

The University of North Carolina
at Greensboro

JACKSON LIBRARY



CQ

no. 1275

UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES

MEDEIROS, JAMES PHILLIP. Two Apartments. (1975)
Directed by: Fred Chappell. Pp. 57.

The two stories of the thesis examine the effectiveness of the main characters in dealing with American life. The disparate backgrounds of each main character further serve to contrast the responses of particular societal types to commonly accepted middle class values. Part of an interrelated series of seven stories all set in the same apartment house, each selection naturally reflects the larger themes of the entire collection: loneliness while being surrounded by people, the difficulty of keeping in the mainstream of American life when ill equipped for it, and the vitality and necessity of the immigrant in America.

TWO APARTMENTS

by

James Phillip Medeiros

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

Paul Chipull
Thesis Adviser

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

Paul Chappell

Committee Members

Lloyd Krupp

Ronald G. Darrell

Paul Chappell

March 26, 1975
Date of Acceptance by Committee

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. THE PARTY BELOW	1
II. THE FIANCÉ'S HOME	37

CHAPTER I
THE PARTY BELOW

They're doing it again. One long party, all night long, and they won't let me sleep. They've been away so long and now they've come back. Just when I was going to say my prayers for Billy. I thought they couldn't follow me here, I thought that I got away. Now I know that they're everywhere. I wish Mrs. Souza was here, then she'd know. She'd hear them. How can they party all night long? Aah, they'll get theirs. God sees it all. He'll fix them. They think they've got me now and they're starting out quiet, waiting until they're all here. I'll fool them this time. Maybe they're already all there. They think they'll get me but I'll fix them. They've been after me ever since Billy. Oh Billy, Billy. Poor little Billy. Just a boy and they were after you. They want to stop my prayers but they won't. I won't let them. I nursed you when you were with me and I'll take care of you now. That damn laugh, that cop. He's down there, too. He's as crooked as can be and he's still a cop. Laughing at me, my prayers, at you, Billy. They better watch it. If they get too loud I'll fix them. I've still got a couple of tricks. They think they'll get me, but I'm not too old. All because of you, Billy. If I'd only listened that first night. You told me and I wouldn't believe. I should have known. Even the spirits said something.

The moon fluttered in that late fall night, the clouds netting it. It was a polished quarter at the bottom of a muddy basin. For Ruth, the road was a faint frosted path cut through the trees. To the right was her land, three hundred yards of scrub pines and scattered maples stretching from the corner to where the house rested on concrete blocks. The noise of the foghorn pushed through the damp, pine-edged, Cape Cod air. Tired and footsore, she wished that the hospital had not made her retire. The work there had never made her this weary, and she kept repeating that she had been a good nurse. At least now there would be work for as long as her present patient lived, but she knew the woman would not last a year. The spirits had told her that. Others called it intuition but for her it was more than that. It was a strangeness she had ceased questioning as a child. It was quiet and soothing to be close to the naked trees after the frenzied household where she was the invalid's servant. She turned a bend in the road and noticed how dark the deeper forest became beneath the moonlit branches. By the time she came to her peeling pickets her feet were so cold and sore she felt she could barely walk. She wanted to tumble to the screened porch and throw herself through the door for the long parlor couch. Dead leaves scratching across the road made her shiver. She ached to rush forward but she was too tired to move quickly and was glad she had not when she reached the gate.

He moaned on the doorstep.

She froze; blood sucked from feet pounded in her head. The silhouette of his body moved as it lay on the decaying porch. She glided forward, knowing he was hurt, thinking only of that as her white uniform strained against her rapid movements.

"Don't move. I'll get a doctor."

He struggled up on an elbow. "No, no."

He coughed and fell back, head rapping on the screen door, then his voice cracked weakly in the cool air.

"Please, no. Don't call a doctor. Don't call anybody. Please. They'll kill me. Just let me rest."

His skin was gray in the moonlight and she could see the shadow of blood on his lip and darkly blotting his shirt.

"How bad are you hurt? What happened?"

"Just a fight, lady," he whispered. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to lie here. I'll be all right. Just let me rest. Please."

He's hurt, they told her, he needs you. She knew at once he lived hard, wouldn't hurt her, and needed a place to stay. They told her all this in the moment after he had spoken, told her before her mind could fill up on its own. Training took over and she started to help him.

Once inside the low-ceilinged house they went to the parlor where the unshaded bulb threw long, fuzzy shadows on the dusty blue paint. She swabbed the lip then pressed an ice cube to the lump on his eyebrow. Then, after removing his shoes and suitcoat and loosening his sleeves, she pressed his ribs for breaks. He was quite dazed or he wouldn't have let her touch those sleeves. She had seen the addict marks on his arms. After he sank into the weak-sprunged couch, close to the cushion that always stabbed her and made her swear, they sat and talked between an endless procession of cigarettes. The oil can on the space heater gulped, and she sat in her chair, the arms worn down through the false velvet fuzz, through the cloth the fuzz had been woven in, worn down to the yellowed wadding, the same armchair

she warmed every night. There were two magazine stacks on either side of her chair, each high enough to hold an ashtray in easy reach. In front of the couch was a magazine-littered table. Two flaking tables guarded the couch, one leaning beneath another load of magazines, the other holding only two books and a dusty, blackened hurricane lamp.

She studied him.

He was very young and thin, bony hunched shoulders jabbing his shirt, his long cornstalk arms poking from the shirt sleeves, while surmounting it all was a thick-lipped, baby face and narrow chin. A finger of brown hair hung on his forehead. His name was Billy and he told her he was thirty-two though he looked twenty. Thanking her repeatedly, he said he would leave in the morning.

"Don't be silly. In the first place you have nowhere to go. Your family's dead, or at least not from around here. You're still weak and if you're seen around here you might get jumped again. You can stay here as long as you have to. I won't charge you anything. Besides, you should see a doctor for your ribs."

His face shriveled, his lips drawing inward to hide his teeth and make his face a lump of flesh. He jerked weakly. "You're one of them. You'll kill me. You're everywhere. I'm getting out." Then he coughed, the spasm wringing him until it was all he could do to force out the hacking. It dragged from his lungs, shaking him like a doll until he dropped back and his skin turned moonlit gray. "You're one of them," he whispered.

"One of who?"

"The gang."

"What gang?"

"The gang."

"The Mafia? Is that who you get the dope from?"

His mouth dropped slightly, then closed as his unswollen eye glistened.

"No," she said "I'm not one of them."

"How do you know about me then?" He bent forward, his fist clenched. "You must be one of them to know."

"I just know. It's what I've always had. I can tell."

They were talking to her again, pouring Billy's life into her as they only did with the dying and a few others. He needed her. She could trust him. She stared at the yellowed picture of her family behind him, Nat, her mother and father, herself on the lost New York farm.

"You're not from around here . . . your mother's dead. Too bad, she was a good woman. She loved you very much. She's been dead a long time?" She turned her eyes to see his beaten face nod in surprise. "She took care of you. She still does. You have money from her every month. They say you have money all around you. I see a big house. Your father is in it and won't let you in." Her eyebrows arched and she shook her head. "That's too bad. You really love him and he doesn't want you there. You're a good boy though he doesn't see it. He only sees the bad. He's old now and might let you come back but you have to have a job. You would love to go back, wouldn't you?" He nodded. "You're the youngest and, I see, they say six. Six children in your family. Two of them, they're fuzzy. Are any of them dead?"

"Yeh." He stared at her.

"I thought so. All five were ahead of you and they all, they all wanted the money. They want your father's money very badly and do just

what he says. He didn't see it before but he does now. He's a little sorry he was so hard with you." The words pushed against one another, funneled into her, then leaving as fast as she could form them, hurting if they didn't get out fast enough. "You have always done as you liked, got what you wanted, your mother gave it to you, you never went to college like he wanted, you traveled, went everywhere, wild, mad, got mixed up with other kids, did crazy things, dishonest things and you just got in more and more until now you can't back out. You think you can't go back though you want to. You will, you can go back. You'll live in his house again. You won't have all the money but you'll have the house, the house with the high stairs and hanging lights, and you'll have enough money. There's nothing to worry about, just try like you've decided. You'll go back. Don't worry. I see it. He wants you."

With a cry she fell back in the chair, drained, no longer hearing them, noticing for the first time that his head was bowed. She did not speak, did not want to know more. Her mind was blank, a vacuity that dragged at the inside of her skull and left her unable to even draw forward to pick up the cigarettes where they lay beside the last charred, untouched butt. The heater glugged slowly yet she was still cold and assumed that was because of the spirits' touch. She sat quietly rebuilding her energy to speak.

"Now do you trust me? I'm an old and useless nurse that nobody wants and I change bedpans for a dying woman while her son and his wife pray for her to die. I don't belong to the Mafia or anything else. I just want to help. Will you see a doctor?"

When he looked up she thought his face was tear streaked though he was not crying. "Why do you want to help me? If you know all that why

should you be interested?"

She was too tired to smile. "It's because I know that I want to help you. I'm a nurse, you're hurt. I know you're not bad. You're good. Even if you weren't, I don't have anything to steal, just a lot of books and furniture. I can help you. That's why they told me so much about you. They've always told me when someone needed help. They always tell me when someone's sick. You need help. Stay here."

Licking his swollen lip, he stared over the barricade of magazines. "I'll stay on one condition. Don't tell the cops or make me go to a doctor. They said they'd kill me if I went to anyone. Promise you won't tell. They'll kill me. They're everywhere."

She sighed and was tempted to smile at his conception of an insidious gang. She felt she could snatch him to her breast and rock the fear out of him, soothe the terror and pain away, but instead she nodded and arose. After checking the blue-red glow of the heater she gave him sheets, blankets and a pillow.

"I get up early for breakfast and you can eat then if you like. You need to sleep now. If you can't sleep there's brandy in the kitchen."

She snapped out the light and went up to her attic bedroom. In the mirror she noted crow's-feet and lines and the short, graying, curly hair half hidden beneath her cap. When she slipped out of her whites, she scanned her figure and was pleased with it for the first time since she could remember. Slinging the oil can onto the space heater, she felt neither old nor useless. The metal snapped as it expanded in the low flame and the wicks soaked up the kerosene. Over sixty and having trouble with her hearing, she did not feel like a

woman that had been forced to retire. There would always be private patients, she told herself, although they seemed to die quickly. She knew the present one would die soon and, consequently, Ruth had not scolded when the woman messed the bed or couldn't hold back until the bedpan was quite in place. She was very gentle. Sometimes, she thought, a nurse did not have to heal. With the battered table lamp out and the cool quilts molded around her, she felt capable and contentedly alive.

There they go again, louder than ever. Oh Billy, Billy. Why didn't I listen to you? Why didn't I go away with you and they couldn't have gotten you? But I'm ready for them. They won't get so far this time. I've got some stuff for them. I'm smarter than they think. Listen to that noise. They're getting worse, banging on something. Or maybe it's the door?

Ruth sat on a sagging iron-framed bed in Goldstein's apartment. Her hands were folded in the lap of the faded dress she had shrunk in. In her hands was the monthly text of the nondenominational prayer society to which she belonged. Her face was shriveled around her bones, and her glasses, oversized now that the wrinkles curving along her cheeks had lost their body, slid on her nose. She was like a child caught in her mother's dress, her feet suspended short of the floor. The room was circular, eighteen feet across with the screenless windows all around except for the solid wall where the door was. Beside the door was a two burner cast iron range, a Glenwood number four, with short legs that had been built onto a wooden frame to bring it waist high. The roomer before her had painted the iron silver and

it was spottily greased and peeling. On one burner was an iron skillet that had not been cleaned since her supper of bacon and eggs. A heavy cardboard closet with a broomstick shot through held her clothes. All the cardboard had been cut away from the front and five loose dresses, identical in style to the one she wore, hung from the stick. There was a lumbering wooden dresser with mirror in front of one dark window. The wood was charred with cigarette burns and one leg had been broken and rejoined with a metal brace. Overhead was a two-bulbed light with painted globe and an older, unused fixture that hung breast-like with the teat of its cap thinly painted. Ruth cocked her head, hand adjusting the hearing aid clipped to the front of her breastless dress. Sitting motionless, she listened to the banging then got up and opened the door, leaving on the chain.

"Hi there, I just thought you might like some coffee."

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Rirdan. That would be very nice."

She closed the door, disengaged the chain, and a man, slightly taller than herself and with salted black hair, came in. Dark skinned and with a lightly lined face, he held a cup of coffee.

"I had some left in my thermos and thought you might like it," he said offering the cracked cup. "I always get some before I go out to the site where we're working. I get it at Mary's, where the caretaker works. They don't have much good there except the coffee and the ice cream."

She smiled, wrinkles soaking the skin around her mouth, head wobbling on the veined leather branch of her folded neck.

"Oh thank you, I was just sitting here saying my evening prayers and was thinking how nice it would be to have a cup of coffee."

"Awful cold out there tonight. Really nippy. You know what they say, when the frost is on the pumpkin it's time for Dickie Dunkin." He smiled but Ruth was watching the coffee swish in the cup. He had a rasping gargle of a voice that loudened as he aimed for her hearing aid. "I didn't think you were in. I was knocking for about two minutes.

"What?" She cocked her head.

"I say, I was knocking about two minutes and you didn't answer."

"I was saying my prayers. I told you that."

"Oh, yes."

She smiled at him then sipped the coffee, cradling the cup in both hands. Motioning the cup at him, she thanked him again.

"Any time. I know you like coffee."

They stood. His eyes avoided her while his hands fidgeted in his pockets. Finally, he smiled, his eyes the centers of two puckered pools of wrinkles.

"Well, I guess I better be going."

"Yes. I was saying my prayers. That's what I was doing when you knocked."

"You can give me the cup back any time."

"Yes, it'll be cold tonight."

He was gone. As she gulped the coffee a roach skittered across the Glenwood number four. The roach stopped and turned toward her, then went on.

A cup of coffee. He thinks I don't know why he comes in here. He thinks he can do the things he does while I'm asleep when I'm awake. I'm no fool. Why else would he bring me coffee? I know he's in with them. He may have been a good man once but now they're just

using him. Maybe even making him do it. Does he think that just because they dope me up . . . the coffee. Dope in the coffee.

She quickly put the cup on the stove then backed away.

Even the coffee. The bastards. They think I still don't know. I can tell. Oh yes, I can tell, by the bed, by the way I feel in the morning. I've got to get a position. Just because I've tried twice and the positions were filled doesn't mean I can't get one. I'll get something in private patients. They think I'm too old but I'll show them. They think they'll get me like they got Billy and the land but they won't. And that Mr. Rirdan and his coffee. I'll dump it down the bathroom sink. He won't get me doped up tonight. I'll be awake. If he tries it tonight, I'll get him. Oh, I'll get him.

She went to the dresser and ran her hand along one of the narrow top drawers then got a cigarette from atop the two job rejections.

Oh Billy, Billy, why aren't you here? You wouldn't let this happen. You'd stop them. I know you would. Nobody can take your place.

It was a full year before he slept with her. After the first week of his stay he was up before she was, the kitchen stove already lit and reeking oil when she came down at five-thirty, the oil cans for the heater filled; and when she was late he would have the breakfast started. He was definitely a good boy, and though she still had the strength to haul in the oil cans from the barrel by the garage, it was much nicer to get up in the morning and find it done. He did small things that the house had needed badly, painting the fence, patching the roof, even tinkering with the car that had sat in the garage as long as she had lived in the house. Sometimes, when he thumbed

through her father's books that lined the dining room, she would think it wrong to keep him there, knowing he was an addict and perhaps a criminal, yet she could not tell him to put the books down or not to paint the chipped blue parlor, or not to sit in her father's favorite rocker, the only piece of furniture from the sale of their New York farm. But these times, when she remembered what he was, were few and usually she did not think about it long.

When he received the monthly check from his mother's fund he gave her part of it. He did nothing to anger her, respected her always and was not obtrusive. Slowly, she came to look forward to the end of her day. She would hurry beneath the gloomy dusk sky to open the front door and smell him cooking supper, a frying steak or boiling shoulder that filled the house with a steamy cabbage smell. She did not read much now, and often sat in his parlor until it was time to put a fresh can on the heater and go up to bed. Once a week he went to Provincetown. This was for his dope. Yet, growing accustomed to his perpetual long sleeves, she nearly forgot he was an addict.

They did not talk about the dope, that is, not until one week when he avoided her. His appetite grew worse, his hands constantly fidgeted with the silverware.

During the evening of his worst day she went down to the dining room for a book. His light was on and the radio whispered music. It was quiet and still in the summer night, no cars humming, a breeze wiggling in the curtains, trees hissing over the house. She felt good and wanted to suggest they go to a clam boil together. She went to the doorway and her blood thinned. He was on the couch, veins protruding from his arm just below a tourniquet tied from a strip of rubber.

A candle burned on the scattered magazines and paper crinkled in his hands. He was shaking and sweating, spilling powder into a spoon, then heating it over the candle, trying to stop his tremors by using both hands. When he had finished with the spoon and filled the needle, he shot it, despite the shaking, into his arm, then jerked it out and ripped off the rubber. The ugly distended muscles and veins disappeared as he dropped the arm and threw his head back, open-mouthed, eyes closed. Dressed only in underwear, the hunch of his shoulders made him more boyish than ever.

She fell back from the doorjamb, the trees hissing like a den of snakes and her arms trembling. Leaning on the treadle sewing machine she had inherited from her mother, she panted for air and felt suddenly stifled in the summer night. The clam boil was blown out of her like a feathery seed caught in a storm. He had not noticed her and his sweaty profile was still framed in the doorway, compelling her to deal with the dope. It was as if an old nursing teacher stood beside her and threatened her with the police, scolded her for harboring an addict yet she had not thought of him as a criminal. He was not bad, though several times a week he must use the needle just as she had seen him do. She could not keep him. It was wrong and she had to choose. Repulsed and outraged by what she had seen, she was still twisted by the impulse to help him, to reach out to him. If he stayed she might have to go to prison for him yet he needed help. She panted for a cigarette in the stale paper smell of the room.

It had been naive of her, blind probably, but she had never truly thought of him as an addict. He was always simply "Billy," and those

times that she had thought of him and his need it was merely something he did occasionally, like a weekly drunk. There must have been times when he had been behaving strangely, when he hadn't been eating, when he had been listless or nervous, yet now she was unable to recall an exact day, a certain moment, when she had noted and recognized the signs. The treacherous swirl of horror and concern churned within her, and she knew that she had to relieve the pressure, that she could not simply go up to bed.

Billy was starting to relax. After she got her cigarette, she returned to the parlor, trying to remember how many days he had been jumpy.

When she came into the room he was sitting back on his sofa-bed, slack-jawed and lazy compared to the intensity she had suffered through with him. He made a simultaneous motion to pull the sheets over his underwear and lean toward the works still on the table, desperation and fear in his fluid eyes.

It was difficult for her to contain her confusion but she waved a hand and went briskly to her chair.

"Don't bother. I saw it all from the doorway."

"You did?"

"Yes. I wasn't spying or anything. Oh no, don't get me wrong. I just came down to get a book and you had the needle out."

Still bent forward from his first impulse, he collapsed deep into the sheets. "What are you going to do?"

"Do?" She had groped for action, wondered all the way to the attic and down what she would do. She sucked on the cigarette. "Why,

nothing of course. It's not up to me. I knew about this when you came. I can't do anything. Why don't you?"

"I can't."

"Why not? Other people do." She avoided his face.

"I just can't. I tried. Now they won't sell me any more so I've got to go."

"What?"

"They won't sell to me any more. The gang got to them and they don't trust me. I'll probably have to move out of state to get some."

"Can't you get it some other place? Boston? Providence?"

"Naw. They run Providence. I could try Boston but they know me there too. I got to go soon, Ruth. I don't have any more, not enough."

"But you could stop now."

"I can't."

She wanted to tell him to stop it, to try and break it, that it would kill him, but she knew it would mean nothing. Her silence was as meaningless as her concern before his shiny eyes and sweaty stink. She was tempted, as when she had first seen him, to take him and hold him, to rock him and tell him "no more," but the impulse was drowned as if by his soaked undershirt. He would not, could not, stop, and she was unable to change that.

If she couldn't stop him then there were other ways to get the dope. The gang wasn't the only one that had it. She had known enough who could get it.

"How much do you need?"

He told her.

"That much?"

"Yes. Why?"

"You can't live without it, right?"

His eyebrows lifted and he stared intently. "Ruth, you're not thinking of, Ruth, you can't. I won't let you. You don't do that stuff. I know you've never done it and you can't. It's not right. I'll get it somehow."

"You keep quiet. I'll do what I want. Nobody has told me what to do for fifty years and I'm not going to let some kid start now." She got up and went out without looking at him.

"Ruth," he called. "Ruth, you can't. You know it's not right."

She went upstairs, grateful for his opposition. Quite quickly, through a nurse she had known for twenty years, she got what he needed. That was in the summer just before he'd stayed a full year.

It was in the following November, when they were celebrating his birthday, that she sipped champagne with him and slept with him.

They started in the dark library air of the dining room and then, through the hours, they had gotten a little drunk, and she sat close to him on the couch and kissed him, wanting what she had not wanted in years. Billy was at first surprised and lost until he realized they were both ready. The next day he was up ahead of her and got soaked in the rain of a gusting Northeaster when he went for oil. It was her day off so she ¹³sank his feet in a basin by the stinking kerosene stove while she singed a greasy stew of thick meat chunks, quartered potatoes and carrots in pasty sauce. They had not spoken of the previous night as she had been asleep when he went to fill the cans. He sneezed and his cough gripped him, flailing his arms, as she stirred her bubbling mess. She plucked out a handkerchief for him.

"Here. I suppose it's just as well you've waited until now to get sick. I'll be able to stay home and nurse you in another week."

"Have you lost her already?" he asked between pulls at his nose.

"Yes. They're putting her in a rest home. They always ship them out when they get tired of watching them die. Let someone else get bored with her, they figure."

It was the fourth patient she had lost since he lived with her. The first had died, the next two were only seasonal summer work and this last was rich, but the children controlled both the money and the woman. During the winter it was difficult to find patients. The wealthy came to the Cape only for the summer. She could live well enough as long as he stayed but she would not ask him to.

He coughed into his hand. "Ruth, I'm sorry about last night. I mean, I didn't mean what happened. I didn't mean for it."

"Last night?" She looked at him with a strand of her faintly streaked brown-gray hair across one cheek. "Don't worry about it. Don't you dare apologize either. You'll have me feeling like I can't do anything wrong and still enjoy it. It could have happened a long time ago. It wasn't bad, was it?"

Open-mouthed, he squinted over fading summer freckles. "Oh no, no. I mean, if it was all right with you I, I liked it."

"Well, then. I don't see what's wrong." She smiled down at him, a long-handled wooden spoon in her hand.

"No, oh no. If you say so. I mean. It's all right, I guess."

He looked babyish, his skin pale in the gray window light, his nearly hairless legs stuck in the steaming basin. The rain rapped, hail-like, on the pane and the frame rattled in a passing gust. He

sat quietly until she had put a plate of peppered stew in his hands.

"Ruth, I'm not sure I understand you."

He sneezed then began to cough and doubled over. She smiled and rubbed his bent back.

"There's not that much to understand," she said softly.

They're fairly quiet now, just the sound of their glasses clinking on the bar. You'd think they'd come out like proper people would. It's legal now. Of course, drinking isn't all they do down there. I know, oh I know them all. They get the young kids like Billy, and they get the dope into them and that's it. They're a rotten bunch. They used to run the places years ago, even the sound of the glasses was the same. I remember it. It's kind of like the sound mother's canning jars would make when father brought the box up from the cellar. That kitchen was so warm, not like this cold room. It's not even winter yet. I remember the kitchen and the canning. The old icebox was, let me think, by the door?

Sitting on the bed, she closed her eyes and lowered her chin to her chest as the angular joint of her jaw moved, fanning ripples back from her mumbling lips.

I must be getting old. Why can't I remember it? I ought to remember it. It'll come in a minute.

She sat thinking a moment longer.

It seems at the tip of my tongue. How little I remember. Listen to them now, and that woman shrieking. I know what they're doing down there. Oh God, what a rotten bunch. They're trying to drive me out,

keep me awake by breaking glasses. I'll stop them now. That's enough.
Now is the time. I'll get them.

Ruth arose and went to the dresser, hesitated, then went on to the dark window. A film of frost covered one lower corner and, despite the light glaring on the glass, she could see the two Puerto Rican children from the third floor playing on the roof of a car abandoned by a former tenant. The dead grass around it and the yard behind disappeared in a spattering of Schlitz cans and an old tire. The children jumped on the car until a heavily wrapped shapeless woman appeared briefly at the edge of the window; then children and woman disappeared.

I'll wait this time. I'll wait until they're making so much noise
that they bother the others, like that boy who's the caretaker. That
way Mrs. Souza will see. They think I can't wait but I'll show them.
I'll wait until they make so much noise they come through the floor.
They'll go too far. I have to show poor Mrs. Souza. She's the only
one that's stood by me. I'll show them.

"Hold still now and stop moaning. You're the one made a pig of yourself. It's your own fault, dear. Now stop that moaning."

"My son, my son, my son, oooo."

Ruth's arms sprouted from the breastless dress. Unlike the other patients in the mental hospital she had never run from working. The work, no matter what, was always familiar and comforting. She stood in the ladies' room, one hand holding Penelope's floppy skirts up in the air while the other one swabbed at the fat woman's enormous hams. There was shit on the floor and on one of Ruth's hands. Ruth's ninety

pounds were dwarfed beside her huge fellow patient. Standing oblivious to the cleaning, the woman's puffy face cracked only to moan and flash her two teeth.

"My son, my son, my son so long. Oooo."

"You should have made it to the hopper, Penelope. You know you don't have to do this." She finished poking the legs clean, legs that looked like nylons filled with apples.

"Did she mess herself?"

Ruth looked up as a small unfamiliar nurse came toward her. The nurse was Ruth's height, small-waisted with shapely legs, and breasts that angularly held her uniform far out from her waist.

"Yes, and it's the second time today. She needs new clothes."

The nurse went out and when she returned with the clothes Penelope was a great nude blister.

"Oooo, my son, my son, my son."

After she was dressed they steered Penelope into the day room where the other geriatrics watched television, rocked endlessly in their places, whispered slyly to the air or pushed chairs from room to room. It was only then that the new attendant, Mrs. Souza, found out Ruth was a patient.

"You mean you're not with housekeeping?"

"Oh my, no. I've been here seven years. They think they can keep me here forever but they can't."

"Do you always help with the patients?"

Ruth adjusted her hearing aid and squinted.

"Of course. That lazy head nurse, Benoire, won't do anything. I went down an hour ago and told her that Penelope was messing herself

today and should be in bed but she wouldn't listen. She said to let her sit in her shit a while so she'd learn."

"Did she really say that?"

"Why did you come down?"

"She said Penelope was dirty."

"See? I told her an hour ago and now she sends somebody down. She's one of them, you know." Ruth bent forward, head wobbling. "You're all right. Your life has been too hard for you to be one of them. But Benoire is one of them. Who do you think had them do this to me?" She grabbed her empty dress. "They didn't have to take them both. I'm a nurse. I know. There was only one bad one. They're trying to drive me crazy but they won't. I know who they are." She winked and a smile dried into her wrinkles. "I'll fix them yet. Don't you worry."

"Yes, I'm sure you will." Mrs. Souza smiled.

"Why don't you go back to your husband?"

"What do you mean?"

Mrs. Souza's face crumbled and she leaned forward. Her eyebrows crowded together and her knuckles burned red-white on the chair arms.

"You know you love him. He may, he drinks, right? Well, he may drink but he loves you, too. He doesn't always show it but he does. Then you wouldn't have to work."

Mrs. Souza's Adam's apple bobbed.

"Ah, I see. You have to work for your mother." Ruth leaned her head on one hand, concentrating. Age marked her face like the ripples on a sandy sea bed. "He won't support your mother but you want to, so

you work. Your mother can't talk? Is something wrong with her? She can't talk English, that's it. She can only speak some foreign language. Take care of her. She's getting older, but she's a good woman." Ruth settled back in her chair.

Mrs. Souza sat erectly, smooth face staring, popeyed. Ruth toyed with her hearing aid, mumbling at it, then once again settled. One of the men from male geriatrics was stiffly swabbing the floor near the end of the room. It was only after the antiseptic smell of the mopping blended with the natural sweat and urine odor that Mrs. Souza, still stiff, spoke.

"Who told you that?"

"Nobody. I just know."

"How?"

"I can't tell you. My mother had it and I have it. I don't ask. They just tell me. Never about myself, always about other people. I've always had it. You know, you really should go back to him. Prayer would help. It always helps me."

After that first day friendship slowly branched between them, solidifying like the initially fragile and thickening web of ice in a bucket. Mrs. Souza would sit and listen to Ruth describe the attendant's family, analyzing the past, predicting the future, and always, inevitably, Ruth was right. They settled so close that Mrs. Souza eventually joined the same mail order prayer society.

Ruth worked on the ward, cleaning up after patients, badgering Benoire when a patient was sick. When Annie was dying Ruth took Mrs. Souza to get her temperature. Annie was a small woman who constantly

whispered in a high voice to an unseen companion. She was never any trouble, and now she lay in bed, smiling with her rotten teeth and complaining of the cold. Her temperature was low and Mrs. Souza tried to get Benoire to look at the woman. She told the head nurse that Annie was dying. Benoire accused Annie of faking again but promised to come down. Ruth stayed with Annie, feeding her water, holding the icy, smooth-worn hand as the wind struck solidly through loose casements and up ranked beds. Mrs. Souza came in frequently and Annie, between hissing to an invisible friend, blessed Ruth and Mrs. Souza. The spirits told Ruth that Annie would die and the old nurse went down to snap at Benoire. Finally, two hours after she had been told, Benoire came and sent Annie to the hospital where the woman died that night.

"Benoire is a dirty bitch," Ruth spat when she heard of the death. "She never liked Annie because she was always too sick to clean her office. Oh, what a bitch! She'll get hers. God sees."

"Now Ruth," Mrs. Souza said without conviction.

"It's true."

Ruth was bothered less and less by the gang now. It was as if with the appearance of her new friend they were afraid of being discovered. It was the first time she had lived in peace since before she had lost Billy. At Christmas, Ruth went home with the attendant and met the Portuguese mother whose only word was a bare "Hello" in clumsy English. The new year came and winter slid by, and the antiseptic, urine-scented wards had finally been opened to the spring air when, for the first time in eight years, they talked of releasing Ruth from Middlesex State Hospital. In June, Mrs. Souza signed her out and they

looked for a room. There was a little cash left in her bank account and a small pension. She was free and swore they'd never get her again. She could live with Mrs. Souza's immigrant mother but Ruth knew that what she needed was total freedom. She answered Goldstein's furnished room ad because it was cheap, in easy walking distance of the business district and she could cook there. They settled to take it on Monday and Mrs. Souza drove Ruth to the Cape Cod house. She had not returned to it since entering the hospital.

"Oh Ruth, you have so many antiques here. Everything is so old. Why, look at these tables and this hurricane lamp."

Mrs. Souza bent over the oil lamp beside Billy's sofa. There was a pillow on the dusty couch and a candle was on the long table in front of it. Without the electricity they moved in dirt filtered light and the mouldy damp smell of the house settled in their clothes. Ruth examined a candle where it had burned over the magazines and dripped on the rug. The wax had seeped into the cloth and refused to come out when she clawed at it. The family picture that hung over the couch was streaked and cracked from a leak. High bushes tapped at her windows.

Mrs. Souza stared at the family photo. "What a pretty antique picture, Ruth. All these things are worth money."

Ruth looked around the room, the magazines scattered on the floor, an ashtray overturned. "They've been here," she said.

"Now, Ruth."

"They have."

She led the way out of Billy's damp, worn out room and up the winding close stairs to her bedroom. It had been ransacked, the mattress ripped open and thrown off the bed, drawers spilled out, clothes

scattered, Billy's old hat, underwear, a yellowed shirt.

"It's all junk now," she muttered, "all junk. This used to be all nice things. I wish you could have seen it."

"What happened, Ruth?"

"I told you. That gang's been here. They must have thought I had money or dope or something." She stooped beside the bureau, feeling beneath it for where Billy had tacked the bundle. She smiled when she stood up with a cloth-wrapped wallet-size package. "They missed something," she said unfolding it. She held out Billy's needle and set of works for Mrs. Souza to stare at.

"Ruth, that's just like the ones in drug training."

"Of course. It was Billy's."

"You mean, he really . . ."

"I told you, he was an addict. Oh, poor Billy." She cradled the set in her hands and shook her head. Her hair swayed, lusterless, short and curling at the ends.

Mrs. Souza nosed through the clothes. Ruth watched her, and at the sight of Billy's hat she remembered something the gang couldn't have gotten. She was down to eighty-eight pounds now, thin, tired, flesh pulling her bones. She sat on the bedsprings.

"Mrs. Souza, would you mind finding some cooking things for the new place for me? I think I'll sit and rest, then go through the clothes."

When Mrs. Souza was gone Ruth went to the wall beside the bureau, pried out a board, and removed a parcel. She found a satchel, dug some of the best clothes from the confusion, then put everything, including her two packages, into the bag. She smiled as she went

downstairs.

Mrs. Souza, head bent over a book, was sitting in the old rocker. An arm had been broken off the chair.

"They've been here, too," Ruth said pointing to the rocker.

"What?"

"They broke my father's chair."

The attendant looked at the broken piece. When she spoke it was loudly, gesturing. "This would have been an antique, too. Too bad it's broken. This book is so old, Ruth. It's like everything here."

Ruth looked at the cover of the book. "That's one from nursing school. You can have it. Take anything you want. They'll only get it when we're gone. They'll ruin it. That rotten gang. There's land though. They can't ruin that. I could still sell it and get some money. I own all the way down to the corner."

"Do you really mean I can have some of these things?"

Ruth squinted and adjusted her hearing aid. "Yes. Take it all."

"That sewing machine is worth a lot, too, Ruth. You could sell it. A Singer that old must be one of the first ones."

"You can have that, too."

"Oh no, Ruth. I couldn't. It's worth money. If you want to sell it I'll buy it from you."

"No. You've been good to me, Mrs. Souza. I want you to take it. I never used it."

"Well, maybe we'll come back sometime. Did you get everything?"

"Yes. I want to see the rest of the property and maybe we could find out how much to sell it for."

The trees rustled over them and birds squeaked in the low bushes. There was a new house on the opposite side of the road but Ruth said nothing. It wasn't until they turned the bend in the road that they saw the hamburger stand on her own corner. She stood a moment, head wobbling, her face pulled tightly over the corners of her skull, then she raised her skeleton hand and advanced in a fast shuffle, her cracked old-woman voice screeching.

"I'll kill them. I'll kill them. They've gone too far now. The dirty bastards."

She was too quick for Mrs. Souza, and the attendant had to run half way across the parking lot to catch her. They stood in the midst of the cars, gesticulating and arguing as teenaged drivers snaked around them. It took ten minutes, but Mrs. Souza finally quieted her. They agreed that the attendant would find out how the hamburger place got there and they returned to the car.

On the way back to Middlesex they drove past the corner for a last look. The building was metal-skinned with shiny orange and white paint, glistening stainless steel and fluorescent lights and a parking lot that deadened and soaked the summer sun. Ruth's mouth was paper thin. She shook incessantly, closing her eyes tightly then opening them very wide as her mouth worked over the words.

"It's my land, Mrs. Souza. They can't steal my land. I'll get a lawyer. I'll fight them. They've gone too far, now. I'll find some patients and make some money and use it to get my land back. They can't take my land." Her small body trembled and she gestured with a shiny fist.

"I don't care if the whole town's crooked. It's my land. I paid for it. I'll start checking the papers for a position as soon as I get back. I'm not too old. They always need nurses. I'll show them."

"It's valuable land, Ruth. Land is expensive all over the Cape. They can't just take it. I'll find out. You have to at least get some money for it."

"I want my land." She stared at the dashboard, her small body dwarfed by the car, her face white and drawn.

It took Mrs. Souza a week to find out all she could about Harry's Happy Hamburgerland, and when she sat down to talk with Ruth she bit her lip. They sat on the bed in Goldstein's apartment and the attendant was serious and hesitant, holding both of Ruth's hands.

"I don't know how they did it, but they got the land. They've got it transferred from you to those people. The hospital doesn't have a record of your making the sale but the town says you did. It doesn't make any sense. I don't know how it happened but it's all there and legal. Ruth, maybe you're right. Maybe the Mafia is in it. Somebody is. I don't get it."

Ruth stuck out her jaw and smiled. "Of course I'm right. They haven't left me alone since I took in Billy. I know that gang. I'm no fool." She winked. "They may think so but they've got another thing coming. I'm going to get a position and a smart lawyer and then we'll see who's who. I'm not a kid like Billy."

"I don't understand. Maybe you're right."

If I could only get a patient, then I could fight them. You have to have money. That's all they have is money and with a patient

I'd have money. I've tried two houses so far. I have to try some others. God, listen to them. Quiet down there, be quiet. I'll shut you up. I know what stops you. Go ahead. You won't get away this time. Go ahead. I'll get money and then we'll see who makes noise. You crooks. They'll track you down and get you for Billy. Poor Billy. I'll get you for him. Putting the dope into a kid like that. All I have to do is get a letter from my last patient. My last patient. When was that? During Billy's last year? So long ago. That gang's getting louder.

She had not had a patient in over a year when she first heard the gang. It seemed natural for them to be there, coming as it did after Billy had been badly beaten in Provincetown one weekend. Parking the car and leaving her in it, he had walked the two blocks to the liquor store. She did not mind waiting in the spring May coolness, and when the wind blew she could smell the salt air it carried up the narrow streets. After three quarters of an hour, he had not returned and she sought down the road. He was sitting on a bench that looked on the sea from an empty wharf. As she came up behind him the wind tugged at her hair and she leaned forward. He fell over when she touched him. His face was lacquered with blood, much worse than the first fight."

As she drove back he dabbed the raw meat of his face with a wet cloth and told her that they would kill him next, that they thought he'd told. He said he had to leave the Cape and, as soon as he was in the house, he started on it again.

"They'll kill me, Ruth. They'll find me here and kill me. I have to leave. I don't want them to hurt you. I don't want them to do anything to you. What should I do? Where should I go?" he mumbled. His lips were swollen and he held an ice pack to his eyes. She had painted his face with Mercurochrome and it was lumpy and red. Hands folded in her lap, she sat beside him, her face set and the corners of her lips dragging in an elderly look.

"Why leave the Cape? They can find you anyplace as well as here. They're everywhere. You know you can stay here. Where else could you go? Your father doesn't want you yet."

"Ruth, you don't understand. They think I'm dangerous to them here, but I'm not big enough to just get rid of. If they see me around or know I'm still here they might kill me. They might hurt you."

"They haven't come here yet, and I don't see why they should. Besides, you have no place to go. It makes more sense to stay here. At least you've got a place here."

He sat looking out of swollen eyes and they stared at one another in silence. His irregular lumps twitched. She was the first to look away and purse her lips.

"At least stay until you find some other place to go."

The next day he came back with two pistols, ammunition, and padlocks and bolts for the doors. He showed her how to shoot the gun. It hopped in her hand like a captured snake yet she liked the small hard feel of the butt. They hid the guns behind a board in the bedroom. He still slept downstairs unless she asked him not to. It was the following week, one night as she slept alone, that she heard them for the first time.

It was an uncertain noise, like the minute sound of something gnawing through the wall, but it was there. It came for a few minutes before she went to sleep and then it was gone. For several days it did not return. Billy started writing letters, trying to find someone off the Cape he could go to. The day he sent them off the gang was back behind the walls, gnawing and scratching, clawing the sleep from her mind. Billy never left the house and she went out only for food and dope. She did not mention the gang until she had been sleepless three days. On the morning of the third day she passed out over bacon and eggs. When he brought her around she told him about the noises.

He hesitated when she had finished, then narrowed an eye at her, speaking gently. "Are you sure it isn't just the wind, Ruth?"

"I tell you, Billy, I hear something up there. Will you stay with me tonight?"

He slept with her and the sounds did not return for several days. When he went back to the living room she stumbled fearfully down to him and he went upstairs again. She slept soundly the rest of the night and it was Billy who noticed them next and told her about it. It was not the sounds this time but something outside.

It was dawn, foggy and gray with the foghorn pulsing in the mist, and Billy looked up from a skillet of bacon to see a man outside, a moving mound¹³ against the dripping trees. As Billy watched him cross the yard, the man turned and looked directly at him. He had a fat round face and when it grinned black gaps showed between his teeth. Billy had shouted, dropped the pan and stumbled upstairs. He and Ruth returned with the guns and watched the mist until it had faded and the sun was baking the trees.

He slept with her constantly, keeping one gun on the bureau, going sleepless many nights, sometimes hearing the scratching or hammering downstairs, then going down with a gun to find nothing. They prowled, afraid of each other, frightened of looking out every window, yet always compelled to glance. They were watchmen, patrolling, examining, rattling locks; each noise and every movement suspect. They hid behind the locks and bolts that weighted the doors. They discussed boarding the windows, agreed it was the best thing, then decided it was better to be able to see. In a kind of compromise they nailed them shut in spite of the summer heat. Billy's letters came back, some returned unopened, others answered without invitations, and the last ones receiving no reply. They lurked and wrapped themselves about one another, and snapped and fought just as often. They went on for a month, two, then, in the middle of the third, a letter came from Billy's father. He was dying and wanted Billy home. Billy planned on leaving in three days. Ruth was staying.

In the early morning, the day after he received the letter, she lay wide awake, listening to them and their party beneath the house. For two days the party had kept her from sleeping. It had started very quietly with the rubbing, scratching sound she often heard. The gnawing had irritated her but when she drew closer to the wall of Billy's back she felt comforted. By yesterday morning, when the yellow block of sunlight first floated on the floor, she had not slept and the sound worsened. Replacing the gnawing was a man's voice, his words indistinguishable, but his tone loud, deep, sewn with laughter. His laughter, she knew, was for her, for Billy. By the time Billy awoke the noise was gone and she had spent the day dusting the books in the dining room. Billy had paced by the window, waiting for the mail.

When his father's letter arrived he had been jubilant, engulfing her, telling her it had turned out just like she said it would. She was happy, too, smiling, her arms folded beneath her breasts, watching him spin a circle and shout, yet, it was like watching a child, a stranger.

"We can get out of here, now," he had said, coming up to her, the letter crackling in his hand.

"Yes, you can," she had nodded.

When he realized that she was not going he had tried to argue her away. Her "no" was firm but she had smiled. They had always been here and she felt they could not be right in another place.

Now, tonight, the man's voice returned, loud, multiplied by other voices and much laughter. Glasses rang and a woman cackled and there was danger. Her intuition said they laughed at her. It was a party, she even thought she could hear music behind the rowdies, and there was a hint that Billy wouldn't get away. Anger began to sweep endlessly through her as if a pipe had burst in her blood. They had no right to be there, no right to have disturbed her sleep for so long. They were no better than sneaky children at Halloween, pranksters. Beside her, Billy snored. The noise built, billowing up the stairway, daring her. She left Billy still sleeping and went downstairs with the bureau gun.

Sound layered over itself, tier upon tier, laughter hammering through the floor, then a man and woman roaring together in an off key chorus. She held the gun tightly, picked up the phone, and clumsily dialed. As she waited she set her face. A voice buzzed in her ear.

"Now see here," she said, "I'm sick of all this noise and they won't stop. It's my house and I want to sleep. They're down there having a wild party. I've waited and waited and they won't stop and I want

someone out here right now to stop them. It's not right. Yes, Ruth Barclay, Twenty-two North Point Road. I'm sick and tired of it all. If you don't do something I will."

She slammed the receiver and paced the room, mumbling, giving the rocking chair a push when she passed it, waiting. It seemed they had been down there since the day he had come and she was angry, determined they would never bother her again. They had broken up the nights too often and they were cowards, hiding behind the walls and beneath the house, afraid to show themselves. The woman erupted again and Ruth pictured her, fat, drunk, big-bodied, laughing like a witch.

"That's enough. I won't wait. I'll show them. I'm not afraid."

She unfastened the padlocks, slid the bolts, unhooked the chains, then, finally went out the door. Staying close to the house she waited and watched for movement. She started firing just as a car pulled in front of the house.

"There, you rotten bastards," she shouted. "Now you'll let us sleep. You'll leave my Billy alone. Leave us alone. We just want to be alone." The gun jerked, and she had emptied all the chambers before the policeman came up behind her and got it away.

"All right, lady. You must be the one having the party. What's the idea? Don't you know there's people trying to sleep? You could hurt somebody."

"Ruth, Ruth, are you all right?" Billy burst out the door and stopped short, his underwear white in the gray pine morning. A long knife was in his hand.

"All right, Mister, just put your knife away. There isn't anybody here but a little old lady and she can't hurt you now." The other

policeman shined a light on Billy just as he was about to turn back to the house. The porch was only two strides away and it was easy to see the needle scars.

"Hold it, Mister. Stay right there. Come out into the light."

Shivering, Billy descended.

"You have no right to do this," Ruth said. "I was doing your job. If you hadn't taken so long you could have caught them."

"Are you the lady called about the party?"

"Yes. They were right downstairs and I might have got them if it wasn't for you."

The cop looked at the house as he held Ruth. "You mean they were inside? On the first floor?"

"No, of course not. They were downstairs. Underneath."

"Lady," said the policeman with the light, "there isn't any underneath. This house is on blocks. There isn't any cellar."

"They were there. Oh no." She tried to twist away from the policeman who held her. "You're one of them."

When morning came the police took them to Middlesex State Hospital for thirty days of observation. Thirty days stretched to sixty, dragged out to ninety, and they were both committed. Ruth protested to Benoire that the gang would get Billy unless she were there and the head nurse laughed. Ruth kept watching for Billy through the heavy, wire-screened windows but all she ever saw were white-capped nurses and files of old patients on the concrete walks beneath the trees. Twice she smuggled letters to Billy through a patient that worked on both their wards and then Benoire found one of the notes and the patient no longer came to the two wards. Months passed and Ruth finally heard that Billy had been

transferred to another state. At the same time she began to complain to the attendants that the gang was coming and using her body every night.

My God, my God, my God, why do they follow me? Why won't they let me alone? So loud, so loud it hurts. That's it. How can they get any louder? The house will fall. That girl screaming and those two men shouting. The cops. That's who it is. It's those two cops. And that cackle. It's that witch Benoire who used to give me dope so the men could come and use me at night. Well, you're not going to have it this time, honey. Oh no. I'm wide awake. I'm ready for you. I didn't drink your dope coffee. You thought you would get it all, the land, the house and me. I'm ready for you. Just a minute. Just a minute and you can send in that Mr. Rirdan. Poor Billy. I'll get you for him, too.

Ruth went to the drawer and, jerking it open, she pushed Billy's old set of works aside and unwrapped the second bundle she had brought. She was down to eighty-four pounds and the gun seemed almost too heavy for her to lift and hold in her hands. She went to the bed and sat, both hands on the gun, the muzzle resting on the foot of the iron bedstead and aimed at the door.

Now come on. I told you I was ready for you. Just come in now and see what's happened. It's all over. I've got you now. For Billy, my land, for papa's land. Come on you witch bitch, Benoire, and I'll give you what you need. Come on. I'm ready to stop you now. It's going to end tonight and I'll wait until you're in the doorway and it'll be for everything. You can't do it any more. I won't let you. Oh Billy, you poor, poor kid, Billy. For you. For us.

CHAPTER II
THE FIANCÉ'S HOME

Since he had started as the night dishwasher at the Porter Steak House, Sammy Gonzalez had acquired the habit of cleanliness. Each night before Sammy changed out of his baggy white work clothes, the manager would come to inspect the tile floor and the stainless steel sinks and equipment. The Puerto Rican stood the inspection proudly, often even directing the manager to check beneath the polished sinks or in the hard-to-clean corners of the tile. After checking along the tables and machinery for dust, the manager always patted Sammy on the shoulder and the dishwasher would insist on shaking his boss's hand. When the Health Inspector came around with his flashlight there were never any points lost because of Sammy's kitchen.

Just as Sammy left no streaks in the stainless steel kitchen, no flecks of food or water stains on the rows of plates and bunches of silverware, so too, his apartment sparkled like a carefully scrubbed water goblet. His shiny gold linoleum was as clean as the steaming plates fresh from his dishwasher. The apartment was special to him and he himself had paid for the linoleum and for the stereo. To abandon it after he had spent so much time and money cleaning, painting, and arranging struck him as wasteful. Parting with it, he would lose not only the time and money but also a part of himself. Now, while the stereo screeched with guitar music, Marguerite was asking him to do just that, saying that when they got married they would have to find a

different place to live.

As he sat on the couch in the kitchen-living room, he brought his Schlitz to his dark lips. The sharp planes and high cheekbones of his dark face combined with his heavy eyelids to make him look oriental rather than Latin. Marguerite beside him wore a white blouse peaked with the large cones of her breasts and drawn down to her narrow waist. White shorts molded themselves to the vase-like curve of her hips. Sweat from the October heat condensed on her forehead and glistened like her dark eyes. Her hands fluttered in the air, backing her words, modifying them with adjectival slashes. When she stopped speaking and brushed back her short black curls she marked the end of her paragraph. Sammy's large teeth flashed like even chips of white stone.

"I know it's small, but it's a nice apartment," he said in Spanish.

"It's not the apartment. The apartment is big enough and you've done so much with it. I think the apartment is cute. It's the house itself, the thing that comes with the apartment."

Sammy considered the kitchen around them, the beige walls, the matching curtains with pompons linked by curls of white cord, the golden linoleum that hid the stained inlaid floor, the white utility cabinet set in a corner of the room. Everything was neat, and even the gouged table and chairs pleased him because he knew they were clean. How could she not like the apartment when he had worked so hard? It was home and some day she would share it with him. Here she would cook his meals and wash his clothes. He shook his head and swallowed more beer.

"I'm always cleaning up the house," he said. "You know I do it to keep it ready for when we get married. What's wrong with it?"

"I know, Sammy, but it's not that. Your apartment is always clean. It's the house. The furniture. Everything about it is dirty and old. You know what I mean? Just look at the kitchen chairs and the table, all cut and ripped. We need something nicer."

"But everything's clean. Every week I clean, I wax the floor, I sweep the bedroom, I dust."

"No, Sammy. It's nothing you can do. It's the house and what comes with it. It's the owner. You can't help it. Like the couch, look at how dirty it is. You couldn't clean that. And when you sit down it's too soft. Everything needs painting in the hallways. He doesn't even have an arm rail on the stoop outside. Remember when those drunks broke it during the summer? He hasn't even bothered to fix it."

The material of the sofa felt coarse beneath Sammy's hand and the musty smell forced him to admit its uncleanness.

"You don't like the furniture?"

"Well, if it was new it would be all right but it's all ripped and old. We need someplace better than this."

"But if it had new furniture you'd like it?"

"That's part of it. It's like what I mean."

"Something new, like the stove or a refrigerator?"

Sammy pointed to the yellowed Frigidaire and the new Hotpoint against the walled up mantle.

"Yes. Something new."

"I see."

"It's everything. Look, even the windows don't have screens. You open them up and put the fan in and all the mosquitoes get through."

"I can buy screens at Stop & Shop when I go to work."

"It's not just screens, Sammy. It's everything. You'd have to buy screens, and paint, and furniture. You'd have to do too much."

"But then you'd like it here?"

"Well."

"If it was all nice and we had good furniture?"

"I guess I wouldn't mind it."

"I see."

"I've got to get going home or I'll be late for work."

He hopped up as she stood. Whenever she stood apart from him he watched her face and figure, thinking of how she was far more beautiful than any other girl. He wanted a home for her, a kitchen where she would like to cook their meals, somewhere they would be happy together, where they could have a family. She was prettier and smarter than any girl he knew and he did not want to lose her. She was upset today because of the apartment, but he saw a way to keep her happy.

"Look, Sammy, I know you've worked hard here but it's just not right. I like everything you've done and I know it's hard to leave it all behind for somebody else to get, but we have to. We need someplace nice to start off. Someplace where we can have people over."

"It would be better if it was fixed up."

"Yes, that's it. You understand."

He followed her downstairs to the door. Before going out she kissed him, frowned up at him a moment, then smiled and kissed him again. Just as he was letting her go the door popped open behind her, bumped her back into his arms, and an old woman in a blue straw hat hopped clumsily on one foot and stumbled to the floor. Her wire-rimmed glasses were knocked awry on her wrinkled face and she sat up

to look, first down the dirty little corridor where the three single rooms were, then at Sammy and Marguerite. Sammy scrambled to help the woman up while she patted her shapeless coat.

"Thank you, thank you. That last step is so high, I just didn't realize how big it was."

"Sorry, sorry." Sammy clucked in English. "Stand in door, you can't open."

"What? What's that? You know, you look just like Billy. I almost thought you were him. But you're just like him. Yes, I can tell. You're a good one. You're all right. Don't be like Billy. Watch out for that gang. Don't let them get you like they got him. You're too good for that."

The woman hooked onto Sammy's arm with both her bony hands and stared fiercely up into his face. Marguerite stood behind Sammy.

"Remember, watch out for them. That rotten gang is everywhere. They even think they'll get me but they won't. I'll show them. Take care of him, dear. Don't lose him."

The woman winked, squeezed his arm with her cold hands, then went down the corridor and disappeared into the dark door at the end.

"Es loco," Marguerite said.

"She's the one from the crazy house, the one Maria was talking about."

"They should put her back there."

"If she was crazy the doctor wouldn't let her out."

"The doctors don't know everything. Stay away from her. Are you sure they'll give you next Saturday off for the band concert?"

"Yes. They promised. We can eat here before we go."

"See you then."

Sammy had a savings account to which he added steadily and from which he had made only two withdrawals: one for a down payment on his stereo and the other for his kitchen linoleum. He had several thousand dollars in it and the blue passbook with the neatly typed figures was to him a legal document that proved he could buy things. As he talked to the salesman at Weintraub's Furniture he had the bankbook in his back pocket ready to pull out in case the man did not understand or refused to sell Sammy what he wanted. When the floorwalker shook his head Sammy felt it was almost time to present the book.

"I'm sorry, I don't know what you mean," the man said as he folded his arms.

Sammy waved his hands. When he spoke, his broken English rushed out, tumbling over itself almost as his Spanish might.

"Wanew buy forniture," he said.

"No, no, no. You've got to talk slower. I just can't understand you. Here, try it again."

"Forniture. Chare. Bed."

"Do you have an account with us? Do you want to make a payment?"

"No, noo. Buy. Wanew buy."

"Are you Portuguese? I can speak Portuguese."

"No, no Portugees."

Sammy clenched his teeth. When he had bought his linoleum here there had been someone who spoke Spanish. He had not had this much trouble making himself understood for some time. Even when he had spoken with Goldstein just before coming here, the Jew had understood

what he wanted and told him it was all right to move the old furniture out. This man could not seem to understand him and Sammy felt nervous standing in the midst of the large, high-ceilinged show room with dozens of parlor sets spread about him as in a haphazardly styled waiting room. He shivered and desperately folded his hands together, then leaned his head on them and closed his eyes.

"Seep," he said.

"No, you can't sleep here. Just because we've got beds doesn't mean this is a hotel. Don't you have any friends in town?"

"No, noo. Nut now. Buy bed."

"Oh, well, the mattress department is upstairs. You'll have to see Mr. Comte."

"No. Not now. Want to buy lots furniture. Here."

"Do you speak Spanish? Couldn't I speak Portuguese?"

Sammy looked around, trying to find the salesclerk who had sold him linoleum.

"I'm awful sorry but I don't know what you want. If it's a bed you want you have to go upstairs to the mattress department."

"No."

Sammy strode to the nearest parlor set, placed a finger on the sofa, then put the same finger on himself and sat down. The sales tag was in one hand, his bankbook in the other.

"I want to buy chairs," he said exhaustedly.

"I'm sorry. Of course. I see. Wait right here and I'll be back."

As the salesman hurried off Sammy settled back and wondered if the man would give him what he wanted. He felt he could speak

English quite well, yet it seemed he could never be certain that people understood him. Slowly, he slid his tongue into the hard valley his bridge left in the roof of his mouth, and he wondered if the salesman really knew what he wanted. The memory of how he had lost his two teeth worried him that perhaps it was wrong to sit on the sofa and he looked around for a sign. His tongue hesitated then once more touched the nerveless, lifeless plate, and he shuddered and decided to stand and wait for the man.

He had lived in Massachusetts two years when he lost his teeth. That Friday he had had the day off, and he met Maria and Antonio from upstairs. With Marguerite working there was nothing for him to do, so he and Antonio went down to the Junction Cafe to drink. Sammy had not spent a day drinking in months and the weather was hot and sticky. The touch of cold beer sliding down his throat soothed and relaxed him. Deciding there was no better way to avoid the heat shimmering over the sidewalks, they agreed to stay late into the afternoon. They sat in their wooden booth across from the plywood-paneled bar and sipped beers all morning. Two men argued at the bar and glanced over their shoulders at the two Puerto Ricans. Antonio bent his dark bald head toward the dishwasher.

"Do you know those men, the drunken ones at the bar?" he said.

"No."

"One of them keeps talking about you, saying 'He's one of them. I'm going to get him. He'll know where his brother is.' Are you sure you don't know them?"

"No, I've never seen them. They're mistaken. I don't know anything about brothers."

Sammy sipped his beer and lit a cigarette. Antonio stared at the bar but Sammy ignored the men and drank. The room felt distant. He was relaxed and content. He only wanted to sit and drink beer, day-dream about Marguerite, and think of the lazy day ahead. Sammy was still learning English so the two whispering and growling men meant nothing. Antonio's glass banged on the table.

"Sammy, they think you're Gonsalves' brother. You've got to go. They're going to come over here. You've got to get out of here."

"Gonsalves, the rapist?"

"Yes, they're friends of that girl. They think you know where he's hiding. You've got to go. They'll come over and start a fight."

"No, they won't. That's not the way things are here. I don't even know this guy. He's Portuguese, isn't he?"

"I don't know. It doesn't make any difference. You've got to get out. They're going to come over here."

"If they come over I'll just tell them I don't know this man. We have different names. They'll see. There won't be any trouble."

"Please. You've got to leave. They're drunk. They won't listen to you."

Sammy smiled and shook his head.

"It's all right. I'll just tell them they're mistaken. You worry too much."

He was finishing his beer and thinking of going to the bathroom when he was pulled from the booth. One of the men from the bar stood in front of him while the other was behind. The one before him was dressed in paint-spattered denims and had curly red hair that trembled as he slid a finger at Sammy.

"Your name Gonsalves?"

Sammy tapped his chest and smiled. "Sammy Gonzalez."

"You're that cocksucker George's brother, ain't you?"

"No, no. Sammy. No brother."

"Don't lie to me. I seen you around. You're his brother and you know where he is. We're gonna get him for what he did to Mary Lou."

"No brother. Sammy, Puerto Rican. No Portugees."

"Don't give me that no speaka the lingo shit. Where is he? C'mon. You know."

"Hey, Skippy, lay off the kid. He don't know anything about George. He's just a local spic," said the bartender.

"He's the son of a bitch's brother. He ain't fooling me. Now where is he?"

"No George. Sammy." He smiled and felt the second man's breath on his back.

"You little bastard, you're gonna tell me where he is or I'll kill you."

"Gonzalez, no Gonsalves. No brother," he pleaded then smiled as he backed away from the man and into the drunk's companion.

"Tell the man what he wants to know," said the second one.

"He's not George's brother," called Antonio. "He doesn't even have any brothers."

"Shut up, spic. Don't try and weasel him out of it. We know. Come on, Gonsalves, where is he?"

Skippy grabbed for him and Sammy dodged and then his arms were pinned from behind.

"You little motherfucker, you're gonna pay. You bastards think

all you gotta do is fuck around."

"No, no. Not brother."

Skippy's fists shot out, then Sammy was sitting on the floor, hands covering his broken teeth, Antonio kneeling beside him as the bartender chased the two men out the back door. Pain wrung Sammy's head, ripping through his mouth.

The teeth he had lost were the only ones missing from his perfect set, yet he remembered those men and the fight only when his plate felt foreign and strange in his mouth or when his gush of English fell uselessly like a flood running off thirsty soil. He shifted his weight to his other leg and wondered if perhaps he should take courses at the high school to improve his English. I would never have to worry about understanding then, he thought.

"Señor Gonzalez."

He jumped at the voice then grinned and shook hands with the salesclerk from whom he had bought his linoleum. The man spoke a little Spanish and, unlike the time at the Junction, Sammy was sure he would be understood.

She had not liked it. When she had come in to have supper with him she had been very surprised and even smiled and talked about how beautiful everything was. She had bounced on the skirted Early American couch and matching armchair, had studied her reflection in the slick maple dining table and tried to lift each chair of the heavy set of six which went with the table. In the bedroom she had goggled over the thick-posted dark-grained bedstead and told Sammy how fine all the pieces were. It had seemed that he had pleased her and that she now

liked the apartment, yet when they sat down for dinner she had insisted that the house was still not right for them. She shocked him with that and he sat silently through the meal, resisting her attempts to talk about the evening concert, restrained not by anger but by sadness.

Outside, as they strolled in the deep channels of the yellow dusk, the speckles of sun that dropped through the trees gently rode across them. Sammy was still quiet. The wind wiped the leaves from the seamed asphalt before them and she held his hand as he walked mournfully.

"What is it, Sammy? What's wrong?"

"You don't like the furniture."

"Oh no, Sammy. That's not true. I love the furniture. It's more than I ever dreamed we'd have. It's beautiful and I know you paid a lot of money for it. You know I like what you buy. I liked the stereo and the linoleum when you bought them. I told you I liked everything."

"But you still want us to move out."

"Not because of the furniture. Like I said before, it's because of the house."

"But I've fixed up the house, Marguerite. You said it was big enough. You always said it was all right before."

"I know. But that was before we were going to get married. I mean, it's only next summer and that's very close and don't you want everything to be nice when we start out?"

"Yes, Of course. I've tried to make the house nice. You know I want you to like the house."

They turned down Providence Avenue and toward the park. It was an old street, lined with mansions set back from the pavement, the past community of the town's rich. Down the road was the park, once part

of someone's estate, and they could see the stone steeple of the Congregational Church across the street from it.

"I love the apartment. It's just right. It doesn't cost too much and until we have a family we could put money in the bank so we can have our own home. But that house, the paint, all the dirt in the hallway. It's terrible."

Sammy studied her as she wrinkled her eyebrows at him. The air was thick with sunlight leaking through the leaves in red and yellow stains. Marguerite herself was warmly tinted. Her oval eyes seemed to plead with him while her black curls dangled close to small ears. The longing for her cut through him like a knife and he wanted to exult in his good fortune, yet she troubled him, made him feel strangled and cornered.

"But what can I do? You keep saying the house, the house. I've done everything. What more is there? All you have to do is tell me and I'll change it."

"Well, wait a minute."

She stopped him and turned him toward the nearest house, a building that sprawled beneath several large maples and mushroomed three stories into the air. It was gray with white trim, a wide lawn, and a semi-circular gravel drive tangent to the spindled railing of the porch.

"Look at that house. I don't want a house like that, but look at how nice everything is painted and clean. Even the yard and the grass and the flowers look clean. It looks like a house somebody lives in and not a vacant lot. And I bet inside it's the same. I bet everything looks neat and clean. They probably have nice furniture but it isn't just furniture or linoleum, but everything else, the hallways, the stairs, the railings, the yard. All that makes a house nice to

live in. Do you see?"

Slack-mouthed, Sammy stared at the house and nodded.

"You see," she said, "all the halls at the apartment house are dirty, the stairs need to be painted. You could paint our whole second floor but then the rest of the house would look bad. Then there's the yard and that junk car, and the railing for the stoop. It's the owner's fault, but we need some place nice when we get married, some place that's clean and pretty."

"But then, it only needs to be painted. The house isn't bad, it just needs a little work."

"Yes, but the owner should do that."

"The owner's a busy man. Don't you know he owns houses all over the city? How can he have time to worry about every one? Why do you think he paid for the paint when I painted my house? He doesn't have time to do it himself so he lets the people who live there do it. I can paint. I've painted before. That's easy. I can do that. I can still fix the house."

"No, Sammy, that's not for you to do. It's not your house. Let him do it. We can find someplace else that's already nice."

"But why move? Why? We like this place and we have good furniture and it's clean and cheap. All it needs is a little paint and I can borrow a lawnmower and take care of the yard. I like it there and so do you. The owner will give me the paint. Everything will be okay then. It's simple."

"But, Sammy, you shouldn't have to do it."

"Why? The owner's a busy man and I have all day. I don't go to the restaurant until late and you work during the day. I don't have

anything to do."

"But Sammy . . . "

"There's nothing wrong. The landlord will pay for everything. Besides, you like the house and if that's all that's wrong I can fix it easy."

"Well, are you sure you can get the paint?"

"Yes, of course. He told me any time. He's a good landlord."

The church bell began to toll and Sammy squeezed her hand.

"We'll be late for the concert. Our house will be fine. Don't worry."

"Okay. If you think you can do it."

The hallway was so chilly that Sammy wore three shirts. The first floor had never had a storm door in winter and the door it did have closed unevenly, leaving a gap that the wind continually slithered through. The smell of oil paint was like teeth on the edge of the cool air. This cold wave had come only in the last week, leaving a heavy frost in the mornings and now stiffening Sammy's hands as he painted the trim around the roomers' bathroom. The door was set between the stairs and the first roomer's apartment. He had spread newspapers along the floor and he worked slowly, keeping the wash of paint a hairsbreadth from touching the wall. As he worked he held in his mind the image of the house Marguerite had pointed out on the way to the concert, and then he replaced that with an empty lot that slowly grew a cellar and foundations. From the foundations sprouted the frame of a house. Walls were being lifted into place like pieces of paper when the young caretaker came in on a puff of cold air that made the Puerto

Rican shiver. The caretaker was dressed in a faded field jacket, the collar turned up to protect his scant black moustache and the ends of his long curly hair.

"Hey Sammy, what you doing?"

"Paint house. All dirty and no good. Need paint."

Sammy tapped around the doorknob where years of sweaty hands had left a greasy smear.

"You sure it's all right with Goldstein for you to do this?" the caretaker said sharply.

"Yes, yes. Okay. Owner say it's all right. He buys the paint."

"I don't know. Painting the hall is a little different from painting your own apartment."

"Call and ask the owner. Owner say it all right."

"Well, okay. If he's buying the paint and you're sure he knows about it. How much is he giving you?"

"Giving?"

"Yeh, paying you."

"No pay."

"You mean you're doing this for nothing?"

"Yes. Look bad. Dirty. All clean now."

"Man, Goldstein ought to put you on the payroll for all you do here. You'd never catch me painting. He ought to at least give you a rent break."

"Yes?"

"Yeh, fat chance. I'm going in. Too cold."

Sammy smiled as the caretaker went into his apartment. For a moment he had been afraid the young man wouldn't believe that Goldstein

had said it was all right to paint. For just a second then, his tongue had self-consciously flicked his plate but now he went on with the molding. He worked methodically, spreading the weak stream of the paint, a trickle that leaked from his brush to slowly engulf the door frames. His mental house slowly expanded as the paint flowed. When he had reached the first roomer's door the outer frame was up and the paint from his brush began to cover his own house. He was halfway around the second door and began to shingle the roof when the construction man, the roomer who lived across the hall here, came from his room with a cup of coffee in his hand.

"What you doing there?" he said raising an eyebrow.

"Paint everything. Everything dirty, bad. Look old. Paint doors, stairs, whole house. Everything look new."

"Did you ever paint before?"

"Yes. Paint house upstairs."

"Did your apartment, huh? You're pretty good. You ever want a job painting you let me know. I could probably get you on one of our projects. How much is this man paying you for the job? I hope you're getting something decent. That's a lot of work."

"No pay. He buy paint and I paint. You know, look too bad."

"What are you crazy? Cheesus. That man would have to go out and pay somebody a couple of hundred dollars for all the work you're doing. Why, a union man wouldn't let him get away with that. That ain't right, ain't right at all. Didn't you ask him for something?"

"No."

"Are you foolish? Cheesus. Let me know next time you get the urge

to paint. I'll find you plenty of things to paint."

He shook his head and went to the door at the end of the little corridor. Sammy looked away and frowned. Trying to ignore the man's banging on the far door, he laboriously recalled the picture of his house. It was painted and clean, and each stroke of his brush added something new, a rainspout, a chimney. The door at the end of the corridor opened and the construction man spoke to the old woman there, then returned to his room. Sammy was finished with the door now and as he started the molding before the woman's door frame he began to arrange the trees in his yard.

"Ah, Sammy, when are you going to paint my house?"

He looked back at Maria who stood near the outside door. She had on a thick gray coat and she had pulled her hair back from her full face.

"Do you really want me to paint your house?"

"Of course. You paint everything else here, even the Jew's halls."

"I don't know when I'd have time."

She giggled and shook the folds of her coat.

"You don't have time. And who's supposed to paint my apartment then? Antonio's never here long enough," she teased.

When he shrugged she wagged her black eyebrows.

"When will that Marguerite be happy? What does she want? The next thing she'll have you building a whole house by yourself. I'd never ask Antonio to do that."

"It looked terrible. Everything was dirty and the owner wasn't going to clean it up, so I am. He pays for all the paint. I don't have anything to do during the day."

"Oh, you work hard enough at night. Six days a week and that girl's

not satisfied. I have to have a talk with her."

"She didn't ask me to do it. I told her I'd do it."

"You're crazier than I thought. Where is she tonight?"

"Working."

"You do too much for her."

She went out and returned in a minute with her children, Jesus and Linda.

"Can we help, Sammy? Can we paint?"

"Come here, come here. Don't touch anything. You get paint on your school jackets and I'll give you such a beating. Go straight upstairs. Up to bed. It's already late. Say goodnight and go on. Don't touch anything."

"Can't we stay up a little while to help?"

"Jesus, I said no. You and your sister go on."

"Goodnight, Sammy."

"Goodnight, Jesus. Goodnight, Linda. Go to bed so you can do good in school."

"Remember, Sammy," Maria called, "I want you to do my apartment next."

"Certainly. Tomorrow."

Her laughter faded up the stairs and he worked toward the door at the end of the corridor. The yard of his house needed work and became the yard outside as he cleaned weeds from the roses tangled in the broken-toothed fence and pushed away the old car that rusted in the back yard. Paint flowed rapidly as he neared the door. The ruts in the driveway filled with an asphalt frosting and he began to mow a full green lawn.

He was in the doorway at the end of the hall now and began to paint the inside edge of its trim. Around the entire house was a chain link fence woven with roses, while inside the house Marguerite sat on the Early American sofa he had bought last month. Yes, he thought, this is all for you, Marguerite. Her hair had grown longer and was in ringlets that brushed the curve of her neck. I will even put up a railing here, he decided. He began to hum and with the brush strokes the door of his house opened and children came out, each with dark hair, each a girl, and he swept the brush lightly. It will be beautiful, he thought, our house. It will be the most beautiful house in the city. Oh Marguerite, you'll love this house.

He lost his balance for a moment and his shoulder rattled the door. He turned, half expecting that the rattle would be mistaken for a knock and the door would open, and the wood exploded before him. He fell back, overturning the bucket. The door shook as the wood continued to burst. With each splintering of the door there was a loud report from within the room. Sammy sat on the floor and looked at his shoulder. There was a hole in his layered shirts that was seeping red. Paint had splattered against the wall, ruining a section he had just completed and flooding the floor. The shrunken old woman opened the door in front of him and shouted.

"Oh no, they got you, Billy. How could they get you again? Don't worry. I'll get them. I'll stop them. Here, I'm still a nurse. I'll help you. Don't move. They'll be back but I'll get them this time. Oh, I know that rotten bunch."

The door to Sammy's left opened and the old construction man put his head out.

"What the hell's all the noise?" he said.

The woman had a gun in her hand. There were holes in the door behind her. She waved the gun.

"Put that thing down," said the construction man.

Footsteps pounding, another squeak of hinges behind the Puerto Rican.

"What's going on?" the caretaker said.

The old woman knelt by Sammy and patted his shoulder.

"You'll be all right. I'll take care of you, Billy. They're scared of me now. I've got them on the run."

"Sammy, are you all right?" said the caretaker.

The Puerto Rican looked around at the paint flooding the floor, then looked up to where he had been painting. There were gouges in the wet molding, and his house, like a building made of cards, collapsed; the figures of his children folded like paper dolls. Pain rolled over him and he began to cry and he couldn't think of the words to explain that he had permission to paint.