for me to be outside. Not when I have to . . . have to remember--you know--remember Gloria!"

There was a silence. The waiter had disappeared and the bartender was counting bottles in the storeroom behind the bar.

"You're just going to get thrown into jail again? Just thrown back into prison?"

"Yes, Mr. McClellan. That's what I'm going to do. I think it's the only place I can function. Hell of a discovery, isn't it?"

"Well, I have to get some sleep. Would you care for a nightcap?"

"No, but thank you very much anyway. It was a really interesting story. Thank you, I guess thank you, for telling me."

"I'm glad you listened, Mr. McClellan. Good night."

"Good night, Mr. Fleck. And . . . uh, good luck."

II

He woke in the middle of the night, the train clattering and swaying beneath him. He could not sleep and he knew immediately that it was Fleck's story that had caused his insomnia.

Ray tossed off his bed covers and went to his open suitcase, dressed only in undershorts. He opened the bottle of bourbon, took a water glass from its holder and, removing his cigarettes from the pocket of the shirt which hung on the handle of the bathroom door, returned and sat on his bunk. Taking the cap from the bottle he poured a drink into the glass which was clasped between his thighs. He lit a cigarette and tossed the match into the steel basin across the compartment.

Ray was not sure about which part of Fleck's story disturbed him. The casual murder, surely, and the willingness to go back to prison as well. He tried to dismiss the idea that any of the story applied to him and then remembered the strange, wordless treaty he had agreed upon with Fleck. He knew now that their treaty applied not only to paying attention to Fleck's story but that the treaty was some sort of covenant between two very similar people . . . or at least that Fleck's quick glance into Ray's eyes had convinced the older man that here was a psychological kin.

He thought, now, that he was disturbed because Fleck never had said why he killed his wife . . . or if there was a sufficient reason, or any reason, why he had murdered her. Ray sensed a disgust, a weariness with Fleck's own life that caused the murder; but he was not sure. He thought, too, that it was Fleck's inability to live a kind of life that was not ordered for him (Ray

had seen men like this while he was in the Army) and knowing he was a man who had practically no will which had caused him to act so brutally. Or at least what Ray considered brutal.

Fleck had said that he couldn't "function" outside of prison and this discovery sent him on his way back to Raleigh.

He wondered if Fleck sentenced himself to prison as if it were a penance--a reparation--for the new guilt he had discovered that he could feel. Or perhaps Fleck, regardless of his need for repentance, did have not sufficient respect or love for himself to live in a free world. Maybe he had murdered his own self-respect when he murdered his wife.

Ray remembered, then, a schoolmate of his in grade school. A tall, thin boy, who was nicknamed "The Creep," was the butt of all the cruel, childish jokes of his classmates. "The Creep" seemed always to be inadvertently drooling through lips that were constantly covered by ice cream. No athlete, he was always the last picked, or not chosen at all, for the schoolyard games of punchball or ringolevio. Even his brother David, while not abusing him, treated him with little regard and tried to act as if his brother were no relation. But whenever Ray was a captain in these games, which was often, he would pick "The Creep," whose real name was Laury, and

make a show out of picking him. The boys he had picked urged Ray to change his mind but Ray simply ignored them and gave "The Creep" his position. "The Creep" of course would let hits go through him, for everyone tried to hit at him. "The Creep" tried to show his affection for Ray and once loaned him his brother's bike but David came as Ray was getting on it and demanded it back.

After grade school Ray never saw Laury but he learned from David that Laury had a job with The Times. Ray never knew what kind of job but he thought that Laury must be proud of working for such a respected company. David worked at a Manhattan branch of The Dime Savings Bank. After getting off his commuter train, he often went to a neighborhood bar, The Trestle, which was close to the Long Island Railroad station. Ray saw him there a few times when he was on vacation or during a summer break.

In the spring of his junior year, Ray read in his hometown newspaper that Laury had been killed while driving his automobile. The paper also said he had been despondent. And that summer, since Ray was doing his apprenticeship with Denton and Hopkins in Manhattan and living at home, he would stop in at The Trestle for a beer before going home. He saw David more frequently now since David's train arrived only forty-five minutes before his. He said hello always and sometimes more. One

night, toward the end of that summer, when both Hopkins and Denton complimented him on his work, he stopped at The Trestle and celebrated with a bottle of Lowenbrau. David was there, too, with the bartender and his wife. This was a Friday and most of the customers came in later than usual on Fridays, especially during the baseball season when the Dodger game would be on the bar's television. Ray decided to buy David a drink and thought that maybe some of his happiness would rub off on David, who did not look very happy.

Ray moved over next to David as the bartender brought the drink.

"Well, how are things, David?"

"What . . . oh, hello, McClellan."

"You know my name's Ray," he said with a smile.

"Listen, I don't want any of your bullshit tonight."

"Okay, okay. Forget it," Ray said and slipped off the stool.

"You pulled that magnanimous stuff on my brother all the time. Well, don't try it on me. You don't like me any more than you liked him."

"Look, I'm just buying you a drink. I guess you don't need any more."

"I don't want your drink," David said and pushed it toward the bartender, who was talking much louder to his wife.

"Why did you do all that stuff for my brother? He was too simple to know that you were pitying him but I know. Well, he's dead now and doesn't need anybody's help anymore."

Ray reached across his bunk to pull the curtains over his window. He took his bottle from the floor and poured another drink. His watch read 3:10 and he remembered that in three hours Fleck would be getting off the train.

He thought how confused he was that night he left The Trestle and then he recalled how confused he had been at another time.

He remembered how he had almost made a confession although he probably wouldn't have called it that because he felt no responsibility for McKinney's death. He had wanted to tell Fleck that he sensed some sort of relationship with him, for he, too, had been accused of murder.

In the end of December 1950, when the Chinese had started their offensive his squad had been pinned down for over six hours. They had been retreating, almost at a run, and were close to the thirty-eighth parallel when they were stalled. Finally artillery cleared out their pursuers and mortars from his squad destroyed a nearby machinegun nest. They received orders to pull out. Trucks from the other side of the parallel had

made it through and they were to be taken to a stronger defensive position.

McKinney was wounded in the leg and drowsy from the morphine Ray had insisted on giving him so he was left in a partially destroyed hut when the squad had gone out with their mortars. When they returned they packed what little was left of their gear. An MP rushed into the hut and told them to hurry or they would be left behind. Ray told Morrisson to give his equipment to Walters and help McKinney.

There was mass confusion at the trucks. There were not enough trucks for the healthy men and less Red Cross trucks for the wounded. The artillery barrage became louder and increased the confusion. Morrisson was returned his equipment and climbed on the truck leaving just room for Ray and for McKinney, who leaned on the edge of the truck. Ray did not notice that the convoy was leaving and was bending over to help McKinney onto the tailgate. The truck lurched forward and began to move. McKinney lost his balance, bumped into Ray and they both fell. Ray jumped up, ran for the truck, caught and pulled himself in. The rest of the squad members watched as McKinney rolled out of the way of the last two trucks.

"You left McKinney," Morrisson screamed. "You left McKinney."

"I had to. We both couldn't run after the truck,"

Ray said still breathing hard.

"You left him, you left him, you son of a bitch."

"At ease, Sargeant."

"Don't pull your fuckin' rank on me. You left him."

Ray found himself staring at the blood stain, McKinney's blood, on Morrisson's fatigues.

"He'll never get back with that leg. He'll never get back," Morrisson snarled and, his hand wrapped around a mortar round, swung at the lieutenant. Walters grabbed Morrisson as the truck hit a rut and the mortar was jarred from Morrisson's hand onto the floor of the truck. Ray kicked it out onto the road.

Both memories seemed to be the same one to Ray. David had indicted him as being partly, at least, the murderer of "The Creep's" spirit by practicing his magnanimity at Laury's expense and Morrison had accused him of a selfishness that ended in McKinney's death.

The similarity that Ray now saw puzzled him more than his immediate reactions had been to each one singly. He wondered whether either denunciation was fair to him. He knew, in contrast, that at least his magnanimity was better than David's embarrassment, if it was magnanimity, and he knew that Morrisson or anyone else would have done the same thing given the situation. But did that excuse him? Did he murder by omission as surely as Fleck

brutally committed?

He thought that if his wife were unfaithful or hated the child they were soon to have or became shrewish or turned frigid he could straighten any of these things out and remain calm through them. But would he remain calm because he did not care? Because he had learned to ignore them just as he had originally ignored Fleck's story?

III

Ray awoke as the train was beginning to build up speed. He looked at his watch and saw that it had stopped. Pushing the curtains open, he judged it to be about six-thirty or seven o'clock. Then he remembered that they were pulling out of Raleigh and thought to himself, "Well, I guess that kook is off the train now." As he lay back down to wind his watch he laughed to himself about his drunken soul-searching and resolved to send a telegram ahead to his wife.

A RIDDLE

The letter began, "Godamm you, Jean, godamm you . . ."

And when she had finished the short letter, full of anger and sorrow, she said to herself, "godamm me, godamm me," and broke her cigarette in half crushing it out in the whiskey-colored ashtray. But Jean knew there was no reply to the letter and no answer to him. If there was something that could be said it would have been said. But she had said "no" with and without words months ago and still the memory of Danny lingered. At times she was almost ready to take the steps necessary to have him back. The letter or the phone call or whatever was needed. But she knew she wasn't able to write the letter and the phone call would just be ridiculous. What could she do? Just get on the phone and say hello and how have you been and are you still working and is your car still running? Why did all this have to be so damn hard? But she knew if she called, (He wouldn't. She had been too final.), he wouldn't let go this time. It would be full siege. Did she want that?

Soon the bell rang and she had to go to class. "Miss Jean Stewart: Typing" the register read which she slid into her briefcase. When she opened the door of the faculty lounge some of the heavy smoke rushed out

into the hall, into the mass of students changing classes. She climbed the stairs to classroom 208, placed her briefcase and books on top of the desk and her pocketbook underneath. Young girls began to enter. Tall Italian girls with names like Luzo and Antuni, hair piled high on their heads, eyes heavily made up; Spanish girls with large bracelets and brightly colored shoes and girls with seemingly no nationality at all because these were the third and fourth generations of immigrants who had come to New York. When the day was over these girls would get on the subway or a bus and go home to their boyfriends, some with tight pants, others with large medals hanging outside their shirts, and perhaps go to a movie and neck or go to a party and neck. Come to think of it I could use a little necking myself, Jean thought.

It was time to start the class. Jean could hear some of the Spanish girls chattering in the middle of the room and one of the girls was buffing her nails on the fabric of her skirt.

"All right, girls, uncover your machines," she said.

The talk ceased now and bracelets jingled and clacked in the fading early September sunshine which fought its way through the soot of the city into the classroom.

She quickly cleared her throat. "Today we're going

to try typing to this record." She held up the record. Isn't this going to be fun class, she thought. "It's very slow and all I want to see is correctness. The record won't force you to go fast."

One of the students stuck up her hand.

"No, you won't be graded on this," Jean answered her question in advance. As a matter of fact I probably won't even look at them. Jean thought that they probably knew this was a time-killer for a last-period Friday class.

She put the record on the Grundite phonograph. The cover-speaker spoke:

"A-s-d-f-j-k-l-semi-colon. A-s-d-f-j-k-l-semi-colon."

I hope dear sweet Mrs. Elias doesn't come in, Jean thought. She wasn't supposed to be playing a record this early in the term. But she didn't want to teach and they didn't want to listen to her.

By the time she got into the elevator Jean couldn't tell which was heavier, the briefcase or her arm. She touched "2", the doors closed and the elevator rose. Jean and her two friends had chosen to live in the suburbs rather than in the city. The apartment house, ("close to school, church and shopping facilities"), was four stories high in the shape of a "Z", each section painted a different color.

As she approached her apartment she heard Paxy and Sue talking from behind the partially opened door. Sue was taking off her coat as Jean entered.

"Hi, Jeanie. What da you say we eat out tonight?"

"Uhm . . . I'm too tired tonight, Pax. Let's just heat up some french fries." No one said anything to this so Jean put her briefcase in the closet, hung up her coat and went into the kitchen for a drink of water. As she started to reach for the tap she heard the snap of a pocketbook. Coming into the main room of the apartment, Jean saw Paxy, a cigarette clenched in her teeth, searching in Jean's pocketbook which Jean had left just outside the closet.

"What do you want, Paxy," Jean yelled coming quickly toward her roommate.

Paxy flinched for an instant. "Just . . . some matches." Then she became annoyed. "I'm not gonna read your lousy letter."

Jean slowed her pace toward Paxy. "I'm sorry, Pax. I'm . . . Here," she said taking some matches out of her skirt.

They knew about the letter. Jean had received it the night before. When she saw who it was from she said she was going, "to Teds to have a beer before supper." This was the signal they all had when they wanted to be alone. Often they really did go to the neighborhood bar.

Jean had come back a little drunk and very morose so neither Paxy nor Sue had said anything that night or in the morning rush. But now they were all tired.

"I'll go turn on the oven," Paxy said.

Jean came into the bedroom as Sue was leaving. No doubt she had heard the conversation, Jean thought. Unbuttoning her blouse she heard Sue and Paxy talking low in the kitchen, one of them opening and closing the refrigerator more than was necessary. She tossed the blouse on the bed. Almost as if the light touch of the blouse on the bed had set off a flashbulb Jean remembered when she and Danny had held each other in a frenzy of happiness on that bed. Her roommates had gone home for the summer and she would go home soon, too. She thought now, as she had thought many times before, what would have happened if Danny would have made love to her that night. She sat on the bed and pulled the pins out of her hair. She remembered him putting his head on her breasts, both of them laughing when her stomach growled. Then, as he got ready to leave, she lay on the bed very contentedly. He bent over and kissed each breast through the cloth and said, "Quite a pair you got there, baby," and smiled. If he had not stuffed his shirt in then, she would have called him back. She wondered if it would have been different when he came to visit her as she walked to the closet.

"Are you sure that's all you want, Jeanie," Paxy

called from the kitchen.

Jean put on her robe and came out of the bedroom.

"We don't have any vegetables or fish, do we?"

"I don't think so. I'll take a look."

"Do you want to go to the Shamrock tonight?" Sue asked.

Yeah, she thought, let's see if I can take it.

"Nope, nothin in there," Paxy reported.

"Okay. Want to go Paxy?" Jean asked.

"Sure. Let's suck a few down."

Jean thought of suggesting another place or of not going but she knew the damn sad looks she'd get if she did so she just let it go. Funny all this never bothered me at home. The Shamrock might be a test but she knew she wouldn't drink much because she was tired and if she drank too much when she was tired she would get sick. Besides, who knows, she could use a few dates. She was tired of going out with "good friends" during the summer. But I don't want dates, she thought. I want . . . oh hell I don't know. Danny . . . do I want Danny . . . Oh God. Stop it.

"Dinner almost ready?" she asked.

"My stomach is kind of empty. But I love the whiskey sours here," Paxy said to no one in particular.

The Shamrock, except for the jukebox, was an unexciting bar. Neither new nor old the bar was frequented

by all ages but none younger than college graduate age people. It was such a small bar for such a big jukebox, thought Jean. I guess they only come in one size, though.

"Do you have any matches, anyone, please?" Paxy asked.

"I have some, Pax. Here," Jean said. God it's all right, Pax. Relax.

Paxy lit her cigarette. "Hey, I heard Ellie Quest is finally getting married."

"You're kidding," Jean and Sue said, almost together.

They had all gone to school with Ellie Quest and she was always on the verge of getting married to someone.

"No, really. One of the girls in my third period homemaking is Ellie's . . . uh . . . boy friend's cousin. She said they'll get married some time around Christmas."

"I wonder where those drinks are," Sue said.

Don't they ever wonder about marriage, Jean thought. I want to get married in two years she had told Danny on their fourth date. Danny had lit a cigarette at that point. Shock or agreement Jean wondered.

"Dollar ninety-five," the bartender-waiter said.

"I'll get it," Paxy said.

Jean crushed out her cigarette while Sue fingered through her change purse.

"Hey, Jean. Play the jukebox," Sue said handing Jean a quarter. "Give me the matches, Pax."

Not giving me a chance to refuse, huh Sue. And asking for the matches. Why don't you just ask her, Sue? Jean thought as she walked over to the large jukebox. I don't need their damn sympathy. They didn't even know we had broken up until about a month ago. All right cool it. Put the quarter in and play the Beatles. Fast and loose Danny used to say quoting the Hustler. No Barbra, no Sinatra, no Tony Bennett. Okay E and 8. "Love Me Do." Okay Q-2 and T-3. When she had finished pushing the buttons she stood in front of the jukebox to give her rommates time to finish whatever they were talking about. It was, no doubt, about her.

"We'll have to get some food for the apartment," Jean said sitting down. Don't give them a chance.

"We'll go tomorrow, Jean," Sue said.

There was a long pause. Just leave me alone please, she thought. Stop being a woman will you Sue. What did Danny say? Treat me like a drunk and I'll act like a drunk. Treat me like a . . .

"Listen, Jean . . ." Sue said. Jean knew this was the beginning.

"It's all right. I'll go," she said quickly. "I have to get up early to work on some papers, anyway . . ."

It was a lie, Jean thought. "Did your father pay the

Esso bill? You need gas, don't you?" She was speaking too quickly.

"No, it's okay, Jean. Listen . . . about Danny . . . don't let it bother you. I was kind of fouled up with Frank and it doesn't do . . ." Sue ventured.

"Yeah, Jean don't let it bother you," Paxy chimed in.

They looked at her. She tried to look calm.

Oh God make them stop . . . make them stop. Oh Danny make them stop. Oh God Oh Danny. Oh godammit. Oh dammit dammit . . .

"Jeanie . . . ?" Sue asked.

I guess I don't look so calm. Jesus don't let me make a scene now. Over some lousy letter.

"Give me the matches, Sue. And one of your cigarettes." Don't bend down for your pocketbook, she thought. Don't give yourself a chance to hide, even for a minute.

"Here, Jean," Sue said with a little bit of fear in her voice. So she knew a scene might be coming too. Paxy got up to get some pretzels from the bar.

As she lit her cigarette she thought: god it's been over for months. Won't this ever end? Why all the dramatics. Keep your cool. Then she heard the jukebox. "I can do the goose," she sang for Sue to hear.

"What kind of vegetables should we get? I know Paxy wants broccoli," Sue said as Paxy returned. Good

girl Sue Jean said to herself.

"Yes we do want broccoli," said Paxy sitting down.

"What do you want, Sue?" Paxy returned the gesture.

"Limas are okay, I guess."

"Now tell me baby do you like it like that," Jean sang.

"Do you like it like that," Paxy and Sue chorused. Sue looked relieved.

They took a long drink.

Paxy was asleep in the back seat on the Wantaugh. Sue's cigarette, in the darkness, reflected red on the windshield. Jean inhaled deeply through her nose to keep from vomiting.

"I don't think you're going to get up as early as you planned tomorrow . . . , or today rather," Sue said with a laugh.

Jean swallowed a pancake of spit. "No, it doesn't look that way." She didn't want to talk. She just wanted to not think and keep breathing through her nose.

"This damm bar's too damm far away. We should stick to Teds . . ."

"Yeah . . ." Jean muttered. Why did he have to send that letter? Couldn't he just leave it alone? Now it's all back . . . the sweater, the Fair, the nick-names . . . "You may have to stop the car, Sue."

"Okay, Jean. No sweat."

What the hell was she so cheerful about? . . . What did the argument matter? . . . Why do I always say never . . . and did I act like an ass. For god's sake patting his arm. Like I was some damm football coach. She laughed to herself at the thought. Too bad kid you didn't make the team. And to do that to Danny. That was worse than slapping him . . . oh jesus Danny I want to be your woman. How I want to be your woman. God how I hurt him. Oh jesus christ god. Oh jesus damm god.

"Stop the car, Sue! Stop the car!"

Sue pulled off the road onto the grassy shoulder. Jean lifted up on the door handle and then remembered you have to push down on it. She leaned against the door and almost fell down trying to get out. She went to the edge of the shoulder where the bushes and trees began and bent over, placing her hands on her knees. She vomited once and heard Sue getting out of the car.

"I'm all right, Sue." She swallowed some mucus.

"I'm okay."

She started to sob and vomited again, then rubbed her sweatered arm across her eyes. The hard, high crying sounds blended with the swift, abrasive-sounding intake of breath. Paxy shifted her position in the back seat of the car. Jean heard Sue push the car lighter in.

Is that it she wondered.

She drew in another deep breath, her stomach contracting in sobs. "Godamm me godamm me . . . godamm. . ." Jean said to herself and to the night. She straightened up, inhaled deeply again and pushed some hair off her moist forehead. But it's only french fries she thought. She heard the lighter in the car pop out. She spat, wiped her eyes again and walked crookedly toward the car. But she still felt sick. Sue leaned across the seat and opened the door which she had closed. Jean reached for the door to lean on it for a moment but her hand missed the frame and went through the empty car window. Her hip banged against the door. Then she steadied herself. She spat once more and got in the car. They drove away.

EASILY, TURK

Nov. 10

Pony,

God I wish there was an icebox here. For food, not for coolness. I swear to Clair Bee the Dwarf is going nuts. He's got us jumping benches for God's sake. Says it's good for our spring. It hurts the hell out of my ankle. He says Brummel does it and look at the spring he has and pretty soon we'll be grabbing all sorts of reebbs. The whole first week we did that. Till Flip hurt his back and now the only thing we jump is the wires in Mack's car. It's good playing ball again though. With a good team I mean, even if it is in North Carolina. Boy that damm summer league stank.

Flip came back with a whole new set of words. Some of them are pretty funny. "I got burgered" means the shot was blocked. "Vines" are clothes and "a smoke" is a jerk. Like "what am I? A smoke?"

I doubled with Jetty last Saturday. Yeah Jane. You oughta see old Jetty move. First time I ever saw a guy make out with a broad while the cop was makin out a speedin ticket for him. Well I gotta go eat. Probably that lousy pot roast tonight. I'll mail this when I get some stamps. At least you're getting a report even

if it's late.

Easily,

Turk

-

Nov. 16

Pony,

Two weeks till game time. Puck's playin good ball but boy when he's off he's really off. Jetty's much better than last year. You remember last year how he couldn't get off his feet. We could've used you this year. Anyway now he really gets up for the reebbs and he's got a real fine lefty hook. But he's still as slow as a pregnant elephant. I keep thinking of that story about the rabbits or foxes that were inside the wolf's stomach and they got out and the mother sewed rocks into the wolf's stomach. Well thank God for Brownie and Henny. They run like every cop in South Amboy is after them.

The team is shaping up pretty good but Flip is still sore from jumpin benches. I'm wearin a brace for my ankle now. It helps a hell of a lot. It's like the feather Dumbo used to fly with. Remember we saw that in the Kenmore? Of course that was before we discovered Vinnys. Boy I miss that place. Or any place to drink. The places down here are like quonset huts compared to Vinnys. You know what Al the bartender's

real name is? Get this. Cuthbert. Puck says his old man knew him when people used to call him Cuthie. Did you drink any Benjamin beer when you were down here? Boy it's terrible. It's like vinegar mixed with chocolate milk.

Well I'm gonna sack now. I'm all out of stamps and envelopes but I'll get some soon. Say hello to Cuthie for me. See ya in about four and a half weeks around Dec. 14. I'll probably come up on the Vomit Comet. That's what they call the train from here to New York. Tell Kathy I'd like to hear from her.

Easily,

Turk

-

Nov. 24

Pony,

One week till the bonfire. Big deal. All the freshmen are going nuts for wood. One of them got the fence from around the old Indian graveyard and the mayor's goin nuts to find it. Somebody told me they bolted down the ping-pong tables.

Flip wants to get some wheels and get some brew at Duds so that we can drink before the bonfire. We're gonna play some school from upstate. We never played them before. We can beat them loaded and in our gym. Forget it. Boy I'm dying for a cigarette. It wouldn't

be bad if all the guys I hang around with didn't smoke but when Skid blows the smoke near me I go bananas. It's good that I've stopped drinking (so far) because I can't have a beer without smokin a battalion of ciggies.

We got a nice out of bounds play from under the basket where Flip pops from the corner while Puck screens. The Dwarf is tryin to work on a count-down out of bounds play. You know count to a certain number and then break to a spot. I really don't think it will work. That double pick we used when you were here worked a hell of a lot better.

I swear the food is getting worse. I really didn't think it was possible to have stale corn flakes for breakfast or have hot mashed potatoes with luke warm vegetables and cold meat for supper. If you eat the meat first (I still don't use the gravy. I don't need the G.I.'s) and then both the vegetables and potatoes are cold. And the french fries. I think they cook them in sweat. Flip says all the food tastes like a vaseline sandwich. We pulled into a diner the other night after practice and theres a Corvette sitting there so Flip says "Touch vette uh."

Gonna shoot some pool with Henny. I got some envelopes now but no stamps. Three and a half.

Easily,

Turk

Nov. 30

Pony,

Bonfire tonight. The Dwarf told us "light drills today gang." Gang. He thinks he's Knute Rockne. So we sprinted up and down the gym for a while and then shot about 17,000 foul shots and then he let us go. I gotta go eat now. I'll write after the big deal tonight. We might bend a few elbows before or after. I saw the menu and it's going to be a great meal tonight. Boiled French Fries and fish that looks like they just finished giving it a 10,000 mile checkup complete with lube job. They don't put it on your plate. It gives ya a Maury Wills and slides in. I swear some night I'm gonna get spiked.

Dec. 1

Yes we did have a few ambers. And the cigeebutts went like free Bibles in Alabama. Did about as much good too. Well enough of my prejudices. I must away to ye olde sack and boy it is olde. By the way I don't start. But I can still date the cheerleaders. Yay, go Big Red, Boola-Boola and excelsior (the poem not the stuff they put in boxes). And I do get an extra portion of oatmeal. Yes everyone should play basketball. Two and a half.

Dec. 2

We romped. 76-54. I played a couple of minutes and fouled a guy so I'd have some sort of number in the

box score tomorrow. The Dwarf is chanting all sorts of letters like NIT and NCAA. But most of all our beloved leader is thinking I'm gonna break your backs Monday gang. I wish I knew what it is with the gang bit. I think maybe he used to be a social worker or something. 12 days to go go. I think Skid has some stamps.

Easily,

Turk

-

Dec. 5

Pony,

About one week to go. According to the Cafeterial law of food poisoning the food should start getting better soon so that we won't really bitch when we get home. Same thing at orientation time so the parents will think junior is being well fed. But boy the food is really terrible. I'm still on my diet of chocolate milk and cookies. I wish to hell they'd get some decent bread. I'd eat that. I'm trying to eat as much as possible to get my stomach in condition. Nothing like a good ol Irish cook like my mother to get my stomach in shape.

That damm Jane must be rah-rah. She just has to go down to that place in town. You know. The place next to Western Union. She says "all the kids go there." Well "all the kids" must be awfully fond of death because that place smells like the bottom of my locker. But it's young and collegiate and if you're young and

collegiate you just have to go there. Skid was telling me about the basic phyness of female-type people and I am beginning to see that all this non-conformist jazz that some of them practice is about as real as bubble gum cigarettes. I guess I should say something like live and learn or something as bad. Well cool.

We had two games and we split. We shoulda lost both but we got some breaks at one. Brownie's having some trouble from the outside with his jumpers and that's hurting us but Jetty's reebin great.

I got stamps and envelopes now when I need them. For date-type activity on the vacation.

Easily,

Turk

-

Dec. 9

Pony,

Less than a week. I was right. The food is getting better. You could probably give it to a starving man with no taste buds and he'd like it. But I still don't. Thank God for cows.

I've gotten a couple of letters from Kathy. The usual crap about what she had for lunch on Tuesday and the cute boy she saw in the drugstore and the boss is a s.o.b. and her mother is gettin to be a pain. I write letters to her and hint as loudly as possible about me dating her at Xmastime but she seems to be about as

thick as the grease on Friday's fish. Meanwhile back at the ranch I'm still dating Jane. Good ol Jane. Faithful ol Jane. Sounds like the description of a dog doesn't it. Well. We shall endure.

We won two. God what a schedule. The one at Hurst we almost got beat. Flip and Puck fouled out on practically all charging fouls. You know the bit. Flip calls it home cookin. He also says we got pooned. Well one more game and we finish till after vacation. No holiday tournaments this year. I'll probably get home about two days after this letter gets there. If I can find some stamps.

Easily,

Turk

-

Jan. 4

Pony,

Well I'm back. The train ride was good from what I can remember. I can see I'll be in great shape. But what the hell I don't play anyway. I met two guys in the head and we went back to the club car and played cards. I don't know what the game was but they kept saying "2 uptown" and "3 downtown" and "we Bostoned Ya" whatever they mean.

As you know Miss Kathy Swenson and I did not agree on many things among them the number of beers one should consume at a given time. But I gave her the old jazz

about pressure and escape. You heard me. She wrote me a letter about what a nice time she had at Xmas and that I was a little too forward after the New Years party at Macks. I wrote back about what the hell do you expect me to do when I like you and they keep me locked up here.

There's a dance after the game tonight so that I can sprint off the bench and into my dancing clothes. Yeah I'm still on the pines. Maybe I should pull the same crap Mung pulls and make it with the Dwarf. I doubt it but I get a chill sitting on the bench all the time. But I still go on road trips anyway.

Flip's got an envelope and I think Henny's got some stamps. Easter is a long time away.

Easily,

Turk

-

Jan. 10

Pony,

Got the tape off my ankle now. It feels good and boy I'm sure I'll start now. Oh yeah for sure.

Well two games to go and then we don't work out until after semester exams are over. Usually that is. But so many guys were so out of shape after Xmas who knows. I got a feeling the Dwarf might sneak one or two or three practices in. He asked us for our exam schedule and we all got together so at least four or five

guys would have exams every day.

After the game Saturday (we won) I went to the dance and met Jane. I took her back to school and she played Vestal Virgin all the way. No man is gonna handle her rough. I'm tired of her moving from passion flower to ice cube. Yeah I know all that biology crap but she pulls that jazz too often. But who the hell else am I gonna date around here? No one so I guess I stick with Jane for a while. If you see Kathy tell her to write more often because I'm kind of lonely. But don't tell her that. Just say that my letters sounded like I was kind of lonely.

You know the less I play the more that damm Mung tees me off. That s.o.b. gets to play more often than I do and he's only a soph but he always says "sure coach" and "check coach." You just don't be nice to a guy who breaks em all year long. I can see it if you're winning like crazy but we're not doin so great so why the brownie routine. The hell with him.

Well I gotta go get my whites for the game. I think I have envelopes and I'll mail this on the way over.

Easily,

Turk

-

Jan. 24

Pony,

Not much time. The damm semesters are coming. I hurt my damm ankle again. So you know what the Dwarf says "run it off." Great huh. He tell you to "run it off" if you had a broken jaw. We all go ask Puck whose father is a doctor. Sometimes he's even right.

I hope the hell I make it through exams without smokin. Great pressure you know. I'm glad I got good notes in most of the courses or I'd be in the hopper now. I'll write more tomorrow.

Jan. 25

Not a bad test. Not too easy but fair. I forgot to tell you we won one and lost three. The Dwarf ain't too teed off or nothing. We got some home cookin twice but we should have won anyhow. The third loss was just a horror show. Nobody got off their feet, we kicked the ball away half of the time, guys were walking. Puck was really off. We won a good one though. We pulled that timed out of bounds play and it worked. The Dwarf just sat back contented like he knew it would work all the time and he knew his boys could do it, etc.

I'll write you after exams. No more envelopes.

Easily,

Turk

-

Feb. 1

Pony,

Well the semesters are finally over and the Dwarf

is runnin us worse than when you were here. Maybe he wants us to run cross country in the fall even there's no such team here as you know. We all know Melvil is small and fast so why not play possession. But if we run Ear will have all sorts of collapses and Jetty can't get all the reebbs. We'll see.

I don't know how I made it through semesters. I just about made it being able to take the tests. I had so many cuts you'd have to be a Budda with all those hands to count them except for that one course where the prof doesn't hardly ever take roll.

Feb. 2

I don't know how but we won. Those Melvil guys ran and ran and we ran and ran and Ear collapsed. But Jetty was springin good and we got lots of reebbs. Flip hit a jumper from the corner and we won it by one 85-84. I even played a little, no ankle trouble for some reason, and I ran my butt off. I even got a burger in. The Dwarf knew we'd win all along. He's a great tactician. Yes he certainly is.

I had a cigarette before one of the tests and it didn't taste so good. I really have stayed away from them except for those guys who hardly play at all. Some of them, like Flip and Henny, have a few beers now and then. Well I'm gonna go get a Coke. I think Ear has a stamp.

Easily,

Turk

-

Feb. 8

Pony,

A little more than four weeks of the season to go. The Dwarf isn't building character like he said he would. He says that when he's got a rotten team. When he knows he'll have a lot of lettermen back so he'll say what a fine bunch of boys he has and he may not have the horses this year but next year we'll go all the way. If this was a big school he'd probably have all sorts of alumni on his back.

We lost one and won two this week. Somebody up there likes us or something because we played pretty lousy ball. The one we lost the Dwarf almost kicked his chair apart. Ear really did a job on some guy on a fast break. I'm surprised the guy got up. The two we won was strictly reebs off our boards. Nothin went in except the taps and not even them right away. I think we shot something like 32 percent in that game but the other team shot about 27. The other one was pure hair. We lucked out the whole game. Puck put in some of the most amazing shots I've ever seen. They weren't even sensible but they went in. Even then it took a tip by Jetty to get us in.

After the long trip to A & T we stayed up for a

couple of hours to get breakfast. We got it. Cold eggs and warmed french toast. They shouldn't treat us so good. Hell with all the good food we're liable to bang our heads on the rim. Then we had to go to classes. Thank God I only had two.

Mom sent some stamps.

Easily,

Turk

-

Feb. 14

Pony,

Just one game this week thank God. We ran the hell out of Dwight. Those guys ran and jumped like they had marble feet. I played six minutes too. The Dwarf is real happy about his "rebuilding program."

I got the same English prof this semester that I had last year, Brennen, and he's on my back again. He considers all B-ball players natural nummies. I hand in a paper and all he says is that's what he'd expect from a ball player. Sometimes even the students get on your back about being a ball player. But if they want to come out and run with us for a while they're quite welcome to. We made a convert though. The other day Flip was getting allergy shots and we needed someone to play with us and so we got a guy to run the full court three man weave with us. After about fifteen minutes he changed his mind.

Flip fixed me up (yes I jilted Jane) for Saturday night and I hope the Dwarf doesn't pull another Sunday practice like he did once last year. You remember? The girl he fixed me up with likes to talk about Supreme Court decisions so it ought to be a great night.

Next week we play Gilbert in our gym and that's good news. That means we win and that there's a dance after the game. We got six more games to go after that plus one exhibition and then it's home free all. I like to play, I really do but when the Dwarf finishes practicing we're just about ready to run from Greece to the site of the next Olympics. It's good playing games and scrimmages but those wind sprints and three man weaves gotta go. So do I to get a stamp.

Easily,

Turk

-

Feb. 20

Pony,

Last night we beat Gilbert by 17! I expected that. We also had a dance after the game which I expected. But we had an English test which I didn't and I flagged it. I'm in the hopper so far in that course.

The dance was good and, as usual, hot and smoky. Boy I really had an urge for a cigeebutt. Flip and Ear and Puck danced like wild men. By themselves in a circle or with each other. I saw the broad whose so

fond of Supreme Court decisions and she had a sweater tied around her neck which is supposed to be cool I guess.

We go upstate tomorrow so I miss lab. Yes basketball is a good thing. We're 10 and 8 now and that isn't too bad except we didn't play any games at Xmas. 18 games is a hell of a lot of games by mid Feb.

Oh yeah. I got a letter from Kathy asking me when I was going to be home again so I guess that's a good sign. Or maybe she figures I'll be out of school in a year and a half. I'd like to write to her regularly but she writes about as often as there's an eclipse.

Well I gotta go study. Not too much of the season to go but there's still about two months until Easter. Did you say hello to Cuthie for me? No stamp but no sweat.

Easily,

Turk

-

Feb. 27

Pony,

Five games and the exhibition to go. I'm really starting to feel tired now. Even iron pills don't help much. I just got over the flu or somethin and didn't eat very much for a couple of days.

You know I actually think I'm getting used to the food. I know the food is still rotten but I think they killed my taste buds. Except when you get stuff

like stuffed peppers or uncooked meat you can eat pretty good. I mean you can eat a lot but it's still not good food really.

We won two and lost one this week. One we had at home so that's automatic and we played two downstate. One against Ekhist we lost. The score was 60-59 and what a horror show. Nobody could hit and most of our scoring was on foul shots or tips. The Dwarf almost ripped his shirt off at that one. Then we played Theomore and romped. Flip got 17, Jetty 28 and Ear got 12. We beat them 83-54 even with home cookin.

But it's still a heck of a long time before we go home. I'd like to do something about the Kathy situation. See if you can get her to write more to me. Do it so she doesn't exactly know I want her to write to me as bad as I really do.

I gotta get some sleep. Cool.

Easily,

Turk

-

March 1

Pony,

One week and three regular season games and the exhibition with Ft. Crane to go. I hope to hell you appreciate these letters because I owe about twenty guys envelopes and stamps.

One of the profs who follows the team saw how

tired we are and insists on giving us vitamin pills. Everyday before lunch we meet him in front of the admin. building and he gives everybody two. He gets real mad if everybody doesn't show up. This guy's a bit of a nut but he teaches sociology so I guess it's to be expected.

We lost two big ones this week and the Dwarf isn't so happy about his "rebuilding program." He told us to use that count down out of bounds play against Melton and some fast guard stole the ball and went all the way. That didn't help us much. The other game was downstate and these guys were a bunch of clowns. They'd throw really bad passes and miss all sorts of cripples but they beat us. I swear I don't see how.

All of a sudden Kathy's writing like I'm the Romans and she's St. Paul. She comes out with all sort of lectures. No more stuff about her boss or what happened on her coffee break or stuff like that.

Ear told me you were talking to his brother. He's a good football player isn't he. Well I gotta go. I need some damm envelopes.

Easily,

Turk

-

March 10

Pony,

Well I missed a week. We went on a trip and I

haven't had time. Besides I've been writing like a madman to Kathy.

Let me catch you up because this is going to be the last letter for a while. I have a lot of things to do like tying on one of the biggest toots I have ever tied on. Also I've got a few papers to do before mid-semester and I've got to catch up on other work because I've been so damm tired.

We lost the first game we played this week upstate. The trip back on the bus was just great. We were all tired and couldn't wait for the damm season to get over. Also our record isn't exactly fab. We won the last two regular season games nicely and played like a team for one of the few times this season. We played the last game away from home, but not far, over in Waxton. A lot of students came over to watch. Flip came out near the end of the game and I guess he got the biggest applause. If that counts anything. He is the best ball player. He's no smoke. Then we had the exhibition with Ft. Crane and nobody gave much of a damm until one of the soldiers decided there was a scout in the stands and put on a show and started laughing at us. Well Ear danced a number on his skull and we started playin like we were the original Celtics and they were the St. Marys CYO.

Well anyway it's all over till next year.

Kathy is going bananas with the letters. I got two

from her a couple of days ago. Does her mother lock her up or somethin? I suppose you can't tell from letters but I could have a good time when I get home which is only about a month from now.

The Dwarf's rebuilding and character development program might just be working out. Of course I still hate him. But we were playing like a team for the last couple of games. I always like to play with a winning club because when you're tired like I am now it's awful hard to get out of bed if you're not winning.

Well listen I gotta go to the library and look up sources for Beowolf. I'll be writing to you whenever I can. It won't be as regularly as it has. So stay close and watch Kathy for me. My Mom sent down a whole bunch of envelopes and stamps.

Easily,

Turk

-

TESTAMENT

I

He sat on the edge of the crosstie and leaned back, resting his elbows on the rail. From its midpoint he looked both ways down the half mile of Southern Railway track and thought that it looked as if the train came from nowhere and goes to nothing. Through the thin sweater Walt could feel the coldness of the steel which must have been warm when it was laid. He imagined that it was put down many years ago in a hot summer when he was playing baseball. Perhaps during the Korean War when the shouts of the players were silenced by the throaty war shouts of the F-84's testing above him. Or perhaps they were laid cold, as cold as the day Bishop slapped him and named him a Soldier of Christ. Or as cold as Beethoven's Fifth which Erica never stopped playing at full volume. Or as cold . . .

He was tired of comparisons.

As he lit a cigarette part of the sulphur from the match stuck to his thumb. He ground it out on the cold rail rolling his thumb back and forth as if he were being fingerprinted, then cleaned it off on his dungarees.

He jumped at the sound of a car. "Probably a campus cop. I wonder what he's doing so far from campus," he thought. "Maybe Sandy won't come. The dorms are almost closed now."

A blue mercury light reflected off the rails like a glob of mucus and he spat at it. When he moved his head the glob became mercury and darted down the rail.

He pinched the hot ash off the tip of his cigarette the way, he remembered, his ex-wife had and then tried to extinguish it with more spit. He missed. The spit seemed like a sliver of bone, a fingernail flying from sharp cutters.

Walt wondered when the train would arrive. He wondered if it would ever arrive. In the darkness the coal continued to glow like a sanctuary light.

"Sandy's gotta show up," he thought and moved his lips to form the words again as if they were an incantation. She would come because he believed in fire and earth and air and water and in his own body and what his immediate reactions were. And because he believed it, she believed it also. She believed it because Walt could mold people's ideas and thus their actions. Not in a cruel way, although he did do it for his own sake. He had the ability to discover girls who were looking for a direction and he provided it. Not simply because they could look forward to having dinner with him or making love that he persuaded them that food and sex

were a direction. But still he knew that these malleable girls gained a strength from this, a strength that caused them to understand that they could now form themselves. Walt knew it would be this way with Sandy just as it had been with his ex-wife Erica.

Erica had two outstanding qualities. She never complained when Walt wrecked four or five of the expensive sports cars she owned and she thought Walt was a great lover. But Erica had no earth and no fire. She found herself with a husband whose passion was not confined to their bed. Erica screamed in bed and sank her fingernails in Walt's back even when it was bad between them while Walt only moaned making a sound like a test pattern.

Walt rose from the tie and found that his hip was sore. He was tired of waiting and decided to leave. But he put his head to the rail and heard the train. He hit the heel of his hand against the rail to practice.

In the silence, as he rose, he could hear the signals clicking around him and smelled, for the first time, the tar on the ties. He stepped back, feeling the sharp edges of the descending chunks of blue and gray gravel through the soles of his tennis sneakers. Then the train roared around the curve like a sudden burst from a choir. He stepped back into the bushes which bordered the tracks to let the engine pass and

then stepped up and, like a handshake, shoved his open hand-- his writing hand, his touching hand, the hand that held Erica's hair as he cut her long, proud fingernails--between two freightcars. The hand smacked against the rung of a ladder and the force threw his almost tall, almost thin body back a few steps. He pushed some of the hair out of his eyes.

He decided to position himself better and to aim a little lower.

This time he distinctly felt his second and third fingers smash into the car; the sting was like catching a baseball in early spring. He was fascinated. Again and again he jabbed his hand into the space between the freightcars. Beneath, the rails gleamed dully like pure steel and he thought he could see drops of his blood on them. The cars winked light at him as his hand slammed against the metal and he thought the space was a camera recording his work. He thought he saw the tip of a bone sticking from his hand and, as he stepped back to examine it, he saw Sandy vomiting into the road and onto her hands which rested on her knees. He smiled to himself then lost his balance and was bumped by a car. It spun him around and he rolled into the bushes. A branch jabbed into his ear.

He lay still, satisfied. He felt a pain so intense that it seemed as if his rib cage and groin had met, castrating him.

He noticed, then, the pain in his left shoulder, the shoulder that had caught the edge of the car.

"I couldn't even do that," he thought. "I couldn't even keep it on one side."

And before he passed out he wondered why Sandy had vomited. "From horror," he thought, "or from seeing me clearer?"

II

Walt had met Erica at a friend's party which was two doors away from his apartment. He had walked in, said hello to a few people and went to a table where pretzels, potato chips, and dip were displayed. A record player crooned Stan Getz. A necklace of the zip tops from beer cans hung from the wall around a poster of Allen Ginsberg wearing an Uncle Sam hat. Walt reached for a pretzel and chewed on it. There were only a few people there and Walt did not know any of them so he began to count the links of the zip-top chain. Bored with that, he examined the books in the brick-supported bookcase. A series of loud hellos sounded as more people, some of whom attended Walt's classes with him at Columbia, filled up the two rooms. Some hid bottles in the stove and the cabinets above it, others held six-packs of beer by the empty white plastic loop, five cans dangling like ammunition as their free hand choked an open can. A couple danced

once and when no one joined them they stopped.

He lit a cigarette with the tip of one he had just finished and dropped the short butt into one of the empty beer cans which, by now, were beginning to take up all the table space in the apartment. A brown bag, next to the refrigerator, overflowed with empty cans.

A dark-haired girl came toward him in clothes whose labels would read "sportswear," clothes which were a little incongruous with the corduroy and leather jackets that the majority of the people at the party were wearing. Their eyes met and held each other. He could not distinguish their color and as she walked closer he moved toward her, grasped her elbow and led her out of the party to his apartment.

They entered and sat down on his mattress. He did not have the bedstead and box spring that she later bought for him. Wooden matches were scattered over the floor and some bad copy of an uncompleted story lay on the edge of the bed.

"I'm Erica," she said. "You're Walt, aren't you?"

He answered "Yes," and she began to unbutton his shirt. Without too much force he slapped her hand and rebuttoned his shirt. Then he took all of her clothes off.

She made love, Walt thought later, staring at her pale pink lipstick stains on the loosely-drawn sheet, as if she had used a pornographic book for her guide.

With her nails she had scraped his back and buttocks, took a breast in both hands and fed it to him and chanted clearly how much she desired him and how much she enjoyed their joining.

Throughout their affair they never decided or said they loved each other, only that they loved whatever they did together. When they married, that January, Erica's father stood in a pew and Walt's father stood beside him as best man. Walt had wanted his friend Patrick as his best man but he needed the two hundred dollars his parents were willing to give him more. He thought of that money frequently in the early days of his marriage, remembering another time that his father had given him money--twenty-five cents when his father wished to destroy the snowman Walt had built on the front lawn.

Their honeymoon was brief because both had classes they could not cut. They spent a weekend in a cabin that Erica's parents owned on the Jersey coast, hurriedly loving as if they never would again. After Erica had fallen asleep, Walt spent long hours walking around the quiet streets guessing who had lived in the boarded-up boarding houses and who had cried, who had rejoiced, what families had grown closer and tanned together during the previous summers. He walked to the ocean, also, over the hard sand that reminded him of Saltines and, taking the place of the retreated waves, raced the

incoming water until he was beyond its foam. The wind blew through his pants up his legs and he could feel the cold air drying the still warm sexual juices on his thighs.

They spent their last day efficiently making love and drinking the last of the champagne Patrick had given them. As Erica packed, Walt took a last walk remembering to buy a tube of vaginal foam at the drugstore before it closed.

Later they took a cab from Penn Station and Walt saw, for the first time, their new apartment. From one side was a view of Central Park and from the other Walt could see the New York A.C. which Erica had given him membership in as a wedding present. Erica and her parents had furnished the apartment in pastels; the walls were lime green and pale yellow, the rugs and furniture shades of pale pink. The first time Walt saw the apartment he imagined he was trapped in a closet full of cocktail dresses. In the middle of the apartment was a Home Electric Manicure Set, gift-wrapped with a note from Erica's mother and a congratulatory card.

III

- (-How'd your class go?
- Is it too late to drop?
- Don't you need Anthopology to graduate, baby?
- Yes, I need the goddam thing.

He sips his coffee and waves to a friend at a nearby table.

-Okay, Erica.

-I'm sorry. I just don't like this place. Why don't we go to Chock Full O'Nuts for our coffee? We can afford it.

-I know we can afford it. This place is just closest.

-I'm sorry. It's the lousy rain.

-Okay, baby.

She leans across the table.

-You want to make love when we get back?

-Do we always have to plan when?

-No, it's just that you don't seem to be relaxed, as if someone's watching us. I want you to be at ease.

He sips his coffee again and lights a cigarette.

-C'mon, Walt. We're on the twelfth floor. What's the matter?

-I don't know. My damm Catholic conscience, I guess.

-Your Catholic conscience?

-Look, I told you I was raised this way. The animal part of man causes sin. Right? And reason is the one resource that separates us from animals and reason controls the sin-making part. Which means screwing is a sin, for which we're supposed to feel guilt, unless you're making children who won't be

bastards.

-You still don't believe that junk, do you?

-My mind doesn't and my body doesn't . . . but my conscience does.

-But you like making love . . .

He drops his cigarette into the remaining coffee.

-I love it. I think you love it more than me, Erica. Too much, maybe.

-Too much. God, it's all there is.

-You seriously mean that?

-I seriously think that everything else people do is just a preparation for love-making.

-Oh, c'mon.

-C'mon nothing.

-If you weren't so vain . . .

-I'm vain, yes. You're right I'm vain. But you don't seem to mind when you've got your hands on my boobs.

-There's no reason to talk like that.

-What's the matter? Does it offend your Catholic conscience?

-No, just my sense of good taste.

-Oh, you're gonna start that.

Walt pushes his chair back.

-Never mind, never mind. Do you want more coffee?

-Yes, please.)

IV

When they had been married a few months, Walt spent many nights looking from their twelfth story window as Erica rearranged his bookcase, Wagner blaring from her stereo console. Often she sat reading from her new collection of books on Nazism under a sun lamp in a dark apartment. Walt felt happy but unsure, not of what was to come or of himself, but for a moment he vaguely saw Erica plotting some sort of long campaign and informing her friends on its progress.

That spring, when it rained, Walt watched as Central Park Lake opened its thousands of mouths to receive the May rains. He watched, Beethoven playing in the background, as the rain hit his window. It seemed to him as if the glass were melting. When Erica moved behind him around the apartment, her body, reflected in the glass from the sun lamp, became ephemeral--sometimes blending with the darkness outside the glass; sometimes areas of her body were shaded in the light like a figure from an Orson Welles movie.

V

As he began his half-mile walk to the tracks, fatigue and anger signalled to him in short bursts. He knew he never should have played football that afternoon for now he found it an effort to exhale. On the short

walk back from the student athletic field his body felt as if it had been deftly jabbed and he felt the aches one by one as if newly injured. Now he felt a kink in the right side of his neck and he rotated his chin to massage the pain away. His chin pushed out to the left side, where the factories were, where the bakery he and Sandy had stood outside of one night to smell the fresh bread was; then up to the sky where the curious stars pushed their light out from the darkness; to his right where houses were decayed more and more as he walked; then down across his shirt collar and out to the side again. He reached up with his right hand which still smelled of the semen he had dribbled onto himself. He was glad to have his roommate out of the house when he masturbated. "But professor," he said aloud, "the only cure for a period is pregnancy. Zank you." He felt a pain in his back which was as if someone were pressing against it with the heel of his hand. Walt squeezed his eyes closed to shut out the pain but he heard a slight crunching sound, like shoes on winter sand, and opened them, then began to revolve his chin again. Once, he remembered, he was almost caught by the janitor after football practice. But his roommate was visiting and Sandy was in her night class so there were no witnesses--not to his sin, Walt understood, but to his lapse.

"Too much regular sex," he thought. Or, at least,

it would do for a reason. When he and Sandy were in bed, or even when they were not, he was content, which, he thought, could be dangerous. Perhaps this was why he was going to the tracks; to take some of the placidness out of the affair. But he knew he wasn't sure about that either.

VI

(-Was it good for you, Sandy?

-Oh, yes.

He begins to rest on her but decides to withdraw.

-I gotta whizz.

She makes an exaggerated frown as he leaves the bed. He throws her a pack of cigarettes and she is putting the match in an ashtray as he re-enters the room.

-I hid your cigarette case.

-That's okay.

Holding the crushed pack she shows him that there are no cigarettes left.

He begins to do push-ups, and she brushes her long, brown hair.

-If you're gonna do push-ups, you'd better dust off your letter.

She points to Walt's high school football letter whose edge protrudes from neglected books in the farthest corner of the room.

-Only the backs wore their letters. The rest of us left them in the envelopes.

He stops the push-ups and inhales loudly.

-The funny thing, though, was that the only time Father Guerrin, the principal, ever spoke half-way decently to me was when he gave me the letter at an assembly. All the other times I was sent for. He never did anything though. I think he liked me.

He lightly bounces on his toes.

-He came to all the games. The cheerleaders even had a special cheer for him. "Here's Father Guerrin/We're sure to win. He even wore the same checkered cap every game. He had the flu once and didn't come until late to our game with Bethpage and we lost. Theologically he probably hated the idea of being magical but I guess he liked it as a principal.

-But he did come to the game. That guy got out of bed to come watch us play. He'd even come to the gym and do all sorts of fancy stuff on the horizontal bar. Guys were really scared when they were sent to see him. He was some tough priest.

-What do you call those?

-Jumping Jacks.

-Well, forget them and jump into bed, Jack.

-Ho, ho, ho.)

VII

He could almost feel Sandy getting restless and so maybe this was the reason . . . or another reason for coming to the tracks. "Why am I here?" he asked himself. Was he cleansing himself or changing things violently, which is the only way he knew, or simply testing himself. "This is not Grecian," he thought. "This is not knowledge. Will I do it?" he wondered. "Will I?"