The Iowa School of Letters Award for Short Fiction

The BLACK VELVET Girl

C. E. Poverman
THE
BLACK
VELVET
GIRL
The Iowa School of Letters
Award for Short Fiction
The BLACK VELVET Girl

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for my mother and father
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Deathmasks of Xo

WHEN BOMBAY WAS far behind me, I got down from the bus and started walking along, trying to hitch a ride—I didn't really know how it was done here or if it was possible, there weren't that many cars and it took me a few minutes to remember that cars drove on the left over here just as in merry old England. But at least here was the countryside, villages, villagers, farmers in bullock carts, waterbuffalo, goats, and as I walked along the road, I felt comfortable splashing through the monsoon puddles with the smell of animals and warm mud.

Toward the end of the day, a monsoon shower blew up, the sky grew black, the branches and leaves on the trees turned over, the leaves white like the bellies of dead fish, the rain came pelting down. A while later, the sun came out for a few minutes, the mud and road smelled of steam and earth, the sun set. Exhausted, I rolled myself into my poncho under a banyan tree—I was lying in the mud, but so tired I didn't care. I put my head on a root and slept dreaming of Xo.
I woke up for a second when they hit me. I couldn't get out of the poncho, I was all tangled up, arms, legs, everything, feet were all around me, I was knocked out.

Then water brought me around, I wasn't in my poncho, but spread out on it, we were in the middle of a field, a lantern hissing and faces shining in white light. We were in a circle and I was one point of the circle, a dazed point on his back—and everyone was looking through my stuff—not much—I thought, shit, if they're disappointed they're going to kill me, I noticed they were wearing skirts and saris and they had very long hair and were wearing nose drops and earrings and anklets, bangles, and other matching accessories, in other words, they were chicks.

My head was pounding, I felt very very strange, something was not quite right. They were all gabbing, it was Ram Lal this and Ram Lal that, they were gabbing and bickering, waving their hands around, they had deep voices, awfully deep voices for chicks, they inspected my passport and a couple of my knives, got the switchblade figured out pretty quick and started snapping it open, waving it around, easy, ladies, and fighting over who was gonna get it.

I kept my lids all but closed, I watched them through the cracks as I lay on my back. Then I thought, okay, I've had enough of this stuff, time to split, I jumped up, I forgot I was dizzy, I staggered and almost bit the dust just as they gave a big yell, I got my footing and started to run.

They tackled me—hard—brought me down and started to beat me and hit me with sticks (I later learned they were lathis) and kick me and suddenly one chick raised a long curved knife which I later learned was a kukri, I screamed just as someone grabbed her wrist.

I don't know. That might have been it. Right then. But Ram Lal called them off . . . Her off. He was their leader; that was another thing. They weren't chicks.

I guess that night Ram Lal decided I'd be useful to them and maybe he got a kind of crush on me. He was a little shorter than I
was with hair as long as a saddhu's—or mine for that fact—he had a handsome dark face with large light brown eyes, lighter than most Indians—but the main thing was he had speed—he was quick!—he was clever, and he commanded the others with absolute authority—they were afraid of him; they really didn’t know how many bolts of magic he might be able to deal down on their heads.

That night, they set right about it. They had my passport and everything else, they had me outnumbered. I couldn’t do a thing.

They held me down and pierced my ears with the tips of daggers, they smeared my ears with ointment, they hung heavy silver earrings through the bleeding holes. They made me put on a big tribal skirt, a sleeveless vest covered with small mirrors like armor and embroidery swirling all in between the mirrors. They had to crush and squeeze my hands until I screamed to slip the gold bangles up onto my wrists. By now, when the others saw how Ram Lal was fitting me up, they started getting jealous because he was blowing some of their best jewelry on me. Ram Lal sat with the lantern hissing in front of him and insisted and that was that. No one wanted to mess with him. He took toe rings and anklets out of a pouch and put the rings on each of my toes so it was painful to walk at first. The anklets had bells on them. Every step I took made them jangle. Here I come.

When they dressed me, I was still dazed from the beatings and daggers being poked through my ears—the blood was drying on them—so when Ram Lal told me to stand, I staggered. He directed me to turn in the lantern light. He smiled. He dug it. His hunch about my white skin was going to be proved right—another thing that would add to his power.

When I realized what they were going to do with the dagger, then I fought again and they had to fight like a bitch to hold me down, though Ram Lal wouldn’t let any of them hit me too hard, I struggled until I started knocking some of the mirrors off the blouse and then Ram Lal came over and slapped me and said something I couldn’t understand, but the way he looked at me almost stopped me. When I kicked him, he laughed out loud. He kicked me back and stared at me. His eyes were strange. I got reeling numb. Hands covering every inch of my head so I
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couldn't move, they pushed the tip of the dagger through the
back of my nostril, at the bite of the iron I ground my teeth, I
wished they were at least chicks . . . .

They set a guard on me. I finally fell asleep:

In the morning, they washed the blood off my face and put
more medicine on my ears. Then Ram Lal brought a small gold
nose drop out of his pouch and they fastened that in my nose.

Eventually, Ram Lal and I became lovers and got to under­
stand each other, he teaching me some Marati, I teaching him
back some English. We passed information back and forth with
our eyes, not in a faggy way, but in a way of understanding—
this guy is bad news, this situation is going to get out of hand in
thirty seconds, heads will get bloody . . . that kind of thing.

The first few times, I followed along with the troupe, but
didn't try to do anything. I was still tan enough from the boat
and crossing the Equator—the Equatorial Sun—so that I looked
dark enough to pass off as Indian, I wouldn't be noticed; or, if I
thought it was to my advantage, I could wrap a half-sari about
me and pull it down completely over my head, holding the
corner in my teeth like the chicks did for a little quick purdah
while still digging what was going on by staring through the
cloth, that was to my advantage to do the first few times we
went out together while I observed.

Even on the road, as we would pass in twos and threes, I’d
notice the farmers in their bullock carts, the women, the children,
everyone would give us wide berth. They’d see us coming and
they’d cross the road.

Weddings were the big thing. During the wedding season
we’d travel all up and down through Maharastra and Gujarat,
oh, man, Ram Lal knew all of the rich ones, all of the important
days. He’d map the whole thing out so that we’d make a sweep
from one place where there would be two weddings—we’d hit
‘em both—to the next place and so on and so on.

We’d show up outside the gates of some Big Brahman’s pad
and you could see from the look on the chipassi’s face right off
he was thinking, oh, shit, man, now we’re in hot water, the master’s going to be out plenty and these guys are bad news, no telling what curses . . . .

The wedding party would come out to the gates to get a glimpse of us, and surprise, there we’d be stoned up on todi—wine from the sap of the todi palm—and also, they had some very fine hemp *bhang* and *gunja* or in plain English grass and hash, we’d crank up a few drums, finger cymbals, flutes, harmoniums and shenais, we’d dance up a storm for them, hump and grind and dance in trances, it was really a ball.

They didn’t really have any choice but to watch. They were kind of what you might call a captive audience. They’d look at each other uneasy as if they weren’t sure how they were going to get out of this . . . .

They’d have food brought out to us by servants.

Which was fine. I dig a good meal.

But the main way they were going to get out of our dancing was by paying us money—plenty of money.

You see, Ram Lal was known among our kind as a very potent man, a man to be reckoned with . . . a man of powers. And one way of keeping these powers from descending on you and your family in the form of the bridegroom being struck impotent, zonk, a womb being scorched barren, a child being born with two heads or no legs, or the old man dropping dead or developing leprosy, was by paying Ram Lal.

So we’d dance and the bread would fly.

Ram Lal would indicate by a certain very cool sang-froid reserve that the head of the house had the right idea, that really, basically, he was doing just fine, and after a little more dancing, he’d really get the idea . . . which was our signal at the clap of his hands to do a few more numbers.

We’d stop and money money would come from the wedding party. I loved it. It was like rain.

There was no way of beating Ram Lal. I don’t care what you might have heard about some of the others, the way Ram Lal ran it was we’d dance and dance and they’d pay and pay. No matter how much they paid, they could never ever pay enough (though Ram Lal might have gotten ten times what he’d expected), be-
cause Ram Lal'd always pretend he was outraged at what they'd paid him and curse them in some small but harmless way just to keep the fear alive in them.

Almost everyone paid. They had to—even the educated ones—because there was enough guilt, non-specific, generalized happy-go-lucky, nameless guilt. And if by some strange coincidence disaster struck and some one hadn't paid up, why, he'd feel responsible. So . . . pay Ram Lal. It wasn't worth it not to pay. Sure, you might say to yourself, this Ram Lal is a big phony, and his curse isn't worth a thing, it's harmless, but what if . . . what if . . .

The money always came.

In several cases where the people treated us badly, well, one family we heard afterward was in a terrible car accident—the old man fell asleep at the wheel, veered, hit a waterbuffalo; the bride was killed, it took the police two hours to get the buffalo out of the bride's lap, the old man was paralyzed from the waist down and hasn't said a word to this day—the police came hunting for us, but they didn't look too hard because they might catch us and then if Ram Lal . . . if . . .

Ram Lal insisted I keep my face and arms covered and stay out of the sun as much as possible because he wanted me nice and white.

I have funny eyes, kind of grey-green around the outside of the iris, maybe light brown in the middle, and a spot of black pigment in one iris, they have lots of colors really, Ram Lal liked to stare into them, he'd nod and shake his head as if he were staring into my head and thought pictures on the inside back of my skull, I didn't care much for this staring activity pastime of Ram Lal's.

He taught me to put my eyes into a kind of trance look. When I'd faded nice and white, he put kohl around my eyes—which is like black eye shadow—we were getting dressed up to go to a big wedding. He said to me:

When I tell you, you come forward, up close to the bride and groom, dance slow in one spot and stare through them until they cover your feet with money. Don't move until they're covered.
We were coming through the streets and I saw this big beautiful-looking woman coming toward me a split second Xo inside a shop Xo window the woman Xo me Xo shook me so hard I had to sit down on the curb because my knees began to shake.

When Ram Lal looked down at me sitting on the curb, I knew he had immediately understood.

At this wedding, I danced forward and tranced up my eyes like Ram Lal taught me. I stood in front of the bride and groom, I don’t think they’d tied the string on their wrists, yet, here was this beautiful young girl, maybe sixteen or seventeen—shy, blushing, in a gold Benares sari—and her groom, a nice-looking young cat, maybe twenty, the two of them almost like fawns, and I felt really kind of mean, and also, sorry for the young girl, but I danced up closer and closer, and dancing in one spot, I moved my feet up and down slowly so the only sound was the jangle of the bells on my anklets, I swayed in front of them, then, just her, like a cobra, she didn’t blink, but stared back into my eyes, she was fascinated by the color, by the spot of black pigment, I raised my hands slowly over my head, her eyes never moved from mine.

Even in the heat, the coins were cool as they started to sprinkle my feet. Then, there was the feathering of banknotes on my feet and ankles like birds’ wings. I suddenly realized what Ram Lal had taught me to do with my eyes—and what I had known in the jangle of the ankle bells—was to hypnotize her. One of Ram Lal’s real powers was to hypnotize—to hypnotize the fear into them—to hypnotize his curses into them.

The car accident?

My arms met, forming a vault over my head, my anklets jangled softly, the bangles on my wrists jangled together as I raised my arms higher.

I knew that she was hypnotized, and suddenly I felt so sure, I looked away from her eyes, looked down into the circular mirrors of my tribal vest and saw the thousands of splintered faces of the bridal party, of Ram Lal, of the troupe, the servants, the bride,
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each one, separate, and all together, reflected in each of the mirrors, each of the mirrors flashing like a beam of sunlight on a wave, I looked down over the left side of my chest, then arched my back slightly, still softly stamping the jangle of my ankle bells like the whisper of a telegraph, I looked down at the faces reflected on my back; then, turning slowly back to the bride, I peered down on my right side and was instantly blinded by thousands of suns, it was to my right or it must have been in the East, my eyes ached, and I suddenly thought, what am I doing here?—where am I?—how did I get hung up on a gig like this I gotta go find Xo.

Ram Lal was very pleased with me—as a lover, as a chela—student, as a . . . Ram Lal was pleased that I could go into a wedding party and knock 'em dead, bring the gold out of their pockets.

I started getting my own reputation.

No one knew who I was or where I came from. I had various names—the one with pigment in his eye, the white one, and so on. It was a gas watching the brides right off look into my left iris, searching for the black spot, yes, it's him!

I'd nod for Ram Lal who would start to smile because word had already been here ahead of us and it would be a cinch.

It was a cinch.

I don't think he was jealous. It was more bread for everyone.

I don't know how long Ram Lal had been considering this next move, but one time the gig wasn't proceeding so good—a very uptight wedding party, no money. I'd been dancing in trances in front of the bride, nothing was working, Ram Lal had threatened to curse them, they weren't intimidated . . . . They were getting ready to have us heaved out.

Ram Lal clapped his hands and got us all dancing, not frenetic, but a very steady, very slow, menacing kind of dance, Duleep playing the deep drum, very slow, very loud, like it was tolling, booooom . . . booooom . . . can the finger cymbals, no sparkling sounds.
Ram Lal danced slowly through the troupe over to me and staring straight into my eyes, looking up slightly because I was taller—though I always thought of him as taller—he put his arm around my waist and swaying his head in a trance so I had to fight to keep from passing out and falling over in the dust, he taught me the first curse.

It was humid, very hot and close, flies swarmed in the air, it was the season for chills, convulsions, viruses, fevers, unname-able diseases, bad water.

The sky a coagulate mucous, trembling,
I danced before the bride and with the drum tolling
softly softly
trembling
I said it as Ram Lal had said it.
I didn’t even know what it was and maybe that was why Ram Lal taught me—because there was no power if you didn’t know what it meant? Maybe he thought I’d forget. Or wouldn’t even know it was a curse. Or maybe he trusted me.

Whatever I said, the coins cooled my feet in the dust. The flutter of banknotes . . . .
They had to pay plenty more that day to buy the curse back off.

Ram Lal took the curse away himself, but only after hours and hours, plenty of money . . . not until the old man got down in the dust, stretched out his hands, and cried. I didn’t like Ram Lal for that and wouldn’t sleep with him for a few nights after.

He loves me so much.
And now I’m worth more than ever. He watches my every move, I’ve really gotta find Xo, he obviously knows I’m thinking about Xo.

We’re getting rich.

The other members of the troupe have grown afraid of me.

Fucking Ram Lal. But he really turns me on, too. Compared to him, Pretty Blue was—nah, I loved Pretty Blue, just dif-
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ferent. But I'm almost a prisoner of Ram Lal. I'd split, but if he
curses me?

One day Ram Lal took me aside.

His arm encircling my waist, we strolled slowly along while
he spoke: like a brother, like a father, like a son, like a lover, in all
these ways, and so many other ways, I love you more than any
other person, you are the most beautiful-faced person, the most
beautiful of movement . . . .

Ram Lal told me lots of other things.
We made love.
The sudden chalky seawater gag of him in my throat.
We slept. After washing in a stream, he said, now my lover,
I'm going to teach you some simple tricks so if I am ever hurt or
killed or cursed to death or you are being hunted, with these
tricks you can survive anywhere in the world.

He taught me to crush a light bulb in a handkerchief and eat the
glass.
He taught me how to get out of chains and straitjackets.
How to hold my breath for long periods.
How to take pain.
He taught me tricks in controlling men with my gaze.
He taught me to put a dagger through my arm in the space
between my taut biceps and the bone.
He taught me to swallow half of a sword which he assured me
was very good. He could get it down until the hilt clanked
against his teeth.
He taught me to handle venomous snakes—cobras, adders,
etc.
Simple things like how to slit a pocket with a razor for a wallet
or papers.
He taught me lots of things.
The first time I tried the mouthful of gasoline was like when I
was cherry to come in my mouth, I gagged and puked and wept
and wouldn't try it again, but Ram Lal said it was the fear of the
gasoline that was choking me and not the gasoline itself, I said,
fuck you, Ram Lal, don't give me any of that fancy talk, and
puked again. The first time it was miserable.
But I remember another first time. It was getting dark out. Ram Lal and I were apart in a maize field, the farmer had threatened to drive us off, we threatened to curse him, so he said, cool, stay, be my guest; the boys were cooking over fires, about half a mile away there was a railroad track running through the countryside, old crones, stooped over like fat herons, were pecking their way down between the tracks, picking up chunks of coal in the wake of a locomotive. I had the mouthful of gasoline, the flame of the torch in front of me, and Ram Lal, his brown eyes bright even in the last light of day, nodding, smiling, said trust trust trust with his eyes right up until the last second when he stepped aside and I terrified staring at the flame the terror suddenly dropping away like a body not mine I blew the gasoline out into the air across the torch, saw the evening stars, calm and still in the purpling, disappear in the orange white blast of the fireball, felt my face dusky, thicken, and scorch with the blast, spat and cut it off like he'd taught me, it can go back down your throat . . . I started laughing, the stars came back.

He'd been standing right behind me with a blanket ready to throw around me just in case, but when the fireball disappeared in the air, he dropped the blanket, he ran over to where I was. He was laughing hysterically kissed my lips still sweet with gasoline fumes. (Kissing on the lips was something I taught him.)

Above us, the low branches of a banyan tree were still crackling with flames, you could smell the scorched bark and the sap from some of the leaves, I didn’t like that too much, the tree was minding its own business, and a bird, fluttering in flames at my feet, making its way into the maize to die, too late to do anything for he or she.

Ram Lal explained:

With the things I have taught you—you will always be able to make your living anywhere in the world. People will always pay to see a man risk cutting his arm open, gag on glass, or catch fire. Always. Their secret hope is this time he slips and burns up. With this secret, they feel guilty; you can shame them. You can shame them more for wanting a free show. They will pay. Believe me, they will always pay to see you gag on glass or see the fireball come back around your head, leap down your throat.
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They want to see flames come leaping through your chest, they want to see your heart still beating in the fireball. They will pay to buy back the ghost they want you to be.

I really loved Ram Lal at this time and didn’t care that I wasn’t free to do anything. I often knelted and kissed the ground he walked on. I even thought I didn’t care that much about Xo anymore, though I loved her more than ever, but didn’t know it. Perhaps the worst curse of all.

So it was more of the same old thing, like anything else, it gets to be old hat, me and Ram Lal and the boys, up and down the countryside, both of us now with big reputations, worth a lot to placate and buy off, and now Ram Lal was teaching me more and more curses because they were having such good results coming out of my mouth, shit, one wedding we showed up and they had about three astrologers and a couple of saddhus hanging around ready to field our curses like infielders shifting around for a line drive hitter, they thought they were going to be able to fight off our curses, that was a joke, I got so pissed seeing all the temple cats lounging around big and fat and well fed on the people’s money and really having nothing they could do or give back to the folks, that I did go out of my mind, or so they told me afterward, I brought down every curse Ram Lal had ever taught me, all of them, pissed and mean as I could be, and when they threw money this time, I laughed and picked it up and ate a few of the coins and threw the rest back at the wedding party and the saddhus and astrologers, I tore the notes up into shreds and ate the shreds, I spat them out, I danced on them, I threw them at the saddhus so that when I caught my breath and looked down in one of the mirrors, I saw a look of terror horror and amusement all at once on Ram Lal’s face, maybe he was a little afraid of the saddhus, but I didn’t give a kilo of turds, and, but, beyond all that, and more important, when I saw Ram Lal’s lips moving quickly, I knew he was trying to ward off my evil, maybe he thought I was possessed and maybe I am, but two things I immediately knew, when I tore the money and ate it in handfuls, there would be much rending of clothes and exorcising
DEATHMASKS OF XO

on the old homestead this night, and, most important, when I saw Ram Lal mumbling preventatives and anodynes, I knew I had him on the run, I knew he could be had, I was no longer afraid of him, at least completely afraid of him; soon, I’d find a way to split and find Xo, because now I knew I was going to find her.

I think he’s finally taught me all his curses. He’s so greedy, selling out his curses like that, I know if I were him I’d never do it—if I were in his shoes, but one thing he’s right about, when I say them, the folks know they have to pay. Word travels. Folks have heard about my throwing the money back. Even the other dudes in the troupe avert their eyes, now. And, Ram Lal is afraid of my come! Haaa!

Out for a walk yesterday evening, at the edge of a field, suddenly Ram Lal pops out from a ditch and says, where you headed, Wolfie.

For a walk I tell him.

He sure didn’t believe that. He thought I was splitting.

He took my hand and insisted on coming with me. Now I don’t like that from anyone.

Yesterday, he said he wanted to do a big gig, two hundred kilometers northwest, small village, I’m tired of going in the wrong direction, I don’t like traveling west, if only for a few miles. Each morning I see the sun come up, I want to go that way, East for Xo. Anyway, Ram Lal said we could knock off this gig in pretty quick time. We were washing up by a stream and I started moving my lips, a plain English curse, Goddamn your ass, Ram Lal, let’s move East for a change!

Ram Lal was rinsing out a skirt when he saw my lips moving, he couldn’t hear because of the rushing of the stream, but he dropped the skirt, the current swirled it away down stream, Ram Lal jumped back, then his lips started moving, what? what? He laughed it off, but I knew he was afraid I’d laid one on him, the skirt was gone and I had him on the run.
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Finally I said, look, Ram Lal, you’ve been good to me, there’s no getting around that, good to me right from the start when you could have let them kill me for the fun of it.

You’ve been good to me and taught me life breath and meditation and lots of street arts.

We’ve made a lot of bread together.

And you’ve loved me.

I don’t want to be ungrateful, but let me go find Xo and then maybe we can work something out.

I tried to be kind.

He wouldn’t hear of it.

Fear of my leaving is making him irritable. Impossible to live with.

He curses everyone at the weddings now—bad curses no matter how much they pay. I feel guilty because indirectly it’s my fault. When Ram Lal, dark circles under his eyes, lets the curses go, I repeat the anodynes as fast as I can to myself, I try to find someone in the wedding party to concentrate on I beam **** energy **** with my eyes ****. Sometimes I get through, sometimes I don’t. Ram Lal might be jamming me, but I don’t think he can curse them hard and jam me at the same time.

I felt sorry for the folks.

Just because I wanted to leave and find Xo, Ram Lal’s curses go haywire, it screws up the entire sense of justice. When I see the old fathers quaking with fear at the weddings, I feel so lousy because they’re getting gypped. They’re not getting what they’re paying for. One gig Ram Lal was so angry, he even tried my trick of eating the money—which pissed me off because that’s my scene.

Redoubled guard, Ram Lal a pain in the ass!

Another gig. Ram Lal wasn’t doing too hot at all, monsoon making him irritable, I finally had to step in and do the curse for him. Later, jealous and quiet under a tree, he stood on his hands and mumbled some funny little song, I couldn’t catch the words, but anyway, I kept the anodynes going the whole time.
Still feel uneasy, though, because he must know lots of ways of getting through, even though he swore at the time he taught it to me, that the chant of the four days would take care of anything. I've been jamming him as hard as I could. He's trying to pick me like a lock. I've lost ten pounds concentrating on keeping him out. He's not liking the way I'm looking lately—a little peaked, Wolfie.

Yeah, Ram Lal, I wonder why. You're looking a little thin yourself.

We tacitly called a truce when we both lost another five pounds.

Made up last night and made love, things good again, Duleep, Ram Lal and me war counselled up some new ventures. Ram Lal wants to steal some kids and sell 'em to the beggar gangs. Young ones, he insists. Preschoolers. The beggar kings can deform them anyway they want while they're young and pliable . . . keep them in boxes to stunt their growth, put nice curves in their spines, etc., break their arms, gouge out their eyes—anything to make them pitiful, but you've got to get them while they're young. There's a lot of money in it. The beggar kings and their gangs are loaded. Gold hidden everywhere. We'll get some of the shepherd boys, we can sell them to rich old fags. The rest we can nab on the way home from school.

No kids, Ram Lal!

He called me a sentimental young fool. Imagine that?

Wolfie, I'll do what I please. We're stealing kids!

Okay, Ram Lal, you steal kids and I won't ball you no more! Okay? Find yourself someone else. I'm moving EAST.

I felt a curse knocking on my nervous system and jammed him . . . . His face immediately looked drawn and I knew I was younger and could wear him down on sheer animal energy—though he had the experience and the moves. He knew it too, but gave the whole thing up immediately.

Alright, Wolfie, no kids . . . . How about this? If no kids for the beggars, let's do a straight kidnap and ransom.

Ram Lal, kids are out in all forms!

I put a stop to that shit. Kids are where I put my foot down.
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Christ, Ram Lal’s driving me nuts today. He’s so uptight. Now he’s accusing me and Duleep of having something going.

Duleep’s practicing his juggling, and I’ve got a lota full of gasoline we’ve siphoned from an Ambassador, I’ve already put up one beautiful fireball—almost a perfect sphere except for the neck itself, and, amid shouts of atcha! and shabash! from the boys, I’m feeling pretty good, very fluid and limber, when Ram Lal sits down next to me and starts sharpening his daggers on a whetstone. Sunset, my favorite quiet time—next to sunrise—and he has to sit down right next to me and start screeching away with his blades. Now look, I ask you, impartially and fairly, isn’t that interference? Isn’t he hassling me? I’m not making any excuses, but I blew the next one pretty badly . . . the ball took a nice enough shape, but he’d shaken my confidence with the knife sharpening, suddenly, the ball kind of fluttered and collapsed, the fireball was coming back at me, it was going down my throat, I cut it off, ducked—something Ram Lal told me never ever to do—duck. The flame died about an arm’s length from my lips. Lucky. I can’t jam him when I blow fireballs. Did he almost nail me? Was he doing it?

He started right in. You are terrible. You can do nothing right.

He picked up the torch, took a mouthful of gasoline and shot out the biggest fireball I’d ever seen, really, it was beautiful, high, round, perfect, and it seemed to hang for a split second, stretch, and inflate as though there were a big face inside puffing out its cheeks like those hoary old faces of the wind in the corners of 16th-century maps. Mmmm. Ram Lal didn’t even look at me. He flung the torch on the ground and walked away.

Well, there wasn’t much I could do. I knew he was trying to take me over again, scare me, beat me down, and though I couldn’t stand the thought of it, the gasoline really had me terrified, but I had to do it.

I picked the torch up out of the grass real quick like nothing in the world was wrong, like I wanted nothing more than to put one up in the air, and more, that Ram Lal’s was ordinary, just ordinary.

I think the boys sensed it was coming down to some kind of
contest because they gathered around, I could see them in a circle at the edge of the torch light.

I put up a real beauty.

Ram Lal matched it.

I put up another one. I'd never blown better fireballs.

Ram Lal matched it.

I swear it wasn't premeditated, I'm not that bad, it was when I had the mouthful of gasoline, it suddenly came to me, and maybe I was a little drunk or sick or stoned on the fumes, my head and eyeballs seemed to be burning with it, I was so liquid and black with the gasoline, and now the stars were out like phosphorescent seeds floating in the gasoline fumes in my socks, I held the torch in front of my lips, saw Ram Lal in the corner of my eye, his arms crossed haughtily on his chest, the gold bangles shining in the firelight, and suddenly, I turned and spat the whole thing out across the torch. He looked transparent in the flames, almost as though he'd been X-rayed.

He started rolling in the flames, he was really beautiful, his hair and clothes burning, he drew back his hand and threw one of the daggers, I could hardly take my eyes from his flaming arm to duck, the dagger came at me in flames, but he missed, then I knew I was going to make it, I threw the lota of gasoline over him, in the flames I could see his lips moving, the flames starting to go down his throat, but he was still cursing me, and I suddenly broke through the circle and started to run across the field for the road, some of the boys were trying to beat the flames out and I hope to God they did, he was so beautiful, and I didn't want to kill him, I just wanted to be free to find XO again. I felt so sick for her love XO love, some of the boys suddenly started to chase me, they were about thirty or forty yards behind, waving torches and throwing daggers, and they were gaining, when suddenly I stopped dead, raised my torch below my lips so they could see my lips moving and I began to curse them—things to shrivel them, make them impotent, make them blind, make them gnaw their own arms and legs, things to make them go mad and things to kill them. They stopped dead. They made a lot of noise, but not one of them dared come forward . . . I even walked back toward them, but they backed up. They were com-
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pletely mine. I turned and walked across the field to the road without looking back once over my shoulder.

On the road, I dropped my skirt.

When I took off the tribal vest, I suddenly realized a big part of me loved the vest and jewelry and so I took the vest and smashed it on the surface of the road again and again the way the dhobi smashes a shirt on rocks in the river again and again until my hands were bloody from the shattered mirrors and the vest was in rags.

I was free to look for Xo.
ROYAL SAID IT was urgent, she had to talk to me, she was breathless and secretive on the phone from Des Moines, she’d gone home to get some things, she was leaving for Chicago as soon as she hung up, but she just had to talk to me. If she could talk to me, everything might be different.

Okay, okay, I shrugged, I’ll just be sitting here having a pitcher, and handed the phone back across the bar. I hadn’t even known she was gone. I crossed the empty bar, put some Aretha on the jukebox—The House That Jack Built, Chain of Fools, I Say A Little Prayer—and sat back down over my pitcher full of cold winter sunlight at the window. John was cleaning a few glasses. The old man who was always there was alone and minding his business at the end of the bar. The place was shadowy like a boarded-up thirties dance palace—chilly drafts in the corners, laughter and cadence of dancers’ feet absorbed and secret in wood darkening with age. I wanted to walk out, but I kept on sitting, drinking pitchers. I’d been drinking for a few weeks.
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Outside, the street was bright with the brief winter sunlight, dirty snow piled in frozen mounds like spattered slag along the curbs. The sun was touching the tops of the peach-colored duplex across the street. In a while it would dip down below the roof, reappear in the alley between the two houses; the fire escape would become a black burning stairway going no place, holding square suns. I knew how the sun moved on this street.

I’d stopped going to school. I’d gotten a job. I’d quit the job. It was too cold to work outside. It was the time of the Lady-Who-Made-Me-Miserable. Leila. I couldn’t stand to see her. I couldn’t stand not to see her. I’d come to a stop in Rosa’s Beer Garden.

For a while I had believed: I’ll break out, I’ll make it with some other chicks, then I’ll be free. But the great God of Conscience forbid it. I was soft as putty every time. The girls would comfort me. It’s just a passing thing. Sure. Girls can be real nice about that, though it would make me nauseous. We’d lie in bed in the afternoon, our breaths steaming up the windows, and we’d talk, real friendly and open and easy the way we might not have if we’d made love. It had been like that with Royal a couple of months ago.

It was while we were lying in bed that she had told me how it was going to be back in high school. The three of them had pledged eternal loyalty to each other: Clare, Marie, and Royal. That was freshman year. The plan was that after graduation they would get an apartment of one enormous room, and they would paint the room white. They would keep bottles filled with colored water and marbles in various places. Windowsills. Though I imagined the room without windows. And there would be a bathtub, an old one with squat legs, perhaps, if they were lucky, with curling toes on them, and the bathtub would be painted like the room, white on the outside. The inside would be orange. Flat orange. I never asked if it would be connected or if anyone would even take baths in it. The plan was that one of them would work four months a year while the other two did just what they wanted—painted or maybe did some weaving or wrote poems or just slept. Then they’d alternate. Eight months off, four months on. I wish I’d thought of that, myself. I didn’t
ask Royal how much they’d be making. I guess enough. They would die not later than twenty-six. That was a little much. But I still liked it. “Die with a cigarette still burning between my fingers,” Royal said lying in bed beside me. I tried to think if I’d seen that in a movie. I was sure I had. I was sure she had. But I liked it, anyway. As we talked, the room was growing dark. It was only a little after four. We pulled the covers up and were warm.

Royal told me Clare had had a baby at fifteen which went into the state home for adoption. Then, shock therapy. Royal said Clare couldn’t remember much about that year or the years before. You could ask her, but Clare was always vague. Royal warned me not to look into Clare’s eyes. Later, in fact, I did. Lovely brown eyes with clear black dilations around the pupil. I would have loved it if something incredible and mysterious had happened when I looked into Clare’s eyes. Nothing did. Sitting at a crowded table in the Union one winter afternoon, I saw her look away and fog them into a dullness. Someone had just made a lousy joke about getting knocked up. Clare took a deep drag on her cigarette and stared out through the smoke at the black river covered with blades of broken ice. I wanted to give her a hug, but I didn’t. I guess her body’s memory of the baby was a little deeper than the shocks could go.

Royal was convinced Clare had occult powers. Clare had seduced Marie’s boyfriend—one Marie wanted to marry. Marie still wouldn’t talk to Clare. That would have made it tough living in one white room. Clare had also seduced several of Royal’s boyfriends, but each time, Royal and Clare had made it up. The white room had been taken care of even before they’d finished high school—which Royal almost didn’t finish, anyway.

The three used to cut school quite a bit. You might have said it was their way. One day in the middle of senior year after they’d phoned in their sick excuses, Clare and Royal had been fooling around in downtown Des Moines, perhaps Royal imagining she was Barbra Streisand swinging down Broadway in some musical, when a photographer had stopped and asked them if they were coeds from Drake. Oh, yes! Drake College! When they’d
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appeared in the *Des Moines Register* with their names spelled correctly, Royal and Clare cheek to cheek before the windy expanse of a Des Moines street and department store, Royal's swept-up arm taking in the whole world, laughing, the principal, who'd been looking for just such a thing to pin on them, leaped up in glee and expelled them both. Eventually, he'd wanted to get rid of them more than keep them out of college. So, Drake, for real this time. And then a transfer to the big state university.

Ahh, I hadn't even thought about Royal since that afternoon. Too busy drinking. And collecting my welfare. Twice a month. And foodstamps in two different counties. I suppose I could have gone on working as a carpenter, making the molds for the concrete they were pouring on a new wing of the psych ward, but then it got too cold, man, I just don't like working in the cold. Anyway, when that psych ward started taking shape, and I saw how thick they were pouring the walls, and then one day stood inside in the frozen blue gloom of the concrete shell early in November, I thought, maybe leave a secret opening, here?, but I suddenly got this feeling, no, no, I don't want to drive nails to help them build this damned thing. So I quit and went on welfare. By then it was cold!

I was in the middle of another pitcher when Royal's lime-green VW—the color of clouded ice over a stream—sped into the street, skidded and swerved slightly on the ice. She overshot the parking place. Her long brown hair whipped around as she backed up. A second later she was walking quickly across the frozen street. The bell on the door jangled as she stepped in, looked around, saw me, and smiled uncertainly—as I thought then. As I've come to think of it now, perhaps bravely. She stood in the door, her eyes bright blue from the cold, but more likely from the amphetamines she insisted were not amphetamines, but diet pills. Her eyes were the color milk would be if it were blue, yet also, bright, the way the sky is over Iowa on freezing days in winter. Her eyes reminded me of the interstate—eighty—the openness of all night drives to Chicago on speed and acid to get to the city with the sun coming up behind it, just in time to turn around and drive home. Hell, you didn't have to look at her eyes
to see that. There were the rusty dents all over her car. She had all of the space and energy of the interstates, but really no place to go. From the way she was looking, maybe I was where she had to go.

She stood there with her hands in the pockets of her coat—even in her winter coat, you could see her breasts beneath, her blue jeans starting below the knee of the coat, and then her green suede cowboy boots with the nervous white dried waterstains around them look like receded highwater marks.

"Get another glass. I got a pitcher going." Then I surprised myself. "I was getting kind of low drinking alone." She gave me a big smile, very certain this time. She unbuttoned her possum fur collar. I did love that. A possum fur collar. "Hey, never mind, sit down, I'll get it. John, another glass." I gave her some change for the jukebox. She went over and began to press buttons. The thud of electricity. Every Streisand record on the jukebox.

When I came back, she was settled on my side of the booth, her cowboy boots neatly beside the seat, her coat hanging up. She wore a heavy black sweater. "Your face looks thin. You're not taking care of yourself."

"Sure I am. I'm warm and inside all day long. Out of the elements and taking it easy."

"You don't take me seriously. You're so handsome, but your face is grey as ashes. Look at the circles under your eyes."

"Funny, I'm trying to get a good solid fourteen hours of sleep a night. If you know any way of sleeping longer short of dying, tell me, quick. I shouldn't have circles under my eyes."

"You do."

"You don't. You look just beautiful. Why are you going to Chicago?"

She fished up the silver Star of David from out of her sweater and began to teethe on the points. The silver clicked against her teeth. It was something she always did when we drank beer. She wasn't Jewish. She was Choctaw Indian and Bohemian. Her uncle worked on the railroad. Her father drove a truck. Her mother had kept track of the days of the month when it would be safe for her in high school. At forty her fecundity would have
thickened with gravity and booze—you could see faint lines just starting beneath the bridge of her nose and moving out toward the corners of her mouth. Just shadows. She would work in a truckstop. It wasn't the face of a Jew. None of that tense metaphysical suffering. The shadows were on the face, not beneath it. But she'd been in love with a Jewish boy in high school and so converted. The silver chain hung down into her black sweater and quivered as she worked the star around in her mouth.

“I'm going to get a job.”
“What about school?”
“That's what my father said.”
“Well?”
“I got too far behind. I should have asked you to do me a couple of papers. You could have in no time. You're so damned smart. What're you doing drinking beer in here all alone every day?”

I shrugged. “How did you know?”
“Even I could figure that out.”
“Is this the first place you tried?”
“First and only.”
“Guess I have been here too long.”
“You're wasting yourself. Why'd you quit?”
“Couldn't think anymore.”
“That damned bitch! Oh, I could just see how unhappy she was making you. I watched your face when you were in here one night with her. You looked miserable. Sick. All night. God-damnit, why do you love a bitch?”
“I didn't plan it that way. She wasn't when we started. I don't think. I don't know, anymore, anyway.”
“The draft is going to get you, isn't it?”
“Never mind.”
“You'll let yourself get drafted just like you've been letting yourself sit here; you'll get killed in Vietnam.”
“Come on!”
“I'm not in school, but at least I'm not going to get drafted.”
“Look, you go on back to your apartment over there on South
Main Street. I’ll help you do the papers. You don’t want to end up being a waitress.”

“Messing around on construction, you can’t talk.”

“I’ll dictate. You type. And I’m on welfare, now. Anyway, I was a carpenter. It’s not like doing just labor.”

“A man like you on welfare.” She reached down to squeeze my stomach, but I don’t have one. Her hand touched my skin. “No, you could sit and drink beer all day every day and not have a gut. You’re just not that kind.” She sighed. “I have one. Even with diet pills.” She licked her lips, dry from the amphetamines and cigarettes. Took a swig of beer.

The sun was reappearing in the alley, slanting into our eyes. In a few more minutes the black fire escape would burn square suns. Then it would get shadowy on the street. The streetlights would come on. That would be something else, altogether: the midwestern winter night with the great black emptinesses between the houses at the end of the streets. All night.

“If you had offered sooner to do the papers, I might have made it. But now I’ll use the time and money to payoff my loans.”

“Come on. We’ll do them right now.”

“It’s too late. I quit. And got rid of the apartment. I’ve got to go to the bathroom, wait a second.” But she sat beside me. I ordered another pitcher. “I couldn’t get over how easy it was to quit. All those stupid entrance tests. Then I went to the registrar’s and signed out like a hotel book or something. No one even said, ‘Good luck, Royal.’ The secretaries went right on typing. Five minutes and out.” She pulled on her cowboy boots and walked with her head high to the ladies’ room. She’s almost as tall as I am in her boots. And she has a lovely natural carriage. When she came back and saw me watching her, she smiled. Lovely lady.

She started pushing her cigarettes around on the table and messing with the Star of David in her teeth. She sang to the Streisand songs so that finally I asked her, “Look, what’s the matter?”

“There’s a boy in Chicago and I guess I’m going to stay with him. He’s been after me a long time. I said I would come.”
“Good. It’s better you stay with someone.”
“I know.”
“So?”
“I’ll get some little job. Oh, I know it would be better if I stayed with someone. I want to stay with you.”
“Me? Why me?”
“Because I like you. That bitch’s making you miserable. Everyone can see that from your face. But I could make you happy. I know that.”
“I don’t see her anymore.”
“We could live together. I’d cook things for you. Bake bread in a wood stove. We could leave Iowa and go someplace warm where we can hear the ocean. I’d get a piano and could sing Streisand. I can make you happy. I just know it. I don’t want to go to Chicago. I want to be here with you.”
“I didn’t know you could play the piano.”
“I can’t, but I’ve always wanted to. I’ll learn. And you can be happy. I can make you happy.” I looked at her milky blue eyes. I started thinking about living by the ocean, the sound of the surf. Nights lying there with her. The smell of bread baking. I was getting tired sitting by the window alone with my pitcher.
“We could have such lovely children. Really.”
“You’re kidding me?”
“See, you don’t take me seriously.”
“But I do! Children are . . . a child is . . . very serious.”

The sun was below the fire escape, rolling down between the two buildings in the alley. The snow washed out purple. Oh, God, the night was coming, the long midwestern night. January. She was offering it all to me, but I just couldn’t get myself to believe it. Or didn’t want to. She’d mess up like with her papers. She’d sleep late, the bread would burn, she’d drive me crazy with the piano all day long, she’d have no talent, she’d cry, she’d need endless comforting, she’d forget to take her pills, I’d get her knocked up—if I could get it up, myself; then there would be guilt, the small hatreds would begin, grow, petty revenges would take over, she’d start drinking, fucking everyone, stealing my meager bread, she’d get up on her speed, drop too much acid, bum trip, disappear driving for days at a time on the in-
terstates with her eyes bright and the sun rising into them, somehow, no matter what, never bloodshot; it would only be when she was away driving that I might care for her. We'd take January with us, wherever.

She was holding her breath, the star between her lips when I realized she’d land on her feet. “Nah, thanks, really, for caring about me, but I don’t want to live with anyone. I’ve just been through it, you know, and well, you saw, it’s got me so hung up I can’t even screw anymore.”

“Oh, that was nothing. You were nervous. I know what you can do. See, I’ll give all that back to you.” She crossed to the jukebox, stepping around a small puddle of melted snow near the door. More Streisand.

“I can’t do it. Not now. Really.” I knew she’d want to bring her cats. She had cats all over her apartment; there was the fine acrid smell of cat pee under furniture and in corners. I suspected women who kept cats.

She looked into her beer glass and sighed. “I knew you wouldn’t.”

“What have you done with the cats?”

“I gave two to Clare. And the nice Tom to my mother. Then I gave the Russian Blue to the people next door. I let the rest go. Wild, now. Damn! I hope they’re getting enough to eat.” She drank off her beer. I poured her another. “This will be the last time I see you.”

“Oh, you’ll be back.”

“No, I’m going and then that will be it; I’ll be gone.” I thought that was a little much, but didn’t say anything.” “I wish I could stay with you.”

“In a way, I wish you could, too. I mean if it would make you happy. But I’d be terrible company.”

I went to the men’s room, she to the ladies’, I helped her with her coat, and we stepped out into the frozen air. The streetlights were on. We walked across the street arm in arm to her car. I looked up at the stars starting to fog, smelled the freezing air. “Take it easy, driving. It’s going to do something—snow . . . .” I could see stuff piled in the back. “What’re ya bringing?”
“Just my things.” She opened the door. A huge pile of Streisand albums on top of a mound of clothes. “Streisand and blue jeans, mostly. That’s all I need.”

We kissed goodbye. She felt big and warm in my arms. I pulled away quickly and patted her hand resting on my shoulder.

“You’re crazy.”

“We’ll find out.” When she opened the door, I could see the area in front of both seats was scorched and blackened. “What happened?”

“Oh, the heater caught fire, but nothing happened.”

I stared at the burned shell. “For God’s sake, watch out, now.”

When she was seated in the dark of the front seat, possum collar up about her cheeks, the radio playing, and the motor revving, she said, “I might be back—once.”

“I thought you said . . . .”

“You know the guy with the water sculptures and mobiles? Brown?”

“Yeah?”

“He’s been out for me a while.”

“Lot of guys after you.”

“Except the one I want.”

“What about him? He’s a bad customer.” Cat who had appeared quite mysteriously in the art school, full black beard, a black opera cloak, spats and gaiters, a bad customer to be sure though I’d never spoken a word with him.

“Just because you won’t let me live with you doesn’t mean you have to be so protective. It’s very simple. I’ve been modeling an electric dress for him; I’m going to have to come back and model it one last time for him when he finishes it. The whole dress will have lights woven into it. It will be beaut-tee—full.”

She always said it like three Himalayan peaks. Beaut-tee—full. “If it works. And maybe he can sell it in New York or some place and become rich and I’ll go with him—just to be his model. Then I could start modeling in New York and maybe I’d get a part in a show. Don’t look at me like that. I already promised him. It’s only fair. He’s started it along my lines . . . .”

“Sounds dangerous.”
THE ELECTRIC DRESS

She handed me a piece of paper. "My number in Chicago if you change your mind—his number." She popped the clutch, took off side slipping, spinning out around the corner. Gone.

Back up at the house, I found the Poet staring at the unpainted wood planks of our walls. As I told him the whole thing, he drew on his Lucky Strike through his beard and looked at his desert boots from time to time. The Poet had numerous theories concerning love and will and choice. Phrases such as: the algebra of need; a scrimmage of appetites; a contest of wills; the geography of love; coming to terms with your cock. He was reading a lot of Cesare Pavese, James Wright, Bill Knott, suicides and would-be suicides for love. When I was finished talking he said three or four things; I can't remember if they were in this order:

"I wanted to fuck her myself, one night, but her whole thing sounds like a stone-ass drag."

&

"Why does she want to live with you? Why? Oh, come off it. You actually listen to her seriously. They like you because you're sympathetic."

&

"Worried about her? Take care of herself? She'll always be okay. She's better off now than we could ever hope to be. It's organic." At this point he flicked his ash. In the doorway he looked past me out the window. "The only moral question is suicide." He went into his little writing room and closed the door. I went back down to the bars.

When I woke up next morning just before noon with the customary cigar and beer hang-over, I lay there for a long time listening to the freezing air, but I couldn't think of anything, anything at all, so I got up and crept out into the drafty hallway. I wanted to go in and say, hey man, I've just gotten off a great dream, make one up, send the Poet careening off on a poem, I wanted to say, I think, you know, we're all wrong about Royal, all wrong, she's great, she's everything a woman can be, I've made a mistake as tragic and profound as Cesare Pavese's suicide, sending the Poet into spinning depths of imagery, push-
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ing back the membrane of his consciousness, fucking around with the alembic of his unconscious and subconscious and dreams. ETCETERA. I wanted him to convince me Royal was what I needed. I stopped short outside at the draft of cold air and cigarette smoke swirling in the sunlight of his door. Peeked inside, feeling like an emerging Kilroy.

The Poet was sitting at his plywood desk, back to me, a blue merchant marine knit cap on, tufts of hair everywhere, his pheasant-hunting, logging jacket buttoned up into his beard. The window was wide open. His ungloved hand rested on a yellow pad pushed in among piles of books on human brain anatomy, poetry, wildlife, Indian totemic symbols, Jung, Freud, Marcuse, hard candy, Lucky Strikes, tail feathers of pheasants poked into the pages of books. There was a vague scrawl on the pad. His hand was still and blue from the cold. Periodically, his breath clouded around his head. Finally, his hand began to move. Slowly. Spastically. Like the needle of a seismograph or tidal wave drum. Stop. Start.

I took a deep breath. He had a good day for it, though much too cold for my taste. We lived right next to the town dump and when it was burning well and the wind was right like it was today, the Poet would open up the windows for the fumes. After a while, he’d let himself go into a trance and the fumes of the burning garbage pyres would move his arm; he was simply the honorary, organic medium like an animate Ouija board. So he claimed. He was hoping to hitch electrodes to his scalp and get an E.E.G. while he was writing his poetry. Perhaps draw relationships between those brain waves and the ordinary brain waves of a schizophrenic. His hand began to move across the pad. I could see his fingers spasm. That was enough for me.

Outside, my eyes closed against the white light. They opened reluctantly. Ice hung in filaments of sun on thousands of branches clicking softly in the wind like Japanese wind chimes. There was a crust of granulated ice on everything and the wind was moving, a great silent express train of blue sky.

I took a deep breath and skidded on the ice.

I was going in for coffee in the middle of town when I thought
I saw Royal outside the Hamburg Inn. She walked with her hands in her coat pockets. Something about that. Lovely carriage. When I recognized her, I knew I’d made a mistake, I should have told her to come on ahead and live with me. “I thought you were supposed to be in Chicago.”

She walked gingerly on the ice, but kept her balance. “I’ve been waiting for you. I knew you’d be getting here about now for coffee.”

Inside, she told me how she’d gone to have one last look at the poets’ farmhouse before she left. A pilgrimage of sorts from the sound of her voice. Five miles out of town and maybe a quarter of a mile down a dirt road. But the farmhouse, an old broken-down place with only a handpump and outhouse in back toward the woods, had burned, maybe two or three months ago. The heater had caught fire. Now there were books all over the floor with pages burned out of them, come-stained, smoke-blackened mattresses disgorging stuffing, burned clothes, fragments of burned poems which would probably find their way into some stoned collage, unwashed dishes from before the fire with food still stuck to them—now, smoke-blackened. When you stood inside, you could look through the floor to the basement, look through the ceiling to the attic, through the attic to the roof, and through the roof to the stars whirring in the gaping hole at night like sparks from a great dynamo. I’m sure that’s just what she had done—stood in the smoky smell of burned poems and fire-eaten clothes of the poets, stood looking up through the hole in the roof, sighing softly to herself in the silence, oh, the poets, the poor poets, the poor poets have no home. When she’d worked herself into a proper state, she’d picked her way out through the crunching broken glass and holes in the floor, to come out on the front porch and stare at the junk cars, stuck in the ditches or ruts where they’d been abandoned, worthless, or the driver too stoned to care, the cars silhouetted against the frozen fields and woods, their rusting, horseshoe-crab bodies painted with peace symbols and quotes from Pound and Williams, Rilke or Pavese, or Mad Magazine or Zap comics, impossible to read, now, in the dark, quotes the peasantry out there on route eighty, seeing the somnambulists passing on their way to or
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from San Francisco and New York could never understand. She'd made her way out through the frozen cars and started back down the snow-covered dirt road. It was sleeting. When she tried to move her car, it was stuck. It had been stuck all the time in the old ice of the ruts.

"So down on the road I thought sure I'd get a ride, but it was a long time, and finally this guy stopped. Coming in, near the bridge, I said, 'Let me out here, this is it.' But he wouldn't, he started looking around for a place to rape me. I get so sick of that I could die. I grabbed the keys and when the car was slowing down, threw open the door and jumped. He started to chase me, but I threw the keys in the snow and that ended that. They'll always stop and look for their keys." She laughed. "He was a jerk. The only problem is I've gotta get my car."

Yeah, I saw what she meant. The only problem.

The Poet's car had been mistaken for abandoned and towed by the city where it was impounded in a great Flanders Field of cars until he paid his fine. We finished our coffee and went up to see the Poet. We lived on the edge of town. The Poet had finished writing and was cleaning his shotgun. There was the arid smell of lemon oil and silicon. It sure didn't escape me how he looked her over. He was a little peeved about going to get the car, but I convinced him this was as good a day as any, so we went down to pay the impoundment fine at the police station, no way out of that. Receipt in hand, a little cash between us, we hitched out to the huge field, where the watchman's Great Dane leaped up, jangling the fence, paws higher than our heads, and bayed clouds of steam into the freezing air, his sides shuddering with each bark, drool dropping onto the broken crusts about his hind paws, spattering on the fence and forming needles of ice.

After the watchman waved us in, we spent a long time walking through the popping, ice-crusted snow, moving up and down the silent rows of frozen cars, each one a bubble of glass and frozen steel and dead smells, each like a bathysphere suspended at the bottom of an ocean. The junk and cars were covered with ice and everything flashed and shone in the sunlight. It was blinding.
THE ELECTRIC DRESS

We finally found the car—a '58 white Ford. Completely welded in ice. We began to chip at the door handles with pieces of junk. When the Poet pried open the door, ice popped and shrapneled in all directions.

It wouldn’t start. We called the watchman who brought the wrecker crashing like an icebreaker up the crusted rows of glacial cars. More chipping to pry up the hood. Hands in pockets, Royal watched us with interest. The snow was just below the tops of her boots. We hitched up jumper cables and gave it a try.

"Whew, fellas, I think ya gotta getchyaselves a new battree."

When he saw we weren’t up for that song and dance, he got down to business. We took off the air filter. He started shooting ether down into the air-intake. "Try it!" A sheet of flame jetted up out of the shadows of the Poet’s engine. Royal screamed. The old timer gave it another blast. Another sheet of flame. "It’s beaut-tee—full!" The engine sputtered. The old watchman gave her a real blast so the flames walked up all over the engine and raised hood like the inside of a dragon’s mouth. She started.

The old watchman cackled when we discovered the flat frozen to the rim. He sped off, returning a few minutes later. Hopped down and bounced a tire into the snow from out of the back. "Got one just yer size . . . still got some tread. Five bucks. Seven-fifty raise yer back end."

We had to pay.

Out at the farm, the VW was frozen over. Royal had forgotten to close the windows. I could just imagine the snowdrifts in our room. "Honey, please don’t be angry and whatever you do, don’t look in the bedroom for one second. I forgot to close the window this morning." I hoped we wouldn’t have any trouble getting her car started. The windward seats of the car were covered with ice. In back, the Streisand albums and blue jeans were now an alloy rainbow in a block of ice. "Oh, God, ruined!" New York’s Nefertiti.

"Nah, they’ll thaw. Be fine. You’ll see when you put them on the guy’s record player in Chicago."
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We rocked her. The VW shot forward suddenly. Royal skidded sidewise almost up over us hanging onto each fender and up into the field, but the Poet and I hit the snow and rolled, and she went shooting out to the road, did a perfect three-sixty, ended up facing right. We rose and walked out to the road, brushing the snow off. The Poet’s beard was white with snow and balls of quickly forming ice.

Royal threw open the door and came running down the road as we were about to get back in the Ford. She sure looked beautiful out there running in the sunlight, the icy fields spreading away all around her, hair flying in the sunshine. Her cowboy boots were dark with melted snow up to the ankles. “Oh!” She stood gasping. “Oh!” A great O of breath in the sunshine. “It’s late. Let’s get stoned and go see Yellow Submarine. Then I’ll buy you a pitcher. Both of you.” She brushed some of the snow off my jacket. I hesitated. The shadows were long and blue in the fields.

“Nah, thanks.” The Poet looked up and down the road. I knew he was listening for my answer with all of his elaborate theories of love and will and suicide, but I was starting to feel like a dope, so I said, no, too, though I sort of wanted to. But not really. I watched the lovely muscles moving beneath her jeans as she ran back up to the car, she wobbling slightly on the heels. I didn’t breathe easy until I saw her turn off behind us onto the interstate. Then I could start to care a little.

The Poet shrugged and mumbled something about choice and will and possibility. I said, shit, she’s a pain, whad’ya think the temperature is on the bank sign? We bet a pitcher. I was seven degrees too low, the Poet off by two (low), but I said I didn’t trust them, they had the temperature high to create an artificial climate of optimism—good for spending. The Poet said he’d taken all of that into consideration before he made his guess. He was damned smart. The bank spelled it out. 16 . . . 3:47 . . . 16 . . . 3:47 . . . 16 . . . 3:48 . . . 16 . . . 3:48 . . . you could go crazy watching it. In another half hour it would start dropping down for the night. All I had to do was say one syllable: yes.
I was really low, still lying around doing nothing, when she came walking toward me down the street one day in February. I guess I was happy to see her. “How’s it going?”

She shrugged. “I left him. He wanted me to stay in all the time. The place was too small. We fought. I knew it before I went. Oh! I brought you something.” She unbuttoned her coat and pulled out a copy of a sumptuous nude sketch by Boucher. “For you.”

“Me? Why?”

“I like it. I like you.”

“Thanks. How were the records when they de-iced?”

“Okay, like you said they’d be, though the covers were ruined . . . I bought some more. Well, not exactly. I swiped them. The stores figure it into their budgets, anyway. For the covers. I love them.” She laughed. “But the place I’m living in now doesn’t have a record player. Just bums. Either they pass out or feel me up in the halls, goddamn ’em, but the place is cheap.”

“That’s lousy. I’ll buy you a beer.”

She squeezed my stomach. “Still nothing. You’re incredible. Living like you do, and strong as a bull. I’ll buy. You got me out of the ice last time . . . .”

“Ah . . . .”

We had a few. She’d seen the Yellow Submarine three times: acid, mescaline, THC.

“And, oh, yeah, I knew there was something I’ve been meaning to tell you.” She took the Star of David from between her lips and sat up. “You know who I saw?”

“What?”

“Guess!” I guessed. “No! No! Who’s Meher Baba? NO! You’re way off. You know Otis Redding’s dead. Why are you guessing dead people? You know who? Aretha! Aretha Franklin! I know how crazy you are about her. The whole time she sang, I was thinking only of you and how much you would have loved seeing her. It was like being with you.”

“She is a gas.”

“When the lights came up, she ripped off her hair. She was a
guy! Totally bald. Or shaved. In a sequin dress. A guy. But it sounded like her. Exactly like her! It blew my mind when he threw the wig into the audience. Right near me! I could have caught it and showed it to you. I'd still have believed I'd seen Aretha if he hadn't taken off the wig, but there must be a law against impersonation.”

I laughed for a long time, looking at the Boucher beyond a small puddle of beer on the table. She laughed, too.

Later, we went to my place and gave it another try, but I still couldn't do my stuff. I kept listening from time to time for the scrape of the Poet's chair. Don't know why. Royal lay back in bed with her great breasts flat and overflowing down onto her arms. She quivered, once. I made feeble excuses. “I guess it was the beer.”

She slapped me lightly on the shoulder. “The beer! She's still hanging you up.” She put her arms around me. “What a waste.” She never made me feel bad. “But you know, some morning, you'll be back together again. Don't let them draft you. Please! Go over to student health. It doesn't matter you've quit. They'll still see you. I knew a guy who got letters from the shrink and got out.” She sighed. “But you won't. You'll let it slide and they'll get you and you'll have your handsome head blown off.”

She put her hand on my cock, thus bringing the matter to a close, I presumed.

Before she took off again, I tacked the Boucher up on the rough wooden planks over my mattress.

The Poet had come across something in Pavese. Wasn't it love, wanting to relive the childhood of another? Maybe, but that's what had finally ruined me with Leila . . . her father a drunken salesman moving from town to town . . . when she was eighteen, she'd been raped on a logging road in the dead of winter. She'd been angry at her father and gone to hitchhike up to the family summerhouse. She had been a virgin. When she told me how they had turned onto the logging road, and then trying to run, his footsteps slowly became my footsteps on the frozen ground. She could still remember the unnatural grip of his
hands: he’d been a pipefitter. Like converging images in a camera’s viewfinder, the double image of the faceless man and myself became one. The next day, she had pinned the torn fly of her Levis with safety pins and called her father. She never told him. She told me. I was the right one. If I forgot and picked her up off the ground in play, her face would shatter like an image painted on glass and she’d scream. Her pipefitter’s hands on the wheel, we drove up that abandoned logging road night after night. We ran the whole thing on very high octane, vaporous guilts and taboos. I apologized for her bad marriage. In the end, I apologized for being a man. A bad move. I was never more potent. She knew she had her man.

And Pavese? Why should I care what Pavese had said? He had committed suicide over some American actress—that was one theory. He blew it. What’d he know about love? Enough to let it get to him? Was that genius? Nah, Leila sure had gotten to me, and all I did was stay in Rosa’s—not exactly worth the Nobel Prize.

In a much different way, I loved the adolescence of Royal, the vacuum of the interstates, a state of pure perpetual energy.

But now, I couldn’t get it up. The man on the logging road had finally caught me. He had an unnaturally strong grip. I think I could have even stopped tripping out on pasts and stood still for loving in the present tense just to renew that simple organic miracle.

The spring was going to be late. When we had a cold snap in late March, I was personally enraged. I cared a lot about the weather. I wanted to see green things, growing things, again. Toward the end of that cold snap, I saw the Poet coming up the street toward me with his quick sprite steps, coming through the afternoon shadows thrown by the houses on our side of the street. He was blowing clouds of breath. When he came up, I could see his smoky blue eyes shining and searching me. “Where’ve you been for the last week? Growing a beard? I was starting to think you’d gone somewhere.”

I touched my unshaven face. “Nah! A beard! I was pissed at
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te the weather.” I told him I’d gone out to a friend’s farmhouse, wrapped myself in a big quilt behind his oil heater, and slept and read science fiction for a week.

“Ya have any good dreams? Notice any changes in your metabolism?”

“Metabolism? I don’t know. I suppose I dreamed all week. Science fiction and Leila. I think I’m getting up to her adolescence, maybe up to her marriage by now, but I’ll be through it one of these days, you’ll see. Through it and out in time for the spring wine drunks. The Sylvan Spring-Time Boozers’ Annual Lawn Drink. It will be magnificent. I’ll roll in those muddy fields with the cows and dogs and laugh.”

“What were the dreams?”

“Ah, I forgot. Thank God. But I’ll remember to write ’em down next time. Promise.”

“Yeah, while you’ve been sleeping, your friend came back to town. Don’t look so mystified! Royal, man. She came back to try on Brown’s electric dress.”

“There really was an electric dress! I thought she was putting me on.”

“You ever take a close look at that guy Brown? I knew when I saw him in his black opera cloak squeezing his way through the tomatoes over at the Eagle that he wasn’t kidding. No, man, it’s come out since that he’s not the usual run of the mill artsy-fartsy over there on the other side of the river. He has a degree in electrical engineering from M.I.T. He used to design electrical systems for jet fighters before he came out here. Shit, man! There’s a war on now, unless you’ve forgotten. Which you won’t cause there’s a letter from your draft board up at the house.”

Then he told me about the dress which had become common knowledge by now. Everyone had been talking about nothing else for a week. How Brown had led Royal up to his second floor studio, through his wandering mobiles and bubbling water sculptures with lights flashing through them, and how she had gone behind the Chinese screen in the corner, taken off her jeans and cowboy boots and come out wearing the dress, a skin tight sheath laced with fine wires and tiny bulbs woven into the fabric—a burnished aluminum. Dazzling. She wore black
THE ELECTRIC DRESS

stockings with a faint iridescent purple undertone. She turned in a complete circle slowly the way models did in fashion shows. Brown fitted his monocle, threw the switch, and stroked his beard. She was completely lit up. A couple of guys standing on the landing saw it. The third was already on his way to get a movie camera. Oh, Jesus, she was beautiful. The light seemed to move up and down her stockings in clouds of static electricity. Her bright blue eyes were like lasers. And the dress! You could not look directly at her lit up. Impossible. Brown pinched out his monocle, slipped on shades.

“'It’s beaut-tee—full.” She ran her hands along the dazzling contours of her body. “Oh! Beaut—tee—full!”

A puff of smoke at the hem. She let out a single scream as the dress crackled and flashed. The camera caught that—the third guy was back. The dress burned completely off her. Brown kicked the door shut and bolted it in the faces of the three on the landing, but they watched through the keyhole and cracks, the camera shooting on. The smoke was clearing, there wasn’t a single mark on her white body, and as one of them stuttered later, “She was absolutely untouched . . . as . . . a butterfly from a cocoon!” And oh, Brown was cool as they come. He unplugged the dress, carefully removed his vest, shirt, spats, gaiters, pants. He took her right there on the floor beside the blackened fuselage of the dress he had painstakingly spent months constructing.

They went careening, rolling and moaning through the over­turning water sculptures, Royal having orgasm after orgasm. The water started to flow out under the door and into the air­ducts, flooding the people in the rooms below. Everyone in the house was on the landing trying to peer through the cracks in the old door until one of the big five-hundred gallon babies over­turned and everyone ran, screaming and laughing down the stairs before a wall of water. Even at the bottom of the stairs, they could hear them still moaning and splashing around like whales in a tidal pool.

We walked quickly in the cold. We were headed for the house. “Royal’s all moved in with him. He got her an old upright piano which she plays night and day. The neighbors are going out of
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their minds, not to mention everyone else living in that house. Oh, man! What an image: untouched like a butterfly from a cocoon. I asked that guy if he was a poet. He thought I was putting him on. Think of all the poetry in our collective unconscious. I've tried to work that image into five poems already. And the movies are great. I hear they're showing them in the parties over the hardware store. They came out framed through a keyhole. The whole thing syncopated to the band and the lights, they show it on all four walls. At once!" I must have had a funny expression because the Poet asked me what was wrong. "You're jealous, now, aren't you?"

"She could have been electrocuted."

"But that was just the risk!"

"Risk? You don't think he burned it off her on purpose?"

We were coming up to the dump. I could see the flames dancing around and disappearing into the freezing air. The Poet took a deep breath. "We'll just never know what he intended. But look at the evidence. Brown was crazy about Royal. And then, of course, there's always love to consider."
CLOSENESS, I AM thinking about closeness, when I am interrupted by seeing my mother navigating down the street toward me. It’s a mild winter day, but there are still a few patches of ice on the sidewalk and somehow I smell snow in the air. Without quite taking her eyes off the sidewalk, she casts me a weather eye and waves. I wave back.

There is a good half block left between us so as we pick our way through the ice my mind True-Norths back to closeness, what about closeness? and there is Francis Wylie Kelly sitting across from me, booze in one hand, bony chin pointed toward the ceiling, grey hair—Youthhaired less grey—like a woodpecker’s topknot, also pointed at the ceiling. Behind him, the sliding glass doors are misted with ocean spray, and through the misted glass, there is a sandy stretch of tradewind twisted ironwoods, the ocean and the Hawaiian blue sky.

Francis Wylie Kelly repeats the word, closeness.
Kelly is a psychotherapist—not mine. I don't have one. Kelly is my neighbor. I drift over here when things start closing in. Sometimes we get up a poker game in the evenings. Kelly is divorced now. He has one son, Billy, about fourteen, I think. The night Kelly's wife was giving birth to Billy, Kelly was out getting laid. He's never figured it out. And that's his profession, figuring out things like that.

Kelly rubs his tennis elbow and groans. Closeness, he repeats again.

Kelly did a lot of thinking about closeness. He was on the farm for three years sometime after his divorce. That's where Kelly did most of his heavy thinking. He'd think about closeness every day from the time he'd get up to the time he'd go to bed. An old Hawaiian Filipino had given Kelly the shell of a giant sea turtle he had speared far out at sea. Kelly would carve the turtle shell and think of the problem of closeness and why it should be a problem in the first place and how some people could take only so much closeness even though they wanted more and some wanted closeness and could allow none at all and how some wanted closeness but it made them miserable at the same time it made them happy and so on. Kelly had carved the sea turtle into buttons and combs and necklaces, puzzling closeness until he had used up all of the sea turtle shell and then it had been three years gone by and he still hadn't gotten it right, but by then he'd been well enough to get out and be a psychotherapist again. But not mine. I didn't have one. He was my neighbor on the windward side. And poker partner. I don't think he'd have been a good psychotherapist for me. I once had nothing showing and no hole cards and I bluffed him out of thirty dollars. He'd been holding two pair.

Kelly is up and still rubbing his tennis elbow, walking splayfooted, his bony knees cracking; he walks unsteadily toward a large chest and pulls open the middle drawer. It is wide and deep and full of turtle shell combs and buttons and necklaces, all polished to a mysterious translucent perfection.

Closeness, Kelly repeats, some can take it and some can't, that's all I could figure out. Three years.
I cross the bungalow floor and look into the drawer while Kelly kind of tips his head back and breathing heavily through his nose, tips back his head even farther to regard me through his black-framed glasses. He'd missed a few grey whiskers here and there. Out on the drainboard, next to a sinkful of unwashed dishes, I can hear the rock tumbler grinding away. Beside being a shrink and a poker player, Kelly is a lapidary, an enterer of contests, and a clipper of coupons.

Kelly goes on staring at me and finally, he says, I don't know, but I think you're one of them sorry ones who can't take too much of it—the closeness.

He coughs on his cigarette, looks at it a minute, wheezes, they'll kill me, catches his breath, stretches out a hand over the brimming drawer, says, take something. Anything.

I think of Kelly hunched over a slowly diminishing turtle shell for three years. Of the long solitary days. Of the turtle being carved into slowly diminishing pieces. This drawerful. I remember reading how the elements of our bodies—hydrogen, nitrogen, oxygen—were the used up remains of burned out and exploded suns, and how they would be again, some day.

I select a long bead necklace and hang it around my neck. Kelly refills our drinks, walks unsteadily over to the stereo, sorts through a pile of dusty cassettes, and, selecting one, jams it into the magazine. The volume is already loud.

Hi, Dad.

Francis looks out the window. That's Billy.

I recognize his voice. Billy flew out twice a year from L.A. to visit Kelly.

I've been fine except I've had a cold and so I've been home building a stereo . . . .

She got the kid. He's lousy about writing, but he'll send the cassettes. He's a nut for electronics.

My mother casts her weather eye upon me. Well, what's my son doing in the world today?

Coming from a job interview. Nothing there.

I had a dream last night. You were in it.
Yeah? What was I doing?
My mother thought for a minute. Jack, I can't really re­member, but I do remember the atmosphere.
And?
Well, Jack, you weren't doing so hot. I would call it a dis­turbed atmosphere.
Nothing to be disturbed about, Mom. I'll find something.
I had been working for a politician. Human relations type job. Smoothing things over with the minorities. Use your charm, Jack. I had, but my man hadn't been re-elected.
I shrugged. Don't worry about me, Mom. It's just politics. If you can't stand the heat, stay out of the kitchen. The tides and winds of political feeling are shifting in this country. Shifting. One day you're in, next day, you're out. Fortune, all fortune. The winds and tides have shifted.
To what, Jack?
Who knows, I don’t know, if I knew I’d be an oracle, all I know is I’m out of a job. You can’t dump 150 billion dollars worth of hardware and 600,000 men into an Asian swamp for ten years and not have it make a difference somewhere. The chickens have come home to roost.
My mother looked at me a long time. Suddenly, she said, oh, Jack, never mind the chickens, why did you leave your wife, what kind of a thing is that?
I stared down the sidewalk patched with ice. I looked up at the bare winter branches moving up and down in the wind. I had the feeling it was going to be snowing soon.
I shrugged. I don’t know, Mom, I’ve been thinking about it.
Look at you, circles under your eyes, sallow, peaked, Jackie, where are you living? And what are you living on? Your father and I have been concerned? No one’s been able to reach you. Two months. Why are you being so mysterious?
I’m not being mysterious, Mom, I’m just thinking things over. It takes time.
It’s normal for a mother and father to be concerned about their son. You’re our son, Jack, even though you’re grown.
She lowered her voice. Jack, if it’s someone you have to get out of your system, go ahead, none of us are perfect, get it out,
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under ordinary circumstances I wouldn't say that, but one has to be a realist. Your father and I have been married thirty-four years without so much as a glance at another person, but I'm a realist. Get it out of your system, then go home and make it up with your wife. You love Leilani, don't you, Jack?

I stared down the street. There was definitely a cold front coming in.

Yeah, Mom, I do, I love Leilani more than anyone or anything in the world. I'd die for her.

No one's asking you to die for her, Jack. Just go back home and be her husband. Be happy, love your wife, what is there to die for? Life is short, go home and live.

I know, Mom.

My mother studied me, worried. Jack, maybe I'll go see an astrologer about you.

She thought that over another moment, then put on her bright Be Positive face and reached into her pocketbook, put on her glasses, and said, now don't laugh, alright?

Alright.

She read: Dance Teacher. No experience needed, will train right person, 10 K per year, Call Fred Astaire Dance Studio, ask for Mr. Petrillo.

Mom . . . .

Jack, you said you wouldn't laugh. Keep an open mind. I saw it and thought of you. You're the right person. You're tall, you're graceful . . . .

She handed me the ad and reached up to pat my cheek. Be positive, Jack.

She turned and made her way down the street.

I went on walking and thinking about closeness.

I didn't want to go to Dicey's, not yet.

I thought about Dicey for a second. Her grey-green eyes, a peculiar sarcastic way she had of not saying anything, but just sucking her lower lip a moment and rubbing the top of her thigh with one hand.

Dicey would say, what do you do when you're out? I'd say, walk around.
You do a lot of walking around. What else do you do?
I'd say, think.
About what?
About a lot of things. About what I want.
She'd say, you do a lot of thinking, do you think about me?
Sure.
What else?
I'd shrug and start to get pissed. About whatever I feel like, I don't know.
Yes, you do, you know, you think about your wife, don't you?
I'd shrug.
Don't you? You've left her but you love her, don't you?
Shut up, Dicey, I'd say softly.
Dicey was pissed because she knew if I'd leave my wife for her, I'd leave her for someone else. Beside that, we were always having some kind of endless argument, Dicey and I. I could never figure out what had started it; it never seemed to come to an end. No one seemed to win.

I walked along. Leilani wasn't far from here. I wanted to go see her. I didn't know what to say to her, now. Each day it got harder. I didn't understand. I was looking for something to say to her, some way to begin again, a first gesture . . . .

I thought of a picture taken of Leilani before I'd known her, before we'd married. She is standing in front of a DC-9 in her stewardess' uniform, head cocked slightly to one side. She is smiling. The plane is behind her, and she is a woman, a person, alone on the painted apron, alone with her beautiful smile.

I feel a tightness in my chest.
Sometimes, she would stand before the mirror putting makeup on the delicate curves of her Hawaiian-Chinese eyes and say tentatively, Jack, and touch her eyes.

Then she'd be gone all day, flying.

When she'd come home, her belt would be tight from the cabin pressurization—the swelling.

I'd pull her shoes off, and, taking each foot in my lap, I'd
massage her feet. She would smile at me and eventually I would have to stop because she would be holding my hand.

I wanted to see her.

Instead, I kept walking. I remembered a day I'd gone body surfing. A clear June day, the summer south swell coming in at Sandy Beach, the deceptively slow, massive walls advancing, each with a reflection of clouds and sky in their faces, shadows in their bellies; the red warning flag had been up beside the lifeguard tower.

Earlier, Kelly had seen me walking to the car with my fins.

He'd walked up to me, tipped back his head, looked at me through the black frames.

Ya got that funny look on yer face, Jack. Like ya want to hit someone—Kelly made a bony fist—like this. Pow! He stopped his fist short of my nose and sucked his teeth. Pow, he said softly once more.

Swimming out, diving, I could turn my head and look up into each wave rising, see the sunlight pouring down through the massing water in long shafts and shining on the sandy bottom. Then the wave would break, each break a shadow momentarily refracted with splintered sunlight, stunning compression, and sudden clouds of sand rising off the bottom. Then again the shafts of sunlight pouring through the massing walls.

Outside, I got some good fast rides before I got closed out on a wave that seemed to rise from one end of the beach to the rocks at the other end, then collapse. I got bounced off the bottom, lifted, turned over, held down again.

Kelly had caught sight of me limping from my car. He'd stopped sorting his mail, closed his mailbox, and walked over.

Between clenched teeth, I'd explained.

Halfway through, Kelly had started nodding and toward the end, he was repeating, you were out with the red flag, uh huh, that's right, that's what I expect from you, Jack, that's what I expect. Well, if the pain gets too bad, come over and get a drink.

The pain got too bad three nights later. My leg had been
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streaking black and yellow from my hip to my knee, and in the middle of the night, I woke with a hard knot of pain in one place and a numb cold sensation.

In the emergency room, the doctor had probed the hematoma: We'll have to cut it open.

First, the novacaine. Behind another white curtain, I could hear a drunken marine moaning. He'd been beaten up by some locals. The doctors were trying to put his face back together. Farther away, in the hall, I could heart a woman sobbing.

The doctor prodding. Can you feel that?
No.

At the incision, I sensed the release of pressure and looking back, saw thick clots of blood on the table, the surgical linen, splashes of blood on the linoleum floor.

With his finger, the doctor had showed me the depth and thickness of the hole in the muscle. He'd stuffed the wound with idioform gauze and I had gone around trailing blood for a week. I'd sit, get up, and there'd be a pool of blood. My pants would be dark with it. Twice a day, Leilani would change the dressing. When the wound had finally closed, she had gotten me a bottle of vitamin E oil for the skin.

Walking along in the chilling air, I wondered where the vitamin E oil was. In the medicine chest. In the apartment Leilani's, now. I felt a sudden sense of panic.

I kept walking. I didn't know where to go. I was sure the vitamin E oil was in the medicine chest. We hadn't left it in Hawaii . . .

Then, for some reason I started thinking about Dicey's shirts and sweaters. She had shirts with pictures on them: people holding hands, sailboats heeling, slim Jamaican blacks trucking in outsized feet; she had one sweater with ectoplasmic rayguns on a pale yellow background blasting red explosions in some time warp dimension.

She had one sweater that said Retour Du Sahara on it.

I could see it as it had been last night, tossed over a chair in the snowy light coming in the window. Retour Du Sahara. The sweater was green and had cloaked Arabs marching five abreast.
They carried rifles and led a woman on a camel. In the background, there were palms and pyramids fading into the distance. The tableau and the words Retour Du Sahara repeated themselves all over the sweater—Retour Du Sahara, Retour Du Sahara, Retour . . . . The Arabs and woman seemed to march on and on in the snowy light.

I repeated the phrase.

It seemed familiar. Maybe it was a title of a line from a poem. Retour Du Sahara. Or a song . . . .

Was the woman’s name Sahara?

Or, maybe more idiomatically, return to Sahara?

I’d look it up in Bartlett's Familiar Quotations when I got back to Dicey’s. It sounded vaguely French Colonial.

I wasn’t ready to go back to Dicey’s, not yet. Once I was at Dicey’s, Dicey would take me up completely. She would sit on my lap, take the book out of my hand, ask me what I was thinking, her mother, who said I was the only man she liked beside Elvis Presley, would feed me, ask me if I was getting a cold, bring me a cup of tea and two aspirin whether the answer was yes or no, ask Dicey and I if we wanted to lie down and take a nap on her bed . . . .

I wanted to go see my wife, but I couldn’t. Maybe it was already too late. I felt panic. But what could I say?

It was too early to go back to Dicey’s.

I walked on thinking about Retour Du Sahara. Maybe I should go to the library and look it up. What if Bartlett’s didn’t have the quotation?

I bought a paper and went in to the Greek restaurant to read the want ads. As I scanned the paper, I thought I saw the phrase, Retour Du Sahara.

But it wasn’t. It was Receptionist . . . Re . . . .

I folded up the paper to go to the library to look for Retour Du Sahara. I would ask the reference librarian. But would I tell her I saw the phrase on a sweater?

I wasn’t sure.

I opened up the paper and went on reading the ads.

At the end of the counter, the regulars sat together; I thought of them collecting social security, being helped by some patient
C. E. POVERMAN

neighbor to pencil in their state forms; they seemed to have no families, nothing but these stools and cups of coffee and the paintings behind them of wide streams curving through the mountains, or, on the other side, the snowy Alps. They would sit and talk to themselves. A couple of them carried overflowing shopping bags and periodically went through the bags, taking out each item, in some cases carefully unwrapping it, wrapping it back up again, and setting it on the counter. Occasionally, one might let out a sudden cry, a whimper, or throw up his eyebrows and start nodding. The friends of the Greek owners—were they a family, cousins, brothers?—would come in, sit in front of the grill, and talk Greek, loud and fast, with long silences, then more Greek, loud and fast. They would ignore the mumblers. Maybe something in Greek culture made them more tolerant of these . . . kinds . . . of people, I didn’t know.

I saw the ad for Dance Teacher—Fred Astaire . . . call Mr. Petrillo . . .

Then I saw myself on a shiny wood floor dancing before walls mirrored from floor to ceiling. I thought of ugly women with fat calves and soft waists coming toward me. I thought of painfully thin women with bony wrists.

I smile and take them in my arms. Patiently, I guide them across the floor. Will train. I’d have learned that from Mr. Petrillo. The right man. We would glide on all four walls at once while music would play from a record player on a stand in the corner. Bossa Nova. Learn the Bossa Nova! Rhumba. Rhumba after two lessons! Don’t be left out. I would address their attention to the image in the mirror and tell them to watch their feet while they would clutch me hard, their perfume the collective perfume of movie lobbies. They would be the kind of people who answered ads on matchbooks—earn big money . . . learn . . . Dale Carnegie . . . . . Were there people who answered ads on matchbooks?

Outside, it is starting to snow.

I wouldn’t tell the reference librarian it is from a sweater. From Dicey’s sweater. I would tell her it is from . . . that it was something I heard mentioned in a film. Maybe a French film.

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RETOUR DU SAHARA

One of the men two stools away is moving his lips. I lean toward him to listen, but I can’t hear anything.

I paid and started back to Dicey’s.

On the way, I walked to Leilani’s. A lot of my stuff was still in the apartment. Our apartment. I came to the corner and looked across the street. I looked up into the snow at the lights coming out of the third floor window. I could barely see the house in the snow. There was a silver Corvette parked in front. It had been there on and off for the last week. I started to cross the street. I stopped and balanced on the curb. I looked up at the windows for a long time. Then I started back toward Dicey’s.

Dicey is lying on the sofa, her mother, Ivy, is in the kitchen watching the Guiding Light from the doorway. Dicey is half watching the Guiding Light and reading Cosmopolitan.

Dicey doesn’t really look up at me, but says, Hi.

I ask, didn’t you go to your classes?

She shakes her head, no, without looking up at me and lets her hand wander to her breast. She squeezes her breast gently.

I say, no?

She says, is it a crime? I didn’t feel like it.

I was just asking.

Her mother greets me with a cheery, Hi, Jack, and asks me if I want a piece of banana bread and some hot tea. I nod.

Ivy says, I see it’s started, we’re supposed to get about ten inches.

Dicey sucks her lip, rolls her eyes, and says, ten inches.

I go to the Bartlett’s on the shelf above the stereo and begin to look up Retour Du Sahara.

Dicey says, snow, Chook, you’ll like that, won’t you?

The husky lifts his head and looks at her a moment.

Then he looks at me. One blue eye, one brown eye.

Yes, my little man will like all that snow, won’t he?

The husky drops his head back on the floor.

I look under Retour.

Dicey says to me, I’m reading the Cosmo test—it’s so stupid—what men think women find attractive in them and what women really do find attractive. Listen to this . . . .
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I'm listening. My finger travels down the page: Ra . . . Re . . . .
Men think women like big arms and bulgy biceps—they don't, did you know that?
Sort of. There is nothing under Re for Retour.
Do you think I like your arms, Jack?
I look up Sahara.
Jack?
What?
Jesus! Do you think I like your arms?
I hope so.
No, you don't give a shit if I like them or not, I can take them or leave them, that's our Jack. I started knitting you a sweater, today. Dicey held up a lush expanse of green between two thick needles. Do you like it?
Yes.
You said you liked green that day I showed you the scarf in the window . . . I can see you don't even remember.
Christ, Dicey, of course I do.
You're full of shit, Jackie. You wish I hadn't started it. It makes you uncomfortable.
I didn't answer.
Doesn't it?
No, Dicey, I'm glad.
You sound real glad. I don't care, I want to make you a sweater whether you're glad or not. And I will.
I looked under Sahara, but there was nothing under Sahara.
Listen to this, Jack. What women really notice is men's asses, did you know that? Women like men's asses.
I didn't know that.
I like your ass, Jack. Dicey smiled at me. I love your rotten ass, Jack. You have the cutest ass I've ever seen on a man. But you don't give a shit about that, either. Where've you been, Jack?
At the job interview.
No, since then?
Oh, I don't know. Just walking around.
What have you been thinking about?
I don't know.
Yes, you do.
Retour Du Sahara, I said.
What's that?
Your sweater.
She shrugged. She read from _Cosmo_ a minute. Jack, men think women like broad shoulders. Do you think women really do?
I don't know. Maybe.
You never can just come right out and say yes or no, goddamn-it! Do you?
Well, Dicey, it probably depends on a lot of things. I mean, no single feature is attractive in itself.
No single feature is attractive in itself, she mimicked. She read the _Cosmo_ another moment. They do, you big asshole! Here's my mother, she likes all your dopey shit, don't you, Ivy?
Ivy smiled at me. Yes, I do, Jack, I do like all your dopey shit, you're a sweet man and I like you and so's Dicey.
I love him, Dicey said. Jack, would you like me even if I had to lose a breast like Betty Ford?
Jesus Christ, Dicey!
Would you, Jack?
Yes.
You liar.
Have some tea and banana bread, Jack, it's cold out. Ivy brushed at the snow in my hair. Dicey get him a towel.
Ivy liked all my dopey shit because of something that had happened about three days after Ivy had found Dicey and me sleeping in the fold-out bed.
Irene, the old maid who lived in the front apartment, had knocked on the door to tell us, Dicey and I, that she had been looking out the window and seen Ivy take a terrific fall on the walk, and that she was just lying there.
We'd run out and there was Ivy lying flat on her back, groceries scattered on the ice and crusted snow, her cataract glasses a few feet from her.
Dicey'd screamed, Mom!
I'd kneeled over Ivy. Her lips were moving slowly and her blue eyes were watering with pain.
Dicey'd screamed again, Mom! Jack, do something!
I'd felt for broken bones. Ivy lay there, stunned, staring up at the grey winter sky. She hadn't seemed able to move.

Finally, I'd picked her up in my arms and carried her inside. Halfway up the stairs, she'd gripped my neck tightly and said, Carl . . . .

Carl had been her husband before he'd left her for his secretary.

At the top of the stairs, she'd cursed once in Hungarian.

Inside, I'd set Ivy on the sofa, a few minutes later Dicey'd come through the door with the groceries, and a few minutes after that, Ivy'd come around.

That's why Ivy liked all my dopey shit.

Ivy brushed at my wet hair and repeated, Dicey, get Jack a towel.

Let him get it himself.

But Dicey got up and got me a towel.

How'd the job interview go, Jack?

Nothing, Ivy.

That's too bad. They're fools.

Dicey came back with the towel and began drying my head. I reached up to take the towel.

I'll do it, Jack!

Okay.

Yeah, okay! What happened with the interview, Jackie?

I shrugged. They didn't like my face.

He's a big one for saying what he doesn't like and what other people don't like, but he's a little slow to say a few of the things he does like, aren't you, Jackie?

Don't listen to her, I like you, Jack.

Thanks, Ivy.

Ivy's all upset today, she read in the paper that Elvis Presley's been hospitalized because he's gotten so fat.

Ivy shook her head. The poor man. He is the dearest man, but he's just gone crazy eating.

We all stared at the Guiding Light without watching it.

They say he's up close to 240 pounds. Can you believe it? He won't perform, much less let anyone catch sight of him. He's ashamed to be seen anywhere. Poor baby. Ivy shook her head.
RETOUR DU SAHARA

Ivy sent him a diet, didn’t you, Mom?
I sure did. She looked out the window a moment at the snow falling. Just got back from mailing it before the snow started.
Dicey finished drying my hair and threw the towel in my face. Here you are, you big bastard.
Thanks.
Yeah, thanks yourself.
Dicey hugged me, pushed her knee between my legs, kissed me, pushed me away and slapped my shoulder.
Jackie, you’re a shit.
So are you.
Ivy looked at me. Do you think he’ll use the diet, Jack?
I thought about it. My first inclination was to say no, that Elvis Presley was probably rich enough to hire the best dieticians in the world and the best people in the world to help him enforce the diet if he needed help with his will power. But then again, he was rich enough to bribe the same people off when he got really hungry up there in the hospital. Send them out for pizza or southern fried chicken or whatever. The King of Rock and Roll could do that if anyone could. But then again, if there were money involved, a big loss, the Colonel—Tom Parker—wouldn’t let that fat stuff go but just so far.
Finally, I said. I don’t know, Ivy, maybe he will use the diet.
Jack always says maybe, Mom.
I wrote him that he needed a more positive attitude about himself—poor baby, he’s no actor, but I do love to look at him, he’s so sweet.
Ivy had seen all of his movies, had every one of his albums over there on the shelf below the Bartlett’s, and saved Elvis clippings. Just last week we had sat through King Creole on the late show. Well, I couldn’t knock it, I was an old Elvis fan myself.
Maybe he will use the diet, Ivy, there’s really no telling, is there?
Ivy said, I do hope so. She stared at the Guiding Light a second.
Do you think Ed’s going to die?
Not with Sandra pregnant.
Ivy stared at the tv a second. She held her chin in her hand. I think he’s going to die. Maybe by the end of this week.
Oh, Ivy, Ed’s not going to die.
I think so.
Dicey sighed.

It was still snowing out when we made love—the room was muffled and soft with snow light.
In the beginning, the noise had made me nervous—the fold-out bed was full of springs that would suddenly creak and let go with metallic twangs. Ivy sleeping just through the kitchenette could easily hear us. But Dicey didn’t care. Ivy didn’t care. After a while, I didn’t care either.
Ivy would say, good God, go ahead, make love to your heart’s content, be happy, don’t mind me. Just do exactly what you would do if I weren’t here.
Ivy meant it, too. Ivy, I think, was a woman with no illusions left, no pretenses. She’d had them all burned off her when Carl had left with that secretary after twenty-five years of marriage. Her weight had dropped forty pounds. She was okay, now, weightwise—that had been six or seven years ago. But I don’t think you lose forty pounds for someone you love and keep your illusions. Even if you haven’t been laid in six or seven years, which is what it had been for Ivy, Dicey said.

Alone with Ivy, her brother in Vietnam, her sister in college, Dicey had been the only one left for Ivy to talk to about Carl. Dicey’d developed migraine headaches and also the habit of sleeping afternoons. That had been when Dicey was sixteen. All water over the dam, now, though once Dicey’d shown me a picture of her father.
He digs rosebushes, she’d said.
He’d been standing beside several rosebushes.
I sent him that one for his birthday. He names them. He named that one after his Aunt Ethel. What are you thinking?
Weird, was all I could manage.

Anyway, that was Carl, and Ivy had lost forty pounds over him when he’d married and gone to St. Louis with the secretary. Ivy had no illusions: she said, and meant, do just what you want, act as though I’m not here, and sometimes we did. It felt strange at first, but you can get used to anything.
RETOUR DU SAHARA

We were getting used to it now.

Dicey sat up on me—the snowy white light on her body, her honey-colored hair a shadow around her head and shoulders. In the snowy light, her grey eyes looked almost perfectly clear, colorless, like ice.

She looked down at me and smiled without her lips parting. The corners curved slightly.

Jack, I’m not going to let you come. You like that, don’t you, Jackie?
I didn’t answer.

Come on, Jackie, you like it when I tease you, don’t you, Jackie? You know you do.

I looked toward the window. It was beaded with water from our breath and the plants on the window and television.

You do. Just say so. Be honest. Just a little?

Shut up, Dicey, I said softly.

Dicey gave me a hurt look. She began moving her hands very quickly as though making a combination of shadow puppets, Masonic lodge signs and hula hands.

Yes?

No.

Watch again.

What is it?

Deaf-dumb language. Watch.

Where’d you learn that?

Working with deaf-mutes one summer. I told you! Watch.

Dicey made the signs again.

I don’t get it.

I love you, stupid.

I didn’t say anything. After a long time, I said, I love you, too, Dicey.

Suddenly, Dicey leaned forward so her breasts rested on my chest. She stared at me. She put her hand over my mouth. Don’t say that, Jack. Please. I know you love her, Jack, not me. That’s why you can’t tell me you love me. I always tell you. You never tell me. I know, Jack. I feel bad for you, Jackie, I really do, but maybe someday you really will be able to tell me you love me.

I love you now.
C. E. POVERMAN

Don't you think I can feel her here with us, Jack.
Shut up!
Don't you think I know you're trying to make up your mind
to go back to her, Jackie?
Dicey . . .
But it's alright. I know you do love me . . . in your way . . .
you'll tell me you love me, sometime, Jackie, when you really
can, won't you?
She stared at me.
Now you're angry at me, aren't you?
Suddenly she sat back up, moved quickly and after a moment,
frowned a sharp single line between her eyebrows, and came
sharply. She gasped, opened her eyes, looked down at me, her
eyes rolling, the whites showing, gasped, don't come! in a higher
voice, and came again.

After a time, I came and we were still. She reached down,
caressed my cheek and hair gently and looked at me a long time.

A while more, we came apart and held each other gently. I
started to drift. Leilani. The day we hiked in to the center of
Oahu along the Palolo Valley ridge. The vegetation becoming
twisted and gargoyles-like and Honolulu and the Pacific horizon
fading between the hau and koa trees as though evaporating in a
shimmering mist. We had walked into the clouds and wind
coming from the windward side. Except for the sound of the
wind in the shrunken trees, and the clinking cry of the
magiros—the Japanese rice birds—it had been silent. Finally, the
wind had become almost too strong to walk into, the clouds had
completely surrounded us, and we could go no further. Our hair
hanging in dripping coils, we had looked up in the air and down
into the wind and clouds funneling up the mountainsides we
couldn't see. It was the center of the island.

Outside, the snow was getting deeper. The room silent. The
husky panted several times, sudden and loud, then more silence.

I held Dicey and stared at the white glow on the ceiling. It was
still snowing. My body started to grow light. I fell asleep.

Then Dicey was curled up on her side of the bed, sobbing,
shoulders shaking.
I sat up. There was a chill in the room.

Dicey?

Outside, it had stopped snowing. She went on sobbing.

Dicey? I put my hand on her shoulder. She shook her shoulder. Don’t touch me!

I sat there a minute. When I realized I was holding my breath, I put my hand on her shoulder again.

Don’t touch me! Go! Just go. Get your clothes and get out of here!

I sat a moment. No point in asking her why. Why didn’t really matter, anymore. I looked at the clock. Almost four.

Dicey went on sobbing. She had moved in with her mother after she’d split up with her boyfriend. Freud’s four at the bed. Two pair, four of a kind and nothing showing. Hard to beat.

I got up, found my pants, and balancing on one leg, then the other, I slid my pants on. I stood still a minute. Dicey went on sobbing silently, her back turned to me, her shoulders shaking. I shrugged and started pulling on my boots. The husky stirred around.

I laced my boots and looked at the dark television screen. Too much of that Guiding Light and General Hospital shit, I thought, that’s where she gets it. You can’t tell me you love me . . .

I walked to the apartment door and slid back the chain. Dicey’s back was still turned to me. I opened the door.

The husky stared at me, the hall light hitting his blue eye. Then, with crouching furtive movements, started to climb up on the bed. He never got on the bed when I was there. I looked for something to throw. After a moment, I shook my fist and gave him the finger. Someday, I whispered, as he curled up, I’m going to kick your ass.

I closed the door and stepped out under the hall light. I blinked at the light and felt the chill in the hall. As I walked down the stairs, I felt blank and by the time I reached the door, I was relieved.

I would go back to Leilani, now.

Outside, the snow was piled up to the door. There was no wind, it was absolutely still, and overhead, the sky was bright
with stars, the three bright beauties of Orion’s belt and beneath, the monster galaxie, a single reddish star by appearance, Betelgeuse, somber and bright.

I took a deep breath of cold air. The Christmas lights were still up on the hemlock bushes; they glowed mutely under the snow. I started wading through the snow. In the porchlight, single grains and flakes caught the light and sparkled.

I waded out to my car, swept a porthole of snow clear through the windshield and got in.

Inside, cold bluish white light. I tried the engine. It didn’t catch. I tried it several times. Finally, the battery started running down.

A sense of urgency came over me. I gripped the steering wheel. Go. Go now.

But even if I could get the car started, the roads hadn’t been plowed.

Then walk. Get moving. I sat another moment, then felt tired.

I pulled on my gloves, blue knit cap, drew my knees up to my chin, put my hands between my knees, my head on the armrest, and stared through the window at the bluish white light coming though the snow. I closed my eyes. It was absolutely silent. I drifted off into the silence.

I woke to a vague sound and a cold draft.

Dicey was standing in the open door, the husky behind her. The husky had his leg up, a clump of snow on his nose, and was cutting a perfect yellow hole into the snow.

Dicey was calf deep in snow, her blue flannel nightgown falling open at the top so I could see a shadow between her breasts. Tears were running down her face.

Don’t you see what you’re doing?

Go away, Dicey.

Do you know what you did?

I didn’t answer.

Do you, Jack?

Just leave me alone, I don’t care anymore.

That’s the trouble. She started to cry again. After a minute, she said, do you know what you did?

I didn’t do anything.
She sobbed. You said ... her ... name ... in your sleep. I almost blurted, I’m not responsible for when I’m sleeping! I said out loud, bullshit. Dicey stared at me a long time. She sucked her lower lip. Her face seemed to change moment by moment. She slid her hand under her nightgown and massaged the curve of her ass for a moment. She said in a little girl voice, will you come back inside with me?

No. Close the fucking door!

She said, I’m getting cold standing here, Jack. Then go inside. Can’t I come in, Jackie? I’m going to hit you, Dicey, I swear it.

She kneeled forward onto the seat and stared at me. She reached down into the front of her nightgown and took out her breast. She stared at her breast cupped in her hand for a long time. For a second, I thought she was going to say something to her breast. Then she looked at me. I didn’t know if I was going to hit her. She crawled forward across the seat.

Jackie?

Dicey, I’m warning you, get away from me, I’m going to kill you, I really am.

She lay down across me. Jackie, I love you, don’t you understand.

Get off me.

She reached down into my pants. Her hand was cold. I felt myself start to get hard. I pushed her away. I didn’t want to get hard.

She raised her nightgown and tugged at my pants. Then I was in her. I was wondering at the heat of her juices and the coldness of her skin. Once, a part of her or myself got caught and the horn blew. I almost laughed.

Afterward, I lay there and stared out behind her through the open door at the husky sniffing at the soles of my boots dangling in the piled-up snow. I felt the cold seat under my bare ass, looked at the husky rooting in the snow, and heard myself say, someday I’m going to kill that fucking dog.
C. E. POVERMAN

The psychiatrist is asking, well, could you get an erection, could you penetrate her?

I sit there a minute before replying, yes, yes, that’s not it, yes I could get an erection, yes I could penetrate her—what a word! I don’t like talking about my wife like this—it’s just that I couldn’t enjoy it with her anymore.

But you had once enjoyed it with her. Before you were married? And for a period of time after?

I nod.
What changed?
I don’t know. You’re the shrink.
Well, how was it at first?
I . . . could just let go . . . give her what I had in me.
What do you mean, what you had in you? What did you have in you?
What I had in me! Me! I raise my voice.
The psychiatrist studies me a minute.
Alright, he says quietly, you don’t know what changed? Did she do anything?
Nothing.
Think about it.
I think about it a minute. I see her smiling at me and feel tight in the chest. I don’t want to cry. I get a breath.
Nothing, I repeat.
The psychiatrist says, what did she do the first night you pushed her away?
She cried, what do you think she did?
And what did you do?
You seem very angry.
How would you feel?
He says in a quiet tone of voice, we’re not concerned with me, here. What’s all this anger about?
I don’t know. I’m not that angry. I just don’t like talking about it this way.

How would you talk about it?
I wouldn’t. I just want my wife. Everything’s getting out of control.
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He waits a minute. Want to talk anymore about that?
I want to go back to my wife, but I can’t. I try every day, but I can’t.
Tell me something about your wife, Leilani. What did you like about Leilani?
Everything. I love her. I love everything about her. The sound of her voice, her smile, her eyes, her kindness.
I stop for a minute and lose my voice. I choke.
The psychiatrist watches me quietly.
Is there anything you disliked about her?
No. He starts to blur and I blink. No, nothing.
What’s your wife doing now?
Working in a restaurant. She’s living in our apartment. Sometimes I go there but I can’t go inside. I just stand outside.
After you stopped making love with Leilani, what did you do?
Went without as long as I could. Saw other women.
And the girl you’re seeing now? Do you enjoy making love with her?
Yes, all the time.
What’s she like?
Not the kind of person I’d like.
What do you mean, not the kind of person you’d like?
Not the kind of person I want to like. She’s . . . impossible. Hysterical, sort of. Sometimes I think she might even be crazy. This look she gets on her face. My wife was nothing like her. Nothing.
I study him a minute. He’s not much older than I am. I want to ask him if he’s married. I almost do.
Meanwhile, I keep looking for a job. The girl in the apartment across the hall is pregnant. She has flinching Chihuahua eyes and sits home most of the day waiting for her husband who has a featherbed job on trains. On the blackboard above the telephone, she has a list of the things her husband does and does not like on his sandwiches. I hate to think what their kid will be like.
Dicey has half the sweater done, but is giving it a rest. She’s embroidering over there on the sofa. I consider putting an ad in the paper. Situations Wanted.
I watch Dicey a minute, get a piece of paper and write, Situations Wanted.
Dicey pushes the needle halfway through, stops and listens to the radio in the kitchen. She shakes her head.
What was that?
The Elton John Mystery Message.
Did you get it?
She shakes her head, no.
I stare at the paper. Situations Wanted. I write, Bright Personable Man . . .
Dicey cuts the thread and releases the cloth from the hoop. She smoothes the threads and holds up a pair of underpants with a black fishnet crotch.
Do you like it?
Yes, nice.
You don’t even know what it is.
I can still like it. And I know what it is. A flower.
It’s not a flower, stupid.
Okay, it’s not a flower.
Well, don’t you want to know what it is?
What is it, Dicey?
Yeah, you almost want to know. It’s a Volkswagen.
Why a Volkswagen?
I felt like it. Want me to do one on yours?
Yeah, sure. Okay.
I’ll bet.
I read: Bright Personable Man. I hesitate and add: Wants . . .
Aren’t you going to get them?
I tap the pencil and go to look for a pair of underpants.

I go out for a long walk, stop in a phone booth and dial Leilani’s number. The phone rings twice. I hang up. With a panicked, empty feeling I stand in the phone booth.
I see the psychiatrist again.
He asks, was your wife cold?
Cold! Jesus, no!
Later he says, I get a strong feeling about Dicey. Who she is. What she is. Your dislike. Your attraction for her. Your wife, on the other hand, still seems somehow . . . remote . . . when you talk about her.

I cancel my next appointment and tell his secretary I'll call again in a few days.

I see Kelly sitting across from me, grey hair Youthhaired less grey, slowly rubbing his tennis elbow, and squinting through the smoke of his cigarette at some point on the ceiling.

Kelly, I say, what's happened?

I'm thinking about writing Kelly while Dicey and I lie on the fold-out bed, clothes over the chairs, windowpanes beaded with moisture. In the next room, Ivy is listening to the Elvis Presley story. It's been on one hour every morning for a week and has a week to go. Interviews and music. Those who knew him. Those who know him. Those who know people who know him. And the King of Rock and Roll, himself. So far, they've gone all the way from Tupelo, Mississippi, to the *Louisiana Hayride*, from the *Ed Sullivan Show* to that famous haircut and his being proud to serve in the U.S. Army in Germany, he is back from Germany and though they have predicted he would not survive being out of the public eye, he is back, it is 1961, and he is bigger than ever.

Dicey and I start to make love slowly. I kind of want to get up, but it's happening. I hear Ivy start laughing at something Elvis has just said.

Dicey says, I love you, Jack.

I don't say anything. I listen to hear what the next song will be, but the man keeps talking about how Elvis' image has survived.

Dicey's sweater, *Retour Du Sahara*, is hanging over the back of a chair. It's not a sweater, it's a flannel shirt, and the Arabs, whom I had remembered as having robes of pale moonlight color, are actually wearing khaki colored robes and the palm trees are much bigger and greener. Other than these details, it is the same.
I am still sure that Retour Du Sahara is a famous quotation or line or title to a poem, and decide to get to the library and look it up sometime soon.

I go for a couple of more job interviews and midway through one of the interviews, I look down and see my pants and sleeves covered with husky hair. How long has that been going on, I wonder, maybe that’s why I haven’t been having any luck.

After the interview, I walk down the street, it is cold and grey and I think of Kelly sitting across from me in the white bungalow and saying, well, ya gotta start at the root of the problem, what are you afraid of . . . I mean, what’s the worst thing that can happen?

I look out the ocean spray misted window and think, beside Leilani and I ending, I’m afraid it’s a cycle, it’s endless, no matter who I get close to, it will only go so far before it closes off again . . . something inside me.

I start up the narrow stairs to the apartment and have climbed two or three stairs—I feel weak and wonder if I maybe need a blood test—when I look up to see the girl across the hall has started down the stairs. Her face is puffy and shiny in the pale winter light, her belly enormous.

I climb a couple of more steps and see that maybe there won’t be room enough. We are only a few steps apart and she is still coming down. She is holding on to the bannister.

Hi, just a second, I say, my head level with her belly.

I backtrack down the stairs, she keeps coming, and nods, thanks, how ya doin? in a midwestern twang.

Fucking shitty, I say.

She smiles and looks away.

I go ahead of her down the hall and pull open the door.

No, I was only kidding, I say.

She smiles and buttons her top button. See ya’ll later, she says.

Inside, the apartment is empty, Dicey’s at classes, Ivy’s doing some secretarial work.

I sit down at the kitchen table, pull out my checkbook and work out the balance. Not much left.
I sit for a minute, then go to my jacket, empty out the pockets and find the ad.
I look at it for a long time.
Then I dial and ask for Mr. Petrillo.
The secretary puts me on hold.
I see a woman coming toward me across a polished dance floor. I'm not sure what she looks like. The music starts to play. I smile to put her at ease and take her very correctly by the waist and hand.
Then Mr. Petrillo is on the phone.
We talk for a few minutes and then he says, well, you seem easy to talk to.
Thanks, I say.
He asks me if I can come in for an interview.
I tell him I can.
He asks, incidentally, how tall are you?
I stare out the window at the snow on the ground. It's going to start getting dark in a few minutes.
With or without shoes? I ask.
With.
Just over five feet in shoes, I say. But wait a second, wait a second! Don't let that put you off, you're not prejudiced, are you?
There is a long uncomfortable pause from Mr. Petrillo's end. Then a cautious, nooo . . . but . . .
Wait, Mr. Petrillo, I am a terrific dancer, a fantastic dancer. Name a dance and I can do it. The cha cha. The fox trot. Name a dance. Go ahead. Beside that, I am a great gymnast. I'm a wonder on the rings. I can walk over seventy-five yards on my hands; any dance I can do with my feet—and I know 'em all, Mr. Petrillo—any dance, I can do on my hands. I can do the Bossa Nova on my hands, the rhumba, I can waltz on my hands . . . and not just waltz, but waltz gracefully . . .
Mr. Petrillo coughs.
You're not going to let my height interfere, are you? Some women like five-footers. As a matter of fact, almost all women secretly . . . Mr. Petrillo hangs up.
I listen to the dial tone for about thirty seconds, then hang up.
Then I peel off my sweater, shirt and tie. The room is slightly chilly.

I clear a path from the kitchen through the bedroom to the bathroom and through the living room—shirts, books, newspapers, underpants, tv guides.

I go to the door, take a deep breath, kneel, put my palms on the floor, ease my weight onto my palms, bring my weight in a ball over my hands, and slowly straighten my legs. Blood pounding to my head, slowly and carefully I start across the room. The tables and chairs move by upside down. The tv. The plants. I walk from the front door, through the kitchen, into the bedroom, around the foot of the bed, and into the bathroom on my hands. The toilet hangs from the floor. Blood pounds to my head. I pivot on the cold tiles and start back to the front door. I get as far as the kitchen before my arms quiver, I lose my balance and land heavily on my back. I lie panting on my back between the kitchen table and the garbage. After a few minutes, I get up, put my shirt and jacket on and take out the garbage.

As I cross an intersection, I hear a car radio. Elvis Presley is coming to the Coliseum in July, all tickets by subscription . . . .

I think of Elvis Presley, the King of Rock and Roll himself, lying up there in some hospital room in Memphis or Nashville, two hundred and thirty pounds, two hundred and fifty, who really knows how overweight the King of Rock and Roll is? All we've been told is he's ashamed to be seen in public. In the mornings, they bring him orange juice and coffee, that's it. By lunch, cottage cheese . . . is the Colonel there? Have Bill Black or any of the old Jordanaires come around to see how he's doing? Is it possible for him to be slim enough by July? I think of the King of Rock and Roll lying there with his hair dyed black, twenty million dollars in the bank and tied up in various investments, a closet full of pink and black suits that no longer fit, Colonel Tom Parker, the old carny man, pacing up and down the hospital corridor, the Colonel says, I love this boy like a son, what's his weight this morning, goddamnit!

Will he be slim enough by July?
Christ, what poor Elvis must be going through to lose the weight.
I wonder if Ivy saved a copy of the diet she sent Elvis.
Who knows, maybe the Colonel opened the letter, jumped up, clicked his old carny man's heels together, hot damn! This is it, find that woman, fly her down here to Memphis . . . .

Dicey closes the door and stands by the chair a moment. She looks sadly out the window. Melodrama. Guiding Light time. The husky stands panting, looking up at her.
I'm supposed to ask what's the matter.
I don't.
She looks at her fingernails.
What's the matter, I ask.
I can see from the blinded look in her eyes she has a migraine.
She doesn't answer.
Dicey?
She doesn't answer.
I don't say anymore.
After a minute, she says so I can barely make her out: I just ran into my old boyfriend at the store.
I wait.
He found out he's got diabetes. He has to give himself insulin shots every morning for the rest of his life.
She looks quizzically at me a moment, then rushes by.
I follow her into the bedroom. The bathroom door slams.
Dicey? I tap on the door. I hear her sobbing inside. Dicey?
She doesn't answer.
Fuck you, I say softly, diabetes isn't that bad. I go out.

I open the trunk of my car—my surf casting rod, my tackle box. Absently, I rummage through the tangle of hooks, leaders, swivels, sinkers, bright feathers, spoons . . . I poke around the stuff thinking of all the fish I had caught in Hawaiian waters and would not be able to catch here with these bright feathers.
I poke around some more and find a plastic container under some leaders. I peel off the lid. Inside, a roll of bills. Crisp and dry. I wonder where the money . . . .
C. E. POVERMAN

I remember. Poker. Kelly, three of his shrink friends, and I. Everyone out except Kelly and me. We'd raised and doubled a few times, Kelly had leaned back in his chair and studied me a long time through his black glasses, Kelly'd gone on watching me, and finally said, a little disdainfully, dropping in a wad to match my last raise and more to call, okay, I'll have a little peek at them cards, feller.

Three kings and two tens.
That time I hadn't been bluffing. Kelly had looked at me. I'd shrugged. You're a shrink, Kelly, you're supposed to know when they're bluffing and when they're not.

Later that night, I'd been out fishing. The Molokai Channel surge was starting to reach up on the rocks and soak me, so I'd put the money in the plastic container to keep it dry, the Coleman lantern up on a rock ledge.

I count the money. Fifty dollars.

I deposited the money in the bank and wrote out a check for two prime seats to the Elvis Presley concert. I paused and then wrote Dicey's address for return. I knew Ivy would have her ticket by now.

I thought for a moment of the quizzical, almost hurt look on Kelly's face when I'd said, you're supposed to know when they're bluffing.

I felt bad. That hadn't been fair to say. At least, not when I'd just won fifty bucks off him. I looked around me at the puddles of melting snow. No, not fair at all. Most of the time, I didn't know when I was bluffing myself. And didn't usually find out until long afterward.

I would have to write to Kelly and apologize.

The snow melted and disappeared, the girl across the hall kept gestating, the tickets to the Elvis Presley concert came. When I got the tickets, I thought about the King again. I wondered how he was doing with his weight. I figured he had about three months to make it. Maybe less, depending on when and where his tour started. Meanwhile, was he staying in shape, maybe singing in his hospital room while nurses flocked outside his
door? And fat—had fat changed the quality of his voice, could it? I wondered if Elvis had to keep in practice or if he had been singing so long that he just had somehow, in the course of his life in rock and roll, altered and re-encoded his genes so that rock and roll pumped through his auricles and ventricles, bass runs and fine silvery filigreed rifts flickered like heat lightning between his synapses and at night, when he fell asleep, even in the hospital, he climbed long ladders of lyrics to the stars.

Then I thought, what would he do if he didn't lose the weight? Would he cancel the tour and disappoint his fans? Or would the show go on, anyway? Fat or not?

A couple more months went by, the grass got green, the tulips started coming up, and the women in the apartment would congregate on the grass to discuss the business of everyone in the apartment. One of them, the old maid of fifty-two, Irene, who had called us when Ivy fell, and who, according to Dicey, who had it from Alice, her best friend, had never done that with a man, not even once, much less seen a man naked, asked if men had hair where women did? Dicey brought her down a copy of *Viva* and Irene sat there in a lawn chair, turning the pages and going, Oh! My Jesus! Oh! Oh, my God! and laughing, so you could hear her all over the apartment, My Jesus! they're like chipmunks! When she came to a page where a man was cupping a woman's breast, Irene suddenly let out a cry, my God! Oh! My Jesus, they touch them there, too! Then she held the magazine at arms length, looked at me and said, this one looks like Jack! Oh!

Dicey said, maybe I'll loan you Jack.

Irene looked at me. Oh! Oh! Oh! and laughed.

Later, I said to Dicey, that wasn't too funny, what makes you think I'm yours to lend?

Dicey sucked her lower lip, looked at me with her grey eyes, and slapped me on the shoulder. You are, you big shit, you are.

A few days after that, there was some trouble. Ivy's check came back in the mail. She'd been just a little too late, the concert had been sold out. The King could still sell out a concert, even in the hospital.
C. E. POWERMAN

She sat there on the sofa and looked at the check. She smoothed the edges. She laughed. I'm glad. I would have been disappointed, probably. This way is better. She was blinking rapidly behind her cataract lenses. I turned away.

A couple of days after that, Ivy slipped and sprained her ankle so badly she had to limp around on crutches.

I knew Ivy would never accept the tickets from me. She'd ask me where was my ticket and when I couldn't produce one, she wouldn't take mine.

I was still young. I had plenty of time to see the King.

The night of the concert, a hot humid July night, I dug into my tackle box and got out the tickets. I left the two tickets on the kitchen table, just before dinner, and wrote a note.

Dear Ivy and Dicey,

Two tickets to see the King of Rock and Roll. I'll be held up, but I'll meet you inside the concert. I've got my ticket with me so go ahead in.

Love,
Jack

I waited until about an hour after show time and then walked back toward the apartment. The windows were dark.

Irene was sitting on the grass in the fading light.

Hi, Jack.

I didn't answer.

I let myself back in. The tickets were gone. The bathroom mirror was still fogged and the air smelled heavily of perfume. The husky lay with his head between the toilet and the tile bathroom wall. He was panting. It was the coolest place in the house, but he was still panting.

I went over to the stereo and put on an album: Elvis' Gold Records, Vol. 2, 50,000,000 Elvis Fans Can't Be Wrong.

I listened to both sides and then went out. It was hot and humid. The leaves grew into the silvery humidity around the streetlights. I walked and looked up at the stars.

I walked mile after mile. Movies let out, clocks struck the hour,
cars sped by. One passed and a beer can flew out, rolled across the road, bounced off the curb, and landed in front of me.

In a while, Elvis would probably be winging somewhere up among the stars in his private jet, slipping off into dreams of rock and roll, rhythm and blues, while the jet streaked toward Nashville or Memphis.

I came to Leilani’s place. The trees grew up around the third floor. I knew how it looked from inside because I used to live there. The lights were on and shining out into the leaves. The silver Corvette was in front.

I walked to a pay phone and dialed.
A man answered.
I asked for Leilani.

After a moment, Leilani picked up the phone and said, hello.
I lost my breath a moment.

Hello? I could hear the slight Hawaiian accent in the word. I remembered the day we walked to the center of the island.

Leilani, I said, this is Jack.
There was a long pause.
Leilani . . . I . . . love . . . you.
She didn’t answer.
Leilani, I love you more than anything.
After a moment, she said softly, Jack . . .

Leilani, I choked and hung up.

Ivy was still dressed to the nines. Radiant, she sat on the sofa, her cane beside her, the ankle propped on the coffee table.

Where were you, Jack?
They screwed up and separated our seats. But I was close. I could see everything.

Ivy shook her head. He was gorgeous!
Ivy was afraid she wouldn’t be able to make it up the escalator with the cane and sprained ankle.

How’d you handle it, Ivy?
Like a champ. Mom got on and rode right to the top, no sweat.

I thought for a minute of Ivy riding the escalator with her cane and sprained ankle.
C. E. POVERMAN

No trouble getting off at the top?
None.
Her eyes still had a far away look.
Jackie, wasn’t he just so slim?
Ivy, as slim as he was in Jailhouse Rock.
I tell you, when he stepped out in that white jump suit, with
the pearl belt, oh, God, he was a vision, he just knocked my eyes
out. Do you think he used the diet?
I do. I really think he did.
Oh, God, his eyes were so blue, Jack. And slim! Better than I
could have believed possible. If I’d been twenty years younger, I
would have chased him right off the stage.

Then Dicey and I were lying without the sheet, our bodies
cooling from making love and the July heat.
Dicey lifted her head. Jackie, tell me you love me.
I do, Dicey, I do. I love you.
No, you don’t, Jack.
I felt tears starting to run across my shoulder. I lay silent a long
time.
Finally I said, you’re a bitch, you know that, Dicey?
I know, she said. So do you. That’s why you like me, isn’t it?
I didn’t say anything.
In the next room, above the sound of the fan, I could hear Ivy
snoring. I wondered what she was dreaming.
I’m a bitch and it turns you on.
I didn’t answer.
Just admit it to yourself. You can lie to me, but admit it to
yourself, Jack. I’m a bitch and she wasn’t, was she?
I stared at the ceiling. The husky was panting at the foot of the
bed.
You’ll be in trouble when you find out I’m not the bitch you
thought I was. You’ll have to find someone else and start all over
again.
She lifted her head. Just tell me the truth for once.
I love you.
No, she shook her head, no. Tell me the truth, just say you
don’t love me.
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I didn't say anymore.
She started to cry again.
Finally, I said, Dicey, is this the way it's going to be?
I waited for an answer.
She didn't answer. She went on crying.
Big Blues

BIG BLUES HAVE disturbed his sleep.

Big blues have disturbed his waking and sleeping hours.

Big blues have made Chase unquiet and turned his life to disarray so he is eating badly and dreaming feverishly.

Big blues have caused Chase to get up in the dark and go to bed in broad daylight.

There is a picture of a big blue scotchtaped over his pillow. The big blue is taking a diamond jig.

It starts one night as Chase is inching in. The news is still on in the next room and Chase hears the phrase, big blues . . . here.

After a moment, Chase receives a tap on the shoulder. It is a light tap, but Chase is startled.

Chase, she says, Chase, you’re not in me, anymore.

He looks down.

You’re right.

Chase, your mind’s somewhere else. That’s a dead fish down there.

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BIG BLUES

She slaps his shoulder.
She gets up and starts to dress.
Once, Chase says, you've got them on inside out.
She doesn't say anything, but dresses faster. When she leaves, she slams the door behind her.

In the bathroom, Chase drops the lid and sinks slowly. He stares at Sal Angel's tide table. It is tacked above the doorknob. June, July and a good part of August are almost gone. The tide has ebbed and flooded four times a day for almost eighty consecutive days. Seaver has lost and regained his stuff. The networks have started carrying the exhibition games and soon the teams will make their final cuts. The harbor has filled up with bunkers and the bunkers have stayed and fattened so now the gulls can hardly take off with them in their beaks. Still, Chase has not gotten a big blue. Chase runs his fingertip down highwater and checks his watch. It's a bum tide, but still, he's tempted to try. He goes back in and lies on the bed and stares at the picture of the big blue.

In the street, whenever the kids see Chase appear with his pole and bucket, they stop their Kung Fu kicks and dancing and follow Chase on their bikes. They gather around his convertible.

Chase, Chase, where you think you goin?
Goin fishin, Georgia.
Chase, whatcha think you gonna catch?
Chase pokes the rod in through the window. Chase gets in on the other side because the driverside door fell off and is wired permanently into place. The kids watch Chase crawl across the front seat and giggle. Daylight comes through tears in the roof and weeds have taken root in them.
Chase, you gonna catch pogies?
Chase, you gonna catch flats?
Chase, gonna catch hisself one big catfish.
Wilma, ain't no catfish where Chase go. I told ya that one time already. No way. Chase don't go in no rivers, lakes, streams, no creeks, either. Chase goin in the ocean, aincha, Chase?
Chase starts the car.
Come on, Chase, whatcha after?
C. E. POVERMAN

Chase can see Leroy's red bike pennant out in front.
Someone yells, Leroy, get outta way!
Leroy peddles out, looks at Chase, and standing on the ped-
dles, falls off.
Chase, whatcha after? My momma say, Chase got circles
under his eyes like a man distracted.
Chase stares ahead. After a moment, he turns and looks at
Georgia.
Georgia, I have told you many times before what I'm after.
Georgia, what am I after?
I forgot it, Chase. Only fish I know in the chopped ice.
Chase swallows. His hand tightens on the wheel. Georgia, I'm
after blues. Big blues.
Big blues! Georgia repeats. Big blues, that's it!
Big blues, they say, turning their transistors back up, Chase,
he after big blues. They fan out in the street and cover both
sidewalks, dancing and slapping each other's palms and sending
Kung Fu kicks to the fatal spot behind each other's ear.

Chase had started from the beach with a surf rod and Coleman
lantern. That was back in late June. How many tides ago? The
beach, a bum place to fish. The bait would sit out there on the
bottom and the crabs would always be giving false alarms and
having a field day cleaning the bait—bad, but better than noth-
ing.
When a friend had gone on vacation and left Chase his out-
board, it had been a real windfall. Chase had had a surge of
hope—no, not hope, but certainty.
No time was too early or too late to get up and go out.
The twenty-four hour clock had vanished. Chase could look
at a watch and see no numbers: only high tide and low tide, the
breakwater covered or uncovered.
He had gotten up before sunrise to fish the rising tide. He had
watched the water come out of the black beneath, become
shadowless grey with the sky streaking hot colors behind the oil
tanks, and then turn deep blue as the sun rose.
He had gone out late in the afternoon to fish sunset—watching
the sun fading until the black in the water would rise through the depths and then he would look up and see the stars out.

He had fished at high noon.

He had fished whole mornings and afternoons. He had used bunker, mackerel, hooks and diamond jigs.

He had trolled; he had drifted; he had anchored.

He had fished in shallow water and deep water, in and out of channels, and he had fished on the ebb and flood.

He had spent hours looking for schools of blues feeding on the surface. Once, he'd been surrounded by a huge school of bunkers where the harbor narrowed and the lights from the moored tankers and scrap iron yards blazed into the water. The bunkers had been jumping wildly, and Chase had suddenly stood up and yelled, they're here! He'd stayed out all night, snagging bunkers until the boat was slippery with blood, but no big blues. Chase couldn't understand it.

Another time, he'd seen a thunderstorm coming. The sky had darkened the color of rotten eggs. Chase figured he'd fish a little longer and then run for it, but the storm had suddenly overtaken him. Chase had bailed furiously. The lightning and thunder were low overhead and the lightning was so bright everything lost color. The boat half-filled with water and Chase, sure he was going to get greased by a bolt of lightning, dropped the bailing can and lay in the bottom of the boat, mumbling, oh, God, oh, God. The storm had passed away to the east, making the shore disappear, and Chase had sat up to bail and feel foolish.

Often, he'd been ready to quit and then he'd think of Sal Angel's. Sal Angel's was in the old Italian part where the Puerto Rican neighborhood met the black neighborhood, like the line of a fierce tide rip, and the harbor smelled strong of fuel oil and ships and tide.

Sal, as a finale to any solicited advice and gossip would always smile and say, Chase, ya're never too early; Chase, ya're never too late; and, Chase, ya never, never know what they're gonna do, right?

Chase would be ready to reel in and he'd think of Sal Angel saying that and cut himself another piece of bait and sigh.
C. E. POVERMAN

Sometimes, Chase could not but wonder if it weren't a conspiracy to sell bait, steel leaders, hooks, jigs, swivels—Sal Angel more like an oracle who'd sold out to sheer mindless optimism—after all, he was selling bait and tackle, right?

On the way out of the store, the old Italian men who sat between the cigarette machine and nets would watch Chase to the door and lean over to talk among themselves. Their stomachs, hard and round as huge bocci balls, would spread their suspenders as they'd lean to whisper in veiled accents—increasingly, to Chase, the mother tongue of Machiavelli and all conspiracy.

As the summer went on, and Chase would turn from the cash register, the door would seem farther away, the old men's voices more like the suck of tide at a shoal.

As he'd get halfway to the door, Sal would yell, hey, Chase. Chase would turn.

Good luck! Don't catch em all! And then Chase would hear the old men's voices.

Once, Chase had stopped halfway between the cash register and the door, sure they were laughing at him, but they'd only sat looking straight ahead, puffing on their cigars and sending up curtains of smoke.

The dreams started.
The horizon tipsy, the breakwater, the harbor buoys, and a sense, a presence. In the dream, the voice said, they're here.

Where, said Chase.

Here off Milford, the voice answered.

What are they hitting on, said Chase.

Bunkers. Bunkers off the bottom, the voice answered. Get up, Chase, the time is now.

Chase got up. It was a little after four.

Chase sat in the dark.

Chase shook himself, get up, said Chase in the dark; the time is now. The time is now off Milford.

Chase had fished off Milford until the sun was high and his bait gone. He'd fallen asleep to wake and find himself adrift, sleeping in the bottom of the boat.
Chase opened his mind to the possibilities of paranormal communication. Somewhere between sleeping and waking one night, he saw the water changing colors on the ceiling. Somewhere. Where? He realized it was a creek emptying into the ocean. He recognized the creek. It was Carolina Creek. He knew where. Off East Haven.

Chase sat up and said, they're off Carolina Creek!

It was after midnight.

On the way out, the fog closed in so the buoys and lights disappeared one by one and then all Chase could know was the distant sound of the foghorn on the breakwater. The air got cold and seemed to be rising from some rotting place. The fog condensed in Chase's hair and rolled off his nose and chin, and Chase got the rank dense smell of the bottom in his mouth.

Ahead, he saw red port and green starboard running lights. Close and bearing down. He swung quickly.

Another fisherman, must be.

Chase shouted.

Any luck?

A light went on, diffuse and muted in the fog. The light focused on a hand holding something long and blue in the fog.

Chase swallowed. After a second, Chase shouted, where?

The voice came back, muffled and distorted through the fog: Carolina Creek.

The light went off, the boat faded and disappeared.

Off Carolina Creek, Chase caught sea robins. When he boated the first one and had gone to pull the hook out, the sea robin made hoarse croaks and flapped its orange-red wings on the bottom of the boat.

A while later, it was a large black spider crab. Even when Chase shook the line, the crab wouldn't let go of the bait and once he'd swung the crab hard to bash it against the side of the boat. It hit him in the face so Chase stood up, cursed, and felt a hot and cold chill pass across his chest and shoulders.

It had taken Chase hours to find his way back through the fog. He'd gotten back on his last drop of gas.

In the morning, he'd gone into Sal Angel's and spent over six dollars on two hundred and twenty-five yards of forty test
C. E. POVERMAN

monofilament. He was sure his twenty-pound test wouldn’t be enough when the time came.

As he passed the old men between the cigarette machine and nets, he pretended he knew something not even Sal Angel knew.

The sink was full of dirty dishes. Chase no longer knew when to eat or what to eat or even when he was hungry; he was waking up at odd hours now and falling dead asleep at eleven in the morning.

He took to eating at McDonald’s.

There was a hot dog stand about two hundred yards from McDonald’s—Rinaldi’s. The dusty parking lot was always full of greasers. Chase had eaten there a couple of times, but had gotten bad indigestion—even for Chase.

So it was McDonald’s.

Chase would say to himself, shall we dine at the arches, tonight?

After a moment, he’d answer, certainly, the arches, then.

From anywhere out in the dark harbor, Chase could see the white lights of McDonald’s. Beside McDonald’s, there were two pale green range lights on steel towers. When the lights lined up to make one, the tankers knew they were in the channel. When Chase lost his bearings, he’d look in at McDonald’s and know pretty much where he was or where he had to get.

One night, Chase noticed one of the girls behind the counter. She was always making strange motions with her legs and occasionally going up on her toes, or stretching, or dipping, in a peculiar way. Chase noticed her as she turned to get his order. Halfway between the counter and Hot Apple Pie and Big Macs, she did it again. Went up on her toes, right on the tiles. Chase noticed she was wearing shiny ballet slippers. Her legs were long and had fine golden hairs in mid thigh beneath the hem of her skirt, and she was so tall, Chase had to stand as straight as he could to equal her height.

As she gave Chase his Big Mac and coffee, he noticed he smelled of cut bait. He read her name tag.

You’re Stella.
She pointed at the faded letters on his army jacket: and you're Chase. What are those steps you take? Plis. Plis? What are they? Movements. Pointe. Turn-out. Changement de pieds. Échappé. I'm studying to be a dancer. Just then Chase recognized someone and said, hey, Harry . . . Harry? but Harry didn't recognize him and passed by without saying hello. Chase felt invisible and embarrassed and went outside. Over at Rinaldi's, the greasers were raising clouds of dust on their choppers, bouncing back and forth, hunched down beneath their Nazi helmets, taking off in rising volleys of sound which faded on the curb near the sewage treatment plant, or returning suddenly to throw hairy 180s and raise more dust. A couple of voices called out of the dust. Hey, a fisherman. Yeah, a fisherman. They said it long and slow, saying each syllable of fisherman, fish—er—man as an invitation to fight. Chase crawled across his front seat, half spilling the coffee. As he ate his Big Mac, he could see Stella in there, through the window, moving gracefully, occasionally making those movements she called plis, or pointe, or else just making a graceful whirl with handfuls of cheeseburgers and french fries. Chase thought she was pretty.

Chase always dreamed of the Race. There were big blues in the Race. It was where the Atlantic met the Sound and there was life in that boiling water. He'd been half tempted to go out there, but it was forty miles and even if he could make the forty miles, it was crazy to think the boat could hold up in those rip tides. Just last week there'd been those three black guys overturned in a boat right off Branford. They'd found one hanging onto the boat, the other two, gone, not even their bodies, yet, and they'd searched and sent down divers. Nothing to do, now, but wait for the bodies to rise.
C. E. POWERMAN

No, the Race was out.
Then Chase was carving the bat. He kept an old Louisville Slugger on board for a fish pacifier. He was working the Spalding brand into a mermaid with long flowing hair, daydream breasts, and a tail curled voluptuously like a seahorse's.
He carved and dreamed of the blues finally schooling up on the surface to feed, gulls swooping and wheeling overhead, air dark with them, the water boiling with bunkers and explosions of water as the big blues would rip into the schools from below.
Chase stared at his line disappearing down into the dark.
Had Sal Angel caught any fish? Sure, Sal probably had caught loads of fish, all beauties. No junk fish would dare hit Sal's line.
And what about that guy, Joey, who rang the cash register walleyed and had a speech defect and spoke in husky bursts like he'd scare the fish away.
Even he had his picture in the reel case by the cash register—the Valhalla of all great catches. There he was, almost on his toes so the tail would clear the ground, straining to hold up a forty-pound striper with both hands hooked under the gill, the caption: Joey Giordelli, 42 pound striper, Niantic.
How did Joey talk to the fish? Sal Angel?
Chase jigged his line up and down a couple of times.
He wondered how long he would live. He said out loud in the dark, I'm not going to live very long. He felt sad. A while later, he started laughing, repeating, I'm not going to live long, and laughing.
Chase felt his hook take hold somewhere down in the dark. He stood up and began to reel. Something was taking out his drag. It was dead weight. Something huge and phosphorescent was rising in the dark. Christ, said Chase, Christ, the body, but it was only a half-smashed lobster pot.

When sunset and darkness seemed to close in fast one cloudy Thursday, Chase realized the days were getting shorter. Chase got a couple of hits that night, hard and sudden, but they seemed to throw the hook before he could say they were blues. They came about twenty minutes apart. After the second hit, Chase stayed out for hours, waiting.
In McDonald’s, Stella came down off her toes and moved to the counter. After she took his order, she went up on point, came down, and said, Chase, I do hope this isn’t all you eat, this kind of food. You could starve to death on it.

Chase said, oh, no, I have some other things.

Stella said, because you look like you’ve lost weight.

Chase noticed she put her eye shadow on badly—a thin, black line above the eyelashes which would begin to smudge and streak and contrast oddly with her pale blue eyes, but Chase thought somehow it made her look more beautiful—the smudged eyeshadow. She had a small carrot-colored mole near her nose and that made her look beautiful, too.

When she brought him his order, she said, you’re fishing. It wasn’t a question, and it wasn’t a statement.

Chase was again aware he smelled of cut bait, salt water and outboard fumes.

His mouth was dry, but she didn’t ask him if he was having any luck.

Then there was a fat woman talking beside Chase and it was clear she had overheard that he was fishing, she was dressed in traditional black like an Italian widow and she was talking in an Italian accent and making wide eloquent gestures and pointing at Chase and his two Big Macs and steaming coffee.

All of the time, they are, these men, going out upon the waters, they are smelling of baitfish, this one particularly, I smell the cut bait upon his very body, he is the breath and soul of cut bait, he is breathing and smelling of cut bait, ho! these men are gone upon the waters day and night, day and night, thinking of nothing but sport, high sport and low sport, they are taken over by sport, these men, high and low, but above all, sport! yes! and of course, they are taken over by their stomachs, oh, yes! and what they can put in their stomachs, ho! for they work up a hearty appetite upon the waters, famished and hungry like wolves, they come home and all they can think of, these men, is what they can put in these stomachs, ho!

And she turned, fairly gracefully for such a fat woman, and walked to the door.

Stella started to go up on point. The manager, bleached a
permanent fluorescent midwestern white, in double knits, ap­
peared close to the french fries. Halfway up, Stella fluttered
down without looking at the manager, whose name was Brad,
and stared out at some place in the distance.

She said to herself after a moment, Chase does not smell of
bait, but of harbors, estuaries, the sea.

Chase picked up his Big Macs, hesitated, and then said, I have
had some other things to eat beside these.

Stella nodded. Good, because you could starve to death on this
food; and, you have lost weight, but at least your color’s good.

Chase said, how’s this job? and Stella said, slavery, but it pays
for my dancing and that’s all that counts.

The fat woman had her chubby hands on the door and when
she heard the word slavery, she suddenly turned and started
moving back toward them so that Chase picked up his order and
dashed for the door; she pushed by and as he got to the door, he
heard her start suddenly, slavery! of course it’s slavery, of course
he’s losing weight . . . tits and asses, tits and asses, that’s all the
world is thinking about, tits and asses, and those mysterious
places deep within . . . .

Outside, Chase peered back through the glass. The fat woman
was talking at Stella who suddenly made a pas glissade and disap­
peared behind the Hot Apple Pie.

At home, Chase stepped on the scale.

Stella was right. He had lost weight. Ten pounds.

He stepped off. He realized he hadn’t been with a woman since
he couldn’t remember when.

He slept fitfully, having feverish dreams he couldn’t re­
member, but having vaguely to do with things crawling on the
ocean bottom. He woke once—wide awake—at exactly 5:07
when the tide was at full flood, got out of bed for a drink of
water, and then fell back to sleep.

Chase had drifted well beyond Carolina Creek and the red
nun, but was still inside Townsend Ledge Bell when he got the
hit. It was just before sunset. It wasn’t a perfect tide—as a matter
of fact, it was a bum tide—the rocks were already well
uncovered—and Chase had been thinking of quitting. He’d started slowly reeling in the line when whatever it was hit with a chop and then another one, and Chase just had time to set the hook before the fish took out his drag and bowed the rod—a second later, the line went slack so Chase thought he’d lost it, but the fish had only started to rise.

In a few moments, the fish broke water, flashing clear, and then disappearing. Chase had time to see it was a blue.

The blue was diving. He took out a lot of line and Chase let him, keeping the pressure on by reeling, but not tightening the drag.

Chase didn’t want a broken line because he couldn’t be patient and wait for the blue to tire.

The blue did seem to tire briefly and Chase took in a lot of line before the blue leaped again, closer to the boat. Chase shouted and the blue dove again, this time not so deep. Chase again took in more line.

The blue was rising near the boat now. Chase could see his dark back in the water. He was just beneath the surface and, keeping the pressure on, Chase reached for the net.

The white belly of the blue flashed and Chase thought he’d rolled and thrown the hook, but no, he was still on, but diving again. Chase dropped the net and went on reeling. He wished the handle of the net were longer.

The blue didn’t take out so much line this time and Chase brought him up to the surface again and he stopped reeling long enough to take the butt of the rod in his left hand and feel for the net until he had it in his right.

Chase was afraid the moment would allow the blue enough slack to throw the hook, and Chase spooned the net down into the water as fast as he could.

Chase could hardly move the net. Chase pushed the net toward the blue’s tail, but he couldn’t make it move quickly enough through the water. It was like trying to run in thigh-deep water. As the net moved toward the tail, the blue flicked his tail and thrashed.

Chase, leaning overboard, on his knees, almost lost his balance and fell in, but caught himself.
C. E. POVERMAN

The blue took out more line. Chase dropped the net in the boat, and the blue disappeared back down where the water was black.

Chase's throat and lips were dry. Chase swallowed and licked his lips. He was still on his knees.

He picked up the rod and started reeling. After several moments, Chase again felt the blue.

This time, the blue rose close to the boat, drifting in so close that if Chase had had a free hand, he could have touched the fish.

Again, the blue passed beside the boat, the belly a stark white as the blue made a half roll.

Chase said out loud, if he comes in again . . . .

The blue came in.

Chase dropped the rod and picked up the net with both hands. He pushed the net into the water and the netting drifted back slowly as he pushed it toward the tail.

Chase pushed as hard as he could.

At arm's length, the rim of the net reached under the tail. Chase felt the gunwale dig into his chest. Chase moved his knee toward the rod with the vague idea he might press the line and keep it taut. Chase didn't care if he broke the rod.

Chase began to lift the net. He didn't have much strength with both of his arms extended like this—and from being on his knees.

The net rose slowly toward the dorsal fin, the gills, the eye.

The blue inched forward.

Chase was panting. Chase followed with the net, his arms trembling. Chase said, now, and leaned over as far as he could, water suddenly poured over the gunwale, and Chase lifted the net. It got easier and easier to lift as it came out of the water and then harder again as Chase took the weight of the blue free of the water.

Something silver flashed from the corner of the blue's mouth. Chase flinched and ducked.

Something stung his scalp.

He swung the blue inboard and dropped the net.

Carefully, feeling with his fingers, Chase groped up and untangled the jig from his hair.
The blue slapped against the bottom of the boat. His eye moved, back and forth, back and forth.

Chase was trying to know what he was feeling now.

He looked at the black and green scales, so thick around the mouth and eye. The downturned mouth, opening and closing, the teeth.

Chase said out loud, Chase, what do you think, now?

He couldn’t tell and after a moment, Chase caught his breath, picked up the bat, hesitated, and hit the blue on the wide flat place between the eyes. The blue thrashed and stiffened, opening and closing his mouth. Chase hit the blue again, the blue convulsed and stiffened, and a streak of blood appeared near the eye.

Then Chase sat down. He leaned back and fitted the curve of his back into the bow of the boat and stared up into the sky. The sun had set and several stars were out.

The harbor was full of lights. Flashing reds and greens, reds and greens, rising and falling, running lights, deck lights on the tankers, vertical whites from a passing tug, the twin white strobes on the power plant stack; the outboard left a carpet of phosphorescence behind, an electrostatic blue the color of a comb being passed through hair in the dark. Suddenly, Chase was very hungry. So hungry he felt nauseous.

Chase looked through the glass. Stella had her back to him.

Chase pulled open the door, then changed his mind and went back to the car.

He got in and sat a minute.

Then he got out again and looked in the window a long time.

He got back in the car.

Then Chase stood outside McDonald’s and tapped on the glass. Some people near the window looked up. Chase tapped harder. Stella peered out and Chase tapped again quickly and after a second she gave a quick wave.

Chase waved back and held up the blue. He wasn’t sure she could see it so he pressed the blue right up against the glass.

Stella smiled, a beautiful smile, went up on point, and moved
into a series of jumps, changement de pieds, pas assemblé and grand jeté.

Brad the manager appeared by the french fries and crossed his arms.

Stella suddenly did a small sissonne tombée forward which became a jeté en tournant. As she rose through the air, her toe floated above vanilla, chocolate and strawberry milkshakes and Chase could see the black crotch of her dance tights.

Brad the manager made several attempts to approach Stella, but each time, Stella would perform a sissonne ouverte en écarté and once, a saut de basque, so that he would step back quickly like a man changing his mind at a curb, while Stella’s toe stopped inches short of his nose.

Stella whirled gracefully and elegantly in the close quarters between the Big Macs and Hot Apple Pie.

The customers watched with hamburgers poised below open mouths.

Chase could see Brad the manager pleading. The other girls, well clear, stood shoulder to shoulder, arms crossed, and, smiling, leaned against the wall.

Chase saw faces appear framed where Big Macs and Quarter Pounders usually issued forth. Their eyes followed Stella back and forth like spectators at a tennis game.

Stella whirled by Brad the manager, he made a grab for her, she whirled away, her toe just touching his nose on a saut de basque, leaving a smudge of dirt on the tip of his nose, and, reaching behind her, she undid the apron and threw it so it fluttered down on his head.

Brad the manager tore the apron away from his face in time to see Stella alight on the counter, perform a series of arabesques and come to a sudden stop on point.

Brad the manager made another grab for Stella balanced on one leg; Stella hopped down off the counter. In a moment, she was moving toward the door with the most elegant walk Chase had ever seen. As the door opened, Chase could hear applause mixed with sounds of chaos.

Stella looked Chase up and down.
I’ve just been fired.
Stella, you can really dance. You’re a star!
Stella pulled her hair pin and her hair fell down her shoulders and back and stopped right above her waist.
Stella looked at the blue.
Good God, Chase, that’s a beauty! A real beauty. You must be starved. Follow me home and I’ll cook it for you. You need a good meal. Real food. Something nourishing. I thought I would die if I saw you eat another one of those Big Macs. They oughta outlaw ’em.
Chase looked at the blue. He hadn’t thought about cooking it. But what else would he do with it. Take a picture of it for Sal Angel’s fish Valhalla? No way.
Chase had sort of had it in the back of his mind to show the blue to Georgia and Wilma and Leroy, all the kids out in the street—just to show them something about where fish came from, sort of. But they’d all be home sleeping in their beds, now, dreaming of Kung Fu and Superfly. And the blue was getting heavy, just standing here, like a dummy, holding it.
Chase said, okay, Stella, let’s cook it.
As he followed Stella out of the lot, a couple of greasers pulled out of the dust from Rinaldi’s on their choppers and swung close to her fenders as though they were going to kick her car, but at the last second, they shifted gears suddenly so their elbows snapped down and the choppers rocked and lifted on their frames; in a moment, their red taillights disappeared one after the other around the curve and the sound faded.
Not too far from Stella’s, Chase heard a band playing—a high school marching band in the A&P parking lot. Everyone was dressed in sneakers and old football jerseys and jeans and some who thought they’d heard the whispers of revolution and counterculture had pony tails and bare feet and stiff denim overalls. Everyone marched out of step, and blew like hell, and beat the drums, large and small, making a hell of a din; the white spotlights shined down on their beat-up tubas and cymbals and they marched back and forth across the white lines for cars. Chase got absorbed and almost missed Stella’s turn, but at the last second he saw her taillights just disappearing around the corner.
C. E. POVERMAN

Chase’s car didn’t lock, and though Chase thought it would be rather graceless, he didn’t want to lose his fishing rod. He took it with him.

He got a few steps away from the car and went back for the bat. What the hell, it was only a bat, but he didn’t really want to lose that, either.

Stella didn’t say anything about it, though, as she met him on the sidewalk.

Inside, Stella went back to the door and looked out. After a second, she said, you’re okay, there. I don’t want you to get towed. It’s twenty-five dollars.

There were bikes locked up beside the bannister and the hall smelled of rubber stair tread and stale food.

On the second and third landings, the lights were out so that once Chase almost jammed the tip of the rod into the bannister.

And, once he stumbled and the blue made a flat thwack against the wall. Chase said, excuse me, and then felt stupid.

There was a poster scotchtaped to Stella’s door: war is not healthy for children, flowers, and other living things.

Chase could see it when Stella turned on the light.

Stella said, you can clean him on the fire escape.

She handed Chase some newspaper and a kitchen knife, but Chase had his fillet knife.

Chase started for the fire escape.

Wait a second, Stella. Do you have a scale—a bathroom scale?

In the bathroom, Chase stood on the scale.

Okay, now hand him to me.

Chase cradled both palms and Stella very gently laid the blue in them. They looked down at the same time.

Oh, Chase, incredible.

Then they looked for a yard stick, but Stella only had the yellow tape from her sewing box.

After they’d measured the blue, Stella said, wait.

She lay the blue on the floor. The floor was bare wood. Chase noticed there were no tables or chairs, nothing but a bed, dresser, a stool by the window, and this bare wooden floor.

One wall was a ballet barre and a mirror that wasn’t big enough. The other walls had posters of Rudolf Nureyev and
Veronica Tennant in *Sleeping Beauty* and Judith Jamison of Alvin Ailey in *Cry*.

Stella carefully traced a magic marker outline of the blue on the floor. Okay, Chase.

Chase stood on the dim fire escape, the newspaper spread at his feet. Through the window, he could see Stella mixing a batter. She had taken off her McDonald's uniform and was standing in the black dance tights she had on underneath. Chase centered the blue on the newspaper, nudging it back and forth until he had it right in the middle. Chase could hear the din of the high school marching band rising over the rooftops and slapping between the houses.

He wondered how long it took a blue to get this big.

Then he crouched, cut the head off, slit the belly, spilled, scooped and scraped the guts, and stood in the doorway.

You mind?

No.

Chase crouched over the tub, scaling the blue, and washing it out. The tub stopped draining and filled with blood and pieces of guts in the water. Chase reached into the drain and pulled out scales and tangles of blond hair and when the water drained, he cleaned out the tub.

On the fire escape, he cut off two large fillets. He wrapped the head and guts in newspaper. The spine and what was left were too long and the tail stuck out. Chase dropped the bundle off into the garbage can four floors below. Halfway down, the paper started to open and when it hit the garbage can, it broke open almost completely.

The fillets were too big for the pan. Stella cut off part of one—the rest she put in the refrigerator.

The pan had started to spit softly when Chase saw *Zen and Macrobiotic Cooking* on the shelf over the stove.

Stella, you're not cooking it in any zen hippy way, are you?

No, Chase. Just home style.

Chase drank some wine and watched from the stool by the window. He stared at the outline of the blue on the floor.

Stella was moving up and down, dreamily, on her toes, start-
ing sus-sous, échappé, glissade in one direction or the other, and saying softly, as she stared into the iron pan, God, Chase, a beauty, a real beauty.

She was moving in time to the sound of the blue cooking in the pan. The soft spitting made the electric sound of a jazz drummer tickling a cymbal.

Stella detached herself from the stove and began a series of arabesques, glissade, and sissonne ouverte and fermée, keeping her eyes fixed on some distant point.

She did a soft pas de chat by Chase.

He had never seen longer legs on a woman. They were hard and supple as saplings.

Stella did a series of jeté on pointes which made Chase swallow hard.

Another pas de chat, so close this time, Chase had to draw his feet back.

Stella didn’t shake or jiggle where other women shook or jiggled.

She did a saut de basque.

She danced on: she did a cabriole.

Her pointed toe passed over Chase’s head. She came to a standstill on point. Slowly, the foot descended onto Chase’s shoulder.

Chase stood and the moment he picked her up at the waist, her body seemed to lighten and balance in his hands. Her other leg detached from the floor like retracting landing gear; she locked both legs about his waist.

Chase took a step, going where, he didn’t know, staggering on the second step, and when they hit the floor, it wasn’t as hard as Chase thought it would be.

Stella’s tights were difficult, and with one breast free, and Chase’s pants at his knees, Chase gave up and pushed the crotch aside.

Stella.

Chase.

After a moment, Chase said, the blue, Stella!

Chase started backing up, but Stella suddenly reached behind and held Chase fast.

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BIG BLUES

Don’t move, Chase.
She unwrapped a leg from around his waist and he half turned
to see her pointed toe nudge the gas off.
Stella.
Chase!

They had finished the fish and wine; the phone rang.
Stella said, uh oh.
What, uh oh?
The breather. Every night at this time. I think it’s one of those
motorcycle creeps.
The phone kept ringing.
I saw them digging in my glove compartment one day and
that was after I wouldn’t tell them my last name and where I
lived.
Don’t answer.
He’ll just keep on ringing. I’m afraid if I took it off the hook,
they might come over.
Okay, pick it up.
Stella picked it up. She listened for a moment, then pressed her
lips together.
She cupped her hand over the mouthpiece.
He’s making . . . those kinds . . . of noises.
Chase grabbed the receiver and rapped the fishbat against the
mouthpiece.
Get that? There’s more where that came from!
Chase slammed the phone down.
Chase flushed.
Stella sighed. He’ll call back when he thinks I’ve forgotten
about it.

Chase stood naked on the fire escape. The marching band had
stopped. Chase could smell some dead leaves. Below, several
cats were in the garbage can. Several more made a tight circle on
the ground. A dark triangle in the center, like the tip of an anvil,
the blue’s head was slowly moving out into the dark part of the
yard.

Inside, Stella and Chase took a shower, soaping each other.
Stella washed Chase’s hair.
C. E. POVERMAN

Then Stella locked the door to the fire escape, lit a bayberry candle in the middle of the floor, and Stella and Chase made love again, slowly, to make it last.

They dozed.

Stella’s breath began to deepen; then, Chase’s.

Once, Chase slapped his arms down and straightened his legs because he was falling. Stella stirred and went on sleeping.

Once, Chase woke with a start, but the phone was silent in the candlelight. After a while, Chase fell fast asleep and dreamed of nothing, nothing at all.
HERE IN THE Sandwich Islands, five or six of the girls from next door swim barebreasted on the beach in front. When they come out of the water, their shaking breasts gleam. They watch you through their tanned nipples. I don’t think they have any special talents.

The beautiful one—she came from another part of the beach—I better give her a name. I can almost call her Jade because that was one of the first things I brought her—jade. Lovely green jade like translucent ice.

Walking beside the ocean, head above the horizon, breasts in the ocean, a loose shift reaching below her buttocks, she—Jade—sees the girls swimming. She bends to pick up worn bottle glass in the surf. Each time she raises her head, she looks at the girls. When she is close to me, she sits with her elbows on her
knees. She jingles the pieces of glass in her hands, she stares at the girls. Watching her face as she stares I feel . . . .

At first it wasn't too clear. I'd be standing in the middle of a living room with my pockets full of jewels. I'd be going out a back door. I'd see my face float through a bathroom mirror. I'd hear steps coming in the next room and hear my heart get loud in my ears as I'd slip out a window or back door.

And then, I don't think I ever planned any of them. At least, not until the one on the twenty-fifth floor. And that, too, was different. But most of the time they would just occur—it would just occur—and that would be that. I'd see something. A half open door, or someone stepping out for a second, and that was the way it would be. My body would feel different, too.

This fine jade necklace, each stone smooth and cool between my fingers. I wrapped it in a black silk handkerchief. I put it in a box and wrote the word JADE and left it in her mailbox on the street. I would check back at night, but after some time it was still there.


She lived in a fine house down the beach. The front facing the ocean was glass and stone. Elegant. I'd walk on the beach at night. Below her roof spotlights shining on the coarse sea grass and out onto the beach. Mist rising through the light. And crabs, out of their holes, scuttling over my feet. At the edge of the light, the ocean. The dull gleam of a wave breaking near the shore.

And then, squinting below the two bright floodlights, peering through the window, I'd see the globe in a waist high cradle. Some expensive books on shelves—art books, books on ruins, books with thick glossy pages, and so on, and near the globe, a large white telescope on a tripod. A desk beneath a pyramid of white light shining on a blotter. If I went inside, I knew I would find a thick leather book next to the telephone. But I wasn't going inside, yet. I suppose she was married.
After a week, the necklace was still in her mailbox. It occurred to me she didn’t know it—the necklace—was for her.

There’s something about the way these palms are late at night, the way they surround the house, thick and still, with the fronds hanging jagged and black like spider crabs. When it’s hot and still and the trade dies. The fronds are so thick and still. There’s something about it. Sometimes it’s so green. And thick.

I had no idea who the people were but I guess they were loaded. A terrific house near Diamond Head overlooking the ocean. Look in the classifieds and check out what that goes for a month. And references, too, if you please. I had a pair of the wife’s earrings in the palm of my hand. They, too, were green jade. I wanted them to match the necklace. The man came in. I hadn’t heard a sound. Barefoot.

He stopped in the doorway. Yawning. With the evening paper in his hand. He was maybe forty and looked like a jogger or what not so I didn’t have any hesitation. I had the earrings in my hand and they matched the necklace and they had to be hers, I said to him, get out of my way and that will be all, because this is the way it has to be, but then he said, put them down; the room got small and thick, he turned black and white like a negative so I hardly felt when I hit him with the first punch or heard the sound of his head hit the wall, I jumped over him and ran out, out through the yard, out to the street, I had the earrings.

A little article here on one of the inner pages about a robbery and beating. Just like them to exaggerate. A beating. Brutal. They didn’t have a very good description of me. The idiot got it all fucked up. He had me too tall and he had me dark whereas I’m blond and he had me heavy set whereas I’m medium build and he had me athletic which I am and do like, thank you, but generally speaking he exaggerated, shit, I hit him first and hard. And not all that hard. My knuckle’s a little black and blue. If he’d let me pass, there wouldn’t have been any trouble as I didn’t want to hit him.

I cut the article out and folded the earrings inside. I put them in
an envelope and left them in the mailbox next to the necklace JADE. Sometime later, when I thought about that description of me in the article, I considered going back to get it.

The fronds thick and still. When I felt inside the mailbox, it was empty. The jade necklace and earrings were gone. And the newspaper article. It gave me a funny feeling.

The clouds get held up against the lava mountains so it’s always raining here. It’s like a jungle. Banana plants, palms, guavas, cane. . . . Five sisters live here. Leilani. Luana. Maile. Kuulei. Momi. All of the five sisters are painters. They’ve covered the walls of this room from floor to ceiling with waterfalls and palms and stars and a panther crouching in the jungle and horses grazing and lots of other things, the paint flowing on and on over every exposed surface—the stove, the refrigerator . . . everywhere.

Each of them—the sisters—is over six feet. Models. Fine eyes. High sculpted cheekbones. Long hair. Large breasts. Long legs. I once saw Leilani sitting in a bikini on that horse shining out there in the rain by the banana plants. Her long legs hung down and the sun was glowing in the light down on her legs. Each of the five sisters is lovely like that. The third sister, Momi, is Miss Lucky You Live Sandwich Islands Girl. Momi is on things in travel offices advertising suntan lotion. She’s got the smile. The skin. The eyes. If you’re thinking of a trip to the islands, she’s the girl you’ll see on the brochure. She’s on lots of things. She’s prettier than all of the girls put together on the Yick Lung boxes. She’s on Safeway and Foodland grocery bags, her face and hair in black ink, an absence of ink where the plumeria contrasts against her black hair. On the airline ad, she wears this necklace I have tangled up in my pocket. It’s a fine gold chain. The green jade pendant has a gold Chinese character set in the circle of jade. For good luck, I think. I have other things. Her sisters’. A gold choker of pearls, lots of rings: a long sliver of smoky topaz, a cabochon jade, a star ruby on a wide band, a cameo, a jade under a web of gold, a large square of uncut turquoise, I have bracelets,
a twisted enamel . . . I have lots of things. I wish I could steal
the paint off the walls of this room.

I was on my way out when I saw some nice papayas on the
table. I fried three eggs, some bacon, did some toast, and had
two papayas. Delicious. It was only 9:30 in the morning so I
guess I’d call it breakfast. And the rain was beating on the roof as
I ate.

I was quite delighted to see an article buried around the fourth
or fifth page headlined: THIEF HAS BREAKFAST. They had it
about right, too. Three eggs, some bacon, and toast. And two (2)
papayas.

I left Jade the article and stuff in a manilla envelope. I also
enclosed a suntan lotion ad and an airline brochure. In the airline
brochure, it’s obvious Momi’s wearing the Chinese character
necklace under a pikake lei.

Sometime later—maybe a week—I left Jade an empty en­
velope. That, too, was gone when I checked back.

Most of the time I’m pretty honest, but occasionally I do slip
in some article—some small piece—which grabs me. One in
broad daylight. A guy coming out of a bank with three grand in
an envelope. Think of it. Someone quick on his feet snatched the
envelope and ran to a waiting car. There’s not a trace of him.
Vanished into thin air. I wonder if he knew what was in the
envelope or just got that old feeling. I wish I’d done that one
myself. Anyway, I thought she’d appreciate it, so I left it for her.

I got her lots of things from so many different places I can’t
even remember them all. I never kept any of the stuff for myself.
I didn’t want it.

It was a ground floor. I cut a hole in the bedroom screen and
pushed out some of the jalousies. I sensed lapis lazuli, baguette
diamonds, turquoise, maybe some topaz. I did a quick lurk about
in bedroom bathroom closet. Nothing. Feeling in the backs of
drawers. Bureau. Night table enormous double bed. Under the
bed. Not a thing. Missed. Nothing beautiful. And such a strong
feeling. I'm not usually off. Near the bedroom door, a low sound
in the next room. Gurglings. Like a bathtub overflowing. I knew
don't open the door, but I was so curious I had to open it a crack.

Looking into a large low ceilinged room. The smell of food.
No windows. A long table—long enough for maybe two or
three people to lie down on—the table was completely covered
with food, some eaten—there were bones—but most waiting to
be eaten, there were pizzas and steaming cartons of Chinese food
and chickens and hams and turkeys and candied sweet potatoes
covered with marshmallows and fat link sausages and bowls of
chocolate pudding and ice cream starting to melt and . . .

At the end of the table a fat woman in a print dress. Her
buttocks overflowed both sides of a low wooden stool. The flesh
hanging from her arms jiggled while she ate with both hands and
made low gurgling, smacking cooing noises. Her neck was col­
lared in fat. She watched me out of the corner of small holes . . .
her eyes; she didn’t stop eating, she picked up a ham and stripped
it to the bone she popped sausages off a string one two three four
. . . I walked to the end of the table and watched her as she ate a
steak and dropped the bones beneath her feet. Three Boston
Bulls snarled under the table.

She pushed up from the table, wobbled erect over the stool
and came down the side of the table throwing one leg in front of
the other her legs were swollen and black and blue her arches
flattened were streaked with black varicose veins she moved
incredibly fast I felt as though she were skidding toward me she
slapped the middle of my chest and I fell on my back the wind
went out of me and she sat on my chest.

My ribs bursting.
Please.
A long gasp.

She could reach the table. She went on eating. I felt her
stomach rumbling and gurgling through her fat. The Boston
Bulls braced their legs and snarled at me.
Pleeeeeease . . .

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She peeled three cupcakes, ate them one after the other, drank a glass of scotch, and ate three more cupcakes. The dogs ate the papers as they dropped beside me.

When she had eaten away the entire table within her reach, she raised herself and moved down the table without looking at me. I got up, staggered, ran into the bedroom and half dove half fell out through the hole in the screen landing in a red shower tree in full bloom. I don’t think she even noticed I’d gone. Jesus.

Sometimes I’d remember a room. It would come back to me. The strange house sounds. The silence. I’d see something. The way a comb balanced on the curve of a sink. Or myself in the bathroom mirror. Or, I’d be taking a shower and soaping up my head. Or trying on a shirt and slacks to see how I looked. These pieces would come back to me and my breath would catch. I’d feel something. One place I tried to find my way back to. I couldn’t stand it. I was pacing and pacing. My body felt so strange. I wanted to stand in that strange room and do everything again as I’d done it before. Put my hand on the jewelbox. Feel into the backs of drawers, probe under shirts and underwear for the first contact of pearls, the coolness of jade. But, no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t find the house. Another time I actually did find my way back to the house but the people were inside, I couldn’t go in. I walked past the house looking in the windows from the sidewalk and grinding my teeth.

I woke the other night and heard breathing in the room. I lay still. I listened. The palms around the house were motionless and thick. The air was dense with sea and earth humidity. I got up and turned on the lights in the room but there was no one.

I made up several articles for Jade. I wrote them up as they should be. Fourteen or fifteen stories above the street. Entered by the lanai. Surprised a woman coming in from work. She never felt afraid. He explained he needed her jewels for a worthy cause, he was sorry he had to take them but he thought she’d understand. She promised to give him five minutes before she called the police. He was kind. He led her to the lanai and
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showed her his route up the side of the building. Showed her how he’d found an open door several floors below; how, once out on the lanai, he’d climbed from lanai to lanai. She said she only wanted her jewels back. If she could have her jewels back, that would be the end of the matter. She wasn’t interested in revenge, she only wanted her jewels. She liked the young man.

I have a friend who owns a press, it could have looked completely authentic if I’d had him print my article, but Jade wouldn’t have found it in the paper. She would have stopped trusting me.

A woman with jewels who lives in a high rise apartment.

Found.

Can’t get in. She always keeps it locked and chained. She’s careful. When she’s out, it’s double locked.

First saw her at an opening—an exhibit. She was one of the patronesses. She’s loaned out some of her rare Chinese screens, her name was beside each of the screens on display. A cocktail party, the exhibit in a large bank lobby. Cocktails, expensive sounds of glasses, chatter wafting. Lovely stuff she was wearing. Bracelets necklaces watch earrings rings. Way overdone for the occasion, but nice stuff. She was divorced from a very well known, very rich man on this rock. I didn’t feel for her one way or the other. She had red hair and short legs. I didn’t even follow her from the party. I looked her up in the phone book.

I sat around the apartment parking lot. When she drove in, I waited by the elevator. We rode up. She kept her eyes on the numbers for about ten floors. At fifteen we smiled at each other. Nice eyes, blue green, almost hazel, turquoise would bring them up well, but little lines at the corners. Look and try to remember me. I got off with her on the twenty-fifth floor. Nice and high. Very good. I got out of the elevator and walked slowly down the hall the other way until I heard her stop, watching me? I turned as her door closed. Fourth from the end on the right.
Where'd she get those jewels? From the old man? Alimony?
She's out during the day. Active in the art leagues, or so. And she
always has her door locked.

If you stand down in the street and look up and count down
two stories from the top, that's her's, the twenty-fifth. Moving
across the floor, each apartment has its own lanai. For each door
going down the hall, a lanai out here. Furniture on the lanai.
People walking by me as I stand on the sidewalk looking up.
Each lanai is about three and a half to four feet from the next.
There appears to be about six inches of concrete slab extending
beyond the rail. Enough to get a foot on.

I have two chalk marks on the floor. They're five feet apart.
On each chalk mark, a two by four (2x4). In between the two by
fours are shattered beer bottles. I make standing jumps from two
by four to two by four in my bare feet. I try to land without
waving my arms or rolling around. I jump—once, neatly—from
one two by four over the glass and land on the other two by
four. I concentrate. I've never done anything before to prepare
like this, but in a way it's fun. I do exercises standing on my toes.
Up and down. Then I put sandbags on my back and do the same
thing. Then I do deep knee bends. I jump from two by four to
two by four across the five feet of shattered glass. I land without
waving my arms.

I would appear and disappear in and out of her hallway look­ing
for unguarded doors on the right side. Even if she did leave
her door open now by some unlikely oversight, I don't think I
would have gone in that way.

One afternoon, the open door—three apartments down—I
took a chance and stepped in, heard the shower going, I cut
through the apartment and out into the sun on the lanai. In a
chair, some knitting. I tore off a length of the yarn and tied it to
the rail. I looped the loose end around my wrist. I wanted to
leave my tracks. Orange yarn.

I stepped over the rail and jumped to the next lanai. I didn't
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look down. I worked my way along the ledge outside the rail and jumped again. I stopped. The building, white and shining in the sun. Warm and clean. The buildings below and beyond. Waikiki. The shore. The sun in the west the sea silver and white between the cool blue shadows of the buildings. I thought of Jade walking on the beach against the skim of water gleaming on the sand. I saw her walking with the jade necklace and earrings like translucent green ice in the sun. I looked straight up into the blue sky, edged along and jumped to another lanai. Would she wear the jade on the beach? Or the pearls? I jumped. The jade. I landed on the redhead patroness' lanai. I stepped over and tied the yarn to the rail. It began to tug gently up and down in the wind. My track.

The sun slanting in her apartment. Silence. Thick rug. A living room and dining room. A crystal chandelier. I turned it on. Nice. So silent with these rugs. A downstairs. Class. An apartment with an upstairs and downstairs. I moved silently downstairs on the thick carpet. A low sound from where? The bathroom. Perfumes. Powders. Towels. And across from the bathroom, the bedroom the sound getting slightly louder. The TV on at the foot of the bed. Sesame Street. This is near, this is far. Those Muppets. Back and forth. This is near. This is far. This is near. NEAR. This is far. FAR. Nothing in her bureau. Her closet. The top shelf of the closet. There they are, bet. In the toes of these shoes. Well. A brooch—a whirling comet. Let's get a look at this. An aurora of yellow textured and white smooth gold surrounding a hunk of polished lapis lazuli, the whole thing studded with tiny diamonds. The toe of the other shoe. Drop earrings with natural colored diamonds. And what here, a cocktail ring? Made up of a cluster of round and baguette diamonds, and these, one two three four . . . seven sapphires. Her night table. A gold bracelet. No. A watch. No numbers. Midnight blue dial. And in her dressing table. A gold contour necklace. Oh the feeling of that gold. Matching earrings. She had wonderful little things hidden away for me to find. All I had to do was look. I turned off the tube when I was ready to go. Upstairs, I noticed the bare spaces on her walls. The Chinese screens. She'd get those back.
JADE

Front page lower right:
THIEF TAKES JEWELS . . .
There’s a picture of me taken by a tourist with a telephoto lens. I’m a large speck caught in midair between lanais.

Late yesterday afternoon several people saw a man jumping from lanai to lanai on the twenty-fifth floor of . . .

Reckless . . .
Daring . . .
Not a trace . . .
Etcetera.

I wonder if the fat one reads the paper.

I thought of Jade walking down the beach wearing the jewels. The Chinese believe the longer jade is worn next to the body, the deeper the colors get.

I left Jade the newspaper article and the jewels.

Sometimes I hear breathing when I wake. I sleep with a light on.

The crabs scuttling over my feet on the sand. The mist moving through the spotlights from her house. Water on the glass. The globe in its varnished cradle, the white telescope on the tripod . . . behind the glass.

I walked out of the light, through the cool sand, onto the coarse grass.

The side door was unlocked.

Inside, I stood on the cool polished flagstones. The telescope. The globe. I walked to the window and looked out through the glass into the fine mist where I’d been standing. The wind through the jalousies, the dim light shining on the blotter . . .

I moved down a short hallway.
There was a light on in a room.
A spotlight shining straight down from the ceiling. She stood
naked beneath it. I, in the doorway. She was wearing the jade necklace and earrings. The first things. She hardly looked at me while she turned slowly beneath the spotlight. The jade was deep and clear against her skin. All of the jewels were spread out on a black velvet background on a table. My old friends. She unclasped the jade necklace, pushed out the earrings, and placed them on the table.

She clasped Momi’s necklace around her neck. The gold Chinese character caught the light as she turned. She hardly looked at me.

I stepped out of my clothes.
She removed Momi’s necklace.
She slipped the star ruby on a finger.
The smoky topaz.
A necklace of carved chunks of salmon coral on a backing of white gold. The tiny diamonds moving like sun on water. I couldn’t remember where, that one.

Yellow and gold diamond pierced earrings that tinkled as she moved.
A handful of cultured pearls became a dog collar, a choker, and a single long rope of pearls.
There were pins made of leaves dipped in gold. She set them against her skin. On her nipples. Between her breasts. Across her stomach.
I stood still with my clothes at my feet.
She put on the gold contour collar.
A four strand bracelet of lapis and pearls.
She held the brooch between her breasts—the white gold comet with the lapis and diamonds.
She turned slowly in front of me. Then she turned her back to me and walked to the bed where she lay down on her back her arms at her sides she gazed up at the spotlight.
I lay down beside her.
We lay still.
I rolled lightly on top and entered her she came she raised her legs and clasped them around my waist she came again she began to mumble quickly coming and coming her nails hot in my back the bracelets cool beside the nails, tell me, tell me, I parted her
lips with my tongue and began to whisper as she came I whis-
pered syllables, she gasped, were they beautiful, I whispered this
is near and this is far I whispered sounds I'd never heard except
as I pushed them out of my mouth between her lips, she came,
tell me, tell me, I whispered she came as I whispered . . . .
SOMETIMES SHE WILL scream and scream.

Then Jack will become speechless walking in tight circles, finally saying to Mother, what? what? what does she want? what does she want me to do!

And then Mother will say in a voice softened to underline his excitement and serve as a reproach, no one wants you to do anything, anything at all.

Then Jack will become speechless again, walking in tight circles.

Rose will go on screaming.

Jack will say, what? what? what! What does she want!

Mother will say, oh, don’t you know? Your own sister, don’t you have any compassion.

Sometimes Rose will scream the name of her husband, Bill, where’s Bill?

Jack will hear the words in the slurred remains of her speech, where’s Bill, and say, I don’t know, I don’t know!

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She'll go on screaming, Bill, where is he?
Jack will walk in tight circles and blurt, gone, he's gone.
Rose will scream, her body spasming so her necklaces rattle, NO!
Jack will say, yes, gone.
Mother will say in her softened voice, yes, Rose, Bill is gone, Bill has gone, now you know that, we've been through that, you know that, yourself.
Sometimes Rose will scream and convulsively bite the back of her hand or wrist; the blood will come before they can pull her hand from her mouth.
Finally, Jack will go out, slamming the heavy front door behind him; the screaming will become less sharp, but will follow him down the sidewalk. Jack will say through clenched teeth, at least they could shut her goddamned windows. He will walk quickly.
On one of these walks, as he passes the Kelly's next door, he looks up and thinks he sees Kitty Kelly at the upstairs window, but that can't be right, she must be married and long gone. She's Rose's age. When Jack stops to look up at the window, he sees nothing but the half-drawn shade.

Later, Jack will return quieted by walking.
One end of the hospital bed is raised. Rose is propped up watching the tv.
Jack sits by her bed.
Then he sees he is not sitting close so he pulls the chair in closer—not as close as he intends, but a little closer.
Rose watches tv with her one remaining eye turned toward the screen. As she turns her head, rhinestones embedded in the plastic frames catch the light. The other eye has no vision at all. The doctors thought it lucky to save the eyeball.
Jack wonders how much she understands.
Mother says, Rose understands, Rose understands everything, everything. And some day she will do everything again. She will walk, she will swim, she will have fun, she will lead a normal
life, she will raise her children herself, she will do everything, everything.

Then Mother mentions Patricia Neal. Patricia Neal had a stroke. And Patricia Neal couldn’t walk or talk. She couldn’t move a muscle. But her husband stood by and made her want to live. Oh, it wasn’t easy. But he nursed her back to life. Patricia Neal has even acted again. It took love to make Patricia Neal recover. It takes love. Loves makes the difference. Doctors don’t know everything. It takes love.

Rose watches tv.
Jack watches her. He wonders how much she understands.
Her stiff orthopedic shoes rest on the sheet. The smooth soles never have more than a few scratches. Rose must wear the shoes all day. Otherwise, her feet will curl down and no longer meet the ground.
Jack looks at the flat steel braces disappearing up under the cuff.
Jack hates the shoes.
He hates the way she is dressed: the bright blouse, slacks with the repellent sheen of synthetics—convenient for spills and other accidents—and ropes of colored beads around her neck. Then, the oversized rings on her knotted fingers. Mother calls them fun rings: aren’t they pretty, Rose?
The sound of her breathing returns to Jack. Each breath reaching for the next. Each breath in the tiled glare and silence of the intensive care unit. Each breath reaching for the next over a divide which seemed high and thin like the peak of a mountain, each breath reaching until it seemed to stretch, get thinner and thinner, turn brittle in some frozen region, and then, just before snapping, it would find the next breath. Mother would say, Rose, wake up, Rose . . . Rose . . . the hoarse sound of breath in the dried throat. Lips cracked and swollen, corners caked black with mucous.
Then, the bright red lipstick. The first time he’d seen her since the intensive care unit. He’d just come home.
She was framed in a doorway. Jack stopped in the hall.
IN THE REMAINS OF HER SPEECH

She'd been sitting in a chair—she looked propped up to Jack, as though she'd been carefully balanced there.
Jack smelled the heavy perfume.
The bright red nail polish matched her lipstick.
He'd stood in the hallway several moments. Then he'd started quietly backing away. She was staring straight ahead. She hadn't seen him.

Jack? Jack, you can come in here, you know.
There'd been a cold flat edge in Father's voice.
And then Mother's: oh, Rose, here's your brother, at last. Aren't you glad to see him?

Rose had swung her head suddenly. He saw the eye moving behind the tinted glasses. She'd never needed glasses before. She twisted her head farther so she could see him with the one remaining eye. Her lips drew back on one side of her face. The other remained without expression. Was she trying to smile?

Jack could hear Mother prompting, aren't you glad to see Jack, Rose?

Jack tried to smile.
No. NO! And she started to scream, body convulsing, feet tangling under the chair as though high voltage were going through her.

Afterward, Jack said to Mother, why do you have her dressed up like that?

If she's dressed up to look pretty, maybe she'll start to feel pretty.

Well, she's not dressed up to look very pretty like that.

Jack, you are negative. I think she looks very pretty. Jack, if you are going to come here, but bring your negative attitude, it would be better if you had stayed where you were. You must try to think only positive thoughts around Rose. She is aware of everything.

Jack pulls his chair closer to the bed, but not really; he only shifts back and forth. After the walks, the room smells heavily of Johnson's Baby Powder and Dermassage.

Jack lights a cigarette for Rose, watching out for her nails and saying, that's okay, I'll hold it, you just smoke.
Jack would like to cut the nails, but Rose won’t let anyone near them. The polish is always chipped; the nails get so long, they begin to curve and sometimes break off.

Whenever Jack moves her, the nails dig into his neck and make a pattern of purple bruises which last for days.

And often, when she is finished eating, food still splashed on her blouse, she pulls back her lips and scrapes her teeth, the bright red fingernails clacking on the teeth like a bird’s beak. Then, Jack turns his face away or abruptly walks out of the room.

Jack holds the cigarette. Rose bites for the filter with a sudden exhalation. She puffs, she puffs, Jack says, don’t you come up for air? She giggles, then gags on the smoke, the smoke comes out in coughs and giggles. Jack taps the ash.

Toward the end of the cigarette, Jack says, Jesus, don’t smoke the filter, this isn’t the last cigarette in the world.

After the fast walks, Jack will start by being soft and gentle, but she asks what seem like endless inane questions in her slurred speech. Or the time. She asks Jack the time every five minutes. Jack will say, you just asked me that, it’s a couple of minutes later. She will ask the time. Or Jack’s birthday. Or his age. How old is he now? Or if he’s married yet. Sometimes she will ask him how old he is and then when he answers, she will ask, why?

At first, Jack hadn’t been able to understand anything she said.

He’d say, what?
She’d say, what?
He’d take a deep breath. I was only asking you what you were asking me.

She might take a deep breath and try again.

The hoarse syllables would come out garbled and slurred—as if she were underwater.

He wouldn’t understand.

He would see her flushing. The sharp red fingernails digging into her palm until the skin grew purple.

Then he’d say, quickly, oh, yes, I see, or anything, anything at all, and she’d calm down a little, no matter what he said.

Sometimes, though he doesn’t want to, he will answer her
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sarcastically: well, here we all are, Rose, waiting on you hand and foot—just what you always wanted.

She will answer in the hoarse flat slur, what? what?

Jack will answer softly, nothing, Rose, I was only kidding, and feel terrible, remembering how the people in the so-called rehabilitation center called her a beast, or an animal—right in front of her. They did that for months. They’d thought she couldn’t talk or understand. One day she bit one of them. Then they knew she understood.

Jack stands suddenly and walks to the window so Rose can’t see his face. He paces. Back and forth.

Here is her room, the same as in high school except one shelf has some of her college books. Here are knick-knacks. Here the old Raggedy Ann. Jack picks it up. Puts it back down. There, in the other bookshelf, are the paperbacks. *Peyton Place* with the hot parts still turned down from junior high.

Jack paces back and forth to the window.

From the window, sometimes he will suddenly walk out of her room without saying anything. She won’t turn her head from the TV and he will think, what’s the difference anyway, what does she understand?

Other times, when he stands by the window, she will say, bathroom, because she knows he is getting ready to leave. He feels she is using anything to hold on to him, but maybe she really has to go? What then?

He will walk her to the bathroom, though she can’t walk, but can only hang from his neck, her nails digging into his skin, her legs kicking spastically, feet tangling and breath coming in gasps.

Jack will mostly carry her to the toilet. He will look away as he lets her down, biting the inside of his cheek as he wonders how long she will live.

In the beginning, Mother hadn’t asked Jack to come back. She had written: Rose seems happy to be out of the rehabilitation center. At last! Who can believe it’s been two years already. It’s a miracle she’s alive, yet, but there is a lot of work—trying to get
her to walk again, exercising her arms and legs; she needs to be lifted and carried. Your father gets home from work half dead all the time and though he has to start lifting Rose, he is a dear man and has not complained through any of this. The two boys are as good as they can be, but they are still two little boys, dear, sweet, and hard to keep up with.

Jack would answer all of her letters in a very neutral way.

After a time, she’d written: you might give your family a little time and consideration, or are you a member of this family in name only, and just what is it you are doing out there that’s so important?

Then she had written: Rose always did love you in a special way. Maybe you can get through to her in a way we can’t. Are you a member of this family or not?

You know, someone else didn’t like facing things, either. He did the easy thing, but he’ll have to live with it for the rest of his life.

(Here she was referring to Bill’s desertion.)

People who think only of themselves are never happy in this life. They may think they are, but they aren’t. Not really.

She’d gone on to say, and what is it you are doing out there that’s so important? Being a bartender? Involved with your own world and pleasures and no one else.

Yes, Hawaii is nice, and your father and I might like nothing better for ourselves than to relax in Hawaii—your father, you might remember, had been planning to slow down his practice and enjoy life a little more before this happened. For us, the time is now, we won’t get any other time, but still, there are responsibilities and a mature adult faces them.

No, we don’t have to raise her children. No one is making us. But we want to raise them. What kind of home would a man like Bill give them? Rose sweated to have those children and we are going to see she has them.

And, I don’t need to tell you we could just stick Rose out of sight in some home and forget her, but we’re not that kind of people—neither are you, in case you don’t know it. At least we didn’t raise you to be.
And you being a bartender? With a college education? Is that living up to your potential? Really living up to it?

Jack had written back, what exactly is my potential? Mother had written back, one's personal happiness isn't everything—your potential is not the life you are leading.

Three weeks after Jack had come home, he'd said, remember that letter you wrote me—about living up to my potential?

Yes, she said, I remember very clearly.

Well, Jack said, this sure isn't it, either.

Jack had gone on writing to his girlfriend. He missed her. He missed afternoons at the beach with her. Then, being away from her to work nights. He liked working at night. He liked the bar, the precision of drinks and keeping track of several things at once and occasionally slowing down to joke with the customers and waitresses. And he liked coming out early in the morning and standing all alone, his shirt smelling of booze and liquor and cigarette smoke, sweat and perfume, and feeling the balmy trade wind. He'd stand alone in the middle of the parking lot and feel the conversation and faces and music slowly running out of him into the trade wind. Then Jack would go home to his girlfriend.

Jack had never had any trouble with his back. He could tend bar for eight hours straight without an ache. That included standing up as he ate facing the back bar. Now he'd developed a pain in his lower back and a numbness in his right leg which made him squirm trying to find a comfortable position.

Jack's girlfriend wrote: when will you be coming back?

Jack wrote: I'm not sure when, soon, I hope, life here in Connecticut is hell and I miss you.

At night, he'd dream of the Hawaiian ocean and sky—electric blue—and the trade wind clouds purple on the horizon.

Often, her screams would wake him. Or, the children's crying. Going to take one of them in his arms, he might meet Mother coming out of her bedroom and say, go back to bed.
In the morning, he would have the pain in his back and as the day went on, it would get worse. Jack could only think of the Hawaiian sun. The sun down in those latitudes had real power. During the spring solstice it would pass directly overhead and a stick poked into the sand would cast no shadow at noon. The Hawaiian sun would be able to bake this pain out. It was clean white light. It could penetrate to the pain.

Here, the sun was leaving him, going south each day, each day going a little farther away. The remaining sunlight was murky and indistinct. The colors seemed flat and two-dimensional in the yard. It was more and more like living in a black and white photograph.

Now mother was reading *Psychic Discoveries Behind the Iron Curtain*, Jean Dixon, and Nostradamus. She would spend long hours on her white telephone, calling long distance, speaking in low tones, sometimes whispers.

She was in touch with a faith healer. She was trying to get a faith healer to come for Rose.

Sometimes, Jack would wait to use the phone, hearing her whispers in the next room. They would go on and on. Finally, Jack would get fed up and storm in. Can I use . . . .

There would be no one on the phone.

Mother would say, if only everyone weren’t so negative. She would turn to Jack, thin lines around her mouth. You’re not helping, not helping at all. It would have been better if you’d stayed where you were. All you know how to do is resent her—and resent our spending money on her. Thinking about that money makes you green with envy, doesn’t it?

You could take a little more time with her boys. It wouldn’t kill you.

And I’ve seen the look on your face. Your father’s a grown man and he’s not embarrassed to be seen helping her. I know, I know how you feel. I see what’s in your heart.

On the street one day, Jack met a man who knew Jack’s father. The man said, I saw your father the other day. I hardly recog-
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nized him—he looked so old. He used to look so proud, but this was no longer the same man.

Jack felt dizzy. He knew he was going to hit the man. He wanted to break his nose. He walked away quickly.

Jack’s girl had written. Jack, do you want me to come out there? I want to be with you. I miss waking up next to you.

Jack said, if her husband hadn’t left, we wouldn’t be doing this now, would we? Would we, now?

Mother said, oh, what’s the point of that, if the moon were green cheese, if if if, some things are the way they are and you have to learn to accept them, like it or not. What’s more important to you, anyway? Your sluts?

Jack was thinking he’d better see a dentist. Lately, there was blood on his toothbrush.

Jack tried to write his girlfriend three or four times, then finally gave up and left the letter on a pile of magazines beside his bed.

Jack said, do you believe in Mother’s faith healer stuff?

Father said, all I know is I’m the guy who pays the bills around here.

Jack said, that’s not really what I asked you.

Father said, you heard me. Then said, if it makes your mother happy.

Jack said, everyone’s just so martyred here.

Jack had no job since he’d given up the bartending. The days were long and boring. Jack had called a few old friends he had gradually come to remember. Most of them had gone away. His old girlfriends were married and some had kids.

Even if he had been able to find someone, where would he go? He couldn’t bring anyone back to the house. He didn’t want them to see Rose. The wheelchair wedged against the children’s tricycles in the back hall was embarrassing. And the screams . . . .

At night, Jack couldn’t sleep. He would pace. His bed was up
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in the attic over her room. The kids had his old room. He would pace and Rose’s screams would come through the wooden planks of the floor.

Rose could hear him moving around up there and it disturbed her, she said, the sound of his walking, make him stop.

Jack tried to call his girlfriend long distance one night in Hawaii. He called until three in the morning, but she was out.

Rose whispered something.
Jack put his ear down to her lips.
Rose whispered again.
It was so hard to understand her. She seemed to be speaking from underwater.
Jack thought she said, tell me.
Jack said, tell you what? Why are you whispering?
Rose whispered again. Tell me what you do with girls, tell me everything everything.

Jack wrote his girlfriend, I’d love to see you, I’d like you to come here, but I think you should stay there for now.
They’d written a couple of more letters; then, Jack’s girlfriend had stopped writing.
Jack had tried to call her another night, soon after that, but couldn’t get her, that night, either.

There was the nurse named Teresa who came in days, she had black hair, she plucked her eyebrows in a thin line, and she had deepening lines at the corners of her eyes. Her eyes looked like green glass and had an unnatural light.
Teresa would see Jack having his coffee alone at the kitchen table—she would ask Jack what he thought about women’s lib and say that with his nice face he probably had all the girls he wanted, woman’s lib or no, and what a wild life it must have been bartending out there in Hawaii, and what about those beautiful Hawaiian women.
Teresa would make her green eyes flash and say, Ireland is no
place for a woman, Teresa would say she had been born too late for women's lib—she had two kids—but maybe it wasn't too late, yet.

Jack wouldn't say much.

Teresa would say, well, you're a quiet one, now, aren't you, cat got your tongue?

Teresa would hint things weren't quite right with her husband, he didn't care about her right—yes, he did have a good paying job—a systems analyst, but he didn't care about her right. She'd stand, hands dug into the flat pockets of her nurse's uniform.

One night, as she was talking, Jack pushed back suddenly from the table, crossed to where she was leaning against the sink, and kissed her, roughly; she made a whimpering sound. Jack shoved her away and walked out.

Kitty Kelly stops over from next door.
Jack is alone taking care of Rose. It's a humid night.
They sit on the sun porch.
Kitty says, I didn't know you were home.
Jack says, I thought I saw you looking out the window the other day.
Kitty looks away.
Jack says, maybe it wasn't you.
Kitty says, how long have you been home, Jack?
Jack says, a couple of months, a couple of months too long.
Oh, don't say that. You know, I've been next door the whole time and I didn't see you.
They have a drink, then another. Kitty talks quickly. She looks at Jack and closes her eyes, slowly and tightly.
Jack can't concentrate on what she is saying.
. . . Nixon or McGovern . . .
Her blue eyes are large and shadowy; they are beautiful, but she closes them tightly so Jack can't look at them. And her chin, she has a nice chin, but when she talks it moves like a baby's fist. In the street, men would look after her ash blond hair and full lips. After a moment, they might realize she is not beautiful.
Kitty talks quickly. She closes her eyes and laces her fingers together and stretches them across her knee so her fingernails go white at the quick.

She wants to hear all about Hawaii. What a fabulous place.

She asks sudden questions Jack can’t follow or thinks pointless.

She repeats herself, Nixon or McGovern.

She says to Jack, Jack, you are very good looking, did you know that?

She says, well, yes you are. Very.

Now Kitty wants to know all about Rose, how long was she unconscious, and her husband, what happened to her husband, where’s her husband? And what did Jack think, is she getting better, will she walk again, did Jack think she would ever walk again, what did Jack think?

Jack can hear the tv upstairs, he can’t follow what Kitty is saying, he is trying to pay attention, but he can’t follow, he knows Rose is going to scream, he looks at Kitty, Kitty closes her eyes and clasps her knee so the nails go white.

The pale yellow plastic of the old castro is sticky in the humidity and occasionally Jack or Kitty has to push back against the plastic cushions to keep from slipping.

Kitty says, it’s hard to imagine this could happen to anyone I know, Rose was such a beautiful girl, so beautiful, I always think of her climbing the tree in back when we were little, or her playing tennis or swimming—she was a wonderful swimmer, and her voice, Jack, remember her voice, we all thought she had the most beautiful voice, what had happened to her singing?

Jack says, she let it go after she got married. It wasn’t that good, anyway.

Jack excuses himself to refill the drinks. When he returns, Kitty says, where’s yours?

Jack says, my father’s not a bourbon drinker, he doesn’t keep much on hand. The martini’s his poison. Go ahead, though.

Kitty closes her eyes tightly and says, we’ve got some at our house, I didn’t know you drank so much, do you drink a lot, no, you don’t drink a lot, that’s silly of me, this is only your second or third drink, my third, really, isn’t it, if you drink a lot, then I
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guess I drink a lot, and she tries to laugh. The corners of her mouth go up, but her lips don’t part. She spills a little of the drink on her skirt and begins to brush at it, spilling more. Her lipstick is very dark.

Suddenly, she says again, so, which is it, Nixon or McGovern, you didn’t tell me.

Jack gets up for a towel, but she reaches out quickly and pushes him down by the wrist, and, Jack, not knowing what she is talking about, says, McGovern.

She brushes at her skirt. Oh, McGovern, why McGovern?

Jack says, I don’t know.

She looks at Jack and closes her eyes and says, well, come have the drink, I’m not going to sit here and drink without you drinking . . . I hardly ever drink, anyway.

She stands. Jack senses her fragile body.

No, Kitty, you’re right, I do drink too much. I’m going to stay here. But sit down and finish your drink.

Kitty thinks that is simply ridiculous, she has only been kidding him, kidding him, that is all, and he shouldn’t take it so seriously, and to come on, have the drink, and if her father is up, to say hello to him, he’ll be glad to see Jack, he hasn’t seen Jack twice since they were kids.

Jack listens. He hears the tv on upstairs. Jack listens but he hears nothing else. Maybe she is asleep. Probably. Finally, he says, okay, Kitty.

In the hall, the classified ads are still lying on the mail table. Jack’s father had circled an ad for him.

Before he had gone out, he’d said, did you see the ad, Jack?

I saw it.

Father said, well?

I saw it.

Now Jack reached out to fold the paper over as he passed. Instead, he just pushed the paper back a few inches on the table.

Jack eased the front door shut and followed Kitty out to the sidewalk. Back in high school, when there would be a heavy snowfall, Jack would shovel to where the Kelly’s began. When the snow wasn’t too heavy, he’d push a path one-shovel wide
through the Kelly’s walk. Mrs. Kelly would open the front door and shout across the snowy yard, her voice high in the cold air as it came across the snow, thanks, Jack.

It had been awful to see Kitty sobbing at her mother’s funeral, Mother said.

When they were past the hedge, the Kelly’s door light was bright on the lawn and sidewalk. Without thinking, Jack started to cut across the grass, but Kitty walked straight down the middle of the sidewalk. Jack checked himself and followed Kitty down the middle of the walk, suddenly remembering a time when he was little. He was supposed to go with his father, but he had gone somewhere with Kitty and Mr. Kelly. They hadn’t been gone long, but after, he’d been afraid to go home. He hadn’t told his father he was going, he knew his father had been waiting, he knew his father would be angry. Where had they gone?

Jack looked back at the house. He could see the grey tv light flickering on the ceiling in Rose’s room. Rose had probably fallen asleep. Whenever Jack would tiptoe in to turn off the tv, Rose would wake and scream—as if she’d been lying in wait for Jack to do just that.

Jack would say, but the stations have gone off the air.
Rose would slur, tv tv tv.

Jack might forget and say, but you were sleeping, anyway.
Then she would scream, no NO NO NO NO never sleep never SLEEP NEVER SLEEP NEVER SLEEP I NEVER SLEEP I NEVER SLEEP.

Jack would turn the tv back on.
Jack looked up at the light flickering on the ceiling.
She was probably sleeping now.
Jack followed Kitty into the house.

The Kelly’s house had always had a certain smell—it still had the smell. And there were the pictures—not one of them had moved in the last, over twenty years. Jack remembered having looked up at them—the Madonna and Child in the circular frame; Christ, rays of golden light coming out of his hair; and, going up the stairs, the saints, hands clasped in prayer, eyes raised.
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Jack wondered about the smell. He had always thought it came from something Mrs. Kelly used to cook, but Mrs. Kelly had been gone a long time and the house still had the smell—the exact same smell.

Kitty sang out in a loud sing-song voice, as though she might be calling a partially deaf person, or a child, Dad, whooo, Dad, this is Jack, Dad, you remember Jackie from next door.

The piano was in the same place. The last time, Jack had been able to look up underneath and see the large bolts holding it together. There'd been a Christmas tree just in front. On the piano, there were photographer's portraits. One of Kitty in a silver frame. She was in a white dress—it was from the shoulders up—and the soft focus and silver in the print made Kitty look beautiful and dreamy. Beside Kitty, there was one of Kitty's older sister, Laura. And color snapshots of each of Laura's three kids.

Dad, Kitty was saying more softly, Dad, you remember Jack, look how he's grown.

Jack felt Kitty's voice was strange. He couldn't remember hearing anyone say look how he's grown since . . . junior high.

Kitty and Jack looked down at Mr. Kelly.

He was sitting up in his chair, the reading light on beside him. His glasses had slipped down his nose and his mouth was open a little so Jack could hear him breathing. The sports page was open on his knees and Jack could see Sox . . . the ballpark, not Red Sox, but down to the ball park, that's where they had gone that time, Jack remembered standing up on the seat to look out the back window and seeing deep black shadows which he now knew were the portals.

And the radio. Mr. Kelly always used to lie in a chair in the back yard and listen to the ball games on the radio. His bald head would be in the circle of his sun visor like a face without features. The announcer would sound out of breath and excited, the crowds would cheer, how could Mr. Kelly lie there in the hot sun so long?

Jack looked at Mr. Kelly sleeping in the light and wondered if Mrs. Kelly had even enjoyed it those times the church had said were okay. Her high thin voice coming across the snow.
Kitty spoke softly, ssh, Jack, we won’t wake him, will we, we’ll let him sleep and she touched his arm and pointed to the doorway.

Kitty was trying to crack the ice tray, yes, he still goes to the office every day and he was seventy-three in April.
The ice cubes weren’t coming out. Jack took the tray.
Kitty was looking into the cabinet. *Four Roses* isn’t bourbon, is it bourbon? you were drinking bourbon, I can’t tell the difference, really, but you better not change them, let’s see, do we have any bourbon?
Jack said *Four Roses* would be fine.
Kitty said, are you sure, are you really sure, because *Four Roses* isn’t bourbon, is it? and they say it’s bad to change drinks and maybe we do have . . . .
Kitty, *Four Roses* is fine. Perfect, really.
Kitty looked directly at Jack and closed her eyes tightly, are you sure?
Jack was going to say he was sure, but instead held out his hand for the bottle and made the drinks.

The tv was still on in the den, the light flickering on the walls of the empty room; they sat on the sofa and Kitty said, what do you want to watch?
Jack said, I don’t care, Kitty, anything at all.
Kitty said, no, really.
Jack shrugged, this is fine, really.
Kitty said, really, Jack?
Jack didn’t say anything more. He stared at the tv. He could hear the ice clinking in Kitty’s glass.
After a few minutes, Jack went into the bathroom. On the way back, he could see the sports page open on the floor and Mr. Kelly’s chair empty, a deep depression still in the cushion where Mr. Kelly had been sitting.
In the den, Kitty was talking quickly, yes, she had been a legal secretary for a while, quite a while, six or seven years after college, that had been nice, and paid well, too, but she got tired of it.

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She had had her own place, several, in fact, and one really nice place out by the shore, but it was on the third floor. It was nice, but it was on the third floor, Kitty didn’t like to climb stairs, she got tired of the stairs.

Kitty got up to make Jack another drink. Jack could hear ice cubes dropping in the glass. After a few minutes, Kitty returned with the ice in the glass clinking and said, I went to New York for a while and that was nice, too, but I couldn’t live in New York, it was too expensive.

Kitty handed Jack the glass.

Then Kitty carefully took back the glass from Jack. She spilled a little as she set it on the floor. She moved quickly and grabbed Jack behind the neck and kissed him. She dropped on the sofa and went on kissing him, gasping and panting, and Jack felt a soft inner convulsion pass through Kitty like a twinge of pain. She made small weeping noises and kissed Jack harder.

Jack reached out to calm her a little. He was surprised at how taut and frail her back felt under her shirt. He could feel her ribs.

When Kitty felt his hands on her back, she made sobbing and gagging noises and moved convulsively against Jack.

Jack held her more tightly. He wanted to stroke her back and calm her.

She pulled the tails of his shirt out of his pants and when she ran her hands across the skin of his stomach, she made a sudden loud noise, a cry, talking fast and low, words Jack couldn’t quite understand. She slid her hand up his thigh and Jack could feel her reaching for him, stubbornly, insistently, reaching to feel the shape of him through the cloth.

Suddenly, he kissed her hard and pushed her down on the sofa. He pulled back to look at her, but her eyelids were closed so tight he could see them fluttering in the light from the tv.

He ran his hand up her thigh. She moved suddenly and let out a strange sound, as though he’d hurt her.

She started yanking at his pants, fumbling to pull them open.

Then Kitty froze, her eyes opened wide, she swung her head and looked at the doorway.

Jack started. He looked at the doorway. There was no one there.
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Kitty closed her eyes. She kissed Jack hard, suddenly, jamming his lips against his teeth. Jack tasted blood in his mouth. Kitty pulled away. She looked at the doorway.

Jack looked at the empty doorway.

Then Jack said, he’s sleeping, Kitty, he’s gone to sleep.

Kitty dug her fingers into Jack’s back, yes, yes, sleeping, sleeping, he’s sleeping.

She pulled Jack on top of her. She reached down, fumbling; Jack reached down and unfastened his pants, then he felt himself come out and brush against her thigh.

When he touched her thigh, Kitty began talking quickly and softly, words Jack couldn’t understand.

She pushed him away suddenly and looked at the doorway. This time Jack sat up and pulled his shirt around. He eased his pants back up. After a moment, he could close and button them.

Kitty reached for him again.

Jack gently pushed her away.

Then she sat very still and closed her eyes tightly. Jack could hear them all the way over here. He wondered how long it had been going on.

Kitty was staring straight ahead. Her voice came back suddenly, well, then Four Roses, but you shouldn’t mix them . . .

Jack, did you say Nixon or McGovern?

McGovern.

Did you say McGovern? Or wasn’t it the other way, Nixon?

No, you said McGovern, that’s right.

Good night, Kitty.

Jack, why McGovern?

Jack hesitated at the door. Outside, the bright bulb was surrounded by white moths.

Jack pushed open the door.

They were louder out here.

The moths batted into the door and left clouds of white powder on the glass. Several flew down into Jack’s hair and collar. He dug into his collar and brushed several times at his hair.

When Jack reached the sidewalk, the Kelly’s doorlight went
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out. Jack heard the heavy front door pushed closed and the lock click. Jack stood still in the dark.

He could see the tv light flickering up on Rose's ceiling. He looked up through the trees at the stars. Then he took a deep breath and started for the house.

They got louder as Jack pushed open the front door.

They would peak and then waver and weaken, then become strong again.

They reminded Jack of a speeded-up movie showing flowers opening and closing for morning and evening.

They were very loud at the top of the stairs, and Jack gritted his teeth, okay, OKAY, I'm coming!

Her room was dark except for the tv flickering. Jack switched on the overhead light and blinked. The bed was empty, trailing sheets and part of the blanket down after Rose. Rose was in the middle of the floor, lying on her side, exhausted from having tried to turn herself over, either on to her back or stomach, which one, Jack couldn't tell. A broken piece of red fingernail lay near her hand and there were smears of blood on one of her fingers.

When she saw Jack, she held her mouth open and made a long low quavering sound which went on like a string unraveling, but she didn't scream.

Then she slurred in the remains of her speech which Jack had learned to understand, bathroom!

Jack saw a single orthopedic shoe under the desk. The steel brace stood upright alone, the straps unbuckled. He saw her pale atrophied legs; her feet had lost the muscle between the tendons and were becoming undefined like fins.

Her one good eye followed his eyes. Her other eye followed; it always seemed late and unable to catch up to the other eye.

Was she smiling at Jack? No, glaring.

Jack said, don't look at me like that, I've been where I could hear you.

He came closer.

I have.

She wasn't glaring, no. She was trying to smile.
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She seemed to be waiting. Her eye followed him.

There was a large dark stain under her on the floor.

Rose saw him notice. He smelled the close acrid odor of urine.

She giggled.

In her struggle to turn herself over, her nightgown had come up so Jack could see the dark shadow between her legs.

Jack bent suddenly and jerked her nightgown back down to her knees.

His hand passed close to her shoulder. She swiftly turned her head and bit his hand.


He jerked back his hand.

He slapped her.

He looked at his hand. Blood was rising in the teethmarks.

Bathroom, she slurred in the speech Jack had learned to understand.

Jack knelt and began fumbling to get his hands under her shoulders.

Yes, Jack said, bathroom.
SEEMING TO DESCEND out of the air itself, screaming and cursing in Thai, clawing, pounding his chest, Dang was on Billy. “You bullshit man! You take new woman. I hope she give you beaucoup V.D.!” It was like running into a plate glass door. The last Billy could see clearly was her Thai face, the wide nose and high cheekbones and light coffee skin. The knife flashed in the street lights. Hand. Hers. Snatching Billy’s thick glasses. She slashed at his shirt, pulled his hair, bit his neck, kneed him in the groin and clawed his cheek before someone pulled her back. She shrieked, cursed, broke loose, ran for a taxi, jumped in . . . gone. Shirt in rags, bleeding, Billy tried to focus. The chick he’d just spent the last two hours picking up was also suddenly gone, G.I.s were giving him wide berth, mumbling, wondering out loud just what kind of creep he was, what he had done to that chick to make her so crazy.

Billy made his way toward the submerged hull of a taxi. The
first two drivers absolutely would not take him. The last one bargained, but wouldn't come down to less than three times the fair price. Billy agreed, and they drove off.

Two months ago it had been different—much different. Then, alone and drunk, Billy had wandered into the Thai Heaven bar down near the end of the concrete strip on Petchburi Road, wandered into the air-conditioned darkness, just to smell the bar girls' perfume and the G.I. sweat and the booze because his hotel room was too silent and too empty. In a white shirt, tucked in, but gathered loosely above his belt like a reef in a sail, and in baggy pants hanging shapelessly on his short-waisted, almost stocky body, he made his way through the G.I.s at the dark bar. One of the girls, an elbow propped on the bar, smiled. Billy smiled back. She nodded toward the girl beside her. "You like beaucoup?" Yes, Billy smiled, he liked her; he grinned puppyishly. The girl pressed the flat of her hand into the crotch of her friend's tight white slacks. She held her fingertips to Billy's nose. "Here. Smell."

Billy moved into the darkness. Sat down alone at a deserted table, the cloth damp with beer, the ash trays full; he ordered a bottle of beer, paid the twenty baht out of his last one hundred baht note, and sat back to stare out at the circular dance floor—the only section lighted beside the small area near the cash register—where the G.I.s and girls were dancing to a rock and roll band raised above them, dancing in an isolated circle of light like children on a perfect little skating pond seen through the eyepiece of a Christmas ornament. If he had been sitting closer, Billy knew he would have been able to smell the sweat and hear the rhythm of their feet like the soft pad of unshod horses in a corral. From time to time, the beam of a flashlight would sort through the crowd of girls on the dance floor or reach out to the tables or bar. The bar's mamma-san, a matronly woman looking like somebody's aunt in a well-tailored business suit, would smile back down at a G.I. while they waited for the girl. Sometimes, she would look at the G.I. and see he was black, or see that he wasn't black, or that he was ugly, or sense something mean about him and keep on dancing in refusal. If she did come over,
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often the G.I. or the mamma-san herself would pull the chair for
the girl, then smile at both seated together like a benevolent
matchmaker in an old French novel before moving on with her
flashlight beam. Billy watched the light moving around the
room. When the band took a break, he could hear the toilets
flushing in the bathrooms. Billy ordered another bottle of beer.
The band picked up again. When Billy looked across the table,
he saw a girl in a tight silver sheath staring at him in boredom.
Her long black hair slid down her shoulder as she tipped back
her head and dragged on a cigarette.

Billy smiled. "Hello."

She gave him half a smile. Her cheekbones were so high they
seemed to be bruised like a fighter's. She squinted against the
smoke as she dragged again. "When you go back Vietnam?" She
was making a vague, bored attempt to hustle—a little. Billy
replied he wasn't going to Vietnam. She misunderstood and
asked if he was staying for five days, if he wanted a girl for the
whole five days, she was tired of working in the bar, she wanted
a five-day man, one no go butterfly.

Billy answered in Thai. "I won't be going to Vietnam. I'm not
a G.I. I've been staying here a long time."

Her eyes widened slightly as though she were just seeing him.
"Ooooh . . . speak Thai. Number one! You stay Bangkok long
time. Speak good Thai."

She ordered a bottle of beer, moved around the table next to
Billy, and when the waiter came, she paid and tipped him
heavily. Her name was Dang. His was Billy. Bil—lee. Bil—ree.
They laughed. Billy looked at her long black hair. Shiny. Beauti­ful. Thank you.

"Bil—lee. You like me?"
"Yeah, I do like you."
"You like Thai food?"

He did. Billy fumbled with a cigarette. She lit it for him. Put
her hand on his cock under the table as he inhaled. "You want
take me hotel?"

"I'd like that more than anything, but I've got no money." He
showed her the wallet. Just the change from the broken one
hundred baht note. She frowned. For a second. She looked over at the cash register. Down at her hostess' plastic tag.

"Okay, you stay Bangkok long time?"

"Yeah, a year already."

They drank another bottle of beer. "Bil—ree. When you go America?"

Billy shrugged. "I don't know."

"Tonight you no have money?" He started to show her the wallet again, but she pushed his hand back down below the table. "Okay," . . . she probably thinks I have it in my shoe . . . "okay, some night you have money, tonight I no want G.I. money, no want money. You leave bar, go Boston Bar, wait, I come taxi."

"You'll lose your job. It's a big risk."

"Never mind. They no find out. Go . . . go!"

As he passed the bar he thought, everyone can smell the plan by the way I'm walking. He waited with the fruit vendors three blocks down from Thai Heaven. Dang didn't show. They've caught her. She was just putting me on. I'm a sucker. He almost laughed. He stood in the humidity staring at an old, one-eyed woman crouched by a basket of pineapple slices flecked with flies. From time to time, she waved her hand at the flies. A taxi screeched up. Dang. "Hey, come on. What you do, stand old woman. That woman number ten! Ten, baby, ten!" Billy jumped in the taxi. The driver hit it. Dang stared through the back window at the receding pineapple woman, her face full of horror. "One time she beaucoup beautiful. Work bar for Japanese. Long time. Big war. Same-same Vietnam. No want same-same, Dang."

As the taxi sped down the American built highway, the neon signs of the bars began to run together—San Francisco Bar, New York Bar, Texas Bar, Diamond Bar, Lucky Bar, Bar a Go-Go, Whiskey Jug, Phoenix . . . now passing among the new high-rise apartments, now winding down pot-holed streets, once canals, recently filled in to accommodate more traffic, more scooters, cars, buses, motorcycles; now the concrete becoming lanes and a sprawl of teak bungalows, shops . . . giving way to dark, muddy streets. Dang unpinned her plastic hostess' number—
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Thai Heaven #3—and dropped it into her purse. Sliding her hand up and down the inside of Billy’s thigh, she had him turned on by the time the taxi had come to a stop in the silence of a distant street well out of the concrete.

Dang paid the taxi driver herself. She pulled off her high heels with soft suction and stepping out into the mud and rainwater, she picked her way to the boardwalk between the houses. The driver grinned and high-signed Billy. Backing up, the headlights shined on the rain and sun-silvered teak bungalows on their low stilts. Billy slid off his sandals and followed Dang up onto the boardwalk. The cab gone, darkness, the bungalows in shadow, the smells of marshes, wet wood, cooked rice and spices. Billy came up beside her dark movement. Swarms of mosquitoes, suddenly. From one of the bungalows, a baby crying. Quacking of ducks under the bungalow.

“Wash feet!” Dang slid the wooden lid off a waist-high jar. Smell of water. Washing. Then, up three wooden stairs. Inside, the popping chain of an unshaded lightbulb erected bare wooden walls. The dark shapes of Billy and Dang bogy-manned around in a Punch and Judy show. An ironer, a record player, and forty-fives on the floor planks, a television, a radio—which she switched on. Wonderful electric things.

Cigarette dangling from lower lip, Oriental eyes closing against the smoke, she jabbed without looking, “Take bath, honey! Wash! Wash!” She studied herself in a full-length mirror, glancing sideways, pushing up her breasts with the palms of her hands. Suddenly, she reached behind and jerked her zipper. The tight skin of her sheath dropped open. V of golden skin. Black band of her bra strap. She caught him with her glance in the mirror. She jabbed the air, “You! Bil—ree! Take bath, babeee!”

She jerked open a wooden door. A waist-high clay water jar, pan and moth floating on the surface. A porcelain-ringed opening in the wood with non-skid places for the feet. Okay, okay, a bath.

When Billy, towel around his waist, stepped out, she was standing before a shelf with a Buddha on it, several dried up lotus blossoms, coins, and five baht notes strewn over and about the figure. Sticks of smoking incense were stuck in holes.
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punched in a beer can. Her palms were pressed together and raised to her forehead. She kept her eyes closed as she silently moved her lips. The bar dress hung over the back of a chair. Dang had wrapped herself in a peasant garment starting just above her breasts and reaching to mid-thigh. On the thigh, a small scar. She turned from the Buddha without looking at Billy and stepped barefoot up onto the double bed. She began drawing the mosquito net gathered at the head across the strings until it reached the foot of the bed. Dragging a chair up to the side of the bed, she balanced a fan on it, and after much minor adjustment, flicked it on. Then she parted the mosquito net, sat on the edge of the bed beneath the V of the parted net, and slapped the mattress. "Come on. You want me? Like me beaucoup?" He nodded. "Come on! You no can do stand that side." He sat beside her.

She yanked open the drawer of a night table and pictures of all sizes and shapes fell out. She scooped a huge pile into her lap. She groped farther into the drawer and pulled out a small booklet. She thumbed to a place in the back. "See! I clean. No have V.D." The new entry was in blue ink, signed by a Doctor Weinstein of the U.S. Air Force. Billy flipped the pages. The entries went back several years in several signatures, some of them in red, beside those, the number of c.c.s of penicillin required. The red had always reverted to blue. She was blue now. She snatched the book. "Hey, look. You see picture. Beaucoup G.I. like me. I plenty sexy woman." Pictures. All faces, all expressions Billy had ever seen in every gas station, on every street corner, in every passing car... faces: smiling, lonely, ugly, the kid from the small town, ears too big, the grinning confident stud, Dang stabbing the picture, "Black man have big dick, no like, too long, hurt, make Dang sore pussy..."—airmen, marines, posing with pinups or arms around each other or sometimes with several dead Viet Cong at their feet, men with their faces full of fear, of death, men who hadn’t made it, men standing with M-16s, belts of ammo slung about their bodies, cigars lit up, fists on hips, men who grinned as though they had all of the time, power, protection and bravado a man could ever have needed in ten lives, a pilot on the wing of his fighter, hand resting on a
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holstered service pistol, all with signatures on the back, many of them uncertain, uneasy with the pen and words. Dang snatched the pictures away and shoved them back into the drawer. She threw the book in on top. “Number one, huh?”

“Number one, Dang.”

She saw the towel distended between Billy’s legs. She grabbed him in her small fist. “What’s this thing?”

“Uh . . . .”

“No have name, huh?” She untwisted the cloth above her breasts. They lay back beneath the mosquito net and her eyes through the closing lids brimmed. She began to mumble in Thai softer and faster than he could understand, and in the midst of it she said, “Tonight, I have good man,” as Billy gathered away the last of the cloth.

In the morning, Billy was just tucking in his shirt, when Dang said, “Wait! I go with you.”

“You! With me?”

“I go!”

“But . . . you can’t come with me, Dang. I . . . have to go back to my hotel . . . to work at the college.” He wanted to say, I can’t lose that job, that’s a thin little thread I’m hanging from . . . if I lose that job, I don’t eat. I’m screwed. You can always go back to the bar. Beside that, if any of my students saw me walking in the street with you—with your tough tight ass and Dragon Lady beauty, I’d be cooked. “Listen, Dang, don’t you have to go to the bar tonight?” “When I get paid, I’ll . . . .” She snatched the money, crumpled the bills, and hurled them at him.


He shrugged. “Alright, alright. Go to the hotel. But you have to stay in the room. You can’t come to the college.” Suddenly, the image of her in the classroom in her tight dress among his girl students in their uniforms of blue skirts and white blouses, with their hair ribbons and averted eyes. Trouble.
"I go hotel. No go college. Stay hotel."
"Not the college?"
"No go college."
"Promise?"
"Yes."

So they’d driven off to his hotel where the boys down at the desk had looked her over and exchanged smiles when her long slim legs and tight tough ass swung out of the back seat of the cab, where she’d stood with whore’s daytime disorientation and almost childlike confusion, then defiance, giving way to a teasing acknowledgment of the boys’ wondering: maybe the ferang has finally taken himself a—short-time? long-time?—woman.

She’d come into the room as though she were coming home. There were dirty clothes in piles on chairs, a Thai dictionary on the table, empty bottles of makong, an expensive Nikon and a Zenith Transoceanic radio on the night table . . . . She slammed the door behind her, dropped her handbag on the table, and looked through the viewfinder of the Nikon. “Hey! Honey!” Billy turned. “I take photo.” The shutter clicked. She giggled.

“Okay, Dang, cool it.”
“Now you take photo me.”
“The light’s no good in here.”
“What you mean, no good? Take photo. You no think I bea coup beautiful woman?”
“Dang, you are the most bea coup beautiful chick. I just mean the light is weak.”
“Bullshit! Take photo.”

She shoved the camera into his hand, jutted out her hip, smiled, suddenly became shy and little girlish, giggled and swept the hair out of her eyes. “Now . . . NOW!”


“Now you go college. Leave me hotel room.”

So! The Nikon. The radio. So that was it! When she got rid of him, she’d grab his stuff. No want money! “Go. Go teach. I stay. You come back teach me English.”
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“Nope. You go. Come back when I come back.”
“I stay!”
“No! You go!”
“I stay. Come here taxi. Stay now!” Hands on hips, she stamped her foot.

Alright, goddamnit! He’d let her stay, he’d tell the boys at the desk to watch her, lot of good that would do, and make sure that if she left at all, it would be empty handed. Anyway, he knew where she lived, could he find his way back, if that was her place at all . . . ? Maybe a friend’s. Some kind of front. Maybe she had the whole business figured out. He shrugged. Maybe she was okay, too. Why did he have to be such a mean, suspicious bastard?

While he was shaving in the bathroom, he could hear her tuning the radio and singing. She was making faces in the mirror and glancing over her shoulder at her ass when he came out. “Oh, you bea~ucoup handsome man, honey.” Billy’s blond hair was combed, his face was smooth, and his blue eyes behind the black frame glasses were clear. Dang reached up and pushed back a strand of blond hair off his forehead. “Like hair. Same-same sun. Beaucoup beautiful.” She patted his cock, stuck her chin out at him, and lit a cigarette. He tucked the ends of his last clean white shirt into his pants. “Ah . . . white shirt. Good job.”

He felt like saying, yeah, sure, good second rate job. I could never teach in an American college . . . hell, do anything at all in America. He zipped up his fly. “Okay, I’m late. You be here when I get back, okay?” He repeated it in Thai—good Thai. She nodded as she went on tuning the radio. She sure liked that radio. Might as well be talking to the wind. Woooeee . . . what the hell.

Downstairs, he told the boys to keep an eye on her, wondering if rather than protecting himself, he wasn’t leading them to the plunder. For a cut of the pie, they were a cinch to be bought off . . . woooeee, what the hell, he shrugged. A den of thieves. It was all too much. They nodded their heads as he walked out, leer~ing and giving him a respectful, you’re-okay-with-a-piece-like-that sign.
Billy’s first class was at one o’clock—elementary English, a liturgy of responsive reading. “Good morning.”
“Good morning.” (Twice repeated.)
“How are you, this morning?” Wonder how much she’s getting for that camera and radio on the black market . . . probably see the stuff in a shop window in Chinatown one day . . . .
In the coffee room, the halls outside a cacophony of footsteps and voices, the Kid’s gangly arms were praying-mantised over the outspread pages of the *Bangkok Post*. “Hey, Billy, listen to this. The Red Sox beat Cleveland in the ninth. Good karma.”
The Kid rocked back in his chair. Curly black hair, long semitic face. “Yeah, and the blacks burned Detroit. Bad karma.”
“Detroit? There’s enough trouble here. You haven’t seen a chick around, have you, Kid?” Billy described her.
“A chick like that? Here? No, man, why?”
“I don’t know. This chick seems to have latched on to me.”
Billy told the Kid about last night. “She’s in my hotel room right now . . . I hope . . . If she ever decided to come here, I’d be dead.”
“She’d never do that.”
“I don’t know. This broad’s a little crazy. There’s something kind of wild about her that scares me.”
“She might just steal your stuff, like you say, but I doubt it. I always used to worry about the bar chicks following me to the college, making a scene, but they never do. It’s all in the head.”
Billy taught his next two classes. On the way out of the college, he saw the Kid dribbling a basketball, two Thais ridiculously trying to guard his six-three frame. Up, he hung in midair, body ascending like stairs—length of knees and trunk, cocked arms, basketball. He hung there, the Jewish kid who read the scores and standings, the playground athlete. The ball never even touched the rim as the net hissed. The Kid turned. “Hey, Billy, I’ll give you even money your stuff’s still there.”
“I’m not betting against myself.”
The Kid grinned, picked up the basketball, and started to dribble. Another shot. “Call my hotel if you get rid of her, and we’ll go eat. I found a number one new restaurant.” Another swish.
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When Billy opened the door to his room, the radio was blasting Thai music through ten white shirts hung up on a makeshift clothesline strung across the room. Dang was kneeling beside a bathtub full of clothes and suds. Her long black hair was pinned up. In her country dress—blouse and a loose, wrap-around skirt of bright cloth—she was scrubbing, her face no longer tough and whorish, but absorbed, smooth in profile, the rounded dolphin nose, the Buddha full lips. Almost childlike, full of immediate contentment. Whacking clothes around in the tub, singing softly to the radio, she had covered herself with water and white sud stains. Billy undid the top button of his shirt. Loosened the tie. When he saw the Nikon on the table, he wanted to snatch it, rush into the bathroom, and push the camera into her hands. “Here, okay? Now please go.” Instead, he just leaned in the bathroom doorway. She looked up. “Hello, honey.”

He couldn’t smile. “Hi.” He lit a cigarette. Saw himself in the mirror through the smoke. Her false eyelashes like black caterpillars beside his toothbrush.

“Give me puff, honey.”

He kneeled beside her. Held out the cigarette. She pressed it between her lips. Closed her eyes, dragged deeply and blew the smoke out. Softly, “Thank you, telak.”

“Okay, Dang. You’re welcome.” Billy pointed the cigarette down at the pile of clothes on the floor, into the suds, the bathtub. “Why?”

“What you mean, why?”

“Why are you washing them?”

“Dirty! No wash long time. Beaucoup dirty. Clean now. I make clean!”

“But, uh . . . why? Why are you doing it? I mean it’s not your . . . job.”

Dang slung a ball of soggy underpants into the bathtub splattering suds everywhere. “You crazy! I tell you! Dirty, dirty! Clean now.”

“Okay . . . okay.”

“You crazy man! Never listen, never understand I speak.”

“I do understand. Thank you. For cleaning them.”

Kneeling beside her, Billy suddenly kissed the back of her neck. She slapped him on the knee. "What you do? Go away! You bad man." But she was smiling.

In the other room, he turned the radio down, warily watching the bathroom door, but the sloshing of water and the singing went on unbroken. He looked around for a bottle of makong. None. He was just calling down to the boys at the desk when she shouted out of the bathroom. "Honey!"

"What?"
"Honey!"
"WHAT!"
"Tonight we go movie, okay? I no go bar. No like. We go movie. I stay here, okay?"

He looked around the room at his ten white shirts, sleeves, everywhere, opened his mouth, raised his arms to the fan—the eleventh shirt, himself—and in the moment, radio playing, fan thrumming, Dang’s golden fist poised waiting, clenching his dirty underpants in the bathtub behind the wall, he suddenly shouted, "Okay, okay, tonight we go movie. Go MOVIE!" The scrubbing and singing resumed.

Billy paced the room. Kicked a chair. Alright! Alright! Tonight they’d go to a fucking movie. And then he’d give her the slip somewhere. Or if not tonight, maybe tomorrow. Or maybe she’d just get fed up with the whole thing in a few days, and he’d ride it through, very cool, no scenes. Yeah, she’d get fed up in a few days and leave, these girls couldn’t stay in anyone place with anyone man too long. Five days R&R, the Golden Mean. Five days in a hotel room with a G.I., he buys her PX perfume, American cigarettes, a new silk dress if she’s lucky, take pictures together, hot baths, fuck fuck fuck, and he back to Da Nang, she back to the bar. But the G.I. always paid. And this one doesn’t want money. Billy shrugged. No matter, whatever her reasons, she would go back to the other chicks giggling and dancing together on the long hot afternoons before they started making up—gluing on their false eyelashes and painting, dusting on the rouge, ironing frilled blouses and trying on black lace bras . . .
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she would go back to that. There was no need to explain any­thing to her—which would be impossible, anyway—make a thing of his male privacy which he wasn’t so sure he wanted and didn’t always really know how to use . . . the drinking, other peregrinations. He paced beneath the overhead fan. She’d leave soon enough.

In the evening they did go to the movies, first standing in the lobby full of G.I.s—white beginning in a sunburn line just be­neath collars and shortsleeves—and their women. The Thais watched the procession, the young men whispering and socking each other on the arm, the girls curious or offended; the older couples not seeing. Finally, the first show was over, and the lobby emptied as they all went inside.

They watched the endless advertisements: BIC Pen (fired from a rifle through a board, American karate); deodorant (chick with rancid pits wises up and gets her Thai lover after first knocking him cold by lifting her arm); Contac (microscopic clouds of germs, so that’s what they look like), etc. All of which fasci­nated Dang.

“Same-same, America, honey?” In one short, a team of bul­locks pulled a crude wooden plow through a rice paddy, a barefoot women in up-country costume wading behind through the curling mud. Dang sat up. Pointed at the screen, at herself. “Me . . . two years. Me eighteen, now. Before come Bangkok. Two years. Before beaucoup G.I. go Vietnam, understand, honey?”

“Understand, Dang.”

“No like.” She held up her palm in the flickering movie light. “Hard.” She rapped the arm rest. “Same-same. Soft, now.” Billy took her hand. Without taking her eyes from the screen, she squeezed his hand two or three times, “Hey! Hold hand . . . you crazy man, Bil—lee.”

The movie was James Bond killing piles of Doctor No’s evil little gook henchmen. Billy looked at Dang uneasily. She was totally absorbed. He looked around at the audience. Everyone totally absorbed. Embarrassed at this wonder white agent killing gooks like insects: “Eeeee . . . ahhh, unnnggh . . . no more, Bond . . . eeee.” Billy was relieved when Bond had kicked the
last one's teeth into splattering chicklets, the picture of the king came on and the theater lights went up.

Back in the hotel room, Dang took down the shirts, feeling, yes, all dry. She folded each and placed them all in neat piles along with his underwear. She took a long bath, singing and talking to herself. She came out perfumed and fresh, her skin beaded with water, and they made love in a great coolness of water and perfume, coming together like long-time practiced lovers, Dang coming in Thai words and tones which Billy knew he'd never be able to remember to look up in his dictionary in the morning.

After the fifth day, when the Golden Mean of R&R time had elapsed without Dang’s departure, Billy stopped worrying, worrying about her leaving, worrying about their incommunication beyond cigarettes, food, and sex, worrying about being discovered by his chaste girl pupils—Asian Womanhood—while he was walking along with his Dragon Lady, and surrendered himself to his fate of watching BIC Pens quivering through boards every night; he started worrying about his looking forward to finding her singing or reading comic books or staring out the window listening to the radio when he came in. And he worried about . . . it didn’t take shape, the worry . . . he just kept wondering why? What she wanted when she could be out making all that bread? Kicking her out . . . he couldn’t even begin to imagine the scene she’d make. Better just to wait it out, wait for her to tire of him and go.

Which she did do. One afternoon coming in from the college, he opened the door to find her standing in an aluminum metallic silk sheath, her golden calves tapering down to black high heels. When she looked down, lighter coming up to cigarette, her long false eyelashes followed the flame. Her high heels clicked on the cool stone floor. “Honey, I go now.” Suddenly, at the sight of her in her bar clothes, he wanted her.

Billy put down his elementary English books. “Going . . . ?” The radio was silent. He fumbled out a cigarette. Groped for a light. She held out the heavy zippo. Courtesan with a blowtorch. He took the lighter. Inscription: spaced above and below a map
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“Gentle soul.”

“Yeah, he go back Vietnam. Now I go up country, far away,” she waved her hand, “go work . . . again, work bar, make beaucoup money, go fuck G.I., take G.I. money . . . .”

Billy didn’t think now was the time to grin. “When are you leaving?”


But her eyes were already distant into the bar darkness, the rock and roll, the hand on the cock under the table, the rice paddies green and symmetrical as flooded billiard tables, and the fighters and bombers lined up on the runways. Dang dragged deeply on her cigarette; her eyes narrowed against the smoke. Absently reaching for Billy, she put her arm around him. “You number one man. I come back,” she said softly.

Billy pressed crumpling baht notes into her fist. When she was gone, he took a long hot shower, dressed, and then walked over to the Kid’s hotel—a Chinese hotel on the klong not far from the Royal Parade Ground and the golden roofs of the wats. It was Friday, and the klong was silently filling up with open flat boats gliding in from the countryside waterways. He passed two girls in one of the boats, their faces partly hidden by the great discs of slightly conical straw hats. He tried to imagine them with rouge and false eyelashes . . . felt sick, we’re turning them all into whores . . . .

In the lobby, as he passed the old Chinaman at the desk before the stairs, Billy felt the man watching him, though he didn’t raise his eyes. “The *ferang*, the *ferang*, I’m coming to see the *ferang*.” The man didn’t look up from his paper.

Upstairs, Billy walked down the scrubbed, water-darkened wooden planks of the hallway, the radios and fans blasting out through the open transoms of the rooms. He knew the old
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Chinaman was listening downstairs, waiting for his footsteps to stop, the knock, and the English voices before he would really go back to his paper. Billy knocked on the Kid's door.

"Who is it?"
"Billy."

"It's open." Billy entered the shadowy room. The Kid was lying in his underwear on the bedsheets in the middle of the room, staring up at the spinning fan, almost in a trance. Billy stepped into the less hot air. "Billy, what's happening, man?"

"She's finally gone." Billy sat down in a straight wooden chair.

"The chick?"
"Yeah, thank God."
"She steal your camera and stuff?"
"Nope. I knew she'd leave. Those little ladies have their lives to lead."

"I win the bet."
"What bet?"
"The bet—that she wouldn't steal your stuff."
"I told you I don't bet against myself."
"I still win."
"She said . . . she was coming back to stay with me."

The Kid was singing to himself. "Who knows? Maybe you will hear from her again. You just never know with these chicks. Maybe she'll come back with a new, incurable strain of syphilis, just for you."

"I'll never see her again. That's just old whore talk. Their way of saying goodbye. If there's one thing a whore knows how to do beside screw and take your money, it's say, 'So long, you number one man . . . .' She sure did look out and out tough—I mean, tough—when she left. None of that peasant shit she'd slipped into with me . . . though it didn't cost me anything. Little time, some peace of mind, privacy . . . oh, lot of that."

The fan beat against the humid air in the shadowy room, the music from the other rooms swooping and weaving through the blades. "Ya know, Kid, one thing I just don't understand. Why she didn't want any money? And why she just attached herself to me?"
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"Maybe she even liked you."

"I'm thirty-one and let's face it, not that many other people have liked me . . . not to mention strangers like that marine taking smashes at me just because they didn't like my face. I think she was using me to take a little holiday from the bars. Easy street." Billy was thinking about himself, becoming vindictive and hurt. "That's right! Not many people have liked me."

"It's too early. The heat would have us stroked out in ten minutes."

"Yeah, that's right! Goddamnit who wants to be drunk in this heat . . . ya know, she's going back up country to work at the airbase, Kid. Takli."

"Lot of money in those places."

"I was in the Air Force for five years . . . after M.I.T. I sure as hell didn't tell her that, though."

"Why? What'd you do?"

"I taught physics."

"You are too much, Billy."

"I was too near-sighted to be a pilot. A fucking physics teacher."

"Too much."

"Kid, I wanted to be a pilot! I wanted to fly!"

"Too much, Billy. The only thing I know about physics is that space curves back on itself, whatever that means. And Ben Franklin did that business with the kite and the lightning."

"Shit. Let's go out and have a good dinner and some booze. We can smoke some stogies and check the bars."

"Yeah, but . . . ."

They had the dinner and afterward walked the steaming streets, the Thais staring at the two ferangs as they sauntered along smoking long cigars, taking their long strides and speaking their elongated, single-toned words. Outside the bars, the girls ducked out beneath the neon signs to buy fruit from the baskets of crouching vendors while G.I.s disembarked from taxis and smiled at each other and went in to come out a short time later with girls and drive off in waiting taxis to their hotels. The rock and roll blasted out each time the door opened. Inside,
Billy and the Kid sat at a table, Billy getting drunker and drunker, closing his eyes and feeling the music. When he returned to his hotel, he climbed the stairs, slowly, steadily, drunkenly, opened the door, slammed it hard behind him, and without taking off his clothes, fell on the bed and slept. The bed was empty and Dang was gone at last.

But tonight Dang had come back. Come back, found him, and attacked, she'd even stolen his glasses. He was blind without his glasses. The streets passed Billy in a blur. He couldn't be sure, but he thought the driver had been studying him the whole time in the mirror; maybe he wasn't even going to the hotel. The bastard! The mercury street lights slowmotioned the way they had that night he had played the jukebox and walked right into it. And he still thought that bullshit about the song was just an excuse of the worst sort. He remembered how he had sat alone in his booth in the all-night restaurant, out on his nightly prowl, 3 A.M., not looking for chicks, nothing, just having finally beached at this restaurant. Vacant buzz of G.I.s. Airmen. Flipping the songs in the jukebox. Fumbling with coins. Several drop and ring on the floor. Retrieved. Into the jukebox. Several songs play. Silence. Dropping in more coins. The song starts to play: Where have all the flowers gone . . . It plays for maybe thirty seconds. Someone says the word communist. The room becomes silent. Someone else asks who played the song? Billy's humming to himself . . . long time passing . . . who played the song? Me. I did. My very own self. He did. Who? That guy over there. The cat with the black glasses and long blond hair. Me. My very own self. They're talking about me. This coffee cup. Empty. Very interesting. Time to refill. My legs. Won't move.

The marine. Leaning slightly forward. Flushed sunburn, short hair bleached out almost blond. Grey eyes. Oh, Jesus. Nothing but blood and steel. The marine hit the table once hard with his fist so the cup jumped out of the saucer and crashed on the floor.

"You play that song?"
"Which?"
"The one that's playing right now!"
"Oh . . . I guess I did."
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The marine smashed the table again. "Nobody! Nobody plays that song while I'm here. You understand. Not when Americans—my buddies—are dying in Vietnam. And specially you, you long-haired faggot. I come in here for a cup of coffee and you play that fucking song, now I ask you, I just ask you what am I gonna do, huh?"

"I . . . ."

"Shut up! That's a commie protest song like all those god-damned draft card burners are singing and nobody's playing that song. Nobody!"

An army sergeant slipped into the seat across from Billy. "Now hold on. Hold on! Just hold everything . . . you and I know he may be a long-haired faggot, but he's got a right to play that song—even if it's a commie song."

The marine smashed the table so hard that everything flipped off. Billy watched the salt hour-glassing down into the folds of the seat. "Nobody plays that fucking song! My buddies aren't dying for nothing, not for this faggot too, if I have to rip this jukebox out of the fucking wall . . . ."

The sergeant wagged his head toward the door. At Billy. "I think you'd be smart to leave, now."

"I'd like to . . . ."

"Yeah, well, let's you and me head for that door together."

The marine agreed. "That's right, get this shit out of here."

Suddenly, he jabbed his finger into the moisture on the formica table. He drew a line across the table. "That's your side of the line, faggot."

"Wait a minute, how's he going to get out . . . .?"

"That's his problem. Get out, you commie."

"He can't if he can't cross the line." The sergeant saw the smile and started to crush out his cigarette even as the marine's smile . . . never finished. The lights exploded inside Billy's head, came apart and turned to phosphorescence running like rain down a window pane. The song was still playing when Billy came to: . . . long time passing, looong . . . . The sergeant and the marine were grunting, shouting. Someone picked him up by the elbow and half-led, half-dragged him to the door.
while the two-headed shape surged close to him. "That commie faggot! I'll kill him and you next!"

"Get him out. Out. I can't hold . . . ."


So it had been the same as tonight with his hands groping for the taxi door in a blur, the lights spinning away as he'd ridden back to his hotel room. What was it about him? Jesus, the Kid was right. He was a goddamned kite in a lightning storm. "Shit!" The cab was slowing up. They pulled off the street into a driveway. The hotel, must be. The driver repeated the name out loud several times, quickly, quickly to get rid of this unlucky passenger, whatever he might have done, whatever, but the money, quickly out, ferang before something more happens while you're on my hands. Billy pressed the baht notes up to his squinting eyeball. Counted up the outrageous fare. The driver held out his palm. "What?"

"Tip."

"You get your ass out of here!" The driver cursed Billy and sped off, leaving him in the half-moon drive with the hotel office to the street side, the stairs to the other. Billy groped into the office. The desk. "Hello . . . ?" Deserted. "Where the hell are they? Just when I really need some makong, damn 'em all."

Billy crossed the driveway and made his way up a flight of stairs. On the first floor, he heard a radio playing and a rush of water coming from the washroom in the hall. He moved toward the light. Looked in. Squinted. Leaning forward. Dressed in blue shorts, a man squatted on the tiles. He was washing a bulbous bronze Buddha about three feet high. The entire figure, but for the face, was covered with suds and lather. Billy backed into the hall and climbed the second set of stairs. Felt his way down the hall to his room. Pushed open the door. Simultaneously wondered, why open? I locked it. A screech, the plastic room key tag shattering behind his head. The radio hitting the floor. Like standing on the bottom of a swimming pool and watching someone moving at the far end. She must have just arrived. The empty desk, that's why . . . all hiding in the basement. Smart fellows. Wish I was there, myself. A lamp overturned. The bulb exploded. Darkness. "You bullshit man!"
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“Dang, out!”
“You take other woman!”
“You never were my woman. I’m calling the police. This has gone far enough.”

Billy slammed the door. The table. The phone. He could reach it. Got to. “Dang, I’m calling the police. You bitch!” Her shrieking stopped. The room . . . silent.

Black. He stared. Could see nothing. Couldn’t even hear her breathing. She might be an inch away from my face getting ready to stick a dagger through my eyeball and I’d never see her fast enough to blink. He inched a toe out for the leg of the telephone table. Snag it. Groping. Farther than . . . .

She was on him. “You call police! Police! Now I make beaucoup trouble!” They scuffled. The darkness broke as she pulled open the door. Her dark shape in the hall light. “Okay, I come back! Have brother in army. Have beaucoup friend no like American, no like ferang. Brother come! I come! Friend come! Beaucoup trouble for you now, Bil—ree!” She was running down the hall. Clatter of high heels. Downstairs, the radio played faintly from the cavernous bathroom. Billy kicked the door shut. Flicked on the bathroom light. Found his glasses stomped on the floor where she had dropped them. Too bent to wear. He held them out in front of his nose like opera glasses. He dialed the Chinese hotel. Other end. Ringing. Come on! That old catfish-whiskered mummy asleep in his black silk pajamas. Answered. “Room seven. The ferang.” No response. “The ferang,” Billy shouted, “the fucking ferang!”

He paced. Suddenly, stepped away from the window. He imagined his silhouette holding the telephone as it must look from outside. Now she’s sure I’ve called the police if she stopped to look up at the window. Shouting on the other end. That god-damned Chinaman. More shouting.

“Hello?”
“Kid!”
“Billy, what’s shakin’, man?”
“Oh, Christ, you’ve gotta come over here.”
“Now? It’s four o’clock.”
“Dang. The chick . . . the bar chick, the one who moved in and stayed . . . ?”
“Yeah?”
“She’s back. She’s really pissed. I said I was gonna call the cops on her and she said, ‘Beaucoup trouble now!’”
“Beaucoup trouble? What’s that mean?”
“Beaucoup trouble! Oh, Kid, this is bad, very bad. Can you come over here? I’m back at my hotel. It’s worse than the night I played *Where Have All the Flowers Gone!*”
“That bad? Alright. I’ll be over. But I don’t know what you want me to do.”
“Either do I. Bring some makong. Bring your good eyes. She smashed my glasses. Just come.”

The Kid came ambling in a while later, easy time-out walk of the forward flipping his towel away and sauntering back into the game. “Jesus, what a mess. What the hell happened to you?”

“Watch out! There’s glass everywhere.” Scrunching. “Leave the radio, Kid. I don’t even want to try it.” Billy poured out two drinks in plastic bathroom glasses. Kid hunted up his prescription sunglasses, and Billy slipped them on. He slouched in a chair. “Keep away from the window, Kid. There’s no telling who’s out there.” Conspiratorial tones.

“Cool it, Billy. No one’s out there. I think you’re getting paranoid.”

“Bullshit! You wanna tell me the night I played *Where Have All the Flowers Gone,*” he sidestepped saying the marine had decked him, “was my imagination, that I couldn’t move my jaw was my imagination, that this mess is my imagination?” With his shades, rooster comb of rumpled hair, unshaven scratched face, and his drink, Billy looked like a Latin American dictator just barely on a plane into exile.

“What happened?”

“I was just standing with a chick in front of one of the coffee shops when Dang swooped down out of nowhere, accused me of two-timing her, attacked me, then ran off. She was waiting for me here when I got back. How do you two-time a whore? A whore you haven’t even heard from in two months?”
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"Well, I don’t know. Was she still a whore if you didn’t pay her?"
"What’s that supposed to mean? Sure! A whore’s a whore!"
"Hey, take it easy!"
"Listen, Kid, you know why I left New York City in the first place? I left because I was on my way to India . . . ."
"Like Columbus, right?"
"To find an Asian wife . . . ." Suddenly Billy was into a long-winded ramble on where he’d been, his theories on women, languages, but no matter what he said, he somehow kept concluding, "What I need is an Indian wife! What I still need is an Indian wife! An Asian wife!"
Billy poured himself another drink.
"Well, which is it, an Indian or Asian wife?"
"Both! They’re the same! Asian!"
"Well, what do you mean, an Asian wife?"
"A woman from Asia! Asian women understand a man. They’re very gentle. American chicks, well, you know about them without my telling you—pushy, obnoxious . . . Asian women don’t have to resort to that stuff. They’re naturally intuitive, they understand a man without a lot of words and reasons . . . ."
"Okay, I can dig Asian chicks, I do."
"Someone to reflect off, Kid."
"Reflect off? Reflect what?"
"Me. My American self. My male self. My western Christian self. Every man should have an Asian wife!" Billy pounded the table with his fist, took a hard belt, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "But instead I get myself in this mess. Kid, why don’t you see if you can get a room across the hall? I’d feel better if there were another ferang in here. I could always shout for help."
"The Chinaman gives me a good deal on my room. An unbeatable deal."
"That fucking Chinaman!"
"Beside that I’m going into the monastery in about ten or twelve days."

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"You? Kid? The monastery? No shit? Why?"
"Quiet. Very quiet."
"How long will you stay in?"
"At least six months. Maybe a long time."
"A bhikku. Oh, that's really fine, Kid. I admire that—you a Buddhist monk. I'd like to be a Buddhist monk." Billy thought about being a Buddhist monk. "But then, if I were stuck in the monastery all day, I wouldn't be able to find an Asian wife. Kid, Dang's really pissed! She said beaucoup trouble!"

He touched the scratches on his face. Looked around. Lowered his voice. "Do you know what?" Billy was whispering. "I think they really mean to get me. Nail my hide to the wall. Beaucoup trouble. Kill my ass. Dead!"

"Aw, cut it out, Billy. Kill you? That's crazy. Billy, you know those whores are always bullshitting, you know that. Beaucoup trouble doesn't mean kill you . . . it just means maybe most they want is to rough you up some more, teach you a lesson . . . ."

"A lesson? Roughed up? I'm always getting roughed up, Kid! I'm already roughed up! Look at me."

"Yeah, well maybe they wanna knuckle your head, you know, leave their mark on you, a scar or two, Asian honor, saving face, all that . . . ."

"Knuckle my head? Scar or two? Honor? She's a whore! Oh no, man, this time they're going to get me!"

"Come on, Billy. Not even Dang cares enough about you to want to see you killed."

"You don't think she cares about me, man?"

"Oh, Billy, man. I'm not saying that she doesn't care. I'm asking if you think you're actually worth killing? It takes time, energy, money . . . ."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Well, you think she cares enough to bother to kill a guy like you? Think you're worth killing?"

Billy looked hurt. "Sure, Kid, I think I'm worth killing! Are you saying I'm not worth killing?"

Kid sighed. "Forget it, Billy, you're hopeless. Listen, no one
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wants to kill you. Believe me. But if you can't get past that, come into the monastery, I'll get my people to sponsor you.”

“Yeah, I'd like to be a bhikku. That's a magnificent life.”

“You can do it. You've got it in you.”

“Two meals a day?”

“Right.”

“Well, that’s not too bad. But then I wouldn't be able to find an Asian wife. Hey, lookit, can you chain the door?” Billy shook his head. “No, I'd never find a wife in there. And I'm thirty-one and not getting younger.” Billy's head started to nod. Kid stretched out on the bed. Billy mumbling, “I kind of liked Dang. She is beautiful.” Head almost on his knees, he fell asleep in his chair.

In the morning, the Kid took Billy's sunglasses to have new ones made from the prescription. “Tell them at the college that I'm sick and can't make it, okay?” The Kid left Billy sitting, eyes unfocused and hands in his lap. Half way down the hall, the Kid heard Billy fumbling the chain into its track. When he returned in the afternoon, the chain slid back.

Inside, there were empty dishes on the tables and floor. “The boys sent up my meals. I told them to let you in. They're supposed to be keeping an eye out for Dang and strangers, but I know I can’t trust the bastards. For fifty baht, they’d sell their mothers.”

“No, I think they’re okay. They looked me over pretty care­fully. The glasses will be ready late tomorrow. When I told the guy I was going into the monastery, he said he’d rush them for me. Here are your shades.”

“Thanks, Kid. I'd be dead without you.”

“Cool it. Hey, man, you look like hell. Why don't you clean up. This place is like a cell.”

“Yeah, I might just as well be in a monastery . . . .”

“The students asked for you. Told you to get well.”

Kid brought the new glasses. The scratches on Billy's cheek healed, he shaved, washed, and one morning, early, he stepped
out into the hallway. Passed the boys at the desk who gave him the nod. Out to the street where, Jesus, Dang! In a cab, opening her pocketbook, the gun barrel flashed. I’m gonna die. Billy fell dead as the woman pressed the lipstick tube to her lips, red, lipstick. Unnghh. It went like that block after block with Billy turning suddenly, looking into the shops, dropping his eyes uneasily at the indolence of loafers whose lids drooped and gunsight-squinted as he passed. He watched for puffs of smoke from silencers. Electrical cords dropped around his neck. He made it to the college.

Everyone had missed him. The teachers hoped he was better. All had diagnoses and remedies—this climate, perhaps it was just something you’d eaten, you must be careful what you eat, even we get sick from some of the things we eat in these little restaurants. It was nice to see him. His girl students left him sweets on the edge of his desk beside the microphone. Outside, on the court, the Kid was triple-teamed by three Thais. Bouncing of the ball, searching back and forth. Getting faster. Silence. Billy didn’t even bother to follow the trajectory of the ball. “Hey, how’s the patient?” Kid was grinning.

“I don’t like it, Kid. She’s around somewhere. I feel it in my bones. The adrenaline’s been squirting all morning.”

“Come on. It’s all over. She’s got better things to do than worry about you.”

“I looked up during my class and almost threw the microphone at one of the chicks. I thought Dang had slipped in.”

“My ordination’s in three days. Wednesday morning. Wat Plang. You know the way?”

“I’ll find it.”

“You’ll be there?”

“Dang herself couldn’t keep me away. How’re you going to manage it, Kid? Getting up at five-thirty to beg breakfast. Nothing to eat after noon. No ass. No ass. No going out after three.”

“No sweat. Not a bit. I could still sponsor you.”

“Yeah, it’d be a beautiful life.”

The monastery’s cracked walls, twice as tall as a man, were at the end of a muddy, cratered road, the craters full of rain, and the
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monastery deep in the green of palms and bird songs. Even as
the walls came in sight, Billy felt a sense of ease spreading
through him. He recognized several students outside one of the
gates. Beyond them, he could see the colors of sportshirts and
women's dresses moving in the courtyard's enclosure. Everyone
had turned out for the Kid's ordination. To one side of the gate,
an old man, face wrinkled and lined as though soaked in brine,
balanced a thin yoke on his stooped shoulders. From each end
hung an immense tangle of bird cages, the birds fluttering against
postage stamp pieces of sky. One of Billy's students wyed.
"These birds give good luck. Chawk dee. Let one fly." Flower
and ribbon in her hair, the young girl was smiling, yet not
smiling. Buddha-faced. Billy asked the old man how much. Five
baht. The old man stared at some point deep in the green and
shadowed morning trees. His hand met Billy's to take the coins.
Plucking a wooden peg from the catch, he flicked the
matchstick-thin door. Thrash of wings and color. The bird flew
up, perched on the monastery wall, and began to sing. Billy
grinned.

Inside the walls, the grass grew in sporadic tufts among huge
mud puddles. Crowds of students, friends, and monks in saffron
robes stood outside the temple centered in the enclosure. About
the temple were the teak bungalows where the monks lived and
meditated. Billy made his way through the crowd, nodding to
students, smiling, and sweating in the dense humidity.

On the opposite side of the courtyard, the Kid was sitting in a
straight wooden chair in the sun-speckled shade, his saffron robe
hanging on his long limbs, his head slightly bowed. He was
about thirty yards from the mingling crowd, but he was isolated.
No one seemed to notice him. A Thai couple, his sponsors and
close friends, and a monk stood behind his chair. There was a
pan of water on the ground at his feet. Several curls of long black
hair were scattered in the grass and mud. The Kid's scalp was
crossed with white gashes. Billy stopped. They're giving the Kid
a lobotomy, I've gotta get him out of here. The husband, the
wife, and the monk took turns cutting a swath of hair with the
razor. White as a larva, the Kid's skull was slowly emerging
from the peeling hair. Billy wyed, bowing slightly to the three
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holy barbers. "Hi, Kid." When the Kid looked up, his eyebrows were gone, and his eyes seemed adrift in his cheeks and forehead. He smiled. "How do you feel?"

"Very peaceful. Very happy."
"Good. I let a bird go for everyone. For luck."
"The old man at the gate?"
"Yeah."

Another curl peeled off like a shaving from a plane. "That old man’s let the same bird go at least ten times this morning. I was watching him earlier. When the people move on, he has a little boy climb up and catch it with a net. The bird’s drugged . . . stoned out of his mind."

"Maybe it will still work." The last of the Kid’s hair fell into the mud in back of the chair.

The door of the temple was piled high with mounds of sandals. Inside, a dark cavern sheltered from the glare and direct heat of the sun was filled with the shadow of a Buddha in lotus position, robe falling in folds of stone. The Buddha was three or four times the size of a man. Kid kneeled facing the head bhikku and the Buddha. They were surrounded by saffron-robed monks—all smooth-headed—sitting about on the cool stone floor among gifts—baskets of fruit, flowers whose fragrance mingled with the smoke of incense sketching the gloom, bolts of cloth—all brought by friends of the Kid’s and the sponsors’ whose faces crowded the unglassed low windows and were smiling and radiant with the Kid’s monkhood.

Outside, after the ceremony, someone stood behind the Kid and held a huge fringed umbrella over his shining white head. Everyone followed the Kid around the temple three times, the Kid sauntering easily under the umbrella’s swaying fringe in his time-out walk, an easy smile on his elongated hairless face, the tallest monk coming only to his shoulder.

On the last turn around the temple, as Billy passed a window behind the huge Buddha, he noticed a wrinkled old man—he might have been the bird man’s brother—asleep on the cool stone in the incense-heavy shadows. Billy leaned through the window. The air was filled with the shuffle of feet circling the
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temple; the soft murmur melted in with the ticking from an old clock on the wall. The pendulum gleamed softly in the shadows as it swung. The hexagonal face was water-stained with faces trying to emerge through the Victorian numbering. Beside the sleeping old man was a Tarzan comic book and a huge antique telephone. A number on it. Billy leaned farther into the temple. Copied the number.

Several weeks passed. It became progressively easier for Billy to walk in the streets. Once in a while at the rip-fire sound of high heels, he'd whip around and duck, but Dang was never there, it was always somebody running to make a bus. He knew now that he was safe, that she'd gone back up country, back to the bases and the bars, back to her life. Beaucoup trouble, Billy felt foolish. The Kid had been right.

Billy was just closing the door to his room one evening when the phone rang. He hesitated, dug out his key, went back in . . . it was the boy at the desk. Two strangers had started up the stairs. Billy reached over, chained the door. What'd they look like? Pointed black shoes, tight slacks, long hair combed back. Big. They'd started up the stairs, then changed their minds and decided to wait outside. They were in the alley.

How long ago?
Just now.
Had he seen them before?
Earlier this afternoon. And several others. All strangers.

Billy thanked the boy and hung up. So they were out there waiting and they had come after all and Dang really . . . call the police, but what would they, could they do? He was a ferang, a no one at that. The cops wouldn't try very hard. Dang's brother and friends. Small time hoods. And what had he done? She was a whore? Now suddenly it had become some big affair of Thai honor. These Asians and their honor! Everyone and his honor. Even whores with honor. And jealous?! A whore?

Billy dialed the monastery number. Dial a prayer. The phone rang and rang. No one in a hurry over there. Eternity and no-time is time enough. Finally, a voice. Billy asked for the ferang bhikku. A long silence. Static. The voice again. Speaking in some
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up-country dialect Billy couldn’t understand. Ferang bhikku, ferang bhikku. After much jabbering and picking up and dropping of the phone, the Kid’s voice—calm, peaceful, as though awakening from a beautiful sleep.

“Kid!”

“Yeah . . .”

“Kid, oh, God, listen, they’re out there—Dang’s goons. I’m dead, all but for the bullet itself. I didn’t do anything.” His voice was rising. “Nothing!”

“Gently, Billy, gently. Everything’s cool. It’s not as bad as it appears to be. There are no bullets.”

“You’ve gotta help me. They’re gonna kill me!”

“Be cool, Billy, no one’s gonna kill you. What can I do?”

“I don’t know. Maybe get the head bhikku to reason with them. They wouldn’t touch a bhikku. Even goons. Even a goon couldn’t stand that much bad karma.”

There was a long silence. “Stay cool. I’ll be over.”

“Be careful!”

“No sweat. Like you way, they wouldn’t dare touch a bhikku.”

Billy paced. Turned off all but the bathroom light. Stay low and away from the windows. Don’t silhouette yourself. He wished he had gotten himself a gun—a very silent, very deadly, gun. Out in the courtyard, four or five dogs were snarling, going around and around each other in near paralysis, their baretoothed, tearing snarls growing more and more frequent. Bitch in heat. The snarls erupted. People started to yell. Bottles broke outside. The dogs yipped sharply, howled, broke off. Silence. The snarling started again. A knock at the door. “It’s me . . . Kid.” No answer. “Come on, Billy, it’s okay, it’s really me. Bob Cousy, Ted Williams, Bo Diddley, the Raylettes, Merry Christmas . . . .” Billy unlocked the door. Squinted out. The Kid. Alone. Not a hostage. Billy unchained the door, the Kid ambled in, locked and chained.

“Nice to see ya, Kid.” The Kid had never looked better. He stood tall and easy, wrists, elbows, and knees emerging from beneath the loose folds of his saffron robes. His shaven skull, no longer white, had tanned and darkened with black fuzz. He wore
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shades. Slung over one shoulder was a cloth bag. “Did you see them out there?”

“Yeah, they are in fact out there, Billy. You were right. I thought all along it was something you had in your head, but they are out there, and there are at least four or five of them, two in a car in the alley across the street, one on the corner in a shop—that guy’s got a car waiting. Then, there’s at least one up on the roof. I saw them looking up from time to time. He must be a look-out. I think there are a few more, too, though I couldn’t see them.”

Billy’s knees almost buckled. “They’re gonna take me for my last ride, Kid! Kill me!”

“Naw, nothing like that, but you sure do have some bad karma from somewhere.” The Kid slipped off his shades.

Billy paced. Stopped. Paced. “You had no trouble getting in here?”

“Nope, they didn’t even notice me. Like you said yourself, Billy, these people don’t mess with monks.”

“I should have had you slip me a couple of guns. Some ammo. Maybe a broken down shotgun for when they rush, oh, God . . . .”

“Calm yourself, Billy, everything’s cool.” The Kid mumbled, “. . . the poisonous arrows of . . . greed, anger, infatuation . . . .” He shook his head, slipped his cloth bag off his shoulder. Pulled out some bottles. Cloth. A scissors.

“What’s that stuff?”

“I think we can get you out as a bhikku.” The Kid held up a saffron robe.

“Oh, no, man, I’m not going out with just a thin piece of orange cloth between myself and those cats. Orange. What a target.”

“Not orange. Saffron.”

“I need a gun!”

“Billy, with a gun you wouldn’t even make it to the curb. Take the robe.”

“Me a bhikku? They’ll never buy it, Kid! Never!”

“I’m the tallest bhikku in Southeast Asia, and they didn’t notice me.”
“They’re not after you.”
“Listen, they would have noticed any ferang coming in here.”
“What about my round, ferang eyes?”
“Your shades.”
“Kid, you do look like a bhikku. You’re tan and dark as a Thai, your head’s shaved, you’ve got that peaceful smile.”
Kid held up a scissors, a package of razor blades, a razor, and two bottles of Man Tan. “You’ll look like a bhikku, too.”
“Shave my head! You must be out of your mind! I’d rather die than cut my hair. Without my hair, I’d be ugly as shit.”
“Yeah, and with your hair, you’ll look like shit when those greasers get through with you.”
They argued. Billy would not be moved. The Kid sat down on his bed and waited. Stretched out. Waited. Billy paced. Cursed. Kicked chairs out of his path. Back into his path. Smashed things. The Kid shaped the pillow a little better. Closed his eyes. Finally, Billy ripped off his shirt, spraying buttons about the room. Shaking, he walked into the bathroom.
“Alright. Let’s get this over with. But it’ll never work. Oh, God.”
Billy sank down on his knees and bowed his head over the toilet. The fine long blond hair sifted down and floated on the water of the bowl. When it was cropped, the Kid covered his head with swirls of shaving cream like a big pie. Shaving. “Keep your eyes closed, Billy, and the shaving cream won’t make them tear.”
Shaved. The Kid snipped and shaved the eyebrows. Washed and dried Billy’s naked skull. Flushed the hair down the toilet. Billy was trembling. “Easy, Billy, just don’t look in the mirror. Mirrors are bad news, anyway.”
Billy stood up and touched his head. “My brain. You’ve shaved through to my brain!”
Kid gave him the two bottles of Man Tan. “Do it in the shower. And put lots on your head. It’s white as the birdshit on the Statue of Liberty. And don’t look in the mirror. At least not until we’re finished.” When Billy stepped out of the bathroom a few minutes later, except for his eyes, round, blue, and luminous as runway landing lights, he was almost completely transformed. Kid helped him into the saffron robe. “Okay, now put your shades on and step back.” Billy. Brown Thai skin. In saf-
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"I don’t want to go out there."

"The monastery?"

"I’m getting out of this country! India! Calcutta! I’m going to get myself a wife like I started out to do. An Asian, Indian wife!"

"Okay, India. Then get your passport and papers." They threw them into the Kid’s bag. "I’ll send your stuff to American Express in Calcutta."

"You can keep the radio, the camera, everything. I don’t want them anymore. They make me sick."

In shades and saffron robes, they eased out into the corridor. Empty. The waxed stone shining beneath a distant red EXIT light. To the stairs, oh so lightly. Down the stairs, sandals slapping softly. Past the boy at the desk who hardly looked up from a dubbed American Western blasting from the tube. Down the drive. Billy’s knees were shaking. Sweat ran down his face. He whispered, hysterically, "Kid, the sweat’s going to make it streak. I’m cooked." Eyes bulging behind his shades.

"You’re cool. Shut up."

On the sidewalk, now. The two across the street lounging inside the car which faced out of the alley. Sharp as pimps, but tough, big . . . . "Oh, Jesus . . . ."

"Shut up!"

They walked down the sidewalk toward the corner where in the shop across the street, through a hand of flame wavering beneath a wok, they could see a third watching them. "We’re gonna get it in the back and front. Let’s run for it."

"Don’t make a sudden move. I see something very interesting coming into the corner of my eye."

A taxi. The Kid flagged it down. They slid in. The Kid, in perfect Thai, "Airport." The driver bowed his head, then stepped on it. Billy was slumped flat in the seat. The driver was stepping out. After two miles, Billy raised a limp hand and dropped the unblossomed lotus bud out the window. He sat up a little. The Kid was singing Nadine softly to himself. They
stopped for a red light. A barefoot kid with a filthy Asian Games t-shirt pushed a Bangkok Post in the window. Saw they were two bhikku. Switched papers. Thai. The Kid flipped him five baht and took the Post. He opened it.

“Kid?”

“How’m I ever gonna find a wife without my hair?”

“Oh, no sweat, you will.” He turned a page. “Hey, the Red Sox took a double header. How do you like that?”

“My hair . . . .”

The Kid elaborately folded and smoothed the page. “Dig this! The Phillies lost one that went to eleven innings. Oh, man, I just can’t get over the Phillies.”
ALRIGHT, I TOOK the picture. And I happened to show the picture by accident—though one might argue there are no accidents. And of course I suggested Jason let me take the picture, how else would I get it? But that's it, the full extent of . . . I suppose she, Jason's wife, Katie Quick would say, of my meddling.

In the slides, you see us, Jason and I—well, Jason, I'm holding the camera—you see Jason going down to Hanauma Bay, using jagged edges of lava as handholds. He's being particularly careful because less than six weeks before on a visit home, picking wild marijuana at the end of the Minneapolis runway, a long rising 747 had sent him stumbling to the bottom of a ditch where he'd torn ligaments in his knee.

So you see Jason in the progressing slides, sunlight reflecting on his wire-rim glasses, beard on his bare chest as he looks down to check the fit of each hiking boot on the sharp lava; he's not going to sprain that knee, again.
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You see him in jeans, short legged, short waisted, not fat, but no real waist. He is professorial looking. You might say he looks like D. H. Lawrence with the beard.

Now he's ahead of me between two walls of black lava. From the tight triangle of blue sky above Jason, and from the dryness and the ashen black of the lava, you would guess it is very hot. You're right. It is. It's June in Hawaii, late morning, almost noon.

Jason stops to stare at a jagged pocket in one of the walls, perhaps formed by a man-lengthed bubble bursting when the lava was molten. Jason slowly strokes his beard. He contemplates the lava pocket.

Jason, climb in there, it'll make a great picture.

Jason smiles, a faint smile. Katie took a picture of me in there. About three years ago. We were entering a glacial period, then.

Katie had left Jason some weeks ago.

Jason and I'd been drinking cappuccino and listening to Cat Stevens when Katie, in bikini bottom and faded orange T-shirt, ran in from the lanai, Norma Shirley right behind her.

I happen to have a slide here of Katie from a much older batch. With her blond curls framing her face under the wide brim of a floppy black hat, she is a Gainsborough beauty. Good composition. Old slide, though. She sure wasn't any Gainsborough beauty that day she ran in from the lanai, face flushed, blue eyes hysterically bright.

I really knew something was wrong when Jason crossed his arms on his chest and stared at his feet. Later, he told me Katie'd been drinking and he couldn't stand the way she got when she'd been drinking in the afternoon.

Katie paced up and down in front of the coffee table.

. . . Norma and I were talking to this woman at the Kuhio Grill, she said she didn't have to fuck him or anybody else, husband or not, she wears an undershirt and shorts to bed at night and it's his tough luck!

Up and down the lauhala mat, past Jason on the sofa, past me in the chair, past Norma Shirley leaning in the doorway—Norma,
eyes unblinking behind her wire-rim glasses, thin arms crossed on her chest, one foot cocked behind the other, Norma’s marriage already behind her at twenty-eight.

Katie snatched up the copy of *Sisterhood Is Powerful* that had been on the coffee table for the last month and waved the thick testament.

. . . there’s nothing wrong with *me*, the vaginal orgasm is a hoax, a bunch of crap dreamed up by Freud, Freud knew nothing about women’s bodies, nothing at all, except they were some kind of tar pits a man could get stuck and die in, *he* was afraid of women, hell, he hated us!

I edged out past Norma.

. . . I don’t have to fuck anyone!

Several hours later, Jason called. Katie had left to move into a commune with Norma. Well, not exactly a commune. A bunch of people living on the second floor of a house on Plumeria Street in town. She’d taken most of the records and one of the cats. It looked like the final break.

Jason and I went to eat Chinese food.

Since that afternoon, Jason had been home alone tending his marijuana plants; feeding the two remaining cats; boiling the milk for his cappuccino over onto the stove with sudden hisses; carving a branch into a pipe—a snake and a bird intertwined; puffing his clove Krakatoas; correcting a backlog of papers; daily, sometimes hourly, anticipating the splitting of the ice tray freezer as the ice continued to mass—the trays hadn’t been seen for at least six months through the solid block of ice; fooling with his thesis—always the thesis—and generally living in the emptiness left by Katie’s departure.

It was to be a diversion, the trip to Hanauma Bay.

I was only trying to salvage what I could for Jason as he stared at the lava pocket remembering the start three years ago of possibly the final glacial period with Katie:

Look, Jason, you hop in there exactly the way you were when Katie took your picture. I’ll take your picture. The camera will take back your soul. It will complete the cycle . . . and set you free from Katie.
I meant it as a joke, of course.
As soon as I suggested the picture, we both felt uneasy. The heat of the sun on the lava, the iodine smell of the bay, the terrible deep blue of the Hawaiian June sky, the stillness, all seemed to get hotter, deeper, brighter, stiller, if only for a moment. It was that kind of joke.

But whatever was started, seemed to be in motion. Jason pulled himself up into the cavity and slowly let himself down on his back. He wriggled around.

Katie stood about where you’re standing now . . . maybe a little to your left . . . there.

In my viewfinder, a cut-away view of Jason in the pocket under tons of once bubbling molten lava. I framed him with the lava pocket, got him from the hips up in the viewfinder, a large section of lava at his head. His skin glowed in the diffuse shadow as though a candle were burning inside.

He sighed, it’s cool in here.

His eyes closed under his glasses, his beard tipped up, his chest rose and fell gently. Arms at his sides, he might have fallen into a light sleep.

I heard the shutter click.

Jason opened his eyes. He blinked. He smiled.

Neither of us said anything the rest of the way down to the bay. Hanauma Bay is in the shape of a horseshoe—the open part having once been the side of an extinct volcano. The ocean had gnawed its way through the lava walls and there had been a happy union as the water had filled the crater, making an almost landlocked bay—perfect for diving.

Jason immediately became absorbed squinting into the broths in the tidal pools, squatting to poke the mustard and green, mauve and magenta algaes, lying down to take off his glasses and touch his cheek and forehead to them, pick at them with his index finger and smell his fingertip, all the time keeping up a running commentary, how beautiful, how marvelously formed, how wondrously and exquisitely sexual, how . . . .

We snorkeled through the purplish water over the coral reef, we went out into the deep blue waters beyond the reef, we could
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see the black and yellow Kihikikihi, or Moorish Idol; the electric green Uhu, or Parrot fish; we could see the Maomao, the Damselfish; green Kole and yellow Kole, Tangs; there were Lauwiliwilinukunuki’oi’oi, the Long Nosed Butterfly fish, pale blue, black and yellow; Kahikihi launui, the Sailfin Tang; and Paku’iku’i, the Achilles Tang with the orange circle before his tail; we even saw Humuhumunukunukuapuaa swimming by just the way he does when he is the dancer’s hands in the hukelau hula. The sun was high overhead, it was just afternoon, the south swell hadn’t yet come up for the summer, we could see everything there was to see.

Later, we agreed, the waters of the bay had never been clearer.

For as long as I had known Jason, his thesis had been on the table, variously on the lanai, or just inside the sliding doors. The thesis. The Thesis. It was on D. H. Lawrence. It had come with him from Berkeley to Hawaii. It had come with Katie who had come with him from Berkeley to Hawaii. It had been with him five years, the last requirement for his Ph.D. in English, sometimes spread out, sometimes piled up, cats sleeping on it, tobacco spilled on it, sometimes charted chapter by chapter on a great piece of watercolor paper, each chapter headed and subheaded and roman-numeralized and so on. The Thesis. It seemed to have taken on a life of its own, ever accreting, never ending; it was the band aid Jason picked on coral infections on his toes, picked and rolled between his fingers and smelled and examined and reapplied. Everyone who came into the house saw the tiny writing silently spreading out next to already tiny writing in the margins like a fine mold inching across the surface of a petri dish. It was an extension of Jason’s metabolism, of his love of speculation and small pleasures. The ongoing unfinished thesis was his crowning masterpiece in that line. Some said The Thesis remained unfinished not because Jason couldn’t finish it, but because he wouldn’t know what to do if he ever did finish it. That seems to be a Scheherazade theory. The Scheherazade Theory. You see how it is.

Whatever The Theory about Jason’s finishing The Thesis, much of Jason’s life with Katie was woven into it. She’d typed it.
She'd made occasional changes in it with her untutored brilliance. She'd taken the acid trips with Jason on which Lawrence had revealed himself to Jason. For authoritative reference, I should have availed myself of Jason's geological chart of the complete love affair made one sleepless night after Katie left, the glacial periods and hot periods diagramed and stratified in different colors the way they are in science books, but still I believe I can safely say Jason was well into Lawrence when he'd met Katie.

During the long nights when Katie had first left Jason, we'd sit on the lanai staring out into the dark where the marijuana plants were growing like money in the bank at 8 1/2%, the two remaining cats asleep on their backs on the thesis, and Jason would stroke his beard and talk about Katie with the voice of a scientist looking through a telescope. One night, after hours of rambling, he nodded his head certainly, then, more certainly.

There can no longer be any doubt, Katie is the American Myth. It all fits. All of it. She is Zelda, she is Daisy . . . she is Brett.

I listened to Jason explain how Katie fit. First, Katie had run off with her high school English teacher in North Dakota who looked like the man on the Indian nickel would have looked when he was young, who was in fact part American Indian, and who had perfect black hair. Naturally, he'd had a violent temper. They'd wandered west across the country until after about a year she finally left him on a beach near Point Reyes, turning without a word and walking away from him forever. She'd drifted into the Bay Area and married a Berkeley history professor at least five years older than Jason and Jason was nine years older than Katie. Jason interjected, Katie's father used to give her baths up until she was thirteen or fourteen, the father elements, the ambivalence, of course, oh, I should have seen it, maybe . . . I did see it. Though the professor was somewhat pompous—he kept carbons of all his letters—and somewhat eccentric—he sat for hours on the crapper shooting small targets out in the hall with a pellet gun—Jason, Katie, and the professor had formed a happy threesome, camping, going to museums and galleries,
discussing art and history and movies—film—until Katie ran off with Jason.

When the semester ended and Jason was to make his annual summer migration back to the parental museum in Minnesota, he decided to tell his parents Katie was his wife for the sake of peace and propriety; that's the way it had stayed, with Katie eventually taking his name, though they'd never bothered to get legally married. Katie Quick. Jason English. Jason and Katie English. Henceforth, Katie English on her driver's license.

Until Jason told me otherwise, I'd always thought they were married, but, what difference, she was his wife. They'd started to get married four or five times, but each time, Jason had balked at the blood test, or the pagan ceremonies, the outrage of submitting to the state. Jason had balked at letting some pompous ass poke into his affairs and tell him whether or not he was married.

Married or not, Jason would shake his head slowly in the nights after Katie had left and say, she is Nicole Diver, she is Freida (though he didn't need reminding Freida and D. H. weren't the American Myth, per se—a poetic license we mutually consented to).

It all fits, Katie is the manifest destiny of love. Consider the evidence. Katie, starting in the center of America, of the North American Continent, the Midwest, gravitating toward San Francisco; now, Hawaii, the new San Francisco, ever in search of paradise . . .

I didn't know what to say. Jason had a mind for that kind of thing. I listened.

In the beginning, in Berkeley, they'd been happy. Jason had set Katie free from the old professor; her innocence and spontaneity, her little-girlishness and coquetry were once again released. Her untutored brilliance shined. Jason was her source. Her mentor. They'd been happy—very happy—for a year, maybe two.

Then the sound and sync slipped a frame. Drawings and poems proliferated. Long analyses of dreams. Vocabulary changed. The words sexuality, anima, will and womanhood staged their respective entrances. Jason took to spending hours
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over swirling acid drawings with women the hills, the mountains, their hair the clouds and trees, the . . . .

Jason took to drawing cartoons of women straddling rockets which were extensions of their bodies; the rockets said USA and had American flags on them and the women rode them high over the moon with their heads thrown back and their hair streaming behind.

By this time, Katie was hiding her poems and diary from Jason in a different place every few days.

I don’t know if Jason included himself in his American Myth when he turned to me, still nodding certainly, Katie couldn’t give herself to me, anymore—unless she was drunk and then she didn’t have to be Katie, or anyone. Maybe that’s what she wanted. Not to be anyone. I’d become the father, of course. The male authority figure.

Even her cells resisted me. No matter how we tried, Katie couldn’t get pregnant. Ridiculous. We went to doctors to have our respective sperms and eggs scrutinized, Jason smiling slightly . . . all of it unnecessary, really, because Katie’d gotten pregnant easily enough in the beginning when we were having our affair in Berkeley, of course when we didn’t want anyone else but ourselves, though we did consider having it . . . maybe if we’d had it then . . . but Katie had an abortion.

Oh, the humiliation of having your sperm mushed around with by a bunch of technicians in white coats, I rocked in my chair and tried to imagine D. H. Lawrence bringing in his bottle of sperm for examination, Jason shook his head, no, of course we were okay, the doctors found my sperm not wanting, adequate, and the same with Katie’s eggs—adequate.

So we went on trying to have a kid. And nothing happening. And the doctor checking Katie over and over, asking her for descriptions of how we fucked . . . detailed descriptions, Jason sighing.

Finally, the doctor, exhausted, himself going up the walls, told Katie, I can find no other explanation; you’re withholding your eggs from him.

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Naturally, Katie got hysterical. She always was afraid of becoming frigid.

She was working as a waitress at the golf course, then; she started getting secretive . . . more secretive. I think she was having an affair with one of the greenskeepers.

Jason stroked his beard. After a while he said again, with a faint smile and almost a touch of admiration in his voice, she was withholding her eggs from me.

One night, a note disappearing under one of the sleeping cats caught my eye. Thesis summary, aims and workpoints, item #9. I'm not sure I understand it, I'm not sure it can be understood at all, but here is item #9:

To especially emphasize the complicating factor in Lawrence's negative identification, i.e., that he not only identified with the parent of the opposite, but with a dominating woman who herself identified with her father:

The "provocation" Lawrence attributes to his mother cannot (as Weiss implied) be merely the son's projection of his own oedipal hunger. The fact that Lawrence's identification is with the "phallic woman" rather than with unambiguous womanly qualities increases the ambivalence of his counter-oedipal submission to his father.

And further on, written in the margin:

Phallic traits in women serve both as a ground for the author's sympathetic identification with them and as a source of recurring anxiety.

I was tempted to write something in the margin next to item #9, but remembering the warning of the old bisexual philosopher, the imagination is sick, and feeling my impulse was more for graffiti than scholarship, I elected to stay out of the margin.

Within a few weeks, it became clear that whoever or whatever Katie was withholding her eggs from, she was—had been—withholding them no more. She had become huge.

Jason was preoccupied with trying to figure how many months

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pregnant she was, if they might have still been together and still been trying to bring his adequate sperm to her adequate egg. He slowly puffed his Krakatoas and meditated over the elapsed days and nights as he weeded the marijuana patch:

. . . if Katie’s four months pregnant, then we were still together, but, we stopped fucking altogether twenty-three days before she left. It still might be mine, mmm, almost five months, that would make it . . . on the other hand, if she’s less than four months pregnant . . . but then, there’s no way of knowing what she did during the time I was back on the mainland, rather like her to become pregnant at an ambiguous time like this . . . goddamn spiteful . . . .

From the lanai, I could hear Jason mumbling quietly behind the camouflage of long-stemmed hibiscus, the tops of the marijuana plants occasionally shaking as he’d add, subtract, interpolate and meditate, lost in his private numerology.

I met Norma Shirley on the beach one afternoon. She started talking while there were still thirty yards between us. Norma told me she’d had to have a cyst removed from one of her ovaries the week before. She said that everything was depressing and she couldn’t find happiness anywhere. Even masturbation was a drag. She asked me if I would watch her purse while she went in for a swim. She dropped her wire-rim glasses on top of her purse and walked toward the ocean. When she came out, she asked me if I had a cigarette. She spread her towel, took off her bikini top, her long stringy tits almost touched the first crease in her stomach, she lay back in the sun. She asked me if I had a light. She sat up and asked me if I could light the cigarette for her, her fingers were wet. I handed her a lit cigarette. She lay back down. Norma said that though she dearly loved Jason, there was no way he could be the father of Katie’s baby and if he thought so, if he even entertained the faintest notion that he could be, he was just deluding himself and still had one hell of a long way to go before he got over Katie. There was no doubt who the father was, anyway. There never had been. Katie knew who the father was. He was Michael Rose, the greenskeeper.
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Katie was going to have the baby, but not marry Michael Rose or any other man.

I was away on Kauai a few weeks and the morning after I got back, I heard someone knocking at my door. Jason.

Coffee in hand, we ascended to the tower room.

I live on the second floor of a house on one of the windward beaches. An old merchant mariner had started digging a sunken Japanese garden some thirty years before. He'd liked the garden so much he kept right on going and built the house which in the neighborhood is known as the Castle. The tower room was added later. I'd like to think the old salt had woken up one morning and roared, more light! more air! avast! and busted through the roof. You reach the tower by climbing a long iron spiral staircase from the second floor, you rise up into a caboose-shaped room with big rectangular windows in all four walls. In the windows are palm fronds, ocean and mountains.

Jason sipped his coffee and looked out the front window for a long time, leaning on the windowsill.

She keeps on coming back.

Who?

Jason turned to look at me, slightly hurt. He sipped his coffee.

Katie.

But she left, I mean, she's pregnant ... she's ... what?

She still has the key to the house, the significance of that is more than obvious, she was coming around when I wasn't there to take records and books ... she said if I wouldn't let her take the Cat Stevens, she'd tear the curtains off the front window. She's got me there because she knows how paranoid I am about the plants, you can see them through the house.

About ten days ago, she came over—said she wanted to get some clothes. She swore she didn't know I was home. A lie, because she saw the car. She's been able to avoid me every other time she's really wanted to in the last three years.

She kissed me.

Katie?

She said I was the only man she'd ever been able to talk to . . .
and ever would be . . . Christ, she was pregnant. When she kissed me, I couldn’t get within five feet of her. We just bounced off each other.

She’s been back about four times since and each time we sit and flirt with each other. It’s like the beginning.

Do you think she wants back with you again?
I don’t know.
Would you even want her back . . . I mean, if it wasn’t your baby.

I don’t know what she’s doing anymore. It’s like she’s playing with me. She can’t go and she can’t let me go. She can’t stop spiting the father. Or, maybe, she really can’t leave me . . . or, Oh, Jesus, I don’t know, I don’t know!

I wondered about item #9 for a second but nothing rang. I suspected there were plenty of new entries in item #9’s margin.

Jason stroked his beard. I don’t know anything, anymore. I ran into Norma Shirley the other day. I never could stand her. She has the look of someone waiting around for a piece of meat to fall from the table. Norma told me Katie’s decided she’s not going to marry anybody. She’s going to take the baby and raise it herself. Norma says she’s also stopped fucking Michael Rose now that she’s got her baby. You see! She’s complete now! Autonomous. She doesn’t need a man, anymore. He nodded at me. She doesn’t need anyone. Katie’s going to be both father and mother to the child, the logical extension of Sisterhood Is Powerful, autonomy, come to think of it, Norma was the one who gave Katie that book . . . autonomy, you see, Katie has incorporated both parents into herself, the complete identification with each. She will be both mother and father to the child.

Jason shook his head, it’s not natural, not natural at all, it’s the beginnings of madness, yes, it all fits. She always was afraid of madness. Her sister Louise is a diagnosed schizophrenic who’s spent half of her life in madhouses. She stayed with us once, you know. She goes into her room and talks to imaginary people on the walls. Jason nodding, madness, this is the beginnings of madness for Kate . . . though, you ought to see Katie, she looks as though she’s arrived. Her cheeks are rosy, her breasts are soft.
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and full of milk, she's really as beautiful as when things were first blooming between us in Berkeley.

I no longer knew what to say to Jason. I thought of the slides. I still hadn't had a chance to view them except by holding them up to window light.

Jason, let's look at the slides.
Hanauma Bay. Wonderful idea. The water was never clearer.
Never.
Ah, what colors that day, but it's too bright, Jason looking around the tower, we'll have to wait until night.
We can hang some blankets in front of the windows.
Jason, fingering his beard, Katie's coming over in a while . . .
You can bring her.
Actually, that's what I wanted to ask you. If I could bring her over. I'd like another . . . opinion.
Sure, the slides will keep it from getting awkward.

I could hear Katie puffing slowly round and round up the stairs. As she rose to the top, I offered my hand and, realizing my mistake, drew it back; Katie would make it herself without my hand, as she did, her face flushed with pregnancy and the climb.

She was beautiful again, her blond curls shining, her skin and eyes clear. As we kissed each other's cheeks, I acknowledged the bump of the great stomach, the sway of the lactating breasts, and gestured, sit anywhere, making it clear she was to sit in the comfortable padded rocker and hoping I wasn't being insufferably male in offering her the best chair.

Jason puffed up behind her with the projector under his arm.
We got going slowly.
Kate caught her breath.
Jason fished out a Players and offered one to Kate.
She refused, not good for her health now that . . .
Jason fumbled it into his mouth and lit up.
Katie praised me. I'd been such a good friend to Jason.
She was glad Jason had such a good friend.
Pause.
Lengthening.

I offered Katie a nice cold beer, which she declined, and a cold drink, fruitpunch, which she accepted.

Drinks and cigarettes in hand, no one said anything.

I've got some slides of Hanauma Bay.

Jason and I blanketed up the windows. It was August and a little after noon and even with the fan on full, the tower grew close.

The slides came in most any order.

There were the hot primeval closeups of the tidal pools with their greens and magentas and the reflection of the noon sun like chrome on the standing water.

Jason found a tiny fish in the upper right hand corner neither Katie nor I had seen, wondering what kind it was until I was afraid the slide would melt and I had to change it.

There was a lucky one, a silver screen of water sluicing off a rock as the surge drew back.

Katie rocked the chair slightly. Wonderful pictures.

There were the slides of Jason going down the black lava, carefully watching his footing.

Katie rocking, Jason, you're splendid in these pictures, when were they?

Oh . . . June.

Katie stopped rocking.

The next one dropped in. Jason, lying on his back in the lava pocket, eyes closed, bare chest luminous and incorporeal, lit by a soft inner light in the diffuse shadows, the lava pocket forming an even lining around him.

It was one in a thousand.

There wasn't a sound. No praise. No jokes.

I suddenly grew uneasy.

I checked Jason. His glasses caught the reflection from the slide, his eyes couldn't be seen behind the glasses.

The rocking chair started. Stopped. Started. Katie gripped the armrests, she frowned trying to remember . . . she recognized the lava pocket.

Suddenly, she stood up and screamed, a short, high scream.
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GODDAMNYOU! Will there never be an end to it! The unholy delving! The meddling! The endless the endless . . . mythmaking and remaking and unmaking! GODDAMN YOU! You . . . Goddamn meddlers!

She ripped the blankets off the windows one after the other and the blinding white light of midday August in Hawaii burst through the great windows of the tower.

Jason and I sat stunned, blinking and squinting like . . . well, like two moles.

Goddamn you! I should have expected something like this! Will there never ever EVER be an end to the introspection! Never! Devilry!

Katie was white and bloodless, the color of women who surrender their protein to their babies, whose skin gets flaky, gums bleed, teeth loosen, whose hair grows lusterless, whose bowels stop up as pregnancy goes on. She looked as though she were carrying her fifth child.

The image of Jason in the lava, though almost completely burned out by the sunlight, continued to shine on the screen.

Katie suddenly threw one of the blankets over the projector.

You meddlers. You, you’re nothing more than a couple of old ladies. Both of you. No, not old ladies, homosexuals! Fags!

She stopped with one foot on the top stair.

She turned.

She looked at Jason. She looked at me.

You fags!

We could hear her puffing round and round down the spiral staircase, her sandals slapping each iron stair as she descended from the tower.


I had one foot on the top stair when Jason shook his head, a quick tight shake, no, I wouldn’t if I were you, crossed his arms over his chest, and turned to look out at the palms and ocean. I swept the blanket off the projector before the bulb overheated and the image of Jason, whited-out in the tower light, popped back on the screen.

Things went on shattering.

Eventually trailed off and stopped.
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Jason called down, Katie . . . Katie?
We descended.
Jason was very good about the glass. We had a little trouble getting the fine pieces out of the sofa. Most of the impact marks on the walls weren’t that bad. Plates, dishes, glasses, cups, light-bulbs . . . .
I asked Jason if he thought rage could curdle milk or endanger a baby’s life in any way—alter the amniotic fluids or even cause a miscarriage or birth defect.
Jason said he didn’t know.
He offered to pay for everything and of course I wouldn’t let him.
Jason stroked his beard and stared out the kitchen window. He crossed and uncrossed his arms. He started toward the door, peering out cautiously, and then mumbled that he’d had a flash, he wanted to go home and work on the thesis a bit.

Katie named the baby Sun. A boy. Sun Rose. Katie married Michael Rose. They went to live on Kauai, the Garden Island. Michael Rose is a couple of years younger than Katie. He’s good with his hands—carpentry, plumbing; he’s quiet, intense, reads nothing more than the paper, and smokes too much. He’s started building them a small house. Katie’s got her hands full with Sun.
It seems ordinary to me, but I don’t know. Would Jason be able to work it in? For instance, would Jason see Katie’s going to a more remote island as a loss of paradise or a final regaining of paradise? A further extension of her Manifest Destiny? Exile, or recovery? Etcetera?

Jason married Gretchen, a twenty-year-old student who got a good mark in one of his lit classes. They were married up by a waterfall off one of the mountain trails. Gretchen looks a little like Katie, though paler. She doesn’t tan, but sometimes after a day on the beach, she is pink. She’s a little heavy, slouches, sometimes puts her hair into a single braid, and says softly, Jason? Her father was a marine from Tennessee.
Right after the wedding, Jason harvested the marijuana and they moved back to Berkeley where Jason is still working on his 180
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thesis despite the pain of two impacted teeth and a botched root canal.

I've been back to Hanauma Bay twice, but it's never been as clear as the day I took the picture of Jason in the lava.

Lately, though I keep in mind the warning of the philosopher, I can't help wondering how Jason worked it in.
MY FATHER WOULD come to watch me swim. As soon as I'd walk out on the pool deck, I'd look for him. Wearing his dark blue suit and vest for these occasions, he would take his place up on the right side in the packed amphitheater. On one knee, his strawberry hatband boater. On the other, the stopwatch resting in his palm, the hands on zero. He would wait for my event which followed right after the dive.

I couldn’t stand to watch the divers. Each one adjusting the board. Attention. Concentrate. Eyes closed. Pause. Silence. Approach, dive; then, echoes of the judges’ scores and applause. My time coming closer dive by dive. I’d go back into the tile waiting room where I wouldn’t have to watch.

And last night, already, having to piss, unable to piss. Into bed. Out of bed. Into the toilet. Staring out at the mounds of black snow piled along the curbs. Back into bed; and the hardon, painful, taut, pulsing in time to my sprint slowed pulse. Don’t touch it. Save the edge.

Sleeping feverishly.

My stomach turning over to the chlorine the urine the clatter of the diving board. Bodies on the padded tables bodies slumped on the tile floor; a few, towels over their eyes to keep out the glare, motionless as in a trance. One, hooded with a towel, carefully drew the structure of a compound onto a legal pad splashed with water while he held the pages of the chemistry book open with his other hand.

I looked one more time through the small glass window in the door, but I couldn’t see my father anywhere.

In the elevator, I panic. I am missing my race. But I know I have at least fifteen more minutes. I get off on the fifth floor.

Harrison stands motionless in the middle of the empty weight room, a bamboo pole in his hand—the kind used by lifeguards to extend to cramped swimmers. He wears light green bermudas and an inside-out sweatshirt. His posture, perfect; chin tipped up, what’s he looking at? he’s like a man on a golden promontory in a painting where a waterfall rushes, a continent lies at his feet. Harrison is a junior high teacher affiliated with the university as a physical education instructor. He uses the bamboo pole to beat body building time on the floor as the swimmers train during the fall.

His huge sneakers—he’s six-five—squeak once or twice on the varnished floor as he walks toward me.

His lips smile. The chaperone of a junior high dance.

I saw your picture on the sports page. Going the big one. Two hundred.

Yeah, I decided to leave the pool for the dive.

I peeked in and saw you doing fifties the other day. You looked great.

Thanks.
He looks me over a second.

It’s funny, but it’s you guys, the athletes, who have the worst postures . . . from the purely scientific point of view. Portions of your bodies are so overdeveloped, you’re literally pulled out of shape. Here, stand against this wall.

He taps a place between two sets of pulley weights.

I stand there.

See if the small of your back touches flat against the wall.

I press myself against the wall and pull in my stomach.

No, don’t strain, be natural.

Harrison slides his hand in between the small of my back and the wall, then, holds his hand out in front of me.

There. That much curve.

He turns.

The bamboo pole rises to a chart of a neuter male-muscled body; ventral and dorsal views; the skin is stripped away to reveal each muscle, artery, nerve and tendon. In places, the muscle is further peeled away so sections of bone are laid bare.

Harrison’s eyes expressionless, voice a monotone.

An athlete like yourself, powerful in the chest and shoulders, builds up large muscles—trapezius, deltoid, pectoral. Here, here . . . and here.

Each time he touches the chart, he touches the corresponding area on my warm-up jacket.

Now these muscles are so massively developed, that, and particularly the pectoral muscles, they tend to pull your shoulders forward.

Harrison pulling his shoulders forward.

Anything that happens in one part of the body, naturally, is compensated for in another part of the body.

I check the clock.

. . . So, the muscles in your chest and shoulders pull the top of your body forward, like this, and naturally, the lower part of your body—lower back and pelvic area—must compensate, tipping forward to counterbalance. To put it simply, you end up with a curve in your lower spine.

He holds his hand up.

In your case, this much curve from the drop of a plumbline.

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Above the rows of pulley weights, the high windows are almost dark.

Let me show you something.
I follow him into a smaller exercise room.

There are three full-length mirrors on castors in the middle of the varnished floor. Harrison rolls one of the mirrors to form a V with the other.
Stand here.
He taps a spot in the V of the mirrors.
I step between the mirrors.

Harrison pulls the third mirror in behind us so it completes a closed triangle. He is a head above me. We go off in three directions. Front views. Side views. Back views.
Remove your jacket a second.
But I'm all warmed up.

It won't hurt. These few minutes might save you a lot of trouble later on in life.
I feel the chill of the room as I take off my jacket.

Now, look in the mirror on your right side. Observe the way your spine is pushing forward to compensate for the downward pull of these muscles.
The tip of the bamboo pole touching my shoulders and chest.

Well, to tell you the truth, I don't see any curve.

It's deep in your lower back. Lumbar region. Loosen your warm-up pants.
I loosen the ties of my warm-up pants.
I still don't see any curve. A back isn't supposed to be a perfect straight line, is it?
No, but it's not supposed to curve like that. If you stretch the waist of your suit down, you'll see it.

I pull the back of my suit down and check the mirror.

Shoulders narrowing to my waist, the small of my back, a dark line the beginning of my crotch, my tank suit stretched down, my warm-up pants around my knees.

Harrison's expressionless eyes on mine in the mirror.
I reach for my warm-up pants.
Harrison pushing the mirrors apart. I'll give you a list of special exercises.
C. E. POWERMAN

The elevator still doesn't come. A chill draft rumbling as I start down the stairs. The lights are off.

On the next landing, light coming from a wide doorway. Inside, I can see display cases shining, crossed oars from winning shells, old footballs with years and scores, etc.

I hear footsteps.

How do I get to the pool?

Her eyes dark with eyeshadow. Her hair is pulled up on her head and hairspray makes the ends of her black hair shine in the light behind her. I can see the tip of a bobby pin. She has a nice face.

It's down three flights. At the reception desk, go right—ahead, you'll see a door. That leads into the amphitheater. Women aren't supposed to be up here ... only the practice pool is on this floor, anyway.

I know who you are. I saw your picture in the paper.

They're starting my event without me; I'm halfway down the stairs when she calls me.

She does know my name.

Can I go with you?

The coach doesn't like to see us suited up for meets in the reception area. He thinks it's phony ... exhibitionistic. I've got to cut off those stairs and take another way to the pool.

She comes down the stairs until she reaches my stair. She comes to about my chin. She reaches up and slowly tugs the zipper down on my jacket. She pushes back the jacket and slides her hand across my stomach. My skin flows after the softness of her fingers. Her coat falls open. Her white blouse, silky, touches my skin through the open jacket, the pressure of her breasts comes against me as she opens her mouth to kiss me.

I pull her to me, I kiss her. I push her away.

I zip up my jacket. I'll meet you here ... after.

I didn't think you'd smell so funny. Like clorox or something.

I start down the stairs. If I miss my event ... no one had ever done that. No one.

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At the bottom of the stairs, the elevator. Someone had jammed a stool in the door to keep the elevator from closing.

The white of the urinals, the close intestinal smell of wet skin and urine and bowels. Echoes of water. The chlorine rushes me with adrenaline. I choke up some bile in the toilet.

Washing out my mouth, I raise my head from sink to mirror. The diving board still clattering out there. Applause. In the mirror, my face pale and grey; my hair, dried out, dull. Skin flaking under my eyes, dark smudges, lipstick on my mouth and neck. I look both ways and begin to rub the smudges off with a wet paper towel.

Echoes, skin being slapped, the sound getting louder, echoing through the shower. Jackie Richardson slapping his cupped palm against the hollow made in the cheek of his buttock as he walks, naked, his warm-ups and suit over his shoulder.

They’re just finishing the dive, you’re up. Go get ’em, man.

The diving board has been raised. I pull the zipper of my jacket, down, up, down again. The pool is smooth, the black lane markers on the bottom magnifying and refracting.

I look up around the amphitheater, but I can’t see my father’s white head and customary blue suit. He isn’t in his usual place on the right side; well, he’s in here, somewhere. I’ll see him afterward.

Mr. Luther is waving me over. He starts walking toward the pool office. He shifts his clipboard under one arm, waits for me, takes me by the sleeve and leads me up by the three-meter tower toward the office.

Stopwatch hanging in front of his tie. Deep vertical lines from middle of cheeks to the line of his jaw. Lines like faint sutures cutting into the top and bottom of his lips. He looks at me from eyes deep behind the silver-rimmed bifocals, he doesn’t let go of my arm.

The only thing holding you back is, touching my head, that. Now you’re ready.

I want you to go out fast. Don’t hold back anything, he pauses to listen as the winner of the dive is announced, take that first
hundred out like your life depends on it. Then turn it on. It's going to hurt. Swim right through the pain. Anyone can swim half the race.

Lines deepening around his mouth and cheeks.

When you hit the wall at two hundred, I want you to have nothing left in your body. Got it? Zero. If you've been living the right kind of life, you'll have it to draw on when you need it. I'll be able to tell. He looks at me significantly. I can watch you in the pool, but I can't watch you out of it. But I can tell you one thing. Nothing out there—pointing beyond the amphitheater—can touch this. Nothing. You'll remember every race you ever swim in this pool for this team.

I'm putting you next to Teddy in lane four. Teddy's going for his pool record in lane five.

Someone opens the steel door to the showers and I hear the thump of Jackie Richardson's cupped palm against his buttock echoing off the shower walls.

Mr. Luther holding my sleeve.

You were a great high school swimmer. You're nineteen, in great shape, you've got the body . . . come on, now, let's see it.

His voice softening.

If you don't hold back, your time will take a big drop. And from there, I'll take you to national caliber.

I check the scoreboard. With nothing but thirds, we have the meet put away.

Body tingling.

Breathing it up.

Their guy in lane two kneeling to dip his hand in the water, quickly crossing himself, then diving in to get wet.

Handshaking.


The microphone echoing: eight lengths of the pool, two hundred yards butterfly . . .

In lane two . . .

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I take it out the way he told me to . . . fast.

When it feels right, the arms don't pull, the legs don't kick. Arms and legs run together, the water, a frosted silver in the underwater lights, slides away, slips from the chest as though sliding downhill on slick grass, the body seems to melt forward. It feels endless.

At a hundred yards, I touch the wall a stroke after Teddy. At one twenty-five, he has a body length. He's starting to pick it up—or, I'm fading. I meet the wash of their guy coming in for his turn, almost gag on it, lose the breath, get a breath.

I realize I'm waiting. I push toward it.

At one fifty, Teddy is already several strokes out of the turn. One stroke before I hit my turn, a hot thickness spreads in the tops of my thighs like penicillin being injected, spreading, shoulders, neck, arms.

But I can still move, my body still slides flat on the surface, the water still breaks at my chin on breathing. I push toward it. The stroke still flows, but now with each stroke I have to break the hot alloy setting in my joints and muscles.

Teddy coming off the last turn, passing me coming in, makes almost no wake.

Pushing off, I can't feel my legs straighten, I glide to the surface, breathe, hit the wake of their guy coming, close my mouth, save it, no mouthful, but no air, the heat spreading, water turning black and white, roar stopping, starting, in me, in my blood, a serum, clear, cooling, lightening my body, breaking the alloy, stroking . . . .

I hit.

A new pool and meet record, in lane five, Theodore . . . .

Luther, shoes in puddle, kneeling, his eyes on the stopwatch. . . . Any idea? No? A clean drop of four seconds. You're in a brand new league.

The red bulbs jump into numbers on the scoreboard.

What place?
Second.

The next event is already being called; I get out.
Spray rising from the start.

I see Harrison standing up at one of the portals. He waves. I pretend not to see him.

I look around at the crowd. I see that girl. Is it? I wave. She doesn't wave back. Isn't it?

All these people, guys and their dates, professors, people from town, Jesus, who would come to a meet on a Saturday afternoon if he didn't have to, much less bring a girl. I see a lot of people, but I don't recognize any of them. I don't see him up there in his usual place.

In the locker room, looking at my warm-ups piled on the floor between my feet. Finally, the manager picks them up and throws them into a hamper next to the towels. I get showered and dressed. In the mirror, my face. Skin dry, flaking, hair dull. I smell my fingertips. Chlorine.

Upstairs, the crowd clearing out past the reception desk. Some of the guys come up and pass, nice race, or see ya later, or wave. While I wait for my father, I look at some of the records held by our swimmers, past and present, painted on the wall. American, Olympic, World.

I wait for about fifteen minutes. The crowd is gone, the gym has emptied out. I start up the stairs. The rumble of the chill draft through the gym. I look up as I turn. The lights are out on the third floor landing. I go up and turn the heavy rings. The leather doors are closed. I jerk the rings, back up and look at the panes above. Dark.

I wait in the lobby until I hear keys jingling out of the dark. Frank, the janitor, white head down, cigar in mouth, shuffling toward me.

Locking 'er up.

Okay.

The bars slam in place behind me as he lets me out. Near the door, dried leaves from last fall whirlwind, rattle, fall still. The light snow lands, not really falling. I pull on my knit cap and take a deep breath.
A car is parked at the curb. Someone waving. I walk over and see a shape lean over and unlock the door.

Harrison.

That was a great race.

Thanks.

You must be exhausted; let me give you a ride back to your college.

No, thanks, I'm recovered. It's only three blocks. I need the fresh air.

He holds out a sheet of paper. Here are those exercises.

Thanks.

You're going to be great.

I crumple them into my pocket as he drives away.

I walk several blocks to the college.

The steam heated closeness of the entryway. Smell of paint burning on metal. Radiators.

One of the doors on the first floor opens as I start up the stairs.

A guy I don't know but who always nods hello. He steps out of his room and waves.

You had a meet this afternoon?

Yeah, just finished.

How'd you do?

Oh, we killed them.

How'd you do?

I ... dropped my time ... four seconds ... it's sort of a new place to be ... a plateau. I looked at him. I got second.

Well, nice going. He crosses the landing to the bathroom.

Up in the room, Red is working on a cartoon for the paper.
He turns down the record player.

How'd you do?

Second.

On the way to the back bedroom, I see Jim outlining an econ book at his desk. The dank smell of laundry and cool air slipping in a vent. The radiator clonks and quits.

On the bunk, I stare up at the springs of Red's bunk.
C. E. POVERMAN

She knew my name. Knows it. She can look me up in the phone book.

The room is cold, I pull up the blanket and close my eyes.
After some time, the pressure against my jeans and underwear hurts. A hardon.

I loosen my pants and take my cock in my hand.

Red coming in. I move my hand.

Was it a good race?

Okay.

Dead, huh? He sifts through a pile of laundry and junk on his desk until he finds a drawing pen and goes back out.

I button my jeans, throw the blanket back, and start going through my jacket pockets. I fish the crumpled paper out.

I read the first exercise: shoulders and buttocks against the wall, pull buttocks down. Try to bring the lower back flat against the wall. 10 x's. Make each one count.

In the bathroom, I pull off my shirt, and looking at myself in the mirror, I press my back against the cold tiles.

I can't see any goddamned curve. I crumple the list and throw it out the window.

In the bedroom, I pull the blanket up and close my eyes. For a second, I feel the motion through the water. After a while, the pressure of my jeans against the hardon. I unbutton them. I take my cock in my hand. I stare up into the snow hanging outside the window. I think I fall asleep.
The Gift: Bihar, India

ON THE PALM mat Catherine was lying just as she had fallen asleep. Her glasses, still on above her closed eyes, were like empty shells abandoned by the sea. On mats and tables and rope beds, the villagers slept about her, their bodies twisted and open, each lying as the day had left him. In sixes and eights their bare feet dangled from the shadows of the porch. The village men lay in groups, touching, their family and village and caste instinct keeping them together as if even in sleep they feared to be alone.

When she sighed, reaching up to touch her eye, David knew she was awake. She was looking up at the constellations where they were brightest and most unweakened by the waning moon. David listened to the dogs growling at each other and pacing through the shadows. Occasionally he sensed one silently pass close to his head.

Her face was pale in the moonlight. Soft. He would whisper over to her in the time it took to draw a breath. Out beyond the
huts the foxes were calling, their voices peopling the night. They crouched in the dust, their eyes gleaming. The moon tugged at their throats.

Now she was getting up. Picking up her missal. And flashlight.

She stepped into her sandals and picked her way into the shadows beyond the hut. David saw the flashlight go on. He stared over at the deserted mat. Someone sighed near him. Behind his closed eyelids the foxes were calling.

She was reading her missal.

The sky flowed pale blue overhead. He felt a quick sense of fear because the day had come while he slept. Like dropped mercury the sun was shattered by a cluster of palm fronds; it had just cleared the horizon. He heard babies crying and women squabbling. He shook out his shoes for scorpions and pulling them on walked toward the open porch. It extended from one side of the mudhouse—a sloping roof covered with earthen tiles and supported by several beams and braces made of palm trunks.

She was always awake a few minutes before him. She stood up from the kerosene stove. It was a silent greeting, a smile. She gave him a bucket from the corner of the porch. He nodded and started for the well. Behind the emptied food and milk crates piled on the mud walls she was pinning up her braids.

He walked toward the well. Under the tree the women from the other villages had already started to gather, shuffling in slowly, almost dreamily, as if in a daze, carrying the rolled mats on their heads. They wove the mats from dried palm fronds and exchanged them for laps of grain, surrendering their thumbs to the ink pad. The trays of the scale rose and fell gently on the chains as they settled in the wind. When the grain was measured out, the women and old men would hold it to them and, leading their naked, wild-haired children, shuffle away quickly like released birds, one thin hand clutching the lump of seeds at their waist as if someone—whoever—were to change his mind and take them back.

David looked at them, squatting, elbows on knees and arms straight out, bangles gathered at their thin wrists. Bemused and
brooding, dazed, as he knew himself to be, they were waiting. At nightfall, they would still be there beneath the tree, they and the shadows having shifted in time with each other, their goats wandering about them and their children stoning worried dogs. It took a long time to weigh out the grain.

They turned their eyes on him. He walked more quickly; not that it was his fault that the rains had failed for two years—that their rice paddies had dried up and hardened and slowly turned from brown mud to dust—that now ungoverned and mocking the dust wandered about on the West wind like the hungry spirits of their dead children and cattle, covering them, clinging to their hair and throats and nostrils, sifting with the white sunlight through the staved thatch of their shadowy huts, sifting with a soft swish when the wind lulled. And then again rattling against the brittle thatch. The thatch for their new roofs was still unrisen from the dark ground as the rain was still in the sky. And this was the second year. No, not that it was his fault, but he walked more quickly when the villagers looked at him.

Brown people they were—hands and feet and eyes—brown as they squatted close to the ground. When they died, the eldest son poured ghee on their pyres, and the smoke and ashes released them to the wind to become.

They watched him as he passed on his way to the well, he, though sun darkened, still white—a white man. He walked across the land, and as nothing else grew or was alive about him, he felt himself to be huge. He felt both tall and exposed on the land.

“It’s boiled,” she said of the water as she handed him the canteen.

“Thanks. You catch what you’re going to catch, though.” Still, he was glad she had remembered. Suddenly he wanted to reach out and touch her face, her skin. She seemed to smile faintly, distantly. Eyes grey-blue and skin pale white. Not for sun like this, but for north and dew and pastures. Strange how her skin hardly flushed. And her green pants, the one to the Punjabis. She slept in them and dried her hands on them. How could she wear them in this heat? But then, the village women
would never let her legs be uncovered, even though it was she
who made certain the milk came to them. He looked at the
loosed Indian shirt—*curta*—hanging to her knees like a maternity
blouse. How could she stand all that cloth?

She was unlike all of the girls he had met and slept with so
easily in his travels. She seemed to have no human needs, to be a
perfection almost like the famine itself. Before he came, she had
already been here alone for six months with a Catholic volunteer
organization. He, just another world traveller, two weeks in
India, and already thinking ahead to the whores of the
Orient—Bangkok and Singapore and Hong Kong—had been
riding on a train down to Calcutta when he’d gotten out at a
station on the line for a cup of tea.

An upper caste Indian, fat, sweating, his teeth stained red with
betel, had approached. He wore a bright fountain pen conspicu­
ously clipped into the breast pocket of his white shirt. The man
wanted to try out his English. Impress this strange white man.
From which country are you coming? America. Oh, a very rich
country. Certainly not like our poor India. “In our country mil­
lions are dying. You see station sign?” He pointed at the sign in
Hindi and English, *Gaya*. “In this area alone, people are starving
in the crores.” He waved his hand, fluttered his fingers, an almost
feminine gesture, as though he were shaking so much dirt from
his fingers. His watch crystal caught the sunlight. “But no mat­
ter. It is better letting these people die. There is nothing to be
done for them. Here in India, we accept such things.” The man
was close now, very confidential.

They had entered the compartment together. Oh yes, old
friends by now. From outside through the windows came the
soft clack of the small clay tea vessels breaking on the platform as
people dropped them and hopped back on the train. The whistles
of the ticket collectors blew. A sudden darkening of
doorways—people running. The train started to slowly roll out
of the station. Suddenly, David grabbed his pack. Ran to the
open door of the train. The vendors, hawkers, and crowds were
sliding past. Behind him the Indian called, “Now what are you
doing . . . ?” Heaving his pack out onto the platform, David
jumped. Staggered as he landed. The Indian was growing
smaller as he stood peering back out of the door. The train clattered out of the station. Gone. Silence. Then, the low drone of the crowds on the open, fly-ridden platform, eating, sleeping, squatting, staring at him.

From there, he had found out about the famine relief center—the ashram. A school for holy meditation. In the cathedral silence and airless shadows immense burlap bags of grain were stacked up to the ceiling. Crates of powdered milk. Food. In the silence, the scuttle of rat feet.

He'd been out with her in the village for two months now. And always she was the same. A perfect island of serenity. Like the circle of blue at the apex of the sky in the brown dust at midday. She was never warm toward him. Never cold. Like and of the famine itself—just there. He sweated. He lost his temper. He cursed at the villagers. At himself. At the man on the train with the gold watch flashing in the sun. He lost twenty pounds. And all the time, Catherine never seemed to lose flesh or change. Her cheeks remained full. Her face at the threshold of flushing. Just the hint of fine perspiration at her hairline. That was all.

The closest they had come to touching was her cutting his hair. Yet he stayed. Because of her? No, because of the original sense of inarticulate outrage he'd felt on the train. He could leave anytime. Each morning, he rose and thought, this morning will be the last. Then she would bring him tea in an old Skippy peanut butter jar. He would sip at the tea. And stay. Just one more day. He couldn't bring himself to say to her, "I'm leaving." Each day, he hoped to find a way to reach her through her perfections. Catherine. So self-sustaining. She had her missal against the scorched land. And he? Nothing. Yet each morning he stayed. So it was this morning, when she handed him the canteen of water.

"I'd better get moving before the sun gets hotter." He soaked a towel in water and wrapped it around his head. Taking the handlebars of the bicycle, he again found himself looking at her cheek and long braids.

"Do you have anything you want me to wash for you while you're over there, some shirts or . . . ?"

"Why do you always want to wash my clothes . . . boil my
C. E. POVERMAN

water... and nothing else? Do you think that what I want is for you to wash my dirty clothes?"

In her soft way, she didn't answer.

He swung up on the bicycle, the canteen thumping against the bone of his hip, and picked up the track of the road.

He could see a long way across the land—close clusters of brown huts or a distant tree, and angle-pelvised water buffalo or dolphin-nosed goats looking for a blade of green. But the sun and the cattle and the goats and the villages themselves through a passivity bred of sun and rain and gods, invaders and a few men with money and generations which went all the way back to those very gods, they had returned the land to brown and nothing green remained but the dust-covered fronds of the tall todi palms and a few twisted trees, their lower leaves long ago stripped as high as the cattle had been able to stretch their wet, curling tongues.

Turning, he followed the road beside the sandwhite riverbed. Farther along he passed a small village. The children ran naked in the dust, calling after him. The white man. They ran a short distance and trailed away. At the last hut an old man walked toward him stiffly, a stick—lathi—in one hand. The folds of a greyed dhoti hung about his hips and covered his legs. As he walked toward David he pulled up the cloth and pointed to an open sore on his calf. He began to whine. David yelled in Hindi, "No doctor, no have medicine. Nothing," and added in English, "Damn you." He held out an empty hand to show the man he had nothing. He felt the man's eyes on his back as he rode away.

He knew she wouldn't have cursed like that. She was much calmer. Perhaps it was not just her, but the way all women were. Or perhaps she drew the calm from her missal—a mass for every day of the year. David rode on, wondering about her. He felt uneasy and empty when he thought of her getting up last night with her missal and moving off alone to somehow draw sustenance from a hidden source in the dead of night, something almost unfair about it, her in the shadow behind the hut thinking everyone asleep, the print like black flames burning on those pages beneath the yellow flashlight. And she reading the lan-
guage of the dead, the Latin and prayers which belonged to echoing damp caverns and death.

Her. Women. They seemed to grow fatter or stay just as full at times when men were reduced to skin and . . . like that man back there. Women. Maybe it was their metabolism, childbearing. All of that power used on themselves when not holding a child. No, that wasn’t true. The village women were thin, too. The fullness seemed to be true only of her. That slow, steady power. He thought of her reading her missal in the shadows.

Behind him the sun was higher, yet the real heat was still to come. The bones pressed up through his taut burned skin as if the flesh were slowly being boiled away, surfacing through the amorphousness of his fats and juices. The sky was wide and empty, blinding blue as it had been for months, the sun yet to go forth, the day, too, an endless going forth, a compression of shadow and brightening of light and leaping up of heat, endless . . . until at a certain moment in the afternoon, the shadows changed almost imperceptibly. Then they slowly began to flow from the sun toward night like water coming back to the river. When that happened he knew he would make it for another day and would let down and allow himself to think ahead to evening and the stars and soft breeze which would dissolve this prison now soundlessly rising about him.

He swung away from the riverbed and followed the path cutting through the ridges of the paddies. The wheels rolled smoothly except when they reached the end of one terrace, and the track bumped through the ridge separating it from the next.

This land. This dust. This heat. Catherine liked them. She had said so one morning. “They remind me of my home. The desert. The Mojave.” And she had stood with her hands in her pockets, a faint smile upon her face, and stared at the horizon and thought about home.

She had told him something about it once, about how her father had been many things, a pilot and a mechanic, and how they had moved here and there. When he died, they had owned the gas station in the desert. She and her mother had been left to run it by themselves. She, the oldest, had taken care of the younger children—eight of them.
Eight of them. Nine, including herself. Because they were Catholic, he had wondered. No. Because they—Father and Mother—had known he was going to die, and they had wanted as many children as possible, she had said simply.

Children. Nine of them. From one man and one woman. And when her father had died, “I couldn’t believe he was dead.” She had told him about it one evening as they sat quietly before the hut, about them, the cries and naked footfalls of the village children rising from the shadows. “When he died, I couldn’t feel anything at first. I just didn’t understand. I was fifteen. He was gone.”

She had sat beside him on an empty food crate, her head resting against the still-warm mud wall of the hut, her face in the shadow of the overhanging roof. She sat next to him, but not touching, sitting as she always did, a little apart from him. “I couldn’t believe he was dead, but I acted as though I did. Together Mother and I dressed the children. And then we all went down to the funeral home. And there was Father. At the front of the room.

“I went up there. To see him. I know I shouldn’t have done that. I looked in the casket. Suddenly I had this feeling. I had to touch him.” She paused, remembering. “I reached out. My hand seemed to move by itself. And I did touch him. His hands were placed next to one another, flat on his chest. And I touched him, just one of his fingers . . . like this.” She reached over in the shadow and touched David’s finger. “When I touched him, his finger, it was then that I really knew that he was dead.” As she touched his own finger, David suddenly felt a chill and imagined himself, eyes closed, hands folded across his chest, lying in the casket.

They were silent. One of the small boys had come up to David’s side and put his head in his lap. David put his hand about the boy’s shoulder, and the boy was still and content.

Then she spoke again. “I thought of becoming a nun for awhile . . . I mean, afterward.”

Again he felt a chill.

They fell silent. Then she continued. “One of my sisters went into the convent for two years. She withdrew before she took
her final vows, though. I don’t know. Sometimes I think . . . .” She stopped abruptly. “You know, I don’t think of Father as dead when I think of him. Not the way he was in the casket. I remember him . . . . “The gas station was just so far from everything. A diner next door was all. They didn’t even have lights on the highway then. That was too bad when they put them in because I used to sleep in this old sailboat out in the desert. But after the lights were in I couldn’t sleep out there because they would shine in my eyes. Anyway. One day a gang of guys came through the desert on cycles. They started cruising around the station and through the pumps. Kicking over oil cans. Wild.” She hesitated. “I think Father might have been the same way when he was a kid—wild like that. But those machines . . . I was petrified. “Father just picked up a wrench. He put it in his back pocket and walked outside. He was big—tall. I was behind him in the office. He stood there in the doorway, and I could see through the doorway around him. And the window . . . after a few minutes they quieted down with him standing there. And then they left.” She became quiet, remembering. “Just stood there.” And at the time, sitting by her, he had been able to imagine the man, the desert about him, and the empty road turning back to scrub on the other side. The blueing desert shadows. And then the silence after.

Ahead, David could see village women squatting in front of the huts. One of the Indian boys—come out to help—was standing among them, dipping the measuring cup into the kettle of milk and pouring it out, white and shiny, into the small earthen pots and brass lotas of the women. They squatted close to the ground, holding up their vessels but staying low and turning their faces, expectantly. They squatted as if reluctant or afraid to rise too far from the ground.

Bharatbhia came to the shadow of the hut door, and as the sun silvered his unshaven whiskers and deepened his child-brown eyes, he smiled and pressed together his palms before his chest. “Namasta.”

The two of them went into the hut. Bharatbhia waited while
David rested, giving him tea and massaging his legs. Then they went out to look at the wells.

They wandered through the paddy fields, stopping and peering down into the clawed earth, down into the wells, the village men following them, holding their hands a half-span apart to show how much water at the bottom or shaking their heads when there wasn’t any yet, or holding up a chunk of rotten rock to tell what it was like down there, that they could not dig deeper without chisels and sledge hammers or dynamite from the block development officer. They wandered through the paddies to the mounds where the dirt had piled up and crusted, deserted because the man digging had suddenly felt the earth pressing about him and the water too far below and had pulled himself up into the sunlight and simply sat down to stare at the dried horizon. And in some wells a face peered up from the shadows. Then the man’s back glistened as he bent over and swung his pick.

It was when he was again resting inside the hut that he first noticed the child. He was naked and holding a grey rag in the cradle of his neck and shoulder, staring quietly and intently at David. He was outside, in the sun. The child looked familiar. Perhaps it was something in his quiet gaze—very steady and sad and old. On his last visit two days before, David remembered seeing this same boy. And holding on to the grey rag.

David rose from the grain sacks and walked to the doorway. His shadow was almost directly beneath him. He felt the heat as soon as he stepped out of the hut. The boy didn’t back away or hold out his hands for food or coins the way many of the children did. He stood still and looked up and didn’t retreat even when David took the cloth between his fingers. Slowly, he peeled the rag back. As the light hit the eyes of the baby beneath, they closed.

The sunlight suddenly seemed to be heavy and sonorous, ringing, rising in pitch, becoming higher and shriller. David felt himself sway, his body formed a sound, apart and separate from himself.

The baby’s lips and nostrils were covered with flies. Black,
they rubbed their hind legs together. The baby blinked and wrinkled up his nose and blinked again. And slowly, very slowly, he opened his small mouth. No sound rose from his throat. After a moment David realized the baby was crying.

He picked the rag away from the child and held him out at arm’s length. He cradled him in the palm of one hand and let the rag drop. Holding the child in both hands before him, David looked at his tiny eyelashes and his almost transparent ears. His oversized head was bald and scabbed, and a keyhole shaped place on top was like an airview of a buried ancient ruin, a small shadow where the skull had started to cave in. He held the baby up. Dangling like vestigial organs, his legs were those of a creature caught out of his medium in some uncertain stage of evolution. His tiny brown buttocks had shriveled, the underside of spoiled fruit neglected in a bowl. David felt the child’s ribcage, his tiny breath pressing against his palms, and the frail soft chord of his backbone.

He held this tiny fragment of flesh between his fingers and wondered whose son he was and whom he belonged to and if he could possibly have a name. How old was he? And could he see David? Did he know he was being held? David wondered what this person had done to deserve all this and if he could even be called a person at all and then he found himself wondering about the child in the Hindu way—whether the child suffered this because of the sins of the child’s father in the father’s present life or if they were sins of the previous soul in his past life or lives which had brought him back to experience the world in this shriveled body. Life in all vehicles—stone, leaf, fish, dog, woman, man, all transformations of the same blind essence trying to come back . . . and this which he held in his hands?

Bharatbhia came out, and the two stood quietly gazing at the baby. The child stared off at the horizon as Bharatbhia bent down and spoke to him. Finally the boy left, and Bharatbhia and David continued to stand looking at the baby in David’s hands, thinking each his thoughts as the baby opened and closed his mouth, crying without tears or sound, until the boy returned, coming from a distant group of huts and leading a thin man who was neither as old or as weak as he first appeared, he—like
Bharatbhia—silver-whiskered and lined about the eyes. Except for the sacred strands—the life cord—hanging from the cowlick, his grey hair was cropped short. A little smaller than her brother, a naked girl trailed behind him.

The father answered Bharatbhia’s questions with the villagers’ reluctance to speak and perhaps dislike or distrust or disbelief in anything spoken. He pointed at the sun and his fields and leaned on his stick. As Bharatbhia replied, he touched the baby. The father squinted as he listened.

When he spoke he was difficult to understand—for David because of the Hindi, for Bharatbhia because the man himself didn’t seem to comprehend what had happened and explained uncertainly. It seemed that the mother had died, and the baby had not been getting any milk. Perhaps another woman...?

Including the father and his three children in the circling of his hand, David pointed over in the direction of the village he had just come from, saying the name. Then the Hindi words for medicine and milk and let’s go. The father shook his head. How could he refuse? What was here? What choice... suddenly David felt desperate. Pointing in the direction of the distant village, he forgot about the baby. They had to go. That was all. He didn’t know enough Hindi to explain about the girl and how she could take care of the baby, how she could watch him and give him the medicine, and do—exactly what, he wasn’t certain—except that she was there, and in a way that was almost enough in itself, that she was there.

It was noon when the father agreed, but by now they would have to wait until late afternoon when the heat slackened. And the West wind, the Loo, had already started. The palm fronds clacked and clattered. The horizon churned a dirty sun color in all directions up to where the sky blued in a pale circle overhead. The dust filtered through the thatched roof and silvered the becalmed sunlight inside the hut.

They started when the shadows were lengthening, though the wind was still hot and heavy. Walking stiff-legged, his bare feet cracked and calloused at the heels, the father led the way, followed by the little girl. Wild-haired and bright-eyed, she stepped quickly, trying to keep up. Before setting out, the father had
bent down and very carefully and tenderly held out a pair of red shorts for her. Standing on one leg, balancing a hand on her father's wrinkled shoulder, she had stepped into one leg, then the other. She wore the shorts now. Her brother followed, holding the grey rag about the baby, who blinked and wrinkled his face—almost bemused—against the flies. David followed, wheeling the bicycle, occasionally forced to lift it up over a terrace ridge.

It was a long way for the children, but they kept up, the little girl now and then hopping between steps. They rested in the shade of a small tree by the riverbed. When they started again, David covered the baby's head with the rag and pointed at the sun. The small boy understood.

Now, through an earthen haze, he could see the village, about it palms bending to the wind. And then, Catherine. She was standing outside. He waved, and she waved back. He looked at the baby under the rag, suddenly afraid, but he was still alive. He began to feel his heart beat. His throat closed, and he became aware of how dry his lips were. He licked them but his tongue was dry, too. He looked at the naked face, a fly in the nostril, and he felt a strange anxiousness, almost a pride, as if the brother were bringing her a gift—his, David's.

She was as he thought she would be. When he took the baby from the brother and held it out for her, she took him with none of the repugnance he had felt. She held him up in her cool hands and looked at his sores. She smiled. "I suppose he's got a little of everything."

She was boiling water to wash him when the father came up to David and touched his arm. The man held out his hand. "Kona."

Turning up his empty palms, David replied, "No have food. Kona Nahi. Work for food." He was vexed to find himself reduced to speaking a kind of baby talk. He led the man a stone's throw from the hut and drew a circle in the dust. He made digging motions and told him in Hindi, "Dig one foot, give you two kilos grain."

The man shook his head, no.

"Damn you, what do you mean, 'No'? No dig, no eat. You're
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not special.” Suddenly he realized he was yelling in English—and in that baby talk. He stared at the father who neither met his eyes, nor looked away from them. He seemed to be wearing a veil, through which he could see, but through which anything David did or said could not penetrate. Something quietly angry about this small wrinkled man subdued David. He asked in Hindi, “How much grain for one foot dig? Kitna?” The man held up three fingers.

That they were starving, that the food wasn’t from their soil, that their own countrymen would let them die—as the man wearing the expensive wristwatch in the railroad station had said in precise, proud English, “. . . better to let these villagers die,” —and they would die if it wasn’t for . . . maybe better to let them die. And that they should bargain with him for the grain as if it were his to give and as if he were sitting on a fat grainbag trying to keep the food from them, for himself. Two kilos, one foot, that’s what he’d been told. Yet he could see in the man’s eye he would not dig unless he were given three kilos. And if it were his to give? But the baby. David held up three fingers.

When he returned with pick and shovel, the father was squatting by the circle. He threw down the tools and made digging motions. The father stood up and held out his hand.

“Qua hey?” David pointed at the circle. “Galdi Caro. Do it quickly.” David looked at the cracked palm. “Damn you, dig first, eat after.” As if the father understood, he pointed at his little girl who was picking up stones between her toes and throwing them at dogs and crows. His child. David walked away.

When he returned, the shadows had lengthened and the wind had dropped. By the circle of dust the pick and shovel lay deserted. The father was squatting in the same place, motionless. Without breaking his stride, David went into the house and bagged a kilo of grain. He threw it at the father’s feet. “Dig.” The man was already rising. He gave the food to his children. Empty-handed he walked toward the circle. He took the pick in his hands, raised it and sunk it into the earth.

She broke the pill into four pieces, again crushing those pieces.

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She held out a teaspoonful of milk and placed a piece of the pill between the baby's lips. "All right, guy, let's see if you can eat," she said softly. She poked the pill until it disappeared, tipping the spoon up against his lips. She held the back of his head. The baby blinked, almost puzzled. The pill and milk ran down his chin. She wiped his face and put the pill back into his mouth. Again it bubbled out. She did this until several pieces of the pill had been swallowed. She gently pressed his swollen brown belly. It was firm. When his bowels ran, she cradled his back and picked up his legs, holding him out above the ground the way the village women held their babies. She poured water over his shrivelled buttocks and handed him back to his brother.

The sun had dropped into the shores of dust, and a single star was out when the father brought David the stick. Taking it, he felt it press between the fingers of his two hands, the stick a kind of perfection, a distillation of the same force in himself and the father. Without going back to the hole to measure for himself, David entered the hut, smelling burned buffalo dung and sweet grain and dust. He ran his fingers through the cool grain. A rat scuttled in the darkness and ran over his foot. He kicked where it had been. Outside, he poured the grain into the corner of the man's upheld dhoti—loincloth. The man sacked the grain with his hand and walked away into the darkness.

The water tugged at the bucket. A darker shadow, the wooden boom rose over his head toward the stars. The bucket lightened as it came up the black shaft of the well. He could hear water spilling and splashing below. The rope slid through his hands, faster and faster as the mud-weight at the opposite end of the boom—lat—dropped closer to the earth and gathered strength. As the bucket heavied, he spread his legs, and bracing his bare feet in the palm logs laid over the hole, he swung it toward her. Catherine poured the water into another bucket.

"Want me to throw it over you?" she asked.

He could see a star rippling down below in the water. Now that it was less hot, he could feel the air fill him. He took off his shirt.
"Yes. Pour it over me . . . slowly." Eased now by the water, he began to speak. "You know, that old man wouldn't work until he made sure his two children got something to eat . . . I mean, not until he put it right in their hands, himself." He pulled the rope against the stars.

"I know." He could feel her near him. "I would have done the same," she said softly.

The bucket hung, swaying, faintly gleaming below. He could hear water splashing and echoing. He was staring off at the low stars, the rope and the boom overhead and his arms taut. "I, too." And then quietly, as if he'd been waiting, he asked, "How's the baby?"

"All right . . . maybe."

He started pulling on the rope again. She had just finished pouring water over him, when he felt her hand on his back. He became still. She ran her hand over his wet skin, then splashed a little water over his shoulders.

"There was some soap still on."

"Thank you," he said quietly.

They said nothing as they walked across the dark open back toward the hut.

By late afternoon when the father started again, the morning's earth was up to his thin chest and piled about him in a ring as if he were digging in for a siege. His grey head came up, followed by a shovelful of earth. Then his wet back, vulnerable and blind, bent. He groped in the shadows of the hole and came up with another shovelful of dirt. He stopped when the first star appeared.

Every day the father dug. Every night they met at the well in silence. She washed him in the darkness, running her cool hand over his shoulder and saying a word about the baby. Her hand sliding over his shoulder emptied his mind, and all he knew was his feet in the mud and his wet shorts clinging to him and the sound of the water dripping and her hand cool and smooth on his shoulder in the dark starlight.

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On the fifth day, he returned from a distant village shortly before the wind dropped in the afternoon. He leaned his bicycle against the hut and entered. The hut was empty and dark. He drank some water from the clay pot in the corner. Outside, none of the old women and children who usually sheltered themselves in the shadows seemed to be around. A single scrawny dog covered with sores limped across the clearing before the hut.

He walked out to the ditch, carrying a can of water in his hand. He picked his way through the crusted excretions and, finding a spot, he squatted down. He could hear a pig grunting nearby. He felt a sharp pain in his stomach and then lower, penetrating somewhere deep in him, and then it lightened and passed. He poured water over himself, waiting for the cleft to dry. He stood up and looked down at the blood and mucous glistening in the strange deposit. A kind of daily internal molting. And strange the way nothing wrong shows on the outside. He held his arm up and looked at the smooth brown skin and golden hairs which so fascinated the children. Nothing. Not a trace. He wondered what he should do about the blood if it went on much longer. Nothing. Nothing he could do. He climbed up out of the ditch. The pig's grunting became louder as he floundered into the ditch and began to gobble. David walked away, trying not to hear.

He looked over at the hole. The father's head didn't appear. Nor his shovel. When David came closer, he kicked at the ring of dirt; it was brittle and suncrusted under the toe of his sandal. He could see the father had not dug that day. The palm fronds clattered in the hot wind. David squeezed his eyes and mouth shut and held his hand over his nose, waiting for the dust to pass.

When the stars came out, he went to the deserted well alone and hauled up a bucket of water, the wooden boom creaking in the stillness, the water splashing below. He sloshed the water over himself, and then squatted the way the villagers did. He sat balanced, very still, the smell of his wet body and the mud in his nostrils. Frogs flopped here and there. The stars. In their same places. Cool. The dusk purpling up to night overhead, already
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deep in the east. He didn’t think of anything. He was lowering the bucket again when he heard her behind him. She started to speak.

"The well . . . it won’t be finished. The father took the baby to be cremated this morning."

He was glad she couldn’t see his face in the darkness. He’d known the baby would die. His heart was beating, and he felt nauseous as the bucket came up. She reached for it; he didn’t bend forward as she poured the water slowly over him, but stood straight. She reached out and put her hand on his shoulder. His skin ached where she touched him. He knew she was waiting for his hand. He bent down and picked up the bucket. Started back toward the hut.

The foxes were calling at the waning moon.

She was lying near him, covered by the sari against the faint bloodless chill which came in the dead time somewhere between moon and sunrise, a dead time in the night or body when the chill came no matter.

For an instant when she took his hand, he felt a sudden warmth, a warmth of flesh and blood dark beneath. And then his fingers chilled. He took back his hand and stood up on the mat. He knew she was watching him as he walked away beneath the waning moon.

The palms were starred, the stars brightening as the dust settled. The air smelled faintly of cow dung and ashes. David went to the unfinished well, deeply shadowed. He kicked a little dirt into the empty pit. It clopped softly as it hit the bottom. He held his cold hand and looked out across the empty land at the dark horizon. His hand had been warm for a moment. He shivered by the empty, unfinished well.

Tomorrow, he would leave.
FOR YEARS, Dr. Goldman has been after me to do two things: let him bleach my black front tooth and call his daughter, Phyl­lis. For years, I have not exactly refused, but—my mouth packed with cotton, my throat parching, the drain sucking under my tongue—I have avoided both by ambiguous grunts, by dodges, by head feints, by lines in my forehead that plead: I must rinse now!

Dr. Goldman will stand beside the chair—no, not the chair, for it is not a chair but a pale gold, decorator’s dental couch in which I recline like an odalisque, Goldman hardly taller than myself, even though I am supine—and he will command, “Open,” and I will open and he will pause in his work, a patient waiting in each of the two other rooms, and, taking hold of my black left incisor with thumb and forefinger, he will shake his head, pull on the tooth, lean forward, peer through the lower lenses of his bifocals, the upper lenses, and then the two square lenses that extend from the long arm attached to the band around
his head: time will stop. Goldman will shake his head and the
loupes, spattered with many strange and opaque substances, will
move back and forth like the antennae of an insect about to
pollinate. Goldman will speak.

“Perfect teeth, perfect. White, even, perfect; did you ever let
an orthodontist have a crack at these? Dr. Bernstein? Dr. Green­
wald?”

“Never.”

“They just came in like this?”

“Exactly.”

Goldman shakes his head.

“A gift. A gift from God. What teeth! White! The work I've
had to do on my kids to give them teeth like this.”

My eyes move quickly to the Kodak print of Phyllis Goldman
on the cabinet.

“And you, a poor brusher, a guy who neglects his mouth,
have teeth like a prince!”

Goldman increasing accusatory pressure on my black tooth
and yanking, the gray hairs on the back of his hand disappearing
into my vision; Goldman yanks in frustration on my black tooth
and shakes his head.

“Perfect! Except for this. This goddamned tooth sticks out
like a sore thumb. How in the hell did you ever do this?”

And again, I tell him the simple tale of high school football.

Goldman stares out the window and shakes his head as he
listens. Adolescence! For him, it is a tale without redemption.

Once again, the ghost of Dr. O’Connor visits my tooth. Poor
O’Connor. Long since the victim of a stroke. But when he was
good, he was good—even though he had only a dental chair he
jacked up by foot. And a slow-speed drill. Once again, O’Con­
nor is breaking into my root canal and excising the guts of the
dead nerve with a twisty instrument, now holding it in front of
me, now turning it slowly in the Castle light so I might observe
with proper wonder and amazement my tooth umbilicus. O’Connor had subsequently sealed up the nerve passage behind
my tooth with the finality of rolling a rock over the mouth of a
tomb, the tooth had darkened bit by bit, and so it had become like
an aged parchment, a talisman, which Goldman simply had to read at all costs.

Goldman still has the black tooth between thumb and forefinger and now, as I peer up at the double chins he gets when leaning forward, up at the missed gray whiskers, up into his nostrils, up into the very dark insides of Goldman’s head itself, I know what Goldman will do next. He will pull back and almost plead, “For God’s sake, let me bleach it for you.”

He will explain the procedure. He will be patient. He will try to be tactful.

“It won’t hurt. You won’t feel a thing. I just drill into the canal, apply some bleaching agents—we’ll do this maybe three or four times—and that’s it. If that doesn’t work, we can always grind it down, drive in a gold post and fit a porcelain cap.”

And I will always shrug noncommittally. Why I can’t let Goldman bleach my tooth I don’t know, I honestly don’t know. Is it that there’s a lot of history in the tooth? That I resist change? I know Goldman is a perfectionist. I know how much it means to him. I really do, in a way, want to let him bleach it—sometimes in my mind I even hear a voice: “Let Goldman have the black one”; or, “Give Goldman that black baby”; or, “Save Goldie the Black Beauty.”

Goldman, pulling on the tooth, seeing by the vague glaze of my eyes in the Ritter light it’s going to be yet another noncommitment, bears down.

“What? Why go through life with a one percent smile when I can give you a one-hundred-and-one percent smile?”

I mumble something.

“What? Is it the expense? Look, you I don’t worry about. You pay me when you can. And money . . . where we’re all going, you don’t need money.”

I briefly consider where we’re all going. “Where we’re all going,” I repeat dully, “where we’re all going, you don’t need teeth either. Especially bleached ones. More so, capped ones with gold posts inside.”

Goldman sadly shakes his head and peers through his various lenses at the black tooth.
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This has been going on for more or less ten years.

Though I might avoid Goldman for months at a time, dodging across the street when I see him, lest he grab me and command, “Open,” right there on the street; though I might travel the wide world over and the whole world round, see sights wondrous passing fair, be gone for years and years, have wandered barefoot and half-crazed in dusty bazaars of the Orient, partaken of food, sweets and potions that might easily have killed a lesser man, gnawed fierce hard nuts, herbs and spices that stain poignantly the teeth of the local populace, still, all in all, no matter how long I had been gone, where I had been or what I had seen, who or who not I had fallen in or out of love with, it was Goldman, Goldman I would come back to.

Oh, not that things stayed the same for Goldman, either. No, no. There would be a new light in the room facing the street, a new dental tray, a compact electronic-looking metal box with some strange gauges and always, always there would be a new dental assistant.

Each of these new assistants, or oral hygienists, while totally different from her predecessor—some fat, some thin; some deft with eye shadow but bad with lipstick; some breathtakingly good in the haunch but woebegone from the waist up; others just the opposite, almost lame but elegant, simply elegant from the waist up; yet others deft with buffer and in all ways excellent in prophylaxis; others, again, embarrassingly and painfully lacking in technique, so that one, I remember, had gotten her hair so badly caught in the drill flywheel I had had to climb out of the couch and distangle her, hair by hair, while she, bent double, tears streaming down her face, waited patiently, both of us praying Goldman stay involved in the oral cavity in the next room—but each, no matter how different, would have some intangible quality in common with the previous girl.

First, each would greet me like a long-lost cousin, calling me by my first name, saying, we’ve heard so much about you, and asking me in a chatty voice about particulars of my life I had long since forgotten. Obviously, that would make me uneasy.

I would ease onto Goldman’s couch, the sad eyes of myriad departed oral hygienists would flash before me like the life of a
drowning man and I'd think, well, this one, this new girl must be different from all the others. Must be. But as soon as Goldman would get rolling, it would be the same.

Goldman would start: “Where’s his chart? Have you taken X rays?”

“I thought you didn’t want X rays, Dr. Goldman.”

“And why shouldn’t I want X rays? I don’t ask you to think! I don’t pay you to think! Just do what I say! Now this time is wasted.” Goldman sighing. “Take X rays.” Goldman suffering. X rays taken, we would resume.

Immediately, they would take up right where they’d left off.

“Dr. Goldman, do you need a double forensic douche bag?” Goldman, pausing, stiffening, becoming still with scorn.

Mouth twisting.

“Do . . . I . . . look . . . like . . . I . . . need . . . a . . . forensic . . . douche . . . bag? Do I? For God’s sake, please!”

Angels in their starched white uniforms, the girls would stare out the window, blink quickly many times, bite their lips. Who could be the ideal dental assistant for such a man? Could such a mortal creature exist, such a mistress of the dental couch, midwife of the properly blended filling? Christ, didn’t these unsuspecting girls sense, when they first walked into his office, that they were dealing with an artist, a virtuoso, the Johann Sebastian Bach of the oral cavity?

My eyes would stray over the glare of the light and inevitably come to the large Kodak print of Phyllis Goldman, and though the pictures would change—now she would be standing in snow glare, leaning on her Head poles; now on a beach, leaning forward out of her top, a little bit of domestic cheesecake; hell, in some countries, like India or Pakistan, a picture like that would have half the pubescent and adult male population jacking off until insane—but though the pictures might change, they would remain constant, so that finally I would come to suspect that they had been placed there above the cabinet by Goldman’s own hand at exactly the place he knew—through years of dental experience—my eyes must stray. But instead of concluding that I must call aforementioned Phyllis Goldman, slowly, as time returned me again and again to Goldman’s dental couch, I came to the conclu-
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sion that Phyllis Goldman, the girl coming out of her top, the girl with the cleavage and the perfect white smile, would be the only girl who could make Goldman the perfect dental assistant. In a delirium of fear and pain, Goldman descending with the high-speed drill, I would see her, Phyllis Goldman, anima of Goldman's office, hovering in the rays from the Ritter light like a Chagall lover.

And, invariably, when Goldman would lay hold of the black tooth and wind up with his two-pronged proposition, I would still see her in that role.

What? What was it with the damn tooth? What was it to Goldman? Perfectionist!

And once, after a long foray out into the world, returning to the scrutiny of yet another new Kodak of Phyllis, I almost said, "Isn't she married yet?"

Instead, I closed hard on Goldman's finger—Goldman, whose finger tips etiolated, wrinkled, gnawed and eaten, undergo a sea change in our collective saliva, Goldman, who is only trying to do the best he can for himself and his family, and through some strange notion, some attraction in my overbite, has decided I am the best he can do for his daughter.

This time, as I, odalisque, lie supine on his couch, it comes to me slowly, slowly; like Othello, the Moor, I am the last to suspect yet ripe for suspicion; my tooth, its blackness, Goldman, Ariel? my tooth sea-changed, he wants to make me perfect before he gives me to his daughter, perfect! Make the white-porcelain crown and drive in the gold post, too, if need be, make that white tooth the jewel for the crown of my perfect teeth, make me a perfect jewel for his daughter, make . . . . Oh, I see it all too well, I am to be his gift horse and he is always looking me in the mouth.

Goldman saying: "You're not taking good care of them, we eat hot things, cold things, enamel expands, contracts, things decay, nothing lasts forever."

But I'm not listening.

Has he not had a better chance than most potential fathers-in-law to test me, to scrutinize my inner fiber, to try me at close quarters; was it not a test, that day, years ago, through the spritz 216
of the water and the suck of the drain, when, easing back on his drill, Goldman had stared deep into my eyes, studying me like a lover, and finally asked, “Too much for you? Novocain?”

And I, macho fool that I was, remembering a Hawaiian cowboy I’d met in a bar, who chewed kavakava root and pulled his own teeth with a pliers, had played right into Goldman’s hands, fiercely whispering back through cotton packs and dry mouth, “No, no way, pour it on!”

Now Goldman looks long into my eyes, pats me on the shoulder, shakes his head.

“You’ve got to brush better.

Deep inside me, I hear an unfamiliar voice:

“Give it to him.”

What?

“The black one. Give Goldman the black baby.”

Huh?

“Go ahead.”

I close my mouth and place the point of my tongue against the smooth wet convexity of the left incisor, departed circa 1960. I close my eyes. I tap the tip of my tongue against the tooth in inquiry. I meditate. I hear Goldman, strangely silent except for the expectant rush of breath in his nostrils.

“Go ahead, give Goldman the black one.”

I dunno.

I break into a sweat.

“Dr. Goldman . . . .” I complain of nausea. I stammer out my apologies.

Is there a look of triumph around his mouth as I ease myself out and close the door? Behind the frosted-glass panel, the outline of Goldman, D.D.S., looms in silhouette like a Thirties movie gangster.

I go through a period of agonizing soul-searching. I walk the streets until the wee hours of the morning. On distant corners, phone booths, like luminous blocks of ice, beckon, Come in, drop in a dime, call Goldman.

Naturally, I think of my father’s teeth—the teeth of my father.

There he is, standing, talking to Goldman at a garden party.
Apparently, my father has been foolish enough to complain he has developed a pain in his mouth. Bad move. Bad, bad move.

In short order, Goldman has my father out of the garden, into the den and bent back in a lounger. From the doorway, I see Goldman in madras sports coat, tie hung back over one shoulder, Tensor lamp in one hand, spoon in the other. The spoon disappears into my father's mouth, Goldman leans toward my father, my father disappears from view; all I can now see of my father is his hand emerging from around Goldman's body, the fingers impressed in the perspiration of the gin-and-tonic glass. Above Goldman's bent back, through the picture window, the wedding reception transpires in lucid splendor: it is like a tableau viewed through the eyepiece of an Easter egg.

Goldman straightens up. He has made some decision.

Suddenly, they are stampeding by, pressing me back in the doorway. Goldman fairly dragging my father down the hall. They reappear in the garden and I see them hopping from flag to flag down the garden path to the street, Goldman in the lead, moving at a rapid clip, slipping out of his jacket and rolling up his sleeves as he goes, my father, still clutching his gin and tonic, bringing up the rear. In mere moments, they are gone.

I can hear Goldman's gun-metal-blue Jag winding out in the direction of his office.

The intelligence reports come jumbling back fast and thick from the front. Bruxism. Father's been grinding his teeth in his sleep for years. Teeth, all of them, loose as rubber bands—Goldman's analogy!

Goldman working fast. That very afternoon, the final decision made. No prevarication. No hanging back. All teeth must go! All teeth out! To be pulled! False teeth! Full steam ahead!

Shortly after, Father chastened, all teeth pulled, perfect white false teeth, what beauties!

Father suddenly a movie star!

I see the teeth on the blue porcelain of his sink. I descend motionless onto the toilet seat. I contemplate the false teeth. White. Perfect. Even. Equipped with their very own red gums. The distillation of something. What? Being a long-suffering father? A responsible, tax-paying member of the republic?
What? Just what? I stare at those even white-porcelain teeth lying on the sink, they stare back and we wonder about each other.

I walk the streets. The voice is insistent:
“Give Goldman the black one.”
Go away!
“Give Goldman the black one.”

I think of my father’s false teeth—the false teeth of my father. Is there a moral in them for me? A warning? If I could pry open those false teeth on the sink and command or cajole, flatter or trick them to speak—“Teeth, speak!”—what would they have to tell me? What riddles? What aphorisms?

I stare at the false teeth, but they remain mute.

If nothing else, if the teeth won’t speak, I know at least this much. My father could take it—having all of his teeth pulled. Well, then, so can I!

But it is not a matter of pulling teeth. And even that convenient old equation Pain × Father = Pain × Son + I-Can-Take-Moreⁿ+¹ won’t wash, since Goldman has sworn on his heart, throwing out his hands, staring at me through any one of his three sets of lenses, “There will be no pain! It’s a dead tooth, right? The nerve is dead! So what’s there to worry about? What?”

I’m at a loss. Yes, what?
The voice insists, “Give Goldman the black baby.”

I say to the tooth, “Tooth, what? Tooth, are you afraid?”
And Tooth doesn’t answer.

I try to empathize, to understand my tooth. How would it feel to have Goldman bore in, apply the bleach?

Fear fear fear fear.

Awful to tamper with Tooth, set beneath my nasal cavity, now embedded in the soft, lastly hardened bones of my jaw but scant inches away from the Big Nerve itself, my brain. Tamper and upset the precarious balance of my reptilian cortex. After all, Big Nerve is the home of my alpha, beta and delta waves, my heaven and hell, my centers of spiritual and sexual ecstasy, which are no more than a few synapses away from each other as it is and which are already theologian’s nightmare enough in their whispering chemo/electric conspiracy. And to just come barrel-
ing in there and mess with Tooth. Tooth so close to the dream factory, Tooth, already the star of so many of my dreams, or nightmares . . . ?

I sit down under a streetlight and, taking up some cat-food coupons providently scattered on the sidewalk, I try to write a poem. Nothing comes.

The pen writes of its own accord: "Give Goldman the black one."

In the morning, I call Goldman. His new girl, Jean Valentine, picks up the phone. In a parched, tired voice, I whisper: "Give me Dr. Goldman."

It's as though he's been waiting by the phone and on a prearranged hand signal from Jean Valentine, he punches right in.

"Goldman here."

The receiver leaves my ear and dips over the cradle.

"Goldman here."

I lower the receiver.

"Give Goldman the black one."

The receiver rises slowly as the snake charmer's cobra.

"Dr. Goldman?"

"Yes!"

"Can you take me this afternoon? This is— ."

"I know who it is! How's one-thirty?"

"One-thirty? All right, one-thirty."

We hang up at the same time. I go into the bathroom and give my teeth a good brushing.

It doesn't escape me that Goldman is wearing a clean blue frock, that all six of his lenses, even the squares of pure observation extending from his forehead, are free of any and all opaque substances, that, in fact, they are, as the trout fishermen are wont to say of their streams, gin clear; Jean Valentine is in a perfectly starched and pressed white uniform, her lips are visibly buttoned, there are fresh flowers in the vase on the reception desk, the phone is off the hook and Goldman has almost creased his double chins in a smile as he hands me onto the dental couch. As
TOOTH

I lean back, I think of the serpent and scepter entwined over the date on the building: 1937. I had never noticed that before. Verily, I have come unto the temple.

Goldman commands, "Open!"
And I open.
The chart is right there.
"Well, we cleaned them yesterday, yes?"
I nod.
"And no cavities, yes?"
I nod.
"So let me guess why you've come."
I nod.

When Goldman finally lays hold of the black one, it is with a look of such infinite satisfaction that I avert my eyes.

Goldman smiles, "Yes?"
I swallow, give a half-nod, wait expectantly for some release papers to sign. There are none. No time?

For Goldman is quick. In mere moments he has drilled into the back of the tooth, poked around, I hear the metallic clank of his hook inside the nerve canal, feel the shock waves spread through my jaw. He presses close. His eyes move behind all three sets of lenses like some wondrous species of tropical fish. "More light!" The Ritter light pours its candlepower into my oral cavity and down my throat. Goldman could sit inside my stomach and read a book.

Now a burner is lit, now the heated air shimmers mirage-like, Jean Valentine has assisted in packing my mouth with cotton, bleaching agents are disappearing under my line of vision, Goldman is heating the hook in the flame, now applying, his lips pressed together in intense concentrated pleasure: "We'll steam it in," his lips allow as he applies the heated instrument. "Steam. It. In."

I go lightheaded. Goldman leaving me to bleach, my mouth full of cotton, the Ritter light beaming at my tooth, my throat parched, Jean Valentine gazing at me adoringly.

Goldman holding up the mirror.
"Look!"
“I can’t.”
Goldman pushes the mirror up in front of me. “We’re only starting. But look!”
I look quickly.
Already the tooth has lightened up some. But it is still not too late to stop.
Goldman pats me on the shoulder. “Fine, fine.”
He is beaming.
“Tomorrow, same time.”
I nod yes, resolving no, I’ll call back later and cancel.

I spend a bad night. Tossing and turning. Feverish. I avoid mirrors.
I dream the tooth has crumbled out, been pulled out, I wake with a start, I fall back to sleep, I swallow the tooth, I dream I am standing in front of Goldman, I am slowly reaching in and bringing a handkerchief out of my pocket, I open the handkerchief, one corner at a time, like the petals of a flower, Goldman looks, my tooth lies in the center of the handkerchief, Goldman is furious, he . . . .

The afternoon session is much like the first. The office is deserted, both Goldman and Jean Valentine have fresh uniforms, Goldman’s many lenses are immaculate, the flowers in the vase are again fresh. Goldman is swift. In no time, he has broken through the temporary filling and is at work. I stare dully between Jean Valentine and Goldman. Before the light, their heads make a silhouette like Archie and Veronica sharing a malt. I close my eyes. Something is trying to be remembered. At the end of the session, Goldman, beaming, mirror in hand: “Regardez! Voilà! We’re getting there.”

I spend another bad night.
Then, once more, I am standing before the reception desk. Yet another vaseful of fresh flowers. Snapdragons.
Why, why do I keep returning? What is it? I tap my tongue against the back of my tooth.
“Tooth, is it too late to stop?”
I listen. Tooth remains silent.
Jean Valentine smiles encouragingly at me.
I smile back.
“Oh, it’s beautiful already.”
I feel my smile collapse.
Jean Valentine pops her ballpoint pen. In, out, in, out:
“Goldman says the companion tooth is so white it’s going to take a lot of bleaching.”
Am I only imagining things, or is Jean Valentine softening in gratitude to a man within the confines of Goldman’s pale gold walls who does not yell?
I look Jean Valentine over, once again. She’s not bad, not bad. Maybe there’s hope. I’ll get another look at her legs when she comes out from behind that desk.
I take a short turn, tight with nervousness, around the floor.
Jean Valentine, intuitive geisha of oral hygiene that she is, says, “He won’t be but a minute.”
From the side room, the one where he keeps his tiny cabinets and trays, where there seem to be enough odd pieces of silver, gold, porcelain, wisdom teeth, molars and assorted curiosities to assemble a mouth of any description for almost any race or species from any period in history or prehistory, from this enclave rises a low whir.
Jean Valentine must see a strange fearful look in my eyes, perhaps she thinks I’m going to bolt; she says, confidingly, soothingly, “Oh, he’s just making some jewelry; you know Dr. Goldman, he’s never happy unless he’s doing something with his hands.”
She is suddenly like a wife indulging the idiosyncrasies of hubby.
“Jewelry?”
“It’s his hobby. He’s so talented. He’s just finishing up a piece now.”
Jean Valentine sighs wistfully, casting her eyes at the flowers. So she must have gazed after the football captain senior year when she caught sight of him passing the doorway of Oral Hygiene Prep III. Jean Valentine shakes her head and sighs wistfully.
"It's beautiful."
"What?"
"The piece he's working on now. Pure gold. And it's not costing him a red cent. It's made from the leftover fillings from extracted teeth."

I pace some more. I look at my watch. Mother of God! Five minutes early for a dental appointment?

And here is Goldman, one-thirty on the nose, in the doorway, beaming, holding his hand forth, enter.

Goldman always gets me onto the couch fast.

Goldman has broken into the root canal, he has the burner lighted and he and Jean Valentine have in unison shuffled cotton into my mouth like a Vegas blackjack dealer, the hook is clanking around in the canal, when it comes to me.

I make a noise.

Jean Valentine taps Goldman.
"He's making a noise, Dr. Goldman."
"What? What is it? Can't you see I'm busy?"

Goldman looks like a sleepwalker who's just stepped in a bucket of cold piss.

"He's trying to say something, Dr. Goldman."
Goldman looks down at me. "No, no, he's not!"

Jean Valentine vindicated!

Our eyes meet for a second. Maybe something with this new one, this Jean Valentine.

Goldman disgruntled, composing himself, then patting me on the shoulder. "It's all right, you know it won't hurt. Haven't we proved that?"

I squawk again.

Jean Valentine wants to reach for the drain hooked over my lowers. I can see her fingers twitching.

Goldman concedes me two cotton packs and the drain out.
"What?"
"Hawthorne."

Goldman looking around the room. "Hawthorne?"
"The Birthmark."

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“What?”
“You know Hawthorne?”
Goldman looking suspiciously through all three sets of lenses in succession. Is he going to send Jean Valentine out for Hawthorne’s chart? “What about him?”
“He wrote a story called The Birthmark. It’s about this dude who’s got a lady who in all ways is perfect . . . .”
Goldman sighing. Restraining himself. The rush of the flame, the mirage shimmer of heated air above.
“We haven’t got time for stories—”
“She’s perfect in all ways except she’s got a little birthmark on her cheek.”
Jean Valentine reaching up and tenuously touching her cheek.
“Make this quick.”
“Oh, I am, I will, I am, I’m almost finished. The dude loves her, but he wants her perfect, right? So he makes an elixir and when she drinks it, the birthmark vanishes, and just as it’s vanishing, her last breath ebbs away.”
Jean Valentine nodding, the saliva shining on her parted lips and teeth.
Before I can add, “Nothing mortal is perfect, dig?” Goldman packs the cotton and drain back into my mouth.
“That stuff doesn’t happen here. That’s make-believe.”
Jean Valentine nodding reassuringly, nodding that it is only decaying enamel and the damaged tooth we are interested in here.
But Jean Valentine looking warm and comely. “I had read that in tenth-grade English. So neat! I love the part where she turns pale at the end.”
Goldman boring in. Once my eyes stray over the light and catch part of the Kodak sand beach, but I successfully keep them down.

At the end of the session, Goldman draws back. He shakes his head. “White. Whiter! Whiter still!”
He holds up the mirror. Again, I can hardly raise my eyes to the reflection. There seems to be a lot of white in front, all right. I feel rather lightheaded.
“One more time,” Goldman says, “one more time! We’ll make it like mother-of-pearl, like the ivory tusk of a young African elephant! One last session!”

For the last session, the office is heavily redolent of the orchids on the reception desk, after-shave lotion from Goldman, what I think might be some domestic imitation of Chanel No. 5 from Jean Valentine’s heated mammalian self, as well as the springtime fragrance of starch in her uniform, all combining with various pink mouthwashes and the odor of nervous sweat staining my shirt armpits.

Goldman gets to work:
 Really, I am quite ill, nauseated and lightheaded.
 Suddenly, Goldman draws back. “There! Voilà!”
 Cotton and drain plucked from oral cavity, the chalice of pink mouthwash proffered, Goldman holding up the mirror, the room grows lighter and lighter.

When I open my eyes, I see colors. The Kodak. Phyllis. Phyllis Goldman. She is smiling down at me. She is moving. I never noticed before how much she is her father’s daughter—her dental-frock-blue eyes, the fullness of her round cheeks.

Jean Valentine peering down at me.
 “Is he all right?”
 Goldman’s voice. “All right? Please! All right, that tooth is like mother’s milk, like the ivory tusk of a young African elephant.”
 The colors are moving, it’s Phyllis, she smiles, it is Phyllis.
 I sit up.
 Goldman is gone. Suddenly, he returns from his enclave of thousands of tiny cabinets and spare teeth.
 Something flashes gold in his hand.
 Jean Valentine’s eyes fill with a peculiar mixture of joy and sadness.
 “Oh, Dr. Goldman, it’s just beautiful. You’d never know from looking that it’s made out of old fillings.”
 Goldman, lips pressed together, takes the drill and inscribes inside the ring, “For Phyllis, Love, Dad,” slips a buffer onto the
drill, gives the ring a quick burnishing and holds it up to the
light, turning it over slowly in his fingers.

Trying to clear my head, I start disengaging myself from the
couch.

Goldman, in the most casual of voices, in a voice I have never
quite heard him use before, in a voice fairly dripping with ten­
derness and honey, yet laced with a brace of anxiety, says, “Have
you met my daughter, Phyllis? She just dropped in . . . for a
minute.”

I stare up at the bikini girl in the picture. Then at Phyllis. I am
still having trouble focusing, but I hear my voice far away, “No,
no, I haven’t, but I feel like I’ve known you for years.”

Goldman smiles, reaches out for Phyllis’ hand and eases the
ring onto her finger.

She gives him a kiss high on the cheek. Goldman pats her
shoulder.

I’m up out of the couch now. This is the girl in the Kodak all
right. She has a perfect white smile. I assume I am looking at a
perfect bite as well.

Goldman is looking at us, one to the other, beaming.

Jean Valentine is smiling, sighing.

I see Phyllis in the bikini, though she is in skirt and turtleneck.
I will always see Phyllis in Kodak, I am afraid. A Kodak bikini.

Under different circumstances, we might have merrily
ravished each other and gone our way without a backward
glance.

Now, so confused is she in my mind with Goldman’s chins,
the folds of his eyelids in deep concentration, the special angle of
his nose and nostrils as he bores in, that all I can see, even when
looking directly at Phyllis, is Goldman.

Still, still, I wait for a long moment, for some chemistry, some
little surge from the DNA coils.

There is none.

It is a Kodak vision, through and through.

Goldman is smiling up at me, his hand on my shoulder.

Jean Valentine is sighing. Phyllis is smiling. What teeth!
I savvy I better do something, and quick, but what?

My mouth has gone dry. No words.
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Over their heads, I see the frosted glass panel of the door, the
gold letters in reverse: DR. GOLDMAN, D.D.S. Man, it’s a long way
off.

I look at Goldman, I look at Jean Valentine, I look at Phyllis. Sudden­ly, I feel myself starting to smile. I can actually feel the
smile. It is perfect, dazzling, white. It is like mother’s milk. It is
like the ivory tusk of a young African elephant. It is like every­
thing Goldman said it would be.

I nod, bow slightly and head for the door.
A Short Apocryphal Tale
of the Sea My Father
Would Deny Anyway

MY FATHER'S ALWAYS been a tyrant at sea. This year it got so bad, my mother absconded even before we left the Florida coast. She is waving goodbye from the dock, Ruby is leaning against the mizzenmast behind my father, and I am midships striking my father's owner pennant—a scalpel crossed with a long-stemmed martini glass.

Now Ruby is telling about the rickshaw boys who couldn't stop, skidded on the ice, and went through the whorehouse; my father is laughing so hard he is spilling his martini on his fly. Ruby is the only person who makes my father laugh like this.

Each year Ruby and my father laugh all the way across the Gulf Stream, through the Bahamas, back across the Gulf Stream and up to spring training.
There, of course, at spring training, my father comes in every day on special passes from Ruby, my father who had never cared for baseball before Ruby sailed with him, and he watches Ruby stretch his six foot eight inch frame under the late winter southern sun, watches him go into his wind up, raise his thirty-eight inch arm kick up his leg and release the wonderful hard white baseball from his fingertips. My father sits up in the stands wearing brown and white saddle shoes and a boater, drinking soft drinks and eating hot dogs and keeping his tan. He watches Ruby throw terrific fastballs, sliders, and get his fast and slow breaking curve working. My father, who never cared for baseball, can actually see Ruby getting his stuff day by day. Ruby frequently looks up at my father in the stands and then throws a beautiful untouchable curve. After my father sees to it Ruby gets his stuff, he flies home to take up his practice of mending shattered and broken bones, twisted spines, etc. For the first time in his life, he reads the standings, at least of Ruby's team and probably the other teams, because to know where Ruby's team is he has to know where the other teams are.

My mother stayed on the dock. Just Ruby, my father, and me. We sailed from cay to cay, spearfishing and laughing. With my mother gone, I found out things I'd never suspected about my father. One was that he made terrible scrambled eggs. Much too dry.

Here is the blowfish I speared the other day, spines still extended, semi-inflated, lashed to the mainstay. I took him for a grouper in about twenty feet of water and went speeding in for the kill. He disappeared under a coral head with my spear sticking through him. When I tugged he came slowly swimming toward me trailing clouds of blood, his body inflated the size of a basketball, his spines extended. I let go of the spear gun and swam backward into Ruby, I started, I turned to see Ruby, his lips puffed up around the mouthpiece of his snorkel, his hair streaming his body an ashen underwater pallor; in the one-way mirror of the sea shining in his mask, I could see his eyes bulging; he was trying to keep from laughing underwater . . . .
A SHORT APOCRYPHAL TALE OF THE SEA

On the surface, gasping, snorkel spat out, mask pushed back, Ruby treaded water, laughed, sucked huge gasps of air, laughed, sank, treaded water harder, laughed, sank, laughed . . . .

Ruby varnished the blowfish, presented it to me in a sunset ceremony, then lashed it to the mainstay at head height—his head height.

We had a good time sailing from cay to cay.

We ate the tails of crayfish and grouper when I could tell the difference.

Ruby and I sleep aft of the forepeak, Ruby sleeping in the starboard bunk and myself in the port bunk. The bunks come together against the forepeak. In fact, Ruby’s legs are so long they curl around the bottom of his bunk into the bottom of my bunk. We sleep with our heads full astern on opposite sides of the V, our feet the meeting, our heads the points of the V.

I was in the process of untangling my feet from Ruby’s one morning when I noticed there was blood on the sheets. I sat up suddenly and hit my head on the deck. Years of cautious sitting up forgotten, I sank back onto the pillow holding my head and weeping tears of rage at my father’s boat. I sat up slowly. I untangled my sheets, parting them gingerly like the tissue on birthday neckties, I pulled one foot toward me, then the other, but my feet where whole and uncut, white as wild daisies. Ruby’s . . . were still oozing blood in several places. He slept soundly, his Roman nose plowed into the pillow.

He couldn’t put any weight on them. There was no point in even trying. I brought him breakfast in bed. As he ate, he told my father and me he’d been winning last night in of the gambling clubs across the cay. Roulette. Blackjack. Craps. Etc. There, he’d met a lithesome young creature, taking his winnings, and gone on to a native bar far from the beaten path. About the time Ruby’s new lady excused herself for a run to the ladies’ room, a man appeared at the door, had anyone seen his wife, the bar got quiet, Ruby figured out who the man’s wife was, the man in the doorway was giving a demonstration with
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his fishing knife, if I catch the man who is with my wife tonight, I am going to do this, and he swiped at the air, and this, swipe, and this, stab, and this, lunge, and this, ha!, Ruby into the men's room as she coming out of the lady's room, 2+2, Ruby pushed out the bathroom window, pulled himself through... out to the road and running in the dark his sandals still under the bar stool and running down the road as a car's headlights went on and the headlights coming down the road growing bigger behind Ruby almost on top of him sprinting spring training early this year on these crushed coral roads the car right behind him he veered and dove into the brush which grew tight up against the road the car swung to shine its headlights after him into the brush and all four doors opened. Men disembarking. Ruby crawled on all fours out of the headlights, up, and sprinting through brush across coral, the men veering, lost, hard to see them in the dark, like Korea again, black on black, sudden noise behind Ruby one of them on the right track collided with Ruby's... right fist. And Ruby got away. Much later, he doubled back to the road, met the girl and took her to a beach.

That made my father smile under his mustache as though he'd just performed the first successful pelvis transplant.

But the feet.

Ruby sat on a bunk in the main cabin where—using the overhead handrails—he'd managed to limp the four or five steps from the bow. Hands locked behind his knees, he slowly raised one foot, then the other. My father kneeled on the floor, put on his trifocal surgical glasses, and gently took each of Ruby's feet in hands—torn, blackened, embedded with grains of coral, bloody—my father shook his head and got a strange look on his face—perhaps sad, perhaps wistful—and told me to bring a large basin of warm salty water.

The ash of my father's Schimmelpinnck falling into the water as he placed Ruby's foot in the basin... ash floating, a grey smudge, gone... My father applied antiseptic ointments to Ruby's feet, lightly wrapped them in gauze, gave Ruby some
A SHORT APOCRYPHAL TALE OF THE SEA

antibiotics, and told him to stay off his feet. He took the Schimmelpinnck out of his mouth. And don’t worry.

A blow came in. We left the dock and anchored to ride it out. With his feet propped up on a cushion and his lap covered with yards and yards of beautiful white dacron, Ruby mended sails while we wound and unwound above our anchor.

On about the second day, I dropped my father’s Zippo lighter overboard. Between blasts of wind, when the water surface would clear, I could see the lighter down there on the bottom. My father asked once if anyone had seen his lighter and I shrugged. He gave me an odd look. I kept watching the Zippo on the bottom. It was the size of half a dime. I was afraid some currents might cover it with sand and I’d lose sight of it.

Late the second day, I dove. Underwater, the lighter grew to the size of a waffle iron as I approached. I dove closer and closer and then my ears began to ring, my sinuses ached, and I choked back a gag as my lungs got hot. My dive lost momentum I stretched out my hand for the lighter, I was nowhere near, I tipped my head up and beat it for the surface driving my fins the hull of the boat hanging above like a face without features, I burst to the surface spitting out the snorkel mouthpiece and gasping for air.

My father was in the cockpit. All I could see was his head, his profile, really; he was staring up toward the bow, somewhere beyond the bow, his head in profile, his bent nose, his grey hair blown up in wisps like mare’s tails, his mustache and his Schimmelpinnck stuck beneath his mustache the ash at the tip hanging on in the wind . . .

. . . closer I startled up a ray buried in the sand he winged slowly away trailing sand I grasped for the lighter in my hand a cloud of sand rose I rolled on my side and looked over at the anchor buried in the sand magnified about the size of a Cadillac the anchor line thick as a tree going slack and taut with the
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tugging of the hull, the line rising going up disappearing through the surface of the water cut off hanging like an Indian swami's rope through the water the grey sky silvery I went back up.

When I hauled myself on deck, my father took the Schimmelpinnck from between his lips, taking a swim?, I held up the dripping lighter between my fingers, but didn't grin, when did that go over he said in such a way I felt as though he had added it to a wearisome list in his head, he put the Schimmelpinnck back in his mouth.

Below, I took the Zippo out of its case, unscrewed the spring for the flint, washed the whole thing in fresh water and lighter fluid and put the spring and the cottony insides and the case behind the stove to dry out.

During the days, the boat would swing and shudder in the wind and thousands of miles of clouds would blow over our masts. I'd watch the people passing on the road along the shore, the men walking or with bicycles, the women moving on their errands. On the fishing dock, the men would come in at odd times and stand up side to side against a long board to gut their catches. Knives flashing, they'd slit the fish and throw their guts into the water. I tried to figure out which one was the husband and which one caught the fist. At night, sudden black shadows would drift in and out of the circles cast by the dock and street lights into the water as the sharks would feast on the fish guts.

Every morning and evening my father would take Ruby's feet in his hands and examine them for signs of infection and progress. He would smear them with ointment and give Ruby his antibiotics for the day.

About the fourth or fifth morning of the blow, I woke to find Ruby's bunk empty. He was standing and moving about the cabin pretty easily. He brought me a cup of coffee in my bunk.
After breakfast, I went topside with the lighter closed in my hand. My father was watching the clouds breaking up. He turned to me. I opened my palm. Then I handed him a cigar out of his sportshirt and ground him up a flame. The flame covered my hand in the breeze while my father puffed and got his Schimmelpinnck going. As I handed my father the lighter, he looked steadily at me behind the clouds of smoke in what I thought was an odd look. The lighter dropped heavily into his pants pocket and clanked his change. He nodded, puffed his cigar, and turned his eyes back up to watch the weather. The sky was blue overhead.

Ruby came topside and got into a conference with my father. We needed diesel and water. Ruby watched the fishing dock several moments. He moved back and fourth in the cockpit. My father and Ruby looked at each other. We needed diesel and water.

We had both the diesel and water hoses going wide open in our tanks with Ruby watching the fishing dock out of the corner of his eye when there was some movement. The fishermen—six or eight—had stopped working and were standing in a group.

The town dock was about four or five hundred yards from the yacht dock. The fishermen moved faster the closer they got, but no one was running. When they grouped at the end of the yacht dock, my father neatly squeezed off the diesel and quickly handed the hose back up to the dockmaster.

I saw Ruby pick up a winch handle.

That was good enough for me. I picked up a winch handle and stood ready to slip the dockline.

They stood over us, their brown feet making several rows. Maybe twelve or fifteen men. They stared silently at Ruby who from the high bow and with his great height rose and fell with the motion of the boat at their eye level on the dock. A number of them had their hands behind their backs and were shifting nervously about.
One of the men, you Ruby Whittaker?
Ruby didn’t answer.
I say, maan, you Ruby Whittaker pitch Red Sox?
The man took a baseball glove from behind his back and made
writing motions.
I got Ruby a magic marker from below.
Ruby signed the glove: Good Fishin’, Ruby Whittaker, Red Sox.
They peeled off their shirts and Ruby spread them fluttering
on the deck and signed them.
Baseballs. Softballs.
Radio on full blast, Ruby!, I listen far at sea, maan, pitch
good, maan, last year pitch good against Yankees, I listen in ma
boat at sea . . . .
Ruby signed the radio.
You gone have good pitching dis year, maan?
Several of the men were looking curiously at the varnished
blowfish lashed to the stay. Maybe these people think varnished
blowfish is a delicacy?
. . . the bills of caps, the sweatbands of caps, the brims of
straw hats, the palms of hands, the diesel pump, the back of a
ten-year-old boy, everyone happy even though the magic
marker didn’t show up against his sun blackened skin . . . .
My father watched proudly from the helm.
Ruby looked at me once and shrugged.

Once out at sea, I struck my father’s owner pennant from the
spreader—the scalpel crossed with the martini glass. I raised the
bloodied sheet to the masthead where we flew it all the way
across the shoal of the Grand Bahama Bank, off the bank and out
into the deep blue of the Gulf Stream and on to where the Gulf
Stream meets the dull blue-green water in a line off the Florida
coast. There, I struck the sheet.

My father couldn’t make it to spring training that year, he had
to go home and fix things up with my mother. He wasn’t such a
tyrant on shore.
As spring training progressed into the exhibition games and Ruby still hadn’t gotten his stuff really working, my father got more and more depressed. He’d stand at the window with the sports page in his hand and stare at the robins in the front yard. He’d sometimes shake his head and look the way he had when he took Ruby’s feet in hands.

The grass got greener. The elms leafed and became thick. Exhibition games progressed into the regular season schedule. I knew he was blaming himself for not being there at spring training, but I thought he was being foolish for such a wise man. There’s only so much a man can do—even for the national pastime.
JUST AFTER I've vowed to be true to my wife, no more messing around, I go to a party at Olomana and get tangled up with the Black Velvet girl. You know the Black Velvet girl? She's the one on the billboards. For the whiskey, Black Velvet.

Anyway, I've got no business up at Olomana Golf Course except Roy's going to hele-on up there to collect Sunshine, who does a cocktail number.

Roy is out of his room. Coming?

I decide I'll ride along for the hell of it.

Atuana, my wife, says, don't be too long, haole boy, I'm making something special.

Back in a twinkling, I say, I'm yours forever.

The pots are steaming away on all four burners, the wok gleams with peanut oil, the vegetables have been cut and chopped into elegant mounds; there is ginger here, green onions, sesame, soy, oyster sauce . . . .
THE BLACK VELVET GIRL

The tradewind fills the kitchen, picks up my wife's stewardess uniform, it floats in the wind on its hanger. After a day in the Hawaiian sky, Atuana is in one of my shirts and a pair of cut-offs. Her long coltish legs are golden in the last sunlight in the kitchen window, she is a Hawaiian-Chinese Lauren Bacall. I am always struck anew by her elegance.

Come on, says Roy.

Right, I say. I hesitate one moment more to admire her hands. They are the supple tapered hands of the Thai dancers on the Ramayana murals. I kiss her fingers.

I love you, I say.

Cut the shit, my wife says, I don't begrudge you a few drinks, just don't be long, tonight. I spark you later.

Outside, I pause for a second, gaze out at the beach, the ocean, Makapu falling into blue shadows. I hele-on, catching up with Roy as he pulls his rusted shit-bomb Rambler around between the houses. I move a surfboard out of the way, hop in, slam the door. When I slam the door, the rust flies and I spend the next few minutes blinking the flakes out of my eyes, spitting them out of my mouth as we hele-on up the K highway to Olomana.

We walk into the clubhouse at Olomana and there are these big mother inflated plastic bottles hanging from the ceiling and standing in the corners. They are pale gold and say, Black Velvet. I squeeze one. As we head for the bar, we are intercepted by Sunshine. She holds up a loaded tray and says, have some Black Velvet, it's free. Promotional. She holds up the tray of Black Velvet and giggles.

Roy and I look at each other, free? shrug, and start belting it down. Sunshine, who practices TM every morning on the beach at sunrise, and who is always preaching the beauties of vegetarianism and informing us—all of us, Roy, Atuana, myself—how we have poisoned ourselves, giggles now because Black Velvet isn't natural, either. It excites Sunshine, makes her nervous to see us poison ourselves with such joyful and reckless abandon. Her eyes, a murky yellow topaz, move back and forth between us.

Then, secretively, she moves her head toward a subdued mob.
of beefy guys in aloha shirts and white shoes huddled before the picture window.

Beyond them, like the panorama of a Chinese screen, I can see the golf course, the twin peaks of Mount Olomana, the black cinder cones of the Koolaus, and the low winter rain clouds socked in against the Koolaus and Pali.

Sunshine says in a breathless voice, it's the guys from the syndicate. Harry Chin, Talofa Talofa, Thunder Lono, Aku Kim, Vitamins Wong, Fat Sonny Ho . . .

She knows them all. When she is finished, Sunshine is flushed pink under her tan. Being 'around so much organized violence and crime, dormant now, but with a long past, simply saying their names, turns her on. TM and vegetarianism cannot hold a candle to organized crime.

Roy says, Harry Chin?

He looks at me.

I look askance at Sunshine, but Sunshine only nods smugly, Harry Chin. Right over there.

I say to Sunshine, I read yesterday in the Star Bulletin the cops picked up Harry Chin for income tax evasion.

Sunshine, who doesn't read the newspapers because there's nothing in them, anyway, but wars and politicians and all that crumpling capitalist degeneracy maya, and because that stuff would jam her TM transmissions, says what's so bad about income tax evasion?

Roy says, it's not income tax evasion.

Sunshine says, then why call it income tax evasion?

Roy says, because that's the way the cops and syndicate play the game.

What game? says Sunshine sulking.

Roy looks at me, makes a funny helpless gesture with his hands.

See Sunshine, I say, it's just a polite way of saying the heat knows Harry Chin had Talofa Talofa dynamite Chocolate Joe Hondo's Cadillac—with Chocolate Joe in it—but they can't prove it, yet. So they call it income tax evasion.

I recall the picture on yesterday's front page. The exploded
THE BLACK VELVET GIRL

white Caddy, the crumpled hood hanging down out of a palm tree.

Sunshine says breathlessly, well, maybe they were in jail yes­
terday, but they’re out on bail today. Two hundred thousand, she says.

Roy pastes up a weekly advertising rag, The Windward Shop­per, has splotches of rubber cement on his Hushpuppies, and takes home a cool $110.00 a week. I think that’s after taxes.

We don’t say any more so Sunshine says, I don’t care what they’ve done, look at them, you can see yourself, they love to laugh and drink, they’ve got the aloha spirit, they’re all good guys, everytime I go over, they’re all smiles, they tip me five dollars. Everytime.

Sunshine reaches into her pocket and pulls out a huge wad of crumpled fives.

That Talofa, he’s cute as a baby!

Roy and I look at each other. The syndicate is not noted for being a charitable organization.

Roy reaches back and nervously smoothes the elastic on his ponytail.

Something passes between them, and Sunshine says, petulant and stubborn, I’m not giving it back, Roy. Any of it!

We have some more Black Velvet, then Sunshine leans be­tween Roy and myself, so close this time, that I can smell the Herbal Essence creme rinse in her hair. She whispers, Harry Chin digs the Black Velvet girl. She’s over there.

Sunshine adds begrudgingly, the Black Velvet girl is beautiful—in a plastic kind of way.

Roy measures the distance to the door and says, let’s hele-on.

Sunshine says, oh, can’t we stay a little longer. Do you have to be such a snob? You know, maybe Talofa’s one of those guys who’s acting mean because everyone treats him mean.

Roy says, maybe.

Yeah, and maybe you and Talofa, once you got to know each other, could be great friends.

Maybe.

And how do you guys know they blew up old whosey face’s stupid Cadillac? Because the stupid paper said so?
C. E. POVERMAN

It wasn't just a Cadillac, Roy says.
What's a Cadillac? Sunshine says.
Chocolate Joe was in the Cadillac.

That shuts her up for a minute. Then she says, well, how do you know that Talofa did it? Were you there?

I recall the other picture in the Star Bulletin. Talofa walking between two Nisei detectives, the pictures captioned, Talofa Talofa in custody maintains innocence. And in quotes: I have not done nothing, please address all da questions to my lawyer.

Finally, I say, in honesty and fairness to Talofa Talofa, we don't know for sure he did it. Yet. A man is innocent until proven guilty.

Sunshine smiles at me and giggles.
But I told Atuana I'd be right back.

Sunshine says, oh pooh, have some more Black Velvet, there's plenty of time.

I stare at the glasses of Black Velvet. It's free. I see Roy might dig another drink, too. And looking across the room at the wall of syndicate beef, I realize I have not yet caught a glimpse of the Black Velvet girl. I am just a little curious.

One last drink, I say.

Then we go, says Roy.

We're drinking up when there's a stir and suddenly, just like that, the wall of Aloha shirts part, and there is the Black Velvet girl set like a jewel amongst the syndicate beef. Any of Harry Chin's lieutenants who are not out pistol whipping a pimp or bookie, beating a call girl who's stepped out of line, collecting on a cockfight bet, wiring up a car, or screwing on a telescopic sight, are here, gaping at the Black Velvet girl. The overhead spots hit her blond hair, her shoulders are creamy and smooth, the black velvet dress is like the backdrop for the Hope Diamond. The Black Velvet girl is the collective genius incarnate of a corporation of overpaid, tanned and pressured ad executives with incipient heart conditions, the best the organization has to dish out. The syndicate loves her. They know the goods when they see it. They give way, parting before her like the waters of the Red Sea. She is coming toward us.

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She looks at Roy in such a way that Sunshine takes hold of Roy at the elbow with both hands. Then the Black Velvet girl looks at me in such a way I take hold of myself at the elbow with one hand.

I see Harry Chin over there. Is he in love? The syndicate looks wistfully after the Black Velvet girl. If they were Ohio State fraternity boys, they would break into song and serenade her. A song in four part harmony full of awakened longing, melancholy and love. As it is, without the numbers of Halewa State Prison under their chins, they seem a little lost, perhaps forlorn. They gaze wistfully after her at the closing door—wahines—before their eyes light on us.

I feel Talofa's eyes wiring me up with a bundle of dynamite, Thunder measuring me with sartorial gaze to see if he can fit my body into the trunk of a stolen '58 Impala without first having to chop off my legs.

Oh, it is time to go, but here comes the Black Velvet girl again, back from the wahines. The dress is a silhouette, a blind spot, zone 10.

Something drops from her hand. Then she is across the room, the aloha shirts close back around her.

I lean down to pick up whatever it is she dropped.

Roy says, I wouldn’t do that if I were you, man.

It’s a neatly folded paper towel. I open it. Handwriting.

Sunshine says, what is it?

I read: the window is too small, dress too tight, I can't fit. Please get me out of here. Can you meet me on the 18th hole and do you have a car?

Roy says, we do not have a car.

Sunshine says, sure we do. The 18th hole is the one out near the beach.

Roy says, don’t point.

Sunshine says, it's a message in a bottle.

Roy says, let’s hele-on.

I say, let’s consider this, it’s a human distress call, we can’t just leave her to Harry Chin.

Roy says, yes we can.
C. E. POVERMAN

Roy and I stare at each other. He searches my face and shakes his head. He’s known me a long time. Yes, we can, he repeats a little more emphatically.

I look across the room. I want to get closer, a little closer to the Black Velvet girl. Even if only to help her get away.

Roy says, boat’s leaving. Now.

Wait, I say.

Roy shakes his head, nope, pulling up the gangplank.

Wait a second, I say. I head for the kane’s. With shaking hands, I tear the note into tiny pieces and flush it down the toilet. Destroy the evidence.

When I get back, the tray of Black Velvet is there alone on a chair, Roy and Sunshine are gone.

I realize all I really want to do is touch the black velvet dress. Just once.

I am staked out at a neutral table staring drunkenly between the aloha flowered backs of Thunder and Talofa—Sumo wrestler backs—when Talofa, acting on his gangster third eye, backs up, soft and swift, the way you back-peddle a surfboard to carve a bottom turn.

I look up into his ripe mango-colored face. He is not cute as a baby. It is Gauguin gone wrong.

He says, whatcho want, haole shokbait?

Nothing nothing nothing, I blurt. Then, completely rattled, I hear myself blurt, if I’m haole sharkbait, so’s she. I point nervously at the Black Velvet girl.

I see the white Cadillac Coupe de Ville of Chocolate Joe Hono exploding in Talofa’s eyes.

Talofa clinks the ice in his glass. The glass is tiny in his huge hand.

He says in a faraway voice, you shokbait, she shokbait, me shokbait, we all shokbait, Shokbait. Hele-on, haole boy, before it too late.

The aloha shirts part to receive Talofa, I see the Black Velvet girl, she is looking right at me, no car, I lip, man, I want to touch that black velvet dress so bad, Thunder and Vitamins Wong merrily start bonking each other over the heads with those big

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mother plastic bottles of Black Velvet, Ey! Tundah! and I decide, Talofa has a point, black velvet dress or no, girl in distress or no, it is time to hele-on home.

I grab a last glass off the tray on the way out. It is almost dark in the parking lot, the flickering drive-in screen up on the Pali glows a pale ghost in the bellies of the clouds. Two hundred odd years ago the victorious Kamahameha drove a load of defeated warriors over those cliffs to their deaths on the rocks below, then crowned himself king. Shitty, I guess, but what was he supposed to do, invite them home to dinner? The moon tumbles out of the clouds, lights the fairway, disappears.

I'm wandering drunkenly through the parking lot, bouncing off the tailfins of the affluent, breathing in the fresh air and plumeria, slowly returning to my senses when I see a shadow move between the cars. I take a last belt of my drink and toss the glass on the lawn. It bounces without a sound.

The blond hair, the black velvet dress in the underwater light. I glance back at the clubhouse and move toward her.

No car, I whisper.
She looks around nervously.
I can't help it, I say, I'm hitching myself, Roy took the car.
It's Harry Chin, she says. He scares me.
I know what you mean, I say. Then I can't help myself, I reach out and touch the black velvet dress.
Jesus, I say.
That's exactly what Harry Chin did.
Harry Chin did that?
First thing.
I touch the black velvet dress again.
Oh, Jesus.
Can you help me?
Got to. Do you mind hitching?
No. She turns, loses her balance slightly, stumbling against me, I put my arm around her waist to steady her, just as I hear voices.
I turn. Talofa. Thunder.
In the doorway. Pointing at me.
Run, she says. Run!
She’s out here, boss!
Wit da shokbait haole!
Run! she says.

I see the white shoes start to flicker in the pale light, man, I run. They’re coming right at me, I run between them, get them going the other way, they whirl, Talofa grabs the back of my shirt, I scream howl blurt, I didn’t do nothing! as the back of my shirt shreds off in Talofa’s hand and I fly, they’re pouring out of the clubhouse now, Vitamins Wong, Fat Sonny Ho, Aku Kim

It’s da Black Velvet girl!
Wit da fuckin fuckah!

I’m on the fairway and I’m running, I run right out of my Nanakuli suedes, my shirt’s torn off, man, I’m running barefoot, behind me I can hear Thunder and Talofa puffing, I run, where? for the beach! I see ironwood trees coming up, I dive into the trees, the branches whip my face, I stumble barefoot on roots, sprawl flat on my face, get up, stumble out onto the beach, the roar of the surf rises to meet me, I stagger into the surf, stumble, get up, stumble again, and finally dive into the black water thinking vaguely, man, these Polynesians were so good natured before we showed up.

When I surface, I see white shoes running, then walking up and down the beach, finally several cigarettes glowing in a circle. I work my way down the beach staying off shore and when the last cigarette has dropped to the sand, I get in where I can touch, the moon comes out of the clouds, I see no one on the beach, hiding in the trees? I watch a while longer, work my way farther down, and finally wade ashore.

Though it will be miles, take hours, I decide to stay close to the water and follow the beach home. Safer, I hope. At least I’ll get there in one piece. Though when I think about how pissed Atuana will be at the other end . . .

I start the long walk home.

For some reason, I get thinking about Maz. Maz and I had been at it hot and heavy until Atuana. Then I’d started sneaking around on Maz, finally fading altogether.
THE BLACK VELVET GIRL

One day, not too long ago, I’m happily married, Maz shows up at the building site—we’re roofing condos. I’m looking down from the roof and there’s Maz in a bikini, standing among the building debris. She’s smiling up at me.

Except for the rumble of a cement mixer, all hammers stop, the roof falls silent. The whole crew looks down at Maz.

There are some whistles. Maz has what can only be described as a lush body. I’m sorry, but that’s the way it is. Lush.

Though she’s been to the legislature to testify on discrimination against women, she doesn’t seem to mind the whistles.

She points her rolled beach mat up at me. Her eyes are greenish blue, the color of the ocean.

Time for a beer after work?

Married man, I hesitate, but no harm in a beer for old time sake. Sure, I say, real cheerful.

Think you can find your way?

She doesn’t wait for an answer, but turns and picks her way back through the building debris. I watch her. So’s everyone else.

Maz has one unusual feature. Her back has a slight curve to one side right above her hip—it makes a kind of upside down question mark.

I love my wife! I once fought her old boyfriend, an airline pilot, he picked the fight, he came looking for me and he picked the fight and we fought on the lawn of what had started out to be a quiet party until we were both covered with blood; well, none of that’s necessary for me to say I love my wife. But I found my way to Maz’s. A few times.

One afternoon, my wife had been driving by Maz’s, quite by accident, and caught sight of my truck parked under an African violet tree in full bloom. I got that later from the neighbor kids.

Inside, all I heard was a crash, which had made my heart pound so hard that Maz had lifted her head from my chest and looked at me in wide-eyed alarm.

Jesus Christ, what’s the matter with your heart?

Nothing.

You’re too young for a heart attack. I wouldn’t want you to die here. I’d have a hell of a time getting you dressed and dropped off somewhere.
Yeah, I know. I'm not going to check out, Maz.

When I'd walked out to my truck, it was with no sense of surprise, more with a sense of déjà vu, that I'd seen my claw hammer sticking through the windshield of my truck.

Of course, I said out loud.

I deserve this, I said.

A couple of kids were watching me from the other side of a low picket fence.

Did you see what happened?

They had.

Can you tell me?

Yes, they could tell me that a beautiful lady, tall, a stewardess, had driven by, slammed on her brakes, backed up suddenly, walked into the middle of the street, looked at the white bungalow over there, looked at the truck, and done the job on the windshield.

I looked over at Maz's. What could she have seen? I checked the windows. A lot, a hell of a lot if we had been walking around. Had we been walking around? Couldn't remember.

I went back into Maz's.

Maz had showered and dressed and looked very cool and elegant. She was sitting in a high back wicker chair. She was smoking a cigarette.

I slumped in a chair.

She crossed her legs.

Maz, did you hear a crash before?

No, but I wasn't listening. I was busy, if you haven't forgotten.

I was too, Maz, but I heard it. My truck. My windshield, Maz. My wife.

She made a funny kind of move with her head and pursed her lips. She had on thin silver earrings. Finally she said, it serves you right, you bastard. I would have done the same thing.

You would have?

You're damn right.

Maz, will you make me a drink?

Make your own drink.

You're right. Absolutely right. I will.
I'd started to push myself up out of the chair, stared at the rumpled bed, fell back.

Maz regarded me sadly for a moment.

Stay there, I'll make it. She brought the drink. Here, she said softly, you are a big bastard.

I know, Maz, but it's not what you think.

What is it, then?

I don't know, really. Honest. And if I'm a bastard . . . you would have done the same thing, Maz?

She nodded.

What's going on?

She shrugged. I like you. Even though you are a bastard. And you are.

It's not what you think, I'd said weakly, not at all what you think.

On the way home, I'd been given a ticket for driving a defective motor vehicle. With the ticket still in my hands, picking glass splinters out of my crotch, I'd climbed the back stairs and hesitated.

No, it wasn't what she thought. What it was, I didn't know. Before getting married, I'd sneak around on Maz. Now I was sneaking around on my wife to see Maz. But it wasn't what she thought.

I'd walked into the kitchen. My wife had been standing there. She's always a little more beautiful than I can really believe.

I saw her and froze.

No, no, it's not what you think, I'd said. I love you.

Her eyes had been flat and hot with hurt and fury.

You have funny ways of showing it!

Sunshine was standing in the door with a towel turban on her head. She had just washed her hair. She was always washing her hair.

I looked at her and she giggled.

I tried to smile at my wife. A nervous smile. So nervous it turned into a laugh.

My wife let out a strange scream. And it's funny, too! You shit! If it feels good, do it! Any woman who shows any interest in you at all, and you're hooked. Anyone! You're a pushover!
easy lay! Don’t you know anything about women! Maz! She was just trying to see if she could get you back. You’re a pushover!

Sunshine had stood in the doorway, the loom behind her, eyes wide, face flushed under the tan until Roy’s hand had risen above her shoulder, pulled her back into the room and closed the door.

Then my wife had burst into tears. I’d crossed the room, put my arms around her, she’d thrown them off, get away from me! I can still smell her goddamned perfume, you bastard, I’d fallen to her feet, grabbed her ankles, kissed her feet, she’d stumbled slightly against the stove, I’d held onto her feet, muttering apologies, kissing her feet, until she’d said between sobs, oh, for Christ’s sake, get up!

Then she’d cursed me for a while in pidgin which was the language of her childhood.

I went on walking down the beach toward home.

If I could map my body like the world, or a satellite photo of Mars, or some solar system, then that part of me, beyond perversity, cussedness and lechery, those uncharted tropical islands, mute continents, faraway planets, those parts of me which are always lighting the fuse in a yin/yang fuckup, then there would be a region, the kind of place some wonderful hack like Edgar Rice Burroughs would describe as a lost continent or forbidden planet. The air of the lost continent would echo with mysterious drums and jungle chatter and be stained with violent sunsets; the forbidden planet would have no atmosphere whatsoever, a close horizon, and if it were in National Geographic, there would be a caption with some phrases like: with no atmosphere, the sky is the eternal night of space itself . . .

Which would be which, the lost continent, the forbidden planet, I don’t know, but there is one part of me which once In wants Out—out of what, out to where, I can’t say. It just wants out. The feeling is, in block caps, I gotta get out. OUT. Probably the forbidden planet would be out.

Then, once I am out, away, extricated, on the lam, I become forlorn, morose, feeling sorry for myself, I want In or In-Again. I don’t care at all what I have to do to get In-Again or Back
THE BLACK VELVET GIRL

In-Again, I just want In at all costs—I know that this time, In-Again will be different.

But of course, once I'm In or In-Again, the whole cycle lapses and I start scheming ways to get Out or Out-Again, oh, Out was really great, those were the days, that was the time, the only place to be, etc.

In the meantime, the process of getting from Out to In and In to Out is wearing, it is hard on the body, hard on the feet, hard on the hide, everyone only sees you In-Between, which is an inexplicable state, you become a bastard, target for invectives of all kinds. Moreover, In-Between is hard on the spirit—none of my quick spun theologies work—and most of all, it is hard and sometimes dangerous, this mysterious journey from In to Out and Out to In, just getting from one to the other and arriving, hello again, safely.

More and further, it is hard on my wife when I have to get Out, it is hard on people like Maz when I have to get back In, but then when I am finally with Maz, and the Out of Maz has become In, and now my wife is Out and I have to get Out or get Back-Out, then it is hard on Maz, my wife, myself, and tonight, thinking about the Black Velvet girl, it could have cost me my life, yes, and again I see the Gauguin gone wrong face of Talofa flashing by me in the pale light of the parking lot, feel the shirt choke my neck before it shreds, see Chocolate Joe's Cadillac starting to explode.

When I finally spot the house back behind the ironwoods, I think, maybe I'm wrong, even though it is midnight, maybe Atuana will just think I missed my ride home with Roy and she'll have dinner waiting in the oven and afterward, we'll go up to the tower room and lie in each other's arms and listen to the palm fronds clicking in the wind, after all, I haven't really done anything.

Yes, that's the way it will be, everything's going to be okay, I tell myself, as I walk in from the beach, pick my way through the litter of broken surfboards, junk cars, and poi dogs snoozing under the stars.
Sure, righto, I say, as I swing on the rusting bannister and climb the spiral stone stairs to the back door.

Three steps below the back door, I abandon optimism and hit the deck, dropping to my hands and knees and crawling up the last steps. I stretch my neck up and around. I peer in the door.

First thing that hits me is the scorched smell. Then the water and tracks on the floor. I peer through the kitchen into Roy’s room.

Sunshine is sitting over her loom, big as a baby grand piano, Roy behind her, smoking a cigarette and staring at a Japanese glass ball hanging in the window. Roy, what reserve, what composure. Sunshine is weaving, her hands are flying, her feet are working the treadles, the shuttles are whirring, Sunshine’s hair is hanging in her eyes, her forehead glistens with sweat, incense is smoking up beside the loom; Sunshine’s eyes are yellow, flat and impenetrable. Roy holds his cigarette like some vestigial organ in his fingers, which extend like the paw of a racoon about to rinse something; Sunshine is feeding all kinds of shit into the loom from a pile on the floor—pieces of driftwood, rags, twists of cloth, an old bikini top; she’s after texture.

Behind her, previous hangings cover the walls, they are like animals or cuddly protozoa, like faces that could almost say something.

I ease back out the door, stand up, walk in.

The loom goes on whirring, Roy’s eyes don’t flicker, I know and Roy knows I know that he is watching me out of the corner of his eye.

The loom stops for a moment, Sunshine moves her head toward me, but doesn’t look, the loom starts again.

The pots are welded to the burners, the bottoms black and crusted with fossilized vegetables. There is a knife stabbed in the wall.

I wander through the smoky guts of the house, shouting my wife’s name from room to room. I get halfway up to the tower. The silence is too much.

Back in the kitchen, Roy and Sunshine are standing shoulder to shoulder, American Gothic, harbingers of the news.

Roy says it. She left.
Sunshine blushes.

Roy says, there was a fire in the tower. The firemen got it before the flames spread. Doesn’t look too bad. Just scorched part of one wall, burned a hole in the mattress, and another one in the roof.

Roy anticipates my next question. The guys next door were burning some stuff. The firemen think some of it floated up through the windows.

Sunshine goes out for a minute and I say to Roy, why’d you leave me like that? I was coming.

Roy shrugs, no you weren’t, man. I saw your face. You weren’t coming. And I figured it wasn’t a healthy place.

You were right about that. Tell me one thing, Roy. What’d you see in my face?

Roy shrugs. That you weren’t coming.

I mean was it an In look or an Out look?

Roy looks at me. In or Out?

Forget it.

I look around the kitchen and start cleaning up. Roy gives me a hand. The loom is whirring in the next room.

We mop and scrub. I throw out two of the pots. The wok is baked. I debate, then throw it out.

Roy says, it was an In look.

I think about it: In look.

Roy clears his throat, hesitates, we go on mopping.

Roy says, maybe it was an . . . .

The loom stops. We look toward the bedroom door.

Roy drops his voice. Maybe it was an Out look.

We look at each other and nod. The loom starts whirring again.

The tower room isn’t too bad. There’s water all over the floor, smoke is still heavy in the air, and I can look up through a pêka in the roof and see the stars. But it’s not that bad.

I head down for a shower.

Sunshine is just stepping out of the bathroom. She has the towel turban around her head and smells of Jean Naté. The mirror is steamed up, the entire bathroom is dripping with
condensed steam, clouds of steam rise off Sunshine meeting the cooler night air. When the vegetarian goes in for a shower, it's for keeps, as though she is entering a time warp, a space capsule, this time she will alter her chemistry. She stops in the bathroom door. I can't squeeze by so cut my engine by two thirds, then full stop.

The bath towel slips so I can see the top of her nipple.

She says in a whisper, what happened up there?

Where?

Olomana? With the Black Velvet girl?

Oh. Everything.

Sunshine looks at my shoulders. I shake my head. You won't be able to see anything, it's no use, she didn't leave any marks. I told her I was married so she was careful. But she did other things.

Sunshine purses her lips as though to say something. Her eyes fasten on me. She purses her lips and swallows.

Sssh, I whisper. Don't even ask. The Black Velvet girl doesn't leave marks, but she can do fantastic things. Things you can't imagine. With her fingers and lips. And her teeth.

I click my teeth together.

Sunshine reaches numbly for the towel, stares at me, I click my teeth at her, she makes a faint whimpering sound, turns and quickly tracks across the kitchen to Roy's. I hear the door slam.

I sprawl in the shower and lie under the stream, get out, spray my feet with Mercurochrome, notice the bruises starting to come out on my body, and specially around my neck where my shirt jerked, and puzzle my face in the mirror. In or Out? I ask the steamy reflection.

I can't tell.

When I step out of the bathroom, I hear a strangled cry coming through the poka to Roy's room. Like a chicken getting its neck wrung and singing an aria at the same time. The vegetarian's love ectasies. I hobble quickly up to the tower room and out of earshot.

I fall on the smoky mattress, am almost asleep, reach over to hug my wife, not there, I doze, the tradewind funnels through the jalousies, the windows, the lampshade knocks, knocks, the stars drift through the hole in the roof.
THE BLACK VELVET GIRL

Then the sun is in my eyes and I’m late as hell for work. I hobble, stiff and sore, downstairs, no one home, everyone at work, I’m at the refrigerator when I hear a shoe scuff on the back stairs, Atuana, I turn and there are two huge guys wearing down-turned sailor hats over lurksome eyes, they look like packaged hams wrapped in Lucky You Live Hawaii and Luau feet T-shirts.

Talofa Talofa.

I jump.

Freeze! The gun is in his hand. Freeze!

I freeze.

Talofa!

No, not Talofa, I his cousin, Aloha.

Aloha, I didn’t do anything, it was the Black Velvet girl’s idea, I never laid a hand on her, I . . .

Aloha says, we looking for Patsy Sakamoto, he escape prison three days ago, rob one bank already, we got reports he been hiding around here, mind if we look?

I’m not hiding anyone, anywhere.

Maybe he come in witoutcho knowin.

You’re cops?

Aloha flashes his badge.

Help yourself, I say.

Aloha and his partner, guns drawn, sneak from room to room. Yank open closet doors. Cover each other while they kick clothes in the closet, poke behind the shower curtain.

Then they’re back in the kitchen. Know Patsy Sakamoto?

Sure, he used to hang out with the guys next door. Hapa haole guy.

Right. He armed and dangerous. Spark Patsy, no approachem, just gev us a call, yeah? And keep da door locked.

Then they’re gone. In the yard, I see similar beefy vice squad gents slipping out from behind trees, stepping warily out from behind cars. They’ve got shotguns.

So I’m later still for work, but finally I’m in the truck, brown bag and thermos on the seat, I reach for the key, pump the gas, and freeze. I detach my fingers from the ignition key.
C. E. POVERMAN

Chocolate Joe.
I sit a long time.
I reach for the ignition key. I look at my face in the mirror. In or Out look, I can’t tell. I can’t turn the key.
I decide to raise the hood, dispel all unreasonable fears, but when I go to lift the hood, I think, maybe that’s where they get you, it blows when you lift the hood. Or you see nothing, hop back in, turn the key, and then it blows.
Suddenly, I see my truck with all of its panels and compartments and think, Talofa Talofa, demolition expert, I’d have to dismantle my whole truck and even then I couldn’t be sure.
I get my tools out and hele-on over to the K highway. I start hitching.

It’s hot and bright up here, everyone’s hammering and there’s the noise inside and outside, the rumble of jets taking off and climbing fills the air overhead. We’re still roofing condos for the aspiring middle class.
I see the silver flashes rumbling off for Maui and Kauai and think of my wife, sealed up inside the belly of the pressurizing cabin, her ears popping while she smiles at the tourists in matching aloha shirts and mumus, the newlywed couple from Des Moines, the nearly dead septuagenarians from Omaha or Topeka, she smiles her beautiful smile, while inside, in her guts, she is bearing my beastly behavior, my inconstancy and flux. She bears up under the dull-witted flirtations, the pawings and maulings, the stewardess jokes, air pockets, turbulence, spilled drinks, old Filipino plantation workers trying to open the windows for some air, she climbs against the aisle steepened by take-off and climb, her body is punished by the cabin pressurization and depressurization, her ears are destroyed by the constant thunder of the engines on takeoff. All day she is like some angelic Sisyphus who climbs through the sky only to come home to me. I am her reward. I go on roofing, feeling both rotten and tender.

On the way home, I stop off for a cold six pack and there is the Black Velvet girl on display in the window.

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I stand gazing at her for a long time.
Back home, I get in my truck, take hold of the ignition key, but it's no dice, I can't turn it. I sit in the cab and sweat.
Finally, I get out and close the door carefully.
No one's home, so I take my six pack out to the beach, throw myself in the ocean, and then wander down to the woods at the end of the beach. I'm sitting there when I hear a voice behind me, ey, brah, gotta beer?
I turn. It's Patsy Sakamoto.
I freeze. I don't know whether I should show I recognize him or not. He's in tank top and shorts and he sure doesn't look dangerous, so I say, howzit, Patsy, help yourself.
He recognizes me and sits down. We have a couple and then I say, they were looking for you down at my house this morning, what're you doing down here?
Come for a look at the ocean, that's all.
So we drink and look at the ocean and then Patsy gets up, looks around, waves to me and slips back into the woods.
Back at the house, I call around for my wife, but no one knows where she is.

Every morning, I get up, get in the truck, take hold of the key, freeze, get out and hitchhike to Hawaii Kai. Now that Atuana is gone, I can do whatever I want so after work I hitchhike into Maz's a few times and we mess around. One night we get kind of loaded and she decides she wants to paint my body so she paints me a dusky yellow-orange, paints black spots on me, I say, what is this shit? But then get into it, I paint her all over, paint her nipples into flaming suns with smiles on them and planets revolving around. It's not enough, not enough, we get drunker, it's almost dark outside, the African violet tree is blooming, we climb up the side of her bungalow, up to the roof, and with a beach umbrella, we take hold of the stem with both hands and jump off the roof, land heavily on the grass, I go on drinking from a bottle on the grass, later come to as a jet rumbles low over the trees, red lights flashing, pass out again, wake up covered with mosquito bites, the sound of Maz down on all fours vomiting in the bushes.
C. E. POVERMAN

Then it is in the paper about Patsy Sakamoto, the pictures of the ambulance attendants lifting his body onto a stretcher.

They'd cornered him in a house up at Kaneohe. He wouldn't surrender, so they'd said at least let the girls come out, we won't hurt them. So Patsy's girls had come out. Then his buddy had gone in trying to convince Patsy it was no use. But Patsy wouldn't give up. He had shot it out and died in a hail of gunfire.

That's the way they'd said it in the *Star-Bulletin*. A hail of gunfire.

There was going to be a grand jury investigation, though, because one story had it that Patsy had tried to surrender, but the police had gone in to nail him once and for all. Patsy had a long record and the police felt he was making them look like turkeys.

A few days later I read the grand jury investigation had been quashed, there would be no investigation.

Sunshine is in the kitchen saying, guess who I heard from today?

I can't even begin to guess.

Guess.

Henry Kissinger.

No, the Black Velvet girl.

Sunshine says in a rush, she's just come back from a whirlwind promo tour—Japan, New Zealand, Australia, Hong Kong, the Philippines.

How'd she look?

I didn't see. She was on the phone. She wanted to know where she could find you.

You didn't tell her?

Sure, she sounds nice. Guess who else I heard from?

The Maharishi.

No, Talofa Talofa.

Talofa?

Yeah, they didn't like what happened that night with the Black Velvet girl. They wanted to know where they could find you, too.

You didn't tell them?

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THE BLACK VELVET GIRL

Nope, I said I didn’t even know you. What’d you do that night, anyway, that everyone’s looking for you?
Nothing.
Sunshine flushes. Nothing, I’ll bet.
Talofa didn’t try to rough you up or anything, did he?
Sunshine waves her hand. Oh, pooh, Talofa? He’s a sweetie, he tipped me five dollars. You know what the Black Velvet girl said? She said she might be able to get me one of those dresses. How do you think I’d look in a black velvet dress?
Sensational. Suddenly, I run to the window and look out.
What kind of a car does Talofa drive, anyway?
Talofa? A silver Grand Prix. Oh, you mean did he follow me?
He went out to play golf. He’s got these cute red golf pants. What’d you do that night, anyway?
Nothing, I’m telling you.
Nothing, I’ll bet, Sunshine giggles.

When my wife appears in the doorway the next afternoon, I forget Maz, the Black Velvet girl, the syndicate, the cops.
Atuana is tan, she’s wearing a new dress, a pikake lei, a white shell necklace, a gold chain on her glowing skin.
The tradewind lifts her hair, the sun turns her eyes a warm golden color. As always, I am aware of her long slim legs. She walks in, sits down on the stool and looks at me.
Ey! Howzit, you look good, haole boy.
So do you. Where’ve you been?
I took some time off. Had some leave so caught a flight over to the Big Island and went up to Kamuela with some of the girls. Had a ball. Visited some friends of Penny’s. Went horseback riding, swimming, went to the Parker Ranch one night for steaks and cocktails. It was great.
Before I can say a word she says, and I thought about you, loverboy. I don’t know what happened that night and I don’t want to know. Maybe I had cause for suspicion and maybe not, but let’s just forget it all, put it in the past, and start over from right now, okay? That includes Maz. Okay?
Man, what a relief. What a woman. We hug and kiss and make
up, Atuana hangs a gold chain around my neck with the Chinese character for good luck on it, we hug and kiss and stumble up the tower room in each other’s arms.

My wife and I are lying quietly together, looking in each other’s eyes and at last all is calm and peaceful. The sun is slanting in over the Koolaus and through the jalousies, the doves are cooing in the palms around the house.

Then Sunshine is calling from the foot of the stairs, someone here to see you!

Before I have a chance to yell, don’t let anyone up, I hear footsteps, I grab my shorts, my wife her mumu.

The golden head appears at the top of the stairs. She is wearing black velvet hot pants, a black velvet blouse. She smiles and says, I just wanted to thank you . . .

She is holding two half gallons of Black Velvet and has a kimono draped over one arm. She sees my wife, looks startled, says, oh, I didn’t mean to interrupt.

But now my wife is up. She is standing in the middle of the bed with her hands on her hips.

Oh, that’s quite all right, come in and make yourself at home, can I get you anything?

Sunshine appears at the top of the stairs. Her murky topaz eyes are wide. She is drinking it all in.

The Black Velvet girl says to my wife, I just wanted to thank him.

My wife says, I’ll bet you did. Don’t mind me, go ahead. The Black Velvet girl says, but he was only trying to help. My wife’s eyes are narrow and flat with fury. I’ll bet he was! I didn’t do anything, I say. My wife snatches for the necklace and pops it off my neck. Now you’re bringing them into the house! No, not true! Our bed! No!

My wife is off the bed, she dives for the bottles of Black Velvet and throws them one after the other out the window.
The Black Velvet girl says, no.

My wife belts me. She can really punch. She was once challenged to fight, fought and beat up the toughest Samoan tita at Aiea High School and that's saying something. She belts me and I see black and sparks for a second. That's what it is, sparks, not stars.

The Black Velvet girl grabs my wife. My wife belts the Black Velvet girl.

Jesus, Atuana, don't hurt her, I yell, she's got twenty corporation lawyers behind her.

I try to separate my wife and the Black Velvet girl and get clawed by both of them.

I back off, push past the vegetarian, run down the stairs.

The Black Velvet girl and my wife curse and snarl at each other, then follow.

Maz appears as I reach the kitchen. She is at the back door with her beach mat, a picnic basket and a six pack. She looks flushed and relaxed from the beach and afternoon sun.

Maz. She smiles at me.

I run toward her. She drops the picnic basket and opens her arms. I duck under her arms, push her aside, just as my wife and the Black Velvet girl reach the kitchen.

Maz takes a look at the Black Velvet girl and my wife, they take a look at Maz, Maz gets the picture, my wife and the Black Velvet girl get the picture, Maz throws the picnic basket after me, sandwiches, olives, cookies and cakes, napkins, forks, knives and spoons unfurl in the air above my head like a banner, I stumble down to my truck, jump in, there is the ignition key, Maz, my wife, the Black Velvet girl are charging down the stairs, hanging onto each other's shirts, mumus, blouses, the vegetarian is right behind them, I don't care, I yell, get back, but they keep coming, the ignition key is between my fingers, get back! this is it, I scream, goodbye, kingdom come! it will be a mass consummation, a suttee, a gangster dynamite orgasm mass rubout, Chocolate Joe, I scream, Chocolate Joe, I see your eyes! I turn the key.

The truck kicks over either in this life or the illusion of this life, the after-life or a new incarnation, whatever it is, there is no
Chocolate Joe, the view is the same, here come my wife, Maz, and the Black Velvet girl running after the truck as I back up, carve a turn in the sand and fishtail it out for the street.

I come shooting out of the driveway, still fishtailing, gaining speed, cut another turn almost piling up into a silver Grand Prix parked across the street. As I miss the car by inches, I get a good look at the gents inside. Aloha shirts. Beef. They have been watching a white jaguar, black interior, Honolulu license plate VELVET parked near my mailbox.

As I take off down the street, I see the Black Velvet girl jump in the white Jag, a minute later, my wife shoots out of the driveway in her T Bird, I see Maz’s beat up VW fall in line, and just as I turn the corner, the Grand Prix flashes in behind Maz.

I tear out onto the K highway, the caravan spaces out behind me, I floor it.

We’re up to Makapu in no time. Now down at Sandy Beach, the usual traffic jam, I bump up onto the shoulder, disappear in a cloud of dust, fly out. Behind me, the white Jag, Maz’s VW, my wife’s T Bird, and the Grand Prix all come bumping out of the dust, more or less in that order.

At Hawaii Kai, I run two lights, fly through Kahala, get on and off the highway, and next thing I know, I’m on Black Point road heading for Diamond Head and I realize that my mother and father live on this street. I spot the house, they have a high hedge, a long driveway, and maybe I can duck in and everyone will pass.

I hang one into the driveway, almost lose it into the hedges, shoot down under the palms and into the garage, jump out and yank down the door with a bang.

I hotfoot it into the house, explode through the door into the kitchen. My mother is standing by the counter with flour, eggs, butter, she is making a cake. On the counter, she has her book on TM.

The sun is slanting into the kitchen, everything is golden, the barometer says, fair.

My mother says, hello, calm down, Son, have a glass of milk and some cookies.

No time, Mom.
Through the kitchen window, I see my father bent over his putter. I run to the window. He strokes the ball. I follow its course through the cool green grass. Right into the cup.

I whirl.

Mom, I might have some company. Atuana. And some of her friends. If they show up, tell them I'm not here.

My mother hands me some cookies on a plate.

No time, Mom!

No time? You're young, take your time.

She shoves some cookies into my hand as I hear a screech of tires in the driveway. I sprint down the hall, duck into my old bedroom, and dive, squeeze, ooze like a Dali watch under the bed. My old baseball glove in here.

A clamor of voices in the kitchen. More voices. Deeper voices. Then footsteps running from room to room.

Suddenly, loud in my room, around the bed. Shoes, feet, all kinds of shoes and feet. Barefeet, sandals, sneaks, wingtips, white shoes.

My wife and Maz grab hold of my feet, drag me out from under the bed. I grab hold of a leg. My mother and the Black Velvet girl yank at one of my arms.

There seems to be no order, allegiance or affinity to the yanking.

I hang onto the bed. Enough, I shout.

My pants start to tear up the crotch.

Then Talofa, Thunder and Aku pile in. They grab the Black Velvet girl who kicks and flails. Things start getting knocked over.

My father wanders in with his putter. What the hell is going on here?

Oh, Dad, you wouldn't know! I look up at him through the kicking and scratching. Dad! Dad! How have you done it? A life lived, guilt free, without the taint of suspicion?

The tearing of my crotch sets up a soft counter melody against the screaming.

Mom, I shout, how did he do it?

I look up at my wife, who is yanking at my leg.

Don't you know how to treat a wife?
C. E. POVERMAN

Atuana, it’s not what you think, I shout.
Atuana curses me in pidgin, heaving at my leg. I hang onto the bed.
The Black Velvet girl is getting dragged toward the door by Talofa, Thunder and Aku, and suddenly, the women see what’s up, let out a shout, they won’t get her! and letting go of me, fall on Talofa, Thunder and Aku, who, confused, duck and let go of the Black Velvet girl.
I crawl naked between the legs and thread my way through the door and down the hall. As I reach the front door, Talofa, Thunder and Aku stampede past me, I get up and stumble out after them.
The women are right behind us.
Outside, there are cars all over the lawn, they block the garage, spill out of the driveway and into the street.
Talofa, Thunder and Aku hotfoot it for the Grand Prix.
My shorts torn off, naked, I run after them.
The women are right behind us.
Talofa, Thunder and Aku pile in the Grand Prix. I pile in on top of them.
It’s a bum moment. Talofa is even bigger than he looks. He is not cute as a baby. He looks down at me. His eyelids droop.
I’m not a stutterer, but I start stuttering. I didn’t do nothin, man, I swear. I swear! I never touched her. Alright, I touched her. Once. No, twice. Just the dress! I didn’t do nothing, man!
Talofa says I didn’t do nothin, either.
The women are getting closer. There is murder in their eyes.
The driver raises his head, looks in the rearview mirror, ey, Talofa, who da fuck da fuckin fuckah and whatchoo like me do?
Talofa’s eyes droop in appraisal. He puts his gangster third eye on me like a laser. I’m naked as a baby.
I blurt, I didn’t do nothin!
One of the women hits the Grand Prix with a croquet mallet.
Talofa slams the door as the women surround the car, yank the doorhandles, pummel the windows. Talofa says to the driver, hit it, brah, he wit us.
He hits it. The women fly back from the car.
We lay rubber a mile long and get the hell out of there.
C. E. Poverman has traveled extensively and has worked many jobs — bartender, dynamiter, housepainter, family counselor and others. He was born in New Haven and received a B.A. degree with honors from Yale in 1966. He taught in Ahmedabad, India, at St. Xavier College on a Fulbright. He then taught briefly at Thammasat College in Bangkok. Poverman received an M.F.A. degree from The University of Iowa (1969). He taught at the University of Hawaii in 1969–70, then stayed in Honolulu to write and do assorted jobs. He began teaching fiction writing at Yale in 1973. His stories have appeared in The Iowa Review, Playboy, and Fiction International. He just completed a full-length fiction manuscript.

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