




CORADO

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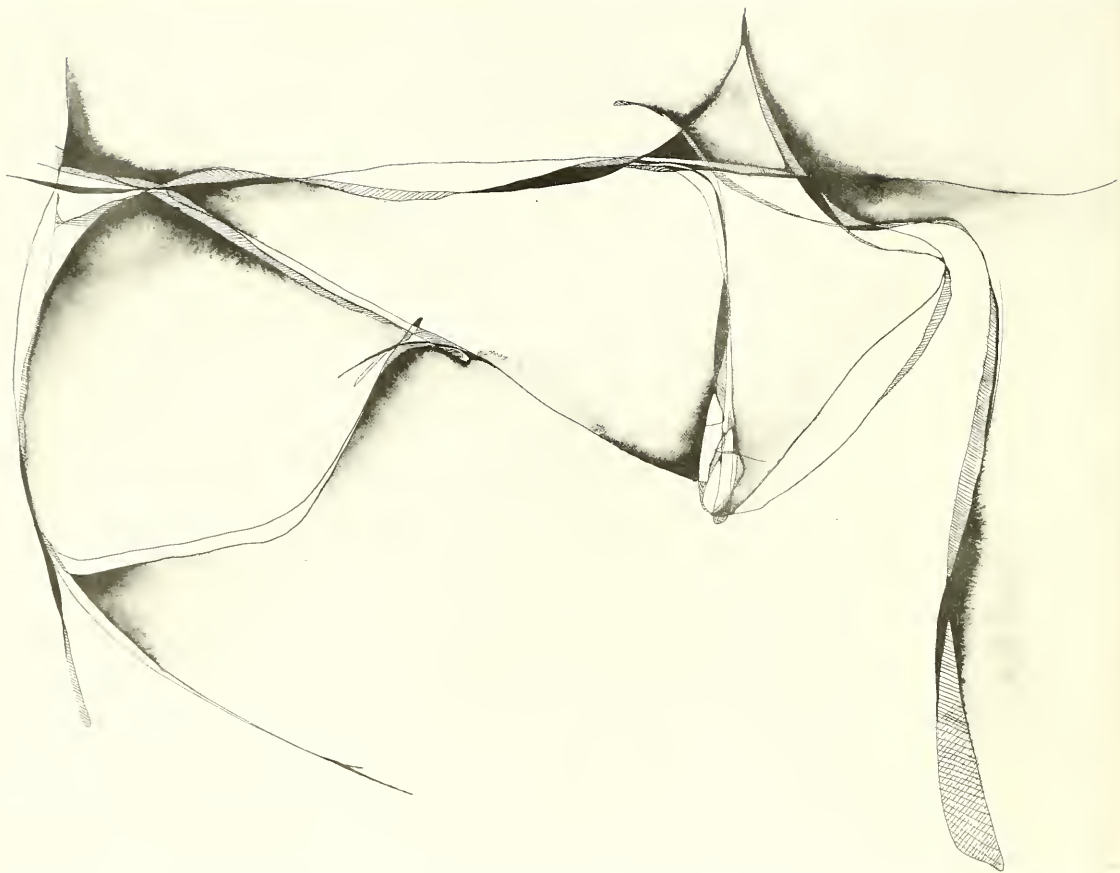
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WRITERS' FORUM CORADDI

THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO

APRIL 1967



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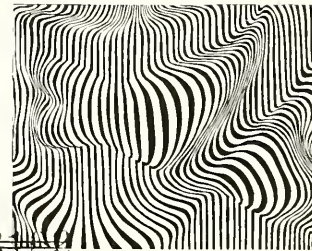
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THE HUNTER

MYRL COYLE BURKHOLDER

The White Front Cafe was one of those places you would recognize in any growing city. Hanging from the overlapping roof, a peeling sign creaked on rusty hinges, a contradiction to its name. A single door separated large plate glass windows hemmed by dusty, ruffled curtains. In the lower corner of the East window a scratched sign announced "Beer on Tap." Written in Bon Ami across the West pane, a flowery script read "Fish Fry Fridays" and "Music Every Saturday."

The two brothers walked gingerly across the eight rails, heads bent against the strong wind whistling down the tracks, woollen mufflers snug against red cheeks.

"Whoooee," shouted John, "I'm gonna need half a keg to warm me up tonight! How 'bout it, little brother? Let's celebrate."

"Jesus, is that all you think about," replied Howard, "beer and girls? I have to work tonight. I might have a short one to be sociable if someone wants to show their appreciation for the music, but I ain't settin' you up all night. Did Ma give you any money?"

"You know she ain't dishin' out anything for us to spend on beer, Howard. I got 'nough to take care of myself though, don't you go worrin' about me. And when that runs out Ma'll give me more, long as she don't know I'm spending it in the cafe. She's gotta show me a good time, you know, this bein' my last furlough."

Running across the red brick pavement beyond the tracks, they took shelter under the overhanging shingled roofs of the Eldorado Street shops. A low hanging street light illuminated the foggy windows of the stores, the curved filament of the bulb making haloed patches on the

wooden sidewalk. The fat Greek proprietor gave a broad smile as the brothers entered the cafe.

"Johnny, how good you come to see Poppa Gus. You look fine, boy, fine. How you like the Army? You go to France now and maybe show them how to fight, eh? Hey, Howie, Sylvia say she be in to see you later tonight. You make some music now and we all have a little fun, eh?" He laid the damp grey rag on the polished counter and offered a swarthy hand to John.

"Poppa Gus, it's good to see you." John greeted the man in the dirty apron. "The old place looks good, and I'm thirsty tonight, so draw me a big one!"

"Sure, Johnny, you have one with Poppa Gus, and then listen to your brother play that old piano. The customers, they like the way he play. Pretty soon we have a big crowd and we all sing together just like old times. We have a big celebration, now you have come home, eh?"

John strutted to the opposite side of the rectangular room and hung his greatcoat and the overseas cap trimmed in blue cording on a brass hook. He acknowledged the greetings of several groups of tired men seated at the oak tables in the center of the room. Glasses of cold beer suspended in greasy hands, they tilted back on the spindly legs of the bentwood chairs and watched as he returned to the bar. Howard hung his brown gabardine coat beside John's and walked to the rear of the long room, scuffing at the crumbs of oiled sawdust on the planks of the dark floor. On the back wall, doors leading to the kitchen flanked an old upright piano, the front panel of which had been removed and the hinged top folded back. The molting ducks were lined up in a row, waiting for the player.

John straightened the blouse of the ill-fitting khaki uniform, tightened the Sam Brown belt at his slim waist a notch, and propped himself against one of the tall stools at the bar. Below the flare of the breeches, leggings of canvass laced tightly from ankle to knee above blunt nosed high shoes. The high stiff collar of the jacket was loose, and garish buttons with eagle and wheat leaf design closed four blousy pockets. Through the smoky mirror behind the counter, he surveyed the room.

"Not much of the old crowd left, is there Poppa Gus? Guess just about all of us have been pulled into this fight by now. 'Cept Howard. He looks a little lost in here with all these old men. He's havin' fun with his studyin' at the college though. Sure makes pretty music on that piano, but I'd rather hear him play the rag-time than all that highbrow stuff." His short fingers combed the straight black hair from the high forehead.

"He's a sad boy, Johnny," observed Poppa Gus. "Sometimes late at night when most of the folks gone home he sits and plays saddest music you ever hear. He like to be in there fighting with you and your brothers, Johnny, and he don't like nobody to ask him about it. Small limp like that not bad; they could use him someplace, I'm thinking. My little Sylvia, she like him fine, and I think maybe some day she catch him, but she getting tired of waiting too, so he better hurry and make up his mind about her. How you think your Mama feel about that, eh, Johnny?"

"Hell, Poppa Gus, we just don't talk about things like that at home. Ma's kinda touchy about girls. She's good to those of us who stay home with her, but she don't pay much mind to one of us who gets married. Surprised me when she allowed Howard to work in here, since it means she has to stay home alone. Reckon she feels like she has to let him do something since the Army won't have him. Must be lonesome, just the two of them there in that house all the time. Ma can be pretty demandin'. Anyway, she says it 'ain't in the cards' for us to get married."

"Oh, she still tell the fortunes, eh? Well, maybe soon you all be home again, Johnny. We lose lots of our boys in that big battle last month at . . . what the name of that place, eh, Johnny?"

"Argonne. My big brother was there."

"Yes, that the one I mean. But things getting better now we got them on the run. When all you boys come home again, your Mama be happy, and then maybe Howie and Sylvia think about getting married; if she wait that long. You ready for another beer, eh, Johnny?"

"Yeah," replied John, "draw a couple and I'll go back and keep Howard company until the gang comes in."

John held the two beers aloft and inched around the tables on his way to the piano. Howard sat crouched over the chipped keyboard, one ear cocked to the mournful thirds of "St. Louis Blues." He had removed the tight tweed jacket. The celluloid collar attached to the striped shirt rubbed a long red welt on the nape of his neck. He

beat a slow quarter time rhythm with his left foot as he finished the tune.

"Come on, brother," laughed John, "jazz it up a little, this ain't no time to be sad. I'm goin' off to the war, and you gotta help me celebrate! Here, have a beer!"

The younger hoy pivoted on the low stool and looked at the dark eyes. John's handsome face was somehow threatening, in spite of the broad smile of the generous mouth; heavy questioning eyebrows met over the high bridged long nose. There was no remarkable family resemblance. Howard had inherited the light blue eyes and fair complexion, as well as the small, finely chiseled nose and chin, from his mother. His sandy hair was brushed smooth over the high forehead with its thin brows. The brothers were well matched in size and weight.

"Thanks, John, I'll just have time for this one before the crowd gets here. You plannin' on stayin' all evening?" Howard glanced at the lively group entering the front door.

"Gonna stay long enough to see what's left of the old gang and have a few beers with them. Might pick up a date for the rest of the evening. You lookin' for anyone special?" John followed his gaze.

"No, no one in particular. Some of the girls from the restaurant over at the depot usually come in about this time. You might pick up one of them; they're usually impressed with a uniform." Howard set the empty schooner on the floor and ran his long fingers tentatively over the keys. "What's your pleasure, brother? How about 'Over There?' That oughta fit the occasion."

As the room filled, there were requests for ballads and more rag-time, and the crowd gathered closer around the piano. Poppa Gus brought fresh glasses to the cellar, and a young waitress in a calf length black skirt and white frilly blouse, replenished the wooden bowls with thick, curly pretzels. As the younger crowd assembled, John was treated to fresh schooners of beer, and the waitress playfully eluded his attempted embraces each time she returned to the kitchen. Sylvia and several other Fred Harvey girls wandered in and joined the group of singers.

"Doggone, Sylvia, if you ain't all grown up since last summer, and gettin' prettier every day. Poppa Gus, you better hide this cute little gal from all these boys 'till she's old enough to get married." John put his arm around the soft shoulders and balanced a beer in his left hand. The crowd joined in good natured laughter.

"Reckon I'm old enough to get married now, John, if the right man comes along." She slipped from under his arm and strolled to the side of the fair boy at the piano. "And maybe I've found him," she said as she ran her hand lightly across the striped shirt. The fingers stumbled on the rhythmic beat of the bass notes. Lazily, Sylvia untied the bow of the white bibbed apron; the demure black uniform accentuated the tiny waist and high bosom. A small white collar framed her heart-shaped olive face. Her small foot tapped to the riff of "Alexander's Ragtime

Band" and John grinned as the full hips undulated with the beat of the rowdy song. When the music stopped she put her hands on Howard's shoulders; she let her arms slither down his chest, pressed close and whispered something in his ear. The color heightened in his face and he turned toward the girl, gently moving her away from the stool.

"Not now, Sylvia, I'm busy. Please, just stand there at the side of the piano where I can look at you." He played blues then, speaking to her with his hands.

She stood at the corner of the piano, one arm resting on the open lid, and her heavily fringed teasing eyes watched as he caressed the broken ivories. John moved to stand beside her and she smiled a welcome.

"You going to walk me home tonight, Howie?"

"Ma's looking for me to be home soon as I finish tonight, Sylvia. Maybe I'll see you for a while tomorrow afternoon, if I can get away."

"Shucks, Sylvia, why don't I just walk you home tonight?" interrupted John. "I got nothin' better to do, and nothin' I'd rather do!"

She exchanged short glances with the brothers and smiled invitingly at John. "Reckon I just might like that, John. We might as well leave now since there isn't much goin' on here. She gave her softly waved black hair a toss and giggled to the coat rack, John following appreciatively.

It was snowing when Howard finished at the cafe. A thin layer covered the frigid ground and the wind whipped the powdery flakes down the slippery brick road and across the tracks like puffs of smoke. The soft white blanket shrouded the ugliness of the old houses and shops around the depot. With clenched fists deep in the pockets of his brown coat, he walked slowly against the brisk wind. He turned down the alley, taking the short cut to William Avenue, and stood waiting for the street car. He did not have far to go, but Ma would think he was wasting his time with some girl if he didn't hurry home.

John waited for him at the corner in front of the house. "Hurry up, little brother, the hour is late and it's past your bedtime," he joked.

"You've had too much to drink, John, and Ma ain't gonna like it."

"Hell, boy, can't you see the house is dark? The old gal finally gave in and went to bed. Let's get inside where it's warm. I been nice and warm *all night*."

"How come you didn't come back to the cafe?"

"Why, Sylvia asked me to come in for coffee, and we just sorta forgot about the time."

"Ain't proper for you to go in and stay that long with no one else there but you two." They entered the house quietly and hung their coats on the mirrored hall tree beside the long front stairway. Howard turned and faced his brother in the dark. "Damn you, John," he whispered loudly, "don't you go tryin' nothin' with Sylvia. She's a nice girl, but she's young and just don't know how to act when she gets around older boys."

"Quiet down, Howard, or you'll wake Ma. Sure, Sylvia's a nice girl, *real* nice, and just as cute as can be, but you ain't got no strings tied to her that I can see. She ain't the kind to sit around waitin' forever for someone to pay her some attention, either. What you aimin' to do about it if I take her out while I'm home?"

Howard clenched his fists. "You dirty . . ."

There was a snuffle and a creak, as Anna heaved herself out of the rocker in the next room. "You two just gettin' home?"

"Yes'm," answered John quickly, "It's snowin' pretty bad outside, Ma, and it was a little slow comin' home."

She flipped the switch for the dim light in the hall and looked at the two angry boys. "That snow gets deep enough, you might go huntin' tomorrow."

"Hell, Ma, that's a good idea. Maybe I can even teach Howard how to shoot; he could stand a few lessons," John goaded.

"Listen, brother, you never did know how to hunt. Take the friggin' gun and bring down all the rabbits you can with it and we'll see how many are fit to eat after you fill them full of buckshot. I'll use my bare hands and still catch more than you can shoot in a day." Howard's fair skin turned red in his anger.

"Well, if you're gettin' up early, you'd best bank the fires in the range and furnace and get on up to bed. The long night dress brushing against the stairs, Anna trudged painfully up the stairs to her bed; but not to sleep. She listened to their muffled argument. It was true. Howard was the best hunter of the lot, and he never used a gun on small game. The year he was ten he had asked his father for a rifle, and had been told he would have to wait a year or two. The six older boys kidded him and he had left the house in a rage. Later that afternoon he returned home with the first live game, a rabbit and two quail. His father had used the strop on him, thinking he lied about catching the game with his hands, and the older boys had spent the evening in great merriment over the "biggest huntin' story" they ever heard. Howard was taken along when he presented his father with the bag of live quail.

The next morning Anna stood before the oval mirror, twisting the last strand of hair, coiling it on to the crown above the round face, and determinedly anchored it in place with the crinkled tortoise hair pins. Looping the strand of jet beads twice over her head, she stepped back to squint at the full reflection. A shiny black poplin dress covered her short body. The small waist abruptly separated full hips and sagging breasts which had generously nourished seven sons and two daughters. The arm of the image in the mirror moved, and the gnarled fingers smoothed a wiry grey hair back in place. There were surprisingly few wrinkles in the face. The staunch thin lips betrayed the soft smile of her eyes. Without further hesitation, she descended the long staircase and walked to the kitchen.

It was a good day for reading the cards; the sky was

clear and calm, the dates on the calendar (Lydia Pinkham standing ready to help all women) confirmed her calculations, but still she hesitated. Perhaps she had leaned too heavily on the ancient signs in recent years, but sometimes the warnings could not be ignored. She must learn to accept the hated image of the dark queen, in whose widow's garb she now stood.

She poured a second cup of strong black coffee and settled herself before the round oak table. Removing the Sacra-cenical cards from their teakwood box, she began to shuffle. Her practiced hand fanned the cards and began the draw, the faded blue eyes intent as she turned the thirteen cards. Holding court in the eighth position was the Queen of Spades. Too many of the cards were reversed, strengthening any bad portents. Each card carried its traditional meaning. Anna began the reading:

Ace of Hearts, reversed—family troubles and quarrels.
Knave of Spades—a dark young man.

Seven of Diamonds, reversed, positioned next to the Queen of Spades—upsets and quarrels.

King of Hearts, reversed—a sensitive fair man, not easy to get along with.

Eight of Diamonds—an excursion in the country or a hunting expedition.

She drew five additional cards and covered the significant signs, then began the reading from opposite ends of the fan, two by two:

The seven of Diamonds and Knave of Spades—a serious anger foretold again.

The Queen of Diamonds and Queen of Spades, followed by the ten and seven of Hearts—spite foiled. The first encouraging sign.

She shuffled the cards once more, separated them and made three small piles on the table before her. One stack for herself, one for her house, and the last for the unknown destiny. She stared at the blank side of the cards, reluctant to finish the reading. Rubbing the arthritic knees, Anna arose with some difficulty from the cane chair and walked to the window. It was a crisp clear day, the snow deep and powdery; fitting weather for hunting. Howard and John always looked forward to this day. There would be fried rabbit for supper tonight.

Inchmeal, Anna finished her household chores, avoiding the table with the stacked cards. She stopped occasionally to stir the fire in the old black range which warmed the large kitchen; then to stir the piccalilli ripening in the stone jar. The sweet odor of the spiced brine, coupled with that of the drying herbs hanging from the wooden rack over the stove, added a feeling of warmth and festivity to the drab room. She prepared a meager lunch and dragged the worn rocker close to the stove. Placing her feet on the open oven door, she sighed in relief as the warmth soothed her aching joints.

She awakened to the sound of stomping boots and the snap of buckles as the boys shed their snow covered clothes on the latticed porch. The man-smell of their damp wool clothing followed them into the room.

"Might as well leave that sack outside, John. Ma's not about to fool around with that bloody mess you brought home, but the dog might could eat it." Howard grinned as he laid six rabbits on the spider legged table. They were marked only by bruises on the heads.

John's heavy brows covered downcast eyes. "They'll make good stew, Ma."

"There's coffee on the stove, boys. Then get to cleanin' them rabbits so I can fry a couple for supper."

"Get a knife out of the drawer, John, and let's see if you can skin this one while I clean the gun. And don't butcher it; them's prime skins and worth a buck apiece if you do a good job," said Howard.

"Ma," said John, ignoring Howard's orders, "reckon how some men can be so gentle they can catch a rabbit with their bare hands and skin it fit for stuffin', but don't know how to touch a woman?"

"Shut your damn mouth, John." The fair skin reddened above the rough collar of Howard's hunting shirt.

"You should'a seen him last night, Ma. He just sat there playin' that piano and all the time this hot little gal over at the White Front was runnin' her fingers through his hair and twitchin'"

"I said shut your damn mouth, you sonofabitch. Get on with the skinnin'."

". . . twitchin' her ass, just achin' for him to grab it and he just played that keyboard."

"I'm wamin' you, John, keep your mouth shut!"

"Ha, I can tell you I knew what she wanted. Them were the firmest little cheeks"

The blast of the gun filled the warm kitchen. John doubled, clutched at his bloody groin, and fell to the floor.

The crowd had not yet arrived when Howard swaggered into the White Front Cafe the following Saturday. Poppa Gus sat at the counter drinking a foamy schooner of beer. "Howie, I like to talk to you for a minute." The Greek was unusually serious.

"Sure, Poppa Gus, fire away."

"Where your big brother tonight, Howie? I like to talk to him too, about last Saturday night. My little Sylvia acting very funny this week. She not smile much, and she stay away from here all week. John not go back to the army camp already, has he?"

"No, Poppa Gus, and it doesn't look like he'll be goin' back. John had an accident last Saturday." Howard walked around the counter and drew a tall glass of beer.

"He hurt bad, Howie? I think he not treat my little Sylvia good, but I hope he not hurt bad. What happen to him, eh?"

"We went huntin' Sunday and the damn fool was cleanin' his gun in the kitchen when we got home and had a little accident. Don't you go worryin' about Sylvia though, I'll take care of her. And I can promise you John won't bother Sylvia, or any other girl ever again. How about a little more now?" Howard strolled confidently back to the rear of the room and began a fast piano rag.





PROLOGUE

DAVID ACKLEY

"Four Bucks," said the pawnbroker, and dropped Chad's wedding band on the counter. Rick looked at Chad, who was bent over, peering intently at a section of one of the glass showcases lining each side of the narrow shop. After a moment, Chad turned his head slightly and said, "Five," then resumed his perusal of the merchandise, a jumbled confusion of pen knives, garnet earrings, beads, dashboard ikons and miniature cameras, in one shelf-long heap.

The pawnbroker, a fleshy man whose complexion was grey as dust, pursed his lips, and looking up at the ceiling, slowly shook his head.

Although Rick was sure Chad couldn't have seen this, the message got across to him somehow, perhaps telepathically, because he straightened up and walked decisively to the counter. Picking up the ring, he drawled, "This ain't the first time you know. I guess I kin get my price somewhere else."

The pawnbroker lifted one shoulder in a so-what shrug, apparently dismissing the matter, and began an absorbed study of his right thumb nail, letting them get all the way to the door before he yielded. "Okay," he said. "Five it is."

While he waited for Chad to fill out the pawn slip, Rick felt a certain vicarious pride for the bland skill he had shown; for a recruit with six weeks of basic behind and two years less six weeks stretching ahead, a method of dealing with pawn brokers seemed an infinitely more valuable lesson to learn than anything the army had so far force fed him. Chad, with his three years of prior service in the Navy, had an enviable store of such skills and a knack for exposing them one at a time, like hoarded jewels, as the particular need arose. On the basis of that same prior service Chad, in the first week of training, had gotten himself appointed platoon guide of the first platoon, and Rick, having had two mandatory years of ROTC in college, was made a squad leader. It hadn't

taken them very long to find out they had a similarly relaxed attitude towards their duties and a common zeal for taking advantage of any privileges that accrued to their positions. With this discovery they had become friends, or buddies as the army has it, and had begun this, their first weekend pass in New York, by fulfilling Chad's expressed desire to get rid of his wedding ring.

Afterwards, they paused outside in front of the pawnshop window, where a number of ceremonial swords were displayed, fanlike, on a piece of maroon carpeting.

"I thought it was illegal to sell weapons in New York," Rick said.

"I think they can sell them—you just can't carry them concealed on your person."

Rick laughed. "Where the hell could you conceal one of those mothers, anyway? In your pants' leg? You'd castrate yourself." Picturing it, his pelvic muscles tightened reflexively. "What's your wife going to say when she finds out about the ring?" he asked, forcing himself to look away from the window, and grin at Chad.

"That bitch," Chad said calmly. "I couldn't care less what she says—and if I'm lucky I'll never have to hear her say it. She must have known I was gone for good though, when she found out I enlisted, so I don't guess anything else would be a big shock—even the ring. You know," he said thoughtfully, "if we'd hopped around some, I could've probably gotten six, but the main idea this time wasn't the money, but just to get shut of the ring. I don't want anything left to remind me of *that* mistake. Damn all you picky yankees, anyway," he added, returning Rick's grin. Chad's wife was an Italian girl from East Boston and he claimed she and Rick had the same niggling traits, things like stinginess and lack of humor, which he believed were common to all New Englanders. Rick, in defense, usually suggested that Chad suffered from congenital myopia, a universal southern malady (attributed to bad food and a debilitating climate), making him unable to distinguish one person from another (Seriously Chad, doesn't my face look like a blur to you?) and therefore assume that members of any conveniently labeled group were all exactly alike. They got along very well together.

At Rick's instigation they spent the rest of the afternoon meandering through the Metropolitan Museum, a kind of ritual sacrifice he made to prove his two years of college hadn't been wasted. He was surprised to find that Chad enjoyed the paintings as much as he did, perhaps more, and then a little ashamed for letting it surprise him. They came out culturally sated and thirsty, squinting into the long rays of afternoon sunlight. Leaning on the metal pipe banister which bisected the stairway to the museum entrance, they lit cigarettes and considered the evening that lay before them, promising and unmarred—virginal.

"There's this place in Greenwich Village that I read about someplace," Rick said. "It's called Julius's—it's supposed to be a good bar."

"Say no more," Chad said, holding his hand up. Julius's it is."

On the subway car to Washington Square, which was only moderately crowded, he managed to squeeze into a seat next to an obese, stringy haired old woman. She held a large shopping bag on her lap and while he tried to act unconcerned she carried on a muttering, bitter monologue as she poked through its contents. Once, without looking directly at him, she snapped her head around suspiciously, but he had anticipated her and was staring across the aisle at an advertisement for a Dale Carnegie course, "The key to a better you." Leaning over him, both hands clutching the metal hanger, Chad grinned like a monkey and rolled his eyes insanely.

"Dirty bastards," muttered the woman, thrusting her right hand to the bottom of the bag. For an instant Rick thought she was referring to him and Chad, and he tensed to move quickly if she became suddenly violent.

"Cheat old ladies, that's all the bastards know to do," she said, reddening at the indignity of it all. She grunted and her hand came out of the bag holding a soup bone, with small shreds of meat clinging to the joint. She examined it carefully, then dropped it back in the bag, her face still suspicious and a bit dissatisfied, as if, having expected the worst, she found anything else unacceptable. Rick reflected that her disappointment at not having been cheated was something like the way New York was affecting him. He wasn't sure of how, specifically, the city hadn't quite measured up—or down—to his preconception, but in a way this didn't really matter; whether one's expectations were better or worse than the reality which inevitably supplanted them, the unsettling effect on the soul was probably about the same, either way. For one thing, though, he had the skin crawling sensation that he was constantly being looked at; unused to this, it made him nervous, even while he realized it was mostly because of his green brass-buttoned uniform which stood out rather luridly against the blurred drab colors of the civilian clothing all around him. Six weeks in the army had taught him to cherish anonymity, the wonderful secret power in being camouflaged among thousands of identical uniforms and knowing that, try as they might, nobody could really find him. Here without that camouflage, he felt tender and exposed, as if his nerve ends had sprouted shoots that twined deviously through the weave of his clothing to dangle, pink and wet, in the hostile air.

The two streets intersected obliquely at about 120 degree angle and the cafe was on the corner with its front and side walls joined at the same angle, giving it an architectural nonconformity that he thought fitting and proper to Greenwich Village. He liked its look immediately; and liked it more when he saw the way the name was printed on the window—just Julius, without an apostrophe—so that he had an urge to anthropomorphize and give *Julius*, a personality of its own.

They ordered two ten cent draft beers and, looking at themselves in the mirror back of the bar, silently

toasted.

"Mmmm," Chad purred, setting his half empty glass on the bar. "I sure needed that. Museums are all right, but they sure do give you a thirst, don't they?"

"That's the price of culture, my lad," Rick said. "How could you know you got anything beneficial out of all those pictures if they hadn't cost you a little discomfort?"

The interior of Julius had a nice, eclectic inconsistency. On a shelf in front of the mirror were pictures of bare knuckle boxers, a snapshot of Dylan Thomas and a bartender, a few tarnished and unreadable loving cups, an old brass candelabra and a framed newspaper column with a few sentences about Julius, "the oldest bar in Greenwich Village," underlined in red ink. Overhead, cones of greasy dust hung like beehives from the bare ceiling.

Only five other customers were in the bar at that hour; two non-belligerent looking swabbies, a swarthy, middle-aged man with a girl twenty years too young to be his wife, and a gnomish old man, wearing an apron, who sat on the end stool and read a newspaper. Each of these people was absorbed in himself or his immediate companion and ignored the others. After the subway ride it was very pleasant to sit at a bar with a beer and be ignored. Except for the dirt on the ceiling Julius was a totally fine and likeable place. So much so that his distaste for New York began to slip away. A city that had bars like this couldn't be all bad.

They stayed, drinking the ten cent beers, until 8:30. Rick had an exfraternity brother who lived somewhere near Columbia University and who had extracted a promise of a visit the first time Rick got a pass. He found the address in the telephone book and by then they were both just loose enough on the ten cent beers to decide against calling ahead. The fun was surprising Bob and his wife; it outweighed the potential inconvenience if they weren't home. However, leaving Julius he felt a mild but tangible sense of loss, which he neutralized by promising himself that he would return the next time they got a pass.

Bob lived on West 125th Street so, changing trains at Times Square, they got on a local that was marked for 125th Street and some Avenue which he didn't get a chance to read. This seemed reasonable until they were settled in their seats and he noted that of the eleven or twelve passengers, he and Chad were the only whites. For some unclear motive they got off the train at 120th Street and the last vestige of good sense in the choice dissolved when they came up to street level, right into the midst of what was undoubtedly the biggest gaggle of colored pimps and hustlers and shills, this side of Algiers.

Those voices; cajoling, wheeling from octave to octave, rising all around them like flocks of startled birds:

"Hey, G.I., you come wif me—I show you some stuff!"

"You want some poontang? Clean, Nice?"

"Just down here, baby. One hundred coffee colored girl, guarantee to make you a man."

"Sheeit! Don' lissen to him, chief. The Purple Panther—that the place for you."

While the voices whirled around them—never touching them, but almost, almost—peals of high-pitched laughter came from behind, where less aggressive types lined a bright store front, shoulder touching shoulder, looking on. Rick stayed partially in the lee of Chad's left shoulder, hoping Chad's dauntless amiability was sufficient armor to take them safely to the opposite street corner which was void of people, and perhaps hallowed ground, like the goal in "hide and seek."

They made it, although there was a hard and lengthy moment when Chad paused at the curb to ask the closest pimp if he could tell them how to get to Columbia. Forget it, he had mentally urged. Move on, Chad, move on! and heard, as if boomed from a loud speaker, the revealing inflections of Chad's southern accent.

Now they're going to lynch us in retaliation, he had thought, believing it completely, and at the same time wanting to laugh out loud because the situation was so painfully ludicrous; a deep southerner asking directions in Harlem and—worse yet—getting directions. They were across the street and half way along the next block before he could really believe they had somehow escaped intact.

It was exactly then, too quickly for any relief to have come, that he understood there might be worse places in Harlem for a white man than a brightly lit corner adjacent to the subway—pimps or no pimps. Far ahead of them were lights, noises—horns; the unmuted roar of the subway where it came to the surface; an occasional voice, like the voices that filter through the closed door of a theater—all alluring reminders of the city, which with its collapsible walls, had suddenly folded away from them on this empty silent street. As they walked he felt the weight of the silence, and its dimensions; on its other side he knew, there was breathing he could not hear. They stayed to the left of the street, walking a line close to the wooden doorsteps—the first thing to the eye that distinguished one building from the next. Looking more closely, he could see the different textures of the buildings, the one or two story variations in height, the thin crack where each reluctantly gave way to its neighbor, but all these distinctions, even the streets cutting the ends off every block, seemed like after-thoughts, sloppily applied over a single, unified building, which extended to the far reaches of the city. After two blocks he noticed something else; of the apartments they had passed, not one had shown a lighted window. If there were lamps within any of them, the glow was caught and contained by tightly drawn curtains. Not the thinnest shard of light could be seen from outside, anywhere.

At the next cross street he glanced up at the sign, and stopped short. "We're going the wrong way," he said.

"The hell you say." Chad replied.

"We are, Chad. We started at 120th and we're now at 117th. 125th Street is back the way we came."

"I thought you said your buddy lived near that College—that guy I asked said it's up there on the right somewhere."

"I don't know. I guess we might as well muddle on the way we are—."

They continued walking in the same direction.

As a relief from his repeated desire to peer into every doorway they passed, with the correlative fear that if he looked too hard he might see someone looking back, he glanced frequently across the street. On that side there were no buildings. A low chain mesh fence bordered the side walk and beyond the fence a bluff loomed, thrusting against the night sky to the west. Further ahead the face of the bluff changed, leaned back invitingly and became climbable. Shaded into its ridge were a cluster of stout, long rooted edifices. The variety of shapes and their untidy juxtaposition, spires and triangular facades impinging on massive rectangles, was unmistakably academic.

"I think that's Columbia up there," he said. "The question is; how do we get there from here?"

Chad turned to him and grinned. "You caint."

"Seriously."

"That guy I asked said there was a way up through the park . . . Yeah there it is." Following Chad's pointing finger he saw the stairway, its landing lit with fluorescent lamps. Alternating with the cones of light were evenly spaced inroads from the darkness, patches where the stairs were obliterated out of sight.

"You sure about this? I mean it looks like a kind of tiring climb. That's rather a long way up and steep besides."

"Well, maybe so," Chad said. "But we're not getting anywhere walking down this street in the wrong direction. Anyway I'm getting jumpy down here; I feel like I got on one of those glow in the dark halloween masks, you know?"

"I know."

They crossed the street and went through a gate flanked by a pair of aluminum painted lamp posts. The harsh light tinged the edges of objects with a violet corona, but abrasively stripped away shadows and wiped out depth so that everything it touched acquired the same, hard two dimensional cast. He averted his eyes, trying to see into the darkness ahead.

Steadily, treading lightly on the ball of their feet to minimize the sound, they climbed the stairs. Close to them were small bushes, and a few stunted trees, but behind these nothing else was visible. The void away from the stairs was impenetrably black, like a cave turned inside out.

Once Rick thought he heard whispering voices and he wondered if Chad had heard them also, but if he had, it went unmentioned, and they continued mindlessly upward. Little by little, fatigue eroded his anxiety. When they reached the halfway point, and flopped down on a bench to rest, the only thing he could think about was

those remaining stairs, and the number of times he would have to lift his legs. At that moment he was in better shape than he had ever been before. Before the army, he would have had to crawl the last fifty steps, drooling cigarette scum and old booze with every breath. They got you that way, he thought, right by the old narcissism. They even let you put your own ring in your nose and smiled as they stuck their finger through it.

"Okay, private no class Chadwick," he said. "Onward and upward."

As he lifted his foot for the first step, Chad nudged him and he froze with the foot in the air, like an addled hen. Three boys had appeared on the next landing, thirty feet up from where they had rested. The middle one, and judging from his clothing, the leader, leaned on the knobbed handle of a slender black umbrella. His body was relaxed, his face calm—obviously he was a boy who was in his home place, and knew it, who wore the fact of it like a doeskin glove. He had on a red cardigan sweater, opened all the way to his waist, and a round, narrowly brimmed cap pulled low on his forehead. His expression as he watched them was almost tolerant, the expression of a cop about to chide someone for walking on the grass. His two companions stood stiffly on either side of him, dressed identically in white T-shirts and dungarees and each had a white strip of cloth encircling his forehead.

Chad touched his elbow and they started up the stairs toward the boys. He told himself he was disillusioned. Three small boys not one of whom looked anymore than thirteen. Really!

"You gentlemen lost?" the boy asked. He tapped the sharpened tip of the umbrella on the concrete once and his two companions uncrossed their arms, the blades in their hands opening with a single oiled sound—Flick!—drawing first blood from the air. Rick felt his stomach muscles give a responsive twitch; not an emotional response, this, but his body's memory of every blade that had ever laid open its flesh, and the sensation of being cut which was somehow worse than its aftermath of pain.

Watching their faces for the effect, the boy smiled, with paternal pride. "Quick, ain't they?" he said. His voice was caressingly gentle, controlled; the voice of one who has learned that there is no need to yell. "These my men," he continued, "And I am the Man." He lifted the umbrella a few inches and again tapped it on the concrete—Plink!—for emphasis. "This is my park too, and right now you standing on my stairs." He glanced left and right at his two "men," then leaned forward confidentially. "Most times we would kill you for this, but I see you wearing the uniform of the country. My men and I respects the uniform of the country and all it stand for, just like Miss Johanson say, so I have decided not to kill you. Thass right! However," he paused, savoring the word, and finding it to his taste, repeated it. "However, we a little shy of bread this month, so . . ." He extended his hand, palm up, in their direction.

Chad reached for his inside jacket pocket and the

"men" came shiveringly alert, like bird dogs, but perceptively relaxed when he produced nothing more than his cigarettes. He lit one and flipped the pack to the boy, who deftly plucked it out of the air, removing four cigarettes—two for his companions, two for himself—then, after weighing the pack in his hand for a moment, tossed it back to Chad.

"So?" Chad drawled. "So what?"

"Say what?" asked the boy.

"So what do you want from us?"

"I tole you, baby. Bread, green stuff, you know—money." His tone expressed infinite patience with Chad's stupidity.

"Why?" asked Chad.

"Why?" the boy chuckled. "Mmmmmhmmmm. Why. 'Cause I say so, mostly. You trespassing on my property, see? You lucky I don't kill you. All you got to do is pay a little toll and you can go through."

Chad shrugged. "How're we supposed to know . . ."

"Ignorance of the law is no excuse," recited the boy. "Besides, who you trying to bullshit? Everybody in this whole town know about the heights." He paused, considering. "Where you from, anyway?"

"Louisiana," Chad said, and Rick winced inwardly. "Baton Rouge."

"Louisiana. Huh; my old lady from down there, which makes us pretty near home-boys—you oughta be glad to give money to me."

"You ought not to take money from a home boy," suggested Chad.

"Thas right, whitey—be clear about that. If you don't give it to us, we sure as *hell* going to take it."

"Don't git too puffed up sonny," Chad said. "The only reason you're still standing there is because I got scruples against beating up on little boys."

"You got the weight whitey, but we got the stuff to cut some of it off," interjected the boy, nodding towards the knives.

Chad smiled. "As I was saying, I got scruples, be-which, being a holder of the second degree black belt in kempo karate, I am forbidden by law to fight anything less than three grown men, and then only in self defense. First thing I had to do in New York was register my hands as deadly weapons."

The boy slowly shook his head from side to side, giggling. "Hee-hee-hee, man! If you ain't the biggest fool to ever come through here, you damn well the most wicked liar." He shifted his attention to Rick, who while they debated had been trying, successfully, he thought, to maintain a facial expression which combined boredom with a hint of certain underlying capabilities for lethal action. "Whas a matter with friend here? He look like he falling asleep." Addressing Rick directly, he said, "Wake up, friend—say something, show us you still alive—while you still can." When Rick didn't reply, (what could one say?) the boy turned back to Chad, and said, "You better check his heart—he maybe dead already, and nobody know

it."

"He never talks," Chad offered in explanation.

"He can't talk?" asked the boy. "You trying to bullshit me again. How'd he git in the U. S. Army if he can't talk?"

"Oh, he can talk all right, I guess. He just won't. He was drafted and he hates the army so much he hasn't said one word since—for two months to be exact. He wants them to think he's crazy so's they'll discharge him . . . If you want the truth, I think he's a little crazy myself. Awful easy to get along with though."

"Yeah?" the boy said dubiously, "how you know all this if he never talked to you?"

"He wrote it down for me," Chad said. "He's been to college and he writes real nice. At night he sticks a big wad of bubble gum in his mouth so he won't say anything intelligent while he's asleep."

"I bet you he talk if I stick this in his ear." said the boy, patting his umbrella.

"I doubt it," said Chad. "Like I tole you, he's crazy—they's no telling what he might do if you start messing with him. One old boy back in the barracks was bothering him, two weeks ago—you know, poking him and all, until Old Rick finally got tired of it, grabbed a hold of the guy and like to bit his nose off. We had to pry him loose with an entrenching tool."

"A what?" the boy asked.

"A shovel," Chad said.

"Hunh!" grunted the boy. Yet, from then on, the way his eyes occasionally wandered toward Rick suggested he was at least considering the possibility of Madness, if not fully convinced of its presence.

"What about those two?" asked Chad. "Your bodyguards aren't the gabbiest boys I ever saw, either." Rick looked at them again. While the boy and Chad talked, they had stood, silent, legs spread, switch-blades loosely held next to their thighs, their only movement the stretch and sag of breathing and an intermittent slow flexing of wrists, which was somehow separate from the rest of them, as if the knives rather than their bodies were its source.

"Them!" the boy said, investing the word with affection and mild contempt. "Thas different—they don't talk because I don't want them to." He squatted with the umbrella between his knees, his forehead barely touching the knob. "I do all their thinking and talking—"

"And they do all your fighting," finished Chad. Lazily, the boy slid his right hand down the umbrella shaft and, in one fluid motion, drew the umbrella behind him and whipped it forward, its point on line to Chadwick's right eye. Silken fabric hissed through the circle of thumb and palm, then his hand caught the knob and the point arced to the concrete, striking with that same metallic note—Plink! Neither he nor Chad changed expression, and the boy said quietly, as though nothing had gone between, "You got a awful big mouf you know? I taken a notion to carve it bigger if you aint careful."

Rick felt a droplet of sweat trickle down his ribcage.

"Well," said Chad, "I been told that before. Just caint seem to keep it shut though. It's a terrible thing." He shook his head dolefully. The boy stood up and flicked a minute particle of lint from his sweater. Sighing deeply, as though suddenly remembering a burdensome responsibility, he said, "I enjoy this little talk, but we seem to have got off the subject. You an' friend lay you wallets on the step there, if you please. I can't be foolin' around here no more."

Chad backed down four steps, nodding for Rick to do likewise. While he moved he opened his jacket and unstrapped the dark blue garrison belt, then stripped it from his waist and began to loop it around his right hand like a bandage; all this done casually, automatically, without taking his eyes from the boy.

Rick followed him, imitating his moves and when they finished each of them had six inches of belt and the brass buckle swinging loose from the right hand; by mutual agreement the time for conversation seemed to have ended.

The boy slid forward, his umbrella cocked and poised like a rapier, his two companions circling away from him in a slow sidling flanking movement, their faces showing emotion for the first time; lips peeled back, eyes bright—not malicious or hard at all, but glistening with the pure perfect joy of animals at play.

The boy hesitated. "Nah!" he said, and abruptly, for no immediately obvious reason, sat down on the top step. "Nah," he repeated moseosely. "I just aint in the mood." He spoke in close to a whisper, talking primarily to himself. "Killin', cuttin', fightin'—it just like everything else—you got to have the mood for it." He was watching Chad carefully and Rick sensed that he was waiting, and perhaps hoped for Chad to say the word or make the move that would bring the right mood on him. The boy's companions had stopped also and turned to him, astonished, silently beseeching him to let them continue. After a few seconds, he waved an imperious hand and they moved reluctantly behind him. Chad said nothing, but merely began to string his belt back through the loops on his pants with an air of profound indifference, as if this outcome was no more preferable to him than any other. Hoping that he projected the same attitude, Rick slipped his belt into his pocket and buttoned his coat, feeling betrayed by the sudden demand of his lungs for deeper, more frequent draughts of air.

It ended so. If in the beginning, when he and Chad had been halted by the boy, there was a core of discernible sense to the event, that such a thing could, no should, occur at such a time in this place, there was yet no corresponding sense in the boy's refusal to carry the dormant violence to its destination. It puzzled him, for he had always believed that beyond a certain point events carried their own weight, forced their own conclusions, regardless of human preferences in the matter. Certainly he was relieved, yet the boy had maneuvered them at his own will to the edge of something, perhaps death, and

then on his own whim, had left them there hanging, —deflated, was the word that came to mind. Before letting them pass the boy pointed out again that irrespective of his desire to show mercy, there was still the issue of property rights to be settled, they were still, in a sense, trespassers. Chad settled on four dollars—two for him, two for his "men"—which seemed a standard unit for the boy, whatever the medium of exchange. The boy took the money and tucked it in his pocket without looking at it, then he and his companions stalked off the landing and disappeared into the surrounding darkness, so vivid the apparition, so quick the departure that Rick immediately began reconstructing their figures and the event in his mind, already uncertain where imagination and reality overlapped.

As they trudged up the last flight he asked Chad why he thought the boy had let them go. "Was he scared, did he like us or what? I mean it was kind of strange it ended like that, don't you think?"

"I don't know about him, but I was scared, buddy," Chad said, vehemently. After thinking a moment, he amended, "I don't think he was scared, though. When he sat there, it was more like he was disappointed than anything else. We were pretty damn lucky. The other two wanted us so bad they could taste it, and if they'd been running the show . . . well." He grinned crookedly.

At the top of the stairs a waist high stone wall parted, allowing entrance to the Columbia campus. Between the wall and the outer buildings was a concrete mall and there they stopped to look down on the place they had just escaped. Seen this way, certain features of the park became visible; they could distinguish the darker shadows of trees, massive bulges of rock, and indiscriminately scattered clumps of bushes; could see the park's general shape, the way it lost its steepness on the lower slopes and splayed out to meet Amsterdam Avenue which, without the widely spaced street lamps, might have seemed itself an extension of the park, so consistently were the windows blacked out along its length. To their right the bluff rounded off and became a hill just before the street where the city once more asserted itself, where there were enticing lights, noises, cars, and, one could assume civilized human beings. From here Rick could see it was a long way, perhaps a half mile, to where Amsterdam Avenue intersected with the other one; in terms of distance, at least, Chad had picked the better route. And in terms of results, the fact that they were still alive, who could say that it hadn't been safer to come the way they had? Yet looking down on the stairs, so exposed by the lights that were supposed to make them safe, he felt an exploratory charge of nausea—the first harbinger of panic—slide quickly through his belly.

"You'd never know there was anybody in that park," Chad said. "Looks like the emptiest place in the world from up here, doesn't it?"

"Yeah . . . what I'm wondering is how many others are down there that we didn't see?"

"And saw us you mean? Good question. Could be hundreds I guess."

"Thanks a *lot*," he said grimacing. "Let's make it, shall we?"

They cut between two buildings and as soon as he stepped within the campus he regained some of his confidence. Gnarled, dignified elms spread aloofly over the sidewalks and there were lawns clipped golf-green short filling the spaces between buildings. The sidewalk meandered across the campus in gentle curves, as if its makers had wanted one to walk slowly, and forget, for a while the need to reach a destination. Slightly elated by the familiar ambience of a college campus, he left the sidewalk, and strolled on the edge of the grass, pretending to himself for a moment that he was a student again and that all this was his. At the end of the sidewalk were two stone pillars hung with the open wings of an ornate cast iron gate. Passing through the gate, they emerged on a street alive with traffic and brilliant with the cold aura of those ubiquitous fluorescent streetlights; only then did it occur to him that the campus had been as dim and quiet as the park and the Harlem street below it.

While they stood outside the gate trying to decide which way to go, two young men and a girl, walking with their arms linked, came down the street towards them. Taking quick inventory of the tweed jackets and the girl's long straight hair, Rick felt an instant rapport and he smiled. But just before the threesome reached them, the young man on the inside freed his arm and stopping a few feet away, he bent over and sweepingly drew a shape in the air with his hands—unmistakably—the shape of a large mushroom, while the girl and the remaining young man applauded and vibrated with laughter. Before Rick could reply or explain they had moved on down the street, punching the wit appreciatively on the arm, and laughing still.

"What was that all about?" Chad asked, genuinely puzzled.

Wanting suddenly to tear off his uniform and somehow disappear, Rick said through gritted teeth, "Those sonofabitches won't think it's so funny in a couple of years. Supercilious bastards! What do they know, anyway?"

But the shame and inarticulate rage stayed with him until they reached the doorstep of the apartment building where Bob lived—five and a half blocks away—and it still took an effort to let the emotion be superseded by the anticipation he wanted to feel, should have felt, for seeing his friends.

The front door to the building was slightly ajar so he decided not to use the buzzer. They took the narrow, wheezy self service elevator to the fourth floor and walked down the hall to Bob's apartment. He knocked and heard shuffling noises inside and then an unnaturally lengthy silence, as if they were hoping whoever it would go away.

"Maybe they think we're bill collectors," he said. "Open up or we'll huff and we'll puff and we'll . . ."

The door opened to the length of the chain lock and Bob's face appeared in the crack.

"Wha do—Oh for crissake," Bob said, and closed the door again. They heard him fumble with the chain and call, "It's Rick, honey," and then they were inside the apartment, Rick and Bob punching each other enthusiastically while Jean and Chad stood by and waited for them to cool down.

A few minutes later he was seated on the couch in their living room, revolving a squat glass of scotch between his palms. Jean was next to him on the couch and Bob sat astride a straight backed chair facing them, absentmindedly tracing circles on her knee with his fingertips—a gesture which for Rick embodied the tranquility he had always associated with them.

Chad had removed himself to a deep chair in the far corner of the room where he seemed perfectly content to sip his scotch and reply pleasantly when they thought to include him in the conversation. Rick had already mentioned how he and Chad had ended up in Harlem. And the subsequent trip through the park—without giving any hint of the encounter on the stairs. Mentioning the park had apparently been enough excitement for the moment. "You what?" Bob had said, while Jean gasped and covered her mouth with her hand. "Do you know where you were?" Bob had continued feverishly, his voice rising in pitch slightly. "That's Morningside Park, pal—the jungle—the daddam mugging capital of the world." His voice contained a curious mixture of fear and pride. Rick had let it drop while Jean fixed the drinks.

Now, watching the oily streamers of scotch swirl around the icecubes in his glass, he felt rather ugly and out of place in their impeccable little nest. From the way Bob had spoken it seemed obvious he had little idea of what really went on in the "jungle" just a few hundred yards from his front door. That had been Bob's excited imagination talking, and perhaps a pardonable touch of the expertise that he had seen in other friends of his who lived in the city; none of them could bear to believe that there was anything about New York that they didn't know, first hand.

He played with the idea of saying nothing about what had happened to them. But something chummed resentfully in his stomach at the thought of leaving all those words unsaid, all those impressions unrefined. And he knew also that the fear he had felt had not disappeared but lurked somewhere around a corner of his mind waiting for him to remember everything just exactly as it happened, so it and the others like it could come skittering to the center of his consciousness, like bats to a window.

Tilting the glass, he swallowed once—too much—the scotch hitting his glottis like a golf ball. He coughed four times, harshly, and looking up at his friends, caught the expression of shy concern on their faces. He smiled to reassure them, and began his story.



TWO POEMS by Cynthia Maul

WAYS OF SEEING NIGHT

I

I watched a morning's shadow leaves
Fill the pail of night like weightless plums
That bloomed from buds of dusky trees. Dark comes,
A hungry shadow thief, to seize the deeper parts of light.
Every leaf I see grows half in night.

II

I listen to the whispers off and on the trees,
When I walk at night through wrinkled leaves.
Or sometimes this: I hear a cracking like mad dice.
Other ghosts must roll for me in colder nights
To still my shuffle through their second sleeps.
I have a darker half before me, to meet
These shadows of the street.

JAMIE—IN MOODY'S ORCHARD

In the Moody's fruitless orchard,
Where spider webs unravel in the wind.
Fifty apple dwarfs wait nakedly for spring.
He stoops to pick a season's legacy of rotting fruits
To smash them on the water's thickened skin.
(He came to skate, but the ice is too thin.)

My restless winter son dangles from a dwarf's arthritic
limb;
Since March has shed a rain, he, in the playground of his
mind,
Dreams of crazy kites and baseball suits.
Then leaves. A day and dreams, like webs, unweave in wild
Loops.

THE DISORDERING OF JUDITH

When Judith lived among the painted cups, trying
To hold at bay the old vulgarian, it was all
Her small hands could do to make him fall
Exactly at her hem and keep him sighing
At charms that had all but ceased from dying
In lovely dainty Judith. But words are small
And even old men in love sometimes seemed tall
To Judith whose love was really in the trying.

And now the only leaves that hang are gold
And frozen as the fingers on Judith's wrist.
But do not blame dear Judith's rage to try.
If what they say at tea is true, when old,
Lovely Judith understood all of this,
But, dying, pleaded to be told why.

Sheelah Clarkson

OCTOBER IN WALES

Stretching into shadow
The mountain yawns, leans to eye
The people at its feet,
Then stretches high
Once more and settles with a slow
Thud to watch the proceedings.

"Greetings,"

Cries the Queen, "to Aberfan.
We (Prime Minister Wilson and I) can
Hardly help you now. Perhaps if you had sent
A request for aid to Parliament . . ."
Helmet lights trap her in their glare,
Twist, torture her face, grab sleek hair,
Explode her into Medusa.

In winter when the black briars
Tweak and tremble,
We, shut in tight,
Gather branches to build our fires;
With us, our mother, with thimble
And needle, sings of the October night:
Katherine, Katherine, where will you be,
When the screech owl wrangles in the dark fir tree?
When down the Rhondda mountains the sun comes skating?
"Down in the mines, Mother, waiting, waiting."

Susan Self

ON THIS OR THAT SIDE OF BREAKING

“What are you crying for?” he asked.
“For you, for me, for the world.”
– Bernard Malamud

(for Tom and Aldy Molyneux)

I

They'd been to see the setter pup,
Who'd stand quail, snakes and mice,
And something began to end for them –
They listened to the leaves,
Listened to their cracking,
And thought of how trees crack,
Breaking apart in dead of winter.

Broken down to bare parts,
The pups head was bred too fine,
His markings slight,
And there was something dull
About his moves,
As if he'd come to life already old.

Weeds of summer, broken and spare parts
Of days they'd sprung from,
Altered not their choice
To leave behind the leggy pup
Who hunted down the wind
For hidden things.

Their eyes, caught by the turning leaves,
Turned upon the season
Revolving marrow-deep in them,
Revolving like the sap of trees,
Revolving in a blood-wry need for death
And a finer need to blaze
Upon the fields of bone and flesh.
At last one said,
“It is the fall again.”

II

(the young wife)

Flesh of old women are the leaves;
Cold sap splits the year.
The edge of something grows in me,
Rain-kissed awake to age in tears.
Flesh of old women are the leaves.

(the husband)

Time beats us at our game,
Backhands us, smashes us
Until we're smooth.
Of all the leaves that fall,
Not one is mine,
Nor can I make one stay.
What's the good of going
If all beginnings end,
And we've no choice?

(the friend)

Beginnings break us,
Not the end of things.
The first day of the summer sun
Is the winter's moon begun.
These fiery leaves broke months ago,
But live much brighter now than then.
We live in old beginnings.

(the young wife)

I flow through earth. No more.
What's north of me waits cold as stone;
The time stays warmer here.
Ding-dong, ding-dong. The bells
I hear say oranges and lemons.
Stay! Stay! My earth is passing;
Ages weep for me. I'll be a gray
And wizened weed
And break before the wind . . .
Old hag! Dry stuff of life! I renounce you,
Take you not for what you seem,
But what you are: deep-wrinkled fear
And what I may become.
My blue-eyed son, my colors wear
When all my colors fade,
When all my former gods are dead . . .
O flesh, turn backward
To my wet beginning.

(the husband)
I'll go one day,
Hissing like a whisper jet,
To some sunset,
And forego all pain, crime,
War and death. My son to be,
Shall I break faith with you?
You who will, like a god,
Perhaps, not understand our folly,
Nor that finer need
For understanding
Of dead leaves. |
When did I kiss
His pale head free of sleep?

(the friend)
We have already broken faith
With one, loosed our ways
Upon the young dog's age.
Tricked him, broke him, for a moment,
To our hands, then left him there,
Scenting early quail, snakes, and mice
In this poor year.

(the husband)
Is something broken, something made?

(the friend)
To live on this or that side of breaking,
Or on the edge of aging flesh,
Is, at least, to be someplace.

(the young wife)
Old woman, mother, witch,
Shall I take your new-old hands
And paper face,
And make a place for them
In the house where I will go?

(the husband)
What can we know of love, humility,
Or of the death of bone?

(the friend)
Remembrances of rain
Will wake us on some reckless hill,
And there we will begin,
Caught in the same bright, bitter sun,

(the young wife)
To hoe a row of dear cabbages,
To teach the children how to sing;
Teach them love and how to dance

(the husband)
And all the other things we forgot –
Teach them hate, and laughter,
Tears and loneliness. And more.

(the friend)
Each day has sun and moon,
Is hot and cold, dark and light –
Each day has love and hate,
And all the rest we remember.
Cloak the children with an eagle's wing,
And in that sky they'll learn to sing.

(the young wife)
Look! Look! Our dear kings and queens
Are dying, dead, or underground,
Are stick-men dancing jigs . . .
O where is Alice? Where the looking glass?

(the husband)
Which side? Which side?

(the friend)
Yes. Yes. This world's a fine place,
An awful place, a quiet shrieking place.
We cannot stop! Let's to our lives.

(the young wife)
In all that dead land? Where my bones are falling down?

(the husband)
There? To hear the thud of death
In every noon-dark sky?

(the friend)
Yes. And, living, find a way across.

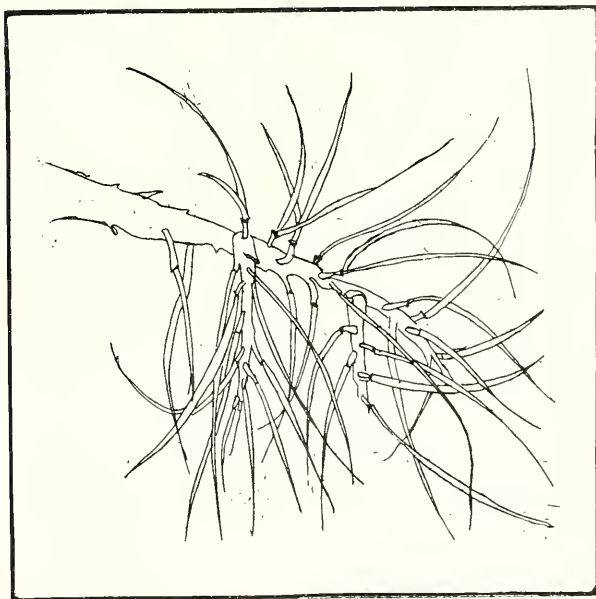
III

And they remembered the young dog,
And leaves in the turning year,
Remembered the sounds
Weaving in the wind,
Out of the wind,
Out of the ticking
That told the season;
And remembered the color
That knit them together,
The color of pheasants in autumn.
Was it the young dog they remembered?
Or was it the clatter
Of something on nothing,
Like voice scraping air?

The fields are overflowing
With the growing rip and surf of night.

The three of them head home,
Like small animals racing sundown.

Harry Humes



FASCINATION WITH OWLS

Because they sang so soft an echo of down-warmth,
never confessing the shaft in the feather,
the center-nested old sharp heart;
because they called and drank so quickly
the milky screams in the thicket;
because they were moon-rhythm and necessary skip,
wearing the disguise of my sleep;
because, when the worm turned in the sun
and words woke to warm our acts;
though we slit yesterday's dead throat over and over
for the dry evidence, for light;
the fabled for wisdom and their subtle
progeny were gone.

Betty Adcock

AUNT ADA AT THANKSGIVING

Aunt Ada at Thanksgiving
Sparrow-brown from neck to hell
With an arm nailed to her side
That sways and jangles in her motion;
A pendulum faultlessly linked to her heart.

Invited out of pity,
Left alone through dread,
Welded to a chair as graceful as a butterfly
Aunt Ada smiles at me and confides
"You look like a movie star that once was."

Aunt Ada Once Was makes life motions--
Denies God at grace and stares at her champagne,
Lips her glass, mashes her turkey, manhandles her napkin.
Aunt Ada pacifies a ferocious bowl of jello, gathers her robes
And returns to her orange chair.

Head back, eyes closed impervious to the noise of the kitchen
Ada sleeps alone astride an orange butterfly
That glides from flower to flower
And softens her face with a mask of pollen
And stirs her body with its gentle motion.

Ted Walsworth





TWO POEMS by Susan Settlemyre

DISORDER

The seasons are disarranged this year. Sunday,
Late in January, was auspice for lovers,
A premature spring or posthumous
Summer, too bright for coats. The only wrap
They needed, long-haired girls and laughing men,
Were arms caught at the waist. I, alone
And looking for a month more orderly,
Passed, grudging them their free embrace,
Pretending to feel a hand that summer knew.
I walked too long that day down streets whose markers
Were the driftwood surfaces of myrtle trees,
And those appropriately, correctly
Bare. But others walked and children played
Their summer games beside the winter-showing
Streets. No snow would fall, so twisted was
The pattern of every other year.

ICESTORM

"This looks," she said, "like war, a country bombed.
Look how limbs fall and hang disjointed
Like broken arms."

"It's beautiful," he answered,
"The world should be so crystallized by ice."

"Rain turning cold. Yes, rain can be unkind.
A travesty of beauty. Midas has
Made mockery in gilding and breaking at once.
A tree outside my window split in two
From weight of frozen rain."

"Rain is not ice.
It's not the same at all. This silvered scope,
What can it have to do with *rain*?" he asked.
"Rain has no delicacy, so little force.
It gives no visions like we get from ice."

"Rain is deceptive, stronger than you think,
And rain, made cruel, is the cause of this."

"No! Rain and ice are seasons separate,
And only ice has all this rigid beauty!"

But "Rain can be unkind," was all she'd say.

ST. VALENTINES DAY, 1967

Sleep, sweet prince of motorcycles
and gin and mustaches
Sleep in your troubled holiday
of wanderjahr
Sleep in your netting, in the hollow
of someone else's borrowed body
Sleep upon the horror of the grins
and worshipping mob
of the swirling of electronics
and the certainty of scale models
underglass
Sleep sweet blond prince
of my restlessness, begetter of rum laughter
mimic of yesterday
begetter of me
Sleep upon my eyes, upon my hair
upon my lacy helplessness.

Glenda Brownback

A SUICIDE REMEMBERS HIS DEATH: THE EUCHARIST

Into these kingdoms, flightless and awkward,
where no head dreams of time left open,
no heart ticks a vision of wings
to spread and carry beyond a time,
burning its age like wax from the arm,
each feather set in its holy flame.
Here Icarus, out of my billowing skies
lights beside me and whispers a word,
a promise of grace and permanence.
(Turning, turning from body and bone
chalice of blood fermented and drawn
from the fragrant flesh of the dying and dead.)
Icarus, you'll understand what I say:

held to the maddening eye of grace,
believing in flight, I stepped from the edge.
I fell, and heard the pigeons sleeping,
bundled beneath the gargoyled eaves.
Icarus, Icarus you'll understand:

dumb and staring they examine my head.
In that cranial window a cold star rises.
I spread my naked arms and rise, enchanted.

William Keens

Adventures Of The Dastardly Bachelor

ROBERTA ENGLEMAN

This is the story of how Sherlock Holmes got on (and off) the “confiscated shelf” in the principal’s office of my junior high school. It lived there with its fellow offenders, branded with the red letters “c onfiscated” on the binding, until I came eleven years later to reclaim it.

I had no idea that it was even languishing there and probably would never have remembered. But fortunately for Sherlock Holmes (less so for me), some time after I graduated from college, my junior high school record proved incomplete. All my seventh grade records, and along with them a Stanford Binet, had been lost. Obviously I had not existed from age 12½ to 13½, and for that reason executives hedged at employing me. So to prove that I had not been away from the seventh grade having illegitimate triplets or some such thing, I went back to my home town to speak with my principal. His name was Mr. Julian DeForrest. He was, as I remembered, round and red of face, and his glasses had no rims.

I called him as soon as I could. “Mr. DeForrest,” I began, “I’m a former student. You probably don’t remember me, but—”

“Of course I do,” he said heartily. “Who are you?”

“My name is Jones. Elizabeth L. Jones.”

“Of course I remember you. You played the tuba.”

“The piccolo.”

“So you did. You know, I was just reading the other

day that piccolo players are in great demand. Now if you want me to write a recommendation—”

“No thank you,” I said. Evidently Mr. DeForrest was still just-reading things. I wondered if he still delivered homilies on them. He once kept the entire school until 3:25 explaining why the art students should not throw etching acid out the 3rd floor windows. (He had just read that it was bad for arborvitae.)

“What I really called about is my seventh grade records.”

“They were excellent, I’m sure.”

“I’m sure they were, too,” I said, “but I can’t prove it. You see they’re lost—and so is my Stanford Binet.”

“Your Stanford Binet! Oh, that is bad!”

“Could you have someone look for them? It’s rather important.”

“Right away, right away. Drop by tomorrow afternoon and you can pick them—oh no you can’t. It’s against the rules for a student to see his Stanford Binet.”

“I understand,” I said patiently, “but I’ll drop by anyway.”

“Goodbye, Miss Jones.”

I spent the rest of the day laying plans for the forcible abduction of a Stanford Binet.

The next afternoon I called at Mr. DeForrest’s office. I was asked to take a seat. It was explained to me by a

harassed and bespattered young mimeograph operator that Mr. DeForrest was disciplining a student. While she returned to wiping the ink off the venerable machine and the adjacent wall, I sat down and began to look at the back issues of education journals. After ten minutes I said, "That poor child has been in there a long time."

The mimeograph girl cranked the machine three more times and accidentally warped it with ink. "That's Gilbert. He pushed the alarm button and we had a fire drill."

"Whatever possessed him?"

"I don't know, but it's pretty easy to do. It's right behind your head."

I jumped. There it was indeed, ready for a taller head than mine to set off, an unmarked doorbell contraption.

"Why is it there?"

"I don't know. That's where they put it."

The tale developed that when the unfortunate Gilbert had pushed the bell, the unwarned and panicky faculty, adrenalin at full stream, had cleared the building in record time, marching the students out in doubletime. I gathered part of this from Gilbert's audible protests on the other side of the door.

Sample: "Young man, you nearly caused Miss Wheeler to have to reschedule her geography test."

"I'm very sorry. I was just curious."

"Curiosity is an excellent virtue," said DeForrest, his mind switching momentarily onto automatic pilot. "But—" (it went back to manual) "—not at the expense of Miss Wheeler's geography test."

This sounded like a lengthy business. I could just see the memorandum in all teachers' mailboxes tomorrow:

"To the faculty: Disregard all firebells except those scheduled on your weekly calendar. JDF."

While the thundering fates closed in on Gilbert, I wandered around the anteroom and read all the brass certificates of achievement that lived on the walls. This was how I discovered the confiscated shelf. The bottom two shelves housed such respectable things as *McGuffey's Eclectic Reader* and a few unclaimed scout manuals. The Bohemians lived above, on the third shelf. There they were, the true romances and horror stories snatched from young readers and stamped in smoldering red:

Dracula

Bomba the Jungle Boy

The Insidious Dr. Fu Manchu

The Secret of Marley Manor (The terror that stalked Marley Manor had no name, no face; yet it threatened Deirdre De Winter in the middle of the night.)

And there, lo, in the middle of all this, was a book of mine. It was a perfectly respectable selection from Sherlock Holmes. I pulled it down and blew the dust off it solicitously. To make sure it was really mine, I checked inside. It had my name and under it, in DeForrest's neat writing, the date of confiscation, some eleven years before, when I was in the seventh grade.

I glanced at the principal's door. The final catastrophe had not yet caught up with Gilbert, but it was near. The book made me wince. It had caused me to be on that same carpet that Gilbert was now, and all on account of Sherlock Holmes.

In those days, I think, the seventh grade boys had shop while the seventh grade girls had study hall after lunch. At any rate there were no boys around, which was beginning to make things tedious. So Chucky, Glenda, Kate (whose last name I couldn't remember anymore) and I left study hall one by one and rendezvoused in the bathroom.

Glenda was all for leaving school, but there was still seventh period. Chucky and I, the timider ones, wanted to go back and finish our work. Kate, the ingenious one, had the solution. We would go down to the musical instruments room, where there were bound to be plenty of props, and do our English lesson for the next day the way Mrs. Blake once suggested. Creative dramatics, she called it. It gave us an opportunity to cut class, be off limits, and do our homework all at once.

"Elizabeth has the next story in the book right there, don't you," she said.

As a matter of fact I did not. What I had was my copy of Sherlock Holmes. But that didn't matter. Glenda liked the idea, and Glenda, once gotten in momentum, was hard to stop. At three minute intervals, we slithered one at a time downstairs through the bandroom and into the storage room.

We picked a story with four characters. After the casting was done, Glenda (the tallest girl in the class) was Holmes; I, as proprietress of the book, was Watson; Kate was an Offended Lady; and Chucky was the Dastardly Bachelor who had left her at the altar and done her out of her dowry.

Glenda lit up a cigarette in place of the prescribed meerschaum pipe and gazed intellectually across the baseball diamond that served as London while I, Watson, tried to console her for the lack of stimulating cases. Suddenly there was a knock at the bass drum.

"Come in!" cried Holmes.

The Offended Lady entered and struck a forsaken pose.

"Heavens, Watson, show our fair visitor to a seat," cried Holmes.

We had no chair, so we adjusted her into the bell of a tuba that looked steady.

"What is your problem?" asked Holmes.

"Alas, Mr. Holmes," said the Offended Lady, waving her arms histrionically and unconsciously working her way tighter into the bell of the tuba, "I have been betrayed."

She proceeded to unfold her story while Holmes paced about knocking her cigarette ashes out the window onto London and I looked medical. The Lady had been abandoned by the Dastardly Bachelor, who meant to abscond with her Aunt Julia's jewels while feigning an interest in



1910

marriage, the cad.

"Aha," said Holmes, flipping through several pages of deducing, because Chucky was complaining about her small part. "I deduce," she ad-libbed, "that the Dastardly Bachelor is now without."

"Really, Holmes!" said I.

"Meretricious," said she.

"What's that?" whispered the Offended Lady in the tuba to me.

Meanwhile, the Dastardly Bachelor had made her entrance, armed with a vicious duelling umbrella. Holmes, her usual cool self, picked up a cello bow.

"Well, Mr. Sherlock Holmes, you've finally met your match," said she.

Holmes put out her cigarette and leveled her cold eye on the Dastard. "We shall see," she said.

While they pranced around in and out of the bassoons and bass viols, the Offended Lady whispered to me that she was wedged in the tuba. I was getting ready to give her a good jerk when I noticed that there were curious little stalactites of sawdust issuing from the soundproof ceiling at irregular intervals.

"Holmes!" said I. "What is this singular occurrence?"

"Elementary," said she. "It is caused by a great number of running footsteps."

"You mean—" said I.

"Exactly. A fire drill."

"A fire drill!" cried the Offended Lady. "Get me out of this damn tuba!"

We all gathered around and gave her a big pull. Out came Kate, and we all made a dash for it. Glenda paused long enough to snatch up the incriminating cigarette. Once we were outside we looked around for our study hall, but we could not find it, and we four looked very suspicious dashing around trying to find our proper line. So we melted into a nearby algebra class and tried to look algebraic. But we were ferreted out and betrayed by the teacher, who turned us over to the dastardly DeForrest when he inspected the troops.

"What are you doing with this class?" he asked us, but we didn't have to answer. He had noticed that Glenda still had the cigarette stub in her hand. She had forgotten in the rush to toss it down.

We found ourselves immediately standing on the carpet of his office pointing our toes this way and that for something to look at. During the preliminaries he paced back and forth (the caged lion technique) planning his strategy. We must have broken so many rules he didn't know how to start.

"Smoking," he began, suddenly stopping his pacing in front of Glenda, "is a bad habit."

"I don't smoke much," she said. Which was true. She had taken up smoking six months ago, hoping to stunt her growth. It was not working.

"She had to smoke," said Kate. "We were doing creative dramatics. It was a prop."

"You're right," he said, "it is a prop. A crutch. A

social crutch. I'm glad to see that you admit it," he said, pacing on.

"I mean," said Kate with infinite patience, "we were acting out a story, and that was part of it."

"What were you acting out? Is it what you have there, Elizabeth?"

I handed him the book rather reluctantly. He turned through it and looked at the pictures, which unfortunately consisted of two murders and a three-color print of the Hound of the Baskervilles. It went onto his desk just out of my reach. I expected it to be branded with the damning red ink, but for the time being it was in limbo.

"Did you have permission to be in the instrument storage room?"

"I play the piccolo," I said.

"And I play the piccolo too," said Chucky.

"But you should have left there," he said, anxious to deliver the final blow, "when the fire bell rang."

"But we couldn't hear the fire bell," said Glenda.

"The room is soundproof," said Chucky

"We couldn't hear anything," said Kate.

"Of course not," he said. "Fire drills are not scheduled during hours when the music room is normally in use. If you had been in your proper place you would have heard the bell."

"Yes sir." (Four times repeated.)

"And now about this book. You stay here, Elizabeth. The rest of you may go to the Dean of Girls for your whipping. Tell her Elizabeth is coming."

While they were leaving he took a second look at the pictures. "After a careful examination of this book," he said, "I can see that it is not the sort a young lady should read. I'm disappointed in you, Elizabeth."

He rummaged around in his drawer, brought out the pernicious rubber stamp, poised it over the prone book, and let it fall. He placed it on the confiscated shelf with the fresh mark glistening on the back and the date inside. If I wanted it, he told me in his most benevolent-despot manner, I could have it in a month. I thanked him as I went to my chastisement, but I had had enough of Sherlock Holmes. I had forgotten it by redemption time and had not seen it again until I was waiting outside DeForrest's door for Gilbert's licking to be over.

I was getting ready to replace it when he let Gilbert out and me in.

"Good afternoon, Miss Jones. You've come about your Stanford Binet."

"Yes I have," I said, taking a seat before him. I had Sherlock Holmes in my lap.

"Whom have you been reading?" he asked. He could not see the disfigured binding.

Sherlock Holmes," I said.

"Ah yes. I read him once when I was a boy. You know, I was just reading that a well known critic—can't remember who—has given us our first authoritative reading of his works."

"Conan Doyle, you mean."

"Oh yes—him. Well— About your Stanford Binet!" He shuffled some papers. "Here it is." He held it up.

I leaned over to take it, but he recoiled. "I'm afraid you can't have it. It's against the rules."

"I may not need it. Does it have a date on it?"

He cracked the manila folder and peeked. "I'm afraid not," he said. "It has your age. Is that of any help?"

"No, not without the date." I could imagine all sorts of unsavory places where one might be subjected to Stanford Binet.

"Do they give those things in homes for unwed mothers?" I asked.

"I beg your pardon?" He snapped it shut.

"You see, Mr. DeForrest, I have to establish my whereabouts at age 13, not the state of my mentality."

"I see."

"And since you remember me, that's no problem, I assume. All I have to do is give you the name of my prospective employer, and you can tell him that I was enrolled during—"

"But Miss Jones, when I said I remember you, well of course I do remember you, but—"

"I wore bangs and braces—"

"—it is impossible for me to state that you were here—"

"What about my teachers? They'll remember me."

"—without your cumulative socio-personal scholastic record."

"My what? "

"I must have a written record," he said.

"Any sort of written record?"

He hesitated, and evidently the gargantuan cumulative socio-personal record had so gotten control of his mind that he could not imagine any other sort of written record. So he said yes.

"Good," I said. I held up Sherlock Holmes, brand first.

"I don't understand."

"Isn't this your stamp, Mr. DeForrest?"

"Why—yes."

I opened the book. "And this is my name, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"And would this normally be the date of confiscation?"

"Yes."

"Ergo, I was enrolled at this school on that date."

"Well—yes."

I tore out the page in question and began to write on it.

"This is the address of my employer. Please explain how this book has been in your possession since I was thirteen years old. That ought to be sufficient proof." I handed him the flyleaf.

He took it, clearing his throat furiously. I thanked him and got up to leave forever. But I heard him calling down the halls after me,

"Miss Jones! What about your Stanford Binet!"



EAGLES IN THE SNOW

alla famiglia mia

TONY FRAGOLA

The little boy trudged through the snow pulling his battered red wagon behind him. He was of medium height for a boy of ten, but he looked thin and frail beneath his bulky green jacket and double layer of courderoy pants. He walked hunched over, and his ears, which stuck out from his black workman's cap, were red and stung from the cold. Weary from pulling the wagon all around the paper route by himself, he was glad that he was only a few houses away from home. Usually he only helped to deliver the papers, but Louie, the boy he worked for and the one who actually owned the route, was sick in bed with the flu.

Walking through the blustering wind, he longed for the warmth of his kitchen that always smelled of the rich sauces that were simmering on the bow-legged stove. Only two months ago his father had come home from work and had announced that he knew of a job for the boy. His father was sitting at the table in his tee shirt. He was short and burly, with thick heavy arms. For a man who had held two jobs simultaneously most of his life, he was still youthful looking at thirty-five. His brown hair was thick and wavy. The face was handsome, and his uniqueness came from his gentle eyes and fine, delicate mouth.

The boy sat next to his sister, who was only seven. She always seemed to be hiding behind her long black hair that flowed to her shoulders. Like her brother, she was

thin. Mary was her father's favorite, yet when near him she was quiet. They ate silently and watched their father as he dunked a chunk of bread into the stew.

"Josie, Jimmy D'Angelo told me his son needed a helper. Nino's got time. He can do it." He addressed his wife who stood up while eating so that she could fill up their dishes.

"I don't know Vito, he's got to be out there every day."

"Look, it's about time he started earning his own spending money. He's no better than I was. His grandfather had me working since I could walk."

"Big deal. Who hasn't?"

"Don't get smart."

"Well he's only ten."

"So what."

She stopped eating, set her jaws together, and stared at the father. She shook her head and tossed her long black hair which was frizzled and tangled. The boy had been watching his mother who was standing with her hands on her hips. His father turned quickly and cast a quick glance at the boy. The boy looked down at his plate. His sister turned and looked at her brother with raised eyebrows, and then also down. The boy took his fork and picked at the pieces of meat.

"Look Vito," his mother began again, "he's been

sick. He's always sick. We've got enough bills as it is."

"He's big enough. A little snow won't kill him. He'd be rolling around or sledding out there anyways."

"What if he get's behind in school?"

"He'd better not."

"Suppose he's sick?"

"Tough. He'll live."

"I don't want him out there, and that's final."

"You know his trouble," he said as he pointed a thumb in the boy's direction without looking while nodding his head knowingly. "You baby him too much. He'll never have any guts."

The boy threw his fork down. "Don't worry about it Dad. I'll do it. Why don't you just ask me instead of yelling."

"Who do you think you're talking to, mister?" His father started to get up, but his mother shoved him back in the chair. The boy was silent, and the corners of his mouth twitched.

"I asked you a question."

"Nobody."

"Go to your room. Next time you throw your fork down you'll regret it, believe me." His father started to get up again. The boy walked away.

"Leave him alone. You better not lay a hand on him. I'm warning you."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"If you know what's good for you, you'll leave him alone."

"Humph." His father sat again.

Later his mother came to his room where the boy was lying on the bed in complete darkness. She had changed from her waitress uniform to a simple printed dress. She had left the door slightly ajar, and she looked at him by the light that came filtering in the room. His head was resting on his folded arms, and he was staring at the ceiling.

"Nino," she whispered. "He's not as bad as he makes out. He just wants you to do good and not end up in a factory like him. You understand."

"Yeah."

"If you want to do it, go ahead, but you make sure you show him. You'll take care of yourself, you promise."

"Sure Ma, don't worry. I'll be all right." His mother started to rise.

"Ma."

"Yes."

"Why's he got to yell at me."

She was silent. She put her hand on his forehead. He could feel the perspiration.

"It's his way. That's all. You understand?"

"Yup. I understand all right."

The next day he had started to work for two dollars a week. Now with the added responsibility of taking the route by himself, he would make two extra dollars. Four dollars seemed a lot of money to the boy. Though he had managed to pay the bill yesterday to Smitty the sta-

tionmaster, the task of collecting and accounting the money had made him a little nervous. Louie would be back on Monday, and he was relieved that he would fall back into the simple role of a helper.

He stopped in front of a large, ramshackle house. The house had a large front porch, and the grey paint had long ago peeled away, exposing its rotten timber. During the summer months, it looked even more squalid. The only land surrounding it was five feet of hard dirt. Adjacent to this patch was an asphalt driveway that led to the garages where the trucks used by the produce company next door were kept. This was the only house in the neighborhood where the old people had not been able to plant and keep alive some grass or shrubbery to hide the increasing stark degeneracy of the neighborhood. The city had even cut down the chestnut trees on his block so that the city could widen the street in order to make more room for the trucks. Three families lived in this house, yet it appeared lonely and lifeless to the boy. The bareness surrounding it reminded him too much of his own house. In both places, the hard earth choked any green plants that tried to force their way through the brown, encrusted earth, and only a few parched weeds managed to endure. Once he had even tried to plant grass in front of his own house. He had cleared away the rubbish of the narrow strip of ground between the sidewalk and the street, dug the dirt, planted seeds, and erected a two foot high fence made of sticks and twine. On the twine he had even hung small strips of white cloth that he had torn from an old sheet. Barely a day had gone by before his plot was littered by the wax tissues that the kids threw away as they finished the cookies they bought from the bakery. In a few more days, the fence had been trampled. He figured that some drunk stumbling home from the bar across the street ruined it. Maybe so, but it didn't matter much. He knew then that he would never have even a small patch of grass in front of his house. A four foot alley, filled with broken glass and jagged rocks, separating his house from the one next to it, and other people's yards, would have to be his play area. 'If I only had a yard,' he often thought to himself. Then he could play in a place that smelled sweet from the sprigs of parsley and sperment that his grandmother would plant in it.

Those were idle dreams of his, and he had no time for them now. He had to finish delivering the papers. The new-fallen snow had covered the alley, smoothed over and settled on the hard brown earth in thick billowy mounds. In hiding the alleys, strewn debris, and rickety houses and garages, the snow had created new shapes in soft and flowing forms. This was a new world; one that he could enjoy. He felt as lightheaded as he did on the Feast Day of St. Anthony, his patron Saint to whom he never failed to make a special devotion on that day. The snow was falling again, and he was happy as he stopped in front of the house. 'Tomorrow I'll get up early and play in the snow before delivering,' he thought. 'An eagle, I'll make an eagle.' He could see himself on his

back in the deep snow before moving his arms and legs in semi-circles while forming an impression of what he liked to think was an eagle. Looking up at the sky while on his back, he always tried to imagine what it would be like to be an eagle gliding on an air current carefree and detached from the world beneath him. At such times he would stick out his tongue and try to catch the snowflakes. Then he could see nothing but the steady down-pour of snow and the tiny spaces between the flakes, and he would laugh.

The handle of the cart fell to the ground with a thud. The boy turned around and spread out the few remaining newspapers. His red plastic mittens were frozen from the icy winds that swept across up-state New York from Canada. He counted five newspapers, and tried to remember where he had missed a delivery. 'Two to Lobosco, one for us, one for Mrs. Rossini, no use, another extra. Bet I get a complaint. That'll cost me fifty cents and I'll have to listen to Smitty. My father'll even be worse. I can see it now.' He could see the probable scene clearly in his mind. His father would stand in front of him and wag his finger, and come out with his usual comment of "when you going to do something right for a change." After these incidents, the boy searched for some spot he could be alone.

Trying not to think about the possibility that someone would issue a complaint, he grabbed a paper, jumped up the three concrete stairs, and began to walk doggedly along the path leading to the back of the house where old Donna Rossini lived with her son. "Well, least I'm almost home. Hope ma's got something good and hot to eat," he murmured to himself. Today he would make his weekly visit to the old woman. Though the boy was fond of Donna Rossini, he wished that he didn't have to face her every week. She was expecting him, and this knowledge bound him to his self-imposed duty like an unsaid but understood obligation. 'Boy sometimes its rough going in some of these places, especially those tenements on State Street where the halls stink of pee,' he thought to himself. He had often found himself daydreaming as he plopped the papers down on the tenement hallways or delivered them to the dilapidated houses. He tried to imagine how wonderful it would be to slide down the bumpy hills of the abandoned cemetery on a piece of cardboard, or to have snowball fights with his friends, or just to walk around the neighborhood wherever his fancy led him and make eagles in the snow. He snickered as he walked up the steep stairs in the narrow soot-covered hallway that was filled with smoke. Folding the paper neatly in half, he was amused as he remembered how puzzled he was when he first found out that Mrs. Rossini could not read. As he got to know her better, he began to realize that it was one of the few sources of pleasure that she had. She liked to turn the pages of the paper and look at the pictures. For Mrs. Rossini, the newspaper was the only contact with the world outside of her room and neighborhood. When he had first come to collect, he had talked

to her. It had been his first week on the job, and he was tired by the time he had reached her house. She had asked him how his grandmother was feeling, and seeing that he was cold, asked him to drink a cup of hot coffee. He had been humbly grateful and pleased that she had gone through all that trouble just for him. They had talked for over an hour. She had seemed happy that she had someone to talk to and fuss over, especially since he brought her news. The fact that Mrs. Rossini was not ashamed to tell him that she could not read surprised him. He felt that he would never have the courage to be so truthful. After having heard her tell him the reason why she bothered to receive the paper, he had promised himself that he would try to explain what little of the news he understood. This was the manner in which the ritual had started. Now before the boy knocked, he prepared himself for the meetings that were becoming increasingly more difficult for him. He no longer felt at ease. He pitied her loneliness and poverty. Though he wanted to help her, there was little he could do, and the awareness made him despondent.

Having reached the top of the steps, his throat felt dry and he thought of dropping the paper and fleeing down the steps, yet he knew he would never do this. Besides, he would have to come the next week and explain his action. He knocked on the door, heard a rustling inside, and finally heard Mrs. Rossini calling out in her cracked voice, "aspetta, aspetta, I come."

She opened the door and looked at him in her stooped position. "Ah, Nino, come in, late now, I worry," she said as she motioned him to enter. She stood shivering in the doorway. "Fa freddo stasera." She closed the door behind him quickly. He stood there for a moment and stammered. "I'd better not come in, Mrs. Rossini, I'm soaking wet and my boots are full of snow. See, I couldn't buckle them." The boy looked sheepishly at her. She screwed up her nose and peered at him as if something was wrong. "E niente, No worry. Vai. Sit," she beckoned towards the stove. "Vuoi caffe?"

"I guess so, if you got some on. If you don't, don't bother."

"She looked at him as though puzzled. You sick?"

"No, I'm all right, just tired."

Her face brightened and the questioning expression disappeared.

"Ah, good, un a tassa di caffe, you feel good," and she passed her hand before her, brushing away his complaints as she would a fly.

She began busying herself, getting the pot to make the coffee. He tried to relax as he waited. He stuffed his mittens in his pockets, took off his scarf and jacket, and felt his dungarees that were soaked through.

'My legs are probably all blue from the pants,' he thought. Sitting on the black chair that stood in front of the kitchen window, he peered past the brown burlap curtains that were drawn aside, and looked at the light that came through the attic window in the house across

the driveway. One of the eccentric women of the neighborhood lived there. Dressed in her brown double breasted suit that had the same musty odor as that of her room, she collected garbage and bits of rags by night, and talked of going to Florida by day.

'At least I don't have to face her tonight.'

Mrs. Rossini hobbled about as he sat silently thinking. Her long black dress swayed slightly, and the heels of her high-topped black shoes clicked softly. She went to her cupboard where she always hid a few cookies for him in a secret hiding place.

He rubbed his hands to get them warm. The bed in the corner was slightly unmade, and he knew that she must have been taking a nap. He began to get nervous, and moved his legs rapidly from side to side. The fire in the stove looked low, so he got up and took a shovel full of coal from the bucket, opened the little door, and threw it in. He remained kneeling, looking into the fire that sent up waves of red heat. He began to stare as though transfixed. Flushed with heat, the tension dissipated from him as if the heat was melting it away. Gazing at the hot coals, he thought of the last time that he had hid in the cellar next to the huge coal furnace. There he could be alone and safe. His father had found out from Louie's father that he had skipped two days. He had wanted to go sleigh-riding and two days were all he dared, but he had been caught and his father was furious. Nino felt ashamed. He knew that he had neglected his responsibility. He had been attracted by the dark cellar. The heat and the glow from the furnace made him feel secure and at ease with himself. Opening the door, he looked at the glowing coals. His father had come down the steps noiselessly in his slippers. When he heard his father's voice, he was startled.

"What are you doing here," asked his father sharply.

"Nothing, just looking after the furnace."

"Go on upstairs and do your homework. And if I ever hear of you . . ." His father stopped before his anger became uncontrolled.

"Dad."

"What."

"You want me to help you shovel coal or something."

"No."

His legs tingled now, and his pants stuck to them. He rubbed his legs with his hands. His own body heat restored somewhat, he looked at the coal bucket.

"I don't think," he said shaking his head. "She's probably low on coal. I'll bring her some of ours." He remained there absorbing the heat until he heard the coffee pot start to percolate violently. Returning to the table, he began to doze off once again. His ears tingled, and he could feel the water dropping off his thick hair, which was gnarled and frozen, onto his neck. His head began to droop, his breathing became slower and heavier, and he fought to keep his eyes from closing. Even the sound of the coffee drumming in his ear, sounded peculiarly soothing.

"Nino," she said as she put a cup on the table. "No sleep now." He tried to shake himself awake. He propped his head up with his hand, and looked past the bed beside him towards a cot in the far corner which was still in perfect order. His sleepy state passed quickly. 'The jerk probably didn't come home last night. I bet she's worried sick. He'll come back drunk tonight. He's got no choice, the snow's getting worse.'

"Nino," che pensi tu?"

"Nothing. I'm not thinking about anything." His thoughts now interrupted, he watched her pour the coffee and marveled at the way in which the long arc of coffee filled the cup without spilling onto the table. "Zucchero," she added as she placed a cracked sugar bowl beside the cup. "Guarda questo," she said proudly as she placed a small plate of cookies before him to admire. "Carmela next door come today." These hard twisted cookies with the sesamon seeds on top were his favorite. He grabbed one, dunked it greedily into his coffee, and bit off half of it. He smiled at her in gratitude as he chewed.

"They're great Mrs. Rossini, really great." He finished that one and ate two more. All the while she kept encouraging him to eat. "Mangia, mangia," she said heartily as she beckoned him to devour the rest. As he continued to eat, there came a silence between the two of them until he sat stirring his second cup of coffee, staring at it, knowing that it was time to begin. She was patiently waiting for him.

"The papers are full of bad news, Mrs. Rossini. The war's getting worse."

"Si, war, c'e sempre la guerra."

"My uncle just got sent to Korea."

"Come si chiama?"

"Korea," he pronounced carefully.

"My uncle says things are gettin' worse. All we get is bad news. Wish something good would happen for a change." He sat holding the warm coffee cup with both hands.

"Nino, this war, why? I no understand."

"Non lo so," he replied as he shook his head. "I don't understand it either." He put his cookie down, unable to finish it.

"I pray Joey no go. He too old. Joey, you know my son Joey?"

"Yeah, Mrs. Rossini, I know him." He wished that she wouldn't bring up Joey. He couldn't understand how she could still be concerned about someone who rarely worked. Forty years old and he had never held a steady job.

"Joey good boy," she said sadly as she looked down and passed her hand across her skirt while smoothing out the imaginary wrinkles.

"Yeah, Mrs. Rossini, sure, I know. You worry too much. He'll be all right." He was thinking about the last time he had seen Joey, who had been peeing on the main street only a few blocks from the downtown area. The skinny derelict, unshaven and dressed in only a

tee-shirt and baggy brown pants, had propped himself against the concrete pillar supporting the railroad overpass. His feet were straddled, and he was resting against his right arm, which was held up by the pillar. With his body at an angle, he stood there exposed and shivered. A few people had passed Joey. He remembered seeing two high school girls who half hid their eyes with their hands as they walked past. Finally a policeman had come and taken Joey away.

"He drink, I know. When he work, no fa cosi . . . no drink." She continued to smooth away the imaginary creases in her skirt.

"I guess it's pretty tough not to have a good job. My father says he never knows when he'll get laid off at the plant." He sat swirling the coffee, which had become cold, around in the cup.

"Nino, you good boy, you work hard."

"It's not much, Mrs. Rossini, I'm just helping out. Things are kind of tough now." He didn't sound very convincing to himself.

Nothing more was said for a few moments, and the boy sat swirling the coffee. Another uncomfortable silence had fallen between them.

"Heard anything about getting social security yet," he said as he toyed with the cookie.

"No, niente. I still wait. They say my husband no work abbastanza before he die. She made the sign of the cross with her thumb on her forehead in honor of her husband.

"What! Ancora. They did the same thing to Carmela. Her husband died one crummie year before he was eligible. Those people give me a pain." He stuck his hands in his pockets and leaned back on the chair. Donna Rossini simply shrugged her shoulders.

The silence came again.

"Now tell me good news. Non voglio parlare piu cosi." Her face brightened in an effort to be cheerful.

He thought pensively for a moment, then shrugged his shoulders. "I guess it's just a bad week, Mrs. Rossini. I don't know, maybe the war'll end soon."

"Povero ragazzo, so sad."

He felt embarrassed. He didn't want her to feel sorry for him. He tried to smile but he couldn't look directly at her. Looking out the window, he saw the snowflakes falling on the window and melting from the heat. A slight smile began to take shape at the corners of his mouth, then it faltered and disappeared. "Well, the snow is pretty."

Her face lost its bright appearance and became taut.

"Ah, neve. That bad. I can no go out. Carmela no come, your grandmother no come, no store, no church niente. Quand onevica, it bad for me. Non posso andare a

chiesa, ma I pray there," and she pointed to her bed where a crucifix wrapped in a withered stalk from last Palm Sunday, hung on the wall above.

"That's good, Mrs. Rossini, someone's got to pray I guess." He took the half-eaten cookie, but couldn't bite into it.

"Finish," she nodded her head towards the cup of coffee. She got up to get his clothes. He took his hands out of his pockets and gulped down the cold coffee and ate the rest of the cookie, barely able to get it down. She came over and handed him his clothes, reached into the pocket of her dress, and pulled out a black cloth change purse.

"Quanto, Nino," she smiled as she went through the final motions of the visit.

"Forget it Mrs. Rossini, I've always got extras. They don't cost me anything. Don't worry about it." He made the same movement with his hand she had done earlier. He was always embarrassed that she offered to pay, and wished that she would just ignore the question of money.

She showed him to the door and gave him the customary greetings that he was to give his family.

"Sure, Mrs. Rossini. And don't worry about the snow I'll stop by if the weather's still bad."

He climbed down the steps and walked hunched-over almost immediately from the cold. The snow was floating in the air in feather-like ease, and he knew the morning sun would make it firm. He no longer wanted it to snow, and he hoped that it would stop. He had not meant to lie, but he knew that he would not stop back before next Saturday. If he brought any coal, he would put it in front of her door and leave before she heard him. He probably wouldn't bring any. 'What good is it making eagles in the snow,' he thought as he approached the wagon. 'I hope it all melts before tomorrow.' He tried to make himself believe that these thoughts were true. Mrs. Rossini was still on his mind, and he could see her in the room, sitting on the chair, looking down and smoothing out her dress. He kicked the handle and caught it as it flew up, and pulled the wagon to the next house.

The snow was still falling, and he knew the snow would be white and clean the next morning. He grabbed two papers and started running towards the back of the house. The snow was soft and fine and deep. He tripped and fell on both knees, but managed to keep the papers dry. The snow flew in his face and made it tingle. He chuckled, got up, and began to run. Suddenly he felt hungry again, and he could almost smell the rich red sauce of the stew. 'I'm going to go to sleep and get up early tomorrow,' he thought. 'Bet the snow'll be as high as the porch.' He ran to the back hallway, dropped the two papers down, and headed home.



THE MAGIC MIRROR

LAURENCE JUDSON REYNOLDS

Merle Merman liked to sit before his mirror at night and read books. It didn't matter to him what books they were, he picked them at random from the shelves at the public library when he took his lunch break from work. He worked on the 24th floor of a twenty-four story building. Randy Mifflin who worked with him always greeted him at the elevator in the mornings with: "Going all the way to the top, eh, Merle?" Merle had always wanted to counter with something about putting his "head in the clouds," but he knew that Randy Mifflin would just think of something else to say. Besides, it didn't seem appropriate for the work they did. It was a very practical kind of work. They were employed in the cost accounting department of a company that made "foundations" for women. Randy Mifflin joked a lot about that too, although it had nothing to do with their work. What they did was practical. All day the yellow ledger sheets would come in from the other departments. Their job was to add up all the columns and enter the values for each job number and transfer all the appropriate information to the black-lined column headed "totals." The girls then took them and punched this information on IBM cards. Then the cards went to the data processing room—but no one in cost accounting knew what happened to them there.

There were two girls who operated the key punch machines in the office where Merle and Randy Mifflin worked. There was a big girl named Josephine whom Randy Mifflin said the company's products would never be able to help. She wore tight skirts and kept cigarettes and lipstick and chewing gum and aspirin in the box on her machine where the rubber bands were supposed to be kept.

The other girl was Loretta who was shy and kept her box filled with rubber bands.

Everyday on his lunch hour Merle would go to the public library down the street from the office and pick out a book from either the section marked "Adult Fiction" or "Adult Non-Fiction." It wasn't that he was prejudiced against children's books; it was just that he knew that Randy Mifflin would make some joke about a thirty-eight year old, balding man browsing through the children's section. Of course, Randy Mifflin never came to the library, but word might get back to him. Anyway, it made no difference what books he read. The emotions that they contained were all that was important to Merle Merman. Love, hate, anger, pride, lust—Merle had seen them all in the mirror.

It was no ordinary mirror. It had belonged to his mother, and she had been no ordinary woman. She had once been an actress—Zelda Merman—and she had stood before the mirror then and admired her beauty and her power over men. But when Merle was thirteen she quit acting and began preaching God's word in the streets. From then until her death eight years later, they had lived in poverty, and she had stood before the mirror and admired her righteousness.

The mirror was large and round, but the frame that held it was square. The frame was brass, and at each corner a closed eagle's claw clutched a shock of arrows. Merle liked these corners, and sometimes he would stare at them, and then look into the mirror and see the mighty eagle rising into the darkness while arrows of lightning cracked the sky behind him. And he would know the power

of the eagle.

The room in which Merle had lived since his mother's death was in the attic of an old house in a rather poor section of the city. Three floors of husbandless old women lived beneath him, but he had a side entrance up the fire escape and through a window and he seldom saw any of them. And in fact, he was so quiet that few people knew that he lived there at all. Although his salary was enough now so that he could have afforded a better place, he preferred living there and saving the few dollars a month extra. Having money made him feel secure—made him feel that there was nothing that he could not do, or have. He kept his money in the top tray inside an old trunk that his mother had left him. It was the only thing she had left him: a trunk full of the costumes which she had worn as an actress. All her other worldly possessions she had given away when she left the stage, but these "special memories" she had kept, locked in the trunk. Sometimes, she would stand before the mirror and tell Merle about the things that the trunk contained. There was one pair of velvet slacks in there, she said, that had "shocked" the world. And Merle had felt the shock as he watched his mother's huge silhouette moving in the dark room before him. But though his mother had been dead for seventeen years, and though he had never forgotten how she talked about the marvelous contents of the trunk, he had never lifted the tray where he kept his money to look at them.

"Wanta take me to lunch today, Randy?"

Josephine was at Randy Mifflin's desk again. Merle looked up at her back. She towered over him like a huge building. She leaned back, her thighs resting on the edge of his desk. The fullness of her tight skirt was no more than two inches from his arm. Sometimes at night, if he were reading a sensuous book, he would think of that bulging flesh oozing over the edge of the desk, and it would excite him then as much as it frightened him now.

She pushed herself up straight again and leaned forward over Randy Mifflin's desk, putting her elbows down and propping her head in her hands so that her face was right in front of Randy Mifflin.

"Come on Randy, take me to lunch, huh?" she said, her fresh-painted lips twisting to let each word slip out.

"You take me!" Randy Mifflin pushed aside the ledger sheets with his arm and leaned back in his swivel chair. "You got the jing. Not me, baby."

Her form straightened and hovered over Merle again. He stopped working but continued to stare at the ledgers in front of him. His right hand was poised over the adding machine. The thighs came back and pressed against the edge of his desk again. Sometimes at night, if the book were particularly sensuous, Merle would lie in his bed and stare into the mirror and see the turbulent waves thrashing about on the great belly of the ocean. Holding his breath, he would watch as one wave began to rise higher than the rest, rushing forward, sucking the strength from the body of the sea. And when it had reached its peak, and the column of water trembled with the power

that was in it, the lightning would rip the dark sky and the wave would crash into a ragged cliff and split open, casting its foam into the night.

"You'll take me to lunch, won't you, Merle?"

"Huh . . . Ma'am?"

"You see, he even says 'ma'am' to me, Randy. Why don't you ever do that, huh?" She had her elbows on Merle's desk and was twisting her head around to look now at Randy Mifflin.

"Ma'am?"

"Merle'll take me. Won't you Merle?"

"He ain't gonna take ya," said Randy Mifflin. "He's gonna take Loretta. Right Merle?"

"Ma'am . . . Huh?"

Josephine laughed. Sweat was standing out on Merle's forehead. He looked back at the ledger sheets beneath his arm.

"Well, I guess I'll just eat alone. It's a shame for a girl like me to eat alone." She looked at Randy Mifflin and closed one painted eye.

"Do ya good," said Randy Mifflin. "Maybe you'll meet some nice young man."

Josephine walked away in front of Merle's desk. He glared at the ledger sheets and did not look up. His hand was still poised over the adding machine. Behind him Loretta's key punch machine rattled softly.

* * *

At lunch time Merle ate at the M&B grill, three blocks down the street from where he worked. It was a dirty place, but cheap: He liked to think of the money he was saving by eating there. Sometimes he would stand before the mirror and try to imagine the great amount of money that was in the trunk. He would see the bills piled in a heap as wide and high as the mirror itself. Then, a whirlwind would begin in the center of the pile and the money would swirl about like a great swarm of green butterflies. As the greenbacks whipped before him in the mirror, the magic power of the glass would transform them into the riches of the world. Huge palaces would rise before him, and green pastures would roll out to the sea, jewels and precious metals would glitter before his eyes, exotic animals would parade before him bearing gifts from other times and other places, and skeins of loose silk would rise like smoke and twine about the bodies of strange women.

He imagined there was a great deal of money in the trunk. He had been saving ever since his mother died. She had never allowed him to save anything. Any time she discovered that he had money she would take it from him and raise her hand before the mirror and beseech God to forgive them for possessing such an abominable thing. Then, she would go out into the street and begin her preaching.

"The Lord has said, 'It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter

the kingdom of God!’” She would stop strangers on the street and force money into their hands, saying: “Here, sinner, take your ticket to hell!”

After Merle finished his corned beef sandwich and bowl of beans he went to the library and checked out a book entitled *Rosa Makes the Big Time*. As he walked back to the office he saw Loretta coming out of Edmunds’ Cafeteria across the street. She was alone, and she looked as small and frail as a child, as she waited on the corner for the light to change. He wondered whatever had made Randy Mifflin say that.

* * *

After lunch Josephine came to Randy Mifflin’s desk three times and whispered things to him and he laughed. Merle refused to look at the hips as they pressed against his desk, but once she leaned back so far that her skirt touched his elbow like a hot piece of iron, and he left his desk hurriedly and went to the bathroom and urinated.

When he came back, Josephine was gone, but Randy Mifflin was still laughing. All afternoon Loretta’s key punch machine chirped behind him like a young bird.

* * *

In his room that night, Merle sat before the mirror and read the book he had gotten from the library that day. It was the story of Rosa, a girl who came to the city to become a famous actress. She had little success in acting, however, and she was lonely and afraid in the city. Finally, when her money ran out she had to take a job as a secretary with a large company. There she met a young man who had just come to the city. He too was lonely and afraid.

As Merle read he felt a great swell of emotions within him. He remembered his mother telling how sinful it was to paint one’s face and strut before people pretending to be something you weren’t. He was glad that the girl had become a happy secretary, and he wondered what the mirror had in store for him tonight. But he did not look up until he finished the part about Rosa’s wedding and snapped the book shut.

At first when he looked into the mirror he saw only a dark blueness as if the mirror were a porthole that looked out into the depths of the sea. But then a light sparkled off in the distance, appearing like the innate gleam of some rare jewel. It moved closer and closer through the watery blueness until it illuminated the entire mirror with a radiance that was almost unbearable.

Merle sat mesmerized, staring at the ghostly illumination until at last all the colors of the light blended into the textures of skin and cloth and hair, and Loretta appeared on the other side of the glass. He thought that he had never seen a girl as beautiful as she. Her skin was smooth, and rich with color. Her hair sparkled with the light from her face, and her clothes seemed to linger

about her like a cloud.

Merle basked in the beauty of this angelic figure until the light faded, and she disappeared. Then, he lay on his bed, and slept.

* * *

“Loretta’s getting married,” said Randy Mifflin.

Merle’s finger came down on the total button. The adding machine coughed up figures on the narrow strip of paper.

“Huh?”

“Loretta’s getting married. You know, ‘married.’ That girl right back there!” Randy Mifflin turned and pointed. Merle felt the blood rising in his neck.

“Oh,” he said.

He added the next five ledger sheets wrong, and his ball point pen began to leak, making his mistakes and corrections look all the worse. He hoped that Loretta wouldn’t see them. He hoped that Josephine would punch them so that Loretta would not have to look at them.

“Loretta’s getting married,” said Josephine, her lips twisting in front of his face.

“I already told him,” said Randy Mifflin.

“She’s marrying money,” said Josephine.

“She coulda married Merle; he’s got money.”

“She’s marrying *real* money,” said Josephine. She turned to Randy Mifflin and parked her hip on the desk again.

“How about lunch, Jo?” said Randy Mifflin.

“No,” said Josephine, letting her flesh creep further onto the desk.

Merle moved his arm. The flesh crept closer. He got up and took the ledger to the basket and went to the bathroom.

* * *

At lunch time Merle didn’t go to the M&B grill, or to the library. He idled about in front of Marilyn’s Shoe Store and watched the people coming in and out of Edmunds’ Cafeteria. He stared from time to time at a pair of black and white polka dot high heels in the display window of the shoe store. He imagined his mother in those shoes. She would strut about in them before the mirror and tell him how the audience had applauded her, and called her back again and again. She would tell him of the people she had known and of the fan mail she had received. Then her tone would become severe, and she would tell him of the “nitwit” director who had given her a role in which she made only two appearances on the stage during the entire play, and how, as she was dressing for the opening night, the Lord had spoken to her out of the mirror. “Turn away from these vile things, and seek ye the ways of the Lord.” He had said. And she had gotten up and left the theatre without telling anyone. And when she saw the long line of people waiting in the street to see her, she

began passing out tickets of her own, and preaching the word of God.

"But I knocked 'em cold in my day," she would say, walking back and forth before the mirror in her old dressing gown and her high heel shoes. "They loved me." As her figure cut this way and that in front of him, he could catch glimpses of the mirror. In it he could see the enraptured audience, and hear their thunderous applause. Even the eagle's fist seemed to tighten around the arrows in appreciation. As his mother talked again of sin and retribution, he claimed the audience for his own. And as she passed back and forth in front of him, he returned again and again for curtain calls.

At twenty minutes after twelve, Loretta came out of Edmunds' Cafeteria and waited on the corner for the light to change. Merle waited behind her. He could see the blonde hair that fell almost to her shoulders, and the delicate skin of her throat. The light changed and she was swept forward in the throng of people. He followed, lagging behind the others.

In the lobby of their building, he made a gallant move to step in front of her and press the button for the elevator, but another man beat him to it. Loretta smiled at no one in particular. Merle felt frightened and started away to another elevator. His fear passed however, and he came back just in time to squeeze through the door before it closed. Loretta smiled again.

After the sixteenth floor they were alone on the elevator. They stood in opposite corners. Several times he tried to turn and speak to her, but each time his heart began to palpitate wildly and the high speed of the elevator turned the hunger in his stomach to nausea. When they finally came to a stop, he rushed through the opening door ahead of her and made for the bathroom.

* * *

Randy Mifflin was late coming back from lunch. Josephine was with him. They were laughing.

"You oughta hear what Jo and I are giving Loretta for a wedding present," said Randy Mifflin, sitting down at his desk.

"What?" asked Merle.

"Oh, I don't think I'd better tell you Merle," said Randy Mifflin. "You look too pale to be shocked right now."

Merle sorted through the papers on his desk. The afternoon mail hadn't come and there was no work to do.

"You know what it is?" asked Randy Mifflin, after a while.

"What what is?" asked Merle.

"What we're giving Loretta for her wedding present. You can chip in if you want."

"What is it?" asked Merle.

"A negligee with fur around the bottom," whispered Randy Mifflin. "To keep her neck warm!"

Randy Mifflin laughed again and rared back in his swi-

vel chair. Merle didn't say anything. There was nothing to do until the mail came. He took a soiled handkerchief from his pocket and dusted his adding machine.

"I bet she had to get married," urged Randy Mifflin after a while. He leaned closer to Merle's desk and whispered: "I bet she has to. She's getting married too quick. Next week, ya know. You can't ever tell about those quiet ones. I got a feeling I've been a fool to mess around with Jo all these years. Ya just can't tell about those quiet ones. Just like you, Merle. It's no telling what you do when they turn you out of here at night."

The mail came and Merle went to work. He worked steadily all afternoon. Josephine only came once to Randy Mifflin's desk, and Merle ignored her then. He left at five o'clock without having looked at Loretta again.

* * *

In his room that night he read parts of *Rosa Makes the Big Time* again. But whenever he looked up from his reading, the mirror was as dark as the night outside the tiny window above his head. He lay on his bed and tried to sleep, but thoughts of Josephine kept coming unexpectedly into his mind. He closed his eyes and remembered the dreadful night when his mother had stripped his clothes from him and left him alone before the mirror.

When he opened his eyes again and looked into the mirror the waves were licking their tongues into the crevices of a towering cliff, and far away the storm rose in the darkness with the power of the eagle, rushing to be destroyed against the indestructible shoreline.

* * *

The next day was Saturday. Merle slept late. When he rose he tried not to look at the mirror. He went for a walk along the streets shadowed by the three and four story tenement houses. It was autumn, but the wind that blew along the street had something of springtime in it. He removed his coat and wandered about the streets thinking. The embarrassments of the day before passed, and he felt renewed and vital again. He thought of how his mother had wobbled about these same streets in her high heels, giving money to strangers, and sometimes yanking it back and depositing it in the nearest wastebasket—always preaching in her best theatrical voice her patent sermon on the sinfulness of money. "Take no heed of what ye shall put on, or what food ye shall eat. The Lord will provide." Passers-by would pause for a moment to look at her and then go on their way.

Though she never received any money after she quit acting, she worked three days a week changing linen and cleaning rooms in the hotel where they lived. Their room was a small musty space among the discarded furniture in the basement. When Merle was fifteen, he went to work as a bellboy in the hotel for five dollars a week, plus tips. With this money he managed to buy the necessities

for their lives. His mother never condemned his earnings, but whenever she discovered that he had money she would take it from him and go into the streets to preach.

A newspaper had once done an article on her, calling her "a rarity among sidewalk gospellers." Merle remembered how proud she had been of the article. All day she sat in the room and read it over and over, glancing occasionally at the mirror with her eyes ablaze.

The memory of the night that had followed had always been a bitter one for Merle, but now as he walked about in the warm October sunshine he thought freely of it. His mother had demanded money of him that night. When he lied and told her that he had none, she became angry and threw him on the bed and stripped his clothes from him. After she found the few coins that he had tied in his handkerchief she stood over him and shouted, calling him a vile sinner and an abomination to the sight of God. With the money in her hand, she rushed away into the night, leaving him naked and alone before the mirror.

In the afternoon, Merle returned to his room and read *Rosa Makes the Big Time* from cover to cover. It was almost dark when he finished. The soft light of evening crept in through the window above his head, tinting the room with a pinkish hue. The air was still warm from the sunshine of the day, and it seemed more like April than October. Merle thought of the girls who had worked at the key punch machines behind him in the cost accounting office since he had been employed there. In the mirror he lined them up and let them pass before his eyes. There were nine in all, not including Josephine and Loretta. All of them had married and left, and he had never seen them again. Josephine had stayed longer than any of the others—almost four years.

Sitting in the soft lingering light of the day a strange feeling came over Merle. He felt that he had been quite intimate with all of these girls, but that he had rejected each one of them and waited for the perfect one to come. And now she was here.

He closed his eyes, and when he opened them again, Loretta stood before him in the mirror. The evening light clothed her in soft pastel shades, and she seemed to sway back and forth like a reflection in gently rolling water.

Merle sat as if in a trance, staring at the mirror, until the darkness came and took the vision away. Slowly he awoke and became aware of the sounds that drifted in through the window. Somewhere below him a radio played. Its music mingled with the laughter and the shouts of the children in the street. He could hear the swish of traffic below and the far away honking of car horns. He thought of Randy Mifflin walking about the streets with Josephine. He thought of them laughing.

Then a strange idea came to Merle Merman as he sat there in the darkness, an idea that thrilled him with its possibilities. He got up from the chair and took the mirror from the wall on which it had hung for so long. A wild sense of adventure pulsated through his veins as he

gripped the claws of the eagle and laid the mirror on the bed. He heard again the applause of his mother's audience. He felt like the eagle lifting its wings into the night air.

Working entirely by the dim light that came through the window, Merle took a pencil and paper from his dresser and wrote: "Dearest Loretta. Look into this glass and know the happiness of your life." It was a paraphrase from something he had read in a book, and it pleased him. He signed his name in a very scrawled hand and slipped the paper into a corner of the mirror, and began looking about the room for an old company directory that he had there. After he had found it and had written out Loretta's address, he wrapped the mirror in a large piece of brown paper. He lifted the trunk lid and took a handful of bills from the tray, and taking the mirror under his arm, he went out into the hall and through the window and down the fire escape.

As he stepped into the street another idea was already taking shape in his mind, and he hailed a taxi with an authority he had never known before.

"I'd like you to deliver something to this address," he said, opening the door and leaning into the darkness of the cab.

"This ain't no delivery service," said the cab driver, letting the cab inch forward.

"There's money in it for you," said Merle boldly, holding out the handful of bills.

"What is it?" asked the cab driver, putting on brakes again.

"This," said Merle, laying the wrapped mirror on the seat beside the driver.

"What address?"

Merle handed him the slip of paper and the money.

"Okay."

"Thank you," said Merle.

The driver stared at him. Merle shut the door and the cab sped away into the traffic, leaving him alone on street.

* * *

Back in his room again, Merle felt a lingering uneasiness about the absence of the mirror, but he tried to dispell it by concentrating on his new plan. He removed the money tray and lifted one by one the garments that had been stored for almost twenty-five years in the bottom of the trunk. There was a huge gown with sheets of lace and ruffled borders. There were blouses whose bright colors were slightly faded now. There were sheer stockings of black and red, and all the harnesses and belts that hold them and other things in place. At the very bottom of the trunk, Merle found the pair of black, velvet slacks his mother had told him about.

He lifted them between a thumb and index finger of each hand, letting the legs unfold as they came up out of the trunk. Down each leg was a row of rhinestones that

glittered like stars against the black velvet.

Merle lay the slacks carefully on the bed and replaced the other clothes in the trunk, before removing his own pants. As he lifted his foot and slid it into the soft, lined leg of the slacks, he felt a storm beginning to rage in him. He felt that he was already with Loretta, that he was touching her. Involuntarily, he looked at the wall where the mirror had always hung, but only a brown spot remained there. The bareness of the wall frightened him, and he looked away and forced his other foot into the slacks.

With some difficulty he zipped the side zipper over his hip bone and buttoned the button above it. Having stuffed a handful of bills into each of the two slit pockets in the front of the slacks, he walked about the room and watched the bending lines of stones that glittered down his legs.

As he sat down in his chair, he felt that he was sitting on a throne and that his small room had suddenly become a sprawling palace by the edge of the sea. With his slightest command he felt he could bring before him the riches of all the kingdoms of the world. But he waited, waited for the magic hour of midnight when he would charge out into the night and rescue his captured queen. Above him the dark spot on the wall hovered like an angry cloud.

* * *

At one o'clock Merle was still walking the street before Loretta's apartment building. He was haunted by the memory of the brown spot where the mirror had hung. The room had become like a windowless cell to him as he waited through the silent hours for midnight. It was drab and cold, and there was nothing he could do to take his mind off the mirror. He kept turning to the wall, and turning away again. His dream of Loretta had quickly taken second place to an urgent desire to have the mirror back. He became like a vicious animal, turning and turning in the small confinement of his room.

At eleven, he sprang out through the window and down the fire escape, and stalked through the streets towards Loretta's apartment. He became completely mad with the desire to have the mirror back, and from time to time, he would stop and growl like a beast in the darkness.

But when confronted by the tall, lighted apartment building he came to himself again. As he approached the entrance he thought again of Loretta, and he walked on past. He intended to walk to the corner and then come back and enter, but he walked by a second time, and then a third. In this manner he had passed almost an hour without entering the building.

Now as he turned and started back from the corner again, he recalled vividly the brown spot that stained the wall of his ugly room. He touched the money in his pockets, and the thought of buying the mirror back came

to him. A longing to have the mirror at all cost rose in him, and he rushed towards the huge, glass door of the apartment building.

The soaring speed of the elevator strengthened his confidence, and he felt powerful and determined as he stepped onto the carpeting of the ninth floor hallway.

He pressed the buzzer firmly with his index finger and stepped back and stood with his arms folded across his chest. He waited for what seemed the proper length of time, and then, pressed the button again. He looked down the narrow hall towards the red exit sign. With a mingling sense of despair and excitement, the thought came to him that she might be in bed. Timidly, he pushed the button again.

At last he heard a rustling from within the apartment and the door opened just wide enough for him to see a narrow strip of a rather fat-faced girl in curlers. Her cheeks were wrinkled with sleep, and she wore a faded blue bathrobe that was tumbled up about her neck.

"Who is it?" said the girl, blinking her eyes in the light.

"Lo-Loretta?"

"Yeah. Who're you?"

"I'm Merle Mer."

"Merle. I didn't recognize you in that . . . What are you doing here at this hour?"

"My mirror, I was wondering if . . ."

"Oh, yes, we got it. That was sweet of you Merle. But honestly, you shoulda brought it over yourself. When that taxi driver came here I didn't know what to think. We just love it though—it was so nice of you. Rick is just crazy about it."

"Rick?"

"Yes, Rick—my fiance. He likes old stuff like that. His mother's an antique collector."

"She is?"

"Yes, it was just the perfect gift for us. You *are* coming to the wedding, aren't you?"

* * *

Merle stood on the sidewalk before a dark store window. He fingered the money in his pockets and sought to find in the glass something of what the mirror had given him. But the window only threw back the reflection of his small, slump-shouldered form. The stones on the legs of the slacks sparkled wildly.

Thrusting his hands deeper into his pockets, he clutched the money, and with one upward motion of his arms, he flung it into the air.

The bills fluttered for a moment in the mirror-blue light of the street. Above their frantic motion the lighted windows of the sky scrapers stair-stepped into the night. Beyond the city, the green plains rolled out towards the sea. And somewhere, in the warm light of a castle, skeins of loose silk rose like smoke and wound about the pale limbs of strange, exotic women.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

DAVID ACKLEY, an MFA candidate who hails from Durham and the University of New Hampshire, has had his work printed in the *Greensboro Review*.

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GUY OWEN, founder and editor of *Southern Poetry Review*, was born in Clarkton, North Carolina, March 8, 1925. He received his three degrees from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and is currently on the staff of the English Department of North Carolina State University in Raleigh. His works include *Season of Fear* and *The Ballad of the Flim-Flam Man*, which will be released as a motion picture in May of this year.

ANDREW LYTLE, born in Murfreesboro, Tennessee in 1902, was educated at Sewanee Military Academy, Exeter College, and Vanderbilt University from which he graduated in 1925. His works include *The Long Night* (1936), *A Name for Evil* (1947), and numerous short stories. He is currently editor of the *Sewanee Review*. In addition, he is Lecturer in English at the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee.

JOHN CROWE RANSOM was born in Pulaski, Tennessee, in 1888. After attending Vanderbilt and Oxford, he was a member of the faculty of Vanderbilt University from 1914 to 1937. He then taught at Kenyon College for twenty years and edited the *Kenyon Review*, which he founded in 1939. He is the author of more than a score of volumes of poetry and criticism. At present, Mr. Ransom lives in Gambier, Ohio, after having retired from teaching in 1958.

TWENTY-FOURTH ANNUAL WRITERS' FORUM SCHEDULE

April 5th Reading: John Crowe Ransom. Cone Ballroom 8:00 p.m.

April 6th Discussion: Andrew Lytle, John Crowe Ransom. Closed*
Alexander Room 10:30 a.m.

Critics Panel: Andrew Lytle, Guy Owen, John Crowe Ransom.
Closed* Alexander Room 3:30 p.m.

Reading: Andrew Lytle. Cone Ballroom 8:p

