MOLYNEUX- THOMAS W.: Two Stories. (1966) Directed by: Fred Chappell. pp. 111.

The purpose of this thesis is, quite simply, to tell two stories. They are stories I thought worth telling, and they are told as I believe they should be told. Each centers about a single character because I believe that people are the essence of fiction.

It will perhaps be most effective to write about the stories individually, inasmuch as talking generally about fiction--its goals and methods--seems a sure and ready way to make oneself foolish. Indeed, talking too much about even the individual ones of one's stories is a way to seem foolish. If what one feels about the story could be summed up in a quick sentence or two, then there would have been no point ever in writing the story. One does not, that is, write a story to illustrate some silly maxim but, more likely, to show the inevitable partial truth of all maxims. This is why I say that fiction's essence is people. One writes about them; and, however much one simplifies them, one must be constantly aware that they are complex. All the tarnished words Time oozes--delusion and futility, pain and possibility--these and the countless others had, like clichés, a one-time validity to be tarnished from; and it is the many and complex facts of life which they once represented--and hopefully can still be made to represent--which one writes about. These are the human elements, the combinations of which define a life more than any chronology

or name or physical description, though all of those are also part of it. Anyhow, one writes from people, not real people but possible people, and one writes about and in context of the overwhelming complexity and subtlety and summary-defying nature of people.

"Jimmy Outlaw," the earlier of the two stories, is about a young, big-city Negro whose world is one of grotesquely incongruous externals. It seems to me that a lot of our worlds are; it seems to me that, inevitably, as what we call civilization becomes what our descendants will call more civilized, this fact must become more true. That is not why I wrote "Jimmy Outlaw," though, in retrospect, it seems a valid reason to have done so. Jimmy is constantly on the lookout for a more flamboyant way to define himself; he likes clothes and girls and jewelry. But each he misuses. Similarly, he misuses his flamboyance, for there is very little Jimmy to define, really. Yet, Jimmy is terribly attractive. Physically, he is lean, well-dressed, and well-jeweled. Mentally, he is witty. Emotionally, he is cool. It has been suggested that the story is too long and does too little. I like to think that Jimmy justifies the length. For a second, I will have to use some of the words I said before had become tarnished. I like to think that Jimmy himself justifies the story's length because we need to know all of what happens to him and all of how he responds to see specifically and concretely just how little Jimmy

there is for the flamboyance to define, and, too, just how much desperate and frittering pride there is in him, and then what parts of dignity and what of pathos and what of selfishness. I cannot say; but hopefully we see enough of Jimmy to understand pretty well.

"Before, Once," the second story, is a rather simple story about an ex-football star returning after ten years to see his alma mater, Princeton, play Harvard. The story is complicated somewhat by the possible presence in the stadium of a girl he persists in loving, married now to the Harvard man she always intended to marry, and by the man's ambivalent feelings about the girl, and about the football game on the field, and about the type of life he closed off when he lost or gave up the girl--a little bit of each--and the contrasting steady life he chose.

TWO STORIES

by

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Fred Chappell
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APPROVAL SHEET

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

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December 14, 1966
Date of Examination

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JIMMY OUTLAW

Everyone had his own name for Jimmy. Only the jewelers up and down the row referred to him plainly as Jimmy, and some of them even, as they came to know him, came to call him That Jimmy or even Money, as he called them, as he called all white men except AJ, whom he called Stack o Dollars, and, later, me. The other runners called him Money and Baby and Pretty, and these too were the names used by the others who worked with us in AJ's basement stockroom, except Frank and Curtis and Joan and, after a bit, myself. Frank called him plain Jimmy; Curtis called him Sweetheart; Joan had no name for him. But it was his girls who had the best names for Jimmy, though the only one I ever met called him just you. "Oh stop that you," she would say, and giggle. "You are somethin else." But, as he told me, "The chickies, they like to have their own name for you." I can only imagine what those names were. Even the members of Jimmy's family had different names for him. He had a brother, studying to be an undertaker who stopped by AJ's sometimes, natty like Jimmy, but softer, less agile, more somber, and he called him Ba Ba, which was short for Ba Ba Black Sheep. I suspect that Jimmy's mother, with whom even then he lived, called him James, though, of course, I never met her, but knew her only in the stories he would tell

about what she would do to him if she ever found his wallet, or learned about his "business trips to Jersey."

The name that Jimmy himself preferred was Jimmy Outlaw. At least, that was how he called himself on that first day in AJ's basement when he saw me standing tentatively half in and half out of the doorway, waiting to be recognized and fearing to be, wondering what each object there was for. Seeing the four of them sitting, a closed unit, their faces stock though I knew they saw me, I thought of my mother saying, "There's no pretending you're going to be able to avoid colored people. But you're just foolish and stubborn to go to them. And the ones in a stockroom just aren't the ones you want to select." But I was not going to them. I was going to a job. And she was wrong.

Then, "Hello, Money," said Jimmy.

I looked up, unwilling to think that he was addressing me, and saw him then singly, perking, not quite relaxed as he was never quite relaxed, but easily and confidently nonetheless, on the dusty brown work bench. Beside him were a cardboard coffee container and a crumpled piece of wax paper, its edge held down by the body of a disassembled radio. In one hand he held a donut and, with the other, he was flicking crumbs of confectioner's sugar from his precise navy blue trousers.

"Oh Money," he said. "Don't you be afraid. Come in, come in; it's only AJ's."

"Let him be, Jimmy," said Frank, whom I did not yet know was Frank.

"I'm just puttin him to his ease," said Jimmy.

Then he jumped from the bench, not sliding off as Frank and Curtis would a moment later, but popping a little up and forward, and landing so that his leather heels clacked once, simultaneously, against the dust grey concrete. He slapped behind him at his rump to knock away whatever rumple might have settled there. His pants were rigidly creased, his black shoes narrow and polished, his shirt sleeves buttoned at his wrist. The neck of his yellow shirt lay open on his chest, as though starched that way. In the opening, yellow also against his brown skin, bobbed a small, dull object on a fine gold chain, which Jimmy identified later--when he first tried and then succeeded in selling me one--as a shark's tooth. He wore a small neat goatee, and his face was small, lean, and like his body, supple with elaborate fine muscles. He walked toward me where I stood still in the doorway, still now not with fright but with simple awareness. Though each step was made final and individual by the clack of his leather heel, all the time he walked, his body moved, almost imperceptibly, without effeminate innuendo, but with concrete, rather arrogant, authoritative rhythm and pomp.

"Oh my Money," he said, "we got to make you easy. Come in and have some java. I'm Jimmy Outlaw." He extended

his hand, sparkly with rings on the three end fingers--one of which, a gold thing set with a red stone and a blue stone, he later tried to sell me because he said the chickie who gave it to him had been killed in a car crash and it gave him bad dreams--and I shook it.

"It's not much, but we call it hell. Old Stack o Dollars' hell," he said, and he laughed, gih gih gih, crisp exhalations of breath against thin saliva, as he always laughed when he was being public.

"Jimmy, I said let him be."

Curtis said, "You know Sweetheart got to show off, Frank."

And Jimmy: "I'm not hurting him, Frank. I'm just puttin him to ease." And then, to me: "Remember, if you need to know anything, just ask me, Jimmy Outlaw."

But Jimmy Outlaw was too formal for that dusty place. I could no more have called him Jimmy Outlaw there than I could, without self-consciousness, have called him Money or Baby. After a few minutes in the place, your hands took on an electric grittiness so that you did not like to touch one with the other, and, though you may not have been working at all, for often there was little to do, your shirt came sticky and uncomfortable about your sides.

The first room was a small one. Across from the staircase and doorway side, the table on which Jimmy and Frank and Curtis had been sitting ran the length of the room.

It was an old table, dented along its face and carved all over with initials of former stockboys and observations on AJ, the proprietor, and on the partner he once had had. Usually it was littered with disassembled radios or phonographs and with packing materials, wide tape and brown paper, tissue and cones of string. Actually, it was intended to be only a wrapping table, but Frank was the boss, a square short man, the veins rigid at his neck and on his forearms, and it was his theory that the radio and TV repair places overcharged AJ. So, in his spare time, he fixed the radios which had been returned against their guarantees, cheap little $29.95 FM's, half of which seemed inevitably to come back. There were two other rooms. One, really--a square, bare grayed plaster on the walls, concrete on the floor, filled with piled crated televisions, radios, toasters, hair dryers, tape recorders and whatever other stock--and then a long narrow aisle, on the other side of the center wrapping room, along which we brought new stock as we unloaded it from the trucks which came once, sometimes twice, a day, both sides lined also with the stock that would not fit in the storage room--shaving kits and manicure sets and battery-run back scratchers, that sort. The jewelry we never saw--it was even wrapped upstairs on the floor--though, nominally anyhow, AJ's was a jewelry store: A J Deatherage, Jewelers of Distinction, Since 1938. The only furnishings in the basement, besides the long wrapping

table, were an olive metal chair, its seat covered with a wrapping paper slip cover attached by rubber bands, and two stools, which Jimmy would stand in the aisle sometimes as Curtis backed along it carrying some bulky carton.

Besides Frank, who was in charge, Curtis, who was Jimmy's age, Jimmy, and, afternoons, myself, there worked in the basement two shy, shadowy boys, David and Randy, who nearly never socialized, and one girl, Joan. Joan had large high breasts and a large high rump, and when she stood, she somehow projected both, a capital S in some flamboyant script. Her lips were bright red, her hair lacquered stiff and shiny, her eyelids alternately blue and green and, once, even red, like her lips.

She was not Jimmy's type, he said. She was the marrying type, too scared for him. But he offered to fix me up, because from the first, he said, he'd seen her eyeing me. I watched out to see that, but the only times I saw her move her eyes at all from the wrapping on the table before her were the slow mornings when she read the paper, and the times when, without moving her head, she rolled the eyes, small against their bright white backgrounds, wary of Jimmy passing, and, without halting her hands at the wrapping, stepped that rump a little to the side and out of reach.

I came into the room, and Frank introduced himself and Joan and Curtis. David and Randy were elsewhere, working,

as they generally were. For a bit we were quiet, Frank and Curtis and I standing in a small circle in the center of the room, Jimmy doing something in the corner, and Joan looking still at her paper. Then, Joan walked along the bench collecting the coffee containers and the wax papers, and Frank said "Well" and looked at Curtis, and Curtis and Jimmy were gone.

"You can work here this afternoon," said Frank, "with Joan. She'll show you what."

And he, too, went off.

For about two hours, then, I worked with Joan, wrapping, standing beside her on the edge of the damp sweet perfume and hair spray smells which encased her, facing the wall.

A cardboard carton at the end of the bench was filled with radios and billfolds and other merchandise, folded in wrapping tissue and banded by elastics, with sales slips pinned under, giving addresses and orders--gift wrap, card enclosed, COD. These we wrapped.

I took a radio. Without seeming to break the rhythm of its own pattern, Joan's hand pointed to a stack of flat cardboard, and I took the box and folded it, trying to approximate the motions I had just observed in her, put the radio in and began to wad tissue paper around it.

"Not like that, honey," she said, though I had been unaware even of her watching.

She stepped across, and I stepped back, and tried to follow the pattern of her hands as she wrapped the radio. My hands hung still before me, and, half consciously, I moved one in a slower, deliberate reflection of her movement.

"You got to crumple it," she said.

Then she stepped back to her own place.

"Thanks," I said.

"You see?" she said.

"I think so."

I picked a picture frame from the carton, and, as before, her hand came out of its own pattern, silently and with no stop in the rhythm, and indicated the appropriate box.

My parents had not wanted me to take the job. Or, anyhow, my mother had not. "Next year will be soon enough," she'd said. "Next year or even the next after that. Soon enough to start working. I had to work at your age, but you haven't and so you oughtn't. There's nothing you need the money for."

And that was so. I tried to think when she said it, when I told her, what need I had for the money. Finally, I ordered an aqua lung and wet suit that would cost most of what I earned.

"Why didn't you ask for it for Christmas?" she said.

"It's too expensive for Christmas," I answered.

"That's for I and your father to decide," she said.

"I didn't raise you to be a stockboy."

"What did you raise me to be?"

"Anything. Whatever you want to be. You can be whatever you want."

I did not want to be a stockboy. Wrapping now, feeling alone and intrusive and inept beside Joan, I knew that, as really I had known it even when I told her. But I did want the job. I did want to buy the aqua lung. And from the beginning I had known that she felt too real a respect for enterprise to forbid me.

After a while, I said, "Where is everyone?"

"Frank's around," Joan said.

"But where did the others go?"

"Jimmy's on his rounds," she said, as though I had forgotten some self-evident thing. "And Curtis has the truck."

From the stairs, I heard footsteps. Trying still to keep wrapping, I turned my head and saw a lanky man come into the room. His foot in a black spit-shined shoe and his calf in a flopping brown pants leg came first into the doorway. Then the rest of him followed, like thick liquid being invisibly guided to join and complete the form. He came into the room, holding a transistor radio.

"Can you hurry this one for me, Joanie?" he said.

Joan said nothing, but turned and took the radio from him.

"Who's this?" he said.

"Just a new boy," she answered, already wrapping.

"What's his name?"

"Ask him."

But he did not. Instead, he went and stood before a mirror on the opposite wall, dodging sinuously before it as though he was shadow boxing, and combed his hair.

He turned round from the mirror, and I looked back then to the bodkin I was wrapping and saw it sitting an arm's length from me along the bench. Before me, in my hands, was a movie magazine I had swaddled in wrapping tissue.

Joan finished the radio and, wordless, slid the package to her right and took up another object from the carton.

The lanky man saw, came, and took the package.

"Thanks, Joany," he said. "You're a dollbaby. I'll remember this."

Then he went back up the stairs.

"Who was that?" I said.

"Salesman," she said. And then: "Son of a bitch. Always wants something special."

We continued wrapping.

I tried to see what she was doing, how, for the paper that seemed to snap to for her merely crumbled for me. But her hands seemed to slash through a ritual of their own, as though she did not wrap the packages, but rather signed some

rite above them so that they wrapped themselves. Her face was blank, bored. Only once when I looked toward her did I see any of her except her hands and arms move; then, she moved her left foot a little ahead of her right, where before the right had been ahead of the left. But though I felt inept handling the thin tissue and willful tape, I hesitated to look too much toward her, aware as I was of the rich S of her stance.

Sometimes, in those two hours, Frank passed through the wrapping room, coming from I didn't know where, though Jimmy later told me that when Frank was off like that, he was taking unofficial unrequired inventory, as he liked to do several times a week.

He came and stood behind me once, and I kept working, trying to fit the tissue neatly around a plastic electric back scratcher with a white plastic clawed hand at its tip.

After a minute, he said, "How is it?"

I stopped and turned my head. Frank was short, heavy and square in the shoulders, flat and thick in the face.

"Okay," I said. I smiled. "I guess."

He stood still there, quizzically set, his arms folded behind his back so that his chest pressed powerfully forward, straining past his green polo shirt at its open neck, while my smile ceased.

"He's doing good," Joan said, "Just good."

"That's good," said Frank, and left.

After a while, without stopping her work or looking to me, without altering even the blankness of her expression, Joan said, "Frank's nice."

"Yes," I said. Then: "How long has he been in charge?"

She said, "He'll look out for you."

While we were wrapping, Jimmy returned. We heard him first from the aisle. "Oh Frank Baby," he said, "what you doin that again for? We're all honest, Baby." Then we heard the hurrying clip of his steps as he continued along the aisle and into the wrapping room. He wore a navy blue, doublebreasted topcoat. Already, he had it unbuttoned so that it flapped stiffly from him, and already, he had tucked his gloves under the military epaulets on its shoulders.

"Oh Money," he said, "it is cold out there."

He moved across the room, the clipped patter of his steps a rather formal background fact as he snaked from his coat. For a second, he looked into the mirror, flicking once at his collar and smoothing his goatee. Then he went across and took a hangar and hung his coat from one of the grayed pipes which ran round the room. He took a small package from the coat pocket and flipped it onto the bench in front of Joan.

"There, dollbaby," he said. "See what you think of that?"

He came round behind us and hopped onto the bench

in a quick clean jump, and perked there as he had when I first came in. I looked up at him and he winked at me. His eyes darted toward Joan, and I turned my head to look to her. The package, a small white cardboard square, was unmoved on the bench before her.

"What is it?" she said.

"Open it. Open it, Baby. I want to see do you like it. Who knows, I might just give it to you," he said, and seeing me looking again at him, he winked again, and laughed, gih gih gih.

Joan had the package open now. Once more she asked, "What is it?"

"What's it look like, Baby? Do you like it?"

"It's an engagement ring."

"Yes, Baby, yes. Do you like it?"

"You already have an engagement ring."

"I already have three, Baby. Do you like it?"

"Yes, I like it. It's beautiful. But what do you want with it?"

"You never know when you're gonna want one," Jimmy said. "I don't have that size before. It's a 6 and 7/8ths."

"You have four engagement rings?" I said.

"Well, one's out right now," he said.

I looked at him.

"I'm engaged right now," he explained. "Once. To a girl in Jersey. A very nice girl. Class. You'd like her,

Money."

Joan said, "What do you want with a fourth engagement ring?"

"I told you: I didn't have that size. It's a 6 and 7/8ths. You never know when you're gonna want one."

"How much did it cost?"

"That's a secret," he said. "What do you think it's worth?"

Joan held the ring to the florescent light above the bench and turned it slowly, slightly for a second. Then, she brought it down and, having once moved her finger over the stone, she returned it to its box and threw it to him.

"How would I know?" she said.

Jimmy opened the box and took out the ring and he, too, held it to the light. Then he polished its band on his shirt sleeve and held it out to me.

"What about you, Money? How much do you think?"

"I don't know," I said.

"Five hundred," he said.

Joan said, "You're a liar. You don't make five hundred dollars in a month."

"Now, Baby, now, Baby," he said. "I didn't say I paid five hundred dollars for it. I said it was worth five hundred. That's what old Stack o Dollars would ask for it."

"How much did you pay?"

"That's a secret, Babycakes. I couldn't tell you.

I might want to give you that ring some day. A beautiful girl like you."

"You couldn't give me all four of your rings."

"All four wouldn't fit. You want to try this one on?"

"I want you to let me get some work."

"Well, do you like it? Do you think it's pretty?"

"Yes, I think it's pretty."

"Good. Good. That's what I want to know. A nice, marrying kind of girl's opinion."

Once more, he caught my eye and winked.

Joan had resumed wrapping and now I, too, took another package and started to wrap it. Jimmy reached past me and turned a radio on.

"Just leave it off," said Joan, without looking up.

"There might be some sound," said Jimmy. He dialed for a station.

"Leave it off, I said."

He flicked it off. "All right," he said. "All right."

"You like sounds, Money?" he said.

I looked questioningly at him.

"Jazz," he said.

"Yes."

"Who? Who do you like, Money?"

I told him that I liked Miles and Blakey and Morgan and Nina Simone. He asked did I like Jamal, and I said yes, Jamal too.

Then, he said, "Joan here thinks I look just like Jamal."

"I don't think any such thing," she said. "I don't even know what Jamal looks like."

"Yes you do," said Jimmy. "She does. She tells me all the time. 'Just like Ahmad Jamal.' She doesn't want to let on how much she thinks about me."

"Why don't you let this boy and me be?"

"What do you think, Money?"

"About what?"

"Do you think I look like Ahmad Jamal? Or is Joan wrong?"

I looked to where he sat beside me.

"Joan's right," I said.

"My fiancee, the girl I'm engaged to now, from Jersey, thinks I'm prettier than Jamal." He laughed, gih gih gih.

I reached for another package.

"You didn't write the address on that one," he said.

I took back the box and saw it was unaddressed.

"Thanks," I said, and addressed it.

After a while, Jimmy said, "You got any chickies?"

I looked at him and smiled.

I had no girls. And, if I had, I knew I would not have them as he would. Not so casually or surely. There was one girl, a tall, rather honey-haired girl, broad featured, Lithuanian looking I thought, though I knew no

Lithuanians. Really, she was Polish, Polish Catholic, which I knew would irk my mother. But the girl was seventeen, two years older than I, and then I only said hello when I passed her in school halls. Girls my own age, the girls who lived on our street or streets like ours, whom my mother encouraged on me, were too young and silly, I knew, to like me.

I knew my parents would not approve of her being Catholic. But they would never state that objection, and I saw no others that they either could state. Passing her, seeing her, I believed that she liked good things. Though clearly she had few, there was something controlled and polished about her which suggested that, something aloof. And I had good things. I had good clothes and a good house and, in a year, would have a good car. I knew that she knew that.

But by the time that year passed, I myself had grown more realistic; the difference in our ages had begun to matter to me.

But Jimmy did not want to hear about her. Hearing about her, he would have called her the marrying kind, though even then, vaguely, I realized that she was not; that she would not have cared about the difference in our ages had there been more of Jimmy's sureness about me. She would have admired the tight rill of his walk.

So I only smiled at Jimmy.

"Oh Money, I know you do. You got all sorts of chickies. I can tell. Joan's been watchin you. He's

pretty, isn't he, Joan."

"Why don't you go do your work?"

"I did my work." Then, to me: "You gonna get your chickies anything for Christmas?"

I shrugged.

"You are. I can tell, Money. That's probably why you took this job: the discount. You have class. That's what I like about you, Money. Right off, I saw the kid has class. Not like the bastard salesmen. They all dress like poor Stack o Dollars. No class. Baby, if I had their money, I'd be somethin else, somethin else, Money. Anyhow, if you want to get your chickies jewelry, you come to me. Jimmy Outlaw. I can get you a better price than they'll give you upstairs. That ring. I had that made the way I drew it. They're makin me a necklace right now for this little chickie in West Philly. And a ring for my mother. The way I drew them. The ring has sapphires. Six, seven sapphires. They're puttin a solid gold watch band that I picked out on a Movado watch that this chickie wants to surprise me with. I told her to go there if she ever wanted anything and use my name, and then I just went and ordered what I wanted and my friend there sold it to her. I'll take you over there tomorrow, you like."

It was near to Christmas--that was how I had the job--early December, and Jimmy was worried about presents.

He knew for sure about the girl who was buying him the Movado watch with the gold band he'd picked out; and he knew the girl from West Philadelphia for whom he was having the necklace made was giving him a blue chalk stripe suit he'd picked out and had a clothing salesman he had recommended to her sell her. But the girl from New Jersey to whom he was engaged hadn't said anything to him yet, so that he was worried she might go just anywhere and get him just anything. There were two other girls, too, that he wasn't sure about, though he had a cashmere sweater picked out from one and a pair of check slacks from the other, if they would just ask. As a precaution, Jimmy had talked to one of the salesmen upstairs and picked out an FM radio in case one of his chickies came in there, though he had long ago warned everyone he knew that Stack o Dollars ran a shyster place, no class. The salesman had also promised to warn Jimmy if Joan bought him anything, so that he would not be surprised and embarrassed. But Jimmy didn't trust the salesman: he was afraid the salesman would tell him Joan had bought him something just to try to sell him something for her.

What Jimmy was worried most about, though, was the pair of check slacks. He wasn't sure he really wanted them.

Jimmy told me all this during my first days in AJ's basement. When he was not working, he would monologue, punctuating what he said constantly with that gih gih gih

public laugh of his, so that somehow, in spite of what he said, he remained aloof.

He told me he'd been a shortstop on his high school baseball team and had had a good chance for a college scholarship until the coach threw him off the team because he insisted on flipping the ball behind his back to the second baseman on double plays. "It was quicker that way, Money," he said. "And the chickies loved it. They used to come out even when there wasn't any game just to watch me practice. They love razzle dazzle, Money, they all do." Then the other players wanted to throw the ball behind their backs, too. But, as Jimmy explained, they couldn't do it and were just showing off. Anyhow, the coach had kicked him off. He didn't care so much, since he'd just kept his satin warm-up jacket. But sometimes, he said, he thought about the scholarships.

I played baseball then myself, and I tried to imagine myself or anyone I knew making a double play throw behind our backs, but I couldn't do it.

Always when he spoke then, Jimmy told something of himself. Even when he seemed only to jibe at Curtis, he would introduce some bit of autobiography. I recall one day, Curtis crouched, one knee on the floor, his arm rigid, outright, straining to lift one of the stools from the ground by the base of one leg. He had the stool an inch or so from the ground, balanced tentatively, his arm tight,

long, streaked with ugly strength. Perked on the bench beside me, Jimmy watched. I had stopped wrapping and also watched. Curtis's eyes, slit in the long rigidness of his face, strained on the stool. Then they would turn to Joan, who continued wrapping, and then immediately back to the stool, as though their guard somehow restrained it from toppling.

"Joanie, you best look," said Jimmy.

Curtis lifted the stool slowly until it was shoulder height. His arm trembling, he held it there for a second and again his look darted to Joan.

"C'mon, Joanie, look at Curtis," said Jimmy. "You want him to do all this for nothin. Get his clothes all mussed and dirty for nothin at all."

Less slowly, Curtis lowered the stool.

"All that," said Jimmy, "and old Joanie never even looked. Well, don't you mind, Baby, me and Money are impressed."

"I wasn't trying to impress nobody."

"Well good, Baby, good. Cause Joan never even looked. She's too mature for that kind of boy's stuff. But me and Money aren't. We're not hardly more grown up than you. Are we, Money? We're impressed."

Curtis still crouched, still resting on one knee. Now he stood, tall, flat, broad. He was bigger than Jimmy or me.

"If you're so damn smart, Sweetheart, why ain't you rich?" Curtis said.

Jimmy laughed, drew breath: the forms of ancient wisdom.

"Me? Why I'm too pretty to get rich. The chickies, they just won't let me be long enough to be rich. Last year, remember I took that night school course? I promised myself, and my momma too, no chickies. And I didn't. For three weeks I didn't, and I was number one in the class. And then it just got too much. They all comin to me and askin, 'This right, Jimmy?' 'How you do this, Jimmy?' 'What you doin after, Jimmy?' All pushin into me. I just gave in. Man like me, Baby, too pretty to get rich." He laughed, gih gih gih.

"Yeah," said Curtis.

"True," said Jimmy. "True."

When I came into the wrapping room my second afternoon, Jimmy was sitting on the bench beside Joan, talking to her, laughing all the time, while she tried to read her paper.

"Money," he said when he saw me. He wore an ascot puffed like a peacock's breast at his throat.

"Where's Frank?" I asked.

"He's off takin inventory again. Every day. He thinks somebody's stealin. Or maybe it's Stack o Dollars

thinks it. I keep tellin him Curtis wouldn't steal from Stack o Dollars; Curtis wouldn't steal from nobody lets him drive a truck. But he don't believe me."

"Ain't me he's worryin on," said Curtis.

"Well it ain't Joan, Babycakes," said Jimmy. "Nowhere Joan could put anythin it wouldn't show."

"It's you," said Curtis.

"Oh, Curtis," he said, and shook his head, and laughed, gih gih gih. "I keep tellin him, Curtis, anyone that gets a pickup truck stuck on the Walt Whitman Bridge when he thinks he's goin to Germantown ain't smart enough to steal. Curtis did that," he said to me. "Ten miles in the wrong direction and he ran out of gas in the middle of the bridge."

"I was goin to Jersey," said Curtis.

"I'm the one goes to Jersey," said Jimmy. "And that ain't for Stack o Dollars. Stack o Dollars wouldn't pay the gas to Jersey to sell a color TV and a diamond ring both. Anyhow, they send you that far away and your mother'd complain."

"Well, it's you he's worryin on," said Curtis.

"Frank's not worrying on anybody," said Joan, her eyes still toward the paper. "He just takes that inventory so he'll always know where everything is."

"That's right, Curtis, Baby, you don't need to worry."

"Shut up," said Curtis.

Jimmy hopped down from the bench.

"Well, Money," he said. "When's your school over? When you comin full time?"

"Next week," I said.

I had taken my raincoat off now and hung it up. Jimmy came over to me, his soles clapping crisply. He took the lapel of my jacket between two fingers and felt it carefully.

"Houndstooth," he said. "Nice. I almost got a houndstooth suit last week. For in the country. But then I thought I can just wear a sweater in the country, so I got a blue one instead. Blue's the most important one. Basic. I've got three blue suits now."

"Three?"

"Well, they're not the same. One's a sharkskin, and one's a year round, and one, the one I got last week, has continental styling, double vent, wrist cuffs, tight pants so the chickies will like it."

"Oh," I said.

"But houndstooth's nice stuff."

"I like your ascot," I said.

"I got a sore throat. I just wear it cause I got a sore throat comin on."

Joan said, "Nothin wrong with your throat."

Curtis guffawed and Jimmy laughed along with him, gih gih gih.

Then he went over to where his coat hung, today a

tan raincoat, belted and hooded behind, again with epaulets for his gloves, and I wondered still at the slightly rilling way his lath body moved above the precise clapping of his leather heels. Joan had gotten down from the bench, too, and was moving along clearing it of the coffee containers and wax papers. There was something of that rill, that litheness, too, in her movements; but her body was richer. As she moved, her S projected, seemed more masculine, more thrust.

While he was putting on the coat, Jimmy said, "You really like the ascot, Money?"

"Yes," I said.

"Joan does, too," he said. "She says it makes me look just like Ahmad Jamal." Then: "I'll take you over. When you start full time, I'll take you over to my tailor's. I got some slacks I can't make up my mind on I'd like you to see. You'll like that place, Money. It's got class."

Then he went out, and I took a package from the box, and, beside Joan, began to wrap. She looked up when I took my place, and I essayed a short smile, but she looked down again before the smile had even formed, as though she had not seen it.

From along the aisle, I heard Jimmy's voice, spry: "Frank, I tell you Curtis ain't smart enough to steal," and Curtis's flat and deep and saturnine, "Shut up you, Sweetheart. I'm warnin you." And then, once more, Jimmy's,

retreating now as he moved along the aisle, "Oh Babycakes, I'm just tryin to help you."

For the week and a half while school continued and I worked only afternoons, that was how Jimmy talked to me, or anyhow communicated with me, for he directed most of his talk toward Joan and Curtis, seeming to make me complicit in his constant teasing. Still, sometimes, he did speak directly to me. He undertook to teach me Yiddish phrases, because he said it was good to be able to throw in a word or two of Yiddish when you were bargaining with people. Even this, though, he used to taunt Curtis, explaining to me elaborately how he had earlier tried to teach Curtis, but had found it hopeless: Curtis was just the kind who had to pay full price for whatever he wanted.

Whenever he was in the wrapping room, Jimmy sat, rather tensed, coiled, on the bench, and held forth, cynosural, in that public general bantering way he had. Curtis hated him, was hostilely saturnine. Frank was ambivalent: he liked and admired Jimmy's efficiency, for Jimmy was the only one who could work as quickly and surely as Frank, but he felt nonetheless that he was indulging Jimmy's arrogance and stories, that there was something childish and frivolous in the way Jimmy worked quickly through his own job so that he could relax and socialize instead of looking for something more to do. I could not

tell what Joan felt. Her face remained stoic, dulled somehow, though without the groping intrinsic dullness of Curtis's, heavy and strong and calculatedly bland.

Jimmy's brother stopped by on one of those days. He had a cashmere cardigan sweater in a box and Jimmy immediately tried it on. Frank and Curtis and Joan were each there, and they addressed Jimmy's brother as George. But when Jimmy returned from the next room, wearing the gold sweater, he spoke to his brother as Sylvester. He came across the room, his body held some stiffly, but with still that easy ripple down it, and, looking into the wall mirror, hiked the sweater a bit on his shoulders.

"It's good, Sylvester," he said. "Good. What do you think, Money?"

"It's nice."

Curtis stepped across and reached out to touch the sweater.

Immediately, Jimmy jumped back from him.

"Don't touch star material," he said.

"I just want to feel the sweater," said Curtis.

"Don't touch star material," Jimmy repeated, coldly now. Then he looked again in the mirror.

"Yeah," he said, "for Sunday afternoons. I got an ascot that'll be just right with it. And maybe plaid pants and yellow cashmere socks." He mused for a minute. "A blue shirt?"

"Where you gonna get cashmere socks?" said Curtis.

"For Sunday?" said Jimmy, as though God naturally expected all the world to wear cashmere socks on Sundays.

"What you doin this Sunday, Joan baby?" he said.

"I'm baby sittin for my sister," she answered.

"It's too bad. Too bad," he said.

He went into the storage room and, from there, we could hear him going at David and Randy. Then he returned, folded the sweater, and stood talking with his brother and Frank for a moment till his brother left. Jimmy kept the sweater. He called along the aisle to his brother that he'd take care of him later.

Later, I asked Jimmy about his brother's name and he explained, rather abstractly, that he just called him Sylvester because he read so many books.

Jimmy seemed to like to talk with me about clothes. He read all the men's magazines which featured fashion, and knew better than I what was current. Somehow, though, he had gotten the notion that I knew about clothes, and he would ask me how I liked some of the outfits he wore and sometimes repeat his earlier promise to take me to his tailor's.

But more than any other topic, Jimmy and I talked about jazz. Jimmy seemed surprised that I liked and knew about jazz. He would come in and ask me a few names each day, testing me, mostly cool, mostly modernists--Monk,

Jimmy Giuffre, Lee Morgan; Ornette Coleman's plastic sax really tore him up, he said. Really, I wasn't the afficionado he insisted upon seeing me as, but I knew the names and, from Downbeat, a few judgments about most of them, and that was enough for Jimmy. He'd say, "Oh Money, that Joan digs sound too. You want to take Joan to hear some sound." And then Joan would respond that she hated jazz. And then Jimmy: "Money, what you do to her? She dug you when you first came. What you do?" And Joan would not say more.

One day, when Joan had left the wrapping bench and Jimmy and I were there alone, he perked on its edge and I before it, wrapping, he said, "Money, I got a confession to make."

I looked up at him, quizzically, rather expecting to see the imminent mockery shimmy down his face as it would sometimes before he laughed outright. But he looked serious.

"I do, Money. Really," he said. "I'm not puttin you on. I dig rock and roll too."

I started to grin, but, hastily, he continued:

"Not like real sound, now, Money. Don't get me wrong. I know what it is. But--in its place--I dig it. I move to it, y'know."

"Yes," I said. "I dig rock and roll too." Which was so, though I did not know what he meant by moving to it, for I moved to no music.

"In its place now. The chickies dig it too. But you

gotta sneak it up on them. Cause they wanta hear about the cool stuff."

But then Joan returned, and Jimmy said, raising his voice,"Where you been, Joan Baby? Is that your lipstick all smudged?"

Some days, Curtis did not take the truck, but stayed in the basement. Jimmy explained it that all that gas made Stack o Dollars like to cry. Those days, Frank would find something for Curtis to do, generally with David and Randy, though sometimes, when there was little wrapping, he would have me work with Curtis, as though unwilling to intrude on their efficient privacy. Frank was always shifting the stock, rearranging it toward some optimally efficient placement, so that during the last days before Christmas, when the real rush started, we would be able to find anything we had and get it onto the floor in a hurry, before a sale was lost.

There was a trolley to move the stock, and with one pulling and the other steadying the swaying piled boxes, it was possible to move a lot of stock in a hurry. But Curtis would not use the trolley. "For women," he declared, in his flat saturnine voice, and, instead, he carried the cartons, piled above his head, swaying precariously, the veins in his arms pulsing erect beneath the pastel polo shirts he always wore. When Jimmy was around, he would

sit on the bench and taunt Curtis about being unable or afraid to steer the trolley. He would also warn Curtis about the boxes dirtying his pretty shirts. Sometimes, he placed the stools in Curtis's path, and Curtis would walk into one, stumble a little, and then juggle nervously, trying to keep the tottering boxes balanced while he regained his own balance, the boxes out from his body now, his arms extended and more rigid than before. Then, one of the boxes would fall, or sometimes all, and Curtis would swear, and Frank would come running.

"What happened?" he would demand.

"Curtis just tripped carrying all those boxes so he can't see," Jimmy would say.

And Frank: "How many times do I have to tell you, Curtis? Use the trolley."

Then Curtis: "He put the stool in my way."

"Jimmy?"

"I never. Ask Joan. Did I, Joan Baby?"

But Joan would not look up from her wrapping or her newspaper, and after a minute of silence, she would say, "I didn't see nothin. Don't turn to me."

Then Jimmy again: "See, Frank. You ought to teach him how to pull that trolley. Wouldn't take but a day or two."

And Frank: "All right, Jimmy, all right." Then: "Well, pick them up, Curtis. And use the trolley."

And Curtis, truculent: "It's for women."

Sometimes, too, Jimmy would point out Curtis's muscles to Joan. "See how strong he is," he would say. "Carryin all those heavy boxes he could be pullin. My, just look at those muscles." And then he'd laugh, gih gih gih.

Curtis would glower at him, really little more than a focusing, a concentrating of his normal expression. And Jimmy would shoot his eyebrows up into narrow arches and laugh again.

When Curtis had nothing to do, he would come and sit on one of the stools by the wrapping bench, laconically social, as though his very coming portended something. Almost always when Jimmy was out on his rounds, Curtis would come and sit that way. Usually, he would say something: "What's in the paper today, Joan?" To which she would reply, "Read it" or "Lots." Or: "Did you hear of any parties for New Year's?" To which she would reply, "Some." Or: "I wish that son of bitch AJ would get this place cleaned up. Gets your clothes all dirty." Or: "Wonder what kind of Christmas bonus that cheap son of bitch AJ will give this year? Manicure sets?"

One day, he asked me: "Why you workin here, Steve?"

"I need the money," I said.

"Yeah," he said. "I sure bet you do." Then he gave off his brief laugh, a knowing smirking of the lips and a

simultaneous exhalation of air through flared nostrils, the volume of which exhalation he regulated to characterize the laugh. This time, it was slight, barely discernible. "You think he needs the money, Joan?" he said.

"If he says so," she said.

Still, he would sit, his knees jutting thinly up and out, bare leg showing above white sock, leaning forward on his forearms in thoughtless brooding. When I tried to talk to him, his responses to me were no more than Joan's to him. But he continued to sit in mock community, his presence more pressing for its silence, as though in stoic performance of some duty. If Frank asked him to do something, he would often come anyhow and sit by us, and when reprimanded, he would say simply that he could do it when Jimmy returned.

"You think Joan and Steve need company?" Frank said one day.

"Yeah, that's it, Frank. I'm keepin them company." And after that, when reprimanded, he would append to his explanation that he was keeping us from getting lonely.

Between the periods of Curtis's lumped and those of Jimmy's effusive, busy presence, Joan and I wrapped alone. At these times, more than the others, Joan seemed willing to talk, though she rarely initiated any conversation, so that whenever she did it surprised and even flustered me, and, even at these times, her answers were finalities,

thorough enough to surely answer the question but not full enough to suggest or encourage more. She was not truculent with me, as she was with Curtis; nor wary as she was with Jimmy. But she was neither really friendly as she would be sometimes with Frank.

By the end of a week, I had found that she lived at home with her mother and two younger sisters, one about my age and one younger still, and that she did like jazz, though less the modernists whom Jimmy preferred than the older, more rhythmical people: Ellington, especially at Newport in fifty-seven, and Ella, and some Gillespie, and Billie Holiday, and even some of the real old ones: Ma Rainey and Leadbelly, Bessie Smith and Louis. I had also learned that when she laughed, she laughed at nothing. For I had noticed, sometimes, a smile filling her face as she worked or even, sometimes, the essence of a fought laugh shuddering down her body. But on the third or fourth day, when finally I asked her about it, she just said it was nothing. She made the same reply the next day and the next, though, the second time, a little vocal laugh escaped even while she was denying it.

Now, as it approached Christmas, more of the salesmen came more frequently into the basement with special wraps. The lanky one who had come my first day came most frequently of all. Each time, he would comb his hair caressingly while he waited for the package, as though that somehow saved him

from wasting any time. When Jimmy was there, they pattered together. He would tell Jimmy that he ought to get an electric back scratcher, they were a big item that year. And Jimmy would reply that he was too young to need an electric back scratcher, he had plenty of the old-fashioned kind, and laugh, gih gih gih. He was Jimmy's salesman, the one who was going to sell the girl the FM Jimmy had chosen and who was going to warn Jimmy if Joan bought him a present. When Jimmy wasn't there, the salesman would try with Joan, but with him, she was as truculent as with Curtis and as wary as with Jimmy. After a while, he knew my name, though Joan never told him and he never asked me. He would call me by name and pat me on the shoulder and tell me I ought to be a salesman, Jimmy and I ought to be salesmen, instead of some of those palookas AJ had. But if I stopped wrapping to listen to him, he would catch me. "Wrap. Tie the knot," he'd interrupt himself. And when the package was finished, he'd ask, "Will it hold?" And then, nearly without pause, he'd continue, "Sure it will. You're a good worker, Steve buddy," and grab the package and be gone, bounding the stairs two at a time. One day, he said, "Thanks, buddy," and handed me a quarter, without slowing his exit, but, nonetheless, noticeably.

Joan just looked at me and shook her head.

"You're stuck now," she said. "That's your Christmas present from that son of a bitch. Always somethin special."

While I looked at her, understanding her meaning but wanting still more words to confirm it, she looked back to the package she was wrapping. I watched her for a second more and then, shrugging visibly, returned to my own wrapping.

After a while, Curtis came over, sat down on a stool, and said, "It's startin to get busy."

Then, after a minute, he said: "Upstairs. It's finally busyin up."

"About time," I said.

"Yeah."

Then, we were quiet. After a while, Frank called Curtis to take a carton upstairs for floor stock. Curtis sat on the stool for a moment after we all had heard Frank's voice; then he climbed down from it, one leg at a time, grotesquely long-legged in the movement so that you expected the bones, wherever they were, to crack, and went off down the aisle. In a minute, he passed through the wrapping room and up the stairs, lugging the huge container of back scratchers by a rope tied round it.

While he was gone, Jimmy returned, moving briskly along the aisle, heralded by his own spry patter, took off his coat with that pattern of gestures he used, and hopped onto the table. He wore gray plaid suit pants and a pink shirt with a diagonal red monogram and a red tie with blue polka dots. On his arms, he wore red arm garters.

"Hello, Money," he said.

By now, he had begun to talk to Joan through me, as earlier, he had talked to me through Joan or Curtis or Frank.

"Not much time left, Money. You gonna get all your chickies somethin, you got to order it now. You don't want to disappoint your chickies. I saw a necklace today. Real class. I was goin to take it just to see if you wanted it. Then if you didn't, I could have given it to Joan. But I figured no, no. I figured no, you don't want to do that. Cause then if Joan doesn't have you somethin, you'll just make her embarrassed. Maybe if it's still there tomorrow, Money, I'll try to get it on approval for you."

He reached with his toe and slid a stool toward the bench and, hitching his pants, perched his foot on it.

"When you comin in full time, Money? I want you to see these check pants. Cause I can't make up my own mind and course my man's gonna say 'yes' cause he wants to sell them. First thing you know, that chickie's gonna have them all bought and wrapped for me and I still ain't gonna be sure."

I heard Curtis on the stairs, returning. He came down and stopped in the doorway.

"Mornin, Baby," said Jimmy. "My, my, they sure do have you all dirty carryin them big boxes. Your pretty green shirt. You ought to tell them, Baby, tell them the chickies don't like you all dirtied and smellied up like that. Make them teach you how to pull that trolley."

"I know how to pull that trolley. But that trolley's for women."

I had not heard him moving behind me, but now I saw the stool wrench and heard it scrape as he snatched it from under Jimmy's feet. Jimmy rolled forward on the axis of his rump. His hands spread and then he leaned back, steadied, and almost leisurely, let his tensed legs fall dangling untensed from the bench.

"Now, now, Baby," he said. "What you want to do that for?"

Though the surface of his voice remained spry and easy, somewhere behind it, not merely sensed but there, though ineffable, there was a threatening. Joan looked shortly, barely, toward him.

Curtis said, "I was sittin here."

"You were?" said Jimmy. His small carved face opened in mock surprise. He hopped from the bench, snapped out a handkerchief, and began dusting the seat. "Here," he said. "Let me clean if off for you. Don't just sit on it, Baby, and get your pants all dirty. I didn't know."

He cocked his head and raised his eyebrows, appraising the stool top. "No, no, that's not right." Then he took that stool and moved it off, brought the other stool, dusted it, and glided back like a theatrical maitre de, indicating the stool to Curtis.

Curtis stood watching, as though the whole pattern

of the performance were some ritual he feared to interrupt. When Jimmy finished, Curtis still stood there. He seemed to sense that as soon as he sat down he would have been made foolish. But he did not know what else to do, so he stood there, as though his refusal to move somehow transfixed the moment, postponed his foolishness. His glower was haphazard, without focus.

I had been watching the two of them over my shoulder. Without noticing, I had turned partway round, so that I stood now sideways to the bench, still moving my hands about in the wrapping tissue. I felt a hand on mine and turned back, aware now, and Joan pointed almost vaguely at the tape machine I had been wrapping and gestured with equal brevity and quiet to me to stop wrapping. She continued wrapping. I looked back to Curtis and Jimmy, aware of the sound of her working the tissue.

Then Curtis's eyes narrowed, his face fell into the focus of being focused.

"Now what are they for?" he said.

He took a step around the stool toward Jimmy. He had seen the arm garters.

"Are you a gamblin man now, Sweetheart?" said Curtis.

He reached out his hand, and Jimmy's arm jerked back from it. Jimmy's whole body snapped with the movement, and when he finished, his forearm had sprung vertical before his body and the fingers of that hand had curled tentatively

closed, and his shoulders were bunched, barely, but with that same present yet ineffable, unprovable threat his voice had held. He shot his eyebrows to narrow arches.

In a voice thick and sweet for him, he said, "Don't touch star material."

Curtis said, "Just let me see them."

"Don't touch," Jimmy said, and still his voice was chiding, bantering, though now the sweet thickness had gone out of it, and the threatening returned.

Again, Curtis stood still, as though again he realized that his next move would make him foolish and he sought to avoid it.

"Jimmy," said Joan.

He turned his head toward her, his lips rippling with the tentative smile that was working on his face. As he turned, Curtis's hand shot out and snapped the arm garter, and then, simultaneous with the wup of the elastic and previous even to Curtis's hand's withdrawal, previous it seemed but for the wup of the elastic snap even to Curtis's initial movement, Jimmy's already upraised forearm shot out, the fist already tightly curled, and he hit, glancing up, into Curtis's mouth and then along past his nose. Curtis jerked back. His mouth opened and already his upper teeth were bloody. Curtis's fists came up, balanced wide on either side of his head, big and threatening a little above shoulder level. Then Jimmy moved, the muscles rilling visibly down

his back through his now taut shirt, moving as always in a quick and sudden pattern, and hit Curtis twice more in the face, and was back out of range when Curtis's big fist lunged across the empty space between them.

Curtis stumbled, leaned on the stool, and then kicked that cluttering from him.

"Stop it," said Joan, not loud. "Stop it before Frank comes."

But Curtis stepped forward, blood on his lips now, and hit again across at Jimmy. Jimmy just hopped back. Again Curtis steadied himself. He turned his head and spit blood to the side. Then, that quickly, Jimmy hit him again, and hopped back, past the heavy lunge that Curtis flung, not even looking now, just furious. Then, once more, Curtis straightened and steadied and raised his hands threateningly. He stood like that in that futile refusal of his for a moment. Then he took a long flat step toward Jimmy.

"Goddammit!" said Frank.

Curtis stopped, frozen, his left leg way in front of his right, so that he stood, his upper body balanced on a wide-based, immobile triangle, his hands dropping slowly. Jimmy already had one hand in his pocket.

"What the hell are you doin?" said Frank.

"Curtis just slipped off the stool," said Jimmy. "Slipped right off and cut himself. Isn't that so, Joan?"

"Don't look to me," she said. "I wasn't lookin at

nothin but my wrappin."

"Yes," said Frank.

He stood, his hands in the pockets of his wide-legged pants.

"Are you done your rounds, Jimmy?" he said finally.

"Yeah."

"You don't have to go pick anything up later? No specials?"

"No, Frank Baby."

"Then go home."

Jimmy looked toward him, arched his eyebrows. "My time?" he said.

"Let your card be," said Frank. "I'll punch it when I leave."

"Sure you don't want some extra help around here? Won't be long till Christmas now."

"Just go home."

"Okay, Baby, okay. Don't have to ask me that three times." He put on his coat and buttoned and belted it around him. Then he took his gloves from under the epaulets and began working one hand at a time into them. "Bye, Money," he said. "Think on that necklace." And he went down the aisle and out.

"Pick up the stool," said Frank to Curtis.

I had begun wrapping again. I was not sure that Joan had ever stopped. Beside me, I heard the metal against

concrete as Curtis picked up the stool.

"Now come with me," said Frank. "You can help me move those radios come in yesterday."

At lunchtime, my first full day, Jimmy took me to see the check pants about which he was undecided. Walking with him through the noontime downtown was like being in some public dance contest. He, and I by his side, seemed somehow more vivid, more crisp than the trudging shoppers, seemed to scud along through and around them as though snapping to some distant rappel no more a part of them than the bright distinct Christmas lights which strung along above between the city light poles, as though the city were his, as it was the lights', natural and only habitat, that conglomeration of straightedged stone and glass and concrete and plastic all the nature he knew or cared for. I moved along at an awkward entrepas, my legs sliding and without the heel-clacking zip his had, trying to keep up with him and, at once, to hear what he said, pushing through the openings he had knifed cleanly through a step before.

As he walked, he talked, steadily, interrupted only by my occasional yesses and, more often, his own salutations: "Hey, Babycakes;" "Hyulyuh, Dollink." On every block, he seemed to know someone, and, turning to look at them, I would bump into someone else, and then run a few steps to catch up with him.

He said, "I know what's wrong with you, Money. Same thing was wrong with me once. Cause you got chickie troubles. I can see that. I can see how you keep lookin to Joan. It's nothin wrong, Money, same thing was wrong with me.

"Hey, Babycakes, my aren't you pretty." He laughed, gih gih gih.

"You believe Joan's lookin at you, Money. You believe she would. I can tell. What's wrong with you, you think you're so pretty you scare all the chickies. You think the reason you got chickie problems is because they're all scared you're too pretty for them. Scared to mess around with you cause they think you're too pretty to trust. I know.

"You are, Money, you are. But it don't bother them. I used to worry about that, but chickies don't care. They don't care how pretty you are. You can be just the prettiest thing around and no chickie blames you for it.

"Hello, hello, my dollink.

"All the chickies worry about is what you do. How you move. You gotta be where the doin is. You gotta be friendly. Course, you let them know who's who, but you gotta sneak that up on them. They don't mind how pretty you are, just so they don't think you do. See what I mean?"

"Yes," I said.

"Hello, dollink.

"Hello, babycakes. How you been?"

Still walking fast, the heel clacking crisply and then

immediately rolled onto the balls of the feet and springing on.

"You dig what I mean? Now, for instance, last Sunday, I was at a party. I had on that cashmere cardigan sweater, the one Sylvester brought? And there was this chickie I knew was watchin me. A fine chickie, Money. Class. Just sittin there, timid. She had on a blue dress that cut way down in the back and, Money, she was somethin else.

"How're you, babycakes?

"And I knew she was watchin me. She liked how I danced. Chickies dig how you dance. And I was right, cause when I went up to her, she said, first thing she said was, 'How do you ever dance like that?' and I said, 'Baby, it's easy. You want me to teach you?' and she said, 'Oh, I could never learn like that," and I said, 'With me, Baby, you can.'" He laughed, gih gih gih. "But I didn't go up to her right away. And even when I did, I was polite, Money. You should've seen me. I was polite and shy like you wouldn't recognize. Cause I had to because she was class, Money. You oughta meet her. Then, when I started dancin with her, I saw she had a little hickey on her back. Between her shoulder blades. Nothin bad, but she knew it was there. So, while we were dancin, I just let my hand keep bumpin over it. You don't say anything, but you let them know. Like, for a while, I just kept twittin at it with my finger, like I wasn't payin no attention. But she was. Just to let her

know I knew. To let her know who's who.

"But you gotta sneak it up on them, Money. Like that.

"Hello there, my dollink.

"I think this chickie might be the one to get me that tie tack I was thinkin of gettin instead of the checked pants. I said to her how her eyes would look good with rubies, with a ruby ring I saw. Then, I just let it drop, cool. But I think she might be the one to get me that tie tack. She's got class, Money. A good job, secretary for a lawyer, and she lives at home. She gotta do somethin with her money." Again, he laughed, gih gih gih.

He stopped now on a corner, stopped walking and talking. I was beside him, and I thought for a second he was waiting for me to comment. Then I saw that he was rolling that shark's tooth between his thumb and two fingers, thinking.

"Money," he said finally, "what is your real name? The one Frank calls you? I can hear him say it, but damned if I can remember it."

For a minute, I did not answer, but looked at him quizzically.

"I got to have it, Money," he explained. "To introduce you. I can't say, 'Stanley, this is just plain old Money.' Anyhow, I think I'm gonna call you by your name now too."

"It's Steve," I said.

"Steve. That's okay, Money. Yeah, that's what Frank calls you, all right." Then, after a second: "How come you never call me Jimmy Outlaw?"

Standing there, the crowds seeming to waddle by with their short unsure hurried steps, the same heavy crowds we had hurried through, it occurred to me that I called Jimmy nothing. That was how all our talk had been: I only answered, only agreed or disbelieved; I did not call him Baby or Money or Jimmy Outlaw or even Jimmy; when I had something to say to him, I just waited till he looked my way, or asked me something.

"Jimmy Outlaw takes too long to say," I said.

"You can say it fast if you want. But you can call me just Jimmy if Jimmy Outlaw makes you feel funny."

"All right, Jimmy," I said.

But already, he had begun to walk again, with shorter, less urgent steps now, though still they had that clipped decision beneath his faint swagger. About midway along the block, he turned into a small store and I followed. It was not a tailor's really, but a small clothing store, of the sort that often append Ltd. to their name. This one had no Ltd. Rather, it was called The British Store: Furnishers to Gentlemen. The letters were in gold, outlined and shadowed in royal blue, in the sort of everyday fancy script one associates with roadside antique shops.

Inside, in about the middle of the small, square shop,

there was a Santa Claus wearing a double-breasted blazer with elbow patches, his pocket handkerchief matching the ascot which billowed with exceptional flamboyance under and around his beard.

"How's my favorite schwatzeh?" said someone.

"I'm good, Money, I'm good," said Jimmy.

"Well, what can I sell you today, Baby?" said the salesman.

"Never know, Money, never know. I want to show Steve those check pants I'm thinkin on."

"They are fine pants," said the salesman. Then: "Steve?"

"Oh yeah. Stanley, this is Steve. He's a good boy. I want you to treat him good."

"Hello, Steve," said the salesman.

He came out now from behind the counter, a tall rectangular blonde man, his hand already partly extended, stepped across and shook hands. He had his jacket off, and folded neatly across a display case, a blue blazer folded so that the pocket handkerchief and some of the gold and blue striped lining showed. His left shirtsleeve was folded up along his forearm, but the right sleeve was buttoned, and, as he shook my hand, I recognized but could not read a script monogram across the cuff.

"Sorry about the casualness," he said, indicating with a gesture of his hand and a nodding of his head his own front

and his jacket on the showcase and, beside it, a puddle of ties he had been stacking. "But this close to Christmas, it's just work, work, work. And my other salesman's out today. Anyhow, this is a casual place. I'm a casual guy."

Jimmy had gone to the suit rack that ran along the rear of the store and was twisting the material at the side of a gray chalk stripe suit, standing sideways to a mirror, arching a little, trying to see how the jacket would fit after it had been altered.

Still facing me, the salesman said, "That looks great, Buddy, great. It was made for you. Don't you have any more girls would want to give it to you? I could sell it to for you? What about your mother?"

Then, his eyes came back to me, and he saw the question on my face, and said, explaining, "Mirrors. I can see whatever goes on here.

"You like clothes the way Jimmy does?" he said.

"I doubt that."

"Well, we'll sell you something. What do you have in mind?"

"Nothing really."

"Well, look around. Take your time. You'll find something." He turned and started back to the ties. Then he turned back. "That's a nice jacket you've got there," he said. "Is it real Harris?"

"No."

"I didn't think so. But nice. We try to stay away from that kind of stuff, but for some times, they're all right. I got a tie here be good with it. C'mere a second."

I went over and stood across the display case from him while he rooted through some already stacked trays beside the puddle of ties.

"Let me see," he said. "Where was it?"

Finally, he found what he wanted and held it up, first against the lapel of my jacket and then in front of himself, a rather narrow tie with an elaborate swirled design in red and green and white.

"Well?" he said, after a minute.

"It's rather Christmasy, isn't it?" I essayed a short laugh, a breathy burst, so that after the sound had ceased I came aware of my lips still upturned and my cheeks still full.

"Well, after all, it is Christmas, Steve."

"Yes,"I said, "it is."

"Be great with that jacket. For Christmas Eve. Look."

He reached across and lifted my arm and flopped the tie against my jacket sleeve.

"See?" he said.

"Yes," I said, "it does go. But I think I'll look around some."

"No hurry. Look around. Like I say, this is a casual

place. I'll keep it aside for you."

I went back to the suit rack and paged through it. Before I had realized he was gone, Jimmy came out of a dressing room, wearing a pair of check pants, rolled at the bottom but flat and tight already at the waist.

The salesman's voice said, "Tell him how fine they are, Steve."

"What you think, Steve Money," said Jimmy.

He had taken off his tie, because, he said, you wouldn't wear a tie with check pants, and the shark tooth bobbed yellow, reflecting vividly in the store's flat bright lighting, as he walked across before me and stood, with absolutely no self-consciousness, before the mirror. He hitched the pants a little at his thigh, pulled them around some on his waist.

"Well, what do you think, Steve baby? Shall I have her give them to me?"

I told him the pants were fine.

"Really now?" he said. "Not too much?"

"Yes, really."

He returned to the dressing room and I began looking again through the rack. Even before the salesman called to me that I was looking in the wrong size, I was aware of his attention upon me. The suits and jackets were thin and, even on their hangars, natty, like suits on glossy magazine pages. They were like that sort of suit, too, in that they weren't

really the kind you saw much on the street. Perhaps in New York or Los Angeles; I didn't know. But not here, every day. They called attention to themselves.

Jimmy came out, and he lingered for a while by the rack. He showed me several suits that he said I ought to have. He knew about the fabrics, and when was the time of day to wear each.

Still, Jimmy lingered through the stock displayed, fingering, contemplating, approving. I had moved about midway along the store, ready to leave, when I realized that Jimmy was still looking and stopped, by the Santa in the blazer. I affected to peruse that for a second, my arms folded behind my back, but suddenly, I felt very large and vague in the precise small shop. I looked about for some single thing on which to focus my attention, and finally went across to a shirt counter and stared down through it. In the inside unshaded glare, I saw some fingerprints and some scattered cigarette ashes on the counter top and, from certain angles, my own reflection, rather bloated, the chin heavy and the face seeming to swell and shut off the eyes, the forehead short and Neanderthal, the whole outline seeming to pulsate, to blur and nearly focus and then thickly blur again, above the spotlighted, display case definition of the shirts, white and pink and striped, on the tops of the various stacks in the case. Then I moved so that the reflection vanished, and I stared at the shirts until they

too fell out of focus, and my eyes felt as they had appeared in the reflection, small and inadequate, vague. I shook and cleared my head. Still, Jimmy lingered by a table stacked with pants. I waited for him, feeling more my own looming largeness in the neat and natty place, the loose fit of my clothes awkward compared to his tightness. All the time, I was aware, too, of the salesman Stanley's indirect attention upon me.

Finally, Jimmy came along, said "Goodbye, Money," as he passed the salesman, and we started out. When we were already at the door, I stopped, and went back and bought the red, white, and green swirled tie.

Outside, Jimmy said, "Well, what you think, Stevie? Class?"

"Yes," I said. "Class." And then: "Those pants were good."

"Yeah," he said, his cheeks tensing in a smile. "I got a double-breasted cardigan sweater I'm gettin to be just right with them. We'll stop on the way back and I'll show you."

We were moving briskly again through the unchanging crowds. My lunch hour was nearly over and I had not eaten, but Jimmy was hurrying along to the store with the double-breasted cardigan, and I was going with him.

"I'll show you the cardigan, Stevie," he said, "and then you look around and see have they got anything you want.

See the size. I can get you anything they have here cheap."

The store was bigger than Stanley's British Store: Furnishers to Gentlemen; and the salesmen here wore their jackets; though otherwise they were much like Stanley, their hard skin holding the softness of their faces like baked enamel containers, their hairlines starkly limned, a tweezed and powdered look about them, faintly Roman.

Jimmy held the door for me and we entered, he walking no faster than I now. Throughout the front of the store, where the mottled imitation marble floor lay bare, the clack of Jimmy's heels was echoed by other customers, buffed like the salesmen to a dull finish. As we walked from Stanley's, Jimmy had begun trying to sell me the shark's tooth and the ring with red and blue stones which gave him bad dreams in what he called a package deal. Coming into the store, he continued to assert how the chickies liked the glitter, dug jewelry, stopping only once to tell a salesman we were just looking.

We moved directly along the store to a table stacked with sweaters from which Jimmy took the blue double-breasted cardigan. He held it up in front of him.

"Now forget I'm wearin a tie and these solid pants, Stevie. Just think about it with those check pants. And maybe a light blue shirt."

I told him I liked the sweater, but thought a yellow shirt would be better, and he agreed--"Yeah, with a blue

ascot."

Another salesman approached and Jimmy told him, too, that we were looking. Then he took me and showed me the suits and jackets. He knew the stock here nearly as well as he had Stanley's. He had a cashmere tartan plaid jacket which he made me try on; and a houndstooth, gray and blue with a red overplaid, also cashmere, the skirts of which cut sharply back across my thighs, because he knew I liked houndstooth. Both jackets were more expensive than Stanley's best suit. Knowing that my lunch hour now was past, I told Jimmy No, but he insisted. And, again, as in Stanley's, only worse now for there were so many salesmen, so many directions, I felt their attention on me; first on us, but finally on me alone, because it seemed they would know Jimmy,he being as neatly cut out and as carefully colored in as they. So I tried on both jackets, while Jimmy sat in a low, modern black leather chair, across a low white wood table cluttered with glossy men's magazines and a matching chair from me, and commented that both jackets were just right for me.

Then finally we left, moving back along the store, Jimmy's clack dud in the rug and then audible again on the bare floor, like two alive watched things moving, whistling, through a quiet woods. Outside, Jimmy wanted to get something to eat--"I'll introduce you to the chickie's gettin me the Movado watch."--but I insisted on returning to work.

He said, "You like that houndstooth jacket?"

"Yes," I said. "But rich for my pocket. That's a rich man's store."

"I can get it for you cheap."

"Not cheap enough," I said. "Not that jacket. I haven't any money."

"Pretty cheap," he said. "What about all the money you're gonna make from Stack o Dollars?"

"Spent."

After a while, he said, "You really like that cardigan?"

"Yes," I said.

We came then to the rear of AJ's, and Jimmy pushed the buzzer. After a minute, Curtis's voice came to us: "Who there?"

"Who you think? You expectin Sophia Loren, Baby?" said Jimmy.

Curtis said, "You're late, Sweetheart. Your lunch was over half hour ago."

"My lunch ain't started," said Jimmy. "I been shoppin."

The freight lift came up, whining for grease as it always did, and Jimmy and I stepped over the guardrail and stood still silently as it jerked back down to the basement.

Curtis was waiting when we stepped off. He shook his head and said, "You're late, Sweetheart," and laughed. Then

he turned and returned along the aisle to the wrapping room.

Anxious, I started to follow him. But Jimmy hooked a hand on my arm so that I turned back. He signed me to wait, and I did. For a second still, while I watched him, he watched Curtis moving away. Then he unbuttoned and unbuckled his coat, and pulled out the blue double-breasted cardigan.

"Here, Stevie," he said.

I looked at him, and God knows what sort of questions came up and stood forth bare for their moments on the screen of my face.

"Here," he repeated. "Take it. I can get another."

I looked at the sweater, its price tag dangling from one flat brass button.

"You said you liked it, Stevie," he said.

"But I didn't say I wanted it."

I knew that I would never wear a sweater like that, that if I did, I would seem to fuzz and blur around it. And I knew that sometime he had just taken that thing, amid all that converging attention, without me even suspecting.

"I want you to have it," he said. "It'll look good. Blue sweater, blue eyes."

"Jimmy," I said, "I can't take that. My parents would want to know where I got it."

"Don't tell them"

"They'd see it."

"Say I gave it to you."

"They wouldn't believe me."

He shrugged. "Well, if you want it."

"You won't be able to get another one anyhow. They'll know that's gone and next time you go in there they'll watch you."

"At Christmas?" And he laughed, this a less crisp laugh than was usually his; more Curtis's broad laugh. "Anyhow, I won't take it next time. I almost never take anything. Today, it was just so easy, I figured, hell, baby. But, you get in trouble takin things. I just order them."

"Order them?"

"Order them. I pick a jacket and I try it on. Then I tell Sylvester what I want and what size and I get it."

"I thought Sylvester was studying to be an undertaker."

"He is, Stevie. But you don't go to undertaker school for nothin. You don't dress up for the chickies for free."

I shook my head a little, musing. "How's he do it?"

"Just takes it. I don't know how. Don't care. Sylvester's a conservative lookin cat. Just blends on in."

"Son of a bitch," I said.

"If you want one of those jackets, let me know. Cost you a third, maybe a quarter the price tag. That houndstooth be nice."

"It would," I said.

"You want it?"

"No, I don't think so."

We stood beside each other for a moment; then Jimmy shrugged. "Sure you don't want the sweater?" he said. "Free."

"No, you keep it."

Again, he shrugged. He hung the sweater on a nail and stepped back onto the lift. He threw his shoulders to hike his coat, buttoned it, tightened the belt, and wrapped the loose end back under it.

"Tell them I went to get some food," he said, and went up on the lift.

I walked down the aisle. I was late, but I thought Frank would say nothing. In my mind, facts slashed chaotically across and among fresh and numbing emotions and old teaching, with inarticulate, rather defiant busyness. I knew that my parents would recognize a cashmere jacket in my closet immediately and demand an explanation.

Two days later, I gave Jimmy five dollars for a shark's tooth. He picked it up next day on his rounds--it was being made, he said, by the same man who was making the sapphire ring he was giving his mother for Christmas--brought it back in a small blue velour bag, and hung it round my neck himself. I had worn a sweater, and, when he hung the shark's tooth round my neck, I took the sweater off and unbuttoned my shirt collar so that it could swing open there. It had a

strange feel, a consciousness, like that of a new watch. Still, Jimmy persisted, trying to sell me the ring that brought him bad dreams, but I knew that I could never wear that anywhere.

I worried even what people would say in the summer about the tooth. In AJ's basement, with Jimmy, it was one thing. But alone at school, I knew it would be quite another. In winter, I generally wore a tie to school. That was my mother's idea, though I liked it. But in spring, the tooth would show at my neck, and I didn't know that I wanted the attention it would draw. I suspected that the Lithuanian-looking girl would see and approve it. She would like something special like that.

Wearing the tooth, I went back to the wrapping bench beside Joan and began wrapping again. There were only three days till Christmas now, and AJ had hired two girls to help Joan and another boy to help with the stock. More now than before, I worked on the stock, the wrapping bench being really too short to accommodate four. But sometimes, as now, when there was no stock to be moved and I felt awkward being idle, I would wrap a few packages. I did not talk much with the new girls; they held mostly to themselves. The new boy, Albert, had become Curtis's friend, and I was polite to him, but I had little to say to him as I had little to say to Curtis, and because he was new, he did not do even the occasional kidding Curtis did.

Curtis was out with the truck and Jimmy had gone for coffee. Behind us, straddled on a stool the way Curtis did, Albert was watching us, trying to talk to Sandra, who was one of the new girls. The other, Daisy, was off somewhere.

I was glad that no one had noticed the tooth. Joan had not looked up at all when I stepped beside her. I recalled Catholic boys, blanched pale with hair long and thin like that of Jimmy's salesman, parochial-school boys, of whom my parents and the parents of most of the boys who went with me to the public swimming pool near where I lived disapproved, their crucifixes flinging as they ran around the pool. There was one who had been able to chin himself one-handed five times and who had dived off the bathhouse one day. He used to keep his crucifix shined, so that as he ran, the sun played off it where it flung behind him. I wondered how my tooth would look, what people would say.

For a bit, I listened to Albert talking and to Sandra laughing and interjecting ironically through what he said. He wanted her to go to a musical bar with him after work, and she was going to go. She had gone the night before. Tonight he wanted her to get Daisy to come along with Curtis.

"Curtis don't want to take Daisy," she said.

"He will."

"But he don't want to. He wants to take Joan."

"Yeah, I know," he said. "But if we tell him, he'll take Daisy. Joan won't go with him. Will you, Joan?"

"Curtis don't want to take me," she said.

"What he ask you for then?"

"Didn't ask me nothing."

"He asked you to Pep's tonight and he asked you for New Year's. He told me."

"Curtis was just talking," she said.

"What you think, Steve?" insisted Albert. "Curtis like Joan or don't he?"

Beside me, Joan was concentrating on her wrapping more determinedly than she had even the first day. Her face was stern, rigidly controlled, and in the pattern of her movements, there was an abrupt fury.

"I don't know what Curtis likes," I said.

"Yeah," he said. "He likes Joan."

Then he started talking again to Sandra. I wrapped two more packages. This near to Christmas, I no longer noticed what object I wrapped. I only wrapped. Jimmy had told me that AJ gave the Christmas help a piece of merchandise for a bonus, and I already had picked an electric back scratcher.

Along the aisle, I heard Jimmy coming, calling out at Frank and then at David. He came into the room and, the bench fully cluttered now, sat on the metal chair, straddled it, leaning forward against its back. His legs pushed in rigid diagonals to the floor, his heels pressed into the cement.

"Hiya, Joan, Stevie," he said. "Hiya, Babycakes. Where's the other Babycakes?"

He referred to Albert, Sandra, and Daisy, both collectively and individually as Babycakes. Sandra and Daisy, he had informed me on their first day, had no class; anyhow, they were both too skinny, and Sandra had an eye that twitched. Sometimes, now, he included Curtis with the three newcomers in his collective appellation.

On the first day, Jimmy had linked Curtis and Sandra. Then, when Albert started dating Sandra, Jimmy had linked Curtis and Daisy. He would tell Curtis that Frank had stopped taking inventory because he knew a man in love wouldn't steal.

And Curtis would say: "I ain't in love, Sweetheart. And I don't steal."

And Jimmy: "Oh, Baby, you don't need be shy with us. We your friends. Tell him, Joanie, tell him we're friends and he can tell us when he's in love. He's just bein coy."

Then Curtis: "Shut up, Sweetheart. I ain't in love."

And Jimmy, hands spread palm first before him, his whole small face arched mockingly: "All right, Baby, all right. But you don't need be ashamed of Daisy. She's a pretty girl. Why, if I wasn't engaged right now, I'd be after her myself."

"Who you engaged to?"

"Girl in Jersey. And maybe one in West Philly. I'm

just tryin to help you. Tell you how a girl wants you to be proud of her. I said to Frank just yesterday, 'Now you would think Curtis would be proud of a pretty girl like Daisy,' and Frank says, 'But you can tell. Why you think I stopped takin inventory?'"

"Shut up."

"Okay. Okay, Baby."

Now, Jimmy snapped the cellophane cap from his coffee and drank some.

"Joanie," he said, "how you like Stevie's shark tooth?"

She kept working.

"What shark's tooth?"

"The one I got for him. The one he's wearin."

Albert had begun talking again to Sandra. Joan stopped wrapping and turned nearly full face to me. I already had stopped, and I smiled at her now. Her eyes met mine; then they dropped to where the shark's tooth lay at my neck, resting partially on my shirt front, then returned to my face, held still in its smile. And then, aloud, she laughed, her body moving as though somehow reflecting the path of a pill she had swallowed, the sound not loud, seeming to mock itself, faintly incredulous.

"You gonna be a little Jimmy, Honey?" she said.

I laughed too, and behind us, on his chair, Jimmy laughed, gih gih gih. Then, before I had found any answer for her, Jimmy said, "I gave him the chance. But he won't

buy any real jewelry. Any that shows. I offered him my ring, the one Eileen gave me that makes me dream bad. About one-quarter price. But he just says people would laugh if he wore it, he'd feel funny."

Joan laughed again. Then, abruptly, as though that had been somehow too much, she turned back and began wrapping again.

Jimmy said, "I tried to tell him how jewelry's luck with chickies, but he just says you're the prettiest chickie he knows right now, and I ain't nowhere with you. Don't even believe you think I look like Ahmad Jamal."

Joan continued wrapping, silent.

Later, when Curtis returned and saw the shark's tooth, he said much the same thing as Joan. But he said it without the laughter: "You think you're gonna be another Sweetheart, huh? No. You ain't. There's just one of him and that's too many."

But, by then, Daisy had returned, and I had stopped wrapping and was talking with Jimmy in the aisle, so Joan, anyhow, never heard the similarity of the comments.

When Daisy had returned and I had stopped wrapping, Jimmy had beckoned me along the aisle to talk.

"She got me the radio," he said. And when I hesitated answering, he repeated it.

"Who?" I said.

"Joan. Joan got me the radio. My salesman told me."

"You believe him?"

"What for shouldn't I? He said she got it."

"I thought you didn't trust him."

"I don't." And then, laughing first: "See, Stevie, not any of them can resist Jimmy Outlaw. You get you some jewelry, some confidence, and you have them eatin out of your hands too. You're a good-lookin kid, a pretty boy. You just need some sparkle. That cashmere coat. Sylvester can still get it, you want it. Now take Joan. I know how you kept lookin on at her, what you were thinkin. But you missed your chance. I told you: Take her to some sound. But you didn't move. Didn't move at all."

"I saw you had her," I said.

"Now, don't be mad, Stevie," he said. "I was gonna let you have her. But if you didn't move, I just couldn't let her go to waste."

"No," I said. "Not that."

"You want the coat?" he said. "Sylvester said for you, twenty-five bucks. Sylvester likes you, Stevie."

But my parents would recognize a cashmere jacket and would know it didn't cost any twenty-five dollars.

"I can't, Jimmy."

"Well, I can only try to help."

He started to turn away, but then turned back and, with great quickness, hit my arm.

"I still like you, Stevie. You're a good boy."

The next morning, Jimmy was perked on the wrapping bench when I arrived. After a minute, Joan came down the stairs, and Jimmy said to me, "I broke my engagement."

"Which one?" I said, laughing.

"The only one," he said. "The one in Jersey. You want to buy the ring? I got no use for it. Can't give the same ring to somebody new. Be an insult."

The day of Christmas Eve, Curtis wore a suit to work. It had snowed the night before, and, still, outside, some heavy grayed flakes seemed to stand in the air. Curtis arrived fifteen minutes late, wearing a white raincoat over the suit and, over his shoes, dull black rubbers. Jimmy, Joan, and I were sitting as for a portrait along the edge of the wrapping bench. Joan had her paper, but it lay folded behind her now, and she sat rather erect, her head snapped forward, drumming her long fingernails sometimes on the bench top, but mostly quiet and still. All of us, for the last two weeks, had been working nine till nine, and now only Jimmy seemed altogether to retain his own physical boundaries, not to be muted and cased, at least this early, in some thick dulling covering. In the other room, David and Randy were quiet. Sandra and Daisy sat quietly on stools, Daisy's eyes closed, her head lolling tiredly about on her neck. Albert, like Curtis, was late. And Frank was along the aisle somewhere, still rearranging or inventorying the stock.

Though Curtis came into the room without speaking, he broke its torpor. He carried a square package wrapped in a brown paper bag under his right arm, between his side and his bicep, and he had a black umbrella with a silver handle hanging from his forearm. As he crossed the room, he lifted the umbrella, held it rather delicately and stiffly from him in his left hand for a few steps, and then replaced it again on his forearm. We watched him watching us as he hung up the raincoat and, from the same hook, his umbrella, and stuffed the package into the raincoat pocket.

Finally, he said, "My, you sure are doin nothin."

Jimmy said, "My, you sure are late."

"My bus wasn't runnin."

"You can tell that to Stack o Dollars," said Jimmy. "But you don't need lie to us. Soon as you came in, I said to myself, 'Curtis got a tie on. There's why he's late. Had to wait and get his momma to tie it for him.'"

"My bus wasn't runnin."

"Okay. Okay, Baby. If you don't trust us. Hey, your momma got the wrong end too long."

Curtis stood, looking out more or less generally at Jimmy with that unfocused glower of his; then he looked down along his front and saw, as we all now had seen, the thin end of his tie showing about an inch below the wide.

"Yeah," he said after a minute, "well I like it that way."

"Sure, Baby," said Jimmy. "It's the comin thing. Everybody be wearin their ties that way soon. My baby brother already doin it. Course my momma ties his too."

"I tie my own tie, Sweetheart."

"Then what you late for?"

"My bus wasn't runnin."

"Oh yeah. Now, I remember, Baby."

"Yeah. Now you remember."

Frank came in then, short, his feet obscured by the baggy bustle of his pants cuffs. After a minute, he said, "Well, let's go, men. Last day."

Joan got down from the bench and had already boxed a package when Sandra and Daisy came and took their places beside her. I saw Sandra reach out and flick on a radio on the bench, and soon her thin right leg was jiggling to the music, more leisurely than the music, but enough anyhow to snap her skirt.

Frank sent Curtis and Albert into the other room to work with David and Randy. He and Jimmy and I went down the aisle, where he had some radios and some back scratchers to be taken upstairs for floor stock.

At the base of the stairs, Jimmy stopped, balancing his stack of boxes with one hand, and groomed his goatee in the mirror. Then he followed me up the stairs.

The store was beginning to crowd. Already some of the salesmen had customers. Most, though, stood behind their

counters, waiting. Jimmy's salesman was in the center aisle, standing with his legs spread widely and his arms folded behind his back. In the florescent light, the comb lines in his slicked thin hair showed like crevasses.

We put the radios and back scratchers behind the appropriate counters. Then Jimmy approached his salesman.

"More radios and scratchers over there," he said, indicating the counters.

"I need those scratchers like I need two heads," said the salesman. "They can give them back to the Indians for me. Four returns and it ain't even Christmas yet."

"Schlemiels, huh?" said Jimmy.

"Yeah, schlemiels. That ain't the word for it."

"Well, the radios are there, Money." And then: "Did she really buy the radio?"

"Who?"

"Joan. The radio."

"Yeah, she bought the radio. Didn't I tell you? Would I lie to you?"

"You'd lie to your mother."

"Sure. But not to you, Jimmy boy."

He laughed, and then Jimmy laughed, and returned to where I was waiting, his torso roiling confidently. As we went down the stairs, Jimmy said, "You want that jacket, Sylvester's got it. You don't want it, I'll take it. But it's good for you, Stevie. Chickies like the feel of

cashmere. Class. Rich."

"I've told you, Jimmy, my parents would know."

"Tell them I gave it to you. He be here at lunch. Out back by the lunch place. Come on anyhow and see it."

"I'll see," I said.

All morning, we were busy. The stock was thin now, and none was expected till January, for the sale, when I would not be working anyhow. There was no more hurry about parcel post, because nothing would get anywhere by Christmas now. But the salesmen cluttered up and down the steps all morning with rushes. All the heavy stuff was being picked up today--the televisions and stereo sets--and we had to carry it onto the floor for the customers. Jimmy's salesman would come down, and call for a television, tell me where to take it and tell me to stick with the customer, he was good for a buck anyhow. He and another salesman kept shouting at Frank that we were to have only a half hour for lunch. But neither would stay from the floor long enough to hear Frank's answer, which each time was profane and negative. That day, that salesman did not slow even to comb his hair. He would come into the room, emerging all long arms and busy legs from the clutter of his descent, talking already as he entered:

"A television six one seven four the Zenith pink let's go let's go they're like flies up there the palookas droppin like flies up there all the last minute schlemiels c'mon

Steve buddy you bring it up just brown paper and string but make the knot good an old palooka in a blue suit I'll show you when you get up there stick with him buddy take it to the curb for him he's good for a buck at least Frank no lunch for anybody half hour most like flies up there."

But we did take lunch. I went with Jimmy to the lunch place across the street, where he always ate and where he was going to meet Sylvester. We both ordered grilled liverwurst sandwiches, as Jimmy did every day and I had begun to. We sat and ate, Jimmy jibing with the counter girl with an energy which transcended its perfunctoriness, asking her how she liked me, telling us both he could set something up. The luncheonette was crowded. Jimmy liked it because its juke box featured jazz as well as rock and roll. Today, though, rock and roll played, but the din and clatter were such that I could barely hear it. Jimmy had a ring and a necklace open in their boxes on the counter before us, trying to decide which to give Joan when she gave him the radio.

Then, a rather soft-looking boy I recalled seeing about pushed to us and said to Jimmy, "Fuzz. Fuzz got Sylvester out front."

For a brief second, Jimmy froze, a half of the sandwich midway to his face. Then, he took his bite and chewed it. Then, his hands and fingers commenced a pattern as quick and mysterious as that Joan employed wrapping AJ's packages, and he closed and put away the necklace and ring

boxes.

He said, "What he have with him?"

"Not sure," said the boy.

"Did he have a jacket with him?" said Jimmy.

"I didn't see it."

Along the counter, those who had stools and had already ordered remained sitting. But the waiting figures who had stood socializing had thinned. Now, I could see the front door along the aisle; on the stoop, I could see two policemen and, his back to us in a dark topcoat, Sylvester. A crowd had gathered in a formal semi-circle about the stoop.

Jimmy put a dollar on the counter, wished the counter girl a lucky Christmas, and started along the aisle to the door. Behind him, I watched the crispness of his steps and the easy sensuous rill of his body above them. There was something tighter, though, about him, something coiled; I recalled the afternoon he'd fought with Curtis.

He passed between Sylvester and one of the policemen, I behind him, and moved, still to a rhythm, into the semi-circle of curious, and turned there amid it to watch.

One of the policemen put a hand on Sylvester's arm. Violently, Sylvester shrugged the arm from him. Sylvester said, "What's you always houndin me for, man?"

The policeman was tall, and his face was rather flat, his cheekbones high and described now from the cold by a thick line of red. Watching him, you could see he was some

bored and some angry. His partner was smaller. He had his billy out, and was thwacking it with affected preoccupation against his hand, calling to the crowd to disperse. Some moved on. But, as quickly, more replaced them. And most made only tentative moves, more shrugs really than steps, moving from one point on the semi-circle to another.

"What he do?" said Jimmy.

"Took somethin," came an answer.

"What?"

"Don't know. Records, I think."

Sylvester said, "You got a warrant?" And then: "Keep your hands off me, then. No warrant, no touch."

His topcoat was a chesterfield. Under it, a white shirt and a red tie showed. His short hair traced crisply along his forehead. He held a flat big bag under one arm.

For a time, he and the tall policeman stood on the stoop, watching each other, mutually hesitant.

"That bag all he had, Baby?" said Jimmy.

"All I saw."

Then Sylvester looked away from the policeman, spat drily on the stoop, and started to walk away.

"You got nothin on me, you let me alone. Let me alone from now on, hear? Just leave me be," he said as he walked.

At the edge of the crowd, the smaller policeman stood partially blocking Sylvester, hesitated, started to move. Sylvester reached forward his free hand and grandly, more

by gesture than by force, though he did touch the other, moved him aside. He started then through the crowd.

"Hey, you," called the taller policeman.

Sylvester kept walking.

"Dammit, stop."

The smaller policeman started through the crowd after him, but Sylvester was clear now of the people, and he began to run. Pushing, swaying, hands groping above his head like those of a drowning man, the policeman moved after him.

"Halt or I'll shoot," called the taller one, still on the stoop.

Then the small one broke free too, and started after Sylvester. He danced around an old couple lugging a full shopping bag between them, hit into a second man, whose two packages tottered for a second far before him on the rigid hands of his outstretched arms while he reeled back, then fell, and continued without stopping, running pigeontoed, gaining on Sylvester. At the corner, Sylvester slid sideways, erect in his chesterfield, the bag of records now in his hand. While he was trying for traction, his legs busy, his arms circling, profiled to us like some natty fellow in an amateur hour dance routine, the policeman slammed into him.

When they returned to the stoop, the policeman prodding at Sylvester's back with his billy, Sylvester had his arm twisted round in front of him, trying to see if the elbow of his coat had been ruined. His tie remained tight

to his collar; the records once more were under his arm.

By now, the crowd had thinned. Jimmy and I watched while Sylvester and the two policemen got into the cruiser and moved away.

"There goes your jacket, Stevie," said Jimmy.

"What'll happen to him?"

"Nothin."

We started back to the store. After a minute, Jimmy said, "He ditched the jacket. They won't touch him for the platters. He got them from a department store and they won't check the department stores. Just the record places."

And then: "Too bad, Stevie. I had some sounds for you for Christmas. Two Ornette Coleman platters and a Miles."

We came to the lift and Jimmy pressed the button. Clearly, he wished to say no more about his brother's arrest.

"What will your mother say?" I asked.

"We don't tell her."

Sylvester's face when he climbed into the police cruiser had been cocked, what seriousness there was about it taking the form of boredom and then as only a thin and tentative veneer. Once seated in the cruiser, he said something, after which his mouth cracked and his cheeks rumbled, so that in the grotesque silence imposed by the closed cruiser windows, I had imagined him laughing like Jimmy, crisp exhalations against thin saliva, tapering finally into a hint of private further meanings, putting the arresting

policemen at ease.

I recalled the utter everyday sense as Jimmy had pulled the cardigan sweater from under his raincoat. Thinking then that my parents would have recognized the sweater's newness immediately, I felt cheated. I felt little and terribly tentative and prohibited from the blasé patterns by which Jimmy maneuvered.

The lift came up and we stepped on and descended into the basement.

Later, around two o'clock, Jimmy had a bottle of bourbon. I had not been aware even of his absence when he went to get it. After lunch, I had been constantly busy, running up and down the stairs, carting televisions and stereos and, sometimes, little transistor radios or back scratchers for rushes. By now, even the surface of my face had taken on that electric grittiness, so that to touch it left an unclean sensation.

Still, Jimmy remained crisp, glossy, imminent, as though all about him waited for some trigger. He offered me a drink from a paper cup, and I took it, sipped at it for a second, and then drank it down quickly.

"More?" he said.

And I extended the cup, thinking already that I would have to stop on the way home and buy mouthwash, for inevitably my mother would expect a kiss on Christmas Eve. I heard the glugging as the liquor poured into the cup.

But then Jimmy's salesman was there again:

"Stereo five oh four eight one I think Philco with speaker what the hell's goin on here some kind of gee dee tea party it ain't Christmas yet not by a long shot let's go Jimmy don't give that kid any of that stuff what the hell you think you're doin on the double Steve I'll show you the palooka."

Curtis brought the stereo and speaker to the bench. While Jimmy bound rope around the cartons, I drank the second drink. Then I took the cartons up the stairs and carried them to the curb in front for a tall, pale, heavy man whom the salesman indicated. Without waiting for a tip, I returned through the store to the basement.

Going down the stairs, I felt already outside myself, and it seemed to me a rather lucky thing that I hit each step as I did.

By four o'clock, business had nearly ended. Frank had sent David and Randy home early; he had offered Curtis the chance to go too, but Curtis had said he'd stay, just in case it got busy again; from somewhere, Frank had produced two bottles of bourbon and a box of potato chips. When the rushes did come, we were meant to be taking turns on them, but Joan did most of the wrapping and I carried most of them onto the floor.

Frank said, "We did all right."

We sat, Joan, Sandra, Daisy, and Albert on the bench,

Curtis and I on stools, Frank on the chair. Jimmy stood.

Frank said, "I'd let all you Christmas people go early, only AJ'll be down soon to give you a bonus, and if you're not here, you won't get none."

I was watching Jimmy. My own physical outlines seemed vague now, bleared, and I was aware of my stomach. But Jimmy stood in sharp focus, and I could see him looking blatantly toward Joan, wondering, I knew, when and where that radio was.

He stepped across to me in two claps and poured more bourbon into the cup I held between fingertips. This was not how liquor was meant to work. Everyone in the room seemed clear; only I was blurred, distorted, somehow wavering.

Jimmy said, "You know: This is the first Christmas in four years I ain't been engaged. Just gonna have to sit around by the Christmas tree with my mother." He looked to Joan and then to me, and laughed, gih gih gih.

Joan was seated between Sandra and Daisy, wearing a blue dress, the bodice angled steeply from one shoulder diagonally across her front until it broke over one high breast. Her eyelids today were blue also. Now, they rested heavily over her eyes. She stared before her with determined impassiveness.

"I thought you were engaged," said Frank.

"I was," said Jimmy. "To a girl in Jersey. A class girl. But she kept wantin me to slow down. Y'know, when she first saw me, what she liked about me was how I danced. But

she didn't want no dancin at the weddin. None. And next thing, I could tell, she was goin to say no dancin ever. Cause she wasn't as good as me. Too controlled. She tried and tried, but she could never get so she could dance good. And I thought: Baby, she's gonna have you dryin dishes soon. And complainin if you even toss them around some while you're doin it. So I just said: No, Baby, this can't be. It hurt me, I tell you. Cause she really was a class girl. And I thought how it was gonna be not to have a fiancée for Christmas. But I had to. For both of us, y'know? She started with me, she used to say how she dug sound. First time we went out, we went to Pep's and saw Miles Davis. Next thing you know, she's askin me to buy her classical records."

Frank said, "That's too bad."

"Yeah, it hurt me. Guess it's too late now to have any fiancée for Christmas. Probably for New Year's too. There's a little girl in West Philly I could get engaged to, but I don't like to play around about this. It's a serious thing, y'know, Frank." And then:

"I tried to sell Stevie here the ring from the girl from Jersey. One-quarter price. Account of it's an insult to give a ring a second time. But he says he's too young for that stuff. He's still playing the field. He don't know how short a time it'll be, eh, Frank." He laughed again, gih gih gih.

Frank said, "Joan, why don't you go on? It's about

over."

"Thanks," she said.

She got down from the bench and moved across the room to the locker where her coat hung, the rich S of her body seeming to continuously reform itself, as though it were perhaps the visible third of some fluid cycle. Jimmy stepped across and held her coat for her.

"Want me to see you home, Baby?" he said.

"No thanks. I can do it today, just like every day."

From the locker, she took a package. Watching, I saw Jimmy's gaze go to it and the elaborate muscles of his face ripple quickly, readjusting.

Then Joan turned and said, "Well, Merry Christmas, everybody," and walked out and down the aisle.

I saw Jimmy look at me and then away.

Curtis said, "Frank, can I go too, now?"

"I thought you wanted to stay just in case."

"You're not gonna get busy."

"No. Go ahead."

Curtis moved across the room in two too long strides, took up his raincoat and umbrella, and ran on down the aisle.

I heard the bourbon glugging again, looked, and saw that Jimmy had refilled my glass and now was refilling his own.

After a minute, Curtis returned. His raincoat sprawled over his arm, and he was fumbling to stuff the

package in the brown paper bag he had brought with him that morning back into its pocket.

"Decided to stay," he said.

At ten till five, AJ Deatherage himself came down and said it was closing time. He wished us all a good Christmas, and told the Christmas help they could take an object of merchandise, something around five, ten dollars, for a Christmas gift from him.

Jimmy came with me to help me pick mine out. I went directly to the counter which had held the electric back scratchers, but they were sold out.

"Just as good," said Jimmy. "My salesman told me they were lemons anyhow."

We looked through the floor stock for a while. Even AJ's had little choice in the five-to-ten-dollar range. Jimmy found a tie press that went for fifteen dollars and told me that if I offered Stack o Dollars the difference, he'd be ashamed to take it. But I had no use for a tie press. Finally, I found a flask in an imitation leather case, and I took that and showed it to AJ and thanked him.

Jimmy and I went down again into the basement, put on our coats, said goodbye and good Christmas to Frank, and walked out along the aisle.

Jimmy said, "You been fun, Stevie."

"You too," I said.

We got onto the lift and rode up to street level. It

was cold, and the air seemed somehow busy, rather clear, though I still felt bloated and out of control.

"Too bad about Joan," I said.

"Oh, she's just shy. Just shy, Stevie. You saw, she had that radio. Didn't my salesman tell me she had that radio. I'll stop by her house tonight and get it. She just didn't want to make Curtis feel bad. That's real class, y'know, Stevie. I'll stop by tonight and get it. They can't resist Jimmy Outlaw."

"How could they?" I said.

"Yeah, that's it. How could they?" he said, and laughed, gih gih gih.

Then, he said, "Look now, Sylvester got that coat stashed somewhere, so if you just want it, stop by anytime. The chickies'll really dig you in that. Cashmere. Not that you need it, that they won't dig you anyhow. But they dig cashmere specially. Tell you, I'll throw in the ring that gives me bad dreams, just cause it's been fun and I want to see you do good with the chickies."

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

"Well, if you do, you do."

We shook hands and wished each other a merry Christmas.

At the drugstore on the corner, I bought a bottle of mouthwash, which I took into the men's room and gargled. Inevitably, my mother would want a kiss on Christmas Eve. What remained of the mouthwash, I poured into the flask.

Then I looked into the mirror at myself. Still, my face felt gritty, so I splashed water over it. In the mirror, I appeared not so vague and distorted as I felt. I was aware of my stomach. Beneath my shirt, the shark's tooth rested damply on my chest. For a second, I tried to picture that cashmere houndstooth jacket with the red overplaid on myself. But already I knew that I would not return for it. My parents would know something was wrong about it. And anyhow, it would look funny on me, too tight; would draw too glaring attention. On me, it would be too odd. On me, it would be showing off.

BEFORE, ONCE

Around him, the stadium still was thinly filled. The row behind him still was empty, and he leaned back against it. He put the case with his fieldglasses in it on the bench plank beside him, unbuttoned his jacket, and let it slide open across his chest in the November sun.

He wished that he had arrived in time to see the teams warm up. He would have liked to see this boy Jaker. But, instead, he had stopped to buy the tie; he had taken ten minutes to buy the tie. Something college boy, he thought in words, and looking down at the red and cream swirled tie, glossy in the sun's defining brilliance, he exhaled a thin, derisive snort. His face, in the quick moment of the snort, seemed that of an older brother, indulging a child, but unable to resist some occasional sign to the world that he, anyhow, knew better.

When the face straightened again, its skin and the lines in it were thin and hard, and it was closed beyond prying. Once the man's face had been so handsome that people forgave him things. His head was large, his black hair thick and slick in heavy waves. He wore a white shirt and a blue blazer and the swirled tie which he had stopped to buy in Cambridge, in the gesture he had mocked even as he performed it, from a feeling he had not mocked so as not to acknowledge,

toward a ritual he did not even suspect.

He sat forward. For a second, he considered going down to the Princeton dressingroom and identifying himself. He would have liked to talk to this Jaker boy. Then again he snorted softly. What would he have to talk to Jaker about? Princeton clubs? Girls? Nonny? Why he'd chosen Princeton? Kirby had chosen it because only Princeton of all the Ivy League schools retained stripes down the length of the sleeves on its football jerseys. And because that was where Bix Beiderbecke had been so popular. Now, how would you say that to Jaker, who probably had never heard of Bix Beiderbecke? How ask him to believe that? Even in Kirby's own undergraduate years, Beiderbecke had been already outdated. And what would Jaker say to him? Calling him mister or even sir. That he was sorry about all those records? Sorry that in all those places Princeton's record book had read Andrew Kirby, it was soon going to read David Jaker? And what would he say then: Oh, I don't mind?

But it wasn't that, he knew. He would have liked to see and talk to Jaker, and there would have been something to talk about. But identifying himself would have set terms and conditions on the day. And he was just a businessman visiting a city on business and going alone to see his old school play an old rival. He needed, he knew, to be only that today--factually, ostensibly, anonymously.

Eight undergraduates had filled the row three before

him. On one, he recognized a Cottage Club tie. That would have been an all right sort of gesture, hint. Better anyhow than the swirled thing he had just paid four dollars for and already smirked to know he would not wear again.

Across the field, he could see the small spots of color and movement as the Harvard people began to arrive. The day was still and the sun warm for November, coming into him and spreading upon him, so that effort seemed something alien and far away and now purposeless. The growing crowd's curr came to him, as from some irrelevant distance, speckled now and again by the hawking voices of the white-coated concession salesmen or by other louder, nearer, realer sounds. On the Harvard side, the busy brilliances of the sun darted among the colors, seemed to sink into the distant white gashes of the concession salesmen moving there, to become a part of the white and shine out through the jackets like snaps. That was where Nonny would be, somewhere there, some one of those spots.

Behind him, he heard a woman's voice going hoarsely on. He turned then and saw her, newly seated, still moving about on the plank, two rows behind him. She wore a suit of thin tweed, a houndstooth pattern, blue and tan and maroon. At her neck, a silk maroon ascot arched. Looking at her, he knew that from his own clothes, from the shoes he wore, she would know that she might know him, as she would not know some of the others round them. But too, he knew that,

looking at him again, she would know that she did not know him, and dismiss him as wholly and finally as he would dismiss those others neither of them would know.

Nonny had said to him once, "I have only gone out two times in my whole life with a boy whose shoes I didn't like, and each time he was awful." Kirby looked now at his own wing-tipped shoes on his short feet, golden as though worked with neat's foot oil. He knew that then they would have been shoes Nonny didn't like; but he knew, too, that Alfred probably had a pair like them today.

Already, the man who was with the girl was reascending the broad steps of the stadium. For a second, Kirby watched the other man's long back; and then he looked to the girl. She was a girl, and not a woman, and the other man had been, really, a boy. She could have been anywhere from eighteen to twenty-eight. Someone else would know, he thought; Nonny would know; and the girl's date. But for him, as he watched her place the leather flask on the coarse cement at her feet, sense his attention, look to him, page through her program, pull down her skirt, uncross and recross her legs, there persisted an old consciousness of not knowing. Undeniably, she was young, was a girl. Yet, too, there had been something once done and tired in the matter-of-fact line of her hoarse voice, there was something premature in the largeness and finality of her features, and something past touch in the brittle sere brown streaks of her hair.

He thought that once he would have known her, or anyhow could have known her, would have known someone who could introduce them. Once he would have known her date. And once, this surely, her date would have known him. He looked away from her and back across the field. Once he had known Nonny.

More now, people were arriving. The spots of color across the field stood now one against the other, and, especially in the center, the white concrete had largely disappeared. That was where Nonny would be, somewhere in the center, some one of the bright moments. Alfred would have good seats.

Twice before Nonny had sat there--with Alfred even then, he thought, and snorted to himself--in less choice, undergraduate seats, and watched him play in this game.

But that had been before, once. And then, in words, he thought Ten years is not such a long time. But immediately he knew that for him it was. For him the first year had been such a long, too long time. And all the later nine had only shored the distance of that first. He had been seventeen when he entered Princeton, eighteen when he met Nonny, twenty-two when he saw her last. And for him that all was once, one time, one moment out of his time.

Across the field, still, the Harvard people were arriving, from club luncheons, he knew, and others from less decorous festivities, for with Yale away, Princeton was

always the important pomp game for Harvard. Even with his naked eye, he could discern in the small and single speckles of color the gregarious gestures, the elaborate and demonstrative and inconsequential business of their movements. Nonny would be there, one of them, with Alfred in one of the club sections--he could not recall which had been Alfred's club--for Alfred would not miss a home Princeton game or a club luncheon.

The stands around him now were filling. He stood again to let a couple pass. Passing, the girl looked at him as though she might know him, and again he thought that once he would have, could have known her. He smiled and she looked away. Once more he snorted and smiled shortly at himself. Something about the girl's date struck him, so that he thought perhaps he had known the boy's older brother, uncle, cousin. Perhaps he had.

Across the field, on the front row, he saw a thin stroke of sun rebound yellow from a blonde head. Around him, the voices played, scattered, gay and always somehow mock. He took up the field glasses, ducked his head through the strap of the case, unsnapped the case, lifted and focused the glasses. The girl with the blonde hair wore it long. Her suit was pink, and her head, he saw, was small. Like Nonny, Nonny's colors. Before her, the man cavorted, lifted his glass to someone in the stands, and then the bottle in his other hand also above his head. He could be Alfred.

Again, Kirby turned the glasses to the woman, and his long heavy fingers adjusted the focus. But he could not see the features, could not tell was it Nonny, though there was something undecided, something partial in the way she moved that made him think perhaps.

Then, as he watched, the other man came up behind her and put his hand, holding the glass, across her shoulder. She turned her head, and Kirby thought he recognized the movement of the smile, like his own, removed and indulging, but never excusing. But he was not sure even that it was Nonny. He could discern only the moment of the movement, only the colors.

The Harvard team came onto the field. He saw the man with the woman across the field turn and point, turn back toward the stands and make a long slowed sweep of his arm, like that of a Hollywood cavalry officer. Hearing the cheering and, behind him, the scattered calls, he looked to the Harvard team on the field. They ran a straight dive perfunctorily and trotted to the sidelines. When he looked again at the stands across the field, the girl in pink had moved. He found her again, moving up the concrete steps, and he watched till she reached her seat and settled. Then he looked back, through the glasses, across the conglomerate colors of the crowd, just looking. Each of the single brightnesses seemed cheering, calling, drinking individually. Then he saw a second blonde head, pale and single and somehow

frail in the sparkle of definition the sun's glare provided, and he hesitated, watching. This girl looked straight before her. Her hands sat together on her lap, like those of a schoolgirl. She, too, might be Nonny. He watched her sitting, as though isolate from the activity round her. He looked back to the girl in pink, then back again to the new girl; but he could not see enough.

The stands around him cheered then. As the call moved away from him, it seemed to merge, to unify, and its core, somewhere far behind him, struck him as vaguely threatening and vaguely exhilarating, so that he shivered for just a moment. Before, he hadn't given a damn about the cheering; sometimes, had not heard it at all. And he laughed that now, when the cheering was for someone else, it could move him. He wanted himself to cheer, but, aware of the younger people around him, knew he could not. Why, even they felt foolish at it. How would they feel to hear him calling "Go Tiger"? Today, he was just to watch; that was part of the thing. Once more he laughed, more coldly even now, thinking of the swirled necktie it had taken ten minutes to choose.

He looked to the field, where the Princeton team was gathered on the sidelines. They wore white jerseys, with black numerals and black sleeves, and still, ringed down the sleeves, orange stripes.

"Which one's Jaker?" he asked the boy beside him.

"Twenty-four."

The boy had a soft unmarked face. He wore a tan plaid suit and a pink shirt, the collar of which rolled just so. Kirby had heard him, as he came to his seat, stop and talk with the hoarse-voiced girl in the houndstooth suit.

The boy said, "You won't need Davy's number, though."

"Oh," said Kirby.

"No, not once the game starts. You'll know who he is without any number."

After a minute, the boy said, "Wouldn't know him off the field, though. Wouldn't spot him as any jock. Davy's a smooth boy."

"Do you know him?" said Kirby.

"Sure I know him. Know him well. We think alike. Know it's all a lark. It's all just how much you can fool the next guy; that's what everybody is up to." His tone had changed. He was not talking any longer about Jaker. "It's all just a game, and we know that. Sure I know Davy."

The boy looked at Kirby till Kirby looked away from him to the field.

Then, again after a minute, the boy said, "People say Davy's arrogant. They're just the ones think everybody doesn't have time for them is arrogant. Davy's smooth. Smart. You wouldn't really expect it with his background and all. But he is. A good man."

Kirby heard the explaining voice, sure of its rightness and anxious to be heard, saw the young face, unmarked,

and the eyes dartling like butterflies. As he once would have, could have known the girl in the houndstooth suit, he knew that he once would have known this boy. He once would have been able to talk to this boy, to say the simple yes the boy demanded.

He looked again to the field and found Jaker. Seeing him, his helmet off, the black streaks of charcoal beneath his eyes like some fine warpaint, he wished again he had gone to the dressing room and talked. Perhaps they would have asked him to sit on the bench with them. But then Nonny would have seen him. Well, that might not have been so wrong. She would only have seen him. And he longed for that, from the safe seat in the stands, the safe time past the moment of possibility. He wondered was Nonny too looking now at Jaker. And, if so, was she thinking now of him? And what of Alfred?

Behind him, someone said, "If Davy scores twice today, he breaks old Kirby's record. Once, he ties." And someone else, "Hell, they've lasted long enough."

The boy beside him said, "There's no if about it. No if at all. What Davy wants, Davy gets."

Princeton received the kickoff. Standing with all the others, Kirby watched Jaker. The boy touched his toes once and snapped his arms like flexing wings behind him, spit in his hands. With him, for him, Kirby felt the fear. In his own stomach and then behind his eyes, he felt the juices

rush. He thought for the boy, Hit into the goalpost, start the numbness now. Still watching Jaker, he heard the long rill of the referee's whistle, knew the ball turning bright and dark in the sun's day, traced by the long hollow ceremonial stridor from the Harvard stands. Jaker moved to his right, in front of the other safety, to receive the kick. The sideline, the sideline, Kirby thought. But the boy moved up the center of the field, running at about three-quarters speed. It's on the left, thought Kirby. And then the boy saw and cut. Hard now. The easy roll of his shoulders, the threatening supple flexing of the stripes of his sleeves which had made Kirby a second before for a brief second think again of Nonny ceased. It was all tight and fast now. Watching the blockers, Kirby felt inside him the draining rush at the possibility. "Left," he called out. Then he heard himself; then the urgings of the crowd around him. And he knew he was just one of them now, and Jaker didn't hear him. And he didn't know anymore. He didn't do it anymore. At the thirty, three Harvard boys closed on Jaker, and Kirby saw him slow, looking for a hole. Inside, inside, he thought, though knowing better. But Jaker saw no hole, and started again at full speed, his colors bunched and thick now, trying to angle into them, his head still up and watching. The first of them hit him high about his thighs. Go down, Kirby called to himself. The boy tried to lunge forward, but the other held him, and then a second maroon

body slammed into his trapped upper body, able only to dance like the cocked head of a snake, and slammed him backwards, down. Now the numbness would be there, the confidence. But still in Kirby the scattered juices rushed unfulfilled.

Someone behind Kirby said, "Not bad. But he's better than that."

Kirby thought He is a football player; he is good, and wished again, in words now, that he had talked to Jaker.

Once, in his sophomore year, he had returned a kickoff eighty yards against Harvard. And been caught from behind at the ten. That was the first day he met Nonny, after that game. She was with Alfred even then, and with some people from Princeton who had gone to St. Marks with Alfred.

She had been with Alfred always for all the times you dressed up for and saw people at. Even at David Harrow's wedding, where Kirby had been an usher and she a bridesmaid, Alfred had been her escort. Even though she had gone with him out the front door of the hotel and across the night street and through the park, and stopped in the park with him and kissed him twice, and said, "They will all know," and then, "Alfred will know," she had gone home with Alfred. When he was with her then, he felt and credited the guilt she would have, and was grateful to her. But as he drove home alone, the guilt seemed unreal and inconsequential.

Two nights later, when he took her to a restaurant--as all that year and all the next she met him in such ways--he

went with a speech in mind. He was going to tell her about the fatuousness of the guilt she sought to make him share. He was going to tell her about his needs. But of course, he did not. He began. And even as the first recited words came, as he sat across the table fixing her with his even then narrowed eyes, holding his jaw clamped, consciously looking his best in the squared commanding strength of his youth, she stopped him, made him feel once more that he demanded too much and was ungrateful. And he thought, The time will come; I must only wait, be patient. Again that night she kissed him twice, and made him credit and share her fatuous guilt.

The young boy beside Kirby said, "Would you like one?"

Kirby looked to him and saw between his long open knees a quart container of bloody mary's. Kirby hesitated, watching the long wristed movements of the boy pouring, then said, "Yes, thank you," smiling to the boy and, already, some at himself.

On the field, Princeton made a first down. Again, Kirby remarked the heterogeneous bruiting of the crowd. Again, from higher in the stands, he heard the unified core of a cheer. But that seemed a dull distant sound, only little more concentrated than the cheering from the Harvard stands across the field or the sometimes droning of advertising airplanes above. More real seemed the noises nearer him, and these seemed all addressed to no one, except that some

form demanded some noise and, for that, all the surface lines of all the talk and cheers round him were for every one of the other makers of such noise. More real than any of it seemed the snatching loudspeaker voice from the press box: "Jaker was tackled by White and Amstag." But, when you played, you didn't care even for that. Though he had cared in his senior year, in this game, cared to hear his name come forth in the sucking high voice, knowing that Nonny too heard it, and thought of him, compared him perhaps with Alfred beside her. Now, it was Jaker's name. He wondered did she ever still think, ever still compare. Had she ever compared?

"Well here," said the boy.

"Thank you," said Kirby.

He took the drink and sipped at it.

"Okay?" said the boy.

"Fine."

"Don't I know you?" said the boy.

"No, you wouldn't know me, I don't think."

The loudspeaker voice said, "Princeton: third down and four."

"They'll pass," said the boy. "Moving on the ground, and now they'll pass. You know why we have such room? Know why we're so comfortable here?"

Kirby looked shortly to the boy. He wanted to see Jaker pass. Or anyhow, see what he did now. He wondered

why the man had given him tickets in the student section and thought, in words, smiling outright, It must be because of the tie.

"It's because I've got two seats," said the boy. "You're sitting partly on one of my seats."

Again Kirby looked to him. As he looked, his face retained the thin remains of his thin smile at his thought about the tie. The boy's face, too, held an unso smile, a smile thinned by knowing too much. But the boy's smile was young, still some cocky and some tentative; the boy still smiled to Kirby, but Kirby could smile now to no one else.

"I got stood up," said the boy.

Then, to some unknown signal, the boy's face turned to the field and Kirby's turned too. The linemen were scattered and sprawled. Jaker moved, loping with that sense of imminent brutality, toward the far sideline. His arm cocked, and two Harvard defenders fell back, and Jaker cut inside them, then veered again, his legs seeming short as they canted beneath him from his waist, running full now.

Beside Kirby, the boy was standing, "Go, Davy, go," he called.

Kirby came aware of the boy cheering, then aware of his own fist tight and hopping forward curtly at his side. He watched Jaker get trapped and knocked out of bounds in front of the Harvard bench. He felt the energy come live inside him; and more again he wished he'd talked to Jaker.

He would have liked to sit on the bench today, with the people who were playing, where the paraphanalia and the knowledge were. He would have liked to have been asked. He would have liked to be there where all the crowd was watching, to have been seen by Nonny.

"All the way from Princeton," said the boy, "and no show. You know what I like to drink? Bourbon. Plain bourbon. And here I am with two quarts of these things all mixed just for her. Just to get drunk with her. And no show. Know where she is? She's at the Groton-St. Marks game. A prep school game. Stood up for a little Grotty."

He paused and looked to the field.

"Jaker'll run the same thing again. He always comes back that way. I know him. He told me he always will come back with what works. The Grotty's my cousin. My cousin and that's where she is. No show."

Kirby continued to watch the field, not knowing what sort of response the boy sought. Princeton huddled shortly, snapped out as a unit, and--the boy was right--Jaker did run the same thing again, though this time it did not gain so well. Across the field, the Harvard stands were full. Bright colors speckled through the crowd, particularized by the sun's still brilliance. Their cheering straggled across to Kirby's ears. Looking again to the section where before he had seen the girls who might be Nonny, he found the blonde head, yellow and bright faceted from the sun, of the girl in

the pink suit. Then below and to the left of her, he found the other. Her hair was thin, worn in a twist. But he could not describe the features and he could not tell, though with the fieldglasses he could differentiate between the two.

If he had asked to watch from the Princeton bench, Nonny might still not have recognized him. But she would have. And, down there, he'd have sensed that recognition and been something other for it. That would have asked too much. He was past performing. Even for Nonny, he was past performing. He had been for ten years now, ten years away from New York and Boston and Philadelphia. What he did now was service advertising accounts. And if he came to a town--even Boston--on a weekend and if his old school was playing an old rival, it was fine for him to see the game. It was fine even for him to buy a tie he wouldn't wear ever again and accept a drink from a stood-up undergraduate boy he had no answer for. But he was past performing. He was a businessman with a day free and only that could be so. Once before he had performed, and after that, after a bit, he became a businessman.

Yes, once he had performed. Once, here, he had performed for Nonny. For though the cheering was a distant irrelevant thing, something you heard once while you warmed up, and then forgot, you could know who was up there, know who was aware of you especially. Nonny never cheered for him; without her ever saying so, he knew that. But she had

been aware of him and aware, he had felt even then, that what he did was some for her. And he had known, too, that this was something Alfred could not do for her. He had known that all the time he was on the field. He, Kirby, could perform for Nonny, and Alfred could not.

Then he remembered once seeing Alfred perform for Nonny:

"Alfred can do back flips," she said. "Do one, Alfred."

Six of them stood ringed, several steps before the bar at the bridal dinner for David Harrow's wedding. They seemed small and outlined starkly in their black under the high away lights of the hotel, and Nonny in blue, the only girl among them, seemed still smaller and still more precisely outlined. Almost directly above them, but seeming far high, Kirby recalled the pure bulk of the large faceted chandelier. He had looked at Nonny and then to Alfred, and when Alfred looked and saw his stare, had snapped his head upward and stared at the springing thin strokes of yellow light piercing from the facets of that chandelier. Immediately, he had felt foolish first before Alfred and then before Nonny, and reached behind him for a fresh drink. He had tried to look coldly to her, clamping his jaw. As she stood across the circle from him, perfectly, softly erect as always, her lids came down some over her eyes and the eyes held on something past him, did not dart about as they did normally. Kirby

recalled the slow unwatched sliding of her finger inside the rim of her glass. Nonny's eyes were large, but Kirby could not recall their color. Looking past him still, Nonny had said flatly, "Alfred can do back flips. Do one, Alfred."

Alfred said, "Let's go outside."

"No," she said. "You can do it here. No one will mind if you do it here."

For a second, they all were quiet. Then Alfred handed his drink to Nonny, took off his jacket and pumps. He bent in one false start, a thin boy inside the too full shirt, his weskit cinching the material on his torso. Then he jumped into the air, snapped round himself, and landed again on his feet.

"You can do better than that," said Nonny. "Alfred's wonderful at this. Do another."

Standing coatless in his sock feet, Alfred hesitated, alone with the other five of them and, behind them, the others who approached now. Then again he jumped, and his legs kicked up before him, over his head, and he snapped round himself, and landed on his feet, his arms folded behind his back, straining on his toes to balance.

For a minute, they all stood there while Alfred put on his coat again and slipped on his pumps and pressed his hair with his hands. Then, they moved away, Kirby last, leaving Alfred and Nonny together in the cleared space before the bar.

"Hey, have another," said the boy beside him.

Kirby looked again at the young face, approximating eagerness, beside him. He handed the boy his cup and watched the boy fill it.

On the field, Harvard had the ball now. Jaker stood on the sideline before the Princeton bench, his helmet off, talking to the coach.

"You know," said the boy, "I don't care about getting stood up. Women, they come and they go. I really came to see this game. I want to see Davy set the records. When you know a guy and he's gonna do something, you want to see it. But women, they come, they go. This one, she's pulled this before. But I do the same stuff to her. All the time. Tonight, I'll just snake somebody else's woman. And next week, or the next, she'll call me. She'll call me, and I'll just tell her it doesn't matter. They come, they go."

At halftime, Kirby sat for a time quietly beside the boy. Once, the boy told him he had another little thing at Vassar the girl who had stood him up didn't even know about. And then, the boy told him that when he traveled, he traveled hard and light, and didn't let things bother him because things always changed, like women, they came, they went. Above, the loudspeaker announced scores of other games, and invited the Harvard class of 1940 to a reception after the game.

Then Kirby got up and walked up the long stadium steps to the portal, and down through that into the dank

and muffling tunnel. As he passed the girl in the houndstooth suit, he saw that her date had once more left her, and stared at her until she looked away from his gaze. He stood at the bottom of the steps from the portal on the damp packed ground of the tunnel, hearing the sounds all distant around him. He put his hands into his pants pockets, and, after a second, he drew them out again. Then, he started walking around the tunnel toward the Harvard side. In the highness and dankness of the tunnel, the poeple seemed small and slow. Kirby hurried past them, his head tucked on his neck, his body hurrying with bare motion.

When he reached the Harvard sections, he stopped. If Nonny saw him now, what would he say to her? But he wanted her to see him: he knew in words that that was why he had come. He walked up the steps, and stood in the opening of a portal. As he stepped into the opening, the sun hit him, as though it shone only on him. He turned sideways to let a man carrying sodas and hot dogs in a cardboard box pass by him. Close up now, the people in the Harvard stands seemed more merged and single then they had from across the field. Kirby looked along them from behind, watching for the small insistence of yellow that would be Nonny. It would be best if he could just see her and she him. And maybe he would smile to her as he passed by.

He walked down the stadium steps, feeling the awkwardness of the long strides they necessitated, feeling and

fighting the accelerating, control grasping effect of the unnaturally stepped descent. When he reached the bottom, he stood for a second, squeezing with both hands on the bar of the iron railing, before turning and staring back into the conglomerate faces of the crowd. If Nonny saw him, he wondered, would she call to him? Several rows above him, squeezed in the middle of a row, he found the girl with her hair in a twist. Though he knew immediately she was not Nonny, he stared nonetheless. She was too young, the man with her too young. And this near, he could see her features were larger, more striking but less fine than Nonny's. But still he stared, holding his face impassive. Then he sensed the girl's date or husband staring back at him. He looked then to the man, met his stare, still holding his face so that it did not care. When the stranger caught Kirby's eye, he opened his eyes wide, arched his eyebrows, opened his mouth in a mocking little o, cocked his head. Kirby looked away.

Then Kirby smiled outright at himself. He looked along the slope of the crowd. He saw a girl in pink and hesitated his gaze, but only briefly, for she had dark honey hair.

Then, standing at the railing on the other side of the section of crowd, he saw the girl in the pink suit. She stood talking to someone seated, her head tilted barely to acknowledge their location. She was frailly erect and softly

precise, and above the smile of her mouth, her eyes darted about. As she stood, she moved her head two or three times, and the sun moved along the blonde of her hair, painted the gracile glitter of her head.

First, Kirby thought yes. He took a step forward along the long concrete of the stadium steps, as though to leave. Then, he was not sure. He could not remember Nonny ever wearing her hair curled out as this girl did. Staring still, he stood at the railing, his left leg long before him.

When the girl stopped talking, she looked about her explicitly and she saw him watching. For a second, she returned his stare. He looked as though he believed she would not cease looking. His lip moved, but he did not speak. Looking at her, he did not know was it Nonny. He wanted to be handsome for her, for whoever it was, as though if it were not Nonny, Nonny would anyhow know; and he stood straight. And then, she looked away, and started up the stadium steps, taking full strides, fuller he thought than Nonny's, her hair throwing blonde behind her. For a time, Kirby still stood by the railing at the bottom of the Harvard section. And still he did not know if the girl in the pink suit had been Nonny. He thought to himself that he would have known, but he did not know.

He stood for a time watching the dark oblong of the portal above him, thinking perhaps she would come through it, and smile at him, thinking that something definite would

come. But it did not, and when he saw that it would not, he reascended the long awkward steps and went through the portal himself.

As he returned along the tunnel to his seat, he heard the noise, made huge and distant in the hollowness, of the cheering which signalled the second half kickoff. But he did not hurry now.

He tried to think. He tried to make himself believe that ten years ago he had learned something and gone away from somewhere because of it. He had been an usher in David Harrow's wedding, and for ten years now, he had not seen David Harrow.

A few lone people hurried past him in the littered, high tunnel. But Kirby walked slowly, because he did not care who won. Jaker would care, and then, later, Jaker would not care. Jaker would break Kirby's record.

He tried to regain the picture of the girl in the pink suit, as though perhaps now, away from her, he could tell was she Nonny. But only the brightness, only the gracile sheen would return.

He was an advertising executive who lived in St. Louis and was single and moderately successful. Once, he had played football for Princeton. And then he had taken a job in St. Louis. He had not much ceremony in him.

There had been a girl once. But she did not matter. She was married to someone else now. Perhaps sometimes she

thought about Kirby, perhaps she regretted something that had not been done, but that did not matter. He would not know her anymore. And it did not matter that she might think him handsome if he did. It would not matter even for her.

Kirby came to the steps to his section. He mounted them, and came down the steps to his seat, not fighting the acceleration and gracelessness of the long steps. He stopped in the aisle and asked the young boy who had sat beside him for his fieldglasses.

"You moving?" asked the boy. On the plank beside the boy, Kirby saw the two containers of bloody mary's, covered by brown bags, and the cup he had used, its lip beaded with dried red remains from the drink.

"I'm leaving," said Kirby.

"You're not going to see Davy set the record?" said the boy.

"No," said Kirby. "I can't."

"Too bad," said the boy. "Too bad."

He looked up at Kirby, and his tongue came out and cleaned some tomato juice from his upper lip. In his lap, in one hand, he held his drink; in the other, he held Kirby's fieldglasses. Kirby saw a long spot, dark rimmed, where the boy had spilled some drink on his tie.

"He'll set it without me," said Kirby.

Someone above them in the stands called, "Sit down," and Kirby swung his head to look angrily up across the crowd.

"Just hold your horses," said the boy. Without looking around, he waved the hand holding Kirby's field-glasses to the side.

"I've got to go," said Kirby.

"Well," said the boy, holding the glasses out to Kirby. "Too bad you'll miss Davy."

The boy's head turned then, and Kirby turned too, to watch the play being run on the field. Harvard had the ball, and the play ran off tackle, but gained nothing. When Kirby looked again to the boy, he was refilling his cup. Kirby looked back then to the field. Jaker stood talking to a coach at the sideline. Kirby could see the streaked charcoal beneath his right eye.

"C'mon, sit down," someone called again.

After a second, Kirby turned, and, smiling, started again up the stadium steps. He wished he had bumped into Alfred, though they would not have recognized one another surely. When he passed the girl in the houndstooth suit, he said, "Hi," and she smiled shortly in return.

Sloping about him, the crowd roared then, and he stopped, and looked back in time to see Jaker cut to the far sideline in the field open and scattered by the punt coverage. He watched while Jaker let a blocker get the last Harvard defender, cut inside the crumpled pair, and outran a futile lunging pursuer. Looking then to the spot where he had sat, he saw the boy jumping in the air, brandishing a bag-covered

bottle in one hand, and patting the girl beside him with the other.

Kirby stood until the crowd had resettled, and its tone had again become conversational. But something startled persisted now in that tone. He watched the extra point. Then he removed his tie and opened his collar, went back and gave the tie to the young undergraduate boy.

"He did it," said the boy. "What I tell you."

"I saw," said Kirby. He paused watching the boy's face, open and triumphant, young and looking to him. The boy's eyes were dark and cleanly outlined like a girl's. Kirby saw how curtly they hurried. "Tell Jaker I said he was very good," he said.

"Sure. Why don't you stay? We could go talk to Davy afterwards. I can introduce you. I thought we might do something later."

"I can't," said Kirby.

"What's this for?" said the boy. He held up the tie.

"You spilled something on yours," said Kirby.

He walked back up the steps, smiling again at the girl in the houndstooth suit and hearing behind him the boy's sure young voice calling "Thanks" and "I'll tell him," went out of the stadium, and took a taxi to his hotel.