

The University of North Carolina
at Greensboro

JACKSON LIBRARY



CQ

no. 1329

UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES

MAKLER, STEPHEN JAY. The Laugh Line of a Desperate Man:
Stories and Poems. (1975) Directed by: Fred Chappell.
Pp. 64

The poems and stories in this thesis comprise a representative sample of the work I did while at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

The Irish Lantern is a work in progress. It may eventually take many years to complete, but the seven poems contained here lay the foundation for the basic themes I will pursue in attempting to evoke the character of Ireland: love, war, religion, loneliness, poverty, and abundant natural beauty.

There is no common theme among the short stories, although death is an important factor in all of them.

None of these poems or stories has ever been published before.

THE LAUGH LINE OF A DESPERATE MAN

STORIES AND POEMS

University of North Carolina by

Stephen Jay Makler

A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of the Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro

1975

Approved by

Fred Chappell

Thesis Adviser

April 25, 1975
Date of Examination

APPROVAL PAGE

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

Thesis

Adviser

Fred Chappell

Oral Examination

Committee Members

Lloyd Kropp

Robert W. Yson

Fred Chappell

April 28, 1975

Date of Examination

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

	Page
I would like to thank Lloyd Kropp and Fred Chappell for their help and encouragement.	1
The Mills of Dublin	2
The Queen's Major (Ret.)	4
The Kerry Woman	6
The Yearly	8
The Pub	10
The Plowman	12
The Song of the <u>Big Harvest</u>	14
MEMORITION, SUSPICION AND EMIL LANGER	15
THE BOY AND THE CATERPILLAR	47
A MILL BY LANGLISH	50

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.	iii
THE IRISH LANTERN	1
The Hills of Dublin	2
The Queen's Major (Ret.)	4
The Kerry Woman	6
The Yearly	8
The Pub	10
The Plowman	12
The Song of the <u>Rio Barema</u>	14
PREMONITION, SUSPICION AND EMIL LANSKER	15
THE BOY AND THE CATERPILLAR	47
A WILL BY LAMPLIGHT	50

THE HILLS OF DUBLIN

A pie moon
 lit by night-contoured fields,
 They are alive by night,
 Water-wood brushes parchment leaves,
 they say hush hush
 Wire fences blow and creak at their posts
 and in the banked hedges
 the barriers are bitter and dry with frost.
 The wet cold road is blacker than night,
 blacker than the black jewel-bed night sky
 and its chill breaths of stars.

THE IRISH LANTERN

These Hills of Dublin,
 gravestones of highwaymen,
 of sainted despair,
 where seecries are born
 in fawning, earth-brown stout
 and socked whiskey.
 Care, by the certainty of mistake or fortune
 pale green-eyed dreams lie beneath
 the full-bellied lead
 and sing!

THE HILLS OF DUBLIN

A pie moon
lit by night-contoured fields.
They are alive by night.
Whisper-wood brushes parchment leaves,
they say hush hush
Wire fences blow and creak at their posts
and in the banked hedges
the berries are bitter and dry with frost.
The wet cold road is blacker than night,
blacker than the black jewel-box night sky
and its chill breaths of stars.

These Hills of Dublin,
gravestones of highwaymen,
of sainted despair,
where memories are born
in foaming, earth-brown stout
and smoked whiskey.
Here, by the certainty of mistake or fortune
pale green-eyed dreams lie beneath
the full-bellied land
and sing!

From the G.P.O. to Boland's Mill

We made poor Eng-guh-lund weep her fill

Ah, but old Bri-tannia loves us still!

Wack fol le diddle fol le di do day

Wack fol le diddle fol le di do day

So we say

(Connally is dead)

Hip hoo-ray!

(De Valera is blind)

Come and join the I.R.A.!

(In the maudlin brass lambence of a public house

a foot falls

having failed the rail.)

The Hills of Dublin are immutable scales

locked in a balance of justice and time.

Listen--

inviolable silence!

They are never, never wrong.

THE QUEEN'S MAJOR (Ret.)

My hands are cold
 My jumper is too stiff
 And there is a stone in my shoe.

Bring me heat
 Bring me the women of Aran
 And calfskin boots as well
 Fashioned to curl snugly around
 each
 pink
 toe
 with no space for stones.

Fetch me a star.
 I hold this star in my hands
 A diadem of infinity
 A copper penny
 A lady.

Irish dogs sleep too late
 and leave the dawn to the cocks.
 I would sooner the dogs to crow
 and leave the cocks doze 'til dinner.

For table:

pigeon, hare and pheasant

in that order.

Soup later, and peach flan.

A short cruise

down the alimentary canal.

Delicious

I wash in mineral baths brought

from a natural spring

by a poor lurching woman

from County Mayo.

I own her sturdy hands,

her red runny eyes

and her penny-weight mind.

What is left, pfaugh! may go to charity.

A simple truth:

Humanity is a grocery.

My trade is clay.

Sober, I would dance

in the dead leaves

of

any

dream.

THE KERRY WOMAN

In the patchwork green valley
lives a widow of Kerry.
Her soot-singed stone cottage
has lost its purchase on the soft hillside,
pitched forward, and is now
a lantern.

Two hounds tend her white-faced sheep.
In the glistening hazed morning
she keens from her doorway--
'Go East! Go East!'
And before the braying echo
the masked collies have yapped the sheep
under the bellying eastern clouds.

Her day is passed with ladles and spoons,
making bread and soup and black pudding stew
over the smoky peat fire.
Above the hearth's oaken mantell--
a portrait of her father, the mayor.
A Singapore clock with golden birds
carried from across the granite-cold sea.
And an embroidered sampler from America:
I Toil In The Vineyards Of The Lord.

THE YEARLY

The hard edge of November
 has fallen on Merchants Quay.
 Here, in twisting soot-rimed lanes
 and close cobbled alleys,
 Dublin's lesser industries.
 Booksellers with an eye for rain
 set out racks of second-hand.
 A dealer in recent antiques
 rearranges a tarnished tea service.
 Fading establishments all--
 but for the amber-windowed pubs.

Yet
 temptation in even these poor streets
 at Sweepstakes time.

Above his shop, McMullen's rented speaker
 barks twenty to the hour
 a gaming man's litany:
This could be your lucky year!
So give yourself a sporting chance.

His recorded voice
Don't de-lay!
 the very rattle of dice
If you're not in you can't win--
 reaches out like a workman's fist
It's an old saying and a true one.
 scares the cats pissing.

The dōdge: parceling out
 shares in a hundred-block of numbers.

Think of it, friends!

A hundred chances to win!

Not one wins all

but all win

a little!

Filling the chill wet air
 with shimmering flanks of race horses,
 whiskey-laced kisses,
 cartons of cigarets,
 and thick fingers at wrinkled pound notes.

Distilling the impossible
 to a fragment of the unlikely,
 to a ticket
 which can be held in the hand.

THE PUB

Tonight, good friends, the Liffey's mist
is our celestial overcoat.

Bitter close at the elbow, May lush
at the collar.

Hear hear!

All the same, I'd smoke
the eyes off a piss-wog, says Blakey.

And he would.

We all

couldn't Watch the late dog!

butturrump butturrump butturrump

In Mr. Little's Little Corner
he swings down the bottles,
flips the thin-cut plates of sandwiches,
flicks his rag at the dark splashes on the bar,
and keeps one meaty hand on the mop
at all times.

Pip, in the steamy corner,
face lost in a swirl of white hair,
only blue glass eyes ANOTHER! afloat.
Now those gone too,
cheek in a puddle.

I'll wake him.

You leave him.

Squeeze in here, Tim. The rump should fit.

I'll rump you. ANOTHER!

Steady now, Tim. Surly tonight?

Stout Stout here. Stout all round

To redden the cheeks and run the nose.

Drink of the Saviour, you know.

Oh my, yes.

Those pants'll dry. Your socks--

Not wearin' 'em.

Hurrah for you, Bill. Yes, ANOTHER! another.

I wouldn't mind.

At thirty pounds per, you shouldn't mind.

I ought to know better than

to let your mitts in me pockets.

Thirty pound per, shaking his head,

blowing into the foam.

Thank God for the older ones

eh, Alf? Thank God for the older ones?

Else we'd never lose it.

And you? ANOTHER! And you, Alf?

What d'you say?

Let's have it, have the story.

Mum boy, eh, Alf? ANOTHER!

C'mon lads, let's wake 'im up, that's it. That's it.

THE PLOWMAN

In the wind-sleeping day
the thin cover of land
rumbles like a cookpot lid.
I feel it through my boots
through crushed and bleaching barley stalks
and flattened grass.

Time milling slow.

Slowly

 the watchful sun

(pendant, motionless)

blinds me to all things blue,
erases heaven.

I wrap the lines around my fists,
calling (Hoa!) at the animal.

Across her wet flanks
the traces slap and tighten.

I cant the blade against
the draw of root and stone,

then

cut the earth.

Cut her moist sides open.

THE SONG OF THE RIO BARONA

Dirt and cucumber smells rise.
 Fragrant mud lies slit. Les to the Rainbow River
 (I lie slit ing for the metal that shines like the sun
 rent and spilling into each black furrow.
 Partial pipes and the lines all turn to rust
 aching ones
 long-eyed that was best left alone
 I am
 as common as thread.) ayed up river today

The deep cool earth the follas away
 moss-veined woman the follas away
 draws my head

It's days without light and nights without sleep
letters grow yellow, li into the stirring grass.
And visions of gold don't count for much
when a man is in need of a friendly touch
And she was a friend
A friend to so many men

But the Rio Barona steamed up river today
 With Lita MacAlister, taking all my dresses away
 And she's taken all the follas away
 She's taken all the follas away

THE SONG OF THE RIO BAREMA

It's five thousand miles to the Rainbow River
Where we dug for the metal that shines like the sun
But a mine without ore don't count for much
And the pipes and the lines all turn to rust
Just bones
Of a dream that was best left alone

But the Rio Barema steamed up river today
With Lita MacAlistair, taking all my dreams away
And she's taken all the fellas away
She's taken all the fellas away

It's days without sunlight and nights without sleep
Letters grow yellow, like memories they weep
And visions of gold don't count for much
When a man is in need of a friendly touch
And she was a friend
A friend to so many men

But the Rio Barema steamed up river today
With Lita MacAlistair, taking all my dreams away
And she's taken all the fellas away
She's taken all the fellas away

So it seems like for nothing the work that we did
And what's left in them hills can stay where it's hid
And a man alone don't count for much
To leave or to stay, there ain't no rush
To know
How far his sadness will go

A man is born naked, he's a beggar from birth
And he scrapes for his keep in the crust of the earth
Like an animal gone blind who's lost his way
And can't even make his misfortunes pay
And why
Why not be born to fly?

But the Rio Barema steamed up river today
With Lita MacAlistair, taking all my dreams away
And she's taken all the fellas away
She's taken all the fellas away

PREMONITION, SUSPICION AND EMIL LANSKER

It had been a year since Sonia left New York--and me--to teach at one of those student-factories in California. And in that time I'd hardly given Emil Lansker a thought. The last I'd heard he was under a doctor's care and living someplace in the Midwest--Chicago or near by. It didn't seem likely we would ever have to meet again. Then I began to have these...premonitions. I would catch glimpses of him (him?) entering a store or passing by in a bus, not knowing what to make of it, wondering if it was really him. But I did have two distinct sightings the week before his letter arrived, which is why I call them premonitions.

The first time, I was lecturing on the evils of Versailles to an undergraduate history class, a big class that filled the auditorium. Half way through I noticed a man sitting at the back, an older man. He was wearing a brown suit and a silver tie. Alone among all those hairy and disinterested young heads, his own seemed to be bent over a set of notes. He glanced up, grey, narrow-faced, wire spectacles glinting, and I felt like I'd fallen into a hole four years deep.

The lecture stumbled in mid-sentence. My graduate assistant, a sweaty nearsighted boy named Grommet, hustled up to the rostrum. "Dr. Hoffman, are you okay?"

I turned my back to the hall. "Grommet, I know you can't see--but I want you to tell me if there's a man in a brown suit in the next to last row. He's about fifty, hawk nose..."

Grommet tilted his glasses up and squinted. "There's a fat girl out there in a brown dress. I don't see anyone who looks fifty."

I shuffled my papers a little, wiped my glasses, and when I looked again I saw the girl he was talking about, but in the wrong seat. The seat I'd meant was empty.

Two days later I was waiting on the subway platform at Columbus Circle to catch a downtown express. As the train stopped there suddenly burst out of the lead car two Transit policemen clinging desperately to a huge and furious black woman in a flower print dress. She had breasts like anvils. The two men, both shorter than she was, were struggling to pin her arms behind her back in a double hammer lock. But she bit, kicked, cursed, and slapped herself free each time--and for good measure bashed her assailants across their heads and bodies with vicious roundhouse swings of a giant wicker bag.

Her shrieks and the terrific thwacks of the bag echoed down the platform, attracting a crowd of highly vocal partisans for both sides. Finally the cops managed to wrestle the woman down and handcuff her. The crowd drifted away, everyone relieved it was over--including, it seemed, the woman herself who just lay there panting with her cheek pressed to the filthy platform. I boarded the train and as it pulled past the scene one of the cops happened to look up. He was flushed and exhausted and there was a lash of blood across his cheek. I only saw him for a few seconds, but I would have sworn it was Emil Lansker.

Viewed as a triptych--although there's no particular reason for doing so--these incidents make a fitting preamble to the concluding panel: Emil's challenge to meet him again face to face. I could reproduce it here in full with all its meanderings and sinister overtones, but those unfamiliar with his style have found his prose tough going. Though he spoke English perfectly well, he tended to write much the way a cubist paints, in a heavy, graceless, drumbeat style.

For instance, the letter began: "Dear David--I understand we now mutually share, whether we like it or not, a regrettable and likewise painful commonality. One might think that being left by the same woman would create between two men, whatever their sentiments toward each other, a certain bond, a kinship closer perhaps than blood, though also, perhaps, not a felicitous one."

Distilled and summarized: He'd somehow learned that Sonia and I had separated. He felt terrible about this, he truly did, but that didn't alter the fact there was still unfinished business to be settled between us. (Just what this might be, however, he did not specify, did not even hint at.) He would therefore present himself at my apartment Thursday evening, at which time one of two things would occur (he actually numbered them): if I was home, (1), fine, we could talk; if not, (2), he would take the liberty of assuming I was too ashamed of myself to ever look him in the eye again. Very neatly, too, he omitted listing a return address where he could be reached. Which is to say I couldn't wriggle out of this pow-wow in advance: one way or another I was going to give him satisfaction.

The letter ended with this chewy postscript written in frenzied, dancing characters twice as big as everything else:

"P.S. Which of us do you think is Lazarus?"

A bit of biography might be useful here.

Emil and Sonia hadn't been married long, a year or two, when they immigrated here from Germany just after the Berlin Wall business. Looking for an academic post or something close to it, Emil applied at the Institute for Mid-European Research, which is an affiliate of Columbia University. As the name implies, it's a research facility, a source of material, but it also monitors current affairs in Central Europe. In a sense it does for the academic community what the CIA does for the government. At that time, in addition to my lecturing, I was INER's vice-director and Emil came to me for an interview.

He was a short, sturdily built man of forty, angular and owlsh looking. He had close set grey eyes with very pale lashes, a long nose, and extremely bad teeth. His teeth were crooked and discolored and he tried to conceal them by smiling only a little. This made them seem worse than they were, if possible, because you kept noticing them. He had a habit, too, of staring at me intently as if every word I said was precious. I'm sure someone had told him Americans liked people to look them in the eye when they were doing business--but it was disconcerting and, with his wire-rim glasses, as I say, owlsh. He wore his hair brilliantined and combed straight back. His

tweed suit was baggy and nipped at the waist. He struck me as being eccentric, highly-strung, and altogether very Old World.

What intrigued me about him was his background. He was the son of Eric Waldo Lansker, the brilliant economist, one of the men who helped pin Germany back together after its monetary collapse in the 1920's. He remained an important figure, in fact, all through the troubled Weimar Republic.

The Nazis would have liked to have Lansker's brain--a bonafide non-Jewish intellectual--but he totally despised them. There's a story about him once slapping Julius Streicher in a restaurant. He was a stubborn man--even after they took power he refused to come to an accomodation with them. He should have left the country. Instead he remained and the Nazis imprisoned him, and the rest of his family as well. They separated the children, forced them to sign accusations that their parents were Stalinist agents, British agents, Zionists...Emil was fifteen.

They placed him in the youth labor camp at Oranienburg among other bewildered children of Communists, former SA men, trade unionists, left-wing journalists, right-wing journalists. Emil stayed at Oranienburg for three years, until 1940 when, for reasons he was never told, he was released.

His freedom was problematic at best: he could be re-arrested at any time, or, failing that, he was certain to be drafted. Facing such bleak alternatives, he contacted friends of his father's and asked them to help smuggle him out of Germany. This they did. They disguised him as a nun, furnished him

with false papers, and took him to a small port near Lubeck, Travemunde, on the northern coast. All went well--Emil apparently made an excellent nun--until at the very pier when everything fell apart. He was waiting, baggage in hand, to board a ship to Denmark when somehow the police spotted him and, permitting themselves a good laugh at his disguise, arrested him.

Emil spent the war as he'd spent the peace, trying to stay alive in various camps and prisons. (What those years were like--waiting for his country, which he dearly loved, to be smashed by the Allies--he rarely spoke about.) After the war his English and Slovak got him posts with Allied Occupation authorities in Stuttgart and Nuremberg. Within six years, living in rooms the size of closets, he managed to save enough money to carry him through his degree in Munich. He became an instructor there and eventually met Sonia.

It was a fascinating history. But the longer you knew Emil the more you realized his past was the only fascinating thing about him. By that I mean he was, to me, simply a dull little man with horrid teeth and rather pathetic pretensions to being the intellectual his father was. He was competent enough for our purposes--preparing transcripts of radio broadcasts, state documents, and so on--but helpless when it came to material that required the least degree of nuance. You could virtually smell the sauerkraut in his prose. As a result, his articles never got published, his papers were ignored.

Emil's greatest asset was Sonia. She completed her

dissertation at NYU and joined the Institute three years after Emil did. She was in her twenties then, much younger than him, dark, sensitive, quiet. She was uncomfortable with us at first and it inhibited her from speaking too freely. But gradually the soundness of her ideas and the originality of her approach to various kinds of political projections that had been a headache for us impressed everyone. Back then it was still all right to be pleased and delighted by an attractive woman who could think. It was obvious she would go farther in her field than Emil ever would. (As she's done, I might add.)

What also became clear when she joined us was the true nature of her relationship with Emil.

There are some men who never really outgrow the adolescent intensity of passion. It lies dormant within them, waiting to be reborn sometime between the ages of forty and sixty, a time bomb of undignified impulses. Emil was one of these--though a rarity: he was infatuated with his own wife. Granted, their marriage was young. But that didn't excuse the way he hovered about her, fawning and slavish to the point of irritation. (My irritation.) He missed no opportunity to touch her. Both at the Institute and the times we met socially, he always seemed to be nuzzling Sonia's hand, stroking her cheek, brushing a stray hair from her forehead--as if he needed to confirm by tactile evidence that she was still corporeal, still there.

Was I jealous even then? Maybe so. But in my own defense let me say I felt sorry for him as well. No man should behave like that. Women despise docility and weakness in a man, it's

instinctive with them. They may deny it, but it's true. Emil was the kind that made you want to grab him by the shoulders and say, "Look here, open your eyes. Think what you're doing. No woman will put up with that kind of servility." It would have done no good, though. Any man who loves a woman too much is asking for trouble.

It's necessary to explain this because I never set out, in the predatory sense, to seduce Sonia away from him. For one thing, I didn't think she needed to be lured away. Her discontent with Emil was already evident: I knew for a fact she'd had a brief affair with an acquaintance of mine, a historian at NYU. It was only a matter of time before it happened again. Besides, the only thing I cared about then was getting free of Helen, my fading but still elegant wife of fifteen years. Like many women in the twilight of their beauty, she had embraced something of a Socratic approach to sex--in that she suddenly began sharing the benefits of her lifelong experience widely among the young. I found myself, at the age of forty-five, married to an easy lay. Assistant professors, Legal Aid attorneys, a speech therapist...a hockey player... Helen retained, however, a steely belief in my ability to draw a paycheck and so divorcing her became an effort that required all the energy and ingenuity I could muster.

And there, every day, at arm's reach was Sonia with her dark, almost Mediterranean skin, her slim body and strong beautiful legs. Her lustrous black hair, parted simply and tucked behind her ears, framed spare and delicate features. Her burred Alsatian accent was gently intoxicating, like dry

white wine.

I could see it in her--we shared the same emptiness, the same confluence of sadness, self-pity, and fear. We began going to lunch together, alone; taking in special exhibits at the museums; slipping off to symposia; touching. There was no question of intention or effort on anyone's part. It simply happened. The first time we made love we both recalled the same poem of Rilke's. In the warm afterglow, elated, bursting with hope, I convinced her to undertake with me a joint essay on the future of Latvian separatism.

When Sonia realized she was in love with me she didn't try to conceal it from Emil. I can't explain why, cruel as it must seem. She said she hated deceit too much to practice it--but it must have been more than that. In any case, Emil suddenly found himself in hell and there was nothing he could do. You could see he was losing weight, sleeping badly. His work suffered and almost came to a stop. He would lapse into long reveries at his desk and awake at the end of the day with hardly a thing accomplished.

Yet in the worst of it he never once confronted me. A reserve of iron will or pride or perhaps sheer disbelief maintained him. His demeanor towards me remained absolutely neutral. This went on for months.

"Are you sure he knows?" I asked Sonia while we were lunching one day at a restaurant. At least I lunched while she smoked. She'd been smoking far too much and I was trying to get her to stop.

"He knows," she said. She ground out her cigaret and began digging in her purse for another. Like Emil, she'd too lost weight, dark crescents underscored her eyes. "He doesn't blame you...though he hates you all the same." She sighed smoke. "It's very confusing for him. He respects you, you know, for your learning, your achievement. His father was a professor. And so he just...will do nothing."

"You're sure of that? Nothing silly or desperate?"

"I hardly think so." She lowered her eyes, hooding their expression

"Why won't you look at me?"

It was like a slap. She looked up, coldly. "He knows. Isn't that enough?"

To that I said, "I'm not the one that's leaving him. You are. You're the one. Don't get angry with me."

I knew forcing the issue would precipitate matters. She apologized. She admitted a major step would have to be taken soon. With my divorce about to become final I urged her to move in with me. She said she would consider it.

Not long afterward I took her home from an evening lecture at the university, a long dull discourse on the Rumanian dairy industry. We were both tired and irritable. Reluctant to give her up for the night, I kissed her at the door and begged her to come home with me, but she refused and went inside.

Waiting for an elevator down the hall, I heard her scream.

I rushed back but she had locked and bolted the door behind her immediately, as New Yorkers do. She screamed again. I was frantic, ghastly things were going through my mind. Somewhere in another apartment someone was laughing. I beat my fists on the door. At last the bolts clicked and the door swung open.

Sonia stood in the doorway, terrified. Eyes wide, trembling, she backed away from me through the dark foyer, her hands pressed to her mouth.

"God, God, David..." she breathed. "He's in the kitchen."

And in the kitchen he was. Such a horrible thing I hadn't seen since the war. Blood was everywhere, on the counters, the stovetop, the dishes, the cabinet doors--everywhere--as if he'd gone mad with it. It was spilled across the blue and white linoleum, smeared like paint, to a drying puddle between his legs. For a moment I thought Emil was dead. His face was so waxen and unnatural I almost cried out myself. He was sitting on the floor against the refrigerator, legs sprawled crookedly, his feet bare and starkly white. His eyes were open and lifted toward the fluorescent light in the ceiling, strangely peaceful, dreamlike. His torn wrist lay palm up on his thigh--it had completely soaked his pant leg with blood.

I tied a dish towel tightly around the wound, then, using my belt and a wooden spoon, I made a tourniquet for his arm. Luckily for him the bleeding had nearly stopped on its own. As I worked he began grunting in spasms from deep within his chest, as if to vomit. His lips twitched but he couldn't speak. He was out of his senses and, really, it was just as well. My

reaction to this appallingly stupid act was neither shock nor pity--but anger. I don't know but that--if I thought he'd have understood me--I might have started screaming a blue streak. I know I wanted to hit him, to smack that dumb expression of martyrdom off his face. I hated him that moment like I've never hated anyone.

Sonia, controlling herself wonderfully, dialed for an ambulance. With the customary dispatch of municipal services it took no more than forty-five minutes to reach us--an interminable wait in which we could hardly bring ourselves to speak.

All the while our eyes were stinging from a pall of acrid brownish smoke that hung in the kitchen. Thick coils of it probed the ceilings and windows. It came from a pot of burnt spaghetti: Emil had evidently been in the middle of cooking himself supper and hadn't thought to turn off the flame. The water had boiled away, leaving the spaghetti to hiss and blacken into a heap of shoelace at the bottom of the pot. The stench filled the apartment, but we couldn't open the windows to let it clear: it was more important that we keep Emil warm. So the smoke remained like an obstinate fog, dense and still.

Afraid that we might start the bleeding again by moving him, Sonia and I swaddled Emil in blankets, tucking him warm to the ears, and stood over him there in the kitchen, holding hands until the ambulance arrived.

A formidable last impression.

Naturally Sonia stayed in contact with Emil through his

hospitalization and the divorce, but I asked her not to tell me about him, I wasn't interested. In the three years we lived together I don't think his name was mentioned a dozen times.

If he'd only had the decency to call, I would have told him, "Why rehash everything now? There's no point. What do you want, revenge? A belated apology? That would be ludicrous in the extreme. It's best to let ugly things lie still, let them fade. Everything becomes nothing."

I spent the early part of Thursday evening grading essays. I'd braced myself with several sherries and I was feeling very brave. It was anyone's guess, of course, how the years had affected Emil's mind and what he'd become. If he arrived armed or decided to get ugly, I wouldn't hesitate to give him a taste of the tire iron I had secreted under the cushion of my chair. Working, I could feel it pressed against my leg, solid and comforting.

At ten o'clock, as I was beginning to hope he'd given it up, someone began knocking at the vacant apartment opposite mine. On and on it went--two minutes, five...Who would be so insistent but a cop? I peeked through the little Judas hole in my door and found instead--rear view--a stocky middle-aged man, sportily dressed and patient. He rapped again, briskly, then clasped his hands behind his back in the manner of a man who would keep this up all night if he wasn't stopped.

I leaned out into the hall, a helpful neighbor: "You may

as well hit your head against the door," I advised, "for all the good--" and Emil turned, surprise lighting a face I barely recognized.

"There you are! What, have you moved?" He compared door numbers and slapped himself in the head. "Of course, Six E. Six E! You'd think I'd remember. You'd really think I would. Hello, David, may I come in?"

I recognized the pale eyebrows, the sun dial nose, a liverish birth mark near the temple, but almost nothing else. He'd been re-done: this was a splendid new Emil, bearded, hale, and puppy plump. We shook hands stiffly.

"Of course, of course. Come in."

We settled down in my living room rather like old cronies, armed with spotty snifters of sherry. (I have no talent for dish washing.) I couldn't get over how stylish he'd become. He looked as if he'd stepped from one of those full-color Caribbean cruise advertisements. He was, in fact, deeply tanned--it had brought out a spray of freckles on his forehead. And his hair, long worn oiled and struck flat against his skull, now bloomed poodle-like around his head in a nimbus of tight, silvery-brown curls. The beard, a neat Mormon fringe, more grey than brown, was especially becoming. No question, it lent a certain dignity...He wore a shamrock green blazer over a yellow turtleneck, black and white hound's tooth trousers, and glistening patent leather pumps. As he spoke and gestured, jewelry glinted--a pinky ring, a name bracelet, a Rolex wrist-watch on a wide silver band. Around his neck, targeted in the

V of his lapels, hung a gold-plated medallion, the trident in a circle: Peace.

In the vaguest possible terms we brought each other up to date. It had occurred to me, because of the reference to Lazarus, that Emil might be coming to me for money. I'd been wrong, of course. On the contrary, he was doing extremely well. It seemed he was now a salesman, of all things, for an importer of German precision instruments, of all things.

"The parent company is owned by a former Nazi," he confided with a peculiarly Emilian shrug. "Very high up at one time. But I can't knock the outfit, they make quality merchandise. I do a hell of a volume."

I let him ramble, listening for a hint by word or inflection of what had made this evening necessary. His speech was filled with commercialisms as it had once been filled with allusions to Hegel and Heine: consignments, turnover, net volume, perquisites. Pouring us another sherry, I thought, He's going to bore me to sleep, then smother me.

Business forced him to travel a good deal, he said, and while in San Francisco recently he'd happened to run into Sonia--

"When?" I interrupted. "How long ago was this?"

"Just last week. A week ago Monday. That's where I bought this." He touched the peace symbol over his breastbone. "You can pick up the most marvelous craft items. These young kids make them and sell them right on the sidewalks. I almost bought a very interesting looking pipe--"

"You saw her last week?"

"A week ago Monday," he corrected. "You can believe me. She looks wonderful. She's let her hair grow and it makes her look entirely different, like a gypsy almost."

"Did you get to spend much time with her?"

"Oh, a bit." He made an airy gesture, a flutter of the fingers that could have meant anything. "Listen to this, they've told her she'll be a professor in two years. How about that?"

"They've promised her that? So soon?"

"Yes, remarkable, isn't it?"

I was happy for her if not for myself. A full professorship meant there was little chance of her returning east. I started to ask--upper lip as stiff as pine--if she was living with someone, or engaged, or...but I couldn't. I couldn't do it. I had to set down my glass: my hands were shaking.

Finally I managed, emptily, "And how does she like California?"

"It certainly seems to agree with her."

"But how is she...over all?"

"I don't follow," he said. His eyes were innocent.

"I mean, is she happy?"

Emil stared at me strangely for perhaps half a minute, his glass arrested in mid-air. Then all of a sudden he jumped to his feet.

"Let's go," he said. "Let's go someplace other than here. There's something here which clouds our talk. I tell you what, I know a little place just downtown, not far. It's very lively."

"What? You want to go now?"

"Yes, yes. This is the best time. It's just coming alive."

"But I thought we had things to talk about--Lazarus, and the Brotherhood of Ex-Boyfriends or something.."

"We do, David, but...hmm...Well, a little lubricant, a neutral atmosphere would help. Let's go to this place, it's a good spot for talking."

"What is it, a bar of some sort?"

"Of a sort. Well, no, not really a bar. Sort of a club. It has entertainment as well. I go by there now and then when I'm in town. A wonderful place."

"I don't know..." I wasn't exactly eager for a night on the town with him. "I'm not dressed for it."

Emil was enthusiastic now, his eyes twinkled, I swear.

"Yes, let's go out and have a time. Put on a decent shirt and jacket--it's not even necessary to wear a tie anymore. Just a turtleneck, it's standard issue." He lifted his bristly chin and hooked a finger in the collar of his sweater. "See? Perfectly all right."

In a way I understood his uneasiness. He sensed her, or rather the effect of her, there in the living room. I know. A woman's presence can abide in a place like a pentimento in a faded painting. More than one Sunday I've absent-mindedly handed Sonia the Times' Arts and Leisure section, and been

surprised there was no one to take it.

"All right," I said. "For one drink, just one. On you."

"Yes, of course. It's my treat."

It was a wet, chilly spring night. Rain lacquered the streets in a gentle shower and hurried people along the sidewalks, laughing, protecting their heads. From the wail of sirens there was a fire near by, a big one. I waited in the lobby, listening to the sirens, and through the glass watched Emil trying to flag us a taxi. He stood in the street waving and whistling as drizzle darkened his shoulders and made a flat nest of his hair. A battered Yellow Cab cruised to the curb, nearly running him over, and we were off.

We stuttered down Second Avenue in a crush of evening traffic. Our driver--an enormous pair of ears and hunched shoulders below a leatherette cap--jumped lanes, ran lights, and generally tossed us around in back like duckpins on a tray as he jockeyed for every pointless advantage in the sluggish procession toward midtown. We were delayed several times by police holding up traffic for streams of fire engines racing crosstown. At one stop our driver, nervously tapping the accelerator, asked off-handedly if either of us sports needed any rubbers? I thanked him but declined. Meanwhile the rain fell harder, drumming angrily on the roof, and with our windows shut the atmosphere in the cab grew heavy and fetid. It stank humidly, like a wet dog, of coffee, sweat, and stale tobacco smoke, laced with a faint melody of vomit.

Neither Emil nor I felt like talking. Most of the way he stared blankly out the window, a finger across his lips. Rain dropleted patterns of light and shadow slipped across his face without him blinking. He was very far away.

Floating above the club entrance, in a tropical setting of surf and palm trees untouched by rain, a blue neon wahini beckoned with a manic twitching of her arms--due, probably, to some electrical malfunction. Across her breasts flashed, in alternating amber and hot pink:

LIVE ADULT ENTERTAINMENT

and

SEX-TRAORDINARY!!! SEX-PLOSIVE!!!!

Below her a hand-lettered sign announced in orgasmic italics:

To-nite's Feature--

SALOME AND HER SEALS!

"You don't mind, do you?" Emil said. "Don't be put off by the marquee. It's very tasteful, I assure you."

The rain was beginning to soak my hair and run down my ears and it wasn't the marquee I objected to.

"You said a place we could talk. I'm tired, I don't feel like ducking pasties all night."

"Don't worry, I'll catch them," he promised lightly and led me inside.

The Blue Wahinis, a line of topless and none too dainty chorus girls, high-kicked their way offstage to the mingled whistling and applause of the audience. Emil was unimpressed, but then I'd put him in a sour mood by insisting we get a table as from the stage as possible.

"I don't know where they dig up some of these acts. Their kicks weren't even synchronised," he complained, missing, I thought, the point. He twirled his drink by its narrow stem, the condensation catching the amber light of the table candle. "I'll tell you honestly--now I've got you here I don't know where to begin."

"Why don't we begin with Sonia," I suggested, "and we can end with her, too."

He looked up. "You know, last week in San Francisco I took Sonia to a place very much like this, but more so, if you know what I mean."

"You did? Whatever for? Did she enjoy it?"

"No, not at all, she hated it. She got angry with me for bringing her. I thought it would be something new for her," he shrugged. "It almost spoiled the whole evening."

I looked at him. "The evening? So it wasn't a momentary thing?"

"Pardon me? I don't understand."

"At my apartment you made it sound like you just bumped into her on a street corner. But that wasn't so, was it?"

"Did I say that? No, you're right, of course. It was no accident. We'd exchanged a few letters. I knew where she was living--but I didn't know why. By the way, do you have a pipe cleaner handy? I'm afraid I forgot to bring one." He patted his pockets which had already yielded a pipe, lighter, tobacco pouch, and a surgical-looking tool for reaming and tamping the bole. "I wanted to know what had made her come to California. Her letters weren't all that clear. I wanted to know what had happened between you, whether--forgive me--she had been very unhappy. Perhaps the waitress can get hold of a pipe cleaner, do you think?"

"For God's sake--" I tossed my swizzle stick across the table. "Here, use this. And what did she say?"

"Well, from what I understood--Oh, first off she told me that the two of you had had a terrible argument, and it was this argument that convinced her it was no longer possible for her to continue living with you. She said--Well, I could hardly believe what she told me, to be honest. She said you accused her of trying to drive you to...well..." Emil drew a finger across his wrist. "It frightened her."

For all his delicacy I suspected Emil was enjoying this.

"Yes, it's true, I did. We'd been having a difficult time...you're liable to say anything in a fight. Do I have to explain? Go on, please."

"You understand, now, we talked off and on for quite a while: what I'm telling you are the sum of my impressions." He looked at me. "She said you made her feel lonely, David. I don't say this to taunt you. It's true. She's a complex woman, Sonia. Her parents were very poor--very poor--and because of that she is extremely ambitious. Not that ambition is bad--clearly she has the talent to make good on anything she sets her mind to. But being a woman she has had to suppress a great part of herself, what you might call the weaker instincts, the urge to be protected and petted...I've given this a great deal of thought. She needs--though she would be the last to admit it--to be spoiled with attention, at times, as you would a child. She needs this. I know when we had been married a while she would often become short-tempered and hostile to me and I would have no idea why. Of course I married late in life, perhaps too late, with too little experience of women. It took me...a good while to realize what it was all about." About to continue in the same vein, he cut himself short with a laugh. "Ah, but that's all changed now. I sound very worldly tonight, ja? Too much of this, maybe." He sipped his drink. "But seriously. Perhaps, being older and already a success, you weren't--again, forgive me--you weren't as sensitive to this aspect of her character as you might have been. As an old husband I can tell you, never let her feel too alone. That's the cardinal sin--unforgivable."

The house lights dimmed. There was a fanfare as the emcee, a throb of excitement in his voice, announced, "Ladies and gentlemen, the next act on our stage may shock you--"

Emil, unburdened of his tedious analysis, was all eagerness now. "David, you must watch this. This is the headliner. She's extraordinary."

"But I thought you were just getting rolling," I protested. "Surely you haven't covered everything. I'm a festi- val of inadequacies, ask anyone. What about my personal habits? And cleanliness? Was I too stingy in bed? I feel a little cheated."

"I'm sorry, David, I see I've made you angry."

"You haven't made me angry, I'm enjoying this. I love being lectured about Sonia. And coming from you...It's fasci- nating: you're like a seer reading his own entrails. Such a neat trick."

"Please, David, after this, all right?"

"After this act? Certainly, it's your party."

"That's right, my party."

The waitress hurriedly set down another round of drinks as the stage darkened in anticipation. I was quietly furious. I didn't remember us ordering another drink but I was grate- ful for it all the same. Before she left, Emil whispered some- thing in the waitress' ear. I don't know why, but this aggra- vated me even further and aloud I muttered, "Damn rude to whisper." It occurred to me I was drunk. Excellent. I would finish my last drink and go.

I watched the darkened stage until indistinct shapes and outlines took form and I realized that the darkness wasn't really darkness but a murky blue obscurity, tranquil and

strangely mesmeric. Or maybe I was just in a mood to be mesmerised.

The music was at first barely audible, a low toneless thrumming like a generator or a heartbeat. Then a cone of brilliant white light stabbed the stage. It fell on a cluster of four oblate forms that might have been sculpted, egg-smooth, out of teakwood and ebony. As the music grew in tempo the forms began to move and sway to its rhythms. Slowly the teak figure arose: a woman. Her splendid body was oiled and glistening. Nude but for brief twists of silk at her breasts and thighs, she spread her arms and threw back her head as if embracing the sky.

The seals then came to life, three of them, lifting their shiny blue-black heads into the spotlight. They made a sort of chorus that writhed at the woman's feet in abject, flippery lust. She knelt and caressed the largest of the three, stroking him with the tips of her long red fingernails. The seal on which she lavished her attention--a big hump-necked bull--squinted dourly and rose up on his flippers.

Cupping his head in her hands, the woman mounted him. Languorously she began rocking back and forth along the curve of his back. A shudder ran through her body--she arched like a bow, her hard flat belly stretched taut. Then, like waddly but capable magician's assistants, the other two seals leaned over and deftly nipped the silky veils from her breasts. Hey presto! The effect on the audience was electric. As it responded with whistles and applause, the seals held their prizes aloft--pennants for all to see.

I glanced at Emil. He wasn't clapping. In the candle-light his eyes registered no approval or delight or merriment, nothing beyond a compelling hunger to just see. He was bent forward in his chair, intent, utterly absorbed in the play ecstasy of the woman, as though he was staring into the heart of something mystical and profound that had eluded comprehension all his life.

And then I knew he'd lied about why he'd gone to see Sonia.

"Do you think I'm an idiot?" I said. "That I don't know what you're doing?"

Emil blinked--a man awakened from sleep. "What? What's the matter?"

I felt like committing a dramatic gesture: I would have thrown my drink in his face but I'd already finished it. I leaned across the table. "Because look, it's not that I care what happened in San Francisco. I don't care, you understand? What did you think you could open up the wounds again with all this maudlin crap about how I failed her, then tell me how you and she...Really, it's easy enough to imagine: you took her out, poured a few beers in her, got her talking about the good old days in Munich, all bratwurst and bullshit you were, I'll bet--No, never mind," I said. "I know. It was much simpler than that. All you had to do was slide up your sleeve and show her your wrist."

"No," he snapped. "Damn you, it wasn't like that. I don't ask pity from her. Or you."

"No?"

"No! Oh, I seduced her--that's what you wanted to know, wasn't it? But not like you say: like a mensch. There were no sob stories. I was gay, I was charming. The conversation flowed. All evening long I made little jokes. Then I got her good and drunk and took her to bed, like any man would. Like plenty did even when she was with you, only you never knew it."

He banged down his pipe, scattering ashes across the table..

"You're lying," I said. "And even if you're not you can keep your filthy little stories to yourself. And your strip joints, too. It had to be someplace public, didn't it? Someplace I wouldn't hit you."

"I don't have to make up anything. I would never have mentioned it if you hadn't thrown this in my face."

I thought for a moment he was shaking his fist at me, but he was showing me his wrist. It was crossed with thin puckered lines of scar tissue.

"Not to taunt you, that's not why I arranged this. Will you believe that? You. You can't see anything past the end of your nose. I lost Sonia, yes--but you threw her away. Nobody had to take her from you. All right, she left you--what sense of victory do you think I could get from that? What does it do for me?"

He talked on, his words gaining rhythm, tumbling over each other in freakish haste to be free. He was intensely excited and I can't remember half of what he babbled. He

kept lapsing into German for weighty expletives. And when he came upon a point he thought exceptionally enlightening he would slap himself in the forehead in a parody of realization. Meanwhile, Salome and the seals were bringing their act to a resounding, indescribable climax--akin to the erotic fantasies of a zookeeper--and I had trouble hearing him, what with the music from the band and the frantic honking of the seals.

"I spent three years in psychiatric analysis," Emil told me. "My doctor was a Freudian--I thought it was best. You know the routine, I'm sure. We were supposed to dig out of my memory every shred, every fragment, the bitterer the memory the better. My parents. The camps. After the war. 'Put it together like a map,' he said. 'Follow everything that made you and you'll find yourself.' 'But will I be happy?' 'That comes later,' he told me. All right, this goes on for three years. Finally he tells me I'm ready for group therapy. He particularly wants me to tell this roomful of strangers what I am ashamed of more than anything: Travemunde. I'd never told anyone about it, not even Sonia."

"Travemunde? When you were trying to reach Denmark?"

"That's right--I had papers, money, everything--"

"But they caught you."

"Naturally they caught me. Here I was, traveling as a nun, disguised. I was only eighteen, I had no beard. I'd even sandpapered the calluses from my hands so they would

look soft like a woman's. But I couldn't stop them from shaking. I was terrified the whole time waiting for the ship to leave. On the walls of the ship terminal there were big portraits of Hitler and Goebbels and Schacht looking down at you. They were playing the radio over the loudspeakers, the war news. France had just fallen--everyone was happy, the war would soon be over. The whole world was crazy. I wondered what I was escaping to. After all, you can spit to Denmark from where I was. The next thing I knew, there I was in the men's toilet. I had to pee and I didn't realize what I'd done until I started fumbling with the habit. My God. I sneak out, hoping no one has noticed me and, of course, the police approach me. 'Really now, sister, is this right?' They begin looking at me and shaking their heads. They are too embarrassed to search me themselves so they send for a police matron. As we were waiting for her, the ship sailed."

"Please keep your voice down," I said. "People are beginning to look. Anyway, what's the point of all this?"

"Exactly! What was the point? It took me three years to discover that, not only was I a thoroughly miserable human being, but that I had every right to be. So what? What is redeemed by admitting we have been our own victims? And even if there is someone else who could be blamed--the way I could blame you or Sonia--is that any consolation? The hell with that. I quit my doctor and decided to do something completely different, a new approach. And you know where I got the idea?"

"Where?"

"From you! Ha! Remember the night you found me after I--after I cut my wrist? Do you remember what you said?"

It was eerie thinking back to that night with Emil sitting there, his chair drawn close to mine so that our knees were almost touching. "I said a lot of things. Which do you mean?"

"You know I wasn't entirely unconscious the whole time. I had moments when I saw and hear very clearly. Perhaps I imagined it, but I seem to recall you standing over me, immensely tall, miles high--and you said, 'Look at that phony bastard.'"

Had I? "It's possible. Sonia was absolutely terrified and I was upset...I might have said anything. Forgive me, I'm sorry, but--"

"No, no, not to be ashamed! You were quite right. I knew, you see, I knew I was doing it wrong. You are not supposed to cut across the veins, like I did--the blood clots too easily. You must cut lengthwise, along the vein. I knew that, and still--" He shrugged. "No character, why deny it? A phony bastard. So I decided I might as well be phony all the way. This is what I learned--" he tapped my wrist. "If the past has been a catastrophe you must re-create it. You are what people think of you. With new people, new friends, a different line of work, I've constructed a whole new past for myself, the kind I'd wished for. Even you, David--I've lied about you. Whenever I talk about the

Institute I tell people what a swell guy you were to work for, how much I enjoyed it. And it's amazing--I've said it so often I really almost believe it myself. I hold no animosity for you anymore. I'm fifty years old and I'm free--no more hatred, no regrets, no jealousies--free of all that. Can you say the same? That's all I want to know."

"I try not to regret things," I said.

"That's no answer."

"At least it's not a lie. You can delude yourself into thinking you're Peter Pan if you want, but you've still got Sonia in your guts the same as I have. If it wasn't so, you wouldn't have risked having her laugh in your face--which for all I know is what she did last week."

There was something going on down front. People were turning around, murmuring. It was Salome. She was wearing a shift or kaftan of some diaphanous material, almost transparent, that shimmered in the faint light offered by the table candles. Every head--except Emil's--turned in her direction as she strode gracefully among the tables.

Emil was grinning. Something I'd said had struck him as funny.

"Yes, all right, I'll admit I wondered too. That's why I went to see her. I'd thought about it for months. I'd prepared myself like a boxer training for a fight. I imagined conversations, learned new jokes. And just as I'd planned, she was willing to go to bed with me--it's true!--but I was impotent. There was no physical response whatsoever.

Dead. Once the desire is gone the heart follows. I've survived her, you see? Like Germany, I loved her but survived. Impotent!" he cried with delight.

"For God's sake will you keep your voice down?"

People were looking at us, but it wasn't because of Emil. Salome was standing behind him, smiling. Through the kaftan the silhouette of her body showed, as they on television, like a dream come true.

She put her hand on Emil's, startling him.

"Darling!" He jumped to his feet and kissed her hand. "You were wonderful, marvelous, absolutely superb. Sit down, dear, there's someone here I want you to meet."

As I stood up Emil laid his hand on my shoulder.

"David, I would like to present Elena Maria Salome de Juvaros." He enunciated carefully. "She's from Brazil. And she is going to be my wife." Again he raised her hand to his lips. Half a dozen bracelets slid down to her elbow with a crisp chink. Even under all her makeup she looked not much older than twenty.

"And this," said Emil, squeezing my shoulder, "is Dr. David Hoffman, director of the Institute for Mid-European Research and professor of history at Columbia University."

The girl's eyes widened. "Ooo, is very nice to meet you."

Beaming, Emil told her, "Dave and I used to work together."

THE BOY AND THE CATERPILLAR

In its bottle, its glass bottle--an old mayonnaise jar--the caterpillar looked very natural and at home, bedded as it was in the twigs and leaves Chuck had put in for it to eat. He'd expected, after three days, to find teeth marks or something on the leaves to show that it was hungry, but the caterpillar just wouldn't eat.

The shadow thrown on the window-sill by the bottle was fluted, distorted. The little plastic cowboy he'd leaned against the jar--peering into it, down at the bug--cast a real, man-like shadow. But no notice had been taken of the cowboy either. The bug didn't move.

Chuck flicked the jar with his finger. Not a bristle moved. He whistled softly through the holes he'd made in the lid with a hammer and nail. He cooed to the caterpillar. There was no doubt--it didn't even raise its head--this was a terribly asocial caterpillar. Aloof, self-centered, it lay motionless along the curved bottom of the jar, resting, as if after a big meal. But of course it hadn't eaten a thing, not a leaf, not even the thin bark of the twigs.

Maybe it likes grass better, he thought. Maybe it only eats grass. Why didn't I think of that? Yes, grass.

He put his eye right to one of the little diamond-shaped holes in the lid.

It was like being inside the bottle. The twig blurred, was an enormous tree trunk rushing up at him. The caterpillar looked more colorful now, brightly striped and pleated-- a tiny, painted accordion. Chuck watched its wrinkled sides to see if they moved. But the bug only lay there, not breathing, or if it was, so shallowly as to be invisible. He blew into the jar, rustling the leaves and toppling a twig.

Chuck went into the bathroom and filled the yellow toothbrush cup with water. Stepping carefully to keep from spilling any, he carried the cup back to his room. The bug hadn't moved. Slowly he dripped a little water onto the jar lid. Some of the water ran through the holes and dribbled down the sides of the jar in thin rivulets. It half covered the caterpillar, which began listing slightly to one side. With his finger, Chuck nudged the remaining beads of water through the air holes, almost covering the bug.

"Chuck..."

His father had entered so quietly that he bumped the water cup with his arm when he heard his name.

"We have to be leaving soon," said his father.

"Now?"

"Very soon."

"Can I wear my red tie?"

"No, you can't. You can't wear the red tie. I'm sorry."

Chuck's father went to his closet and took out his darkest tie. It was navy blue and had a gold C stitched into its widest part. He took out Chuck's black jacket and a white shirt. He stared at the shirt, frowning. The collar was dirty and there was a purple ink smudge on the cuff.

"What happened to the rest of your shirts?"

"I don't know."

The caterpillar was floating on its side, just off the bottom of the jar. Chuck thought he saw it move.

His father pursed his lips and began opening the buttons on the soiled shirt.

"Well, you'll have to wear this," he said.

He helped Chuck slip it on, buttoned it, then quickly knotted the tie. The tie felt too tight. Chuck loosened it, then put on the jacket himself. He put it on with his back to his father, because his father was crying.

A WILL BY LAMPLIGHT

Mrs. De Falco, who found him, said Carl's roan pulled up in front of his house, knowing where to stop on his own, with Carl slumped over in the buckboard and the reins trailing on the ground. After he was able to make sense, Carl told us he'd tried to drag the buckboard out of a deep rut and, being close on to seventy, something cut loose inside him. It was February, that dry cold time of the year, and he was lucky to make it back to town. He'd have froze to death sure out on the prairie.

Now there were all kinds of stories out and about concerning old Carl--like how he was a heller back in Kansas before the War Between the States and that, later, he fought for pay for Maximilian down in Mexico--and none of them true that I know of. Carl Beamons was as fine and well liked a man as we had in Bethlehem. He was tall and lean and he wore his long hair Indian-fighter style, cut off neat and even with a knife. Around town you'd always see him tipping his hat to the biddies doing their shopping--"Good day, ladies. Good day. How do?" There was no harm in him and everybody like him. They loved old Carl, him and his long white hair.

So when Carl got sick they sent for Doctor Cubbie, him being the best and only physician in town at the time, and I came with him too. I'd been his assistant, sort of an apprentice helper boy, from the late summer of '97, which makes it eight or nine months I'd been working for him up to then.

Rupert Cubbie was built like a keg, with thick arms and a red face. He was a good physician, which is what he liked to call himself, and he could speak Greek and Latin like a wonder. At times I thought he learned those tongues just so he'd have something to replace English, which he was sure to burn out long before he was through on earth. Because if he had a weakness it was that he loved to talk. Sometimes it was about useful things like diseases and how to diagnose them and what to do for them. But mostly it was about people--meaning his patients. And not just their medical histories, either. Which is why I can tell the story, not in bits and pieces, but all tied up together like it was.

By the time we got to Carl's house we found a crowd already there. Mrs. De Falco, who was Carl's neighbor, let us in. Someone had built a big fire in the hearth and the parlor was nice and warm. All these people were sitting around, fresh from church it looked like, talking about Bryan and McKinley and the weather and Carl and what a shame for him to take sick and that it must be something serious to come on like it did. I listened to all this sitting in the parlor while Doctor Cubbie went in Carl's room with Mrs. De Falco. I knew most of the people, but some I didn't. Mr. Beech from the bank was there, the Keller's, Mrs. Sheehan the widow, Mrs. Dobler and her kids who she kept telling to shut up out of respect, and some others.

Mrs. Dobler nudged me in the ribs and nodded toward Carl's door. "What's he got?" she said and I said, "I don't know, what's he got?"

The door to Carl's room swung open then and everybody turned around. It was Mrs. De Falco and she asked me to come in. Carl was in bed with the blankets around his chin and him whiter than the pillows, breathing hard. His eyes were half open but I don't think he could see me.

The doctor wrote something on a piece of paper and handed it to me. He said, "I want you to run back to the office and go to the medicine cabinet and get this for me. And don't you go tasting of it, either."

"Oh, that," I said, finally making out his writing. "Don't worry, I'm cured. I swore off after the nightmares chased me for a week."

"Will that stuff he's getting do it?" asked Mrs. De Falco. Doctor Cubbie frowned and looked at her. "He's awful bad," he said. "This'll do for the pain, maybe."

"Is he gonna die?" I asked.

"Something's busted inside him." He shook his head. "Old man like this..." He kept shaking his head.

"Lord have mercy," said Mrs. De Falco, real low.

"Get going," Doctor Cubbie said to me.

I went out, closing the door behind me, and everybody turned around and started asking questions. I waved them away and said, "He's sick, that's all. I got to hurry."

Mr. Beech stops me.

"Can you tell us exactly what's the matter? As Carl's friends--"

And I say, "I just help Doctor Cubbie. You ask him if you want." And I left.

The next day there was nothing but talk about Carl and what a fine man he was and how he'd done all kinds of favors for people that didn't deserve it. They were talking like he was dead already, which he wasn't, but close enough. Doctor Cubbie said there was nothing to do now but wait. More people came to the house, Mrs. De Falco serving them sandwiches and stuff to drink, but nobody was allowed in to see Carl. Except Mrs. De Falco, of course

Naturally, the question came up of a will. Mr. Aram Weiss, the lawyer, said that, to his knowledge, Carl never had one drew up. That wasn't hard to understand. Carl was a widower--his wife had died, along with his daughter, in a fever epidemic about ten years before. He had a son left, living somewhere in the east, either Ohio or Philadelphia. No one was sure. Carl never talked about him and nobody ever heard him mention any other relations--so there was a little problem of what to do with his property if and when his time to go came round.

But Carl didn't have a lot. He wasn't a rich man that anybody knew of. There was his house, which was pretty enough but kind of small, his buckboard, and that damn roan of his, which was smart but lazy and if it had just pulled that buckboard a little harder maybe none of this would have happened.

Otherwise there was just that houseful of furniture Mrs. Beamon had piled up before she died. I never knew her, of course, but I'd heard that, being from New Orleans, she'd only

have the best--love seats and armoires, sideboards and end tables, fancy lamps, settees, divans--everything satin and frills. Then, after she died, Carl was left with what some people said was the makings of a real fine cat-house.

Instead, being alone, he began to stretch out like a man will. Over the years he'd moved in a few things more to his taste. It didn't matter if they didn't mix right. In the parlor, for instance, right next to a white and gold divan with curly carved armrests, he set a big elk's head lamp with eyes staring out at you and antlers to here, so help me.

Anyway, Doctor Cubbie spent all afternoon and into the night with Carl. The old man looked yellowy and kept spitting up and I had to wipe off his chin. Sometimes his eyes would open and kind of jump around, then close again. The doctor tried to talk to him but Carl was in no condition.

Around supper time I went in the parlor to have a bite. There were about a dozen people waiting around, Mrs. De Falco giving them stuff to eat and drink, and some women were crying and the men looked sad. They all sat there real quiet, expecting I guess to hear old Carl's death rattle any minute because he sure was looking bad.

Nobody felt like talking much until Mrs. Keller, who was an almighty big woman, said to her husband, "You know, Josiah, I can't help thinking--and the Lord forgive me for this--about that young girl a few years back that Carl had his way with. You 'member the one?"

"Hell, Marie, this ain't no time for stories like that!"

This started a big hubbub and commotion.

"Here, let the woman speak."

"I can't help thinkin'," she said, shaking her head.

"That was twenty year ago!" piped up Mr. Keller, getting all red in the face. "And you don't even know if it's true. Look now, the man's dying in the next room."

"She got a right to speak," said somebody.

"If 'ary a body in this town cares more about old Carl than me, I'd like to know who," said Mrs. Keller and Mr. Keller, shouted down as you might say, just sat there all embarrassed, trying to look every way but in. Then she noticed me special.

"Maybe the boy ought not hear this."

Mrs. Sheehan tugged my arm. "How old're you now, Samuel?"

Just then the doctor called me into Carl's room and told me I might as well go home.

"Carl isn't going to make it tonight," he whispers to me.

I nodded because I knew it anyway. "He lasted a long time, busted like that."

"Those people out there just go to show what a fine and well liked man Carl was." Doctor Cubbie's eyes got teary then and he had to blink them back.

I went home then because I was so tired, him saying it was all right, but he told me later what went on.

Along about eight o'clock Carl opened his eyes and started to make some sense. His voice was just a little croak. He asked the doctor if he was going to be all right and the doctor said probably not, that he was real bad. Doctor Cubbie didn't like to lie to his patients. He believed a man should be able to set things straight before he went and he could only do that if he knew he was going. But Carl didn't want a minister or anything like that. He wanted to know if any of his friends was there and the doctor told him yes, that they'd been waiting for two days to see him.

"Who's out there?" asked Carl.

The doctor told him and Carl said he'd like to see them, all of them, because he wanted to thank them and it would make him feel good to see them one last time anyway. So the doctor gave him some of that special tonic to kill the pain and told Carl that, by rights, Mrs. De Falco should see him first, her working so hard and being a saint about everything. Carl said that was fine with him so she came in quietly and sat by the bed, crying a little because she knew what was up.

There was only one lamp in the room. That was beside the bed, turned down real low because the light hurt Carl's eyes. Doctor Cubbie said half of Carl's face was lit and the other half in the dark. The strange thing was that Carl's lit eye kept dancing around like he was looking for something up in the rafters. But he talked all right, though very croaky and all.

He said, "Tina, the doc's been telling me what you've done here. I guess I can't thank you enough."

Mrs. De Falco sniffed and said something about how happy she was to do it.

"A man's got nothing in this world," said Carl, "nothing but his family and his friends. My family's gone now--but it's enough I got my friends here. I want to do something for them. I ain't got much, not anymore. But what I do have, I say let my friends have it. Let them have it to use and remember me by."

"Carl, you don't have to."

"I want to. I want to do it. It's my last wish." His hand, all weak and shaking, reached out for hers. "You always admired my Louis the Fifteen sofa, Tina, and said how pretty it was. You know how Millie loved it. Sent all the way to St. Louis for it. I want you to take it."

"Carl..."

"Take it. Take it tonight. Have someone help you carry it over to your place."

"Tonight?" she said. "I'd...I'd best wait a while--"

"No, no. Tonight!" Carl told her. "That's what I want. That's my request to you."

She was really crying by then. "If you say, Carl."

Then he asked her to send in the others.

"Have them all in here. I'd like to see them, all those good faces by me."

When the others came in and gathered around, Carl told them, as he was coughing and spitting up, about how friends were all a man had in the world and that by giving them his goods he would sort of be staying around with them. It was a small room, dark, with a low ceiling, and it was crowded. But there was no noise, nobody shuffling around or sneezing, except some of the women gave a little sob now and then.

Carl said his words and told the different people what he wanted them to have. He gave Mrs. Sheehan the horse and buckboard, Mr. Beech a chair and an old hunting rifle, Mrs. Dobler the fancy rug in the parlor, Joe Skinner a pair of horns that he got in Texas off a dead longhorn, and his favorite rocker to the Keller's. He gave away his lamps, his armchairs, two paintings, his cherry wood desk, whatever there was--down to his pipe and an old hat. He gave things to people who weren't even there and some who were dead.

And he wanted them to take it all that night, that very minute.

"Take it. Take all of it," Carl told them. "Every bit. Don't leave it in a house with death crawling up on it like an Indian. I don't want to see it here again."

He got all fevered telling this and tried to climb out of bed, the cold sweat on him though he was burning up. Doctor Cubbie had to push him back into the wet pillows.

"You take it," he went on, "and the spirit'll ride along. Oh me, oh me. I see them black wings flapping over us right now. Watch out, Josiah. Better duck, now." And so on, half out of his head.

Carl never got any clearer about the spirits part but everyone agreed that a dying man's wish had to be humored, crazy as it was. So there in the dead of night Mrs. De Falco got her boys to carry out the Louis Fifteen sofa while the other people lit candles and started looking through the house for what they'd been left. There were one or two arguments about who got what, but they kept it quiet for Carl's sake. They took chairs, candlesticks, paintings, the cherry wood desk which was a beauty, the draperies, bundles of clothing, the Sharps rifle over the mantel, and that elk's head lamp-- all this done as quiet as they could. When the furniture was gone, Mrs. Dobler had Mr. Beech help her roll up the rug and carry it out to her wagon.

The doctor had little Tommy Dobler run get me and I got there about midnight. I walked in and the place looked like a barn, stripped clean. I went into Carl's room and the doctor told me that Carl had something to say to me. I sat next to the bed and put my ear close by his mouth because he could hardly breath anymore.

He said, "The doc tells me you been studying and that you been helping me here."

He coughed then and I pulled away.

Then he said, "I got a box of books in the loft. It's wrapped in butcher paper, in the corner. I want you to take them and read them. Take them tonight. Take them before you go home."

I said, "I sure will, Carl." I asked the doctor if he needed me anymore and he said there was nothing I could do but I could stay if I wanted.

"I'll stay right here," I told him. "You should take advantage of some time to rest."

So I sat up with the dying man. Around one o'clock he starts jerking and groaning and I had to hold him down to keep him from rolling off the bed. We put cold towels on his head, too, because he was burning up. We couldn't get him to swallow anything. He spit up a lot more and I had to keep wiping his chin. Around three he started to gurgle and I thought sure it was almost over. But after that he got quiet and looked like he was asleep. The doctor listened to his heart and shook his head, saying, "A few hours--a few minutes, maybe."

I woke up in the morning, having fallen asleep right in my chair. The doctor was bent over Carl's chest listening with a stethoscope. Carl was still alive and the doctor couldn't understand it.

Carl made it through that day quietly and even woke up once and took a little soup. People came by, but all we could say was that he was still alive, though in terrible shape. They looked awful said and a few said the Good Lord should put an end to his suffering.

But I guess that wasn't the plan because Carl lived through the week. In fact, he started getting better. By the end of the month he was sitting up and talking and eating again.

I stayed with him often while he was recovering, as did Mrs. De Falco. The doctor would come by regularly and tell Carl what an amazing man he was and guessed he'd been an old woman for expecting the worst. "I guess medicine just ain't that precise, Rupert," Carl would say, laughing. Other people dropped by too, to talk with him and bring him food. He got awful happy when people came to see him. He'd sit propped up in bed to welcome them and shake hands with the men and ask how was everybody and he was just as polite and fine as always.

He had to keep to his bed for a few more weeks. But as spring started coming on he went and sat outside and took little walks. Easter Sunday, for the first time in anyone's recollection, Carl went to church and the preacher gave a special talk about the miracles of the Lord and how this showed he really cared for the good people in this world and on and on like a preacher will.

Now I'm sure you can see the problem. Nearly everything Carl owned, down to the cups and saucers, was scattered all over Bethlehem and the surrounding area. The only place left to sit down was the bedroom, the rest of the house being bone dry of anything.

So, soon after Easter, Carl decided to drop by Mrs. Sheehan's. Mrs. Sheehan sat him right down, giving him tea and cake, trying to make it the warmest welcome she could. Then, very politely, Carl brought up the subject of his horse and buckboard and how useful it would be for him to have them back so he could go around and pick up the other things he'd given away that night he was out of his head. He hoped she would

understand.

"Oh Carl...Oh Carl..." she said. "Of course I understand. That's all I been thinking about. Oh Carl, this makes me feel awful..but my eldest boy, Grover, is away at college in Baltimore, don't you know. He's going to be a doctor. And last month--have some more cake, Carl--he wrote home saying how much he needed some more money to get through the year. Oh Carl..."

"You sold 'em?"

"I did, Carl, I did. I sold your horse and buckboard. I don't even have the money--I sent it off more than two weeks ago. No, more than three. It was while you were still-- Oh, I wisht he didn't need the money so bad. I promise I'll pay you back, Carl, every cent."

"All right, all right, Sylvie." He calmed her down. "There's no hurry, now. Whenever you feel like you can."

"I just feel so awful, Carl."

"There, there, now," he said.

Naturally I'm filling in a little here and there but that's pretty much the way Carl described it to me.

A few days later I saw him walking in front of March's Goods and Fancies Store and I went up to him and started walking alongside. I told him how much I appreciated the books he'd given me. I especially liked the one by Charles Dickens about the French Revolution. I had some trouble following what was going on some of the time, but there was plenty of killing and intriguing to keep up the interest.

Carl said I could keep the books because they'd only been taking up space in his loft anyway. He was happy I was reading them and not just storing them in my loft.

Just then Mrs. Keller walked by, like a mountain wrapped in calico, and didn't even look at us, just sweeping by and staring straight ahead.

I said, "Hey, Mrs. Keller."

She turned around and gave me the fish eyes. "Hello, Samuel," she said and turned around and kept on walking.

I said, "Carl, she looked through you like you were a pane of glass. Something wrong?"

"It's nothing," he said. But he sounded kind of sad when he said it.

And the same thing kept happening with other people, or close to it. I figured everyone would be real warm and friendly seeing that Carl was up and around. But they mainly just said, "Hello, Carl. How you feeling today?" And you could tell they didn't care one way or the other.

The day after that, Sunday, I was walking out to the De Falco's, right next door to Carl, to see if Jenny was home. Jenny was as nice as her mother, and prettier. And there was Mrs. Dobler's wagon parked in front of Carl's house. Mrs. Dobler sat up there on the seat, a little pint-sized woman with her face screwed up inside a bonnet, holding the reigns while her two boys took a big rolled-up rug out of the back, carried it over to Carl's porch, and dropped it there.

She called to them, "Come on, let's get away from this place."

I ran over to the wagon and said, "How come you dumped Carl's rug on the porch like that?"

"It's his, ain't it?" she snapped back.

Another wagon pulled up and it was the Keller's. They carried Carl's old oak rocker up to the porch and left it there, too. They didn't even knock on the door. More people right from church--I could tell because they were all dressed up--came with their families, bringing Carl's stuff. Most of them were polite and brought what they had inside but they sure didn't stay long.

Mrs. Dobler sat in her wagon watching all this with her mouth kind of crooked. I couldn't tell if she was smiling or frowning.

"What is all this?" I said. "It's his stuff. He only gave it away 'cause he thought he was dying."

She said, "I ordered a whole new set of furniture just to go with that rug. All the way from Chicago. Now I have to buy a new rug to go with it. You know how much that'll cost? And him practically threatening to kick Sylvie Sheehan out of her house if she didn't give him the money for his horse and buckboard." She called to her boys, "Come one, let's go! Joe! Ezra! Get in the wagon!" Then she looked at me with her eyes squeezed. "Mind me, Samuel, nobody on God's green earth likes an Indian-giver."