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CHURCH, MICHAEL STEPHEN. A Chess Game. (1977) Directed
by: Mr. Fred D. Chappell. Pp. 65.

The problems explored in "A Chess Game" are neither new nor unique. The characters are involved in an attempt to impose order on and gain control over their destinies and as a result also face the disillusionment of the failure to do so. If the characters, events, or objects in the story take on any significance larger than themselves, it is to point out and so reduce that significance, to turn it back on itself and render it human.

Certain liberties have been taken in punctuation and grammatical constructions in the story in an effort to achieve effects that seemed otherwise difficult to produce.

A CHESS GAME

by

Michael Stephen Church

A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of the Graduate School at
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Approved by

Fred Chappell

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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.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

10

	Page
APPROVAL PAGE	ii
A CHESS GAME	1

The king, the queen, and the judge, hand-carved, ornate
figures between them. King protected the black pieces as
and the king would be to the left of his queen, and the
queen's side the preference and also carried first rank. It
was a great opportunity in all their lives at moments of
the king had never seen.

The porch was picnic-style tables with an addition to
the furniture building by some previous tenant and they
looked very snug. They were of no particular benefit to the
owners, they provided a pleasant place to lounge during
the long, slow, summer days and evenings out of the usual
business inside the shop.

King studied the board.
The king waited looking that at the end of the five minutes
they had agreed upon he had only ten moves and opponent
could not really push the king's queen to king's cast. This
move might be the same again.

King glanced into the shop. David was still inside with
the customer, a middle-aged woman whose intention showed
in the widening wrinkles at the corners of her eyes and in
the way her mouth trembled nervously between a smile and a
frown. Without any hesitation she looked

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I

Jay and Nick sat on the broad, open porch of the shop with the chessboard and its large, hand-carved, Renaissance figurines between them. Nick preferred the black pieces so that his king would be to the left of his queen, and Jay allowed him his preference and also conceded first move. It was a minor concession; in all their bored afternoons of play Nick had never won.

The porch and picnic-style tables were an addition to the ramshackle building by some previous tenant and they suited Jay though they were of no particular benefit to his business. They provided a pleasant place to lounge during the long, slow, summer days and evenings out of the humid closeness inside the shop.

Nick studied the board.

Jay waited knowing that at the end of the five minutes they had agreed upon as time limit for moves his opponent would hesitantly push his king's pawn to king four. Nick always used the same opening move.

Jay glanced into the shop. Donna was still inside with the customer, a middle-aged woman whose contentment showed in the unhidden wrinkles at the corners of her eyes and in the way her mouth tensed nervously between a smile and a frown without ever committing itself to either. She looked

as if she were expecting to be told something to which she must unquestioningly listen and respond though not necessarily comprehend. From Ohio, or Indiana, Jay mused; a rural Mid-westerner for certain, but not as far north as Michigan or Wisconsin nor as far west as Iowa.

Nick moved his king's pawn to king four.

Jay made a like move and settled back to wait for Nick to decide to move his king's bishop to bishop four--always the same second move.

Nick studied the board.

Jay was in no hurry; he had time to spare. He stretched his arms along the back of the bench and felt the increased area of warmth across his shoulders and up the nape of his neck as he bent his head forward. He tightened the muscles in his arms, shoulders, and back and then relaxed them. There was something about the touch of the summer sun in slightly salted air bleached white by sand-reflected light, something umber, earthy and brown against bare skin.

He raised his head and leaned back until the sky became so bright he had to close his eyes and just feel the light run down his forehead and pool on his eyelids.

The customer would be a definite sale, but no more than five dollars, Jay estimated. Single ornament on a wire necklace--shark's tooth probably; shark's tooth necklaces had been selling well, a current fad.

Nick moved his king's bishop to bishop four.

Jay moved his king's knight to bishop three.

"Good move. I like to use my horses a lot too." A soldier, not long out of basic training judging from the close crop of his hair, had stopped and was leaning against the porch rail.

Nick gave the boy a disdainful look then returned to his study of the board.

Jay nodded to the stranger and watched as the khaki uniform and shaved head moved around the railing to the steps and came up onto the porch. "You play do you?" Jay asked. Nick would next move his queen's pawn to queen three and Jay had already decided to gambit and give up three pawns in succession in a variation of the Danish opening. Nick could not resist the opportunity to capture an opposing piece, even if it were only a pawn. It made him susceptible to sacrifices.

"I was city chess champion three years running back home before I enlisted." The soldier spoke keeping his eyes deliberately focused on the board.

Nick moved his queen's pawn to queen three.

Jay moved his queen's pawn to queen four.

"I even played Bobby Riggs one time in an exhibition game right after he beat that Russian in the world championships," the soldier said.

Jay suppressed a grin by grimacing into the sunlight.

"You should turn pro." Nick addressed the soldier with a penetrating glance, then, without allowing time for reply, resumed studying the positioning of the figurines on the board.

The young man became uneasy recognizing sarcasm in Nick's voice. He glanced about nervously, first giving his attention to the arcade situated diagonally across the parking lot from where he stood, then turning curious eyes on the bar which was opposite it on the crest of the dune. At last he allowed his gaze to fall across the sandy weed-covered lot between the bar and shop and come to rest again on the chessboard. "What goes on around here?" He changed the subject.

Nick took the pawn.

Jay moved his queen's bishop's pawn to bishop three. "Not too much I'm afraid." He offered the spectator a consoling smile.

Donna followed the customer out of the shop. "Thank you very much. And do come back again," she called after the woman, her voice charming the woods with a childish sincerity that obscured their mercantile triteness.

Donna was magic.

"Hello," she said to the soldier as she approached the three men. She was not bothered by nor even apparently aware of the stranger's bold stare.

Nick took the second pawn.

Jay moved his king's bishop to bishop four.

Donna sidled up next to Jay on the bench. "Watch him; he has snake eyes," she warned.

Nick gave her an annoyed look then focused on the chessboard.

The soldier had watched her every move. He had been caught up in the green ballet of her eyes, the auburn scent of the sun in her hair as it moved gracefully in the light breeze; he was turned to stone. He could taste the sensuous pleasure of her body as her long loose fitting dress, brushing against her as she moved, outlined her figure.

"A five dollar shark's tooth necklace," she said, reading Jay's mind.

"Well, we'll eat tonight anyway," Jay said.

Nick took the third pawn.

"She was from Indiana; about two hundred miles from Cincinnati she said."

Jay took Nick's pawn with his queen's bishop.

"Serves you right, Nick," Donna said.

"Little Miss Sunshine," Nick sneered; "nobody believes you're for real."

Donna poked out her tongue at him but he didn't see her; he was again glaring at the chessboard.

"What do you sell here?" The soldier had finally regained the faculty of speech.

"Oh, it's a form of rare native crafts. Come on I'll show you." Donna grabbed his hand and spirited him away into the shop.

Nick moved his king's knight to bishop three. "Doesn't your wife ever drop that absurd pose?"

Nick's question required no answer, so Jay said nothing as he castled.

Jay and Donna had married in January for no particular reason, their previous arrangement having worked agreeably for three years. But Jay was now twenty-eight and beginning to feel a need for security.

Donna had been a Charleston, South Carolina debutante before she had followed Jay to Seaside to live in the back of the sand-sagging beach shop. She yet possessed all of the naïve charms she had inherited from the myth of the "old South", and she made them all the more wonderful because they had never really existed except in imagination and in her. She had a unique gift for resisting disillusionment. She had brought Jay nothing but joy and he comprehended and appreciated all of her intriguing subtleties.

Nick took Jay's pawn from the center of the board with his king's knight.

Jay moved his queen to queen five.

The wind, as was its late summer custom, had begun to blow a little as the afternoon progressed, but the sun was still high enough to keep the shadows back under the eaves

of the building.

Jay wondered if he would be able to find enough work through the coming months to support the two of them. Business had been slow all summer and now the tourist season was ending and they would have to close the shop for the winter. He had even applied for full time employment with several of the local builders, but construction was off and most of the contractors were cutting back on their crews instead of hiring. He hadn't heard anything definite from Seaside Construction but that in itself was discouraging.

Nick castled.

Jay moved his king's rook's pawn to rook three.

Jay calculated that it would take Nick seven moves to realize he was beaten. He glanced into the shop. Donna had a large assortment of jewelry spread on the counter in front of the soldier, who would buy several items telling Donna that they were for his girl back home, and Donna would sell him the jewelry unashamedly, because she would never allow herself the indiscretion of not believing him.

Nick moved his knight to king's bishop three.

Jay took the knight with his bishop.

The soldier would buy the most elaborate, colorful, and gaudy pieces in the showcase. Only the second sale of the day, a Saturday, and only August; they couldn't pay the rent on the building at such a rate. Nick was contemplatively pulling his black beard at the point of his chin, and it

reminded Jay of the nickname some of the town's people had given Nicholas Satanya. Jay tried to recall if Nick had been dubbed with the name before or after he had grown the beard, remembering at last that the nickname and beard had attached themselves to the dark pinched face at approximately the same time. Nick made it very clear that he did not like the appellation so Jay and Donna refrained from using it.

Jay didn't know much about Nick, nothing at all about his past except that he had been in the army, and now he stayed around the beach showing up like inclement weather, often and unexpected. It was hard for Jay to picture Nick as a soldier with his slight, sloping frame. Jay suspected that he had been dishonorably discharged from the service for some insubordination.

Nick took Jay's bishop with his queen.

Jay moved his king's rook to king one leaving his other castle open as a sacrifice which he knew Nick would not be able to resist.

The soldier came out, followed by Donna, and was propelled across the porch, down the steps, and onto the asphalt of the parking lot by the sonorous impetus of her voice: "I hope she likes them."

The soldier dared not look back.

Donna wistfully glided over to Jay and, leaning lightly against him, brushed her fingers motherly across his blond, shoulder-length hair. "He bought twenty-five dollars worth

of jewelry for his girl friend back home." Her voice trailed away as if it pursued the distance she imagined the soldier felt.

Nick took Jay's castle with his queen.

"How come you've never bought me twenty-five dollars worth of polished rocks?" Donna's voice became animated again and she pulled Jay's hair.

"Because I've never had twenty-five dollars before." He reached back and grabbed her wrists. "But now you can have anything in the shop, on me."

"Anything?" she released him.

"Anything."

She pirouetted back into the building.

"Christ, what's got her in such a good mood?" Nick had viewed the scene with impatience.

"You, Nick; you just bring out the best in people." Jay moved his knight to knight five.

In the past he and Donna had made enough money during the summer tourist season to save a little, and during the winters he had made enough at odd jobs, carpentry and the like, so they never went hungry. But this had been a bad year and lately he had begun to think of perhaps moving the shop to a more frequented beach where there would be a better market and a longer season or maybe even a winter season. Some place where they would be able to get a fair price for their craftsmanship. Donna really was quite good at designing

the pieces and he could perfectly reproduce her intricate sketches in metal and stone.

Nick moved his king's rook's pawn to rook three.

Jay took Nick's pawn at bishop two with his knight.

They would need money if they were going to relocate. They would need more elaborate equipment, tumblers and such, and Jay wanted to work with platinum and gold and with some semi-precious gems instead of just the quartz, feldspar, and shells they found on the beach. If he could only get full time work with one of the construction crews, in a couple of years or so they would be able to save enough money to at least realistically consider moving.

Nick took Jay's knight with his rook.

The game was over; Jay had only to decide which of the several possible combinations he would use. Nick would try to escape but he couldn't.

Jay took Nick's rook with his queen. "Check," he said.

Jay would not ask Donna's parents for money, even if they would lend him enough to get started, and had it to lend, which they didn't. The finishing school Donna had attended had reduced the family's two masted sailing sloop to an inboard-outboard with a small cabin. Jay had even imagined that they had seemed relieved when he had stolen Donna away. Donna herself had been exquisitely and appropriately bored with Charleston; Jay had been adventure, and he worried that he wasn't anymore, that she might become too

used to him.

The tall adroitly hand-carved figurines which eyelessly faced each other across the mahogany inlaid chess-board were Donna's parents' wedding gift to him; they were undoubtedly costly and spoke of the practicality that had all but consumed their family fortune. The wooden faces of the chessmen surveyed the disparity between the world around them and the world which they represented and Jay wondered if he had any right to think of practicality. He glanced over his shoulder into the shop; Donna looking up saw him and smiled and waved playfully before bending intently over her work again, but even absorbed in concentration the laughter lingered in her eyes. She had never failed to make an optimist of Jay with her eyes.

Nick moved his king to rook two.

Jay moved his bishop to queen three. "Check," he said.

It had been at the finishing school that Donna had studied art and become accomplished on the piano and with the flute, and it was also at the finishing school that she had perfected her magic.

Jay had never worried much before; Donna always seemed to be able to transform mundane or trivial little things into something elaborate or mystic, but Jay had recently been troubled by a sense of foreboding.

Nick reached as if to move a chesspiece but instead he upset the board scattering the men. He pretended to try to

replace them but of course failed to put them on the proper squares. It was Nick's way of conceding the game. Nick was a sleight-of-hand artist.

Jay began to put the chessmen back into their case.

Donna noticing that the game was breaking up came to the door of the shop and told Nick that they could use some more shark's teeth if he should happen to find any.

"Might take a few days." Nick was aggravated at having lost again and made no effort to conceal his sullenness.

"Just wanted you to know," she said.

"Go ahead, damn it; I know you're dying to. Go ahead, ask who won."

"I don't have to ask. I already know." She went back into the shop.

"Well you're wrong this time," he called after her. "It was a draw." Nick's ill-humor always followed the game but never lasted long. "Don't know how anyone's supposed to concentrate with all these interruptions," Nick said to no one and lapsed into silence.

Jay settled back to watch Saturday afternoon. He glanced back into the shop once to see Donna bent over a table inside, sketching.

The bathers brought their sandy blankets, rubber floats, and sunburns across the sand dunes and slowly folded and packed themselves into their cars while more soldiers arrived and trooped, usually in small groups, from the

arcade to the bar and back again along the boardwalk that connected the two buildings on the crest of the dune.

"Wonder how many died in that wreck?" Jay noted the arrival of a '57 Olds', rust eaten and, from the noise it was making, running on only two or three cylinders.

Nick turned to look. "Don't say that too loud; that's Fuzzy Bear."

A squat muscular man in his early thirties got out of the car and looked around in an assumed posture, arrogant and defiant. His hair was curly and spread down around his chin in a beard which followed his jaw line but did not cover much of his face. On his belt he wore an axe in a leather sheath.

"I've heard the locals talk about him, but this is the first time I've actually seen him," Jay said. "He really does wear an axe. I was beginning to think that he was just a local myth."

"He doesn't come around here much," Nick said. "He must have been kicked out of all the bars around Three Corners."

"They say he's half Indian." Jay said.

Nick turned back around on the bench. "As far as I'm concerned he's any damn thing he says he is, because he's more than half crazy. He'll kill somebody one of these days sure as hell."

Fuzzy Bear walked across the parking lot up the steps and into the bar. He reappeared moments later to settle

himself in a booth on the bar's spacious covered veranda where he drank tentatively from a can of beer.

"Another game of chess?" Nick asked. The scene had become the expected repetition of comings and goings.

"No. Maybe tomorrow. I . . ."

"Hi, I'm Gidget." Jay was startled; he hadn't seen the girl come onto the porch, but suddenly there she was in a white bikini, and with her peroxide-tortured hair, the color of tarnished copper, pulled back into a loose pony tail. "My real name's Mary Francis, but all my friends call me Gidget." She pinned Jay to the seat with a sharp heavily accented nasal voice and the most suggestive brown eyes he had ever seen. She seemed to ignore Nick who didn't appear at all surprised by her sudden presence.

"Funny, you don't look like Sandra Dee to me," Nick said caustically.

"You're a real creep, Nick." Gidget loosed Jay from her gaze and he quickly regained himself.

"If you would like to see some of our jewelry my wife's inside," Jay said when she again turned to face him.

The invitation faded from her eyes. "No. Some other time maybe." She gave Nick a hard look then flounced off the porch, pony tail bouncing.

"I'll play beach blanket bingo with you, Gidget," Nick called after her.

"Go play with yourself," she called back without turning.

Jay didn't notice whether she went to the bar, the arcade, or out on the beach, but he did notice that Nick kept glancing after her.

"Local slut," Nick said at last. "Surprised you haven't seen her before, but then you don't go to many bars."

They relaxed again, but the monotony of the afternoon became oppressive.

"Let's go for a swim," Nick suggested.

Jay considered a moment then nodded, "Sure, why not. Just let me tell Donna where we're going."

II

Donna acknowledged Jay without looking up from her work when he announced that he was going to the beach. He lingered a moment in the doorway watching her, realizing as the breeze from the open windows pushed through the shade of the building and past him out into the sunlight how warm he had been on the porch.

"I'll be back in a minute," he said.

"Don't hurry; I'll be fine." She still did not look up and he felt a little guilty, but no sooner did the tinge of that guilt shade his features than she sensed it and, looking him full in the face with a mock expression of concern and barely concealing the laughter in her eyes, said, "Don't feed the fish."

"I won't," he said and left.

The wind came across the top of the dune full of the reflected heat from the broad strip of white sand and met them as they crossed the boardwalk. The semicircle of the horizon quivered and Jay who had sprung from one foot to the other crossing the asphalt now plunged his feet down into the sand seeking the cooler moistness beneath. Nick walked casually, lagging behind, complaining of Jay's pace. Jay could not decide if Nick was actually insensitive to the hot ground or just pretending to be.

The sea was dark blue in the distance, but at some point its color subtly changed until it was a deep, olive green out just beyond the sand bar where the waves walled up and toppled over splashing sand-tinted foam into the air. On the shore side the water deepened again and smaller waves reformed and broke, much diminished in size, sliding onto the strand and then back.

The water felt cold as Jay entered but he soon became acclimated to its coolness and found it refreshing, deciding that it was just in comparison to the warmer air that it had at first seemed cold.

Jay dove into the waist-deep shallows of the natural pool and felt the surge of the water flow by and around him. When he surfaced Nick was in the water too, pushing through the tidal pool out toward the sand bar. Jay dove twice more, swimming underwater, touching the little ridges of sand formed by the currents along the bottom. At last he followed Nick who had reached the bar and was now in water that was less than knee deep. He was still walking seaward.

Just as Jay reached the spot where he expected the water to become shallower, he stepped into a hole and allowed himself to fall again beneath the surface. When he regained his footing Nick had disappeared.

Jay's eyes swept a semicircle around him but there were only the advancing lines of froth and the patterns of foam the waves made on the water. Then he saw the little eddying

ripples spreading circularly out seaward from just behind the breakers. The little choppy wrinkles which crossed on themselves distorted the smooth face of the waves as they rose to fall, lipping over from the top. A rip current, an undertow, pulling outward from the safety of the knee-deep water to where the depth fell away to seven or eight feet. Nick was not a good swimmer.

He hurried toward the place where the current marred the surface, where he knew there must be a break in the sand bar. He did not see Nick.

The sea became vertical with waves taller than his head, and collapsed in curving arcs, pulling the water below out and upward in a circular motion so that when the crest pitched over and down the wave rebounded sending sand and bits of rock and shell vaulting into the air with the froth. Then its weight would cause the top of the circle to collapse inward on the tunnel-like hollow, forcing a second cascade of foam, liquid, and debris skyward.

Jay still did not see Nick and he turned sweeping the lagoon behind him on the chance that Nick had returned to the beach.

Something heavy hit him just below the knees and they buckled and he collapsed, managing to capture half a breath of air before his face was submerged. He struggled for footing but could not find the sandy bottom with his feet though he could feel it with his hands. The

pull of the water was dragging him out to sea, out into deeper and deeper water. He attempted to pull himself back up onto the sand bar with his hands and arms but the sand was too loose and came away sifting through his fingers. His lungs became tight in his chest; he could feel his heart beating against his ribs. He fought to reach the surface. He felt a sensation of rising, spinning, falling, the water exploded around him. He was jerked and flung in spasms of currents. He twisted feeling the bottom again with his hands as the force of the wave abated. He fought to reach the surface. Arching his back as much as he could and forcing his head up until the tendons in his neck stretched to pain, he pushed down on the water with a stroke of his arms. He felt air against his face. His mouth and eyes opened. The air was filled with water.

His shoulder struck bottom. Then his back was ground across the coarse sand. His legs were forced up and he was somersaulted losing all sense of direction, tumbled again and again. He tried desperately to hold the air he had managed to inhale, but it was full of the water spray. His throat was contracting to cough. He knew that he could not stop it, and when it came the coughing was uncontrolled. Air bubbled out of his mouth and nose and water seeped in so that he had to swallow to keep from sucking it into his lungs. His arms and legs moved in jerks seeking the

surface, but he was swirled in spastic, rushing currents. He felt bits of shell and rock strike his skin from every direction like tiny spikes of hail. He had to breathe. His lungs crushed against his ribs; he could see his pulse in flashes of light in his eyes; he could hear it in thunder in his ears; his head seemed to expand and contract. His throat burned with salt water. He had to breathe. He tried to spit out the water but only swallowed more. He couldn't inhale. He couldn't. But he had to. He held his breath from one insistent demanding throb to the next as his heart beat out against the increasing constriction in his chest. He could hold it no longer. He became calm. His mind seemed very lucid. He was going to drown. He would inhale the water. He could wait no longer. The water would fill his lungs. There would be that one terrible moment, maybe some pain, and then he would black out and it would be over. His whole body relaxed as he waited for the water to rush into his lungs.

His head broke the surface behind the breakers and air found its way down his throat. He swallowed and coughed. He managed to keep his head above the surface until he could take a deep breath and begin to tread water. He realized that in his disorientation he had probably been struggling against his own natural buoyancy, swimming down, and when he had relaxed he had come immediately to the surface. No one on the beach or in the water had seen him; no one would have known, and now it was over. He had not

drowned.

His body seemed incapable of motion; each movement was an exercise of will over the pain of exhaustion and cramped muscles. He was beyond the breakers and as the waves flowed under him he rose with their undulation and while on the crests he could see the beach in the distance. It was receding; he was still in the rip tide.

He overcame an instinct to try to swim toward the beach against the flow, remembering that the only way to escape the current was to swim with it out to sea until it dissipated and then swim parallel to the shore and come in around the edge.

Slowly Jay urged his body through the water, out, then parallel, then at last again toward land. He wondered what had become of Nick. He wondered if that initial blow that had toppled him had been a wave or if it might have been a body. It all seemed to have happened too long ago to remember what it had felt like.

Finally he was just behind the breakers, and he treaded water trying to allow a wave to land him on the sand bar. His foot touched, but at just the same instant a wave caught him up and he was hurled down with the crest. He tripped; his forehead scraped against the sand, but he knew that the water was shallow and he got his footing and stood. He staggered a couple of steps back toward the open sea then reoriented himself and started for the beach. He would have

to find help to locate Nick, or Nick's body; he was too tired to attempt to go through the surf again.

As he started for the beach something in the water behind him grabbed his legs and he toppled again, twisting into a sitting position as he fell. It was Nick.

"You look like you just stepped on a stingray." Nick stood, laughing; he had ridden a wave in behind Jay.

"Where have you been?" Jay felt as if he should be relieved, but instead there was a slight hint of irritation in his voice.

"Nowhere. I've been here body surfing the whole time. I saw you out there trying to swim the ocean. I wouldn't go out that far in a boat." Nick backed out in the direction of the breakers. "Come on, let's ride some waves."

"No, I'm going in." Jay rose and moved through the water heading for the beach; Nick splashed away in the opposite direction.

When Jay reached the shore he walked halfway up the dune and sat on the warm sand, allowing his arms and legs to go limp in relaxation. He was exhausted and the burning sensation on his back and shoulders reminded him of the number of times he had been thrown against and scraped by the sand.

The afternoon was ending and the beach was almost empty. Jay stared at the insistent surf. From time to time he would see Nick propelled in by a breaker, then walking back out to

wait for another.

A large Irish setter appeared on the crest of the dune a short distance down the beach and stood poised. He was the color of copper wire lacquered to reflect the afternoon sunlight which was already assuming the sunset hues.

Jay stood to leave, but he stopped at the top of the dune and turned back to watch the dog. It bounded down the hill stopping abruptly when it saw some birds.

A covey of sandpipers chased the edge of the water out onto the damp sand, reached down with their long pointed beaks, extracted some morsels of food, and were in turn chased by the returning water back to just beyond the tidal limit. The birds, with their quick stiff-legged steps that were somehow too numerous for the distance they covered, mesmerized the dog.

The setter barked once and ran after them across the remaining stretch of sand in a blur of fine bright auburn. The sandpipers, as if with a single will, climbed into the air on a flurry of wings and carved an even arc, out over the water barely above the waves, and back again to land some distance down the beach. The dog splashed after them barking, but quickly gave up the chase and came out of the water shaking dry.

The animal looked after the sandpipers but then saw three sea gulls, much nearer, standing placidly at the water's edge facing into the steady wind. Again the dog

broke into a full run barking at the gulls, which simply sprang into the air, stretched their long wings, and glided up and out to sea higher and higher, finally disappearing against the background of scattered, fragmented clouds.

The dog had stopped his pursuit short of the water and had watched, then undecidedly dashed down the beach in one direction then the other. He had stopped to look again at the sandpipers several hundred yards away when his attention was attracted by a sudden movement up the dune. The feathers of a dead sea gull, partially buried, were being stirred by the wind.

The setter made his barking dash at the lifeless bird but pulled up confusedly when it did not fly. The dog circled the corpse barking and making an occasional leap at it, stopping at last to just sit and watch until the wind stirred another feather. Then he resumed the attack, approaching with his head down, barking harshly. But still the dead bird confused the animal and he retreated once more.

Finally, cautiously sniffing, he edged slowly closer to the form in the sand and almost touched it with his nose. A gust of wind at that moment moved a feather and the dog jumped away hastily.

He made two more dashes at the dead bird then trotted away ascending the dune, pausing to give one last halfhearted backward bark before disappearing over the hill.

"Beautiful, wasn't he?" Donna had slipped up behind Jay.

"Yes," he answered taking one last look at the breakers before turning to face her.

"Oh, what happened? There's blood on your forehead." She reached up and brushed his hair back, her face deeply etched with concern.

"It's nothing. I just scraped it on the bottom." He led the way back to the shop.

III

The silence inside the shop was full of sound, the steady drone and muffled clicks of the rock polishing apparatus and beyond that the omnipresent ocean, never heard unless listened for. It was sound like a scent. Sound that one was first aware of, and then accustomed to, so that, though it still lingered in the air, it was unnoticed; though it permeated the atmosphere of the shop, it was as the air itself, just there.

Jay moved through the building to their living quarters at the rear and on into the shower. Donna was dressing in the bedroom when he emerged.

"Going somewhere?" he asked.

"You're taking me out to dinner."

"Oh, really, and just where am I taking you?"

"Somewhere nice for a change."

"Well, I have to change the grit in the tumblers first."

Jay could not refuse her and he returned to the work area wondering where she would want to go and how much it would cost. He took one of the tumbling barrels off the rotor and opened it pouring the contents through a system of sieves to separate the stones, sand, and water. After cleaning the barrel he filled the cylinder a third full of fresh water, added the stones, examining each, and then selecting a jar

of white powdery sediment from a shelf cluttered with similar jars containing sands varying in coarseness. He poured in a measured amount of the grit with a practiced eye. Satisfying himself that the barrel was sealed and would not leak he returned it to its place on the rotor bars and repeated the procedure with the second.

Jay glanced out the front window and noticed that Nick had ended his swim and was now talking to two soldiers on the porch. The long straight strands of Nick's black hair, cleft evenly down the center at the crown of his head, shadowed his face but Jay could see his dark eyes glint with some reflected light. Nick pulled at his beard and squinted a moment, then said something to the soldiers, who left.

He came into the shop breaking the monotony of the tumblers, the sound of slow, grinding, attrition.

"Going somewhere?" He asked noticing that Jay had put on a shirt.

"Dinner," Jay answered before thinking.

"Want to get stoned after?"

Jay knew that Nick was fishing for something, probably a free meal. "We still owe you for that last shark's jaw."

"Yeah. How much have I got on the book."

"I'll check." Jay and Donna paid Nick for shark's teeth, shells, or unusual stones that he found if they could be used in making jewelry. Jay would assess the value of whatever Nick brought in and note it in a ledger and when Nick

needed money he would collect. Besides knowing he could trust them, Nick sensed that they might feel obligated to him when they owed him money. Jay felt that it at least offered Nick an opportunity of earning some honest money.

"Six fifty."

"Sure, I could use it. But could you give me five ones and the rest in change--quarters--dimes--nickles--pennies--some of each."

Nick was preparing for a feat of legerdemain and Jay wanted no part of it. "I can't spare the change."

"Well, that's ok; I'll get change at the arcade. Hey, where are you guys going to eat? Around here?"

"I don't know. Do you want to come?" Jay gave him the money.

"No, I got something else to do."

So a meal wasn't it, but Jay knew Nick wanted something.

"If you're going to eat somewhere around here I was wondering if I could borrow the car?"

"It's about out of gas, Nick."

"I'm not going far. There's a guy down the beach a couple of miles that I need to see about something. It'll only take a minute."

Jay was reluctant. "We might need the car."

"Well, maybe you could give me a ride down there right quick. It wouldn't take but a second, and I need to get back so I can meet these other guys here."

Jay unwillingly relinquished the keys to the dune buggy to Nick. He could see that he would either have to lend him the car or drive him and he was decidedly against the latter.

Donna came out of the back room glowing deep green below auburn fire as the sun coming in a back window escaped from the room and transfigured her. She was ethereal and barefoot; she was magic.

"I'll catch you later." Nick closed his fist around the car keys. He knew that legerdemain was helpless against such magic.

"Where are you going?" Donna asked, but Nick rattled the door closed on his way out to protect himself from her voice.

"He had to borrow the car," Jay answered. "We can walk to Seafood Harbour."

"I had something more elegant in mind. Some place where hamburgers cost at least a dollar."

"Barefoot?"

"Well, seventy-five cents, anyway."

"You'll just have to settle for a place with atmosphere."

"You mean the smell of the fish house next door."

Jay was relaxed again; Donna wasn't angry. Letting Nick borrow the car had been the right thing to do. They closed the shop and strolled leisurely along the three blocks to the restaurant. The air had lost its breathlessness and now had a humid viscosity which though not light was neither too

heavy, but rather like an appropriate wine, delightfully intoxicating. There was only a hint of breeze left from the afternoon wind.

Through dinner Donna was moods of girlish effervescence and other assorted contrivances which bubbled out of her capricious imagination. Jay was drunk on the effect and called her a chameleon of happy colors and talked about when they would open the new shop at a beach that would blaze with lights at night and would have sidewalks as white as the unlit sand that also awaited them. He allowed himself every extravagance in his dreams feeling, that he was protected by her.

"It means a lot to you doesn't it?" she asked.

"It means we won't have to scrounge for meals in the winter, and I won't have to be a carpenter, always worried if I'll have a job until spring, and you won't have to keep house in the back of a building that should have been condemned ten years ago. We might even make enough during the summers to travel some in the off season." Jay searched her eyes for the green glitter that said she believed in him. She noticed and reassured him. He wanted to tell her that he had applied for full time employment but decided to wait until he had a more definite plan.

"But we don't have to be misers; we can borrow the money," she said.

"We don't have any collateral."

"Father will lend us as much as we need."

"I don't want to ask your parents." He couldn't tell her that her father was only a mediocre lawyer barely able to support a name ten Charleston generations old.

"Pride," she said in a scolding tone. "Well, what about your foster parents; they seem like such nice people."

"I couldn't ask them for money. They have their own children to think of."

She lowered her eyes.

"I know you're only trying to help, but there is just no place we can borrow enough money," he said, and then he added, "I'm sorry," not really sure for what he intended the apology.

But she seemed to know and she looked up quickly with that little twist of a smile of hers that drove worlds into oblivion.

"I guess we'll just have to save our money," she said. "I'll take in laundry on the side or something."

IV

When Nick parked the car in front of the shop Jay and Donna were still at the restaurant. He pulled a plastic bag from under the car seat and sank down as low as possible in the dune buggy, and with frequent glances in the various directions his deft fingers manipulated something that he kept hidden. He remained thus occupied for a few moments until with final furtive glances and sleight-of-hand he made the object of his concern disappear. Then he got out of the car and went into the arcade to ask for change.

The local grocery was a block away on the corner and after leaving the arcade he walked casually over and stood outside until he saw a line form and back up at both cash registers. It was an August Saturday evening, dinner time at a beach resort's only grocery store; the people were in a hurry. Cash register receipts occasionally missed the bags and Nick just waited and watched. "Excuse me. I just want a pack of cigarettes." He broke into line and took a pack from the display beside the register. He paid for them shaking his head when offered a small bag. "Could I have some matches?" he asked ignoring a small bin next to the cigarette rack marked "Free Matches."

The cashier tossed his receipt on the counter and handed him some of the paper matches.

"Sorry, I didn't see them," he said. He was studying the money being passed in the next aisle. The line of people behind him was growing impatient. "Just so nobody'll think I stole them," he said picking up one of the previous cash register tapes.

He stood to the side where he could watch the other register and slowly lit a cigarette; then when he had seen what he wanted he went outside and finished the smoke.

The receipt was for five sixty-eight; Nick counted out four ones and thirty-two cents from the money Jay had given him and put it in a separate pocket. Then he went back into the store and pushing a shopping cart before him he got a box of sandwich size plastic bags, and a large box of oregano. He strolled around the store matching prices on the receipt with items which he dropped into the cart: a quart of orange juice, a pound of bacon, a loaf of bread, and a quart of cheap wine. He stopped at the produce counter and took the largest bag he could find and as he continued around the store he put the items in the bag. The plastic bags were the only item which did not match a figure on the cash register tape; he was due a ninety-three cent refund. He left the cart and came up behind the second cashier with the bag in one hand and the receipt in the other.

"Miss," he said just loud enough to interrupt her concentration. "Miss, I think you overcharged me."

"What?" She looked at him blankly.

"I think you overcharged me." His voice this time carried to the line of waiting people.

"What do you mean?" The girl stopped in the middle of ringing up an order and looked from Nick to the bagboy.

"You charged me one seventy-five for these plastic bags and they're marked eighty-two cents." Nick pulled the box from the bag and held it and the tape so she could see. The people in the line were getting restless and some moved over into the other line.

The bagboy was dispatched for the manager. The cashier at the other register glanced over to see what the trouble was and looked quizzically at Nick, but with the added press of customers she was too busy to follow her thoughts.

The manager arrived and looked suspiciously at Nick. "What's your problem?"

"Well, I came in a few minutes ago and bought this stuff and when I got out and checked I found out she'd charged me ninety-three cents too much." Nick began pulling everything from his bag and checking it against the receipt. The manager looked doubtful. "I gave her a ten and she gave me this change." Nick pulled the four thirty-two from his pocket. "I did a little painting job for a lady and she paid me before I had chance to clean up so the ten had blue paint on it."

The manager opened the register; the third ten in the drawer was smeared with blue paint.

"I wouldn't say anything but your prices are so high anyway." There was a murmur of agreement from the line of increasingly impatient people.

"Give him the money," the manager said to the cashier. "How much was it? Ninety-three cents?"

"Actually it'd be ninety-seven with the extra tax," Nick said.

"Oh, hell, just make it an even dollar. We wouldn't want to cheat him the one time he actually paid for something." The manager knew that Nick stole regularly from the store but he hadn't been able to catch him; Nick was an expert at legerdemain.

The cashier handed him a dollar and Nick put his groceries back in the bag along with a can of peas from the order being rung up when he had interrupted.

"Thanks," he said on the way out. "Everybody makes mistakes."

V

Jay and Donna sat on the front porch of the shop, Jay strumming a guitar, Donna playing her flute. The air had become heavy and tasted salty and the notes of the flute wavered and floated, pulling at the guitar strings so that Jay's fingers just followed movements already made. Their music blended with the arhythmic collapse of the not-too-distant surf and made it audible by contrast.

"I'm going to put this in your refrigerator." They had watched Nick approach, remove something from the dune buggy, and come onto the porch. Jay nodded and they continued to play while Nick entered the shop. Inside, the music was no longer audible, obscured by the steady drone of the tumblers.

Jay could see Nick through the window as he made his way around the shop. Nick removed something from the bag he held before stuffing it and its other contents into the refrigerator at the back of the shop. Then he sat down on the stool at Jay's work bench and Jay could not see what he was doing. When he stood up again he was stuffing something inside his shirt.

Joining Jay and Donna on the porch Nick suddenly began playing out of key on a harmonica that appeared without provocation in his hand. As the day receded Nick's ability at sleight of hand improved, but Donna's magic was yet

stronger; her flute gilded Nick's notes and led the guitar along a new melodic line. Jay's long adroit fingers followed the strings, and the music was a perfect counterpoint in the dusk until the two soldiers came.

"Uh, you want to go inside now?" Nick asked Jay. He wanted to use the shop for his transaction.

"No. I think we'll just sit out here where it's cool." Jay had hopes that Nick would go someplace else to conduct his business. He was not sure of exactly what Nick was involved in, but he was reasonably sure that it was something illegal, and he didn't want the shop to get a reputation that would be bad for business.

"Mind if we go inside then?" Nick was persistent and knew that Jay would give in unless Donna intervened.

"No, go ahead," Jay conceded.

Jay was not exactly afraid of Nick; it was more that he was wary of him. Nick seemed to have an easy manner, a carefree attitude, but he was dishonest and made no pretenses to the contrary, at least not to those who would see through such charades anyway. There was also something about Nick that made Jay pause before coming to an open confrontation, something that made Jay tend more to placate Nick, to give in more than he might otherwise have done, something Jay could not quite name, something almost sinister. Things happened to people Nick didn't like. Most often there was no way that Nick could be implicated, but things did happen

nonetheless and Jay had Donna to consider.

"Let's go for a walk," Jay said after Nick and the two soldiers had disappeared behind the counter in the shop.

"Ok," Donna agreed putting her flute back into its case. Jay took the two instruments inside and then came back out locking the door after himself.

"Where do you want to go?" she asked.

"Let's walk down the beach to the boat basin jetty."

The tide had come in covering the sand bar and now the waves broke only once heavily against the beach.

It was a third of a mile to the jetty and they walked slowly looking for shells. The sun had grown bigger and its brightness had suffused into deeper oranges as it had neared the horizon. Now it was a thin orange wafer balanced on a distant pine forest.

They walked out onto the jetty stepping carefully from one huge rock to the next until they were close enough to where the waves splashed into spray against the stones that they could see the rainbow colors in the mist as it fell around them. Then the sun set and the water was violet and orange-black in the twilight afterglow. Night came quickly and they started home.

The little translucent ghost crabs scuttled before them, glowing phosphorescent when caught by a sudden gust of light, reflected, from the fishing pier in the distance, by the water-glossed sand.

When Jay and Donna arrived the soldiers were just coming out of the shop and they made an effort to quickly conceal a plastic bag containing some dried greenish-brown chopped vegetation, but Jay got a good look at it before the soldier stuffed it in his pocket.

Inside, behind the counter, sitting on the floor, Nick was counting some money. The bottle of wine Nick had brought from the store was beside him. He looked up, "Here have some wine." Nick handed the bottle to Jay who sat on the floor nearby.

"Nick, that was some strange looking stuff you sold those guys." Jay sipped at the wine; it was barely drinkable, not even cool.

Nick suddenly had a hand-rolled cigarette in one hand and a pack of matches in the other; he lit it and took a long toke. "They'll never know the difference." Nick's words made little puffs of smoke as he tried to speak and hold in the intoxicating inhalation. The air was already thick with the pungent aroma.

Donna giggled at Nick's smoking words.

"How much did you take them for?" Jay passed the wine back to Nick.

"So what if I made a few bucks off them," Nick said between gulps that diminished the volume of the bottle's contents a third. "If I didn't take their money some other guy would. Besides they're only leathernecks."

"So were you four years ago."

Nick frowned; he took another deep drag from the smoke and offered the bottle of wine to Donna, but she wouldn't have it.

"They make that stuff with the rotten grapes the rats won't eat," she said.

"Yeah, but I wasn't ever that stupid," Nick said putting the bottle on the floor and attaching an alligator clip to the butt to keep from burning his fingers. Jay sipped at the wine grimacing. Donna picked up her flute and began to play scales. Jay handed the bottle of wine back to Nick and picked up his guitar. He began to play and sing. Nick took the butt from the clip and then lit a second and offered it to Jay.

"No thanks." Jay interrupted his song and then picked it up again.

Nick shrugged, drank another third of the wine, took a long toke, and began to play the harmonica off key. The sight of Nick's smoking harmonica ended the song in laughter. Jay and Donna put away their instruments while Nick finished smoking.

"Let's go some place," Donna said at last when the sound of the tumblers began to become hypnotic.

"To the arcade. I'm getting hungry and I'm supposed to meet a guy there." Nick struggled to his feet with a little help from the counter.

"Suits me." Jay followed them out into the night.

The air was heavy and thick, and in the dull aureole of the lights waves of mist rolled over the dune bringing the odor of fresh seaweed and the taste of brine.

Ascending the steps to the arcade they passed Gidget coming down clinking with shell jewelry.

"I didn't think she bought anything." Jay turned to watch her. She slid into the front of a car between two soldiers; there were two others in the back.

"That soldier that came in the shop this afternoon bought those," Donna said. "I guess he must have given them to her. I'm glad he found a friend here; he seemed so lonely."

Nick chuckled.

Donna persisted. "He's lucky; some people have trouble making friends."

Nick laughed.

"Very lucky," Jay said. He had noted that that particular soldier had not been in the car.

Inside the arcade Jay bought a bag of potato chips and he and Donna ate them while they surveyed the crowd.

Nick saw the man he was supposed to meet and palming two candy bars while paying for one he went over to his acquaintance and slipped him something in a practiced gesture.

When he returned Jay and Donna had begun playing pool.

As partners they were unbeatable, challenging anyone. Donna's family had had a table in the den to their home and she had been shooting pocket billiards since she was six, but no small amount of magic was involved either. She danced around the table, the cue her wand, levitating and directing the course of the colored balls.

Nick came and stood next to Jay. "That's the guy I had to see this afternoon," he said.

Donna came around to their side of the table. She had just made a difficult combination shot.

"Well, if all else fails, you can hustle pool for a living," Jay said ignoring Nick.

"That's an idea." Donna lined up another shot.

"She hasn't got the body for a hustler." Nick said.

"You just don't have any better taste in women than you do in wines, Nick," she called over her shoulder as she went around the table to chalk her cue.

"I need a beer," Nick said. "You want one? I'll go get them."

"Sure." Jay knew that when Nick offered to go get the beer he was going to ask to borrow the money to buy them.

"You want a beer, Donna?" he asked across the table.

"No, not now."

"Could you lend me enough for a draft? I'm a little short." Nick figured that Jay would not know that he had money left, and Jay never pressed him for repayment of such

a small occasional loan as this.

Jay handed him a dollar. "If it's more than that you must have enough spare change to make up the difference."

"Thanks." Nick took the money and started out of the arcade for the bar. Jay knew he would not return with the other beer, but a dollar was cheap enough to be rid of Nick for the night.

After tiring of pool Donna and Jay went out onto the walkway which surrounded the arcade and leaned against the railing watching the ocean. The night was moonless and the sea invisible except for the phosphorous foam of the breakers, line after line of which glowed and flowed up the beach fading into the black nothingness of the dark. They were the deep rolling land swells of late August.

"Penny for your thoughts." Donna had been watching Jay's motionless features for several minutes.

"Oh, I was just wondering if I'm going to be able to get steady work this winter."

"You're becoming bourgeois."

"No, I'm just tired of being cold and hungry in the winter and never having the money to give you the things that you need and want and should have, and I'm tired of leeching off . . .," he thought the word he was searching for was "magic" but then that wasn't something you could call by name and so he searched for a substitute, "your good spirits to get us through the hard times and my depressions."

He meant the last word to carry financial as well as emotional connotations. Donna was silent.

"I've applied several places for a full time job," he said.

"What's that?"

"What's what?"

A distant moan filtered between the sound of the surf. A form barely visible down the sand dune moved.

Jay knew who it was before he turned the body over and looked at the face.

"It's that soldier who was in the shop today." Donna recognized him after she brushed some of the sand from his face. "Is he sick? Maybe we should call someone."

"He's dead drunk, Donna; can't you smell it?" Sometimes her naïveté was a definite handicap.

"Well, we've got to do something for him. We can't leave him here like this. Wait a minute." She ran back into the arcade while Jay kept the chess champion from rolling over and burying his face in the sand again. Donna returned with several wet paper towels and began to clean the sand from his face. The cold towels revived him a little and Donna decided that he should be helped to the arcade porch. Jay half drug, half coerced him up the sand dune as far as the porch where he leaned over the railing and emptied his stomach in deep wrenching heaves. Jay nudged Donna away.

"Come on, let's go. He'll be all right."

"But . . ."

"Donna, he's going to feel bad enough as it is without having to be embarrassed in front of us."

"But what if he passes out on the beach again?"

"It's a warm night; nothing will happen. Let's go home."

VI

It was a short walk along the boardwalk from the arcade to the bar and Nick had hurried over the distance, stopping at the door to glance around before entering. There was the usual assortment of soldiers, a couple of local girls who bummed beer, cigarettes, and money from the drunken soldiers, Fuzzy Bear in his reserved position at the bar, and another soldier sitting by himself at a table in a dark corner.

Nick had ordered one beer and had sat at the counter where he could see out and watch the arcade. He had seen Jay and Donna go outside and then down on the beach, and he had guessed at the identity of the person they had helped back up the dune and the type of aid he had needed.

Nick ordered his second beer when he saw Jay and Donna leave the arcade and return to the shop and when he finished it he cautiously approached Fuzzy Bear. "Hello," he said.

Fuzzy Bear turned and eyed Nick contemptuously and Nick knew instinctively that he must act quickly because Fuzzy Bear didn't like the look of him and for Fuzzy Bear that was excuse enough for a fight.

"If your name's Fuzzy Bear I'd like to buy you a beer."

Curiosity replaced animosity in Fuzzy's eyes, and Nick relaxed onto the stool beside him. Nick could see how the man had come by his name. Everything about him was thick and

stubby and muscled, his arms, legs, fingers; he had almost no neck at all. His hair was coarse and curly, lying in ringlets like dull brass wire on his head and face. His beard made his face appear round like a child's teddy bear. Nick decided that there was actually some recent Indian blood in him, though it was undoubtedly mixed with other ethnic strains.

"A draft for me and another of whatever Fuzzy's drinking," Nick told the bartender.

"Why? I know you or something?" Fuzzy was perplexed.

"No, but I heard about you."

"What'd you hear."

"I heard you was an Indian, and I heard you don't take no shit off nobody. My grandmother was Indian and the last thing she said to me before she died was, 'Spit in their face.' So I figure I owe you a beer for my grandmother." Nick watched Fuzzy consider for a moment then nod.

"What tribe did your grandmother come from?"

"Chickawah. Up around the Hudson River." It sounded Indian to Nick and he was sure Fuzzy Bear didn't know the difference.

"Your grandma was good people," Fuzzy Bear said.

As Fuzzy and Nick drank and traded tribal lies Nick began to study the one lone soldier in the corner. New York or upper Jersey, he guessed. An "army or jail" volunteer no doubt, and Nick detected a nothing-to-lose fearlessness

beneath his dark complexion; no fool, and he had seen more than a few street fights, yet all his scars were old and small.

Nick studied patiently, first the soldier, then Fuzzy Bear.

At last the soldier got up to leave.

"Hey, I think everybody should drink a beer for us Indians, on me," Nick called above the bar room noise. There was general approval. "Hey, you, slick. You, by the door, ain't you gonna drink with us." Nick made certain the Jersey boy wouldn't turn. "Hey, what's the matter. You got something against Indians; you won't drink with them?" The soldier kept walking without looking back.

"Damn if he ain't gonna have a beer with us." Fuzzy Bear was up from his stool and after him. Grabbing him by the shoulder Fuzzy spun the slight form around.

No one in the bar, including Fuzzy Bear, saw the knife the Jersey boy had slipped from his pocket when he heard Fuzzy's stool scrape the floor. Nick didn't watch; he just continued to sip his beer.

Fuzzy's t-shirt offered no protection, and the knife was expertly held between the thumb and index finger with only a half inch of its honed blade exposed so that it did not catch on bone, but cleanly opened the skin with each quick sweep of the arm that held it. One slash across the arm which had grabbed him, and on across the chest, and back

again, and down the arm closest to the axe; then one down the left cheek, and on diagonally down the chest to the abdomen; and another around the midsection near where the axe dangled from the belt. Then, while Fuzzy looked down, amazed at the flow of his own blood, the Jersey boy backed out into the night, knife still in hand, and was gone.

Something had happened but Fuzzy was not sure of what, or how. He felt funny--like when he drank too much; everything was melted. But he hadn't drank too much. He had been going to make the skinny man take a drink with them. The skinny man did not like Indians or maybe the skinny man had wanted to call him half breed. He was going to hit the little man, hard, just below the eye where the bone was, where it would hurt. He was going to hit the man until he drank a beer with them. But the skinny man had arms that were snakes, quick, and they stung him. They bit him on the chest and everytime he reached for his axe they stung him on the arm, and they even bit him on the cheek.

There were people all around him. The skinny man was not there. Some girl looked at him and screamed and went away. He wondered if somebody had done something to her, and if he should try to find out who it was so he could make them tell her they were sorry, but she wasn't too good looking and she was probably too goody-goody if she screamed like that instead of just slapping who ever it was that did whatever made her scream. There was blood and he began to

remember; he was on his back, the people were standing up looking down at him. The skinny boy had cut him. He would kill the knife-boy. He would get up.

Someone was holding him down. They were holding damp cloths against him. Slowly, slowly he could remember.

The bar tender had been the first to get to Fuzzy; he had started when he saw Fuzzy reach for his axe, and he wondered why Fuzzy had never pulled it from its case. And even more he wondered why Fuzzy had let the soldier just leave.

"Oh, my god," he said and stepped back as Fuzzy turned, tried to stop, and then collapsed to the floor.

Quickly everyone was around the figure on the floor. "Call an ambulance," one of the soldiers said. One of the girls getting her first close look screamed and ran outside to vomit. Nick had taken one last swallow of beer and then reached across the bar and found a couple of towels which he took to Fuzzy and pressed on the two wounds which were bleeding the most profusely. Fuzzy was beginning to regain consciousness and he wanted to get up and go after the man who had cut him, but Nick and two of the soldiers restrained him. The barkeeper returned and said that the rescue squad was on its way. The bleeding had slowed to an ooze from most of the wounds, more towels were brought to Nick who assumed the assertive air of authority. People pushed in for a look and sometime during the confused minutes which followed

Gidget, still wearing the white bikini and nothing else, appeared and pushed through the throng of bystanders.

"God, Fuzzy, somebody sure cut you open this time," she said kneeling down and lifting a bloody towel to see the wound beneath it in compassionate curiosity.

"I'll get him," Fuzzy said and they again had to restrain him.

"We'll get you sewed up first, then you can come back and settle up with the creep." Gidget pushed lightly against Fuzzy's chest and he yielded, lying back down. "Gee, did somebody call a doctor?" She looked around at the circle of faces and someone responded that the rescue squad was on its way.

"We'll get you to the hospital in no time," Gidget told Fuzzy.

"I ain't going to no hospital." Fuzzy sat up.

"Sure you are. The doctor'll sew you up as good as new."

"I ain't staying at no hospital," Fuzzy said.

"You won't have to. They'll just sew you up and let you go." Gidget realized that she and Fuzzy and Nick were the center of attention.

"He isn't going to be able to drive," someone outside of the inner circle said.

"I ain't leaving my car," Fuzzy said, and only Nick's hands on his shoulders kept him seated.

"I'll take care of your car," Nick said.

"Yeah, sure, we'll follow the ambulance to the hospital in your car and then wait for you and give you a ride back," Gidget said, her eyes meeting Nick's. The sound of a siren tumbled through the humid acrid air.

VII

The siren's pulse broke in over the steady drone of the tumblers and woke Jay. After leaving the arcade he and Donna had worked for awhile on some jewelry then gone to bed. He got up and went into the front of the shop. Donna was awake when he returned.

"An ambulance," he said.

"It wasn't that poor boy on the sand was it?"

"No, I don't think so; it was over at the bar. Somebody probably got hit on the head with a beer bottle."

"Nick?"

"No, I could see him standing on the porch, but he no doubt had something to do with it. It's over now anyway; go back to sleep." Jay lay back down beside her but he did not sleep. He waited until her breathing became rhythmic; then, careful not to wake her, he rose and walked out into the front of the shop again. The excitement at the bar was over and both places on the boardwalk were closed. He was restless, something was bothering him and he wasn't even sure what. He returned to the bedroom and sat in a chair and just watched Donna sleep. He decided it was a trite gesture, suitable of any soap opera; husband watches wife sleep; cut away to close-up of wife, asleep; cut away to close-up of

husband, watching; cut away to flash back, or to foreshadowing. He waited but nothing came to mind from the past or the future; there was only the monotone of the tumblers in the other room and Donna here in front of him sleeping in their bedroom in the back of a rundown shack. Donna, who was magic, who had no mean thoughts, who believed the best no matter how absurd, Donna who didn't belong here. It was silly, he thought, but she almost made anything she chose to believe true.

He chided himself for sentimentality and went back to bed beside her and slept restlessly.

Jay wondered what had disturbed him, maybe a dream. He wondered how much time had passed since he had lain down.

There was a thudding knock in the distance and the building shuddered. Then another. And another. And between them the relentless sound filled silence of the tumblers. With each thud they seemed closer. Then the loosely hung front door shook and the glass panes in it rattled until Jay was sure they would break and he waited to hear glass become bells against the floor.

Donna woke too. "What is it?"

"Probably Nick, drunk, and looking for some place to sleep it off." Jay pulled on his pants. "I'll take care of it." He reached out and found her hand in the dark and squeezed it.

The door rattled again and there was the sound of splintering wood and this time a pane of glass did splash across the floor. Jay hurried into the front of the shop but stopped startled before he reached the door. The light from a street lamp glinted sulfur off the axe as it sliced through the mists and splintered into the door. Another pane of glass sprinkled the floor. Jay realized it was Fuzzy Bear as the figure turned to get another angle and leverage for the next swing. In the light which now illumined the left side of Fuzzy's face Jay could see that half of his beard had been shaven where a fierce ragged wound, swollen grotesquely, had been stiched together. The axe flashed; the door splintered; the lock gave a metal cry, and Donna strangled on a scream behind Jay.

Jay had to get Donna out of the shop. He pushed her inside the back room. "Go out the back," he said slowly. She didn't seem to even see him. "Go out the back and go someplace where they have a telephone. Call the police." Jay tried to think of some place to send her. It had to be after three. There were no houses near. The axe against the door. What would be open this time of night? The pier. The axe against the door. The pier stayed open all night. Five blocks, but that was closest.

The axe struck metal through the door; more glass rattled on the floor, and the tumblers slowly rolled and polished the rocks in their drums.

"Go to the pier. Get them to call the police. I'll try to talk to him so he won't hear you leave. Don't come back until I come for you." The axe fell; the lock gave way and the crippled door swung open and rebounded off the wall. "Go," Jay said; he grabbed her robe and pressed it into her hands and then sprang to block the doorway into the rear of the shop and advanced slowly toward Fuzzy Bear.

"Where is he?" Fuzzy Bear held the axe up, poised.

"Where is who?"

"You know who. I'll kill him. Chickawah said he was here."

"He's not here. I don't know where he is." Nick, Jay thought, he's looking for Nick.

"Chickawah says he's here. Tell me where." Fuzzy slammed his axe down into the counter. Moving closer to Jay, into the workbench. Jay backed up. He hoped Donna had left the back door open.

"Tell me where he's at." The axe fell again and again as Fuzzy approached.

Jay glanced behind him at the back door. It was closed. Then he heard the sobbing frightened cry from the corner of the room; she hadn't left. Jay stopped in the doorway. He heard a car door slam somewhere outside. Fuzzy raised the axe. There was a flash of light. Donna screamed. The rent flesh, pinched together with slick black thread and covered in oozing yellow ointment, leapt into the light.

"Hey, man, what are you doing?" Nick had come in and flipped on the light switch by the door.

"You said he was here." Fuzzy continued to hold the axe raised.

"No. I said the wine was here. I don't know where the dude with the knife went." Nick went over to the counter where he had earlier left the wine. There was about a third of a bottle left. "Here," he offered it to Fuzzy. "Drink it and go home. You aren't going to find that guy tonight."

Fuzzy slowly lowered the axe, took the bottle and drained it. "I'm going to find him now. Nobody cuts me." He slammed the axe down one last time striking squarely down the king's bishop file of the chessboard and leaving an axe print from black's third rank to the seventh. Then he disappeared into the night.

"Jesus, look at this mess." Nick walked about the room.

Jay went back to where Donna was huddled in the corner and coaxed her out and back to bed. He closed the door to that portion of the building behind himself as he came out.

"I guess I had better clean some of this up," Jay said lamely. The tumblers continued the slow attrition of sand and water undisturbed.

"Man, I'm really sorry. I took Fuzzy's car to the hospital for him. He wasn't about to let them keep him there. I told him if he'd bring me back here he could get some

wine, but he had that dude that cut him on his mind and he's so doped up on pain killers that he don't know what he's doing. I guess I passed out in the car on the way back. Lucky I woke up when I did."

They looked at each other a moment.

"Man, you look beat. Why don't you just put a chair against the front door and I'll come over tomorrow and help you fix things."

Jay nodded and Nick left.

Donna slept fitfully and Jay could not sleep at all. Sometime around five Donna quit tossing so much and Jay rose, dressed, and quietly left the shop and went up and sat on a bench on the porch of the closed and deserted arcade. He stared vaguely into the darkness making no attempt to order his thoughts or even remember them. The sky began to lighten in the east and the horizon became visible. A bank of mauve colored clouds formed a wall against the sky at the far edge of the indigo sea. The breeze was gentle out of the northeast and cooler; there was the faint odor and taste of fish in the air, fish fresh out of the water flopping and wriggling on the sand. As it became lighter he could see the wisps of mist rising off the water which was now warmer than the air. It was fall.

The sun finally burned away the mists and everything became defined and took shadows, all of the colors changing to pastels.

The sand pipers darted out and back at the water's edge, and a school of feeding fish had attracted a number of sea gulls several hundred yards off shore. It was still early and the birds and fish were hurrying their morning activities so that they could lounge during the warmer mid-day hours.

Jay sat still and watched. There was a noise around the corner of the building and the soldier they had found on the beach the night before staggered into view. His shirt and shoes were missing and he was covered with sand. Steadying himself with one hand on the building he found his way onto the porch and approached carefully, watching where he put his feet and shielding his eyes from the light so that he didn't see Jay until he was only a few feet away. He stopped abruptly and stood there as if by remaining motionless he would not be noticed.

"Feel better this morning?" Jay asked knowing he didn't but hoping to ease the embarrassment of the confrontation.

"Yeah, some better," the soldier said. "I must have ate something that was rotten last night, and it made me sick."

"That was probably what it was," Jay said and turned to watch the feeding gulls. A porpoise broke the surface further out and then another struck the water with his tail and disappeared before the flat plop of sound reached shore.

"It's a good thing I drank all of that beer or I might of died of food poisoning. The alcohol probably killed the

germs. I usually drink about a case of beer every Saturday," the soldier said.

Jay didn't say anything.

"I guess I'd better hitch a ride on back to base though and check in at the infirmary anyway," the soldier continued. "They might still have to pump my stomach or something."

"Yes, it's best not to take any chances with botulism," Jay said without turning around.

"Yeah, botulism's what I had. I had that once before."

Jay stood, turned around, and looked at him. "Hope you feel better tomorrow."

The soldier dropped his head and eyed the boards beneath his feet. "Thanks," he said. "Guess I'd better get on the road."

Jay watched him pick his way across the parking lot and down the road; then he left the porch himself and returned to the shop.

Donna was quiet throughout the morning. Jay did what he could in the way of repairs but there wasn't too much he could do, especially on Sunday.

A little after twelve a man knocked on the ravaged front door which swung open with his knock. He stepped in hesitatingly.

"Is there something I can do for you?" Jay asked.

"You, Jay Clarke?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'm A. I. Jacobson, the shop foreman for Mr. Waters out at Seaside Construction. I hear you been looking for work."

"Yes, sir, I have been looking for a job."

"You do good work. I've seen some of it. I could use you out in the cabinet shop. We got a contract for a new motel going in down the beach."

"Thank you." Jay reached over to shake the man's hand realizing he hadn't already done so and feeling he had been impolite. The man had only his thumb and two fingers on his right hand and was missing at least the first joint of each finger on his left. A circular saw and a table planer, Jay thought.

"This is my wife, Donna." Jay swept an arm back encircling her shoulders and pulling her up beside him. She stood there silently staring at the man's hands.

"You'll have to forgive my wife," Jay said sensing Jacobson's uneasiness at being stared at. "She doesn't feel well today; we had a bad night as you can see."

"Well, the job's yours if you want it. We start at eight in the morning. Pay's three and a quarter an hour to start and you can get overtime if you want it. You can start tomorrow if you want, or Tuesday if you need a day to set things straight."

"Thank you, Mr. Jacobson, I'll be there first thing Tuesday morning."

"Fine." Jacobson looked around. "What happened?"

"Somebody broke in last night."

"Oh." Jacobson surveyed the damage as he left.

Donna wandered around the shop picking up things and putting them down without even looking at them. Then she discovered the flute. One powerful stroke had fallen through the air, cleft through the case, and hopelessly ruined the instrument. She held it delicately and Jay thought she would cry, but she didn't. She simply put it among the other things which were to be thrown away without any sign of emotion at all.

Nick showed up in the middle of the afternoon and Jay, welcoming any diversion, agreed to a game of chess. He hoped to possibly regain the rhythm of the day. Donna sat next to Jay watching the bathers going over the sand dune to the beach or the sea gulls hanging in the air waiting for the garbage that would be left.

Nick moved his king's pawn to king four.

Jay made a like move. He looked at Donna; her face was vacant. He started to say something but didn't.

Nick moved his king's bishop to bishop four.

Jay moved his king's knight's pawn to knight three. He thought he would let the game drag out and take most of the afternoon. He looked at the porch railing where the axe had cut deep bites in the wood.

Nick surreptitiously moved his queen to king's bishop three.

Jay wondered how much it would cost to get everything fixed, the railings the door, the counter top.

"Your move," Nick said.

"Oh." Jay moved his bishop to knight two.

Nick slid his queen straight down the axe scar and took Jay's king's bishop's pawn. "Check," he said.

Jay looked at the board incredulous. "A fool's mate."

Nick sat back smug and smiled. "It's a shame Fuzzy messed up the chessboard. That dude's crazy. A hundred and twenty-seven stitches, a pint of blood, and enough novacaine to be numb for a week and he's ready to murder somebody with an axe." Nick changed his position on the bench. "I hear he won't be bothering anybody else for a while though," he said. "The police caught him this morning beating the hell out of some poor leatherneck he found hitching back to base."

Jay glanced off down the road.

Nick looked around twisting uncomfortably on the seat. "I think I must have caught something from that damn Gidget last night," he said. "And it wasn't worth it. First I didn't think Fuzzy was ever going to get out of the back seat, and when he finally did he made all that damn noise with the axe. I thought the cops would show up any minute, but they never did."

Jay suddenly looked up, straight into Nick's unflinching gaze. "You were with Gidget in the back of Fuzzy's car. You were right outside all the time. You heard. You knew."

"Don't get uptight; nothing happened did it. At least nothing that you can't fix."

"Get off my porch."

"What?" Nick started laughing.

"Get off my porch." Jay's voice was restrained.

Nick stood up laughing uncontrollably and backed toward the steps Jay following him. Nick stopped on the top step and tried to say something but Jay pushed him backwards down the three steps to the ground. "And stay to hell away from here." Jay pointed a finger into the distance and Nick, still laughing, got up and wandered off in that direction.

Donna looked at Jay when he sat down again at the table. "He didn't have his fingers," she said.

Jay looked at her perplexed.

"What happened to his fingers?" She edged closer to him.

"Oh, you mean Mr. Jacobson?" Jay searched her face. Her hair was wind tangled. "I don't know; I guess he cut them off in a saw," he said. There were dark circles under her eyes. "It's an occupational hazard."

"What will you do when you can't use your hands?" she asked. There was no trace of magic in her eyes which seemed colorless.

Jay was silent for a moment. He could hear the tumblers turning inside and over the other sounds he could hear the surf.

"I don't know," he said. "I don't know."