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These stories are about the Imagination. They seek not so much to explain as to chart its excursion from whatever unknown recess of the soul it emerges to its refashioning of those forms of life it encounters. The first story, "De Profundis," has to do with the awakening of the imaginative faculty; the second, "A Nice Little Story," concerns the imagination's tapping of its own mysterious existence.

TWO STORIES

by

Joseph Pawlosky

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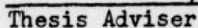
Approved by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APPROVAL PAGE

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DE PROFUNDIS

Peering up from the corner shadows and across the kitchen floor, David eyed his uncle's mudcaked workshoes planted solidly beneath the table, and opposite them, his aunt's slippered feet curled around the leg of her chair. So worn and thin was the drab, gray-and-maroon speckled linoleum that the outlines of the flooring beneath were clearly visible. Fumbling with the slippery laces of his new hightop boots that he had daubed the night before with grease, David caught from his uncle's and aunt's conversation only an occasional fugitive word that happened not to get lost in clatter of breakfast dishes and the clanking of the radiator.

Something his uncle was saying about the cost of fuel oil sprung his mind to the furnace room at school where he had lingered again yesterday, listening to Mr Dyer's story after story about the old days. On and on the man had gone, telling David about what it had been like here in Minden when lumber was King, and about the winter that Paul Bunyan himself had spent hauling logs right from this very county over to the Saginaw River.

Of course, Mr Dyer had to admit that that had all been before his own time, and also before the Great Fire of '81 had swept across the Thumb of Michigan, gorging itself on some of the best stands of pine and oak and hickory in God's green world. "And whole towns," the janitor declared, taking a token swipe with his broom at the dusty floor, "wiped out—schoom!—just like that. And Minden, too, burnt right to the ground." Reflectively stroking his chin, he paused before going on. "Weren't but two years, though, and bingo! there it was—built right up again, right

out o' the ashes. Yes sir," he repeated, glossing his words with a certain sheen of pride, "right up out o' the ashes."

It was not the first time, however, that David had heard of the horrifying Fire. Louie Moore's grandmother, who had been a young girl at the time, said that it had actually rained fire, and that she and her family were saved only by lowering themselves down into the well. Others had escaped by fleeing the nine miles overland to Lake Huron and paddling out in row boats, rafts and even logs beyond the reach of the pursuing holocaust. Not all managed to escape, though. Many people and much livestock had burned to death, and even many of those who had made it to the lake had died from drowning and exposure.

Knotting the lace of his right boot, David shifted his position and pulled on the left one. Staring up at the frost-filmed window above the sink, he shivered thinking of just how thin and fragile was the glass shield separating the warm, steamy kitchen from the raw and menacing cold on the other side. On a sudden updraft of spirited chatter, his younger sister, Mary Eileen, came flitting into the room. In a few minutes Charlie Rice would arrive with the milk, and David and Mary Eileen, after a hurried breakfast, would be trudging out into the cold and still-dark morning on their way to school.

The daily ordeal of having to put up with his sister's incessant proddings to walk faster, and of having to sit for hours staring at a blackboard was made tolerable for David only by the prospect of perhaps finding Mr Dyer again at day's end in one of his talkative moods. Ever since the afternoon some weeks ago, when David had been sent to the furnace room with a message for the janitor, and wound up staying for nearly an hour, his dropping by after class had become pretty much a daily routine.

Although both he and Mr Dyer knew that the furnace room was, strictly speaking, off-limits, they had made a pact that so long as David restricted his visits to after-school hours he could continue coming around. Of course, Mr Dyer wasn't always in when David stopped by, nor, when in, was he always able to stop what he was doing and talk, like yesterday, about the Great Fire, and about the Ottawa and Potawatomi Indians that used to roam these lands. He told David about the Indian carvings he had seen on some rocks out west of town, and showed him the arrowhead that he always carried with himself for good luck. "Seen a live Indian once, too," Mr Dyer said, "at the Fair. Seen him start a fire. Hunk o' rock here, hunk o' flint there, and Kchang!—just like that he had himself a fire."

David marveled. He asked Mr Dyer how come, with such a blazing fire inside the furnace, the room itself was always so cold. "Seems funny," he said, following the man over to the workbench, "being so close to something that hot, and still feeling so cold and shivery."

"Ain't funny at all," Mr Dyer explained, taking out his jackknife and prying loose the leatherpunch. "Lots o' things're like that. Something seems to be one way, and then come to find out it's just the opposite. Like, say, if I was to blindfold you and tell you I was going to put something hot in your hand, but if I gave you something cold instead, something like an ice cube, say, why you'd think sure as anything it was really something hot. Might even think your hand was on fire. See what I mean? Sometimes there's just no telling how things really are."

David never ceased to marvel at the man's inestimable store of knowledge, and at the way he had of making even the most complicated things

unravel with ease. And it was Mr Dyer who, having noticed David's new hightop boots, suggested he give them a good daubing to protect them from the wet and cold. It was obvious, though, that David had been too liberal with the grease, for in yanking tight the lace of the left boot, his hand slipped, resulting in a stinging ropeburn along the crevices of his fingers. Shaking his hand, he tried to rid himself of the pain. It was seven-thirty. Charlie Rice was late and breakfast was late and Mary Eileen was getting fidgety. The telephone rang. Aunt Rose answered it.

A sheep in wolf's disguise, Charlie Rice was an old man whose wife, having died years ago, left him a childless widower. What one first noticed about Charlie Rice were his eyes, or rather that such clear and guileless eyes should have been assigned to so rough and rugged a face. Like the blue bellflowers one is always surprised to find growing from the side of a cliff, they bespoke a life more gentle and indulgent than the rocky terrain would presumably have allowed. Once, David had overheard Uncle John remark that if Charlie Rice ever smiled, his face would probably crack in two. Puzzling over the words, David tried to imagine Charlie Rice with a cracked face, but concluded that his uncle must have been joking, for Charlie Rice did smile, and laugh, too, especially with him and Mary Eileen, whom he called Spark and Miss Bee.

And they, like everyone, called him Charlie Rice. Retired for some years now from the grain elevator, he busied himself performing a variety of chores and odd jobs for many of Minden's residents. Every Friday, although he himself wasn't Lutheran, he drove the Reverend Bowman over to Deckerville to visit the hospitalized members of his congregation. At midday, he could be seen delivering the invalid Mrs McNulty's groceries and mail, and, every morning and evening, milking Ol' Sis, the Leneway

family's cow. Although David, being older now, still appreciated the ritual of Charlie Rice's grand entrances, it was Mary Eileen who took greater delight in hearing the three sharp raps at the back door.

"Who's there?" she would squeal, bounding off her chair and across the room.

"Charlie Rice," would come the booming response.

"Aunt Rose, Aunt Rose, it's the iceman."

"Oh, for cryin' out loud," Aunt Rose would exclaim, pretending annoyance, "what do we want with ice in this weather?"

"Sorry, Mister, we don't need any ice today. It's too cold."

Playing the role with unreserved gusto, Charlie Rice would fling open the door and stand there, milk bucket gushing steam in one hand, his walking stick in the other. "Now, Miss Bee," he would frown, "you wouldn't be pulling my leg again, would you? If you don't want this milk, just say so. I'll take it and put it right back in Ol' Sis where I got it from."

With Mary Eileen wheeling about and flooding the room with laughter, Charlie Rice would stitch up his wooly eyebrows in mock distress. "Well, you going to leave an old man standing here 'till he turns to snow?"

"Come on in, Charlie Rice," Aunt Rose would bid. "Got time for a cup of coffee?"

Nodding and hefting the milk bucket up onto the drainboard, Charlie Rice would swipe off his fur cap and plop it down onto Mary Eileen's blonde curls. "There now, Miss Bee, if you ain't sure as the dickens a bee in Charlie Rice's bonnet. Don't you go stinging him now, though, you hear? He's been stung before and he don't like it, not one bit."

"Care for some toast, Charlie Rice?" Aunt Rose would ask.

"Sure would. And Miss Bee here can just buzz right around and make us some honey to put on it, too."

The ritual, except for certain seasonal or topical changes, varied little from one morning to the next. Brimming with laughter, Mary Eileen would go darting about the room, swooping between the table and chairs, and buzzing like a whole colony of bees.

"Well, Spark, how're you doing today?" Charlie Rice would ask, snatching his cap off Mary Eileen's head and turning to David. "Seen in the paper where you're going up to Bad Axe for the Blue Water Jamboree." David would shrug and smile. "Atta boy, Spark," Charlie Rice would say, leaning over and tousling his hair, "just stay on them toes, Lad, stay up on them toes."

David was less piqued than puzzled by the change that had of late come over his relationship with Charlie Rice. As recently as a year ago, he, too, would have been cavorting about the room, laughing and teasing with the old man. But things were somehow different now, and while he still felt a closeness to Charlie Rice, it was as if somewhere along the way their friendship had shifted its course.

But this morning Charlie Rice was late and, in the instant after his aunt hung up the telephone, the entire household was pitched into a spin of commands and commotion. "John," Aunt Rose called down to the basement, "John, it's Charlie Rice. They called the doctor for him about an hour ago. He's not good." Uncle John's face appeared at the top of the stairs. "You'll have to go milk Ol' Sis, John. David, Mary Eileen, I want you to eat some breakfast, then get along to school. John, I'm going over to Charlie Rice's to see if. . . . David, I said hurry now. This is no time for. . . ."

In a blur of words and hands and books and clothing, David found himself suddenly out of the house and on his way to school. In the swirling snow, Mary Eileen walked silently beside him. He had wanted to ask his aunt what exactly was wrong with Charlie Rice, but in the flurry of activity hadn't been able to. Walking along in the gray dawn, he was transfixed by alternating visions of Charlie Rice, seeing him one moment at the back door with a bucket of sweet steaming milk, and the next, lying flat in bed, with Dr Willot looking gravely down at him. Stopping beneath a still-burning street light, David squinted up into the thick-falling snow. He was standing, he felt, at the tip of some vast and whirling sliver cone, which, like a precariously suspended wedge, seemed about to plunge right through him. A tugging at his sleeve pulled him from his reverie. "David, come on," Mary Eileen said imploringly, "we'll be late."

The morning advanced, but only with reluctance. Each time David chanced to look up at the clock, the hands seemed not to have moved. When called upon to recite, he confused India with Indiana, and twice Miss Kane had to reprimand him for not paying attention. It just wasn't like Charlie Rice not to show up. He'd been sick before, but never once had he missed milking Ol' Sis, not even on Christmas. If there was only some way he could find out what was the matter.

By noon, he could stand it no longer. He left the cafeteria saying that he didn't feel well. From the office he tried calling his aunt, but there was no answer. Suddenly it occured to him that if Mr Dyer hadn't already heard about Charlie Rice, he would surely know who to call. Moving quickly along the creaking corridor, past the smells of clay and paste, and past the stale odors of urine and disinfectant, he came to the furnace

room. "Mr Dyer," he called, pulling open the heavy steel door and stepping in, "you there, Mr Dyer?"

"Huh? What is it?" the man grumbled, shuffling around from behind the furnace. "Uh, it's you. What do you want?" In the dark, windowless room he looked like a shadow among shadows.

"Mr Dyer, I gotta talk to you about. . ."

"Your teacher send you down here?" he asked sternly.

"N-no Sir, she didn't, but you see. . . well. . ."

"Then you can't be in here, and you know it. That's the rule. You just better run along before somebody finds out."

"But it's lunch time now," David protested, "and I. . ."

"Lunch time or not, rules are rules. Now, go on, scoot. Go on, I said, before somebody catches you here. This isn't no time. . ."

Shrinking from the janitor's pelting words, David backed out onto the corridor. Turning, he hurried past the Activities room, and past the din from the cafeteria to his locker. Pulling on his cap and jacket, he left by the back door. Outside, it was still snowing, although it had let up some. Skirting along the north edge of the playground, his legs, of their own accord, carried him away from the school and west, in the direction of town. But now that he was out and away, where was he going? To Charlie Rice's, of course. But what then? What did he propose to do? And how would he explain his even being there?

Taking the back way from the schoolyard, he hurried through Bill McCoy's garden, across the post office parking lot, behind the town hall and past Jake Kanaby's welding shop. Cutting through a number of gardens, across a frozen drainage ditch, and over two fences, his path ended at the boundary between Lee Thorton's and Charlie Rice's properties. Standing

there, motionless, he felt as alone and forlorn as the snow-laden scarecrow he had seen in Jack Shumacker's garden.

Hanging back on the fringe of Charlie Rice's yard, David crouched behind a cluster of pear trees. He knew that if he was to get back to school on time for class he would have to hurry with whatever it was he would do. He also had to be careful not to be seen by anyone, especially by his Aunt Rose. His feet felt stiff and cold. Looking down, he noticed several frozen pears scattered about him. Capped with snow, they looked like eerie lightbulbs. He glanced out from behind the trees and was surprised to see that Charlie Rice's fieldstone house hadn't in the least bit changed. He had vaguely expected to find it different, although different in what way, he wasn't sure.

Squinting through the veil of blowing snow, he saw nothing out of the ordinary. There were no cars around, no lights in the windows, no people—nothing. If Charlie Rice really were sick, there'd be all kinds of things going on. Everything must be all right, then. For the first time ever, Charlie Rice had probably just overslept and might, this very minute, be drinking coffee at the Leneway's kitchen table, telling Aunt Rose about how he had forgotten to set his clock. Feeling ridiculous for having been so alarmed at nothing, David was about to start back to school when he remembered his aunt's having said something about sending for the doctor. Wondering, then, whether Charlie Rice wasn't perhaps in the house after all, lying sick in bed, he decided to venture a closer look. Sprinting across the yard, he approached the door and stood listening. Except for the pounding in his ears, he heard nothing. Timidly, he knocked. There was no answer. Knocking again, he opened the door a crack and peeked in. Seeing nothing, he entered.

David was as familiar with the compact, four-room house as he was with his own. During the summer he often stopped by in the evenings to chat with Charlie Rice, or to listen with him to the ball game on the radio. As he entered now from the cold out-of-doors he felt that the house should have been warmer than it was. The dank air was heavy with kerosene fumes, and he noticed Charlie Rice's boots huddled like twin orphans next to the unlit oil stove.

"Charlie Rice," he called out more loudly than he intended, "Charlie Rice, it's me, David. You home, Charlie Rice?" His words, like chunks of coal rumbling down a chute, echoed dully through the rooms. Hazzarding a step towards the curtained bedroom doorway, he was startled by a flash of gray off to the right in the living room and was barely able to subdue a nervous laugh when, in the next moment, he realized that it was only Charlie Rice's cat.

Moving again towards the bedroom, he hesitantly parted the curtains and stood staring into the empty room. The thin, slightly depressed mattress and pillow were stripped. On the floor at the foot of the bed was a shriveled, half-eaten apple. Charlie Rice's coat and trousers were tangled in a ball and heaped in the corner. David blinked. His eyes filled with tears. . .Charlie Rice's boots.

*

Standing before the full-length mirror, David gazed fixedly down at the shiny tips of his black Sunday shoes, while Uncle John, awkwardly craning his neck, was trying to knot his tie. "There you go," Uncle John pronounced, backing up a step to inspect his work, "looks real fine."

"John," Aunt Rose asked, crossing the room and picking some lint from the shoulder of David's blue serge suit, "you didn't forget to put the sandwiches and the potato salad in the car, did you?"

"All set," Uncle John answered, starting towards the door. "Just have to get myself dressed now and I'll be ready to go."

"Mary Eileen, are you dressed yet?" Aunt Rose called into the adjoining bedroom.

"Almost, but I can't find my good shoes."

"Did you look in the closet?"

"In the closet?"

"Well, that's where you put them after church last Sunday, isn't it?"

"I don't know. I'll look."

"Honestly, that girl," Aunt Rose sighed, returning to her dressing table. "John, did you remember to get my coat from the cleaners?" she called out.

"Got it last night," Uncle John answered from the bathroom. "It's downstairs in the hall closet."

"David," Aunt Rose said, "since you're already dressed you might as well run over to Leona's and get the cake that she's made for the reception. Just put it in the car, and then wait for us there. We'll be down in a minute."

Going next door and returning with the cake, David sat in the back seat of the car, abstractedly tracing his finger back and forth across the fogged window. Life, which for the past two days had been at such an utter standstill, was now showing signs of requickening, although what all these preparations had to do with Charlie Rice, David wasn't sure. While there of course had been, both last night and the night before, a good

deal of activity at the funeral home, with people constantly coming and going, milling about and talking and laughing and crying, still everything had seemed somehow strangely arrested, like leaves caught by the wind and suspended in midair. Even David himself had several times been swept into the current of activity, being kissed by aunts, chucked by uncles, and poked and jostled by cousins and classmates. And yet, it was all so remote and faraway, as though he were watching from a window across the street.

Aunt Rose, followed by Mary Eileen and Uncle John, came down the front steps and got into the car. The four-mile drive over the icy roads to the church was slow and uneventful, except for when Uncle John, in swerving to avoid hitting a rabbit, nearly slid into the ditch. Arriving at the church, they joined the gathered mourners, some of whom greeted Aunt Rose and Uncle John with nods and whispers. The draped coffin, flanked by the pallbearers, was resting on the catafalque before the closed church doors. The snow that had been threatening all morning was now beginning to fall, and several of the people started moving restlessly about, stamping their feet and rubbing their hands.

Presently, the church doors swung open and the priest appeared, his eyes watering and his long black cope flapping in the wind. With a flourish of the aspergil he sprinkled the coffin and the people with holy water, then nodded to Mr Bootz, the undertaker, who in turn nodded to the pallbearers. Processing slowly up the steps and past the statue of St Cyril, the mourners followed the coffin into the church.

The musty air within, which seemed nearly as cold as that without, was needled with the sweet scent of burning incense and the smell of damp

aged varnish. In the choir loft, Mrs Malloy was attempting to overtake the organ before the finish of the processional. After the pallbearers situated the coffin at the head of the main aisle, and Mr Bootz and his assistant arranged the candles, the service began.

When the priest finished reading from the Scriptures he signaled for the congregation to be seated. In a low, monotonous voice he spoke of the rewards awaiting those who labored in the service of the Lord. He quoted from St Matthew, and said that there were many mansions in his Father's kingdom. Visions of medieval castles unfurled before David's mind, and he hoped that wherever those mansions were they would at least be warmer than the church. "And so, my dear people," the priest concluded, "let us pray that our departed brother may now rest in peace."

The words puzzled David. Peace, he thought, was supposed to be something, well, something good, and beautiful. Like when everything fit together, that was peace. But death. . .how could death be "peace"? Death was when everything fell apart and crumbled to dust. He recalled the time when he had gone to church with his Aunt Rose, and the priest, in putting ashes on their foreheads, had said, "Remember, thou art dust, and to dust thou shalt return." The words had terrified David, and for weeks after he kept having nightmares in which he saw himself slowly disintegrating into a mound of soot and dust.

When the service was finished, the priest again circled the coffin, incensing it and sprinkling it with water. A drop landed on David's sleeve and he watched it bead up, then become absorbed into the material, leaving behind a faint, dark uneven spot. The mourners shuffled out of the church as they had entered, trailing the coffin.

Outside in the parking lot, Uncle John had to brush the snow from the car windows. He wondered if, seeing as how the roads were so slippery, it might not be better to skip the graveside ceremony and head directly back to town. Aunt Rose said not to be ridiculous, that so long as he drove carefully there was no danger in going to the cemetery. Knocking the snow from their shoes, they got into the car and fell into line behind the hearse.

The graveside ceremony took only a few minutes, and when it was finished, and the coffin was lowered into the ground, the crowd dispersed. Aunt Rose said that since the snow was letting up some she would walk over and pay a visit to her parents' graves. Uncle John said that he would go and keep the car warm. Accompanied by Mary Eileen, Aunt Rose went off in one direction, Uncle John in another. Neither took any notice of David who, having circled around behind the mound of excavated earth, stood watching the last of the cars depart. Mr Bootz and his assistant were standing next to the hearse, talking and laughing with Mr Obee, the caretaker.

Dropping to one knee, David picked up a stick and began poking inattentively at the mound of earth. How quickly, how matter-of-factly it was all over and done. Looking up and seeing his Uncle John stopping to light a cigarette, David felt the tide of events already beginning to rush back in.

A clod of frozen earth broke loose from the mound. David picked it up. It stung his fingers. Slowly turning the rough, uneven chunk of clay, first one way, then another, he examined it from various angles. As his hands memorized its lines, he became intrigued by the symmetry of

its lines. The longer he studied it, the more fascinating he found the intricacy of its details. Even the pebbles embedded in it, and the chips of blue and red glass and the bits of straw, all lent to its peculiar design. Drawn, as if by some enchanting charm, into the very clay itself, he was overcome with giddy delight. Spotting a piece of granite nearby, he picked it up and began etching into relief the design dictated by his eye. Like a twig sucked into a swirling eddy, he felt himself plunged into the marvelous miniature world he held in his hand. The cuttingstone slipped and scraped along his knuckles, but so transfixed was he by the figure emerging from the clay that he paid no attention to the blood.

Suddenly yanked from his trance by a blasting of the horn, he looked up and saw the swaying hem of his aunt's coat coming towards him. "David, where in the world have you been? Didn't you hear me calling you?" Her shadow fell across his upturned face. "And what on earth is that?" she cried, taking the frozen clod from his hand and tossing it back onto the mound. "Honestly, David, look at you. And your hand, David, it's bleeding."

Shrugging and rising to his feet, David followed her towards the car. Crossing the trampled, snow-covered ground, he considered all the hundreds of frozen footprints there. They appeared so permanent, so eternal. But, come spring, they would all be absorbed by the spongy earth, and would then be no more. There would be no mark, no trace of their ever having been there. The snow would melt and the footprints would vanish into the earth, which, without the slightest twinge, would absorb and reclaim them all. A picture arose before him of all humanity existing on a vast marshy plain, and all were being pulled down, down into the conspiring earth.

As they reached the car he saw Mary Eileen peering out at him, her

pale and questioning face pressed against the window. He felt that he wanted to tell her something, but couldn't think what it was. Lowering her eyes, she looked away.

Knocking the snow from their shoes, he and Aunt Rose got into the car. Uncle John raced the engine and the car lurched forward and stalled.

"Oh, for goodness sakes, John, step on it," Aunt Rose said. "We're already late for the reception as it is."

Equally exasperated, Uncle John cursed and restarted the car, this time succeeding in getting under way. As they were pulling out of the cemetery, David looked back and saw Mr Obee making his way towards the grave with his pick and shovel. Once again it started to snow.

A NICE LITTLE STORY

Note: Chase Naremore, who currently makes his home near Seattle, and whose own work has from time to time appeared in these pages, sends the following story which he came upon in the last published issue of Litterairy, the once popular but now defunct little magazine. Aside from its merits as a story, what is most striking about the piece is its reference to our own Riverrun Review. While finding one's own real and quite verifiable existence actually foretold in a work of fiction may not be unique, it is nevertheless an unusual enough phenomenon to engage more than our casual attention. The original story, written in 1952, predates RR by some six years, which explains why Mr Crowson, when writing his "Introduction" for Litterairy in 1956, would have found no record of our magazine, at that time still two years in the offing.

Ed.

INTRODUCTION

Of this century's many promising but unpublished young writers, none, perhaps, was more obstinately prolific than the late Thomas W. Carboune (1919-1952?). His output was enormous. Having spent eleven solitary years holed up in an apartment on Perry Street in Greenwich Village, and having supported himself by working nights and weekends at Wilentz's Bookshop, he produced during that time enough stories, histories, vignettes, reminiscences and reflections to fill four standard size egg crates.

About Carboune himself, little is known. Having spent his youth working on the family farm near his native Creighcian, Ill., he left there in early February of 1943, shortly following the death of his father. Around Creighcian, Thomas is still remembered as having been a shy, reclusive

individual. Indeed, it wasn't until some three weeks after he had left for the east that his absence was even detected.

Arriving in New York, then, on what would have been his father's birthday, the sixth of March, Carboune lost little time in setting to his ambition to engage in literary work. And so doggedly did he pursue his desideratum, working in total obscurity for eleven long and what must have been lonely years (he never married), that, judging from the sheer bulk of his canon, he would hardly have had time for much else.

Although eleven years of unheralded application might seem like quite an amputative apprenticeship, it is, as belletristic careers go, not all that long. Indeed, it is rather revealing to note just how many of our great writers had to keep plugging away for a decade or more before finally getting themselves discovered. It is not unreasonable to suppose, therefore, that had fate but doled him out another year or two, Carboune might have established himself as a writer, and very possibly a reputable one at that.

But such was never to be. On the contrary, instead of enjoying some modicum of critical acclaim, Thomas Carboune is now all but unknown, and virtually unknowable. Sometime after February 9, 1952, the day on which he was last seen by his landlord, Mr. Chester Mirakos, Carboune disappeared, leaving behind, in addition to his writings, a personal library of several dozen volumes, a worn-out Underwood typewriter, and a few articles of clothing.

It wasn't until some years later that Matt Lewis, the editor of Litterairy, learned about Carboune from Markus Thornberry, the poet, and eventually succeeded in rescuing from the authorities "the Carboune estate." (So far as anyone has learned, Carboune was survived by no next of kin).

One day, then, about two years ago, Lewis, long a champion of unpublished writers, approached me and asked if I would consider reading through Carboune's work and selecting three or four pieces for possible publication in his magazine. The task, while rewarding, has been a lengthy one, made even more so by the fact that I have had to ply myself to it mostly in the evenings and on weekends. Since it was Carboune's shorter fictions which seemed best suited to Litterairy's designs, it is from them that I selected the three stories to be published in this and the two subsequent issues of the magazine.*

I have chosen to initiate this trio with the following untitled story for several reasons, only one of which shall I be able to take up here. In a word, this narrative is a tour de force. What seems to account for its immediacy is Carboune's unquestioned mastery of that deceptively simple form, the epistolary story, a genre for which he displayed great fondness, having employed it in no fewer than 183 stories.

But the epistolary device, especially in the hands of one as equal to its demands as Carboune, can give rise to certain critical problems. When, for example, as is the case here, the author bestows upon his narrator/protagonist his own name, he does so at the risk of having the reader identify the author and the narrator as one. While most readers, of course, are generally quite able to distinguish between the two, there are times when the lines do tend to blur. Because Carboune does

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* It was unfortunately with this, the Autumn, 1956, issue that Litterairy suspended publication, precluding the appearance of the other two stories. Furthermore, according to Chase Naremore, who has looked into the matter, Mathaeu Crowson, who died in an automobile accident a year ago last April, seems to have taken with himself knowledge of the whereabouts of the four boxes of Carboune's mss. They have never been located. Ed.

achieve here such a rare and persuasive degree of verisimilitude, and also, as I say, because he and his protagonist are identically eponymized, an unwary reader could be misled into taking this piece for something more than the work of fiction it is intended to be.

To avoid any such possible confusion, therefore, it might be well to keep in mind that while the "addressee" of this "letter," "Mia Legari," could have conceivably been patterned after one of the author's real-life acquaintances, there is nothing to suggest Carboune's ever having known anyone by that name. "Mia Legari," as well as "Thomas Carboune-the-Narrator," are both nothing more, nor less, than conventional fictive devices, characters conjured up by the author for the purpose of telling a story. This strictly fictional existence of the characters is confirmed by the fact that while "111 Starmount" is a real enough place (it is the location of _The Rack_, a thriving billiards hall on the Lower Eastside), no one at that address was able to recall ever having heard of a "Mia Legari," or of a "Thomas Carboune." It was, it would seem, and especially in light of Carboune's having used the same address in numerous other stories, simply a name and a number that appealed to him.

The further, and in my opinion, more conclusive evidence attesting to the fictituous nature of this narrative is its mention of the _Riverrun Review_, the magazine to which "Thomas Carboune-the-Narrator" submits his story, "The Museum." In truth, there is no _Riverrun Review_, nor has there ever been. There is, of course, the _Riverside Quarterly_, and the _Riverbed Review_, neither of which, however, has ever published a story entitled "The Museum" by Thomas Carboune.

In conclusion, then, I should like to say that while it will no doubt be some time before Carboune's work becomes well enough known to spawn an

appreciative critique, it has been for me a rare honor to have had a hand in bringing before the public one author so undeservedly unknown. It is not, I think, premature to predict that students of American Literature will someday be familiar with his work.

Mathaeu B. Crowson
Saugatuk, 1956

UNTITLED

March 5, 1952

Mia Legari
111 Starmount
New York, 12, N.Y.

Dear Mia,

As this is likely to be my last letter to anyone, it seems fitting that even after these nearly three years of separation and silence I should be writing it to you, who shared so much of my struggle to become a writer. Although while my telling you now is probably too little balm too late to soothe the scrapes and bruises of those, our storm-fraught years together, I have finally succeeded in hoisting myself up and over the palisade of pinkslips and into the Promised Land of the Published. And while it is precisely about that that I am writing—my shedding, so to speak, of the stigma of aspiring writer (which, after all, is nothing more than a publisher's euphemism, a prettily painted hatchet, for unpublished, and therefore non-existent)—, there is first something else that needs tending to. A confession of sorts, or a recognition.

Do you remember, Mia—I'm sure you must—, how, when we were still living together, you so often chided me for spending all of my time reading books when, as you put it, I might have been living, and enjoying life? And how you always used to tell me that I would someday come to realize just how much I really needed people, and especially you, although I could hardly at the time have been accused of understanding what you were getting at.

Well, Mia, you should know that you were right, and that now, that some-day is here. Oh, but there's no need for alarm though. I'm not at this late hour about to suggest we start heaping logs of reconciliation into an icy grate. I only want to let you know that what, because of my myopia, you never quite got me to see, the insistent years, and one chain of events in particular, have flung into frightening focus.

Crow's one thing, of course, that few of us ever acquire much taste for, which is why I've not written before this, and also why writing even now has got me so snarled and twisted up in knots. And yet, I've got to write, I've simply got to. I've got to tell somebody, Mia, while I still can, about something that's happened to me, and you're the only person I know who'll listen. At least I hope you will, which is all I'm asking, really—that you read this. I'm not even asking you to believe it, knowing how improbable, unimaginable even, some of it might strike you as being. On my word, though, it's true, every bit of it, although I can't say I wouldn't have liked making it up. It might at least have been bearable then, to say nothing of workable into perhaps a rather nice little story.

It began— well, insofar as anything ever really begins it began a year ago tomorrow night, March 6, 1951, and it's all about to come crashing to some catastrophic climax tomorrow night, I'm sure of it. And while there's nothing I can do but to wait and see what happens, just not knowing, not having the slightest idea what to expect, has been raking me absolutely raw.

Anyway, it was a year ago tomorrow night that I met her. For days, I had been slogging around in the ditches of my mind, neckdeep in despair.

It was the same old story—eating poorly, sleeping little, writing nothing. And, as if all that weren't enough, I had just finished plowing through Paulson's latest nightmare, Amazing Muses, as thoroughly depressing a gallop through the Garden as one might imagine. Miserable and sour-souled, then, I took myself, after getting rid of the last customer around 11 o'clock, for a walk, and eventually wound up in that little park over on Tenth Street—the one where we used to read the Sunday Times, remember?

You'll understand just how far gone I was, Mia, when I tell you that I came closer that night—it was a Tuesday—to chucking this whole writer bit than I had ever come before. For the first time, I was beginning to see myself for what I truly was—an absurd marionette, treading an empty stage, and bowing to the applause of none but my own bemused imagination. For so long had I been throttled by my white-knuckled ambition to be a writer that I had actually become a parody of a person, a dupe more gullible than any character I would ever have dared to fabricate for a story. I mean, there I was, thirty-four years old, and what did I have? Nothing—, nothing but a mangled dream, a few boxes stuffed with papers, and the heckling memory of all those hundreds of hours spent hunched over a typewriter, trying to coax from an incorrigible language something more than just your common everyday pulpy performance. No, however fashionable it might be for aspiring artists to assume a certain pose of studied desperation, there wasn't anything stagey about my despair that night, that's for sure.

But God, why should I be telling all this to you, Mia, when you know better than anyone just how miserably I've failed in forging my ill-funded dream into something solid and true to the touch? No reason, really.

other than to let you know with what bruising thoughts I, while shivering there on that park bench, was being worked over when she appeared.

A tall, stately woman, dressed all in black, with a black shawl draped about her shoulders, she glided rather than stepped from the shadows. Her face, a cameo bordered by the ebony of her attire, was softly tessellated by the pattern of shadows and light from a nearby streetlamp. I remember thinking how much she reminded me of _Calypso_, that chiaroscuro of Picasso's over at the Guggenheim that you were always so fond of. Like a violinist, she held her head tilted slightly to the side.

Seeming not to have noticed me, she crossed the sidewalk and seated herself at the opposite end of my bench. Figuring she was probably one of those luckless and pitiable souls who habitually haunt public places, and who sometimes surface in newspapers where, with a little verbal touching up, they are transformed into respectable human-interest stories, my immediate impulse was to find another bench where I could continue my musings in solitary. But when I glanced over and saw her calmly poised on the edge of the bench, her pale hands clasped and resting in her lap, I knew that I had been much too hasty in my opinion. Gazing at me as if I rather than she was the vision, there was nothing about her to suggest she was even thinking about asking for a handout. How old was she? I couldn't say, really. So undisclosing were her features that she could just as easily have been thirty, I suppose, as fifty. And besides, it was night.

"Of course, if you want me to leave," she said, not taking her eyes off me, "I will. If I'm not mistaken, though, you're the one who's been searching for me, and not I for you."

You can't imagine, Mia, how flabbergasted I was at the way she had somehow managed to burglarize my thoughts. But more than that, although I hadn't the slightest idea what she'd meant by it, I knew she was right: I had been searching for her. For years, it seemed, without even knowing it, I had been seeking her, whoever she was. More than uncanny, it was weird. But what, even more than her words, ultimately decoyed me was the tone of her voice. Amber and fluid, like the liquid strains of a cello, it so instantly beguiled me that, even if I had still wanted to, I couldn't possibly have gotten up and left.

Well, what can I say but that with those words she began talking, and I, spellbound, listened. On and on she talked, like Scheherazade, splicing the end of one story to the beginning of the next. It was as if I had suddenly been spirited away to a distant island around which ran the river of her words, and so captivated was I by all the many marvelous things she told me that, trite though it may sound, I quite literally lost all track of time.

And when she finished talking, she was gone. No, she didn't disappear exactly, but when it dawned upon me that she was no longer speaking, she was no longer there, either. Just as I had been before she arrived, so, after she left, was I sitting there alone on the bench, only now, instead of trudging through the swamp of my own failed past, I was lifted and luffed on the waft of her words, airily aloft along a lovely and splendid sphere.

And that's it, Mia. That's all there was to it. During the entire time I hadn't spoken so much as a single word, nor have I seen her since. How long I continued sitting there after she'd left, I don't know, so

aswirl was my mind with all she'd told me. And one thing in particular—something she'd said about a museum owned and operated by a friend of hers, a Mr. Roget, up in Montreal—for some reason kept bobbing up into the eddy of my thoughts. If I should ever get to Montreal, she had said, I simply had to go and see that museum. It was, according to her, one of the most amazing places in the world, for it not only depicted the past, but actually re-created it. It made the past, present. Naturally, I supposed she had been speaking figuratively, but what, I wondered, what would it be like if such a museum really did exist? And then it struck me—what a marvelous story a museum like that would make.

And suddenly, there it was—whole and finely fashioned—a story, my story, "The Museum." Never before had I experienced anything like it. It was as if sitting there on that bench and shutting my eyes, I had reopened them onto another world, the world of "The Museum", which, but a moment before hadn't even existed, but which I now perceived as a perfect and magnificent mandala.

Getting up, I realized from the stiffness of my body that I must have been sitting there for a very long time. Walking slowly and cautiously back to my apartment (I'm still in the same place on Perry, by the way), I forced myself to concentrate on the passing cars, the streetlights, the garbage cans, the litter—anything but the story. I was afraid that if I started tinkering with it I would only startle it into all sorts of protean conjurations, or worse, into disappearing altogether.

Doing neither, though, it turned out, as stories go, to be amazingly docile. Getting it down first in longhand, then, making a few corrections, I typed up the finished copy, sealed it in a manila envelope and headed for the post office over on Jackson Street. Stepping outside, I was

surprised to discover it was still dark. I couldn't possibly have written, revised and rewritten "The Museum", which was close to thirty pages, all within what, two? maybe three hours at the most. The only explanation was that I must have written straight through the entire day and well on into the next night. Anyway, having nothing better to do, I walked the streets for a couple of hours until the post office opened, then sent the manuscript off to one of those literary magazines, the Riverrun Review. And so sure was I that "The Museum", after all those years, and after all those hundreds of rejection slips, would be my first published story that I didn't even bother enclosing a stamped, self-addressed envelope. I just knew it would be accepted.

And it was. A few weeks later I received a letter informing me that "The Museum" would appear in the Spring issue, and that I could expect to receive my payment in copies sometime in early June. Payment in copies? Hell, they could have paid me in turnips for all I cared. God, I was a writer! I, Thomas W. Carboune, veteran of countless keyboard campaigns, was a bona fide writer, with a published story to prove it. This called for a celebration. Wine. I literally pranced to the refrigerator. All right, no wine, beer then. Who cared? I went and looked at myself in the mirror. I smiled. I frowned. Which, I wondered, would look better on a dust jacket? And this was only the beginning. Hell, if I could get one story published, was there any reason I couldn't get another, and another, and another? Who knew, maybe even a novel. It's surprising how far you can glide on a little shove of confidence. During the months that followed, then, I began churning out storms of stories, and raining down on publishers everywhere a blizzard of manuscripts.

It wasn't long, though, before reality was back at the door. First of all, since having received word of my story's acceptance, I had been desperately trying to run in again to that woman, to whose further outpourings I would gladly have spent hours, even days, listening and panning for whatever other nuggets she would have been willing to part. With next to nothing to go on, however—I hadn't even learned her name—, my search at every turn came bounding off the barricades which seemed to have been deliberately pushed in my path. The only person who thought he may have recognized the woman from my description was an old lethean poet who calls himself Bud, and who comes to the park every morning to feed the pigeons. She might have been, according to Bud, the same foreign woman—Mina Sinae, or something like that—he used to see quite a bit of in the old days, but whom he hadn't heard from in years.

But reality, as it usually does, was banging away with both fists. Not only did I fail in finding anything out about the woman, but all the stories I had been sending out were coming back to me, one by one, and each adorned with a polite pink note of regret. So things hadn't really changed at all, and it didn't take more than a few months of that kind of drought before my newly budded confidence was again beginning to wither and shrivel up. What was wrong? Why wasn't I able to locate that woman? I was beginning to fear that "The Museum" had been just a fluke, or worse, since I still hadn't received my long overdue payment in copies, a figment of my skittish imagination. But no, it couldn't have been that. Somewhere in this forest of reconstituted timber I still had the original draft of the story, as well as the letter of acceptance, which, to dispell the spreading suspicion that I had somehow gotten tangled up in somebody else's dream, I started to hunt for among my papers.

Talk about needles in haystacks! For three days I searched and scoured every inch of this place, only in the end to find neither the letter, nor the manuscript. What the hell was going on? Had I been the butt of some practical joker's twisted recreation? Surely, when you write and <u>publish</u> a story, there has got to be evidence of it someplace. I wrote to the <u>Riverrun</u> <u>Review</u> and requested the copies they had promised me, but received no reply. That was in early August. Two weeks later, I wrote again, and still no answer. Desperate, I even tried calling, but got only the answering service which informed me that the staff was away on vacation. It was then nearly six months since I had met the woman in the park and written "The Museum."

What I did next, I admit, was a frantic and foolish thing, the kind of panicky act you'd expect of a paranoid. During the early morning hours of September 5th, having gone days without sleep, and having received during the previous week more than a dozen rejected manuscripts, and having utterly failed in shaking off a devestating hangover, I decided on the spur of the moment to hitchhike to Montreal, and to see for myself the museum which had allured me to such a dizzying ledge in the first place. If there was any hope of pulling back from the brink, I figured it would only be in somehow making contact again with concrete reality. Granted, it was a madcap scheme— after all, how did I know that the woman herself hadn't made all that up about there being such a museum?—, but what the hell, what did I have to lose except my sanity, which, under the circumstances, was teetering on a tightrope anyway. So, around three a.m., less than five minutes after having decided to do so, I took off for Montreal.

The trip itself, which took nearly thirty hours, was a dionysiac disaster of the first order. First, there was the detour into the Adirondacks by one of my drivers who turned out to be a pervert; then, there were the two flat tires; and lastly, there was the four-hour layover at the police station in Keeseville. I finally arrived, though, and when I did, not knowing what I was looking for, or whether what I was looking for even existed, I started wandering around at random: Chateau de Ramezay, St. James Cathedral, lunch at a fruit vendor's, Notre Dame, Place Ville Marie. For hours I walked, past the Irish University, across to Sherbrooke Street, and on, up and around the grounds of the Seminaire de S. Sulpice. But no museum.

The sensible thing, of course, would have been to beat it right on back to good old Gotham, or at least to have gotten hold of a map and asked someone where they kept the museums. But who could I have asked? During my eight or so hours of traipsing about I hadn't heard more than a smidgen of English. No, if there was a museum, sooner or later I'd find it on my own. And if there wasn't, well I would then at least have been spared the humiliation of making a public spectacle of my mental erosion.

Ragged, roadweary, and wondering where I would spend the night, then, I came to the top of a steep, narrow street, turned the corner, and there...there, standing directly across the street, exactly as it had appeared in "The Museum", was the museum. No arrangement of words on paper will ever be able to mimic my shock at seeing materialize before me the mirage of my own making, mocking the flimsiness of my fictional cardhouse.

Careful to keep the rough flagstone street between myself and the brick and mortar twin of my imagination, I stumbled the few yards to a sooty, dilapidated bench beneath a scraggly sycamore, both of which I also recognized. Leaning back and closing my eyes, I struggled to tether my whirling mind to something—anything—stationary. With my eyes open or shut, though, it made little difference, for either way I beheld the same swimming vision of the scowling museum, enthroned on its grubby knoll not fifty yards away. A squat fieldstone wall, blackened with age, and stained in places by the rusty wrought iron fence atop it, cordoned off the entire property. The sprawling building itself, having over the years had numerous additions tacked onto it, was a misshapen structure with wings of mismatched reddish brick protruding like tentacles in every direction. A colonnade of high and haughty elms fashioned a thick canopy over the steep stairway that inched from the sidewalk up to the main entrance, on either side of which imposed two enormous statues of fiercely fanged lions. Scores of hideous gargoyles dotted the building's facade, and two trumpeting angels above the entrance, carved in relief and unfurling a scroll inscribed IN PRINCIPIO ERAT VERBUM, along with the stained glass windows and the sweeping gothic arches, gave evidence of the building's having originally been a church.

Able to withstand for only so long the rack of being strung between fantasy and reality, I finally threw in with the latter and crossed the street to the museum. Hesitating, I glanced around to see if anyone was watching, but except for the policeman at the corner talking to a crippled beggar, the street was deserted. Trudging upwards, my feet became increasingly heavy and cumbersome, and the stairs themselves were everywhere

pitted and potholed and strewn with chunks of broken concrete. The stairs were also unevenly spaced, and more than one I lost my footing and went sprawling. Soon, even breathing became taxing and laborious. By the time I had worked my way to the first of the three landings, I felt I had been climbing for hours. The dank parturient air was saturated with the odor of humus, and because of the denseness of the ceiling of leaves the entire tunnel was enmeshed in twilight. Utterly exhausted, I leaned for support against the rusty handrail on the right and turned back to see how far along I had come. The sidewalk and the street were now lost from view.

Slowly and unsteadily lowering myself onto the step to rest for a moment, I was instantly thrust back to my feet by a thunderous roar. Spinning around, I saw come gushing out of the museum a wildly churning river. I tried to move, but couldn't. My shoes had become cemented to the step. The deafening roar shook and rumbled the ground beneath me. I was just about to scream out when I looked up and saw that the wall of raging water, for all its fury, was coursing down the stairs at the same frozen rate that I had ascended them, and when, a while later, it finally reached my landing, it was reduced to a mere trickle before disappearing altogether. And later still, the only evidence of there just having been a flood was my soaked shoes. Brushing the rust from my clothes, I continued upwards, my ascent easier now, and far less labored than what it had been.

In no time at all I was standing on the top step, doused in brilliant sunlight. I was just extending my hand and about to push open the glass door, when suddenly there came charging out of the museum a herd of

yelling, whooping children who were shouting and calling to each other in strange chucking sounds. One of the children, violently flinging open the door, smashed it against the statue of the lion, sending in all directions a shower of splintered glass. The group's chaperone, a smiling but bewildered-looking woman in her late twenties, emerged from the museum and nonchalantly picked her way through the sea of shards. She was wearing a crisp but slightly modified sailorsuit: the blue skirt had been lengthened to reach her ankles, and the white, high-collared blouse was slit in two places to allow her ample, pearlpale breasts to swing freely. To each nipple was tied an exquisitely patterned lace ribbon— one pink, the other blue. Around her neck there hung a splendid gold chain from which dangled an enormous medalion bearing the portrait of Rudolph Valentino, unusual in that it showed him grinning broadly. Pausing on the top step, she smiled at me. "Mr. Roget will see you now," she said.

I thanked her and asked if she found her work interesting.

"I'm hardly the type," she replied, holding protectively to her smile and brushing the thick falls of burnt umber hair back from her eyes. "And beisdes," she continued, "we still have the war to think about, you know. According to the latest survey, nine out of every ten people still suffer, which isn't a very comforting thought." Nodding and smiling sheepishly, I pointed down to my waterlogged shoes.

Just then, one of the children, a pale undernourished boy, came bounding back up the steps. He was wearing a white, stiffly starched Lone Ranger outfit, black mask and all, and dragging behind him by its cord a battered old radio. When he came to where we were standing, he

dropped the cord and began yanking and tugging at the woman's skirt. A moment later he was joined by five or six others, all of whom also began clamoring and pulling at her dress.

"As you can see," she smiled, her nipples turning a brilliant purple, "I've really got my hands full today." Finally, one of the youngsters, a pudgy lad with black wavy hair, succeeded in tearing off her skirt, only to reveal beneath it another skirt, this one white. "It never hurts to come prepared," she said, holding out for all the children to see the portrait of Valentino, around whose head now glowed a neon nimbus.

Taking the hint about preparedness, I hauled from my pockets a pair of four-buckle galoshes which I proceeded to pull on over my wet shoes. "I think you'd better go in now," the woman said. "You know how Mr. Roget hates to be kept waiting." Motioning for the scattered children to get ready to leave, and lifting the hem of her skirt, she descended the stairs. From the sidewalk, which was now clearly visible, she turned and spoke to me through a paisley megaphone she had taken from one of the children. "I'm sorry, but you know the rules as well as I do. We can't always have the things we want," she said, turning and walking away.

Inside the museum, it took some time for my eyes to adjust to the dark. It was as if blindfolded I had been sunk beneath an ocean of smells and sounds. Through an atmosphere singed with burning leaves and gunpowder there swarmed pungent traces of garlic, tar, and other odors unidentifiable, while all about me swirled currents of seemingly sourceless sounds, only snatches of which was I able to catch. Somewhere, someone was whistling softly and plucking the mandolin, while elsewhere dogs yapped, guns crackled, a door squeaked open, a book was snapped shut.

"Well, that about does it," pronounced a gruff, authoritative voice. From above and behind me I heard rushing footsteps, rustling dresses and hushed but urgent whispers:

"...any minute now," said one.

"No, no, he's already here," answered another.

"You mean no one brought crepe paper?"

"Once more, now, push!"

"Ladies and gentlemen, here's..."

Upon opening my eyes to see who was being announced, the sounds ceased. I was standing in the center of a vast rotunda, the skyward sweeping walls of which soared to such heights that I felt like an ant plunged to the bottom of some gigantic vat. Huge gouges were everywhere dug into the yellowish, mud-spattered walls from which hung strips of peeling paint. The once-beautiful green marble floor was in ruins, and all around me were mounds of smoldering garbage and debris. I called out, but was answered only by my thin, tinny echo. At the sound of my voice, a brown oily rat darted from behind one of the garbage heaps and scurried down into a slimy green burrow.

It was then that I spotted the man in the distant alcove off to the right, who, with his back to me, was digging a trench and sending great gobs of dust billowing up towards the open skylight, where they were caught by the breeze and sent swirling in a gauzy sunstreaked storm. As I approached I noticed a painting on the wall of a smiling, toothless priest. In his left hand he held a smoking revolver, and in his right, a bleeding photograph of himself. The dust, smelling strongly of ammonia, made me sneeze. The startled man spun around. It was the Lone Ranger.

He was dressed in a schoolboy's uniform, and while he wasn't wearing his mask I knew it was him from the pale outline around his puffy eyes.

"Excuse me, Kemo Sabay," I said, "but I'm new here, and I was wondering if you could tell me..."

Dropping his shovel, he leaned down into the trench and hoisted up a microphone which he placed in front of himself. Clearing his throat and squinting in my direction, he leaned in close to the microphone. "What in tarnation you mean sneaking up on me like that, Roget?" he asked.

"I'm sorry," I said, "but I'm not..."

My attempted explanation was cut short by the earsplitting blast of a trumpet sounding the Cavalry Charge, which was followed by the rousing strains of <u>Le Prelude</u> and finally overridden by the thunder of hundreds of hardhammering horses. I looked around, but saw nothing.

"Aw, goddamnit," the Lone Ranger muttered, "if that goddamn sound-effects man hasn't gone and screwed it up again. Sonofabitch never gets anything straight." Whipping from his hip pocket a sheaf of papers, he fumbled through them until he found what he wanted. "Goddamnit, Harry," he shouted into the microphone, "that Cavalry Charge doesn't come until <u>after</u> the message from our sponser. Just once, I'd like to see you guys follow the script."

"Sorry," a voice boomed over the speakers.

"All right, take it from the top," the Lone Ranger commanded, stuffing the papers back into his pocket. Clearing his throat again, he repeated, "What in tarnation you mean sneaking up on me like that, Roget?"

"But I'm not..."

"Tonto," he said sharply, "let me have those fieldglasses." A brown

hand emerged from the trench, passing up to the Lone Ranger a pair of pink opera glasses. "Say, what gives here?" he cried, staring at me through the binoculars. "You're not Roget. Where's Roget? What've you sidewinders done with him?"

"If you'll just give me a chance to explain..."

"Reach, Mister!" he commanded, pushing a stubby finger into my ribs. Raising my hands, I again tried to explain, but failed.

"That's right, and keep 'em up where I can see 'em. I got a hunch the sheriff's going to be mighty interested in hearing what you've got to say for yourself, especially when he finds out you've been going around impersonating Roget. Now, march! And no funny business. Remember, I've got this six-shooter pointed right at you. Don't make me use it."

"Oh, for Chrissakes, Beemer," came an exasperated voice from behind me, "now what's the matter?"

Turning around, I saw emerge from behind a pillar, a boney, shriveled up man pushing an empty wheelchair. He was wearing a black business suit, and a black necktie over a shirt of rusted chainmail. Strung across his chest were several rows of neatly arranged medals of various sizes, shapes and colors, and on his pointed bald head he wore a white baseball cap trimmed with gold piping.

"Oh, so it's you," he exclaimed, walking slowly around me and craning his neck to eye me up and down. "We were just about to give up on you. Thought you'd gotten lost or something.

"All right, Beemer," he said rather sharply to the Lone Ranger, "you can get back to work now." Obediently tossing the microphone and the opera glasses back into the trench, the Lone Ranger began shoveling the dirt in after them.

"Well, we'd better get going," the man said to me. Scooping up a handful of soil and spilling it into his pocket, he flung himself into the wheelchair and was off.

"Excuse me," I said, leaning over as I trotted along side, "but I'm afraid there's been some mistake. You see, there was this woman..."

"There always is," he chuckled as we sped along a maze of winding corridors and passageways. "Not to worry, though, my boy, not to worry. I can assure you that everything has been taken care of: your tour of the museum, the reception in your honor...everything. Of course I can't guarantee it'll all come off according to plans. What, with this war on, and a museum to look after, it's a damn wonder anything gets done around here."

The twisting, turning corridors we hurtled along were, like the rotunda, strewn with refuse and debris. Everything was in shambles, and more than once I had to jump aside to avoid plunging into the ditches and pits along the way. Through the great gaping holes that were blasted into the walls I caught, as we whizzed by, occasional blurred glimpses of people working at desks, scrubbing floors, and selling souvenirs and the like.

It was through one such hole that my guide finally steered his wheelchair. "Over there," he said, pointing to a mammoth horseshoe-shaped desk. Like the rotunda, this room, also, was enormous. Off in the distance on the left, a battalion of Marines were practicing landing maneuvers in a plastic wading pool. On the desk itself, which was upolstered with leopard skins, there was a single red button, and next to it a tattered, coffee-stained sign:

HINKY DINKY
PARLEY VOO
CHEER UP FACE
THE WAR IS THROUGH.

BURMA SHAVE!

Mounted on the wall over the three closed doors behind the desk was a replica of DaVinci's Last Supper, in which, instead of the traditional company, there were seated around a table at the Stork Club, the World Champion New York Yankees of 1937.

"Well, here we are," the man declared, pursing his lips and lurching out of his wheelchair. "You'll have to hurry, though, if you expect to finish your tour in time for the reception."

"This might sound like a dumb question," I said to him, "but you wouldn't by any chance happen to be Mr. Roget, would you?"

At first, dumbfounded, he stared at me, but then, seeing that I was earnest, he nearly crippled himself with laughter. "God, that is rich," he gasped, finally regaining some composure. "Do I look like Roget? Listen, for years, now, I've been trying to get in to see that rascal, and every time I've gotten even close, he's given me the slip. He's what's known in the business as one smooth operator, and if you ever manage to get in to see him there'll be a cozy little nook for you in the history books, you can bet on it.

"Still, you've got to give the man credit. He sure knows his war. I mean, how many people can you name who are able to get a war going, and keep it going?"

"Well, I don't..."

"See what I mean? Damn few, right? Listen, it wasn't twenty-four hours after Roget'd taken over here and we had one of the best damn wars

cooking that anyone could've asked for, and it's been going on ever since, too. Hell, any idiot can get a war started. Nothing to it, really. Drop a casual insult here, hurl a rock or two there, and bingo! you've got yourself a dandy little war. But to keep a war going—, now that's something else. That takes more than just talent, my friend. It takes genius, pure genius, which just so happens to be Roget's long suit. Sure, he's a loner, but so what? We've all got our little quirks, haven't we?

"Hey, but look, you're never going to make it to that reception if we keep gabbing here like a couple of sophomores." Striding to the desk, he began pounding furiously on the red button. "Clerk! Clerk!" he roared, "will you kindly get your duff out here! We've got..."

Just then a shrill whistle pierced the air and sirens began wailing all around. There was a horrendous explosion, followed by another. "Get down," the man bellowed, shoving me to the sawdust floor and flinging himself on top of me. "Those lousy bastards," he hissed, stroking my forehead and pushing himself against me. His medals dug into my chest, and his breath, which reeked of kerosene, was making me gag. "Those dirty devils," he whispered, his body stiffening. Then, rolling off me, he lay there on his back for several minutes, gulping like a beached fish.

Finally, clambering to his feet, and motioning for me to do the same, he crossed the room and disappeared behind the statue of _Nike_. Soon he was back, though, wearing now, instead of his black business suit, a suit of armor, on the breastplate of which was emblazoned the image of Ferdinand Demaris. "Any more delays like that," he said, raising his beaver,

"and you'll never make it to that reception. Just wait here a minute while I go see what's keeping the Clerk."

After he had lumbered noisily away through the middle door behind the desk, the room became disturbingly quiet. The Marines, except for a lone sentry posted in front of a grandfather's clock, had all departed. Turning towards the hole in the wall through which we had entered the room, I observed that it was now sealed up and freshly painted. I was just about to wander over for a closer inspection when I was suddenly arrested by the crackle of a machine gun and the piercing scream of a woman which seemed to be coming from the room into which my guide had gone. A moment later, the door flung open and the man emerged, now wearing orange combat boots and a woman's lavender bathing suit to which his medals had been transferred. "By God, if war isn't hell," he was saying, shaking his head and laughing, "just plain hell."

"You can say that again," giggled the corpulent woman who was following close behind him. She, too, was wearing orange boots and a lavender bathing suit, and the rolls of her oily flesh shook and shimmered as she tried keeping in step with him. Whispering and nudging each other, the two of them stopped behind the desk where they stood giggling and munching popcorn. Finally, when they had finished eating, they embraced, and the man, trotting around to where I was standing, winked at me, flopped back into his wheelchair and sped away.

"Isn't he just something, though?" the woman sighed as she came toddling towards me, remaining, however, behind the desk. "But I'll bet you're pretty anxious to get started on your tour, aren't you?" she grinned, revealing a set of superbly matched and masterly scrimshawed teeth. Opening

a desk drawer, she took from it a ring of cardboard keys and motioned for me to come around behind the desk and follow her.

"You'll find your change of clothes right in there," she said, unlocking the door on the left.

"Change of clothes?"

"Of course. You weren't thinking of touring the museum looking like that, were you?" she asked, unbuttoning my shirt.

"I see what you mean," I said, noticing the rust stains and the flecks of sawdust with which I was covered. Entering the dimly lit room, I heard the door click shut behind me. The clothes, which were draped over a Lincoln rocker in the corner, were, to my surprise, identical to the ones I had on: khaki trousers, jockey shorts, a faded denim shirt, deck-shoes, socks and galoshes.

Changing quickly and returning, I discovered upon opening the door that in my absence the room had been transformed into a theater, and that I was now on stage. At my entrance, the vast audience errupted into a great and gusty swell of laughter. What they found so amusing was the fact that upon opening the door I had startled the fat woman who, now costumed in a mauve tutu and dancing slippers, was peering through what had been the keyhole, but what was now the zipper on my trousers. Straightening herself with some difficulty, she led me by the hand to the apron of the stage where she began unabashedly leering at me and making lewd gestures. The appreciative audience, loving every minute of it, kept egging her on with hoots and howls of raucous laughter.

"Well, Sweetie," she simpered when the audience had finally quieted down, "One little kiss for the Gipper, now, and you're off on your

tour." Engulfing me in her massive arms, she hugged and kissed me hard on the lips. Then, releasing me, she curtsied and handed me a map of the museum which had been sketched on the reverse side of my birth certificate.

"Hey, where'd this come from?" I asked, unable to conceal my surprise.

"Oh, where there's a will, there's a way," she winked. The audience went absolutely wild. People were standing on their seats and flinging programs into the air. The orchestra, comprised of a harpsichord, a tuba and a snare drum, broke into "Aba Daba Honeymoon" as the curtain came sailing down.

"Will you just get a load of that!" the woman exclaimed as we stood behind the curtain listening to the thunderous applause. "God, we sure knocked 'em dead tonight."

"You mean it's already night?" I asked.

"Of course it's night," she replied, assuming a somewhat superior air. "We haven't had a matinee in years. Ever since the war was started matinees've been outlawed."

"Oh, I see."

"Oh ho, so you see, huh? Well, to see or not to see—that is the Quest, Chum. Everything else, believe me, including this curtain call we've got to take now, don't amount to anything more than just so many detours." And with that, up went the curtain onto a theater nearly as empty as the stage. Except for the orchestra, which was now into a driving rendition of "Un bel di", the place was deserted. Seeming not to have noticed, though, the woman began bowing and blowing kisses and executing a quick series of entrechats. She motioned for me to do likewise.

"But nobody's there," I protested.

"Bow!" she commanded through a clenched grin.

Reluctantly I bowed and, as I did, the curtain came careening down. "I don't understand," I said, "why we were bowing to an empty theater."

"Well, if you don't know that," she stated indignantly, "then maybe you'd better go back to drama school and learn the basics. Good actors make good audiences. Haven't you ever heard that before?"

"Well sure, everybody has, but..."

"No butts about it, baby," she said, patting me on the behind, "except this one, which had better get itself in gear if it's ever going to get started on its tour. You got the map?" Nodding, I held up the paper. "Good, then follow me," she said, leading the way into the wings. I trailed her along a labyrinth of narrow, dimly lit passageways to a spiral staircase which, winding to a dizzying height, lead to a catwalk.

"Well, up you go," she said. "When you get onto the catwalk, turn right, then keep going until you come to the first door on the left. Knock once, then enter. From there, if you follow the map, you won't have any trouble finding your way to the ballroom, which is where the reception will take place. Any questions?" I shook my head. "Fine, you're off, then," she said, giving me one last bruising embrace.

Following her instructions I soon came to the door and, knocking, entered what appeared to be still another corridor. This one, however, while it seemed extremely long, was straight and brightly lit. The roughly textured concrete walls were coated with a white enamel paint so glossy that, walking along, I was able to detect in them my wavy obscure reflection. The floor and ceiling were also of the same glossy finish. The

air was cool, even chilly, and a brisk breeze was blowing directly into my face. Since there was only one way to go—straight ahead—, it wasn't until I had been walking for quite some time down that unbroken alabaster tunnel that it occurred to me to check the map, which, when I did, I discovered to be hopelessly smuged and illegible. Recalling that the door through which I had entered had had neither knob nor handle on this side, I realized I had no choice but to keep walking on into the increasingly sharp and bitter wind.

For a terribly interminable time, I walked. And walked. And walked. Gradually my slackening steps became heavy and leaden, and my fingers, at first prickling with pain, became stiff, then numb, as also, I suppose, would have my feet had I not been wearing galoshes. I sensed myself moving slower and slower. Somewhere along the way, the walls and the floor and the ceiling had gone from being coated with white paint to being crusted and caked with ice. The farther I went, the thicker and thicker became the ice, and the narrower and narrower the passageway. There was no turning back, because there was no where to turn back to. The only sounds were the crunching of my footsteps and the relentless pounding, pounding, pounding of my pulse. On and on I trudged, taking one excruciating step after another. Seeing nothing, feeling nothing, I was eventually, in order to continue squeezing through the diminishing gap, forced to move, first, hunched up, then, stooped over, and finally, hunkered down on my haunches, waddling and groping along on the slippery ice. Then, nothing: no movement, no motion, no inertia. Crouched, cold, and unmoving, the only sound was that of my breath thundering in my head.

And then, at that moment, with all my senses impounded, and with my very life of less substance than a baby's breath, and lingering on the brink of oblivion, I heard from somewhere the unmistakable sound of that woman's voice I had heard that night in the park, singing what sounded like "Vissi d'arte." With one final shove I thrust myself forward, and there...there on my left and around a little turn was an opening just wide enough to squeeze through.

The room into which I emerged was a grand and splendid ballroom, dazzling beyond belief. Everywhere, there was light, and everything—the brilliant mirrored walls, the glimmering gold and crystal chandeliers, the opaquely gleaming marble floor—everything was drenched in a lovely and lambent light. So splendid and so radiant were the surroundings that my eyes were pinched into a painful squint.

"My God, where've you been keeping yourself?" The raspy voice from behind me I recognized at once as belonging to my former guide, the man with the wheelchair.

"I wish I..." I started to reply, but stopped when, upon turning around, I realized that his words hadn't been directed to me at all, but to one of the tuxedoed waiters who were roving about the room. Wandering over in their direction, I stood for several minutes next to my former guide, who was now wearing a chartreuse toga, and waited for him to finish his conversation. When he took no notice of me, however, I left and began drifting about the room which was densely crowded with people, many of whom I knew. Standing around in small cozy clusters, they were all seemingly hypnotized by their own conversations.

Over in the center of the room, directly beneath the great chandelier,

I spotted the Lone Ranger talking with the woman I had met on the steps out front. They, as everyone else, were drinking wine from crystal goblets off of which glanced glints of flashing light. I waved and called to them, but so entwined were they in talk that they neither heard not saw me. Standing a little apart from them was the fat woman who was likewise enrapt in conversation. She was talking with the toothless priest whose portrait I had seen earlier in the rotunda. Gathered in the far corner around the bar were the Marines, all decked out now in dress uniforms. Meandering from group to group, I kept trying to insert myself in the conversations, or to at least be noticed, but, although in each conversation I kept hearing my name being mentioned, it was as if I weren't there. In what connection I was being discussed, I couldn't tell, so mumbled and unintelligible were the rest of the words.

In my circuit of the room I finally came to an ornately carved oak door, upon which was mounted a tarnished bronze plate with my name on it: Thomas W. Carboune. I pushed at the door, but it wouldn't budge. Leaning against it with all my weight then, I managed to force open a gap just wide enough to slip through. The door snapped shut.

"My God, where've you been keeping yourself?"

No. It couldn't be. It just couldn't. But yes, it was. The room into which I had escaped was identical to the one I had just left. It, too, was suffused in resplendent washes of light. And the people, all of them, standing in the same places and striking the same poses, were the same people I had just left behind. Everything—the room, the mirrored walls, the crystal goblets, the chandeliers—everything was the same. It was as if having entered a darkened theater I saw appear on the screen

the picture of myself entering the darkened theater and seeing appear on the screen the picture of myself entering...

Spinning around, I lunged and pushed at the door to get back into the other room, but it had become welded to its frame. I screamed at the top of my lungs, It's me! Look, here I am, it's me!—, but no one heard.

I had to get out. Someplace there just had to be another door to get out of that room and away from that museum. As I raced frantically around looking for any break in the mirrored walls, I reeled at the sight of my haggard reflection. From everywhere the sound of my name came floating up through the din of muffled conversations. Finally, at the opposite end of the room I came to a door which was identical to the other one. Expecting it also would resist opening, I dashed forward and flung myself against it. So easily did it swing open, though, that I went hurtling out into the night, down a flight of stairs and crashing into a garbage can. A startled cat screeched and shot off into the dark. Half-running, half-crawling, I stumbled along the alley, desperate to put as much distance as possible between myself and the museum. Tripping over a tire and skidding to the pavement, I lay there for several minutes, panting and gulping for air. Finally, sitting up, I tore off my galoshes and flung them away. Weak and exhausted, I got up and started running again and eventually, just before dawn, made it to the highway where, in an utter and complete daze, I started hitchhiking back to New York.

And that's it, Mia. That's all there is to tell. How I managed to get back here, God only knows. Once back, though, it wasn't long before I was rewired into the same old circuit of working at the bookstore,

roaming the streets, and cranking out stories, or at least trying to. Anyway, it's been six months now that I've been back and, puzzle over it, as I constantly do, I am still befuddled by it all.

As bizzare, though, as the whole affair certainly was, I probably wouldn't even be writing to tell you about it if it weren't for something else—if it weren't for this...what should I call it?...this residue, this cloud I've been enveloped in these past six months. Not until some days after my return, after I'd had a chance to begin piecing it together in my memory, did it dawn upon me that my tour of the museum had been on the sixth of September, which was exactly six months to the day that I'd met the woman in the park. And tomorrow...tomorrow, it will be one year, and I know that, no matter what, I'll be meeting her again, which is why I have just had to write this to you. Never in my life, Mia, have I been so riddled with fear, so absolutely unraveled by anything as I am by the prospect of having to meet her again.

But you know, it's not just tomorrow's being the first anniversary that makes me so certain of the future. No, it's not that at all. Rather, it's this residue. For six months, now, I've been living in this awful Hell of having once before done everything that I do. With every act, and every word, I find myself ever more hopelessly entangled in the tentacles of this crushing deja vu. I have become the hostage of my past, sentenced, literally, to reliving my life. Everything I do, I've done before; every place I go, I've already been there; every word I write (including these) and every word I say, I've written and said them all before. It's as if having once left this life, I've been hauled back into it to haunt as my own ghost the halls of my history.

And where can I possibly hide, when there's no where I haven't already been? What can I do? How can I escape? But there is no escape. Everywhere I turn, I run smack into myself. The only sure escape from the Past—the Future—doesn't even exist. In fact, it's gotten so that nothing exists; nothing, that is, except her, and the gnawing knowledge that she, whoever she is, will any minute now come walking through that door. And then what? God, if only I had some inkling, some shred of a clue.... But I don't. All that I do have is this terrifying feeling of having somehow been ensnared into a story from which there is no escape. Round and round I go, never stopping, never starting, but only and always spinning in this same frozen orbit. It's as if I've become a character caught in her cache of stories, a character, who, if lucky, might someday be resurrected in a tale Her Capricious Enchantress elects to tell to another hapless Harlequin. God, I can just hear her now, telling about how this guy became so bound up in a story he'd written about a museum that he actually...what?

It's no use, Mia. I can't go on. Who knows, maybe it's all a dream, a nightmare, and maybe when I meet her again I'll wake up, and she'll be off and telling me another story. But just in case, Mia, just in case something should happen, something drastic, something...something from which I should happen not to return, I only wanted for someone to know, that's all.

Always,

Tom