THE PASSING

by

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APPROVAL SHEET

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FRIEDMAN, ROBERT. The Passing. (1966) Directed by: Mr. Peter Taylor. pp. 75.

This thesis consists of seven short stories entitled: Back Country, The Candy-Store Job, A Rock for Ben Louis, The Seduction, Alive in Any Sea, Charlie, and The Passing. The title is taken from the last story because some of the major themes developed in the previous stories are present in it.

The stories fall generally into two categories. A Rock for Ben Louis, The Seduction, and Charlie are basically character studies. The remainder are situational with the emphasis on plot and action. Most of them, except for The Passing, are experimental in narrative technique and do not attempt so much to tell a story as to equate the proper style and method to the idea of the character or the situation.

INTRODUCTION

Katherine Anne Porter wrote that writing can never be taught, but it can be learned. And if it is to be learned well, it must be done in the writer's own time and at his own pace. A seminar will tell you that there are many kinds of writing. It will show you stories that are alive and well-written, and say nothing; stories with good, imaginative ideas couched in descriptive cliches; stories that are entirely derivative, as smoothly written as they are unoriginal. It will show you also that every writer has his own ideas about plot, character and action. To listen to all of them would be fatal. And to listen to a Ph. D. candidate who tells you about the technical flaws in D. H. Lawrence, the 'sparsity' of Hemingway, or the tedious editorializing of Fielding would be equally deadly. Eventually, one must ask: what is 'good' writing? There must be some fundamentals to work with, some basic values which are unavoidably true. Perpahs it is the fundamentals which can be taught and the values which must be learned.

Style, to me, is a combination of idea and technique. It begins, most simply, with the need to tell a story, to make a statement. If a particular theme or idea in a story is delivered in the manner best suited to it, the story will work. Too often, too much attention is paid to the development of a technique which is supposed to be obvious to the reader, some sort of device that is supposed to make the reader

aware that a unique artist is at work. And at other times, a writer will be so intent upon making his point, that the execution of the story suffers. What must be learned first, I think, is that communication is (or should be) the reason for writing. The difficulty in communicating clearly and the satisfaction in doing it well is also part of that reason.

I wrote once, in an old notebook: "Your characters are rooted in dreams. They act idealistically, not as real people. You must make them appear as anomalies or misfits, so they will be more alive. You must disguise them and feed them to the reader in small doses, just enough to make them scratch a little without quite knowing where the itch is..." Even then, I realized that characters in stories must be seen as real people. The reader must be able to believe that such a human being could really exist. But I was too interested then in just the act of writing itself. It was a withdrawal into a kind of order I could understand and I felt it was enough to put words on paper whether anyone paid heed or not. I put off completely any questions of the usefulness or importance of their meaning. Yet, reading back over some of the early stories and sketches I had written, I found that most of them were connected, if only loosely, in theme. There was a corporate picture emerging from some of the early characters. There was a man who had isolated himself from the world and found loneliness a way of life not entirely unsatisfying, but who is thought to be strange and pitiable by 'city' boys who meet him. There was a boy

who was very much in the world and disillusioned, but did not have the courage to change it, and instead chose a warm body in the bed beside him. In these early stories, there was a theory emerging, a juxtaposition of loneliness vs. chaos, of forced isolation vs. the mindlessness gradually induced by habit and mass-communicative pacifiers. It was the tragedy that a human being couldn't be sensitive, independent, or even truthful in the world if he wished to be an accepted and functioning part of it. And there was, inside, the undercurrent of eternal, deeper probings which plague any cognizant mind and question the meaningless, chaotic motions that men perform in the name of social existence, the undercurrent that sometimes came to the surface and caused that anxiety and insecurity which arose from the not-knowing of real values and the worship of ephemeral ones.

Later stories, including those in this collection, picked up some of the old themes. But as I wrote more, I became more aware of technique. And thus some of these stories are experiments in point of view. An older writer would call it a groping for style, a sign of the influence that other writers have exerted on me and on literature. But sometimes it is difficult to see what is there for what could be there. Most writers will usually read something and think of it in terms of what they would do with the material, and it will often obscure their vision of what has been done. Most of these stories have given me some perspective on the question of idea and execution. In one of them, "A Rock for Ben Louis," I began with a conscious attempt to equate the clarity of the writing to the gradual clearing-up of

the reasoning faculties of the narrator, so that at the end of the story, he is aware and in control, "sane" enough to kill himself. In "The Candy-Store Job," I made an effort to write in a particular vernacular and sustain it throughout, a vernacular I thought apropos to the idea of it. In "Charlie," I attempted to create a naive narrator, who feels he has been made a fool of, without knowing why, though the reader does--the reader knows that Charlie, not the girl, seduced him. "The Seduction" was originally conceived as an attempt to reveal character through the language of a third-person narration. But the story, as it was being written and revised, turned into a comical treatment of a serious theme.

The process of conceiving, executing and perhaps revising a story is never a constant one. If the impetus is first to tell a story, then most of the time the questions of idea and technique will get away from one. Sometimes the story will take over and direct the course of execution. But that too is part of the satisfaction. Fortunately, nothing that can be written about the work will change what is already on the page. It is there that the writer either communicates or not, and it is there that he will stand pat, or fall.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

BACK COUNTRY

Jeremy awoke with a start. It was two hours before dawn and he knew how cold it was outside of the sleeping bag. He could see only the trees above him, but he knew without having to see that there was a mist over the lake and a half-moon almost below the mountains on the far side and that Reuben and Grandpa Isaac would be turned on their sides sleeping without a sound. In his drowsiness, his eyes watched the black and motionless leaves until they seemed to run together and blot out the blue behind them, until they moved and intermingled like people on a crowded floor, and with the sounds of the night, he thought again about the dance and how it was that which finally decided him. He didn't even remember the girl's name now, but he knew what she looked like and what she had done to him, the way she seemed to move more gracefully than anyone and smile so he felt warm inside, and how he had thought she must have been the sweetest, most innocent female he had ever known (not known, really, seen, as it turned out). He didn't remember now, either, how she had casually asked him who he was with, and he had said it was his brother Reuben, and how he had gone on talking about Reuben not because he wanted to but because he wanted to be near her and that seemed to interest her. He had even forgotten everything that had happened when he wasn't with her, because he had stood alone near the wall and watched only her, not even noticing who she was dancing with and that several times it had been Reuben. He

only thought about what he had seen when she suddenly disappeared and he had gone out to the car to get something (or really just to look for her, he didn't know which) and saw the back of Reuben's head jerk up from the seat for an instant, just enough for him to make out that blond head underneath, less than a second altogether, but enough time for him to know who it was, and not only this, but that he hated Reuben at that instant with a rage he never thought himself even capable of. He remembered, too, walking home, cursing and weeping, and had known then how it would end---this while lying motionless on that cold earth and staring up at the leaves, though no longer seeing them as leaves. He moved now, turned on his side, and managed to sleep again, but was still up and dressed before even Grandpa Isaac. He had added some wood to the banked fire and fanned it up, and put the coffee on before they awoke. While they dressed, he watched Reuben and already knew in his mind what was to follow later, though he could not see Reuben as anything but a live man, moving and talking and being Reuben as he had been his whole life, one step faster, not smarter but cleverer, not stronger but more dangerous. They squatted around the fire warming themselves and nursing the steaming coffee, eating some of the cold ham and sour bread, until Grandpa Isaac went over and got Ned (who he had driven five miles to borrow, all the way to San Wyatt's and back because he was the best hound in the country) and brought him to the fire, and they knew it was time to get started.

"Grandpa," Reuben said, "you can run this dog best, so you go on down to the head of the valley and work back. Jeremy and I will set up in that clearing just north of here and wait for you to flush one."

"If I see him before you, I'm. . ."

"You won't. You'll be upwind. Don't worry, you'll get a shot soon enough. This is much easier than followin' that dog all over the country. You're getting too old for that, and you know it too."

Grandpa Isaac just looked down into his coffee, and Jeremy watched him and knew that he was thinking that he could still out-walk and out-shoot the both of them, and was probably right too. Then Grandpa Isaac went over and took his rifle and left with Ned, not saying a word more. Reuben waited fully ten minutes, sipping his coffee, then he nodded to Jeremy and the both of them got their rifles and left camp. They walked without concern for the noise they made because they were downwind and both were aware (it was Reuben who had found the clearing) that they couldn't have had a better place (and Jeremy realized that if he was ever going to have his chance, it would be there, in that bottleneck, where they would have to be on opposite sides and the deer would have to be between them). He had thought it the instant Reuben had described it to him and the whole thing was worked out almost before it was finished. He knew, too, that it all depended on his convincing Reuben to give him the first shot.

"I'm going to give you the first shot this time, buddy," Reuben said. "That way, if you miss him, he's still got to go between us, and one of us should still get him."

"Good," Jeremy said, this taking him by surprise, so that for a moment he thought that perhaps Reuben sensed something, but dismissed it as soon as he thought it.

"You've been right sullen lately, buddy. Something bothering you?" Reuben said.

"I was just thinking about Grandpa. You shouldn't have said that to him."

"Why? It's true, ain't it? But that ain't it, is it? It's that girl. You're still remembering that little slut at the dance."

"Shut up," Jeremy said. "Just shut up."

"Alright. But just one thing, buddy. You think too much. It ain't all in your head, buddy. It's your belly that aches when there ain't any food around. You've got a body, boy, and there ain't no moral or immoral when it comes to satisfying it. You remember that and maybe you'll stop moping around and go on out and live a little."

"I don't need your advice, Reuben."

"You need something. Maybe a good woman would stoke up your coals," Reuben laughed.

"You know sometimes I wonder if you have any feeling at all," Jeremy said.

They walked on in silence until they reached the clearing. The sun was not yet over the mountains and the air was still cold. They seperated, Reuben saying: "He'll probably come through there, near those trees," and pointed to a clump near the top of the clearing. "Try to hit him as soon as he shows." Jeremy only nodded and walked into the trees, found his spot and waited, leaning against one and watching Reuben cross the clearing. Reuben picked a spot further on up but still in view of Jeremy, who now sat, rifle cradled in his lap, watching the line of the sun creep down from the cradle of the ridge. He thought no more about the actual, the incontrovertible thing he was about to effect, except as if in a dream he heard the shell click into

the cylinder and saw the line of the sight and heard the explosion to follow, all in far less time than it would take to actually do it. It was already over to him, done, and through his mind instead ran pictures of what had been: all that had led to where he was at that instant, all the places that not only he, but Rueben and he, had been, and all that he and they had done and seen and lived through. This was no dream, this was real: the decaying wooden house set on cement blocks (not only the sight of it but the smell of it too), the slope of the dusty soil down to the barn, and behind it the only green piece of land on the whole place, with a path worn diagonally across it, which Reuben and he had cut to get to school nine months out of every year for over eleven years. And the summers too, all the hours sneaking into and swimming in Old Man Greeson's pond (and how they had had to make friends with the dog first) and all the nights crawling out of their crude beds and letting themselves down the side of the house, to meet some of the other boys and venture into anything they could think of from exploring graveyards to window-peeping, only to be back before dawn and, trying to keep from laughing out loud, crawl grinning and sweaty and happy into the bed again, giggling under the blankets until dawn.

Now, sitting with his hands on the rifle, Jeremy thought about where it had all gone wrong, and it seemed to him at that moment that it had always been wrong, that he had seen it only when he was finally, personally hurt. Because Reuben had never really questioned anything, had done it only because it was something to do, and this was never enough for him. He sensed it long before he thought to call it by name.

The sound of Ned's baying rang faintly down into the clearing and Jeremy stood up and sighted first toward the slump of shrubs and trees where the deer would emerge, and then swung back to where Reuben was waiting, rifle also poised, frozen in expectation. Jeremy no longer felt anger or fear, or anything, just stood there with his finger on the trigger and the rifle pointed at Reuben, his mouth a little dry and his arms a little tired, but knew that if he lowered the rifle he would never point it again. Ned's baying grew closer. Reuben moved just a fraction and Jeremy knew that the deer had appeared. Reuben began turning slowly toward him, and Jeremy knew that the deer had caught their scent and had begun to move between them. Now Jeremy caught the blur in the corner of his eye, and in the same instant Reuben fired and Jeremy fired. He stood there without moving, the rifle still pointed, dreamlike. He was numb but out of the corner of his eye, he saw the deer crash to the ground and kick convulsively, toss his head, and finally relax with a last wheezing sound and one leg slowly pushing out until it was straightened. He walked over to the deer (it was a buck, a large one, the largest he had ever seen) and poked him, and Ned came up, tongue lolling, sniffing and running around, until Jeremy squatted down and called him. Ned came to him, whining, and thrust his nose into his hands. He stayed there for a moment patting him, and then he got up and walked to where Reuben was lying, face down, his outstretched right hand still holding the rifle. He was still standing there looking at him when Grandpa Isaac came, squatted down and turned him over.

"He's dead, Grandpa," Jeremy said. "I shot him." The old man just looked at him, and then said: "Let's get him home."

They went back and got the car, put Reuben in the back seat and covered him, strapped the deer onto the back and rode home. Grandpa Isaac was driving and he said nothing more. Jeremy seemed to be numb, and was only then realizing what he had done and more, that he felt no remorse or even sorrow. He was thinking that he hadn't taken something Reuben never had. He knew he probably had given him something that he never had while he was alive, a kind of humility in dying an ignominious death, a kind of humility that he needed and would have done without as long as he drew breath. Jeremy looked back at the relaxed, jolting body that had been in that same back seat not so long ago in a different manner, and could feel no grief, because he had grieved all those years Reuben was alive, so that now it was no shock that he should be gone.

Grandpa Isaac stopped before they got home and phoned the Sheriff. He was there almost before they carried Reuben into the house. He came in the new car that the county had just bought him. He first went in and looked at Reuben, who had been laid out in the storage room with a blanket over him, and then he sat down by the stove rubbing his big hands and began to ask Jeremy questions. Jeremy explained it as he had conceived it, but the Sheriff (who had been Sheriff for twenty-four years), though being polite and respectful, was trying to trip him up and Jeremy knew it and Grandpa Isaac knew it. He asked why they had waited until the buck was between them to shoot and Jeremy said that Reuben was supposed to shoot first and he had waited for him until he

thought it was too late and then had shot, it turned out, just after Reuben. It had all happened so fast that he hadn't really known he had hit Reuben until he had gone out and looked at the buck. The Sheriff only nodded and shifted his big frame in the chair and looked over toward the storage room.

"Seems strange," he said finally, "that all this could happen just the way it did. But I suppose it's possible."

"This here's a bit hard on Sarah, don't you think Shurf. The boy ain't been dead two hours," said Grandpa Isaac.

"I know that, Isaac. But these things should be cleared up as soon as possible."

Grandpa Isaac looked over at Sarah, who was standing by the sink with a coffeepot in her hand, and Jeremy looked over too, and it struck him then that the whole time he hadn't thought about how his own mother would take it, and seeing her now he felt for the first time that maybe he shouldn't have done it. Then Grandpa Isaac went over and spat in the bucket that had been put there for just that purpose. His toothless jaws were working and Jeremy knew that he was mad. He sat down in his chair again, and then he said very quietly: "Shurf, if you don't git out of here right now, I'm going to get my shotgun. It was his brother, Shurf. A boy don't kill his own brother. Not git out of here."

"He means it, Lucas. You better go." It was Sarah who spoke, and Jeremy realized that they were the first words she had spoken since they brought Reuben in. She had just looked at him, then held him in her arms until Grandpa Isaac took her back into the living room and sat her down.

Lucas Smalley knew that Grandpa Isaac meant it too. But he was the Sheriff, and he couldn't ask any more questions either because he had a healthy respect for Grandpa Isaac's shotgun.

"Now don't get all worked up, Isaac," he said. "I ain't saying nobody killed anybody. I'm just doing my job. Now how about some coffee?"

He drank his coffee and even managed to find out the approximate time of death before he left. As soon as he walked out, Grandpa Isaac went into his room and came back with a letter, already opened, which he handed to Jeremy without a word. Jeremy opened it.

Dear Reuben,

I was so glad that we were together, if only briefly, last Saturday. I had been trying to meet you for months now and I fear I may have been too forward in using Jeremy that way. But "all's fair" and so forth. I did feel--how can I say it?--cheap, in a way. I suppose I just couldn't think properly. I know what you must think of me. But I'm not like that, really. It's never happened that way before, believe me. I can only wish that you will come to understand that.

I am writing this because I don't remember ever giving you my address. It's: Katherine Cleary, 705 Rutledge St., Barboursville. Please let me hear from you soon, in some way. And don't think too badly of me for writing this.

Sincerely,

Katherine C.

Jeremy read it and then looked at Grandpa Isaac. "Why did you hate him so much, son?" he said.

"I didn't hate him." He carefully folded the letter back into the envelope.

"You was jealous of Reuben," the old man said, "almost before you could walk."

"Why didn't you tell the Sheriff?"

"Ain't none of his concern." Grandpa Isaac got up and took the letter and went into his room. Jeremy waited, unbelieving, as it all bore in upon him slowly, it all washed over him. He could see Reuben's feet under the blanket through the door of the storage room. He was thinking then, my God what was he, not to have seen this, not to have sensed what it would be that he would do? Not only kill a man, but kill his own brother? Was it he, really he, who had taken it upon himself to take a life, any life? It struck him now, came down with all the force of its own horror, so that a shudder went through him and he was almost trembling. He knew only that he must leave, must get away from everything he had known in his entire life, though he also knew that it would never help him to forget. He had been jealous. He knew it now, and knew that what he had done was out of vengeance and hate and that it would follow him wherever he went for as long as he lived, but he wanted it to be his own pain and not Grandpa Isaac's and not his mother's and he knew that if he stayed they could not look at him without it. He went up to his room and packed a bag. He was going to leave without a word more, but as he came into the yard, his mother was in front of him. She knows, he thought, she knows.

He walked to her and kissed her and her expression did not change except that tears came into her eyes and rolled down her cheeks and she bit her lip to keep it from trembling. Abruptly, he turned and began to walk away. "Reuben!" she said. He stopped without turning around. "You killed Reuben!" He started again and this time she called his own name, quietly, almost in a whisper, then "don't go, don't go." But he didn't stop, didn't hear now, and continued on down and road to the highway. She stood there watching him long after he was out of sight, long after he was gone. Finally she turned, still carrying the bucket, and walked slowly back to the house, went in and, with a final and weary sigh, shut the door behind her.

THE CANDY-STORE JOB

When Louie Schwartz moved into the neighborhood nobody talked to him for three weeks. His old man bought out Stakowsky's Meat Market and we all saw him scraping the name off the window that first day and painting Schwartz's Butcher Shop in runny, white letters, and then at the bottom painting the Star of David and underneath that, Kosher. Louie was helping him clean up that day too and he saw Willie and Lump and me walk past a couple of times. We saw he was about our age, with brown hair and green eyes, thin, smaller than us. Willie stared at him when we walked by and spat emphatically on the sidewalk, muttering something like 'lousy kike' under his breath. Lump spat too, but didn't say anything. The next two or three days all kinds of trucks were parked in front of the store and big, hairy men were bringing in sides of beef, large greasy boxes, and squawking chickens in wire cages. Then it was quiet for a while and we could see them working inside when we passed the window. Finally one morning Willie and I were sitting in front of Brenda Moomar's apartment house when the old man opened the door. He went away and came back with a stool, climbed on it and fixed a little bell to the screen door. He took the stool away and wedged a sign in a wooden slot in the door which said Open. Willie looked at me and I looked at him. Lump had got caught by his old lady and was home scrubbing the floors, but Willie and I decided to take a look anyway.

We walked across the street and went into the store. Louie's old

man was behind the counter wearing a fresh, white apron. He was kind of small and stocky, had black hair and a mustache and huge, muscular arms. Louie was on the other side of the store polishing the glass in one of the cases. We could hear the chickens clucking in the back.

"Something I can get for you boys?" says Louie's old man.

"Naw, we're just looking," Willie answers.

"For what are you looking, might I ask? All I got here is meat."

There was already sawdust on the floor. Willie just looked down and started to scrape it with the instep of his shoe. Louie stopped polishing and was watching him.

"Louie, get back to work!" his old man says. Louie began polishing the case again, which was full of big cuts of bloody meat in large tins, and his old man came out from behind the counter, took us by the arms and threw us out, Willie muttering under his breath "easy, Hymie, easy, easy."

The next week or so it turned really hot and we went over to Lake Michigan to cool off. It was early in the summer and there were a lot of pale bodies walking around, including ourselves. The three of us would put down a blanket and stay on it most of the afternoon. Willie liked to comment on the people going past, not quite loud enough for them to hear what he said, but just loud enough for them to hear the tone of his voice so that they would know he was talking about them and that it wasn't favorable. He would say things like, "Do you see that one? What lungs, man, what lungs!" or, "Put a neck on that one and you'd have something." One time there was a man with one leg amputated at the knee. He put down his crutches and hopped into the water. I thought sure Willie wouldn't

say anything then, but he said, "I can't quite put my finger on it, but that fella's missing something." Not even Lump laughed that time.

It was on the third day that we noticed Louie. He was swimming a little ways down the beach. We began to notice after that that he would usually be around the places we went, almost as if he were following us. Lump wanted to "have some fun with him," but Willie thought it would be better if we just ignored him. One time, though, Willie couldn't resist the temptation. We had just left a movie, and Louie was walking behind us.

"Hey, did ya see Louie's girlfriend the other day?" Willie says with that twinkle in his eye. We had seen Louie talking to a girl in front of the butcher shop.

"No." I says. "What about her, Willie?"

"Well," Willie says, "she was a real funny-looking chick. Her mouth was kinda red and quivering and gummy-like."

"What color was her hair?" Lump asks.

"Diarrhea brown," says Willie. Louie just kept walking behind, trying to whistle even, but he was hearing real good and Willie was talking as loud as he could and laughing and looking back at Louie every time he said something. "No," he continues, "it wasn't like that usual kinky kike hair."

"What about her eyes, Willie? What kind of eyes she have?" Lump says.

"They was kind of beady from what I could see. Course you couldn't tell for sure on accounta them thick glasses. But what got me was the nose."

"The nose?"

"I kept thinking now what would I call a nose like that. And then it hit me."

"What would you call it, Willie?" saya Lump, playing the straight man like he was supposed to.

"A clogged pug."

"A clogged pug!" says Lump laughing and spitting.

"Yeah. On accounta the way the mouth was always open, I figures she can't breathe outa the nose, which, the way I see it, is a pug."

We passed the butcher shop then, and Louie turned in. "Hey Willie," I says. "That wasn't no girlfriend he was with the other day."

"Oh yeah? Who was it?" says Willie.

"It was his sister."

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Willie was a good streetfighter. He was tall for his age, wiry and quick with his hands. Lump was stronger and had more of a temper but wasn't as tough. So to say that they had any fear of Louie would be ridiculous. The thought had never crossed their minds. But it was inevitable that Louie should gain our respect in the only way he could. He didn't do it alone, though. About two and a half weeks after they moved in, Louie's cousin Myron came to visit. We saw them together several times and noticed that Louie wasn't hanging around so much. Myron was a little taller, with black hair and quick brown eyes. He was heavier than Louie too, had square shoulders, so that if you watched him walking from behind, his head would turn with no movement of the trunk, like a turret swiveling on its base. We paid little attention to them,

really. Willie had cooked up a plan to 'get' some punks who hang out in a confectionary on Church Street. We had had a rock fight with them just before school ended. Nobody had gotten hurt, but Willie carried a grudge a long time. The plan was simple and relatively harmless. We would wait until they settled in a booth and then enter the confectionary, pelt them with water balloons and beat it out of there.

As it turned out, the whole thing worked like a charm. But we hadn't planned on them retaliating the way they did. The next night they were waiting for us in an alley next to Hofmann's Bakery. When we walked past, they jumped us and pulled us back into the alley. There were six of them. There was a lot of shuffling and cursing, and I was back against a wall trying to keep two of them from getting behind me, so the first I noticed we had help was when someone pulled one of them back. I saw that Lump was down with two of them on top of him, and then I saw a body hurtle by in mid-air and knock someone into a row of trashcans with a loud crashing sound. It was Louie. The others must have thought that the whole neighborhood had turned out to rescue us because they took off as soon as they could get on their feet. When we walked out of the alley, I noticed that Myron was wearing black gloves.

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Myron left a few days after that, but Louie was one of us by then. Willie still kidded him a lot at first to kind of remind him not to get too cocky and Louie took it because he was happy to be accepted at last. But one day Willie got angry at him and called him a 'Christ-killer.' Louie walked over to him and stuck his face in Willie's and asked him what he had said. Willie apologized and said he didn't know what it

meant really but he had "heard it somewhere." After that, though, there were no more names, even in jest.

About the middle of the summer Willie came up with another plan, this one concerning the owner of a candy store who had once ordered him out of his place.

"We're going to hit him," he says.

"Hit him?" I says.

"Yeah. Knock him over. Pull a heist. We're going to knock over a candy store."

"He can get the cops on us for that," Lump says. But Willie had it all figured. We would wear Halloween masks and use a finger in the coat pocket as a gun; and he would never recognize us.

"He's got a chicken kid, too. Maybe we can give him a scare," says Lump.

"We take no money," Willie says. "Only candy."

It was on one of those hot days when the smell of melting tar would be all over the streets. There were some kids getting hosed down in front of Brenda Moomar's place. We must have looked funny wearing jackets in that heat. When we got to the candy store, we waited outside until there was no one in there except the old man, Gorman, and his kid, Huey. Then we put the masks on and walked in, Willie pointing a finger through the jacket.

"Raise 'em," he says. Old man Gorman looked surprised, but didn't move his hands. Huey did, though, and backed away really frightened. "Don't pummel me! Don't pummel me!" he says. Then he backed into a display of chocolates and went sprawling all over the floor, finally

laying face down in a pile of chocolate candy with his hands clasped behind his head. Gorman went over to him and kicked him.

"Ged up, you little punk!" he says.

"I said raise 'em," Willie said again. But I knew we weren't fooling anybody this time.

"I know you punks," yells Gorman. "You ain't heard the end of this. Now ged out of here." Then he started kicking Huey again. We ran.

But Gorman wasn't kidding. We hadn't heard the end of it. He called the police and then he called our parents. They arranged a meeting at Louie's place, in the back of the butcher shop. Lieutenant Sawicky was there, Gorman and Huey, my old man and old lady, Willie's old lady, Lump's old man and old lady, and the Schwartzes. Everybody just sat around eyeing each other for a while until Sawicky stood up and took the floor.

"Okay, Willie, we'll start with you. Were you in Mr. Gorman's candy store on the afternoon of August 24th?"

"Whatdya think this is, Sawicky, a murder investigation?" says Lump's old man, who was pouchy and balding. Rumor had it that he had once been a professional wrestler.

"Everybody knows who was there," says Willie's old lady, who coughed a lot and worked in a laundry on 32nd Street ever since Willie's old man died of cancer when Willie was three years old.

"It was a joke," says Willie.

"Yeah, a joke," says Lump.

"What's the big deal?" says my old man.

"Attempted robbery is a serious charge," Sawicky answers.

"We weren't going to take anything," says Louie.

"Shut up, you punk," Gorman says.

"Don't call my Louie a punk!" says Louie's old man.

"Hold it, hold it," yells Sawicky. "I'm running this thing."

"Just what are you running?" Lump's old man asks.

"Yeah, what're trying to prove?" my old man says.

"Unless Mr. Gorman drops the charges, I'll have to arrest the boys. That's what's going on."

Everybody was quiet for a moment then. Louie flashed me that grin of his and shrugged his shoulders.

"Now look, Gorman, they was just playing a joke," Willie's old lady says.

"You call that a joke to scare the hell out of my Huey so he knocks over a whole rack of candy and could have hurt himself? You call this a joke?"

"We wasn't trying to hurt anybody," says Willie.

"That's right," says Louie.

"You shut up. It's probably all your fault," says Lump's old man.

"Yeah. You let these damn foreigners in the neighborhood and first think you know my boy is robbing candy stores," says Willie's old lady.

"We wasn't robbing nothing, Ma. And it was my idea."

Sawicky took Gorman into the next room and we all sat there without a word, waiting. Lump's old man kept wiping his head and Willie's old lady started to cough. Huey sat very still and pretended not to be nervous and wouldn't look at any of us. Then they came back.

"Mr. Gorman has agreed to drop the charges," says Sawicky, "if each of you promises to punish your boy severely."

"I'll beat him good," says Lump's old man.

"We'll take care of it," says Willie's old lady.

Then Louie's old lady, who was obese and who sat without moving through the entire thing, got up and said, "Everybody stay there. I'm going to get a cup tea and a nice piece strudel for everyone."

***

We packed and left the neighborhood at the end of that summer, because my old man got a job in the Kaiser factory in Detroit. Louie, Lump and Willie came around to say goodbye just before we left. Louie was quiet as usual, and Lump said something like "Don't take any wooden nickels." Willie got me off to the side and told me to keep in touch because he had some plans for us later on when we were on our own. The last I saw of them at that time was when they finally walked away, and Willie had his arm around Louie. I'm sure he was explaining the plans he had for us later. He was saying, "It's got to work. There's no way for us to get caught..." Then they turned the corner and we got in the car and drove away.

A ROCK FOR BEN LOUIS

There was the ticking that bothered me. I hated the ticking. I wanted to smash it and then be alone in the dark without that sound. It just kept going and going and I was alone. I couldn't understand why it never stopped. It was there and it moved sometimes but I couldn't do it. I couldn't. I just let it tick and tick and I thought about what it would sound like without the ticking, but then there would be no sound and I was alone. So maybe it would be worse in the dark if it was gone. But I hated it anyway. Millie liked it. She used to say Hey Sidney, don't forget to fix the dials so you get up in the morning and I would do it. And every morning it would explode and I would get up. Millie didn't because she said it would be no use because she couldn't go back to sleep. So I put on the water too every morning and it was quiet sitting there at the table drinking the coffee alone. Except for the ticking. And I would look at the walls to see if they sweated and thought maybe I should paint them. I tell you Sidney, she would say, I get tired living in this place and to think I could of married Howard who is rich now. Then the chair would scrape every time and Millie moaned and I would leave. I hated to rush because of the ticking, but they all did so I did, and sometimes I could smell eggs on their breath standing up with the subway moving and the doors sliding open. It raced by and you couldn't read the posters. The floor was sticky too. (Why don't they leave me alone?

Sometimes I like them when they come in rustling fresh and white and bring me something or take away something, but never take away the ticking. How are you today Sidney they say. My it's a pretty day why don't we let some nice sun in would you like that Sidney? Cynthia, Cynthia, where are you now?)

They pushed me on the outside, pushing all the time, but it was quiet in the store except when he wanted me to sell more shoes. Millie's brother-in-law owned a shoe store. So I went to work. Don't let anybody get out the door, he would say, without something in their hand. If we ain't got their size, tell them they look better in another size, understand? All the time pushing. At first I thought the evenings would be nice alone with Millie, or maybe going somewhere, but soon she would sit glued in the dark with the light flickering on her white face saying My God it's Gunsmoke on tonight. Isn't it great that we're a one-toothpaste family again? Fresher smoother softer milder faster longer easier try it eat drink smoke use compare it. (Oh Millie, you came in like a Spring thaw. You melted some of the crust from me and I could not help but be drawn by your static. But that ended, that was over very soon. The miracle was gone. I knew it, Millie. I am sorry.)

The doctor said: You could be home in two months Sidney, if you tried but I didn't say anything. He was talking about the nurse the other day. She walked by rustling and I jumped out and booted her in the behind. What a commotion trays dropping and screeching, hah, and I heard them whispering behind the door: Watch out for Sidney, he's dangerous. Watch out for Sidney.

Now look Sidney, the doctor said, we know there's nothing wrong

with you that couldn't be worked out if you cooperated. Really don't you think what you did to that nurse was a little childish now Sidney? And then the day the doctor said, Why do you cause such an uproar all the time? I had just seen Charlie leaning over his bed and yelled Hey, Charlie threw up nurse, hey nurse he's throwing up. Hah, now you got to clean it up, huh nurse. It was the same one I booted. She didn't like me much.

After a while I talked to the doctor, but he got confused all the time. Sidney, he said, sometimes I think you just don't want to go home, and I would think of Millie watching her programs and munching. What you need Sidney (whiter fluffier better sharper stronger lighter purer quicker millions of people use them) is discipline. You need to understand that you have responsibilities. Now when you were a child.... (We would set out to cross that swamp every day and never make it. Waded, floated, tried to build a bridge, but nothing worked except we would get muddy every day. It would be Cosmo and Cynthia and Ben Louis and I. We couldn't have been more than eight. I went back to the swamp a long time ago. It seemed so small then, but it still looked uncrossable. Only thing, someone had put a fence around it. Cynthia and Cosmo and my only brother, Ben Louis, and me. So long ago.)

It's the good guys in the white hats, Morris was screaming. The good guys is coming to get me! They came in and stuck him and I watched until Henry leaned over and said, I been on the stuff. Why are you in here? I just looked at him and grinned and he scratched his head.

Now let's start at the beginning Sidney, the doctor said. These

things take time and we don't want to rush you. Now I know you can talk logically Sidney, so let's talk about it. I looked at him and remembered how they all sat bored while the train went clickety-clickety and how I got out and it was still sunny. I walked down some green, shady streets and watched little kids running and playing and then went to the water. I was all alone and the air felt good so I just sat there and breathed. Then I went swimming in my underwear. Millie had said, For Christ's sake Sidney you're such a nothing. A lousy shoe salesman I got to marry who don't amount to nothing. So I finally said, Millie I don't give a damn if I'm nothing because it's better than a fat vegetable who sits all day soaking up that junk all the time. She threw something at me and that's when I did it. I hit her.

You've got to adjust, he told me. You can lead a productive life if you try. (You were so young once, Millie, so vibrant and fresh. You filled up my empty places. I loved watching you be happy, watching you live every day for me. Soon everything ran together though, Millie. All the days. And I was lonelier than before. Because I never loved you.)

I looked at the old man being wheeled around as he passed the window and the doctor was saying something. I liked when they took me for walks in the afternoon. We used to walk every day that summer, Ben Louis and I, on the beach. He liked rocks, but I would only throw them in the ocean. He told me to bring him back a rock from Korea. I did but he was dead. All the time I was thinking of the rock, with the guns and flashes and the sounds all around me, so out of place and funny even. I

had to laugh. He would have been so good. He made you forget the boredom, and still believe it was worth it. I remembered us on the beach and wished I couldn't remember.

--I wanted to change it, Doc, I said to him. I was trapped and I only wanted to change it. I wasn't me, I wasn't alive, Doc. I was what they thought about me, what they told me to do, what I had to do because I had to eat. I only wanted to change it.

--He said, You can't change things that way, Sidney. Not by breaking them.

--But they were crushing me, Doc, and it was the only way.

--No, he said, the only way is to live respectably and fulfill your obligations to society as a civilized human being.

--I'm not a man, I said, I'm a habit. How can I understand myself when they don't understand me except as a function?

--Sidney, he said, you can't change the world.

I shouldn't have hit her like that. And then they all thought I cracked up after they found me on the beach in my underwear. Madman, she yelled after I hit her, everybody always said you were crazy, with your ideas. I'm going to get you, you crazy-man. Just wait. And then I left and the sound wasn't in my ears any more, only the echo, and I listened to my steps on the concrete stairway and squinted at the sun when I opened the door. She got me, though. She got me. (Cynthia, I would watch you. I would follow your skinny, supple body. Before I knew what bodies were for and how they grew, I was in love with yours. In the night, I used to think you were all I ever wanted. I was so alone

when I came back and Ben Louis was gone. And then you ran away. Maybe because you were his if he wanted you. Maybe because you knew that I would always remind you of him.)

--Sidney, if you live in a society, you've got to obey the rules, the doctor said.

--What if the rules are wrong, Doc?

--Then they're wrong for you, but you've got to adjust to them.

--There must be other ways, I said. I've adjusted too long. Much too long. I'm more of an adjustment than a man.

Ben Louis, we used to walk in the fading afternoons and talk about what was good and how we could live a life that would be worth it so that down inside there would be no void and in our minds no regret. Every moment, we would say, should be vital because we have so few and because when it's over it should not end with doubt or fear. Not that way, Ben Louis. We're in it together, he would say, all of us. It could be so good. And when he was gone, I was so sick I forgot to listen and I drifted. But you cannot drift because this is where the current carries you.

--I don't belong, Doc. I can't go back because I don't belong.

--You belong somewhere Sidney. And you should go back and find out where.

--No, Doc, next time will be worse because I don't belong.

--Sidney, there's a place for everyone. You've just got to find yours.

--You think, I said, that all those people are in their place?

You think those people and the things they do every day that make them live without dignity--you think they're all in their place, Doc?

That time was not so long ago, Ben Louis. I remember when just to be walking and throwing rocks in the ocean was enough and running just for the feel of the wind and the sand. How many care or ever remember or know about that, Ben Louis? How many? (And Cynthia, he was just too young. He loved you as much as I. When we were together, it was the same for all of us. Why couldn't you have let me expalin before it didn't matter any more?)

--Sidney, there are certain things that a man has to do in this world, not only to remain alive, but to maintain his sanity and direction. There are duties he must perform and responsibilities he must accept simply because he is alive and must not only remain alive, but make something of himself.

--What happens, I said, when you look in the mirror every day for twenty years and still don't know who you're looking at?

--Sidney, your progress has been remarkable. If only now you could see that you must try again.

If I could think that what I was doing was worth it. If I didn't have to prove anything to anyone. It's night now and I'm alone and it's ticking away. Soon I'll be a memory, Doc, but somehow a memory has more dignity than a man. But if I don't have dignity even then, it won't matter. The nurse goes rustling by and I watch her. It will still be cool in the morning, and I'll think, Ben Louis, I'll think, I've got something for you. But I couldn't find what you wanted. Millie won't

care. Doctor, they'll say, it's Sidney. They found him. And he'll shake his head. But now I must not think about the ticking. I must wait quietly and think, and then I must get up. I will walk across the lawn that will be shining in the early sun. I will smell the grass and the air and remember it as I have remembered it before. I will listen to every footstep and when I get to the lake, I will wait a long time before I get in the boat and row out. There will be the hollow sound that the wood makes and the gentle swish of the oars as they move the water. Perhaps I will drift awhile until the sun comes over the trees. And then I will stand up in the boat, careful not to tip it over. I've got something for you Ben Louis, I must think. I've got something for you.

THE SEDUCTION

He had seen the girl almost every day for three months. She worked at the main desk in the library and he had made it a habit to be there at least two hours a day at one of the long tables in the main reading room off the central hall. At first, it didn't matter much where he sat in the room, and he took little notice of the girl at the desk. He had dismissed her as a bit too pale and far too reserved for his taste, and had passed many days without giving her a thought. Then a strange thing happened. He wasn't sure himself exactly what it was, but he began to take notice of her when he came in. It may have been the way she looked at him as he checked out a book, a look that he couldn't understand until one day he decided to call it curious. Or, it may have been the way she moved behind the desk: slowly, almost gracefully, and with an air about her that seemed to be at times sanctimonious and at times complacent. In any case, he began to sit on the side of the table that gave him a view of the desk, and he found that his reading was interrupted more and more by glances in that direction, most of them he thought cleverly concealed by rubbing his eyes or pretending to watch someone stroll across the lobby. He began to check out more books than he could ever read and he sometimes cut his two hours short so he could take the books to her and watch her stamp them. He began to think about her as he walked back to his apartment and even while he cooked his dinner. It wasn't long before he realized that she had become an obsession.

Nelson Newman was by now familiar with obsessions. He was by nature a shy individual, but had learned many years before to hide it beneath a veneer of cynicism, and being somewhat intelligent, usually managed to pull it off, so that most people thought him to be mean. The shyness had its consequences, however, because Nelson could somehow never pursue females whom he liked immediately. That would have necessitated immediate action of which he was quite incapable. Even his field of study, anthropology, required patient research and long hours of mulling over a maze of inter-related facts and figures. So Nelson found that he approached females in a habitual way. He usually began by disregarding or disliking them, which gave him more time if they were around enough. Then, quite suddenly, he would see something that he liked and gradually would begin to build on it. It may have been something as simple as the toss of a head, or the way someone sat and crossed her legs on one particular occasion, but once the seed was planted, it grew to astounding proportions. He would watch her and think about her for days, sometimes weeks, before he would seek her out. He would then find that whatever it was that caused him all those hours of thought and worry was no longer there. She would always be different when the ice was broken. And the relationship would soon degenerate into friendship.

But Nelson knew that this one was different. What he had first thought to be paleness was, he decided, merely the lack of sun. Where he had thought her to be withdrawn, he knew now it was dignity, with perhaps a little coyness mixed in. He found out from another girl

in the library that her name was Michelline and this knowledge sustained him for days while he pronounced the name over and over to himself, marvelling at its resonance and beauty. He imagined her last name to be something of French or Scandanavian extraction and it didn't even disconcert him to find out that it was Smith. He felt that there was something earthy about the name Smith, and associated it with the smell of an open hearth and a charcoal fire and the tang of melting iron. His thoughts were filled with fireplaces on snowy evenings, he as knight and gentle lover, she, the soft and wide-eyed maiden. What ecstasy he imagined in the hissing and flickering firelight.

But even such delicious obsessions could not be relished very long. Nelson was reluctant to approach her because unconsciously he knew that such relationships were better in the imagination. Consciously though, he was curious. He wondered if this could be the one. At times he was certain of it and at other times old doubts would plague him. He knew, though, that the time was near when he would have to find out.

The days crept on. The first chill of Fall had already passed and the leaves had begun to turn. There was a crispness about the air which seemed to quicken one's steps, and an unexplainable lucidity which made the same old trees and red-brick buildings seem more real. It was on just such a day that Nelson decided to act. He had sensed it in the morning when he found himself spending a little more time combing his hair. As he walked to school, the beauty of the afternoon overcame him. The cries of children playing seemed more subdued and

relaxed him, and the old ladies raking up the leaves soothed him and made him extra aware of being young. He was delighted just to be walking and that his muscles were young and strong and gave him an even, springy step. He was at complete peace with the world, and when he was in such a mood, he became philosophical. He ruminated on the splendor of being alive and was saddened momentarily by thoughts on the brevity of life. Since the girl Michelline was never far from his mind, he began to speculate on the possibilities of a relationship with her. He chastized himself for wasting so much time, so much of his precious youth because he was afraid of petty setbacks and meaningless blows to his pride. Before he had reached the school, Nelson had made his decision, and had even begun to lay the groundwork for his campaign.

He seemed to drift through his early afternoon classes, not hearing a word anyone said. The steady drone of the Professor's voice acted like a tranquilizer and set him in a state between dream and wakefulness. He was drowsy, like an animal after gorging itself, and didn't care where he was or where he was going. Afterwards, out in the air again, he turned toward the library, and as he walked, he could feel his lungs pumping life into him again. The cloudless sky and the cool clear air lifted his spirits as nothing else could, and he entered the building with just the slightest hestitation and walked to the desk with only a mild shutter of apprehension. Michelline was there, seated, her head down, writing.

"Are you busy, my child?" Nelson said in his most nonchalant voice. Michelline's head jerked up and Nelson could see her blush visibly.

"No, I'm sorry. I didn't hear you come up," she said, quite shaken.

"Then would tonight be all right, around eight?"

This took her completely by surprise and she could only nod for a moment and then she said 'Yes.' Nelson walked to his table, so proud of himself he could hardly see.

He didn't check out any books that afternoon so he wouldn't have to face her again. As he walked home, he thought about the meeting. He had learned that Michelline was indeed shy, was perhaps more afraid of him than he was of her, and that the whole plan would have to be altered. He no longer had any fear of her and his secret sense of male superiority made him feel strong and resilient, and for the first time in weeks, in control. It seemed he should know by now, he thought, just how weak women are. He remembered reading somewhere that the only thing they cared about was getting married.

The color of dying leaves seemed to brighten in the diminishing light. There were some boys playing football and Nelson remembered what it was like to play until they could no longer see the ball, but the feeling somehow seemed to be old. When he reached the apartment he could only sit in the big chair and stare out the window until near dark. He allowed his mind to ramble, trying to remember some lines of Keats, and too lazy to get the book, began filling them in himself. He deliberately kept his thoughts away from the girl. He didn't want to kill it this time. This time was different. He would take her to Eddie Mason's party and then bring her back to his place. He got into his robe and slippers and put a can of soup on. He set the table, picked

up a copy of Growing Up in New Guinea, and sat down to his dinner.

Eddie, the host, wearing a blue ascot and a three-day growth on his chin, greeted them at the door and embarrassed Nelson right away by announcing him to the whole room in a loud voice, and then asking him 'who the good-looking broad was.' Nelson managed to guide Michelline away and pushed through the crowd, picking up stray bits of conversation as he went, greeting people he knew, and finally managed to get rid of their coats and find the drinks. He asked her if she wanted Scotch, Gin, Bourbon, or Vodka, and she said, "A coke, please." He took her hand and led her into the kitchen where a cadaverous-looking boy in a turtleneck sweater was standing in front of the refrigerator saying to a very heavy blond girl, "I tell you it's killing me. I think about it day and night." Nelson said, "Excuse me," and got the coke and some ice from the sink. Two psychology students whom Nelson knew slightly were standing by the stove having an argument. The smaller one was saying, "She's a virgin," and the other one said, "No, she isn't." And the smaller one said, "She is," and was about to explain why as Nelson took Michelline into the living room. He looked immediately for a place to sit, found a corner of the rug, and was no sooner seated when his old friend Charlie Fiedler called out from across the room, "Hi Nelson, how're you hanging?" Nelson just smiled weakly and turned to Michelline who was sipping her coke, but couldn't think of anything to say, so he just watched for a moment and thought to himself She's very pretty.

He looked around the room and saw a fellow he knew only as Buck finally take the guitar that four or five people were offering him, sit back and fondle it like a woman for a moment, and then ask what anybody would like to hear. He began to play, but the noise didn't cease. It was obvious to Nelson that Buck was fairly good but lacked what he called stage presence, so hardly anyone paid any attention to him. Michelline, however, was looking at Buck and Nelson felt a touch of envy anyway. He watched Michelline's eyes move cautiously around the room, and as he watched, he described her to himself, realizing that this was the first time he had had a chance to look at her closely. She was extraordinarily pretty, he thought. He couldn't understand why he hadn't seen it from the beginning. She had very large light-blue eyes, high cheekbones and a pale, but healthy glow to her cheeks, and soft, straight-blond hair. He decided that it wasn't a striking kind of beauty, more the kind that grew out of the warmth of her nearness. He realized too that he hadn't said very much to her at all, that he wanted her very much, and also, a crazy thought came to him: that he felt he would at that moment die for her. He didn't understand it, but he knew he had never experienced that emotion before.

Someone put some music on and Nelson asked Michelline to dance. He was glad of the convention that allowed him the liberty to draw her to him and breathe in the odor of her hair, though he always felt somewhat ridiculous moving about in the middle of the room, imagining what it would look like with no music on. When it ended, Nelson backed away and caught sight of a couple embracing against the wall near the

door. Michelline was looking too. The girl looked around the room once, almost frightened, then quite passively allowed herself to be kissed, and slowly began to respond. Eddie came up and poked Nelson in the ribs, saying, "See that girl. She doesn't give a damn about old Harry. Not a damn." He took a long noisy sip of his drink, then laughed and wandered off, throwing over his shoulder a "Cheer up, Nelson. It only hurts for a minute or so." They sat down again after he had gotten fresh drinks and Nelson asked her if she were enjoying the party, but before she could answer another girl near them, who had frosted hair, turned around and said, "I'm having a marvellous time, which is to say, it's a lovely party, as it were."

A thin rain was falling as they left the party. "A rain to make everything shine," said Nelson as they walked down the steps. He took her hand easily and they walked. He still felt the same strange feeling toward her and he said, "I feel like Sir Lancelot." And she said, "You don't mean Sir Lancelot the knight. You mean the fellow who had the adulterous relationship with the Queen." They both laughed. Nelson saw that her hair was shining, and he squeezed her hand. _There are so many ways we can signify affection_, he thought, _and so few that mean anything by themselves_. He looked at Michelline and thought, _There is something unsullied in her manner, something unsoiled. Something clean_. And further on he said to himself, _She is mine_.

"You didn't say much back there," he said.

"It's not really a place to talk," she said.

They arrived at the apartment flushed from the cool air, quite

vibrant and dripping from the rain. Nelson put on some coffee. He thought that he must convince her in some way not to ruin it. He must touch her. He must not let it slide by this time because of custom or convention or cheap tricks. He wanted to be nowhere else and he didn't want it to end. He sat down next to her and said, "I want to show you something." He took her hand and put it on her throat. "Push in on your throat." And he pressed two fingers on her throat to demonstrate. She touched it herself, gently. "No, push harder," he said. "See how strong and yet how delicate." Then he put one finger beneath her eye, gently pushing in until he hooked it on the bone, and placed his thumb under her jaw, smoothing away the flesh until it lay tight against the bone. Very gently, he moved her face from side to side with the pressure of his fingers. "Now you place your hand where mine was and feel the bone of your skull. See how delicately the eye rests in the socket." She was confused, but she followed his directions, and finally sat back. But it wasn't over. He took her arm and ran his thumb over the inside of her wrist. "Feel the vessels under the skin, how elastic they are." She did this too. Then he placed his hands under her chin and traced the bone all the way up to her ears. "Don't you see," he said, "what fragile creatures we are? How close we are to death all the time? Don't you see how the skeleton lies just beneath the surface, waiting for the flesh to erode?" His eyes were very serious and his hands still lightly touching her face as he drew her to him and kissed her. He was surprised to find that she responded immediately and warmly, that she clung to him as if he were struggling to escape. And, still holding one another, Michelline began to laugh, and he began too,

until the both of them, shaking with laughter, fell off the sofa and sprawled on the floor.

They were walking to Stacy's Coffee Shop. The morning was dull and misty, pressing in around them as they scraped over the wet sidewalks. Nelson felt confused, a vague stirring of dissatisfaction playing in his mind. Michelline was swinging her arms and humming softly to herself. "Why did you stay last night?" he blurted out finally.

She hummed the last few notes of her song, then said: "Because you wanted me to."

"That wasn't the right thing to say," he answered.

"I know."

"Then why?"

"Because I like to make love," she said, pursing her lips, her eyes smiling at him.

"With anybody?"

"No-o-o. It's really because I was passionately in love with this boy who threw me over. How's that?"

"I'm trying to be serious," he said.

"What does it matter?"

"I want to know, that's all."

"Well, maybe it was a combination of all those things, and maybe it was because I just felt like it at the time."

They entered the Coffee Shop and found a booth near the rear past a row of staring eyes and nervous talk. Nelson wiped off the grimy top

with a napkin, ordered tea and donuts, while Michelline fiddled with the song index. The smell of burning grease sent a spasm of nausea through him and the raucous voice of the owner who was roaming behind the counter in a filthy apron grated on his nerves. Michelline was fidgety and began tearing her napkin into squares.

"Why did you have to ask me that?" she said quietly.

"Because I don't know anything about you," he answered.

"You didn't care about that last night," she said, turning her eyes down and away from him.

"It's not that I wish you hadn't stayed," Nelson said, "I just want to know why."

The waitress came and there was an awkward silence while she sat the tea down. It continued while they sugared the tea and carefully stirred and tasted it.

"Look," she said finally, "I spent two years being in love and a long time being lonely because it didn't work out. You're the first boy I've been out with in almost a year."

"Then you would have probably stayed with anyone."

"Last night, I probably would have."

Michelline looked for a moment as if she were going to cry, caught herself and nervously began to play with the spoon.

"What's the matter with you? You direct your whole life to getting women into bed and whenever you do, you feel guilty about it and hate her for it."

"Not everybody," Nelson said.

"No, not everybody." Michelline's eyes began to fill and Nelson

was afraid she would begin to cry. But she patted them with her napkin and blew her nose and even forced a smile.

"Do you like me?" Nelson said.

"Yes," she said. "I like you a little."

Michelline was asleep, softly, her light hair in disarray on the pillow. Nelson was standing at the window, looking at the trees dipping blackly in the rain, against the grey sky. He was remembering what she had said about guilt. He looked at her for a long time and then slowly around the room. Her pocketbook was overturned on his desk, her dress hung limply over the back of the chair, the hem almost touching the floor. He wanted to fix in his mind the memory of her coming into the bedroom the night before and sitting at his desk. She had taken her mirror and brush, her hair shining in the light, and she had pulled and stroked her hair, turning her head from side to side. Then she had stood up and undressed quickly and immodestly and gotten into bed. He had been puzzled. Why had it happened so simply? Why had he been ashamed himself when he undressed? But then his attention was drawn again to the window by the sound of a rainspout overflowing. It was getting late in the afternoon. He had better get some sleep. He got back into bed quietly. Michelline stirred slightly, and he touched her hair, gently rolled it between his fingers. She opened her eyes. Suddenly he said: "Michelline, you're the first woman I've ever had." "Mmn," she moaned, leaned over and kissed him on the forehead. "I know." Then she buried her head in the pillow and slept. Nelson kept thinking 'damn, damn' over and over, though he didn't quite know why. Finally

he turned on his side and drew his knees up. Something within him wished she hadn't said that.

ALIVE IN ANY SEA

In the late afternoon, on the sun side of the Santa Monica hills, the beach is reddish and quiet. The water is of a deeper blue and comes in higher and faster, making a slapping sound against the rocks. It's a peculiarly lonely and quiet time of day and you tell yourself while you walk that you do it not to forget, but to remember. And it seems to calm you because you walk beside a force that changes only in color and light and sound. There is a steep, rocky path leading down the hill to the beach. When you reach the bottom, you can no longer see or hear the highway which runs just over the top. There are rock formations all along this shore which come all the way down to the water, cutting the beach into segments. If you walk north about a hundred yards and cross the first group of rocks, you will see a short distance up the beach where the shoreline bends out to Nettle Point, a small wooden house which sits on a rise less than fifty yards from the water. It is protected by another rock formation which segments still another section of the beach. I never walk that far. There is a girl who sits on the porch of that house every afternoon. She sits in a wicker chair and I have seen her every day that I have been here.

I sometimes imagine, while I walk, what she is like. I can see that her hair is light, reddish sometimes, sometimes blond when the sun catches it. When she leans over slightly in her chair, the hair falls gently over the shoulders and mingles softly in her sweater. Occasionally she will

touch it, brush it back. She is the essence of softness, I think to myself. I think I can almost smell the delicate, perfumed hair near her temple and feel its texture. It would be silky and soft, and her hands which gently stroked it would be soft. She would be warm and smooth inside the sweater, and her laugh would be musical and full of the vibrant, ecstatic tension that would flow through her whole being. Her eyes could be at once loving and afraid and probing and uncertain and soft. When she moves, it will be gracefully, all the rhythm and supple smoothness inherent not just in the body but the spirit too: she would radiate surrender in every step, every fragile, rhythmically un-coordinated gesture. And beyond it, inside, a kind of strength, a lingering loyalty that could endure any pain. She is woman, I think to myself. She is a creature of my imagination. I have created her from the little I have seen, and I have fallen in love with my creation.

It is a lonely life I lead. And I can almost feel her loneliness as much as my own. But I try not to think about her until I get home from the college and start down to the beach. When I cross the highway and scramble down the beach, it begins. One day, I think she will be waiting for me at the bottom and we will talk. Tell me, I will ask her, do you like to run?

Yes, she will say, because when I run everything moves faster and when I stop it all comes rushing toward me and the light changes and sounds and colors run together and I stand there breathing while everything slows down and then it's like it usually is.

When you go shopping, do you look in store windows?

No, she will answer, because everything in them is dead and wooden and it never looks the same when you take it out and put it on a moving thing.

Do you believe in yourself? I say.

Yes, except when I look in a mirror and then I don't believe I'm the same person that I was when I last looked in the mirror. It's hard to believe in something you know is always changing and at the same time is always the same whenever you stop to look at it.

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Days that threaten rain are the best, though it almost never rains this time of year. But occasionally a combination fog and mist will roll in and cling to the coast, and with the brightness of the horizon, it reminds you of a summer thunderstorm. You may think that most days are the same out here, but nothing could be farther from the truth. Sometimes driftwood will wash in from Catalina, or the seaweed will almost turn the water green. If you sit and watch and listen, you will notice much that you would never think existed. I sit and listen too, she is saying to me, and every time I listen it seems to be the same sound. But I know it isn't. It only seems to be. I know it because I know that I spend time in other places. It's not the same. The ocean has washed in new sand, has splashed away some algae, has worn something from the rocks. It is because I cannot see it that I am bothered.

It is remarkable how real are the creatures of our imagination. There is no end to what we can dream. Is she real, I ask myself? Or have I given her life? Perhaps she has given me life. What is love, I ask her. I have never been in love, she answers. I have no idea.

Strange, I think to myself. Everyone has been in love. No, she says everyone has not. The world will rumble on anyway, I think. I stare out at all those uninspiring faces day after day and I talk with love about books, but in the end, I suppose, I'm bored. You are not bored, she says, you are restless.

One day I see that she is sitting on one of the rocks in front of the house. All I have to do is keep walking and I will be sure to meet her. But I turn around and walk back. I have no desire to meet her. She is already real to me. And then a strange thing happens. I ask her why I should feel that way. You are afraid I may not be what you imagine, she answers. Then again, she goes on, I may, and you might never know. This does not shake me too much, until she says, Are you in love with a spirit? Are you satisfied in your passion to have only an idea for a companion? As an idea, you can call me at your leisure and have me be what you want. But as a real person, I ignore you. See, look at me now. I couldn't care less who you are. I look down the beach and see her on the porch. She is looking the other way.

I have finally met her! It happened quite by accident I must confess. One afternoon I crossed the rocks and looked down the beach and she was gone! She was nowhere in sight. So I kept on walking and when I drew close to the house, she came out. I was too close. I had no choice but to keep going and make some excuse for being there. We talked for a while, exchanging brief life histories. She was going to school, and living with her Grandfather, who was semi-retired and working in a

camera shop in the afternoons. Her parents lived in nearby Redondo Beach. When I left her, I was not altogether sorry, but I had a strange feeling of resentment.

I saw her the next day from the top of the hill. She was walking toward me, just behind the rocks. She didn't seem to see me, so I thought to make the rocks before she did, and started down. But I started too fast, my feet plunging into the sand and gravel, wildly, trying to avoid the larger rocks. My legs were moving so I couldn't control them. I finally tripped near the bottom and sprawled face down in the sand. I rolled over and brushed the sand out of my eyes until the blue of the sky came back. And then something gold was over me, something that caught the sun and shone reddish gold. She was laughing and shaking the hair out of her face, flipping it back over her shoulders with a twist of her head. My eyes cleared and I started laughing too and I just lay there in the sand laughing. She sat down next to me, cross-legged like an Indian. I felt like touching her then as she sat there smiling and telling me how stupid I looked and how funny she thought I was. But I didn't. We just got up and walked down toward the rocks and started talking about something ridiculous, like the way it seemed to be getting dark earlier each day.

Well, am I all that you imagined? she asks. I don't know, I say. I doubt it. I have beautiful green eyes, and I'm not at all dull. Leave me alone, I think. It's not you any more. You're dead. Oh no. I'm not dead. I am as alive as you made me. Shut up, I say. Go away. Aren't I pretty? Come on, admit it. So what. So what if you are.

It has been several weeks now since I met her, getting well on into Fall. The relationship was progressing swiftly. It is quite a different affair from any I have ever known, but somehow not really what I wanted. I remember the first afternoon we made love. We had walked on the beach awhile until the sun was just touching the water and gleaming brilliant orange. The water seemed to be almost black and rougher than usual, and the air was turning much cooler. I looked over toward the house which seemed all of the sudden brighter and yet misted as if in a light fog, the way it is always just before sunset. She saw it too, and we started walking toward it.

"Come inside," she said, when we reached it. "There's noone home. There won't be for quite a while. I'll make you some tea, and we can have some cake and..."

"Alright."

We went in and I sat down while she was in the kitchen getting the tea. There was music on, very light and classical. She came in with tea and cake, and we sat drinking and talking quietly as the light failed until the room was in shadow. The music seemed to lift us out of the world. I looked at her and thought that it would have been like holding a newborn kitten in your hand, something so delicate, vibrant, trembling. I had never felt so alive, so aware of being somewhere, in someone's presence. I imagined many afternoons fading into night, as if seeing it from the top of the hill, looking down at two silhouettes on the beach, two shadows walking together. My mind found us in so many places. There would be so much to be done, knowing she was there. The music ended and she came to me as naturally as if we had known each other forever.

I began thinking, as the weeks wore on into the rainy season, that I was never so happy, and yet so miserable in my entire life. I was spending more and more afternoons at home, and I would think sometimes, staring out of the window, that it would be nice if she were here. But then I knew that if she were, right next to me, it would somehow make no difference. I would still be staring out of the window at the rain, still be lonely. She wouldn't help. She would be here and I would look at her and she would look at me and time would pass. You wish to be a part of something you can never be, she would say to me. Are you still there, creation? I think. Are you more real than she is? I must kill her, or you. One of you must go, creation. One of you must go.

She knows something is wrong but says nothing. I awake often to the sound of rain and watch her asleep, her hair on the pillow. I look out at the sea and it seems so much more real than this room. I am ruining this, I think. But I can't help it. There is no real human contact here. We do not seem to make these moves because of what we are, but because of what we imagine. Ah, you finally got it, she says. You finally realized that I am not what you imagine. But look at me there. There is as much alive in me as any sea you stare out at. You are right, but it is too late for her. And she must know it.

Two nights later, at the wooden house on the beach, I told her that it was over. I told her that I didn't love her. First she asked me if I just planned to walk out and never see her again, just like that, and then she became angry and wanted to know why I had lied to her and told her before that I loved her.

"I had to say it to make it not true," I said.

"You didn't mean it?"

"No. Don't you see, I had to say it to know that what I said wasn't true. It would have been only a thought before. I had to say the words and mean them when I said them so that I could know whether I really did."

"You used me. You lied to me," she said.

"Yes. Now it's a lie. But it wasn't then. It wasn't a lie when I said it. I had to say it to know that it's a lie now."

"I don't understand. But I could hate you."

"Don't hate me," I said. "I had to know, that's all. I had to know."

"So now you know?"

"Yes."

"Why did you make me want you?" she asked then. "I didn't before. I didn't really. I thought you could get along without me."

"I know," I said. "There was pride mixed up in it too. I hate that, but it's true. I wasn't sure whether I wanted you because I thought I couldn't have you, or whether it was for yourself. I had to know."

"At my expense."

"I didn't think so then. I had to convince myself that I loved so I could say it and then find out whether it was real," I said.

"What was real?"

"Love."

"Not love," she said. "Not really love."

"You didn't want me until I said it."

"Yes," she said. "I did. I just didn't think you needed me that much. I was being selfish. I wanted you but I didn't want to sacrifice anything."

"But you thought that love implied need."

"Yes. If you needed me, then it was different," she said.

"Why? That's just it. What does need have to do with anything. You were wrong in the beginning. I was wrong, but you were wrong in the beginning."

"No," she said. "I was being realistic, that's all."

"So am I," I said.

The iron smell of rain was in the air that night, walking back. I thought then for the first time that perhaps I had somehow lost the emotion by verbalizing it. And then she said to me: You lost it because it's never going to be as good as you imagine. You didn't lose it. You just never had it. I don't quite believe that though. I thought about going back, but it would just start all over and end the same way. If I don't have to see her, it won't be so bad. It will be bad for a while, but after that it won't be so bad. I kicked at the sand and looked for Catalina on the horizon, but couldn't make it out. It was pleasant the way the moonlight hit the water, like a dancing carpet to heaven. Soon this whole thing might even be a pleasant memory, I think. Because you never know what's around the next corner. You never know.

CHARLIE

I slept alone, but I had a friend, Charlie, who didn't. Sometimes I wonder whether it was really worth it. I mean, on a cold night, I may as well have been the universe there in my room. My curtains, my desk, my bureau, converged on me there in the darkness, huddled warmly in the center of my bed, my knees drawn up, a mountain of blankets over me, my hand cupped under my cheek. I always kept an edge of the blanket hooded over my ears, but never touching. Just enough to keep a pocket of warm air in the crevice. And I could still see the window and the shaft of moonlight through the curtains. Charlie called it a womb of course. I mean there I was in that silence and darkness, with sleep beginning to numb my body, as content as I could ever imagine myself to be. It was sheer physical pleasure to stretch and curl my legs, to nuzzle my head into the softness of the pillow, to pack the blankets tighter around me, and drift into sleep, letting my mind settle wherever it wished. To deny there was something of wombness about it would be delusion. But why think it something sinister if I found pleasure in being alone? Naturally Charlie didn't deny that I enjoyed it. He was much too liberal for that. What he said was that there was infinitely more pleasure with <u>another</u> body in the bed. He began on an elementary level of course, my level he called it, and pointed out that two bodies would mean double the warmth...at least that. Then, it would be more fun packing the blankets around two bodies, concentrating the universe

on two bodies, not to mention the softness of flesh as opposed to the folds of a blanket. This in itself, Charlie went on, was reason enough not to sleep alone. And there he dismissed it with a wave of his arm, a great open-mouthed inhale of a cigarette, and a nod of his head which always meant 'you'll see, wait until you've tried it.' To try to tell Charlie that I had already would have been folly, because he would give me that look of his which seemed to know instinctively that I was lying. And how could one argue with secret knowledge? And how could Charlie understand that I was saving myself for the right time, when there would be something more than mere body warmth? How could Charlie understand that I wanted to spend everything in the one place where it would mean the most?

My room was in one of those large white frame houses that seem to have endless rooms, chimneys, railed porches and shingled dormer windows. It was a high-ceilinged room that had been re-done in pine, with heavy curtains on both windows, a huge, antique desk, and one of the highest four-poster beds I had ever seen. When Charlie came in, if he was in a good mood, he would invariably touch the bed or pat it with affection, saying that it was a virtual monument to hedonism. Then he would put some music on and sprawl on the easy chair with a cigarette. It was always comfortable to have Charlie around. He seemed never to impose his presence on you, and if you weren't careful you could lie around for hours talking, beginning with any number of subjects but always ending with women. It was never his purpose to educate me, but I had a car, and Charlie didn't. Thus, in order to pay his way, he would <u>interest</u> me, but only partially, only enough to accomplish his immediate

objective. Perhaps that was what was comfortable about Charlie. I knew there was nothing ethereal about our relationship. Like the rug, it was made of a baseless fabric.

It had all begun when Mike brought Charlie over one afternoon. Mike was a large-boned, Italian-looking boy with bushy eyebrows and a huge appetite. We had been friends years before, but saw little of each other at that time. When Mike left, it was understood that he was depositing Charlie with me. I had seen them together for several months and knew that Mike was having a bad time of it with a girl. For those months, Charlie and he had seemed inseparable. We talked easily after Mike left and it was hard to see any signs of bitterness that would seem to precede such a parting of the ways, but it was there, concealed in humor.

"He's probably off for a meal," Charlie had said when Mike went out.

"You're probably right," I said.

"Sometimes I get this image of a gigantic colon walking around," he said. "The big eat."

It turned out that Charlie had been a bit too casual with Mike's mother and told her that Mike was sweating a pregnancy. I knew Mike would forget about it soon. He probably needed some time to brood, so he left Charlie in my keeping for a while.

"He said I was trying to turn his mother against him," Charlie explained. "He just sat there like a big bird and told me that I was driving them apart."

"Were you?"

"Naww. But you might as well try to argue him out of a bowl of spaghetti."

We talked until dark that day and he told me about himself: how he had had to get a series of jobs to support himself, causing him to fall behind in the University; how he had been kicked out of his apartment because this Canadian girl had stopped in for a week on her way to Toronto, and had had to get a room just large enough for a bed and a small desk; how he had just recently been fired from an assembly-line job in a can company for agitating the workers to appeal for a morning coffee break and had turned the foreman's woman against him in the process ("He almost killed me," he said. "I had to beat him over the head with my shoe and run for the highway like a scared nigger."); how he had taken a three-hundred dollar loan from the school and blown it all on one weekend in New York. It all came across as if he were a victim of circumstance. He didn't make it seem as if he felt the world was out to do him in, but that it had been fun playing with the system until it stepped on his head. There was an infectious nonchalance about him. He was the first real stoic I had ever seen. Charlie made me feel reckless. He was walking proof that you could alienate almost everyone you know and still be alive. I knew he was the kind of guy who could bum a cigarette from a state policeman who had just stopped him for speeding.

Charlie came to the room often after that day. At first, he sat and listened to music, sometimes commenting on the composer or the theme in such a way as to reveal nothing of significance, but to present an image that could never be real, but somehow clarified something. In a

Copeland symphony, for example, he said that he had seen it performed and that the whole stage was "covered with drums." Having such an exaggerated picture in your mind seemed to emphasize the power of the symphony so that the more subtle movements were lost forever. By this method, he could plant a scene in your mind and turn it until the most impossible things could seem likely to happen. And before I knew it, we would be on the road. It wasn't until after we were back that Charlie pointed out the flaw in the plan, but made it seem courageous and never useless to have made the attempt. Even after you realized what Charlie was up to, it was too late. That careless, adventurous spirit had taken hold and told you that not even the impossible could be realized if nothing at all was attempted. So we made the attempt. Or rather I did. Charlie seemed to succeed. We would drive to a girl's school in the area, walk into a dormitory without knowing anyone, and Charlie would station himself at the piano in the lounge, with one eye on the door. He couldn't play the piano, but he would pick out themes from his favorite pieces or experiment with dissonance or just create his own progressions. As soon as some female manifested some interest in what he was doing, he would ask her in that easy drawl: "Do you play?" The ice was broken and it was only a matter of time before we were out the door with two dates.

There was always an unspoken tension between us on those trips. Charlie approached it like a game, like a hunter entering the forest. I was much more pessimistic and often afraid of the situations I might get in. I mean, Charlie and his date would usually be in the back seat going

at it like a couple of zombies and there I was in the front trying to talk. So I would suggest taking a walk and Charlie's head would pop up and he would say that they would be along too "in a minute," and then we would walk for an hour or so and come back. If I saw a cigarette glow in the car, I knew it was safe to approach. I always wondered what my date was thinking, because we were strangers and I obviously wasn't going to attack her, but I could never ask. I told Charlie, though, that I was getting a lot of exercise on these trips.

When a piece of music calls that room back into my mind, I still get that sweet, liquid sensation of complete contentment. It was as if that room, like the bed, floated in a world that didn't exist--a world of aimless conjecture, a base for reckless venture, a mausoleum of silent and utter timelessness. It was a place from which I peered unconcerned, hunched warmly under a pile of covers, at the gentle movement of branches dipping outside my window, a movement as natural and timeless as I thought I was.

Charlie fitted in because he seemed to be as natural as the view from the window: the way he slouched in the chair and the easy drawl in his voice relaxed you immediately. He would even wear the same clothes for days, yet never look untidy. His talk seemed to be directionless, yet it was in all directions, sweeping the horizon, always looking for an opening. He would know his objective though, and was uncanny in springing at precisely the right moment, when you were in the frame of mood to do anything, when he had left your mind a fallow field, a lump of shapless wax, hot, waiting to be hardened.

Charlie and I were students, living the life of the mind. But the mind needed more than books. He used to say that the classroom was a place you went to find out if you were smart enough to do it on your own. The conscientious student, he would add, is in it for the money. I found it hard to argue with him, but I was still reluctant to see the world in economic terms. Charlie however never pressed the point. If he saw that such an idea grated on my spirit, he would hasten to say that some people were just out for knowledge, including, of course, himself. It all depended really on whether he wanted to dissuade me from studying or not.

Whenever Charlie came in, I was glad to see him. It was like watching the sky before a hurricane breaks. You know what's coming might do some damage, but there is still excitement and expectation. Wearing the same clothes, putting the same music on, draping one leg over the arm of the chair, Charlie smoked and talked and it was like air seeping in from the outside. I would look out the window and perhaps there would be a bird stabbing at its breast, jerking its head nervously, then gone in a blur, leaving the limb bobbing gently. And I would be out too, on the road with Charlie, because to move was also natural for Charlie and it felt right to move with him.

But in my bed at night, under the covers, it would be harder to fall asleep. Somehow the dipping of the branches outside the window would <u>mean</u> something, would make little patterns in the air and form little shapes against the sky. My thoughts would invariably settle on the events of the night, or the one previous, and some force within me would stir. I began to dream, and sometimes it was that I was slipping

or sliding somewhere and kept trying to grab things but would keep missing them. I would wake feeling washed out and tense. I knew that Charlie was planning something and I knew what it was, but it was almost as if I were planning it, and in that way, wanting and expecting it. Because Charlie would have me wanting it.

When he came in that afternoon, he walked right to the bed and hopped on it, sitting there dangling his feet. He looked around the room, then got an ashtray, too off his shoes and climbed back on the bed, curling up on his side and smoking.

"I got an idea," he said.

"Where does this idea take place?" I said.

He looked around again and smoked. He didn't make it seem as if he were doing it to build suspense, but it worked anyway.

"You have a working fireplace, right?" He knew there was no need to answer.

"Fireplaces are romantic. They create a mood that's hard to create without a lot of trouble. They give you something to watch so you don't have to talk if you don't want to."

"I didn't know you were romantic," I said.

"Naww, but you don't have to be. Women are. They dream about the way it is in cigarillo commercials. Like around a ski lodge, with everybody pretty and wearing bright sweaters and a fire crackling in the hearth. They think it's the way it should be even if it isn't."

"So you make it seem that way to them," I said.

"If you want women," he said.

"And there's no other way?"

"Naww, but it's the best," he said.

"And what happens when the illusion wears off?"

"It always does. That's life," he said. I got up and walked to the window.

"What was that idea of yours?" I said finally.

He hopped off the bed, put a record on and took his position in the chair.

"I know this nurse over at the hospital. I thought I'd bring her over her tonight," he said.

"You mean you'd like to use the place."

"Kind of. But it would be better if you were here when I come in. I could be coming to see you or something."

So that was the way it would be.

"Alright, Charlie," I said. "You buy the wood."

When he left, I was sitting in the chair and I didn't move for a long time. Everything seemed to be in flux outside. It had been a bright afternoon for February and the sky became very red in the west just before dark. My while body was tight, the blood racing through it. I had to restrain myself from getting in the car and driving away. Charlie was bringing that nurse for me. I knew it and I was afraid. I had been afraid of women for a long, long time.

2.

Charlie was standing there with a box of wood on his shoulders and a girl with fluffy red hair and freckles. "Melinda," he said, "this is Henry."

"Hello," she said. "Pleased to meet you."

"Indubitably," I said.

"What?" Melinda said.

They came in and took off their coats, Melinda sitting in the easy chair and crossing her legs. Charlie squatted by the fireplace and began to build a fire.

"Could you do me a favor?" he said easily. "Something came up with Mike and I have to go over there and I'd like you to take care of Melinda for a while."

"Do you mind, Melinda?" I said.

"Listen, I don't mind a bit," she said.

While Charlie worked over the fire, I could feel the fear creeping in again. I kept asking myself what there was to be afraid of. I didn't know what Charlie had told the girl or what she was like at all. When the fire was going, Charlie put on his coat and said: "If I don't get back until later, would you give Melinda a ride to the dorm?"

I sat down by the fire and put another log on in order to do something with my hands. I think they would have been shaking otherwise.

"What did Charlie tell you about me?" I asked. She got up and sat down beside me. She was wearing a frizzly yellow sweater and she was not very pretty at all. Her eyes were an inert, watery blue.

"That you were nice."

"Is that all?"

"And shy," she said.

"What else?"

"Listen, we didn't have much of a chance to talk," she said.

"I see." I put another piece of wood on the fire and poked it around some and stared into it while I thought of something else to say.

"Are you a nurse?" I asked her finally.

"Yes," she said.

When I looked at her she would look down at the floor or look away. She was quite passive I had thought and would have sat there for hours without moving, until the heat broiled her. I was still afraid of her but I knew now she wouldn't do anything unexpected, at least not overtly. But then she got up and began looking around the room and finally she asked me if I would like to dance. She put the music on and came to me. I felt awkward at first, but the music took hold of me. It was almost as if she were melting. She pressed very close and nuzzled her head into my shoulder. She was very soft and smelled wonderful. I began to relax too.

"What did Charlie tell you?" I asked just before I went under.

"Nothing," she said, and pulled me to her. I was kissing her then, and she began moving backwards to the bed, thinking she could sit down on it, but it was too high and hit her in the middle of the back and I was leaning on her so she almost broke her spine and pushed me to the side and I bounced off the edge and twisted to the floor. I looked at her and she was rubbing her back, and then she hopped on the bed and began taking off her shoes.

"Come on, Henry," she said and the look on her face was the first

real expression I had seen. It was, I think, something like determination. I got up and turned the record player off, and thought I would be playful and pretend to leap at her on the bed, swerving at the last moment and missing her. Needless to say, I dove through the air, miscalculated my spring, and wound up kneeing her in the stomach.

3.

Charlie came in with Mike about one-thirty, both of them grinning like children, excited, noisy.

"Ah, the lover in repose," Mike said. I was sitting back on the headboard trying unsuccessfully to keep from grinning too. But looking at those beaming faces, it would have been impossible to be somber, thought I felt that way. "How goes it, lover?"

"You mean how came it, lover," Charlie said.

"Some guys just have women hanging all around," Mike said.

"What about you, Mike?" I said. "How's it been?"

"There have been bitter times," he said playfully, "but I am pulling out of them with Spring on the way.

"What he means is," Charlie said, "he's drowned them in gaping bowls of ravioli."

"I don't deny it," he said, rubbing his stomach. "It's in hard times like these that a man needs some consolation."

"Alright, Henry," Charlie said. "What happened?"

I looked at them still trying not to grin. Mike was still rubbing his stomach like he was stroking a golden thigh.

"What did you tell that girl," I said.

"I didn't tell her anything," Charlie said. "You don't have to tell her anything."

"Action is the key," Mike said. "Hey, did she have on that mephitic yellow sweater?"

"Ah yes," Charlie said. "It was that very sweater which enshrouded her ample flesh."

"Memories," Mike sighed. "The way it was makes more palatable the way it will be."

"Well," Charlie said to me. "I think you are finessing the subject."

"I don't think it concerns you," I said.

"Ho! the noble warrior!" Mike laughed, "who defends the honor of the fair."

"I think," Charlie said, looking over at Mike, "he's one of us."

"Yes, one of us," Mike said. "I suspect he knew her."

"In the biblical sense, of course," Charlie said.

"Will you leave," I said. "I'm tired."

"I think he has a right to be tired," Charlie said. But they did leave, still laughing, Mike still patting his stomach. Charlie leaned back in the door and said he would be over the next afternoon and then he closed it and left me alone.

4.

There was a late wind working in the trees when I crawled into bed, probably coming down the valley floor from the north. One of the windows in the room rattled, loose in its fitting, a gentle, comforting sound, almost human. There was no moonlight. I was thinking of a hundred things. One thought was pushing out another as soon as it was

formed, and some of them were there because I didn't want others to be there. It seemed as if so much time had passed, and yet there was nothing lost in the past but an idea I had had. I didn't even know what it was any longer. Communion. Something about soul communion. I hated Charlie for showing me what was there all the time. I hated him for showing me those instincts and making them clear. And for making me be like him. But I knew he was right. I was afraid. I took, I made no attempt to give. That was why Charlie was right. But about pain, about, hurt, he was wrong. That girl lay there without thinking, sadly, almost helplessly. Didn't I feel pity for her, nothing else? Sleep was coming fast, then, that warmth, that oblivion, though the mind still worked, thrashing about. That frizzly red hair on the pillow. Long hair would have made you more human, I had said to her, not a product of bottles. Clothing racks. Cases. Put a cocky expression on your face, Henry. Let the world think you know what you're doing. I'm sleeping alone again, Charlie, but it's not the same. You're right. It's not the same. It's not.

THE PASSING

My grandfather Samuel was the son of a tailor in the small Austrian village of Grunfeld near the Czechoslovakian border. His most frightening memories of the village were of the time he threw rocks at the Czech border guards and one of them raised his rifle as if to shoot, and my grandfather went scurrying back up the hill to crouch behind a rock, his heart beating in his throat. Later he would say that they nearly caught him, and if they did they could have staked him out. He always said it jokingly but in such a way that you knew it was most likely the truth and that probably he had known of someone to whom it happened, though he never said it. The village was set deep in the hills with only a narrow cart road winding through the hollows to connect it with the world. My grandfather could remember the smoky roofs and the children and dogs playing on the earthen common where several of the stores were bunched together. He described it as a softly green and rolling land, where most of the houses were not in sight of one another, usually built into a penumbra of trees, but there was always smoke curling up over the treetops to let one know you weren't alone. As a small child, my grandfather stayed inside most of the time and seemed to be content watching his mother cook and try to keep order amidst the endless bits of cloth and thread his father scattered about. He tried to be of some help to everyone by fetching things when they needed it, but as he grew older, he just got in the way and his father finally sent him outside during the working hours.

At first, he stayed within sight of the house. A neighbor's dog began to visit him regularly and they played for hours in the yard. But soon he began to wonder what lay beyond the clearing and down the path leading to the curling smoke above the trees. So he took the dog Kar one day and started out. He remembered that it was terribly silent around him and that the pine bed seemed to cushion all sound. He could hear only the thumping of his heart and then he heard Kar panting, and finally, a voice shout ahead around the next turn, and he came to a clearing. There was a field, brown and neatly furrowed, a horse drawing a plow, and a tall, fair-haired man guiding it. He sat on the bottom fence-bar, while the dog heard something, flattened his ears and raced on down the path. My grandfather never remembered how long he sat there until the man saw him and turned, and when he had finished the last row, came over to him. But he remembered that the man was much older than he had thought, and when he came closer he saw that the hair was white and the face was as brown as the field. The man came over to the fence and said: "Hello, boy. Who are you?" My grandfather would take his cigar out at this point, and spit out some of the tobacco he had been chewing on and then he would tell how he just sat holding on to the top fence-bar and swaying, not answering the man, until the man squatted down in front of him and said: "What's your name, boy?" And then he said: "Samuel." The man stroked my grandfather's dark hair and said: "I bet you're the son of Benjamin, the tailor, and live up the road there. I know your father."

My grandfather said that the man lifted him then and sat him on the top bar and held him, while he drew some bread and cheese from his jacket and offered him some. The boy took it without saying anything and watched the man while he ate. He remembered that he couldn't tell his age from his eyes, and that he felt very safe on the fence-bar with the man's hand around his waist, holding him.

"Your father mended this jacket last Spring," he said. "He's a good man." But the boy just chewed and didn't say anything.

"You'll have to learn to talk, Samuel," he said. "And you'll need some sun. Would you like to meet Hans?" And he looked at the horse standing at the back of the field. My grandfather nodded, and the man picked him off the fence-bar and carried him over the rows of soft dirt to where Hans stood. He fed him a lump of sugar from his pocket and then he put one in my grandfather's hand and let him feed the horse. The sun was well over the top of the trees by then, and my grandfather remembered that little beads of sweat ran down the man's temple and into the brown creases of his cheek and neck. He would say this to show how vividly he remembered. The man carried him back to the fence and sat him on the bottom log again and said: "I have to get back to work, Samuel. But you can watch as long as you like." He pointed to something barely visible between the trees behind the field. "I live there," he said. "Come and visit if you like." My grandfather would take his cigar out again and say how the man had touched his head and smiled, and then walked away, and how he would never forget that face.

He had gotten hungry then and walked back up the path to ask about his lunch. He came back to the fence the next day but the man wasn't in the field, so he began to wander around near his own house and found a stream and some rocks just over the hill behind it. My grandfather's eyes would squint now over the chewing of the cigar as if he were remembering the way it looked, and then he would say how some of the rocks formed a small cave which had occupied him for weeks thereafter, and he had forgotten about the man in the field. He and the dog would play until his mother's voice drifted down into the rocks and called him home. My grandfather said it was in the Spring and he was about five years old, because he had started school the next fall and the following year had come with his mother to America where his father had already found them an apartment near the water in Baltimore. It was one of those Spring days, he said, that he heard his mother calling him early in the afternoon and he had gone back to find that his mother was sending him into the village to buy some flour for a cake she was baking on his father's birthday. She told my grandfather the name of the store and that the path would take him right to it, and gave him a schilling which he was to put in his pocket and not take out until he was in the store. So again he walked the path, this time past the empty field where the white-haired man had given him bread and cheese. Farther on, he had seen another house in a clearing but there was no one around but a dog who had run after him barking. Finally he came to a small hill and from the top saw the buildings of the village and the common and knew that the building at the very rear was the store.

My grandfather wouldn't describe the store, but would very carefully take off his glasses, lean back and close his eyes, rub them quickly with his fingers and put the glasses back on. He had gone directly into the store, he would go on, and saw five or six men sitting in there and had become immediately frightened. He remembered that they seemed to form a circle around him as he stood at the counter, not even as tall as it was, and looked up at the man behind it.

"So," the storekeeper had said. And then again: "So."

"Have you come alone to make a purchase?" he asked.

My grandfather nodded. "Look who has come alone," the storekeeper said to the other men, leaning over the counter and pinching my grandfather's cheek, "to make a purchase."

"Well, well, well," one of the other men said. "It's the little Jew-blood."

My grandfather took the coin out of his pocket, bewildered, reached up and put it on the counter.

"Some flour, please," he said, almost trembling, his child's voice shrill, incongruous in the room. He had not understood what they were saying, but he had known that for some reason, they were hostile. He was like an animal who sensed danger.

"Some flour, please," one of the men mimicked, and they all laughed.

"Remember when Gerhardt broke that sack of flour over the peddler's head last year?" another one said and they laughed again. "He was like a ghost, eh Klaus?"

"Would you like to be a ghost, boy?" the one called Klaus said, and took a sip of his tea, giggling in the cup.

My grandfather knew instinctively that he should not say anything, so he just stood in front of the counter looking at the storekeeper.

"Ach, the boy is timid. He will not speak," the storekeeper said.

"Like his father," someone said.

"Come, come, come, little one," said the storekeeper. "What's your name?"

"Samuel," he answered. He knew that he should answer then.

"Ach, Samuel," the storekeeper leaned over again and pulled his ear, and my grandfather winced.

"You're a cute one, Samuel," another said, and they laughed again. They hadn't noticed the door had opened and closed.

"Do you know what they would do to you over the border, Samuel?" the one called Klaus said. "They would cut off your arms and legs."

"They would put you on the end of a lance," someone else said, "and leave you for the dogs."

"My God," a voice said from the door. My grandfather turned around and saw the white-haired man, and ran to him without a word. The man leaned down and gathered him into his arms.

"To make sport of a child," he said quietly. "A child." The room was very quiet and then a voice said: "He's not a boy, he's a. . ."

"Shut up!" the man said. "Do you think he understands what you say? Only that you are ugly. Do you think he can answer you?"

"None of them do," someone said.

"Give him what he wants," the man said coldly, and carried my grandfather to the counter, got the flour, then took him outside and put him

down. "Go home, Samuel," he said, and then sheepishly: "Don't worry about them." My grandfather would pat some ashes into the tray, and then he would describe the way the sun caused the ridge of the hills to appear blue and misty, but he was not remembering that, he was remembering the unpleasant knot in his stomach and the confused, frightened walk home, and that he did not see anything really. But he never said it. He would even smile his toothless smile, but that was because it had happened so long ago.

My grandfather never said anything else about the village. He would speak then about the trip to America, the funny odor on the ship which he could never explain and his fascination with the water he had never seen in such vast quantities and the creaking and rolling of the ship which never bothered him because he was too young. But the thing that was most clear in his memory was that he had lost one of his only shoes on the ship and went into the new country to meet his father with one shoe. But it was with a kind of inner pleasure that he told it, a rare combination of humility in starting out so poor and the pride that went with what came later, in the making (and losing) of three separate fortunes. But also there was something that he never understood while he talked but nevertheless made very clear by the events he chose to talk about: the kind of satisfaction he got from knowing he had made in his life a great deal of money. And it was somehow related to what happened in the village store that Spring afternoon. But it was not the money my grandfather really cared about. That was evident from the time during the Depression when he was already a

father and was so broke that all he had in his pocket was a dime to ride the streetcar home from work, and on several occasions had given it to a beggar for a bowl of soup, and walked the almost seven miles to his home. My grandfather never cared about the money. He was too irresponsible with it for that.

After the landing in Baltimore, my grandfather, when he told the story, would jump to his sixteenth year and tell how he had gotten a job as a ladies' tailor apprentice, working in a small shop on the second floor of a downtown building owned by a freight company. He had begun at one of the machines, working with two Negro boys older than he, two middle-aged men and a very old man who had to struggle to do his share. At first they (except for the old man) had harassed him, tripping him as he walked past, pulling the thread from his machine as they passed him, hiding his coat and hat, referring to him openly and loudly as the sheeny. That had gone on for a couple of weeks, my grandfather said, until one day he had gotten so angry that his natural timidity left him and he stood at one end of the room and said: "You sons of bitches, in two years I'm going to own this place and you with it!" And then he had sat down not at all sure of why he had said it because he had no idea about owning anything in two years. But then my grandfather's face could relax again into that broad smile and he would say: "You know, in two years, I did own it." But he wouldn't say how he had done it or what he did, except that he had gotten the old man back in the shop because he had been fired by the previous owner.

To think about it, my grandfather told me very little of his life and it was these same events he told over and over again, so that they became so real I could tell it to myself or someone else as if it happened to me. It would always be in the little foyer off the dining room, in the house on Carstair St. in Baltimore, the house that smelled as if even the walls and furniture were permeated with Dutch Master cigars: or on the stone porch looking down the narrow walk and neat hedge to the street. My grandfather told it to me as if he were not only telling the story, but in his own shy way, giving me advice.

I can remember his shop, the same one on the second floor, which I visited as a very young child before my grandfather retired. It too smelled of cigars, and it was always very quiet, as if the pieces of cloth around the room absorbed sound. He would always bring out the employees to show me off, and then he would give me money. But that is a very vague memory. Thinking back, I can see how much I didn't know about him and how little I can piece together from what he told me. It all seemed so remote.

The last thing he told me before he died was something he had never described before. We were on the porch on a cool late afternoon in April and he was gently rocking in the swing. It seems that before he had left the village my grandfather had gone to see the white-haired man to tell him goodbye. He remembered crossing the crusted field on a bright, cold day in October and entering the shade of the trees. There had been noone in the yard so he had knocked on the door and a very heavy, untidy woman had answered. My grandfather hadn't known the man's name and had become frightened, not saying anything. The woman asked him after

a moment what he wanted, and he said he would like to see the "man." She opened the door and led him inside where it was very dark and then sat down heavily on a chair that was molded with the shape of her. My grandfather stood in the middle of the room, not knowing what she wanted him to do. She said finally: "You can see he's not here." My grandfather asked where he was, and she said: "He's dead." She had not said anything else, and he had just turned and walked out. The yard, he remembered was very still, and he had begun to run.

I had often thought that one day I would knock on my grandfather's door and there would be no answer. I would open it and walk through the dining room and down the long hall with the pictures of my own father on the walls, past the kitchen and the sitting room and the bathroom, and he would be in one of them, in some distracted position, on the floor or slouched over a table, so I would know immediately that he was dead. He was very old and tired and I expected it to be like that whenever I came to Baltimore to see him. And that was the way it had happened, except that my parents were with me at the time. I can remember my mother walking on ahead, looking into each room and calling: "Papa? Papa?" But he was at the end of the hall, in his bedroom, lying on his side on the bed, his left arm stretched out, the fingers curled and still holding the stub of a cigar. The first thing that came to me as my mother touched him was the sound of him saying "<u>You sons of bitches</u>...," but I didn't hear it in the voice of the boy who had spoken it. It was the discordant, distilled voice of an old man,

telling it with a wide smile and a gesture with a mutilated cigar. And I knew that I didn't know him, that it was impossible for me to have known him. When my grandfather died, and I saw all those years so relaxed and quiet on that bed, I knew what he was trying to tell me. The child asking for flour in that village in another world was me.