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BOHEN, MICHAEL. Gagliardi. (1973) Directed by: Fred Chappell. Pp. 76.

This thesis is composed of the single novella "Gagliardi" the germ of which was lodged in my head for over two years before I found a suitable way to release it. I had long imagined the prototype of the main character, who was in a heterosexual bind like Gagliardi, in a situation similar to the one which Mitch has to face in A Street-car Named Desire; this was the what-if quality of my original, rather simple conception. The way to tell the story came to me in a flash while I was working in a sheet metal factory in Minnesota in the summer of 1971. First person narration was the only way to get my fictional juices flowing and to capture the repressed vitality of the main character. Things had finally opened up for me as they do for Gagliardi.

Although a number of readers have found Gagliardi to be unsympathetic, I intended otherwise. Gagliardi will be sympathetic to the extent that the reader can empathize with the acuteness of his identity crisis vis-à-vis his repressive upbringing and environment towards which he feels so ambivalent. Red and Pete are naturally more sympathetic because they have less to learn about human suffering, but they are also involved in similar identity crises. The novella, then, can be seen as a dialectic, in a sense, between main characters who have arrived at varying degrees of compromise with or freedom from their upbringings and environments.

APPROVAL PAGE

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GAGLIARDI

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by

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Thesis Adviser

A Thesis Submitted to
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GAGLIARDI

I should be more like my uncle Guido who eases and slicks his way through life, who has solved the demands of loving on one hand and not getting involved on the other by cruising the night clubs and fancy restaurants for recent divorcées. Dark and distinguished, he tells me he can pick the right one by the look in their eyes or the way they cross their legs. Sure he's been stung by recent divorcées who didn't want to be so recent but he takes it all in stride as part of the hazards of the game. Besides, it keeps him out of the tangle of adultery and for that alone who can complain he's shrugged at me more than once, trying to get me off the ropes and into the game. But I've always been doing something else when he's been hot to trot and free with the advice. And besides, you either have the magic touch or you don't. I've responded to his pep talks more times than I care to remember. He's on Papa's side of the family and only Mamma's side has rubbed off where love's concerned. What more can I say?

I don't normally bend people's ears but I need the exception; I've got something to say and it's got to get said to somebody before things get out of hand; as easily out of hand, it sometimes seems, as my father's temper when his chicken cacciatore isn't just right. This something

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I'm talking about is pretty much the whole temper of my life lately but mostly it's about this gal Red with whom I get the good feelings I've never had with a woman before. And it's about these choking, claustrophobic feelings I get regularly, especially when I wake up early in the morning while it's still darker than asphalt outside with the sweat and consternation of a bad dream where I've been lying in my coffin with three tall orange candles on each side and the lid about to close down on me.

Anyway, this trouble with Red rides high in my thoughts and I've got to get it out before I can grab up the nerve to confront her with what my friend Pete Larkin calls the red-hot facts, facts that would spit in my mother's face if she only knew. If I only knew for sure! If you don't mind, I'll fill in the backdrop so you can understand what's happening up front. Please give me a little room. A choking man needs air, plenty of fresh air.

I'm a twenty-eight-year-old bachelor, a perennial stay-at-home with the parents. And one thing's sure here-- I should arrivederci being too tangled up in the spaghetti of their lives. There's no distance so I create distance each night perched for prey behind my 1970, two-years-to-pay Oldsmobile Cutlass: metallic green on the bottom with a black vinyl roof. I cruise all over the city of St. Mark: restless, rude, not to trust. Charged in pursuit, constantly restless for the action that doesn't

come to me, a portly guy, not dark and greasy and not unappealing in spite of my ever-receding hairline and deep brown eyes hungry with loneliness.

So on I drive, no weekends off, cruising familiar streets, slowing, seeing some girl who has waitressed my eye but doesn't remember me. I pass on, furtive and ashamed. Where's love for the meatcleaver kind of guy I am? Not that I would mind scoring the broads but I want something as tough as the backs and shovels of my ancestors from southern Italy: a relationship, a home, a wife. Why's it so hard for Joe Gagliardi when all kinds of other meatheads do well, seem to have no big problems, play the love game without driving deeper into loneliness and estrangement? Make her ugly, make her fat, bring even a non-virgin but bring me a companion who can talk Beethoven and books, who can carve away this loneliness. Try Joe Gagliardi with a little tenderness, some peace, some small drippings of peace.

What does this meathead do? He cruises out in his Cutlass already revved up to 40,000 miles. He thought the car would help matters with the women along with the Stillman water diet and the metal-rimmed glasses (even Cronkite had them for a while). But I don't let these do their stuff cruising in the poor sections of St. Mark's east side, going along these officially neglected streets,

dark and run-down, with kids littering the streets and screen doors hanging off; old three-story houses with asphalt shingles falling off like leaves and clothes hanging everywhere like so many flags. And I have picked up certain kinds of women several times.

One was a shy girl who looked no more than twenty so I just rode around with her and tried to get a conversation going; the talk went nowhere and nothing happened but payment. Why didn't I, horny as hell, make love? Simple: these poor prostitutes have dirt blowing around inside them; knowing my luck I wouldn't get simple clap but a standing ovation. But leaving the car, her young body stirred up pity mixed with lust for she was my loneliness objectified and placed in the future.

Or some nights I just go home after school, burn my gullet with ravioli, prepare for my history classes, listen to some Beethoven and some Sinatra and masturbate. As to the last item, not always but regular; I've got the problem out in the open at last. I'm so deeply hooked in that it seems impossible to give the habit the heave-ho without a substitute like methadone. But where to get some methadone? A vicious circle, a spermy inferno. And it's locked me out of the Church because I've been raised to see the habit not as one but rather a chain of mortal sins; so Joe hasn't been to church in seven years.

Believe it or not, my parents are still riding high with worry inside over this church business; when they feel on safe ground, like when they're nailing me for ingratitude while living under their roof (they really don't think I'll ever leave), they'll shoot out subtle jabs about the condition of my soul. They never come right out with these tamales; they insinuate the big heat.

And I've learned something else from the secretive, ingrown habit: masturbation is certainly no way to say goodnight. A critic once called Roth's Portnoy's Complaint "the Moby-Dick of masturbation." He said a mouthful; I often feel like a sperm whale: the bulk, the sperm, the whole ocean to get through. And all the devices and ways of pleasure, fixations and strokes--all so much useless knowledge poured down restless days. God, are you listening? I'll forgive you if you bring me out of this sexual desert. If there's so much love out there, why do I bleed at the hands with self-abuse?

Lately I've been coming home tired and heavy with sweat but somehow fulfilled. The hills and valleys of teaching and I've finally hit a few foothills; surprisingly enough in a field I'm not altogether crazy with enthusiasm for--Latin. The people, yes; the language, non. Can you beat that, they're still offering Latin at my school--Bishop Burns Senior High--for college preps. Since I've

had some college Latin, I was plugged into this departed colleague's slot (I guess old Joel, actually he's only thirty-five, just couldn't take the kids and the miserable salary any longer). The principal told me he'd try to get a replacement by the time I'd finished two weeks on Caesar. Fat chance; they've got me where they want me.

Low on Latin but high on turning the students on, I got them all to buy Thornton Wilder's The Ides of March to start the second week. Not exactly the traditional or even a valid approach to a subject where most of the time is spent conjugating, parsing and feeding back stuttering translations (or good stilted ones if a pony is used). That's what turned me off to Latin; it was usually some thimblery of a course and almost never a tool to dig into what it was meant to: literature, history, ideas, passion. Look at what I'm trying to say squarely; if you can't get past the declensions and conjugations, bother the language and get to what's human and relevant. The Ides of March plugs the gap perfectly; it's modern, fictional, provocative, short. Emphasis on Interest not Facts, Interest not Language. Give me Interest and you'll get the rest. And what classes I've had with the novel! Questions about motivation, about the relationship between the historical Caesar and Wilder's, between history and fiction. If only I could turn on the women like my hopped-up class.

Propelled out of myself by a gust of enthusiasm in one class, I failed to notice, sitting large and hairy (everywhere but on my head) on the desk, a ludicrous undercurrent in the class. I guessed, I blushed; my pants were zippered down to my boxer shorts with gamboling baby elephants on them, grey on white. Trying to gain control over my bull-in-the-China-shop behavior which has broken up more than one class, I stared them down, doing nothing about the elephants. I Jack Benny-ed out the bank of windows to my right, my chin cradled in my right hand, then swiveled my face back to them, looked down, back at them, again to the windows chin in hand as the undercurrent mounted. Determined not only to milk the scene like an actor but to post oneupmanship, I asked them a question.

"Has anyone here read Herzog, a novel by Saul Bellow?"

No one responded so I pushed on like Bob Hope maneuvering around a series of jokes that have fallen flat.

"Herzog, the main character, says at one point what he thinks the motto of this generation should be: 'Open your fly and grasp happiness.'"

The class roared its approval, poking and eyeing each other while I went against Herzog's advice. Not exactly appropriate high school fare but then I had managed to turn myself outside in, hibernizing my schlemiel. The guys crowding around my desk after class couldn't resist

joking about my hot social life while I shrugged and smiled. Somehow this I could get away with.

I was muttering to myself, resting on my bed after school to the slow glisten of Beethoven's "Pathetique" when Pete Larkin popped into the room unannounced.

"Hey Joe, time's a wasting. It's Friday, let's get this show on the road."

I swatted his angular body and narrow blond head with a yellow-cased pillow. Pete accepted the slap of my yellow gauntlet and leaped on top of me, fending off the pillow with his left arm and jabbing into my beer belly with his right. His yellow peahead bobbed around before nudging into my gut as well. Then he began tickling me all over until I boarded him off the bed with a saved-up motion into my open, wood-slotted, sliding closet.

"While you're at it, Pete, get my red sports jacket and my white pants, the one with the belt in it."

"You bastard," he said. "No reflection on your parents." He shifted gears as Mamma barged in, shutting off the light from the passageway. Although she spoke good English, she looked the stereotype of the Italian mamma who keeps her little bambinos as well as herself well-stoked: spaghetttied, lasagne-ed, sauced over. A perpetual heartburn of a mother.

"Pete. You interrupted my cooking and my boy's nap. And now you're climbing around in the closet. If you want a job cleaning up, be more quiet. Let Joe alone, he needs his sleep after working hard."

Pushing sixty, whitening hair bunned, exasperated, sagging, the still alluring dark eyes rimmed in shadow.

"No big deal, Mamma. I can probably handle Pete better than your cooking."

"Whose side are you on, Joe?"

"Just kidding, Mamma, just kidding. Can't you take a joke for Chrissake?"

"Don't swear at me. You'd think he'd have learned to respect his Mamma by twenty-eight years on this earth," she shook her head at Pete.

"I know he respects that cooking of yours, Mrs. Gagliardi. One look at him and you can see that he's just bulging with appreciation. As for me, your cooking never ceases to amaze."

"Another wise guy in the house. We might as well make it two. Want to be amazed by my lasagne, Pete?"

"Oh I couldn't, not after such a hassle."

"Lasagne, zucchini and Chianti in a half hour," over her shoulder as she fast-waddled down the hallway.

"Your mother's quite a woman."

"She'd be just fine if she wasn't in my hair most of the time."

"She doesn't have to be."

"So you still want me to move into that dump of yours with the cockroaches and the frozen pizza?"

"Sure, why not? You could get out from under and I could cut expenses."

"So you still think I need to move out for the good of my psyche, huh? Or is it because you're getting lonely by yourself?"

"What if I am? Look Joe, I came over to talk with you about something, not to get into a fight or get buried in zucchini. My conscience is clear."

"Leave the food to Mamma but your conscience to me, your friendly confessor." I smiled back, watching one of my few good friends get up and walk around the room, as awkward with me as I with him when we hadn't seen each other for a week or so. We were aggressive with each other for reasons I've never clearly understood but, like sparring partners, we usually knew when the punches had better be pulled.

"What's so important, Pete, that you had to bust up my nap?"

He paused, sitting on the foot of the bed, seriously dragging on a small cigar. I adjusted my body into a sympathetic curl and wiped the bitchy expression off my face.

"C'mon, Pete, out with it. Good or bad news?"

"Depends on how you look at it."

"How can I look at it when you won't show me?"

"You're in the wrong mood, you'll only give me some shit."

"C'mon, Pete, it's better to get the truth out in the open. I'll find out anyway. You can trust old Joe."

Pete hedged, then burst out "I quit Teitelbaum's today. As of today, I am no longer in the firm of Teitelbaum, Teitelbaum, Stern and Langland."

"You quit all four?"

"Don't be funny, Joe. I don't need any of your cheap Italian humor right this second. I actually quit."

"You don't seem very depressed about it."

"Yes and no." He pulled a chair around the foot of the bed and sat with his arms easy over the back. It was just like his ass to be as calm as the Lake Como of my high school Latin texts instead of pacing around hysterically like I would have. His pale blue eyes bothered me as he went on.

"Tired as hell of being buried down in the vaults searching titles, I went in to old man Teitelbaum and asked him for some kind of job promotion. I told him there was more to law than searching titles and that I was more than ready to move up. Then I gave him all the other arguments I could think of. What do you think he did? He denied my plea as briefly and firmly as a judge. I saw that it

was going to be one of those encounters where you're out of the office before you realize the answer's no, so I headed him off with an ultimatum as a bluff. But the old man locked me into it. I really couldn't back down so I got backed out of the firm. I actually quit but it felt more like I got fired. So I hopped into my Peugeot and headed for Chicago. I was going to set up practice there or so I thought. At least my Peugeot would have new streets to cruise. I came back after a hundred miles or so. I had forgotten my toothbrush and my credit cards. Why do I do these things, Joe?"

"Because you're desperate and probably because you're a damn fool."

"I knew it." He pushed the front of the chair down opening his way to the door, the chair banging my portable and sending the needle skating presto. Before I could move, he stopped as if halted by some great realization. He stood razor-tight at the door, his tall body bent only by his hanging head, his left hand rhythmically squeezing the knob tightly then letting go. The expression on his face was the same as that of the small boy who had accidentally killed his pet rabbit in a blaze of rage ten summers ago.

I had gone too far, motivated by what dark impulses I don't know; I had to work myself up to saying I was sorry, straight wrong.

"Sorry, Pete. Take it easy. I mean you're okay. I'm just bitchy from teaching all week."

After a few moments, he pushed away from the door and went over and clicked off the scratchy sonata. Then, arms over the back of the chair and without looking at me, he went on.

"I suppose it was kind of stupid quitting one of the better law firms in town and it being my first job and only a year and a half in. But Joe, I'm twenty-eight and time's pushing right past me and nothing's moving anywhere. I thought if I could edge past old man Teitelbaum I would be moving up at last and a wife, security, a place in the country"

Why haven't I seen all this suffering camouflaged behind that blond hair and those pale but lively eyes, the bantering manner? Why can't we see suffering unless it erupts right before our eyes? I had to fight back feelings of pity, that odious, condescending emotion. As if Pete were not I.

Pete and I drifted back into my room to get away from Mamma's why-don't-you-take-out-some-nice-Italian-girls-for-a-change inquisitiveness and to listen to some vintage Sinatra as we figured out what we were going to do. It was Friday night and we were bugged to move.

"What's up for tonight, Pete?"

"Not much."

"You must have some ideas."

"What about you, Joe? Am I supposed to be the head zucchini around here?"

"Just asking. How about a movie? Newman directed this flick downtown."

"That's all we ever do on weekends. Be original for a change."

"Okay then, how about going over to Willernie and watch the trucks rust?"

"Very original. Not too funny but very original."

"Humor's my line, not cracking the social barrier."

"You can say that again. A real mouthful of meatballs."

"Watch it or I'll turn you into ground round."

"My apologies to the Anti-Defamation League but lay off the Mafia tactics."

"Watch the reference or I'll take care of your Anglo-Irish ass."

"Kiss of death, Joe?"

Variations on a borrowed theme until the game was in danger of being called on account of darkness. Like a scene out of the movie "Marty" with Borgnine the butcher and his buddies sitting around all the time asking each other where the action is. Then Borgy, even uglier and shyer than me, meets this gal Betsy Blair who's not

Italian and who thinks she's a "dog." Borgy doesn't think so, although his buddies do, and they both paw the ground with embarrassment until things work out. Of course, Borgy's got to work around his Mamma and the old lasagne world of Europe but mostly the story's pure old-fashioned stuff. Not a stitch of porn.

"Joe, hey Joe, what about Bunratty's? You sleeping, Joe?"

"Nah. I just can't see spending all that dough on drinks just to watch a bunch of hot dogs with the fancy clothes chasing all those stuck-up bitches."

"Just an idea. Don't get uptight behind it. At least there's some women there. Dammit Joe, why not? Give it another go. How are you ever going to meet anyone with your attitude? This one's too fat or that one's got nothing upstairs or this one's too pushy or that one's a dumb secretary. Or, believe it or not folks, they're too hot to handle."

"I don't want some girl with nothing but sex on the mind, that's for sure."

"What the hell do you want, perfection? Want to know something?"

"What?"

"You're impossible. You're the kind of guy that chases after a girl and moans like crazy when she won't get caught. But let one of them like old Susy Dawes start

chasing you, boom, you're off in the opposite direction. You bitch about no girls and no love and you spend your weekends cruising, cruising for chrissake, when there's hundreds of girls out there right this minute, ready and waiting."

I felt a thick surge of anger but somehow I managed to clench it into a fist. A seemingly small damning up of my temper but it proved a kind of turning point in my life. At times like these, I think a God must step in, beyond our willing, and put pressure on the appropriate end of the seesaw, lifting us into life.

Driving through that early, mournful-yet-still-light-out, evening rain. Pete chatting in that aimless way of his, filling up all the empty silences; that sort of talk you can pick up while listening to the FM, watching the traffic, listening to the rain, all at once. Sharking through the dark green storm, I felt the pleasant and warm feeling of being closed in by the rain, encapsulated without my usual fits of claustrophobia. I felt the relief of rain, rain healing, for a short time, that sharp cleavage between my private face and public places. And as I felt how good it was to share the rain with a friend, I remembered Beethoven, that stocky man with the titanic hair, expressing the great regret of his life on his deathbed: that he had never married. Love had always

eluded him though he was continually involved in it. Was it because he sought out only aristocratic ladies above the plebeian van of his name as one of his biographers put it? Was it related to the great quest in his music, especially in the last quartets, to express the inexpressible, to grasp perfection?

Up ahead the angular twenty-story red-bricked hotel housing the discotheque clouded out of the downpour. Once inside the door, cover-charged and jostled, all thoughts of Beethoven and the rain disappeared. The brandy was still burning my throat when Pete and I split up to divide the territory, each on the lookout for the other. I stood in the main foyer and watched his tall blond head bob over the crowd as he moved to the right bar of the three-in-one. The first--where Pete went--was a black-tiled, white-walled and yellow-lit Spanish style room complete with whirling tropical fans from a Bogart movie and a jukebox; the second--the one to which I was condemned--was the live, burn-out-the-amps hard rock with a whole-wall bar and a dancing area the size of a closet (and just as stuffy); the third was a place for after the initial contact: a deepdark piano bar. Here I am, the meatcleaver classicist, in the middle of this cornucopia of noise and phoniness: guys out for the score under the guise of real interest, married guys with rings

off or concealed under larger ones, girls with little or nothing to say behind their mascara-ed facades. Losers most of them, hoping to break the bank.

Primed with my usual Scotch on the rocks, I was ready to drift into my waiting game, feeling as out of it as I did at all those anonymous high school and college mixers when I spotted this redhead at the bar, legs crossed toward the dance floor, the head and body twisting back to her drink. That certain look on her face, that wonderful look of a girl you knew you'd like very much if you got the chance to know her, glimpsed on the faces of all those inaccessible girls at the old mixers. I tried to move my body toward the bar when a guy with an ascot comes up and she obliges with a half-hearted smile. My eyes race around and settle on her returning sans ascot. Maybe she's one of those chicks all too happy to dance with you but not for long, dancing just enough to keep their face and body before the public. Then it comes; she's the daughter of a lawyer Pete knows. A social worker or something, that's it. Again I try to move my body toward her--the approach-avoidance of a rat trapped in his maze. Give me a tennis racket or a golf club; but there's no transference and I feel the sinking twist of another lost opportunity. I urge my legs up behind her maroon pants suit, an ensemblic dance of fire with the taller bartender

in his red bar jacket and both reflected in the giant bar-length mirror behind. A dance of fire darker and more vivid than the leaves that have begun to fall outside. Again she obliges, this time with someone she knows. I bump into her accidentally as she moves away and she flashes her bright blue eyes on me. I apologize and order another Scotch. More sinking, more sweat, more than a sip of Scotch. Everyone swirling away into crowds, rhythmic opening and closing, permutation and combination laced with hard rock and flashing, glad-to-see-you smiles. Not drunk, riveted on the verge of these kaleidoscoping groups, my body cutting loose, floating aimlessly. I finish the drink and rest the cubes on my hot mouth hoping to cut the drift, the heart-poundings. Ordering a settler I see Red nudging her way through the crowd with the big hulk in tow. As he leaves, I wonder if it's to the john or the coats. But he doesn't come back; dancing with her must be the kiss of death. Go and don't go. The name Smith comes to mind as I bump into her.

"Excuse me."

She turns and gives me the customary swingles once-over; a rapid survey of the merchandise.

"You again? Three bumps and you're out."

"Excuse me, but aren't you Austin Smith's daughter?"

"Yes, but who are you?"

"I know this guy Pete Larkin, you don't know him, who knows your father."

"That still doesn't say who you are."

The tone cool but not the coldness of a mountain stream.

"I'm Joe Gagliardi, better known as Gagler or a variety of other names."

"I'm Linda Smith, better known as Red."

"Not Red Smith the sportscaster I hope?"

"I hope not too."

She laughed and her face which looked a little tired and pale and somewhat bored brightened up. When not smiling or excited, her eyes were half closed behind the long lashes and some mascara and the large lips were softly closed over the crack between her two front teeth.

"Does that mean you don't like sports?"

"I like sports all right but I had to get out of sportscasting because the jock type turns me off."

I had to shout over the screaming acid of a finale.

"It's certainly a long way from Beethoven."

"And just about as deafening."

I laughed although she probably meant the music not his deafness. But someone who can actually joke about the Master I shouted silently. Twisting away from her drink, ranging her eyes slowly over the crowd and back, she said offhandedly,

"I just bought the complete symphonies for \$14.95. I think I'd rather be home playing them than being here."

"Want to?"

"No, let's dance, Joe."

My heterosexual timing was buzzing me; Beethoven has done me in, that Kraut. I followed close behind her as we furrowed through the crowd. Then out of the blue: how many men had kissed her and touched her before me? The tight fit, a slow number and her long and curly hair brushing my face blew away the thought.

Back on the stools which I had to barge in for, sweating like a trooper but feeling good, damn good, we carried on a conversation with ease, ease mind you, about movies and music and what we had done last summer and the summers before. For a blessed fifteen minutes the talk became all that much easier because the band had taken a breather. Then just as I asked Red a question about her job, the band started up with an old Rolling Stones number that made me more conscious of the people closing us in: the double-breasted older men with hair or wigs banded across their foreheads; young heats beneath wide-striped pants; married men over thirty with dark eyes and bright neckerchiefs, gazing slowly over the passing crowd for the ones returning the same lonely hardness; young and not-so-young girls, homely and not, wearing the latest in

pants-suits and hot pants, fingering their broad bright ties, bored with the old wait-until-he-calls dating pattern of their earlier years which has brought nothing but more knots toward the middle of their great fear; and the dull, dry eyes of the divorcées waiting for a well-heeled stopgap or those anxiously searching for a lesser mistake than the first one--hope triumphing over experience; and all the lonely young men heading toward thirty and the bright, more innocent ones with their craning-at-the-tall-buildings glances. All in this deafening, darkwooded, well-heeled, golden-Scotched dreamscape.

"Joe, I thought you wanted to hear about my job? But you're gawking like some guy dancing with the wrong girl and looking over his shoulder for the right one."

A half smile spread behind a gust of smoke from her cigarette. I tried to look deadfaced but I could feel my teeth sliding from my lips.

"So I'm right, you were gawking."

I was quick to protest but the quality of blue in the wide open eyes and the way she was pressing her lips together warned me about taking her too seriously. I described the types of people I'd observed.

"C'mon, Joe, aren't you oversimplifying just a bit? How many of these people do you know anyway. I used to label the hell out of people but doing social work cured me of that for good or so I hope."

"I suppose I am quick with the labels but that's the way I see it. I've been coming down here, off and on, for two years and I've talked to a lot of people. And I've hit quite a few swingles joints in Chicago. A swingle joint's a swingle joint."

"Where do you and I fit in your schema?"

"Well, there's exceptions to every rule."

She laughed and I had to join her.

"But seriously, Red, you know what bothers me most about these places?"

"No, what?"

"What really bugs me is the way so many of the women get hurt. These guys double breast their way in, throw the bull around, get something going and keep it going until they've carved out all they want. The great secret is to seem sincerely interested in the girl as a unique individual, appeal to her ideal concept of herself while keeping your emotions under wraps. Nine times out of ten the girl is the one left in the lurch."

Why was I telling her all this? I stopped for those sleepy eyes were burning open and blue through the smoke. What was she thinking?

"It takes two to tango, Joe, the old masochism tango."

She deftly two maraschino cherries from under the bartender's nose, chewing them off at the stems.

"Speaking of tangos, why don't we."

"How about answering my question first."

"Question?"

"Now you've forgotten. The one about your job."

"I have forgotten, haven't I? Child welfare's no picnic so I don't like to talk about it too much. Anyway, we all have caseloads of families where at least one kid's gotten out of control. I try to watch the families as best I can but the load's just too big. And to top things off, we have to decide what happens to kids we hardly know. It's a bit too godlike for my blood. Just today I recommended that a kid be taken from his mother because she kept beating him."

"Why did she beat the kid?"

"It was the only way she could control him what with no father and a houseful of kids. She had tried literally everything but that seems to be the way with our society: it sets up impossible situations and when a kid naturally rebels, it uses its institutions as clubs. They've got you coming and going."

Red paused, dragging and assessing, her gaze directed over the liquor bottles lined up along the mirror; she seemed to be looking deeply into herself. I gazed at her and myself gazing at her.

"I see so many kids with no childhoods, with nothing going for them. I'm always torn between leaving them with their families or protecting them somehow. I have these

fantasies about opening my own orphanage and adopting all of them. But it would be like a sponge trying to soak up an ocean. Besides, I don't think I could stand to have problem kids around all the time. Lately, I feel like just getting out and finding a little island of refuge somewhere like so many college kids are doing. A friend of mine from college has asked me to live on his commune up in Vermont. The problem of privacy seems like less and less of an objection to taking him up on it."

She pushed out the inside of her cheek with her tongue before biting at it as if to kill the pain of a canker sore.

"I know what these women go through."

I turned from the mirror and the absurdly friendly face of the bartender pushing for another round to her. What was she saying? Was she speaking from experience? Questions began to race inside my head and my stomach sank in its busy elevator. As the music started up again and the colors started mixing freely in the mirror, she turned and our eyes caught for a few moments.

"Say, speaking of tangos, Joe, how about it?"

Back out we went into the crunch and the sweat and the blasting amplifiers and those guys on every postage-stamp dance floor who feel they have to flail, stomp and shin-kick their way to glory. Over a driving, Otis

Redding version of "Satisfaction," Red yelled, "Let's see you let it all go." I could picture myself collapsing into a ragheap of sweat under the pounding hooves of the glory stompers as she lifted her hands over her head and began snapping her fingers and shaking her solid body to the heavy beat. Her hair kept brushing across the face as she gradually turned into a woman of rubber, soul. I had to move slow to let the Scotch do its work and to let my body ease into the beat. The tightness began to dissolve and the heaviness grow light: the fingers snapped, the more-than-ample midsection began to twist, the arms to flail, the feet to move almost on their own. I let myself sink further and further into the beat and the sweat and the crunch of the crowd until the music mounted toward its climax. I looked across to catch Red's eyes and her broad smile before we were bumped back into our own worlds. The band drove the song higher and higher and faster and faster to such a frenetic pace you either had to go faster than you could or catch it at half time. Red and I both slowed as we laughingly came together and I grazed her cheek with mine. We stayed through another geared up Otis Redding song, "Respect," and a slow, bluesy "Rainbows All Over Your Blues" though we were sweating like two fat people in a Turkish bath.

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And I began to see rainbows what with the way she let me get as close as I could, the way she sank her head

into my shoulder, raising it up from time to time for a parted-lip kiss. But, later, back up on the stools, I noticed how tired and pale she looked and that her tongue was once again circling the inside of her cheek. Just before the last dance, Red slid off her stool, told me what a good time she'd had and left me with, "Call me if you'd like," almost before I could put my drink down. I watched her solid body bump into Pete before the crowd swallowed her up. All I needed was to see Pete and that over-friendly face of his, sometimes even bright and over-friendly after a night of getting shot down or a string of one-dance-and-thank-you girls.

"Hey Joe, how'd it go?"

"Everything A-okay."

"You don't look A-okay."

"How would you feel if things were going real good, good rap, dancing, some great physical contact, then poof, off she goes before you know what's what."

"Did she give you her number?"

"That's another thing. Here I was working up to it real slow and cagey when she slides off the stool and disappears like a greyhound after a rabbit, only I'm not the rabbit. Most nights I move in too fast and the girls back off as if I'm trying to manhandle them right on the spot."

"Were you? I mean you've been known to put the move on right in the middle of a big rock number."

"You'd give a guy a hard time at his own funeral."

"Planning to die anytime soon?"

"Pete. Cut it."

"Look, Joe, don't worry about it. She sounds like one of those prickteaser kind of girls that blow hot and cold because they got dumped way back when. They act real ambivalent even after you get to know them. By the way, what was her name, maybe I know her."

"I don't think so."

"Trust me to know."

"Fanny Hill. What's so funny?"

"With a name like that I'd drop her real quick or farm her out. That's my advice. There's plenty more fish in the ocean."

"Speaking of the ocean, how'd you do?"

"Okay, nothing fantastic. A little rap, some physical contact here and there."

"How many times, Pete?"

"How many what?"

"You know."

"Three. I got shot down three times."

"Know something?"

"What?"

"I don't need any advice from a three-time loser."

He caught me offguard with an easy jab to the gut and spilled some Scotch on my sports jacket.

"Know something else?"

"No, what?"

"You're really something, you know that? You're really something."

"Sorry about the Scotch. I should know better than to jostle a drinking man with a drink in his hand, especially a man throwing down Chivas Regal at \$1.40 a shot."

"Lay off my Chivas, Regal," I shot back as we both eyed each other and laughed.

"Seeing you're in such a good mood, tell me something."

"Shoot."

"Why do I get shot down so much in here? Besides my being a damned fool. Down in Chicago, things are a lot different."

"Simple. Look at yourself. Look at that collegiate sweater and look at those pants--no flaired bottoms and you've still got cuffs. No neckerchief and your hair's almost short enough to be out of the fifties someplace. It all reads out of it and it don't read money. The swingle joints you go to in Chicago are more college-oriented. Vive la différence."

We talked until the barmen literally pushed us out the door into a light rain only minutes after closing time.

"Pete? I think I'll take a raincheck on coffee tonight."

"But they've got this great new waitress"

"I'll take a raincheck."

"Joe? What are you going to do?"

"About what?"

"My advice still stands. Forget her."

"Want to be a four-time loser?" I shot through the rain and headed for the car.

"Don't start that stuff again."

Just one more person telling you what's up and what's down, what's there and what isn't. Out of the goodness of their hearts. Like Holy Mother Church.

About a week later, I thumbed through a telephone book of Smiths and finally got through to Red by a process of elimination. It was the beginning of a minor whirlwind, when to my surprise, she said she would be glad to see that Newman-directed flick downtown. The wind had finally kicked up and it blew hard on my sails. I did things with her I couldn't do with other girls: Beethoven concerts, foreign film festivals (most girls were geared down hard by the gloom of Bergman or the decadence of Fellini or Bertolucci), sitting around her apartment pow-wowed on an

outsized golden shag listening to classical music and sipping sherry, drives in the country with my tapedeck blasting "Daphnis and Chloe" or the "Brandenburg Concertos."

And we talked about social work and teaching and people we knew and religion. Things were going so well I overlooked some of her sharp comments on the latter subject.

"How can you say stuff like that, Joe? How can you come right out and say stuff like that?"

"Because most of the girls I know who've lived with a guy have gotten screwed in more ways than one."

"C'mon, you can't come out with absolutes like that. There aren't any absolutes. All this sounds like a throwback to the Church."

"Don't bring the Church into this. I've seen what I've seen for myself."

"Or is it that you see what you've been brought up to see? Mother Church taking care of all her children if only they will see as a child sees. 'Become like unto little children'"

"Red, you know that's not what Christ meant by that. And another thing, you know I've left the Church, for all practical purposes, seven years ago."

"But has the Church left you?"

"That's as ridiculous as saying there's no absolutes."

"Absolutes like no meat on Friday, adultery and

pre-marital sex are always wrong, church every Sunday et cetera?"

"No."

"Name one."

"Well . . . uh . . . God."

"How do you know that you know that?"

"Come again, Red?"

"That is a mouthful isn't it?" and she let out a giggle and cupped a hand over her mouth while her eyes opened wide under a wrinkled up forehead. She began to shake and I watched her breasts moving beneath an old polo shirt of her father's. Then she stopped and looked at me with those wide open eyes of fire and the lips parted to that lusty crack between her teeth before she burst out again and laughed until the tears came to her eyes. Laughter and fire don't easily mix.

But other sharp remarks were not so easy to ride over. Late one Sunday afternoon (Sunday afternoons were always the bluest part of the week because it was the last bright time before school) we got into Red's Mustang and I drove her around to see my old haunts. We cruised through the old neighborhoods of my grade and high school years, along the Mautuxet river (which bounds St. Mark on the west and is flanked on the east side by some of the most expensive brick and colonial houses in town) where I used

to drive dreaming of the dream girl, and the Forest Oaks Country Club on whose high greens overlooking Lake Owatogo I regularly watched the twilight vanish into night over the rippled water. And out to what's left of the Indian mounds high on the bluffs across the Minnesota river east of town. We parked on an overlook which jutted west to a full view of the St. Mark skyline forever changing with new buildings strutting up and old ones being dynamited or boomed down. It made one glad to see that St. Mark was finally getting with the rest of the country but it left a sadness too and a choking feeling in the chest and throat every time I looked across the river flowing rapidly on its southeastern course to the sea far below. I preferred to do an about-face to what was left of the thirty-seven mounds that were extant all during my grade school years only to be bulldozed to the remaining six for the new interstate highway. Smooth out the ways of my fathers and cover my eyes with concrete.

I watched Red move in wonder towards the mounds dressed in jeans and a heavy tan ski sweater and her father's dark blue windbreaker with Minnesota Vikings stencilled in white over the left breast.

"You mean to tell me you've never been up here in all your born years?"

"Not once in all my born years. What do you know about them?" She moved to the base of a mound many times

bigger than her Mustang.

"They were built about two thousand years ago by prehistoric Indians. Not too many years ago, people thought they were built by a long lost race of mound builders, that is until people started digging around hoping to find their treasures, only to find human bones, spear points and occasionally some copper ornaments. This and other things led to the more believable notion that this was the work of prehistoric Indians who might have gotten the idea from Asia where the dead were buried under mounds."

"What happened to them, professor?"

"That's the big question, why these mound people vanished by the time the white man came upon the scene. There's been a lot of theories such as, they were driven out as hostile groups moved in, or they were taken over by tribes with a more simple way of life. Like the Romans conquering the Greeks."

"Joe?" as she started up the mound closest to us, looking so young and fresh even a little tomboyish with the slight breeze rippling her windbreaker and tousling her hair.

"Yeah?"

"You sounded put out when I called the other night."

"Put out?"

"Yeah, kind of sulky like you weren't so sure you

wanted to talk to me."

"I was still cranky from my nap."

"But you sounded so cold on the phone like my calling really upset somebody, maybe your parents, maybe . . . you."

We climbed past two good-sized trees to where the breeze skimmed the top of the mound.

"Does it?"

"Does it what?"

"C'mon, Joe, let's talk like real people."

"If you must know, my parents have been giving me the business about it. They want to know what kind of girl would keep calling their son this way and so often, God should forbid."

"Does it bother you too?"

I turned to watch the sunset, a gaudy band of orangish-red along the skyline.

"Joe?"

"What?"

"Let's get it out in the open like a couple of adults."

"Don't get too pushy."

"Is that it, Joe?"

"Girls just don't call guys unless it's special."

"But haven't the times changed?"

"They sure have, take a good look at that skyline."

"You're getting off the subject. Don't girls have just as much right to call or travel or make love as men do? Joe, please turn around and look at me."

"There's something to what you say."

"But not for you?"

The breeze died down as the darkness kept gathering over the mounds. I could feel her eyes on the back of my neck as I still faced the western glow.

"How long can we go on like this?"

"Like what? Why are you being so insistent? Can't you leave well enough alone?"

"Joe, I don't want you to go away from me. I want you to stay because . . . I care a lot about you and . . . because I love you. And I don't want you to disappear like these mound builders who couldn't handle the changes that came over them. Joe, don't you see? That's the moral of their story; they couldn't . . ."

She stopped and the silence came over the mound like the darkness and I knew, how I don't know, that she was crying. I felt as stationary as the mounds until she touched my arm. I needed an Uncle Guido to know what to do at a time like this as she gently tugged at my arm. Then the tugging stopped and I could hear the slight rustling movements as she ran down toward the car. I turned and charged down the grassy slope and caught her at the car

where she stood with her head and arms on the roof. I pulled at her until I could feel the full pressure of her body in my arms and her hair fluffed against my neck and chin.

"I've been ugly, haven't I?"

"You're my baby, baby."

"Baby, baby?"

"I wanted to make sure."

Later, we drove by my old high school and parked at the far edge of the athletic field, scene of so many of my anguished and futile tryouts for various sports, and made out as we so often did in various places out of my past, bringing memory into a healing, a completion of sorts.

Then, one night after Red had called to tell me how much she missed me and to invite me to a social work convention, I emerged from my room with a whoop only to nearly run over my mother who stood in the shadows of the unlit kitchen with a duster in her hand and a bandanna around her hair.

"Joe, what's all this happiness I hear?"

"Nothing, Mamma, only this girl and I have a date to go to a social work convention in Chicago this weekend."

"Chicago? I've been meaning to ask who is this girl that calls up?"

"What makes you think it's only one?"

"Then you're going to Chicago with a perfect stranger?"

"Okay, what if it is the same girl?"

"Who is she, Joe?"

"Just a girl I have great times with, that's all."

"So you're going to marry her."

"Mamma, don't jump to conclusions."

"You're going to marry her and you won't even tell your own mother. I'll be the last to know except your father who doesn't know what's happening on the other side of his newspaper."

"She's just a great girl who happens to like the same things I do."

"Is she Italian?"

"No."

"Is she Catholic?"

"No."

"Does she respect your faith?"

"Mamma, since . . . since when am I . . . the great Catholic? And tell me why I should be when all the Church's done for me is screw me up and make me feel guilty for not going along with the program."

"So that's how it is after your father works nights all those years to get a little extra to give you the Catholic schooling and I work my fingers to the bone for you, hoping someday you'll make me proud with a nice

Italian girl who'll provide a good Italian home and children. Then you let a pretty face pull you away from the way you were raised up to be. Was it all wasted, Joe, look at me, was it all wasted?"

"Mamma, no." I moved to put my hands on her upper arms.

"Don't, Joe. You make me feel like a tired, old woman."

"I didn't mean it about the Church, you just made me mad prying into my life. I know what you and Papa have been through and I love you but I've got to date this girl, don't you see?"

"So it's serious like I told you. What will your father think?"

I tried to touch her but she kept me away with the duster.

"Who is this girl that calls up here like a girl with no upbringing? What kind of a girl can she be that chases a boy like that and spits at tradition?"

I let my arms drop and moved around her to the sink deeply shadowed but for the purplish-white glare from a light on the house next door.

"Who is she?"

"A girl named Linda Smith if that's what you want."

"Is her father the big lawyer in town?"

"There's more than one big lawyer in town."

"Well?"

"Yeah."

"I wouldn't have believed it of my only son, I wouldn't have believed it."

"What's the big calamity, is there something wrong with her name?"

"My son involved with that . . . older woman."

I pushed away from the sink and came close to her.

"Older woman?"

"She's twenty-nine, maybe thirty if she's a day."

"Twenty-nine or thirty?"

"You mean you've never looked in the corners of her eyes?"

"How do you know that?"

"Austin Smith was your father's lawyer when that guy at work tried to sue him."

"I don't remember that."

"That's because you and your father don't talk like father and son."

"How does he know about Linda?"

"The lawyer used to talk about his only daughter sometimes with your father and what great trouble she was to him and how his sons had only brought satisfaction."

"What sort of trouble?"

"She's not exactly an angel. Talk to your father."

"He's never home, he's always out working to put me through Catholic schools. Besides, how do I . . ."

"Shut your mouth if you have no respect."

"Sorry, Mamma."

She moved toward me in her slow trundling way and squeezed her hands on my arms.

"Joe, your father and me just want the best for you. We just want happiness for you so don't ruin your life by forgetting who you are. You know what happened to the uncle you were named after and that older woman he married and your cousin Nancy who married that Jewish man and how they never could work out how to raise the kids and the trouble over Bernie's bar mitzvah. And today the butcher told me, Mrs. Gagliardi"

"They're still together aren't they?"

I forced myself to look into her pleading brown eyes.

"Mamma?"

"What, son?"

"I love you Mamma, but please let go. Please."

Lying on my back in my room and listening to a Beethoven sonata, I can see Red out in the backyard of her apartment, amid all the leaves, throwing objects for her Irish setter Gropius to retrieve and then wrestling with him in the leaves. Gropius would take off after a ball or a bone effortlessly and with the sun shining through his

streaming hair. And the grace and freedom and the way he would jump up on Red's shoulders with his unclipped nails and those eyes so close together and high on that long snout. And the way Red would squint over at me through the sun and tell me to take a turn with him. I can hear myself asking her, "Why don't you clip his nails?" And her response, "He needs to protect himself any way he can in this dog-eat-dog world."

Then I fire the ball as high as I can in the air and watch the dog ants around and remember the picture of her father turned face down on her chest of drawers and how she would speak of him if she spoke at all, cryptically, as if there were far more to tell than would bear telling.

The snapshot remains to the end of the sonata: Gropius with his mahogany-red coat and his paws up on her shoulders and breathing white in the air past her lovely pale face and her eyes squinting my way through the sun and the leaves and the chilly wonder of the day.

Although I had been wanting to move the relationship a notch tighter, it was not until after seeing Fellini's "La Strada" a while later that the main chance seemed to lie on the track. Diffident as the day I was born, I had to bull myself forward like a football team with a three-yards-and-a-cloud-of-dust offense. Or maybe my hesitation was due to cowardice excused or human respect

or cold-blooded fear of pregnancy. Or something deeper. But hot-blooded men don't worry long range.

Red was uncharacteristically silent in the car, munching left-over jugee fruits; she consumed mouthful after slow mouthful of the bright colors and seemed hypnotized by the twisting road, the center strips that blurred into a steady white hum.

"Penny for your thoughts."

"Oh, I was just thinking about the movie. Didn't Guilietta Massina break your heart? I mean the way Tony Quinn comes to that poor village and buys her from her parents to use in his one-motorcycle circus as he sees fit. I'm not sure whether I'm madder at Quinn or the family."

"But both Quinn and the family were damn poor." I whipped the wheel around a sluggish old Mercedes up front.

"But I see kids being taken away from their parents every day."

"Then that makes you more like Quinn."

Cross-stepping my gibe she drove her voice straight through the windshield.

"Most of my kids seem to want out, at least they act that way. Massina definitely didn't want to be torn from her family and all she had ever known."

"I agree she got a rough deal. And those impish, sad-eyed faces like a puppy dog's blow you off the map. But what got to me was Quinn, gruff as hell and breaking chains with his chest to scratch out a living. And how he couldn't tell Massina he loves her and appreciates her playing the clown when he obviously does. And to top it all off, that last scene on the beach where, drunk as a skunk, he tears at the sand in utter despair, knowing his pretty clown is dead because of him."

Red turned a soft, inquiring face on me which I could feel face front.

"You seem to identify with him . . . I mean certain aspects, don't you?"

"Certain aspects."

"It's funny but I thought everybody would feel Quinn got what he deserved. After all the stuff she did for him and him shacking up with bargirls and whores and finally leaving her sleeping by the side of a road. I just couldn't sympathize very much with a brutal chauvinist like him. Sorry, Joe, but I don't think you're like Quinn at all. Well, maybe a little."

After I had swerved the Cutlass around another sluggish car, exploding smoothly into the passing lane, she added a coda.

"I just don't understand you, Joe."

She didn't expand on that except to stare through the wipers now flicking off a light mist. Why the hell did I say I identified with that circus freak? Breaking chains with my chest!

Red had the habit of changing the subject; short skips like fingers over rosary beads and we were on something she did during the day, a book she had just bought, something funny her father said--all as we curved along the Mautuxet river with the rich colonials pillaring past on the left. As she buzzed on, animately then softly in her private rhythm, she tucked her right leg under the other and put her left arm over the top of the bucket seat; her body opened toward me. I would turn from time to time, when the lights of cars flashed past, to the pale glow of her face, fireburnt around the edges by her hair and trembling into my driving.

"Red, I could use a cigarette."

She lit one of her cigarettes which she kept for emergencies and passed it over. I sucked back deep on it and blew out fine streams of smoke.

"Do you smoke grass, Joe?"

"Smoke grass? Oh . . . not really. Why?"

"The way you hold your cigarette with three fingers clamped way down on the end."

"Looks like I'm keeping up without even knowing it."

An unconscious mimic. But like most of my generation, I feel more comfortable with a drink in my hand than a joint."

"So do I."

She braked my thoughts with a characteristic, high-pitched call of my name, "Joe?" The mosquitoes and bugs splattered on the windshield like colored rain.

"Are you ashamed of me or something? You've never once had me over to meet your folks. You don't even talk about them much."

"The shame is mutual. I haven't met your father either."

"That's different."

"Why haven't you introduced me to the old man?"

"You wouldn't like him."

"You mean he wouldn't like me. Why?"

"You're a teacher and he thinks teachers are escaping reality à la the old saying."

She filled her cheeks with air and let out an exasperated, "Of course, he thinks no one is good enough for his baby. Speaking of the devil, I wish you wouldn't call me that."

"Okay, baby."

"You still haven't answered my question. You can't get me off the track that easy."

I don't remember how I answered her; I do remember wheeling off the drive onto a dark road pockmarked with

mud puddles that angled down closer to the river, past huge high-voltaged metal erectors and under willow trees and thickets of arching bushes to the sound of running water.

Almost at once I flicked on the FM and began to move toward her but I was restrained by my seatbelt (exactly my gripe with them; they're useless in an emergency). I looked into her eyes and then into those corners. I meant to ask her about that, why she only used makeup around the eyes. She responded to my lips and my none-too-gentle stroking up her back, across the breasts, down the sides. My hands moved ever more urgently. As I passed my hands up the bare, pale legs, up the thighs and back and forth across her bikini-style underpants, I could feel a shudder of indecision in her swaying and squirming. But that was only natural and I pressed my fingers on and over the top and down and further down and through the beginning dampness and in. She let out soft moans as I continued stroking and circling until, squeezing her legs together and turning her face to her window, she clutched my hand until I relented with my head against her open blouse. I felt as klutzy as the hairy bull my mother has always seen in the china shop. Her smell seemed to fill the car.

"So I'm an animal too?"

"What do you mean?"

"Like the others, that's what you think."

"Joe, it's not that exactly . . ."

"What is it then?"

"It's hard to put into words."

"Give me some idea."

"Joe, you're just . . . too hungry."

"What's that supposed to mean? I'm a man and I've got passions like other men. What's wrong with trying to express them?"

"But every night, all the time? And can't it be more natural? Let's get dressed and talk about it down by the river. Okay?"

Down by the rushing sound of the water, she went on.

"You're hungry like I'm not really there and you haven't had it in a while or you're guilty about it and have to . . ."

"But I've got feelings I want to express Don't you really care about me?"

"I, I, I. Can't you get out of your own skin for once? Why are you always talking of being loved rather than loving?"

"Who said anything about love?"

She flashed a terrible look on me, then turned sharply and moved further along the bank.

"Red, have you ever thought that it might be partly your fault, that you really don't like sex all that much?"

The water and the cars passing above increased in intensity. After some time she answered.

"Maybe so, but who said anything about sex?"

I said something in response and we both fell silent and sat perched for a long time on large stones lapped by the rushing water. Finally,

"Red?"

"Yes?"

"How about going back to your place for hot chocolate and some of those funny animal crackers you just bought?"

"Sure."

We had to pull ourselves away from our stones and the river for our cinematic ride back. Joe Gagliardi, the chain-chested Quinn, driving a car instead of a motor-cycled circus cart and Red Smith, the long-suffering Massina, next to him instead of staring out the back of the cart.

We dunked the crackers in the hot chocolate with marshmallows floating on top and talked for a while before I kissed her softly on the cheek and left. She stood at the door to light my way down.

The next day, Pete, appearing out of nowhere and unannounced as usual, burst into my room while I was practicing on my trumpet.

"What the hell are you doing, Gagliardi, blowing your trumpet into the closet like that?"

"I get a mellower tone into the clothes, you unmannered bastard."

"No reflection on my parents of course and all to a background of vintage Sinatra."

It was exactly like Larkin to pop his blond peahead in and start giving you the banter as if he had just seen you yesterday instead of close to three weeks ago.

"Been hearing reports on you, big fella."

I kept blowing into the closet.

"Hot and heavy according to the reports just in. What's the scoop?"

"A scoop in the head, or better, you've got a scoop for a head."

"C'mon, own up. Who's this gal you've been running around with without letting your old buddy in on it?"

I turned from the closet to see the usual look of open-mouthed expectancy but there was an uncharacteristic hurt in the eyes.

"Just some girl I met the last time we hit Bunnatty's. Remember old buddy old pal, one of the last times I've seen that handsome face of yours. Where the hell've you been?"

"Hither and yon," in his best W. C. Fields manner.

"More on that later. Who's the little woman?"

Mystery. Everywhere mysteries.

"You don't know her."

"Oh yes I do. My spies have seen you out together. I just wanted to see if you'd come clean for your old buddy."

"Where? Who saw me with Red?"

"Red? Red Smith?"

"Are you mocking me?"

"Good-looking, redhaired social worker?"

"I thought you knew her?"

"Are you shitting me, Gagliardi, you're making it with Red Smith? Why have you been keeping the good news from me?"

"The path to my bedroom hasn't exactly been well trod, you old fart."

He sat on the foot of the bed, pow-wowing his legs and pulling on one of his soles. An unavoidable smile on his downturned face.

"From what I've heard, she really puts out."

"You're not going to trick me again."

"Have you had any luck getting any, as they say in the hills, poontang?"

"None of your business, old buddy old pal. What have you heard?"

"It's not what I've heard, it's what I want to hear."

"You go first and then I'll break with you."

"Sounds like revenge to me. Nothing much except that this guy who bartends part-time at Bunratty's lived with her for almost half a year or so he says. Then I heard about this med student who had her before he got tired of her."

"Anything else?"

"A rumor about some black social worker getting into her pants."

I jammed him out of the room and pushed and shoved him into the kitchen and flung my trumpet after him, chipping against the cabinets under the sink. I swung around toward my room, about-faced and came back into the kitchen where Pete clutched at the trumpet.

"What's the matter with you? I thought you wanted to hear. Just wanted to fill you in, old boy."

"Did you now?"

"What's the matter, isn't she putting out?"

I shoved a dish off the opposite counter, hesitated, then pivoted out of the kitchen into the backyard and into my car, screeching away from the side lot, sweating like hell and swiping at a huge butterfly crawling across the windshield. I brooded as I cruised, restless like the old days, the old days gaping open as I screeched on the brakes and came down heavy on the horn, giving out what-fors and same-to-you-buddy's in profusion. Was Larkin being straight with me? And her redness haunted the shit out of me.

I sped most of the night away leaving no time for orange candles and coffin dreams.

Like I said in the beginning, I'm about to burst and I need plenty of fresh air and someone like Uncle Guido to advise me on what to do next. But, on second thought, it would all be cut-and-dried with him like the Baltimore Catechism; he'd come right out and tell me I'd better trim my sails and let her sail away over the horizon in her mystic ship. The old papism lives on. I thought telling you about it would bring some blessed relief like confessions of old but it has only levered me up to a still higher level of tension and brought me that much closer to the explosion I fully expect. So much for the conventional wisdom of Freud and all his psychoanalytic and psychiatric camp followers. So later on today, after this long session with you, I'll have to go out cruising once again although I'd prefer to remain comfortably on my couch and God knows I'm deeply tired of the same old seas continually threatening total immersion.

After a week of dodging Red's calls, I found myself out cruising before twilight. My Cutlass almost took me to the South side, St. Mark's Broadway of the prostitute, but I managed control of the car and sent it and my emotions schussing over the wet downtown streets and upward

toward College Hill. Relieved that the South side was behind me, I wanted to get out from under the heavy weight of my emotions, the multiple strands seemingly going somewhere into that sauced tangle. Sweat on the palms and hard steering. I can just hear her saying, "Joe, do you really want to teach all your life?" Does she love me or is it something else? Is she like she is only with me? Interface? Is love all that necessary? Such a tangle and no fork to wind it around or to cut through. No one to whom I can bare my soul or anything to relate it to except maybe literature--but which work: Othello or better Mitch in Streetcar? I can't go to Pete, certainly not Red or the parents. A royal flush quandary.

College Hill was shooting up fast with its spire-steep road curving up to where Croate College had been since the middle 1850's giving prestige to the city and the bricked Colonial and Federal style buildings. Croate, a small private college on the make, trying to be a little Harvard or, closer to home, a Carleton. Everywhere things on the make.

Far up on the curve left was the art school with long-haired guys and girls lounging on the lawn--jeaned, scarfed, beaded--around this huge dark piece of bronze; it appeared to be a rounded, contorted couple embracing with a shaft rising above, something like "Phallus Rising Out of Chaos." Herzog would really appreciate it.

On the wind right, still climbing--the white, limestonish-looking mod library surrounded by nineteenth-century brick and clapboard houses used mainly for academic departments. Swinging over the trees above the library, massive cranes, idle horizontals on perpendiculars now, but ready at the break of dawn to keep on their course of violating the very shape of the college. The cranes inducing down: the feeling of insectitude.

More than halfway up I instinctively braked for a female hitchhiker--the burning sauce on the tangle, Red, with flared blue jeans and a blouse like paisley under a blue denim jacket.

"God, am I glad to see you." Her blue eyes, her manner, perked. "Glad to see me?"

"Sure."

"You don't look so happy to see me. Got heartburn or something?"

Before I could answer or she could get in, a flaming Mercedes pulled up behind and beeped.

"Just a second," and she was gone. Through the mirror I saw her approach this guy about thirty, a scarf around his neck and a downward-turning black mustache under a wide-brimmed Mexican-style hat. Laughter and animation on her part, a knowing smile on his as his eyes moved cautiously over her paisley blouse; she seemed not to mind at all, chattering on. Casting an anxious glance forward,

she cut things off and danced back. I had had an overwhelming glimpse of college as it might have been.

"Sorry, Joe, just an old friend from college."

"An old friend all right."

"You don't believe everything you see, do you?"

"Where did you go? Strangely enough I've never asked you." I stomped away from the curb and crested the hill in no time. Her hand waved out toward the cranes. Before I felt like Quinn; now, more like the old clapboard houses squatting beneath the tall booms. My eyes across her blouse compressed the pressure of my loins with my worst fears.

"Where have you been anyway, I've been trying to get through to you?"

"Hither and yon." I thought of Pete.

As we came to an intersection of law and medical offices just beyond the campus proper, she tugged at my arm. "See that tall grey haired man with the valise? No, not there, over there, the man walking fast with no coat on. Yeah, that one, that's my father." She held my hand from the horn and sent her tongue circling inside her cheek before she went on. "I haven't got the time right now. Things grow as they go."

We ended up at Demo's, a dark-paneled, combination bar, restaurant and dance place, at a table near a wall of safari photographs complete with autographs and away from

the parqueted dance floor in the middle. It all started routinely enough with hardly anyone there but the piano player and a few other musicians warming up in blaring spurts and some of the dinner crowd. Red ordered a double Scotch on the rocks for me and a cool green crème de menthe for herself. The first burning swash of fire was hardly down my throat before she had finished hers. She was signaling the waiter for another when this huge Al Hirt fellow came up and requested her to take a turn on the piano. The small crowd, all seeming to know her, enthused and clapped a second to the motion. With a shock of recognition I remembered she played and well. She flashed doubt on me.

"Go on, Red, go ahead."

As she went across the floor, I sipped the burning yellow-gold and felt the old loins stir, a falling body feeling. The big burl of a man pulled her up on the platform, gave her a terrific hug and swirled her behind the piano which faced sideways to the dance floor. She started off strangely enough with the stirring thematic section from "Rhapsody in Blue" and played for a while before stopping into the mike: "I'd play more but I'm not sure you're in the mood for the heavy stuff." They demurred; she responded with that trill of a giggle-laugh, "I was hoping you wouldn't say that. That's all I know."

She immediately pressed jazz style into "I Wish You Love," occasionally glancing my way, before she moved on to "I Don't Know How to Love Him." The wail of Mary Magdalene brought me to the edge of tears which I gladly hid in the shadows of the table. Several times she seemed to hesitate, then turning to me, held; it burned more than the Scotch going down. Then sharply changing tempo, she did a low-down, Ivory Joe Hunter version of "Since I Met You Baby," pushed back the bench, made a quick bow and stepped quickly across the floor.

Her mood was heavy beneath the banter and the casual paisley when she sat down; it tripped the trigger not long after the applause fell away. Gripping the stem of her cocktail glass tightly, she bent her head for a sip. The familiar tongue reaming the inside of her cheek. She took out one of her emergency cigarettes, lit it, then took only a few puffs before twisting it out in the ashtray.

"You were really great up there, hope you'll play again for me."

"Thanks, I hope I can."

She opened those heavy-lidded eyes of hers and looked across as if for an answer to her unasked question.

"You wanted to talk about something," came out in response to a long, embarrassing silence.

"There's something bothering you and I feel it runs

pretty deep. It's pulling us apart, Joe, I'd like to know what it is."

"I haven't noticed that much difference. School's been pulling me down lately and that grad course two nights a week."

"But you've had that all along."

"What are you getting at, I'm still a little bit in the dark?"

"The things you say to me are much sharper than they used to be. I never know when you're going to snap out at me. I thought maybe you were trying to let me down easy but when we'd get together, you'd be more affectionate than before. And then I don't hear from you for a whole week. Where am I, Joe?"

The insistence in the fingers on the stem and the head pushed forward over the table. Those blazing eyes of sapphire.

"I thought you really cared about me. You've as much as said you loved me, Joe."

"I've never told you that, I've never said the words."

Her head turned right and down. That slender white neck, the cascade of curls, that familiarity breeding ache.

"Red, I . . . I never said I didn't love you either . . . it's just that . . .?"

"Just that what?"

"I wonder about us, I wonder if we really belong together and . . ."

"And you need a little time, some room to maneuver."

"Not exactly."

"When you can say what you mean, you're really going to be something, you know that? What are you so afraid of? Making some irrevocable mistake if you keep dating me? There's always divorce, you know. Oh, I forgot about that, 'Let no man put asunder.'"

"C'mon, Red, you know that's not it."

"If no man can put asunder, I'd be glad to do it for you."

"I don't see what's so funny."

"What is it, Joe?"

"What is what?"

"What's bothering you about us? What is it? I can't take your evasions much longer. Well?"

"Rumors, I've heard things . . ." I had this absurd attraction to her eyes looking intently at a hairy guy with both elbows on the table, trying to get the words, heavy as Italian food in the gut, out. "Rumors about your being too easy, free with your favors so to speak."

"What do you take me for, some whore, is that it? And you're mad because I don't grant you my favors as you

so quaintly put it. Before I get apoplexy, tell me what you've heard."

"A number of guys at school and down at Bunratty's say you're an easy lay if you just say the magic words."

"If that's true, why haven't I heard the magic words?"

"I don't know exactly. I just didn't want to bullshit you."

"But isn't that what you've done? Just because you haven't said the words."

"I didn't want you to get that impression."

"What impression, that you're going out with a fallen woman?"

"That's not it."

"What is it then? Is it just an excuse? You couldn't just drop me like one of the Bunratty crowd so you'll sneak out the back door while I'm not looking. What's holding you back?"

"You ask the damndest questions."

"Well?"

"It's also a question of being ready, experiencing more . . ."

"More experience than us? When will you ever be ready, Joe?"

She cut deeper than she knew: ancient and dark taboos.

"What about trust? It's not just the fallen woman business, it's the whole idea of false pretenses, loyalty, what's behind keeping love together."

Chuckling. "The old chastity belt motif." Then, "You know me pretty well. Isn't that enough for trust? I mean I don't think that all the girls you've been with before makes me distrust you. I need trust as much as you do, maybe more who knows. We've got to get where we know what's in each other's head now, not before. I'm tired of playing games and worrying whether I'll get hurt if I put my feelings out again."

The last word slipped out, no question about it. As she talked, I could sense a tremendous struggle beneath the whole conversation, twisting the actual words into overtones and undercurrents. Her struggle, whatever it was, touched me but I doused it with the last of my Scotch.

Somewhere in the back of my mind going into this bar I had decided against her. As sealed off as the healing of confession was from me. Checkmate. I started to press her about "again" but the waiter responding to a wave of her arm brought the same for me and a different green drink for her--a vodka gimlet. Possibly the Rose's lime juice better fit her mood. That old Biblical saying used during Lent, during the Stations of the Cross: "Call me not Naomi which is beautiful but Mara which is bitter."

"What did you mean by again?"

She ran both hands through her hair and bent her head down before wiping over her face with her hands. Then she looked over her hands triangled up to her face with her eyes wide open blue.

"I'd like to tell you a lot of things, I really would. But you'd only take them wrong. You'd take them and brood over them and ultimately use them against me. I'm not sure how much you can take."

"Try me."

"That's easy for you to say but I've said things before and you've bristled up like a cat."

I couldn't help gazing through the opening in her blouse to her cleavage.

"You've got to tell me, Red, I've got to know more or else . . ."

"Are you giving me an ultimatum? Either, or?"

"I've got to know. Things'll be no good if you don't."

Someone was running the piano aimlessly up and down while dishes were being clashed around in dull aluminum carts on the other side.

"About three years ago I was engaged to a fellow social worker, call him Frank. We made plans to get married but then we decided to wait, seeing as we both agreed marriage was for children and we couldn't see our way clear at the time. So we carried on as before even

though our parents were more than a little upset. Then one summer he went to a social work convention in New York City. One night on his way up to see a friend in White Plains he stopped off at a liquor store in the Bronx to get a fifth of Johnny Walker Red, his favorite. When he came out, a mixed gang of young toughs approached him from behind. There's some confusion as to what happened next. Anyway, when he wouldn't go along with them, they pushed him into the street and his head struck the headlight of a car and he slumped down in the street right on top of his bottle and died. I kneeled and prayed and bargained for his child but it never came. I still shudder at his last letter."

She took a sip of her drink without being aware of what she was doing.

"I remember the love in the letter but mostly I remember the squalor. Near the end of the letter, he told about a tour they took around what was called 'the worst block in Fun City.' 'I'm sick to death of what I've seen. Can God ever set right what we have done here? This must be the hell we will see, not what the priests have told us. These people crawl all over my brain. Tonight I'm going up to White Plains and get good and drunk with my old college buddy Scooter. Tomorrow it's back to rationing out band-aids for all the bleeders.'"

Her eyes kept moving back and forth over the letter. Snapping back, she brushed away her tears with a cocktail napkin.

"After the shock wore off some, I moved into an apartment alone against my father's 'advice.' I told him what he could do with his orders and commands. I was dead to all that. So I met this guy in a discotheque one night and things started up. I didn't even care if I got pregnant or not. I guess in my freaked-out head I figured a baby would help. Finally, this guy up and took off and things were cold again around my apartment just like I wanted them. Cold meals, cold bed, cold. Luckily I didn't get pregnant." She half laughed, half shrugged and added, "I'm probably sterile."

My desire began to stir across what she was saying.

"Later on I met this young doctor just out of med school who was married and had two kids. He didn't care too much about me but he did try to pull me around. He slapped me into taking the pill which he prescribed himself. Pretty convenient, huh. Kent was one of those guys cooped up so long with a wife and school that he wanted to really let himself go for a while, a good long while. Besides, I probably reminded him too much of his patients. All he needed at the end of a hard day was another sickie."

She broke off again for a good sip of the sour-sweet gimlet.

"There were other guys, a musician and a creepy artist-bartender type. I drank a lot and saw as little of my father as possible. But the funny thing is that I don't regret anything. It brought me to where I am now."

"I wonder if you've . . ."

"Enough."

She put her hand on my arm.

"I suppose my story makes me sound like a Mary Magdalene or something."

"What would that make me--Christ?"

"I must say you certainly seem like Christ with your awesome purity of intention."

"But aren't we supposed to be Christ-like?"

"So I am Mary Magdalene after all."

"Touché."

"Joe, do you mind if I just run home alone from here?"

Another hand on my arm and a "Call me sometime" and she was gone.

I walked into the Exit Coffee Shop one night and sat at the counter next to Pete whose head was hangdogged over a bowl of tomato soup. He kept ladling his soup until he saw me; he started and twisted his body away, clattering his spoon on the counter.

"I've stopped blowing my trumpet."

"Thank God."

"God, you look sorrowful. What happened to the good time Charley I've come to know and love?"

"Usually I leave my down side at home. That's why my apartment is painted dark blue."

"So that's what you do with all your time."

"Not too original and not too funny."

"What's the matter with you, Pete?"

"For one thing I've got this incredible hangover."

"Take an Alka-Seltzer, the beautiful sound of relief."

"I've got some of the stuff but it's worthless if you leave it more than a week. It's worthless when you need it and if you didn't buy any until you needed it, you wouldn't have any."

"What else is bothering you?"

"I was sitting here thinking I had lost another client."

"Another client?"

"A good friend."

"Ahh, don't worry about it. Vesuvius blows and things are back to normal. If that's all that's bothering you forget it. Does that mean what you said before wasn't true?"

"I didn't say that. I'm sorry, that's all."

"About?"

"I didn't have to say what I said."

"Coffee, black. Say speaking of clients, how's the law working out?"

"It's working out okay. By the way, I ran into your uncle Charley and your uncle Guido. They both passed a little business my way. Great guys, how come you don't talk about them more often?"

"Good question."

"Anyway, their business and some of my relatives have come through."

"Doesn't sound like that's enough to keep body and soul together."

"You know something? Being on your own isn't all it's cracked up to be. Sometimes I wish I were searching titles down in Teitelbaum's vault."

"Nah you don't."

We talked about this and that until I was literally bursting at the seams with restlessness. I slid off the stool and rummaged through my pockets for some change.

"Aren't you going to finish your coffee?"

"Nahh. I've got to get back."

"Big deal going tonight?"

"Not really."

I let a number of coins slide out of my palm and started to leave.

"Joe?"

"Yeah?"

"Forget my advice. It's fourth down and you've got nothing to lose. Go for it."

I put one of my hands perpendicular to the other and Pete looked up from his soup for the second time.

"No time-out, Joe. You're the QB and the coach can't call this one. You're no Roger Staubach."

"Thanks, coach."

"Joe?"

"Yeah?"

"Don't forget me when . . ."

"I won't, coach," and I moved toward the exit before I stopped.

"Pete?"

His head popped up.

"I'll give you a buzz this weekend. Maybe we can get something going. O. K.?"

"O. K. I'll probably be at the parents' house."

I pressed down on the toothpick holder once and left.

Even as I brooded over the white-striped pavement of the boulevarded stretch of Kelly Avenue, night after night, with the FM tracking the miles, jumbled thoughts the head, I felt that something had snapped open as easy as the metal opener on a beer can. I felt a sense of exhilarating loneliness, a wild, plunging forward along with the jumbled images: the full lips, the shock-of-blue eyes, her sharp remarks on Catholicism, the open paisley,

the artiste and the musician, the cranes, Frank, the litany of lovers, the squinting eyes and the dog up on her shoulders, the clutched gimlet glass dark green in the shadows, the last hand on my arm, the Indian mounds, the voice over the piano, her age. Fallen leaves blowing past at sixty, dark pavement wheeling up under the hood endlessly, as effortlessly as her Irish setter retrieving a ball or a bone; downshifting, wheeling around, upshifting. Snatches of conversations and Pete's old admonition about Bunratty girls: "The girls you meet there are more after what you've got than who you are." I let out a snort of laughter. Pete standing in the kitchen with a clutched trumpet and a broken dish at his feet and Mamma fast-trundling from the living room. As I chuckled I remembered Ambrose Bierce's, the captain of cynicism, definition: Ignis fatuus, n. Love. So this is what I've been cruising for, fantasizing on! Just as crazy as feeling the stirs of lust while Red was reciting her litany at Demo's.

I swerved off the pavement in a grinding downshift and reached for part of my keeping up with the literary Joneses--Moll Flanders in the glove compartment. That passage about the aging Moll, pushing fifty and about to marry a respectable banker without letting on about her sordid past, about what a good thing it is that we can't see into the hearts of one another. No, I whipped the compartment shut and opened the door to get out and walk.

My hand slid off the arm rest and I managed to stay up by putting my knuckles in the moist grass by the side of the road. I kept moving along a fence of odd shaped and colored stones cemented in place until I stumbled through an opening and up a grassy incline under a light rain which had made the grass between the grave markers wet enough to soak up into the hole in my right shoe. I could hear the moisture of death making squishy-suction noises as I stepped in a patch of mud or on a newly filled grave. The moon blanched the headstones and an occasional flash of lightning made them even whiter.

I stopped by a small white stone whose markings were almost corroded away and which was sunk deeper in the earth than the rest as if it needed a womb of earth away from the elements. I could barely make out the name Anthony Leone and the dates 1885-1936. Could this be Leone the tailor? Yes, this would be where he's laid. I remembered him through my father's remembering: a small man in a blue denim apron, rimless glasses, a head gone bald over one of those green visors bank tellers used to wear. I remember that he was generous to a fault, that he used to help anybody who came along until it just about ruined his family. And he used to have a saying . . . what was it? . . . "If you don't give now, when?" And the large, long-suffering Rosa behind him. Where's her

grave? Now I remember, she went back to the old country with their two young sons to live with her family near Naples. Was this what he came over to lay his back under? What am I doing about what he poked needles in his fingers for?

I moved cautiously up the hill heavy with death, claustrophobic with spent dreams, to a plateau and the headstone of one Armand Guillani about whom I remembered nothing. The top of the stone was slanted on both sides like a roof to where it was chipped away on the right side. My eyes passed over and over the numbers, 1894-1952. The moisture of death and the erosions of history. I made my halting way through the rain to Mafalda Girotti's marker squared in the earth. 1942-1961. And how they used to call her "My fault" because she was always saying how stupid she was and how she ended up in the top ten of our high school class. Tall and thin, nervous as an otter, dark black hair and saucer brown eyes. Always wanted to be a journalist. Squared in the earth. 1942-1961. My fault.

I went farther across the plateau as the moon went beyond a bank of clouds until I found the ground slipping and wobbling beneath me. Suddenly I was going down into a dark hole. I reached for what I thought was the edge of the hole and felt my fingers going through loose dirt until I could feel it grinding under my fingernails. My shin scraped against something but I managed to hold on to what

felt like a board; a flash of lightning showed me hanging on to a lone two-by-four lain across a freshly dug grave. The lightning flashed twice in quick succession and I could make out two holed bricks at the bottom of the hole and a mound of dirt to my left under a bright blue canopy. I kept my fingers ground in the dirt and myself astraddle the board until I could get my heartbeat back to normal. A man approached through the darkness and stuck out a large hand. It was a huge black man in coveralls with a shovel over his shoulder.

"Thanks."

"I've been working this graveyard twenty-eight years and I've never seen nobody in such an all-fired hurry to get down into his grave. Except maybe this grave robber who tried to steal this diamond ring off this millionaire lady way up on that hill. Beats anything I ever seen."

He let out a wheezing laugh which he kept up for some time. I didn't feel much like talking to a laughing man so I shot out an "I'm okay" and a "Thanks" and turned and moved along with a cool breeze that had just come up. Over my shoulder I could hear him speak.

"Okay, brother. I'm sure glad to see you decided to stay with us. I've sure had enough trouble for one day."

I turned to see his rumpled coveralls disappearing in the darkness.

I let my panic and my anger blow away in the breeze. I began to walk around the gravestones in a mood of mystery and wonder similar to what I felt receiving Holy Communion in the old days. I wandered over the markers and passed one giant statue of a fireman in full gear leaning against a hydrant with a hose in hand and a stoic stare into the sky atop of what looked like a huge block of limestone with FIREMEN inscribed on all four sides. Our humble version of an Indian mound. I stopped at some distance from the largish marker of one Fallacio Mirabelli just as this dog, a mongrelly wet Irish setter sniffed his way up to me and around my back and front. I watched him zigzag around the stones, sniffing, then circling, then sniffing again until, almost without warning, he went up to old Fallacio Mirabelli's headstone, lifted up his scraggly leg and let it fly like it was going out of style. The urine mixed with the light rain as I could feel my face widen into an unwilling smile, the lips sliding away from the teeth while the stomach began to shake. With effort I began to make a tight stomach until the laughter broke loose into a roar. I roared in and out of context, my head bent forward and back and my belly rumbling, reason blown to the leaves above the stones. The glorious letting go of defecation. The dog looked around with his head tilting quizzically from side to side which only made things worse. Nothing funny only everything as I laughed and laughed, my whole, fat,

hairy body utterly convulsed for the first time since it had gone out of style.

Things begin anew. Surprised by a joy I thought was gone forever. Today I moved out from under, unstuck some twenty-eight years in a single day. No, I won't stay for a wonderful lasagne dinner; yes, I have a place to stay; no, I don't need my pants pressed; yes, I still love you; no, it's not your fault. The cord is cut and life begins. Leaving home physically is not the same as leaving home for good and Red won't necessarily marry me after what I've put her through, but I've made a move, the meatcleaver has come down clean. As I told Red when I saw her a few nights ago, talking heavy as hell: "We've both been lost. Mine has been more toward death and tough as it is for me to say it, yours has been more toward life." No more the spermy inferno nor the whole ocean to get through. Nor hopes blown down as easily as so many leaves.

I can't say how things will work out between Red and me except to say that I've become a firm believer in letting all the strands hang out. So naturally I've come to believe in the title of that book whose author I don't remember: The Journey Not the Arrival Matters. Not that I've read it, only the reviews as usual, for I'm still something of a voyeur with a new lease, probably a new mortgage, on life. So much for the spaghetti of my emotions or as Mary

Magdalene recently put it right to my face: I love spaghetti but I wouldn't want to eat it all the time." And who knows, maybe I can manage to fix old Pete up as well.

One last word from a garrulous Italian out in the clear: I always thought it was Christ who changed Mary Magdalene. Will wonders never cease?