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The Girl from Ipanema, 1963/1982
by Haruki Murakami

translated by Brian Wilson

{It begins with the lyrics of the Getz/Gilberto song,}

Tall and tan and young and lovely.... {and continues like this.}

In 1963 the girl from Ipanema watched the sea in this way. And now, the girl from Ipanema in 1982 watches the sea in the same way. She has not got older since then. She is confined in an image and floating in the sea of time. If she had become older, she would now be almost forty years old.

Of course it's possible that she is not so old, but she might not be so slender and so tanned as she used to be. She might have three children. Sunburn is not good for the skin. She might still be called a beauty, but not so youthful as she was twenty years ago.

But in the song she does not get old. She is always an eighteen-years-old cool and kind Ipanema girl on the velvety sound of Stan Getz' tenor saxophone. As soon as I put on the record on the turntable and drop the stylus on the record, she appears.

Every time I listen to this song, I remember the corridor of my high school building. The dark and a little damp high school corridor. The ceiling is high and when I walk on the concrete floor, the sound of my steps echoed. There are some windows on the northside wall, but little sunlight comes in because the building is just at the foot of a steep hill. It is always still in the corridor, at least in my memory.

Why I remember the corridor every time I hear "The Girl From Ipanema", I don't know. There's no cause and effect. What kind of pebble did the Girl from Ipanema 1963 dropped into my well of consciousness?

And the corridor of the highschool building reminds me of a salad consisting of lettuce, tomato, cucumber, greenpepper, asparagus, onion, and pink Thousand Island dressing. Of course there's no salad shop at the end of the corridor. At the end of the corridor is a door and outside is an ordinary 25 meter swimming pool.

Why the corridor reminds me of the salad, I don't know. There's no cause and effect here, either. The two connected in my mind by some accident or other. Just like an unlucky lady who sat on a freshly painted bench.

The salad reminds me of a girl I used to know. There's a clear connection here. The girl was always eating salad.

"Have you (crunch, crunch) finished (crunch, crunch) the paper for the English class?"

"(Crunch, crunch) not yet, (crunch, crunch) a little (crunch, crunch) left undone."

I myself liked vegetables and every time we met, we ate salad like this. She was a woman of very strong mind, and believed that everything would go well if she ate various vegetables. If people kept on eating vegetables, the world would be peaceful, beautiful, healthy and full of love. Something like

"Strawberry Statement."

"Once upon a time," a philosopher wrote "there was a time when matters and memories were divided by a metaphysical depth."

The Girl from Ipanema in 1963/1982 is walking on a metapysically hot sandbeach without making any sound. It is a very long beach and slow white waves are washing it. No breeze. Nothing on the horizon. I can smell the sea. The hot sun scorches me.

I lie under the beach umbrella and pull out a canned beer from the coolbox and open it. She is still walking. On her tall and tan body are the bikinis in bright color.

"Hi," I pluck up my courage and say to her. "Hi," she answers.

"How about a beer?" I offer.

She hesitates a little. But after walking a lot, she must be tired and thirsty. "Good," she says. And we drink beer together under the beach umbrella.

"By the way," I say "I'm sure I saw you in 1963 in the same place at the same time."

"It was a long time ago, wasn't it?" she says tilting her head a little.

"Yes, it was," I say "Must have been a long time ago."

She drinks a half of the beer in one go and looks at the opening. The opening is an ordinary opening of a beer can. But when she looks at it, it seems to me it is something significant. It looks as if it might contain the whole world.

"We might have met. In 1963? Umm 1963. Yes, we might have met each other."

"You haven't get older since then, haven't you?"

"That's because I'm a metaphysical girl."

I nodded. "Since you were always watching the sea, I'm sure you didn't notice me."

"That might have been the case." she said and smiled. A beautiful smile with a little hint of sadness. "I might have been always watching the sea. I might have been watching nothing but the sea."

I opened a can of beer for myself, and then offered one to her. But she shook her head and said she couldn't drink so much beer. "Thank you. But I have to keep on walking from now on just as I have been," she said.

"Don't you feel hot at the sole of your feet walking on the sand for such a long time?"

"No, because my soles are made very metaphysically. Wanna look at them?"

"Yes."

She stretched her slender legs out and showed the soles to me. Yes, they were really metaphysical soles. I softly touched them. They are neither hot nor cold. When I touched her soles, I heard faint sound of waves. Even the sound of waves are very metaphysical.

I kept my eyes closed for a while and opened them and took a sip of cold beer. The sun didn't move at all. Even the time stood still. It's as if I was drawn into a mirror.

"Every time I think of you, I always remember the corridors of my high school building. Why do you think I do? " I ventured to say.

"The essence of humanity lies in its being a compound," she says "The human science should not try to explore the object but the subject that is involved in the body,"

"Hummm." I say.

"Anyway, go on living. Live. Live. That's all. It is important that you should go on living. That is all I can say. I'm only a girl with metaphysical soles."

And the Girl From Ipanema in 1963/1982 brushed the sand off her thighs and stood up. "Thanks for the beer." she says. And I say, "You are welcome."

Only occasionally, I see her in subway trains. I know her and she knows me. Every time we meet, she gives me a thank-you-for-the beer smile. We haven't exchanged words since then, but I feel that we are connected somewhere at our hearts. I don't know where we are connected, but I'm sure the knot is somewhere in a strange distant world.

I imagine the knot. The knot lies silently in the dark corridor where no one walks along. When I am thinking in this way, many dear old memories gradually return to my mind. There must be a knot that connects me and myself. I'm sure someday I will meet myself in the strange distant world. And I wish it was a warm place. And if there was some cold beer, I would have nothing to complain. In the world I am myself and myself is me. The subject is the object and the object is the subject. There is no opening of any kind between the two. They are closely stuck together. Such a strange place must exist somewhere in the world.

The Girl from Ipanema in 1963/1982 is still walking on the hot sand beach. Until the last one of the records is worn out, she keeps on walking without any break

THE MIRROR

All the stories you've been telling tonight seem to fall into two categories. There's the type where you have the world of the living on one side, the world of death on the other, and some force that allows a crossing-over from one side to the other. This would include ghosts and the like. The second type involves paranormal abilities, premonitions, the ability to predict the future. All of your stories belong to one of these two groups.

In fact, your experiences tend to fall almost totally under one of these categories or the other. What I mean is, people who see ghosts just see ghosts and never have premonitions. And those who have premonitions don't see ghosts. I don't know why, but there would appear to be some individual predilection for one or the other. At least that's the impression I get.

Of course some people don't fall into either category. Me, for instance. In my thirty-odd years I've never once seen a ghost, never once had a premonition or prophetic dream. There was one time I was riding an elevator with a couple of friends and they swore they saw a ghost riding with us, but I didn't see a thing. They claimed there was a woman in a gray suit standing right next to me, but there wasn't any woman with us, at least as far as I could make out. The three of us were the only ones in the elevator. No kidding. And these two friends weren't the type to deliberately play tricks on me. The whole thing was really weird, but the fact remains that I've still never seen a ghost.

But there was one time—just the one time—when I had an experience that scared me out of my wits. This happened over ten years ago, and I've never told anybody about it. I was afraid to even talk about it. I felt that if I did, it might happen all over again, so I've never brought it up. But tonight each of you has related his own scary experience, and as the host I can't very well call it a night without contributing something of my own. So I've decided to just come right out and tell you the story. Here goes.

I graduated from high school at the end of the 1960s, just when the student movement was in full swing. I was part of the hippie generation, and refused to go to college. Instead, I wandered all over Japan working at various manual labor jobs. I was convinced that was the most righteous way to live. Young and impetuous, I guess you'd call me. Looking back on it now, though, I think I had a pretty fun life back then. Whether that was the right choice or not, if I had it to do over again, I'm pretty sure I would.

In the fall of my second year of roaming all over the country, I got a job for a couple of months as a night watchman at a junior high school. This was in a school in a tiny town in Niigata Prefecture. I'd gotten pretty worn out working over the summer and wanted to take it easy for a while. Being a night watchman isn't exactly rocket science. During the day I slept in the janitor's office, and at night all I had to do was go twice around the whole school making sure everything was okay. The rest of the time I listened to records in the music room, read books in the library, played basketball by myself in the gym. Being alone all night in a school isn't so bad, really. Was I afraid? No way. When you're eighteen or nineteen, nothing fazes you.

I don't imagine any of you have ever worked as a night watchman, so maybe I should explain the duties. You're supposed to make two rounds each night, at nine p.m. and three a.m. That's the schedule. The school was a fairly new three-story concrete building, with eighteen to twenty classrooms. Not an especially large school as these things go. In addition to the classrooms you had a music room, a home ec room, an art studio, a staff office, and the principal's office. Plus a separate cafeteria, swimming pool, gym, and auditorium. My job was to make a quick check of all of these.

As I made my rounds, I followed a twenty-point checklist. I'd make a check mark next to each one—staff office, check, science lab, check… I suppose I could have just stayed in bed in the janitor's room, where I slept, and checked these off without going to the trouble of actually walking around. But I wasn't such a haphazard sort of guy. It didn't take much time to make the rounds, and besides, if someone broke in while I was sleeping, I'd be the one who'd get attacked.

Anyway, there I was each night at nine and three, making my rounds, a flashlight in my left hand, a wooden kendo sword in my right. I'd practiced kendo in high school and felt pretty confident in my ability to fend off anyone. If an attacker was an amateur, and even if he had a real sword with him, that wouldn't have scared me. I was young, remember. If it happened now, I'd run like hell.

Anyhow, this took place on a windy night in the beginning of October. It was actually kind of steamy for the time of year. A swarm of mosquitoes buzzed around in the evening, and I remember burning a couple of mosquito-repellent coils to keep them away. The wind was noisy. The gate to the swimming pool was broken and the wind made the gate slap open and shut. I thought of fixing it, but it was too dark out, so it kept banging all night.

My nine p.m. round went by fine, all twenty items on my list neatly checked off. All the doors were locked, everything in its proper place. Nothing out of the ordinary. I went back to the janitor's room, set my alarm for three, and fell fast asleep.

When the alarm went off at three, though, I woke up feeling weird. I can't explain it, but I just felt different. I didn't feel like getting up—it was like something was suppressing my will to get out of bed. I'm the type who usually leaps right out of bed, so I couldn't understand it. I had to force myself to get out of bed and get ready to make my rounds. The gate to the pool was still making its rhythmic banging, but it sounded different from before. Something's definitely weird, I thought, reluctant to get going. But I made up my mind I had to do my job, no matter what. If you skip out on doing your duty once, you'll skip out again and again, and I didn't want to fall into that. So I grabbed my flashlight and wooden sword and off I went.

It was an altogether odd night. The wind grew stronger as the night went on, the air more humid. My skin started itching and I couldn't focus. I decided to go around the gym, auditorium, and pool first. Everything checked out OK. The gate to the pool banged away in the wind like some crazy person who alternately shakes his head and nods. There was no order to it. First a couple of nods—yes, yes—then no, no, no…It's a weird thing to compare it to, I know, but that's what it felt like.

Inside the school building it was situation normal. I looked around and checked off the points on my list. Nothing out of the usual had happened, despite the weird feeling I'd had. Relieved, I started back to the janitor's room. The last place on my checklist was the boiler room next to the cafeteria on the east side of the building, the opposite side from the janitor's room. This meant I had to walk down the long hallway on the first floor on my way back. It was pitch black. On nights when the moon was out, there was a little light in the hallway, but when there wasn't, you couldn't see a thing. I had to shine my flashlight ahead of me to see where I was going. This particular night, a typhoon was not too far off, so there was no moon at all. Occasionally there'd be a break in the clouds, but then it plunged into darkness again.

I walked faster than usual down the hallway, the rubber soles of my basketball shoes squeaking against the linoleum floor. It was a green linoleum floor, the color of a hazy bed of moss. I can picture it even now.

The entrance to the school was midway down the hallway, and as I passed it I thought, What the—? I thought I'd seen something in the dark. I broke out in a sweat. Regripping the wooden sword, I turned toward what I saw. I shined my flashlight at the wall next to the shelf for storing shoes.

And there I was. A mirror, in other words. It was just my reflection in a mirror. There wasn't a mirror there the night before, so they must have put in one between then and now. Man, was I startled. It was a long, full-length mirror. Relieved that it was just me in a mirror, I felt a bit stupid for having been so surprised. So that's all it is, I told myself. How dumb. I put my flashlight down, took a cigarette from my pocket, and lit it. As I took a puff, I glanced at myself in the mirror. A faint streetlight from outside shone

in through the window, reaching the mirror. From behind me, the swimming pool gate was banging in the wind.

After a couple of puffs, I suddenly noticed something odd. My reflection in the mirror wasn't me. It looked exactly like me on the outside, but it definitely wasn't me. No, that's not it. It was me, of course, but another me. Another me that never should have been. I don't know how to put it. It's hard to explain what it felt like.

The one thing I did understand was that this other figure loathed me. Inside it was a hatred like an iceberg floating in a dark sea. The kind of hatred that no one could ever diminish.

I stood there for a while, dumbfounded. My cigarette slipped from between my fingers and fell to the floor. The cigarette in the mirror fell to the floor, too. We stood there, staring at each other. I felt like I was bound hand and foot, and couldn't move.

Finally his hand moved, the fingertips of his right hand touching his chin, and then slowly, like a bug, crept up his face. I suddenly realized I was doing the same thing. Like I was the reflection of what was in the mirror and he was trying to take control of me.

Wrenching out my last ounce of strength I roared out a growl, and the bonds that held me rooted to the spot broke. I raised my kendo sword and smashed it down on the mirror as hard as I could. I heard glass shattering but didn't look back as I raced back to my room. Once inside, I hurriedly locked the door and leapt under the covers. I was worried about the cigarette I'd dropped on the floor, but there was no way I was going back. The wind was howling the whole time, and the gate to the pool continued to make a racket until dawn. Yes, yes, no, yes, no, no, no…

I'm sure you've already guessed the ending to my story. There never was any mirror.

When the sun came up, the typhoon had already passed. The wind had died down and it was a sunny day. I went over to the entrance. The cigarette butt I'd tossed away was there, as was my wooden sword. But no mirror. There never had been any mirror there.

What I saw wasn't a ghost. It was simply—myself. I can never forget how terrified I was that night, and whenever I remember it, this thought always springs to mind: that the most frightening thing in the world is our own self. What do you think?

You may have noticed that I don’t have a single mirror here in my house. Learning to shave without one was no easy feat, believe me.

—TRANSLATED BY PHILIP GABRIEL

A SHINAGAWA MONKEY

Recently she'd had trouble remembering her own name. Mostly this happened when someone unexpectedly asked her name. She'd be at a boutique, getting the sleeves of a dress altered, and the clerk would say, "And your name, ma'am?" Or she'd be at work, on the phone, and the person would ask her name, and she'd totally blank out. The only way she could remember was to pull out her driver's license, which was bound to make the person she was talking with feel a little weird. If she happened to be on the phone, the awkward moment of silence as she rummaged through her purse inevitably made the person on the other end wonder what was going on.

When she was the one who brought up her name, she never had trouble remembering it. As long as she knew in advance what was coming, she had no trouble with her memory. But when she was in a hurry, or someone suddenly asked her name, it was like a breaker had shut down and her mind was a complete blank. The more she struggled to recall, the more that featureless blank took over and she couldn't for the life of her remember what she was called.

She could remember everything else. She never forgot the name of people around her. And her address, phone number, birthday, passport number were no trouble at all. She could rattle off from memory her friends' phone numbers, and the phone numbers of important clients. She'd always had a decent memory—it was just her own name that escaped her. The problem had started about a year before, the first time anything like this had ever happened to her.

Her married name was Mizuki Ando, her maiden name Ozawa. Neither one was a very unique or dramatic name, which isn't to say that this explained why, in the course of her busy schedule, her name should vanish from her memory.

She'd become Mizuki Ando in the spring three years earlier, when she married a man named Takashi Ando. At first she couldn't get used to her new name. The way it looked and sounded just didn't seem right to her. But after repeating her new name, and signing it a number of times, she gradually came to think it wasn't so bad after all. Compared to other possibilities—Mizuki Mizuki or Mizuki Miki or something (she'd actually dated a guy named Miki for a while)—Mizuki Ando wasn't so bad. It took time, yet gradually she began to feel comfortable with her new, married name.

A year ago, however, that name started to slip away from her. At first this happened just once a month or so, but over time it became more frequent. Now it was happening at least once a week. Once "Mizuki Ando" had escaped, she was left alone in the world, a nobody, a woman without a name. As long as she

had her purse with her she was fine—she could just pull out her license and remember who she was. If she ever lost her purse, though, she wouldn't have a clue. She wouldn't become a complete nonentity, of course—losing her name for a time didn't negate the fact that she still existed, and she still remembered her address and phone number. This wasn't like those cases of total amnesia in movies. Still, the fact remained that forgetting her own name was upsetting. A life without a name, she felt, was like a dream you never wake up from.

Mizuki went to a jewelry shop, bought a thin simple bracelet, and had her name engraved on it: Mizuki (Ozawa) Ando. Not her address or phone number, just her name. Makes me feel like I'm a cat or a dog, she sighed. She made sure to wear the bracelet every time she left home, so if she forgot her name all she had to do was glance at it. No more yanking out her license, no more weird looks from people.

She didn't let on about her problem to her husband. She knew he'd only say it proved she was unhappy with their life together. He was overly logical about everything. He didn't mean any harm; that's just the way he was, always theorizing about everything under the sun. That way of looking at the world was not her forte, however. Her husband was also quite a talker, and wouldn't easily back down once he started on a topic. So she kept quiet about the whole thing.

Still, she thought, what her husband said—or would likely have said if he only knew—was off the mark. She wasn't worried or dissatisfied with their marriage. Apart from his sometimes excessive logicality, she had no complaints about her husband, and no real negative feelings about her in-laws, either. Her father-in-law was a doctor who operated a small clinic in Sakata City, in the far north prefecture of Yamagata. Her in-laws were definitely conservative, but her husband was a second son so they generally kept out of Mizuki's and her husband's lives. Mizuki was from Nagoya, and so was at first overwhelmed by the frigid winters in Sakata, but during their one or two annual trips there she started to like the place. Two years after she and her husband married, they took out a mortgage and bought a condo in a new building in Shinagawa. Her husband, now thirty, worked in a lab in a pharmaceutical company. Mizuki was twenty-six and worked at a Honda dealership. She answered the phone, showed customers to the lounge, brought coffee, made copies when necessary, took care of files and updating their computerized customer list.

Mizuki's uncle, an executive at Honda, had found the job for her after she graduated from a women's junior college in Tokyo. It wasn't the most thrilling job imaginable, but they did give her some responsibility and overall it wasn't so bad. Her duties didn't include car sales, but whenever the salesmen were out she took over, always doing a decent job of answering the customers' questions. She learned by watching the salesmen, and quickly grasped the necessary technical information, and the knack of selling cars. She'd memorized the mileage ratings of all the models in the showroom, and could convince anyone, for instance, how the Odyssey handled less like a minivan and more like an ordinary sedan. Mizuki was a good conversationalist herself, and that and her winning smile always put customers at ease. She also knew how to subtly change her tack based on her reading of each

customer's personality. Unfortunately, however, she didn't have the authority to give discounts, negotiate prices of trade-ins, or throw in options for free, so even if she had the customer ready to sign on the dotted line, in the end she had to turn over negotiations to the sales staff. She might have done most of the work, but one of the salesmen would take over and get the commission. The only reward she could expect was the occasional free dinner from one of the salesmen sharing his windfall.

Occasionally the thought crossed her mind that if they'd let her do sales they'd sell more cars and the dealership's overall record would improve. If these young salesmen, fresh out of college, only put their minds to it, they could sell twice as many cars. Nobody told her, though, that she was too good at sales to be wasting her time in clerical work, that she should be transferred to the sales division. That's the way a company operates. The sales division is one thing, the clerical staff another, and except in very rare cases, these were unbreachable boundaries. Besides, she wasn't ambitious enough to want to try to boost her career that way. She much preferred putting in her eight hours, nine to five, taking all the vacation time she had coming, and enjoying her time off.

At work Mizuki continued to use her maiden name. If she officially changed her name, then all the data concerning her in their computer system would have to be changed, a job she'd have to do herself. It was too much trouble and she kept putting it off, and finally she just decided to go by her maiden name. For tax purposes she was listed as married, but her name was unchanged. She knew it wasn't right to do that, but nobody at work said anything (they were all far too busy to worry about details), so she still went by Mizuki Ozawa. That was still the name on her business cards, her name tag, her time card. Everybody called her either Ozawa-san, Ozawa-kun, Mizukisan, or even the familiar Mizuki-chan. She wasn't trying to avoid using her married name. It was just too much paperwork to change it, so she managed to slip by without ever making the changes. If somebody else would input all the changes for her, she thought, she'd be happy to go by Mizuki Ando.

Her husband knew she was going by her maiden name at work (he called her occasionally), but didn't have a problem with it. He seemed to feel that whatever name she used at work was just a matter of convenience. As long as he was convinced of the logic, he didn't complain. In that sense he was pretty easygoing.

Mizuki began to worry that forgetting her name so completely might be a symptom of some awful disease, perhaps an early sign of Alzheimer's. The world was full of unexpected, fatal diseases. She'd never known, until recently, that there were diseases such as myasthenia and Huntington's disease. There must be countless others she'd never heard of. And with most of these illnesses the early symptoms were quite slight. Unusual, but slight symptoms such as—forgetting your own name? Once

she started thinking this way, she grew worried that an unknown disease was silently spreading throughout her body.

Mizuki went to a large hospital and explained the symptoms. The young doctor in charge, however—who was so pale and exhausted he looked more like a patient than a physician—didn't take her seriously. "Do you forget anything else besides your name?" he asked. No, she said. Right now it's just my name. "Hmm. This sounds more like a psychiatric case," he said, his voice devoid of any interest or sympathy. "If you start to forget things other than your name, please check back with us. We can run some tests then." We've got our hands full with a lot more seriously ill people than you, he seemed to imply. Forgetting your own name every once in a while is no big deal.

One day, in the local ward newsletter that came in the mail, she came across an article announcing that the ward office would be opening a counseling center. It was just a tiny article, something she'd normally have overlooked. The center would be open twice a month and feature a professional counselor who, at a greatly reduced rate, would advise people one-on-one. Any resident of Shinagawa Ward over eighteen was free to make use of its services, the article said, with everything held in the strictest confidence. Mizuki had her doubts about whether a ward-sponsored counseling center would do any good, but decided to give it a try. It couldn't hurt, she concluded. The dealership she worked at was busy on the weekends, but getting a day off during the week wasn't difficult and she was able to adjust her schedule to fit the schedule of the counseling center, which was an unrealistic one for ordinary working people. The center required an appointment, so she phoned ahead. One thirty-minute session cost two thousand yen, not an excessive amount for her to pay. She made an appointment for one p.m. the following Wednesday.

When she arrived at the counseling center on the third floor of the ward office, Mizuki found she was the only client. "They started this program rather suddenly," the woman receptionist explained, "and most people don't know about it yet. Once people find out, I'm sure we'll get more people coming by. But now we're pretty open, so you're lucky."

The counselor, whose name was Tetsuko Sakaki, was a pleasant, short, heavyset woman in her late forties. Her short hair was dyed a light brown, her broad face wreathed in an amiable smile. She wore a light-colored summer-weight suit, a shiny silk blouse, a necklace of artificial pearls, and low heels. She looked less like a counselor than some friendly, helpful neighborhood housewife.

"My husband works in the ward office here, you see. He's section chief of the Public Works Department," she said by way of friendly introduction. "That's how we were able to get support from the ward and open this counseling center. Actually, you're our first client, and we're very happy to have you. I don't have any other appointments today, so let's just take our time and have a good heart-to-heart talk." The woman spoke extremely slowly, everything about her slow and deliberate.

It’s very nice to meet you, Mizuki said. Inside, though, she wondered whether this sort of person would be of any help.

“You can rest assured that I have a degree in counseling and lots of experience. So just leave everything up to me,” the woman added, sounding like she’d read Mizuki’s mind.

Mrs. Sakaki was seated behind a plain metal office desk. Mizuki sat on a small, ancient sofa that looked like something they’d just dragged out of storage. The springs were about to go, and the musty smell made her nose twitch.

“I was really hoping to get one of those nice couches so it looks more like a counselor’s office, but that’s all we could come up with at the moment. We’re dealing with a town hall here, so you can always count on a lot of red tape. An awful place. I promise next time we’ll have something better for you to sit on, but I hope today you won’t mind.”

Mizuki sank back into the flimsy old sofa and began to explain how she’d come to forget her name so often. All the while Mrs. Sakaki just nodded along. She didn’t ask any questions, never showed any surprise. She hardly even made any appropriate sounds to show she was following Mizuki. She just listened carefully to Mizuki’s story, and except for the occasional frown as if she were considering something, her face remained unchanged, her faint smile, like a spring moon at dusk, never wavered.

“That was a wonderful idea to put your name on a bracelet,” she commented after Mizuki had finished. “I like the way you dealt with it. The first thing is to come up with a practical solution, to minimize any inconvenience. Much better to deal with the issue in a realistic way than be tormented by a sense of guilt, brood over it, or get all flustered. I can see you’re quite clever. And it’s a gorgeous bracelet. It looks wonderful on you.”

“Do you think forgetting one’s name might be connected with a more serious disease? Are there cases of this?” Mizuki asked.

“I don’t believe there are any diseases that have that sort of defined early symptom,” Mrs. Sakaki said. “I am a little concerned, though, that the symptoms have gotten worse over the past year. I suppose it’s possible this might lead to other symptoms, or that your memory loss could spread to other areas. So let’s take it one step at a time and determine where this all started. I would imagine that since you work outside the home, forgetting your name must lead to all sorts of problems.”

Mrs. Sakaki began by asking several basic questions about Mizuki's present life. How long have you been married? What kind of work do you do? How is your health? She went on to question her about her childhood, about her family, her schooling. Things she enjoyed, things she didn't. Things she was good at, things she wasn't. Mizuki tried to answer each and every question as honestly, as quickly, and as accurately as she could.

Mizuki was raised in a quite ordinary family, with her parents and older sister. Her father worked for a large insurance company, and though they weren't affluent by any means, she never remembered them hurting for money. Her father was a serious person, while her mother was on the delicate side and a bit of a nag. Her sister was always at the top of her class, though according to Mizuki she was a little shallow and sneaky. Still, Mizuki had no special problems with her family and got along with them all right. They'd never had any major fights. Mizuki herself had been the sort of child who didn't stand out. She was always healthy, never got sick, which doesn't mean that she was particularly athletic—she wasn't. She didn't have any hang-ups about her looks, though nobody ever told her she was pretty, either. Mizuki saw herself as fairly intelligent, but didn't excel in any one area. Her grades were all right—if you were looking for her name on the grade roster, it was faster to count from the top of the ranked list than from the bottom. She'd had some good friends in school, but they'd all moved to other places after getting married and now they seldom kept in touch.

She didn't have any particular complaints about married life. In the beginning she and her husband made the usual, predictable mistakes young marrieds make, but over time they'd cobbled together a decent enough life. Her husband wasn't perfect by any means (besides his argumentative nature, his sense of fashion was nonexistent), but he had a lot of good points—he was kind, responsible, clean, would eat anything, and never complained. He seemed to get along fine with everyone at work, both his colleagues and his bosses. Of course there were times when unpleasant things did arise at work, an unavoidable consequence of working closely with the same people day after day, but still he didn't seem to get too stressed out by it.

As she responded to all these questions, Mizuki was struck by what an uninspired life she'd led. Nothing approaching the dramatic had ever touched her. If her life were a movie, it would be one of those low-budget environmental documentaries guaranteed to put you to sleep. Washed-out scenery stretching out endlessly to the horizon. No changes of scene, no close-ups, nothing exciting, just a flatline experience with nothing whatsoever to draw you in. Nothing ominous, nothing suggestive. Occasionally the camera angle would shift ever so slightly as if nudged out of its complacency. Mizuki knew it was a counselor's job to listen to her clients, but she started to feel sorry for the woman who was having to listen so intently to such a tedious life story. Surely she couldn't suppress a yawn forever. If it were me and I had to listen to endless tales of stale lives like mine, Mizuki thought, at some point I'd keel over from sheer boredom.

Tetsuko Sakaki, though, listened intently to Mizuki, taking down a few concise notes. Occasionally she'd ask a quick question, but for the most part she was silent, as if focusing entirely on the process of listening to Mizuki's story. The few times when she did speak, her voice revealed no hint of boredom, rather a warmth that showed her genuine concern. Listening to Tetsuko's distinctive drawl, Mizuki found herself strangely calmed. No one's ever listened so patiently to me before, she realized. When their meeting, just over an hour, wound up, Mizuki felt a burden lifted from her.

"Mrs. Ando, can you come at the same time next Wednesday?" Mrs. Sakaki asked, smiling broadly.

"Yes, I can," Mizuki replied. "You don't mind if I do?"

"Of course not. As long as you're all right with it. Counseling takes many sessions before you see any progress. This isn't like one of those radio call-in shows where you can easily wrap up things and just advise the caller to 'Hang in there!' It might take time, but we're like neighbors, both from Shinagawa, so let's take our time and do a good job."

"I wonder if there's any event you can recall that had to do with names?" Mrs. Sakaki asked during their second session. "Your name, somebody else's name, the name of a pet, name of a place you've visited, a nickname, perhaps? Anything having to do with a name. If you have any memory at all concerning a name, I'd like you to tell me about it."

"Something to do with names?"

"Names, naming, signatures, roll calls…It can be something trivial, as long as it has to do with a name. Try to remember."

Mizuki thought about it for a long while.

"I don't think I have any particular memory about a name," she finally said. "At least nothing's coming to me right now. Oh…I do have a memory about a name tag."

“A name tag. Very good.”

“But it wasn’t my name tag,” Mizuki said. “It was somebody else’s.”

“That doesn’t matter. Tell me about it,” Mrs. Sakaki said.

“As I mentioned last week, I went to a private girls’ school for both junior and senior high,” Mizuki began. “I was from Nagoya and the school was in Yokohama so I lived in a dorm at school and went home on the weekends. I’d take the Shinkansen train home every Friday night and be back on Sunday night. It was only two hours to Nagoya, so I didn’t feel particularly lonely.”

Mrs. Sakaki nodded. “But weren’t there a lot of good private girls’ schools in Nagoya? Why did you have to leave your home and go all the way to Yokohama?”

“My mother graduated from there and wanted one of her daughters to go. And I thought it might be nice to live apart from my parents. The school was a missionary school but was fairly liberal. I made some good friends there. All of them were like me, from other places, with mothers who’d graduated from the school. I was there for six years and generally enjoyed it. The food was pretty bad, however.”

Mrs. Sakaki smiled. “You said you have an older sister?”

“That’s right. She’s two years older than me.”

“Why didn’t she go to that school?”

“She’s more of a homebody. She’s been sort of sickly, too, since she was little. So she went to a local school, and lived at home. That’s why my mother wanted me to attend that school. I’ve always been healthy and a lot more independent than my sister. When I graduated from elementary school and they asked me if I’d go to the school in Yokohama, I said OK. The idea of riding the Shinkansen every weekend to come home was kind of exciting, too.”

“Excuse me for interrupting,” Mrs. Sakaki said, smiling. “Please go on.”

“Most people had a roommate in the dorm, but when you got to be a senior you were given your own room. I was living in one of those single rooms when this all happened. Since I was a senior they made me student representative for the dorm. There was a board at the entrance of the dorm with name tags hanging there for each of the students in the dorm. The front of the name tag had your name in black, the back in red. Whenever you went out you had to turn the name tag over, and turn it back when you returned. So when the person’s name was in black they were in the dorm; if it was red it meant they’d gone out. If you were staying overnight somewhere or were going to be on leave for a while, your name tag was taken off the board. Students took turns manning the front desk and when you got a phone call for one of the students it was easy to tell their status just by glancing at the board. It was a very convenient system.”

Mrs. Sakaki gave a word of encouragement for her to go on.

“Anyway, this happened in October. It was before dinnertime and I was in my room, doing homework, when a junior named Yuko Matsunaka came to see me. She was by far the prettiest girl in the whole dorm—fair skin, long hair, beautiful, doll-like features. Her parents ran a well-known Japanese inn in Kanazawa and were pretty well-off. She wasn’t in my class so I’m not sure, but I heard her grades were very good. In other words, she stood out in a lot of ways. There were lots of younger students who practically worshipped her. But Yuko was friendly and wasn’t stuck up at all. She was a quiet girl who didn’t show her feelings much. A nice girl, but I sometimes couldn’t figure out what she was thinking. The younger girls might have looked up to her but I doubt she had any close friends.”

Mizuki was at her desk, listening to the radio in her room when she heard a faint knock at her door. She opened it to find Yuko Matsunaka standing there, dressed in a tight turtleneck sweater and jeans. I’d like to talk with you, Yuko said, if you have time. “Fine,” Mizuki said, frankly taken aback. “I’m not doing anything special right now.” Mizuki had never once had a private conversation with Yuko, just the two of them, and she’d never imagined Yuko would come to her room to ask her advice about anything personal. Mizuki motioned for her to sit down, and made some tea with the hot water in her thermos.

“Mizuki, have you ever felt jealous?” Yuko said all of a sudden.

Mizuki was surprised by this sudden question, but gave it serious thought.

“No, I guess I never have,” she replied.

“Not even once?”

Mizuki shook her head. “At least, when you ask me out of the blue like that I can’t remember any times. Jealousy…What kind do you mean?”

“Like you love somebody but he loves somebody else. Like there’s something you want very badly but somebody else just grabs it. Or there’s something you want to be able to do, and somebody else is able to do it with no effort…Those sorts of things.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever felt that way,” Mizuki said. “Have you?”

“A lot.”

Mizuki didn’t know what to say. How could a girl like this want anything more in life? She was gorgeous, rich, did well in school, and was popular. Her parents doted on her. Mizuki had heard rumors that on weekends she went on dates with a handsome college student. So how on earth could she want anything more?

“Like what, for instance?” Mizuki asked.

“I’d rather not say,” Yuko said, choosing her words carefully. “Besides, listing all the details here is pointless. I’ve wanted to ask you that for a while—whether you’ve ever felt jealous.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

Mizuki had no idea what this was all about, but made up her mind to answer as honestly as she could. “I don’t think I’ve ever had that sort of experience,” she began. “I don’t know why, and maybe it’s a little strange if you think about it. I mean, it’s not like I have tons of confidence, or get everything I want. Actually there’re lots of things I should feel frustrated about, but for whatever reason, that hasn’t made me feel jealous of other people. I wonder why.”

Yuko Matsunaka smiled faintly. “I don’t think jealousy has much of a connection with real, objective conditions. Like if you’re fortunate you’re not jealous, but if life hasn’t blessed you, you are jealous. Jealousy doesn’t work that way. It’s more like a tumor secretly growing inside us that gets bigger and bigger, beyond all reason. Even if you find out it’s there, there’s nothing you can do to stop it. It’s like saying people who are fortunate don’t get tumors, while people who’re unhappy get them more easily—that isn’t true, right? It’s the same thing.”

Mizuki listened without saying anything. Yuko hardly ever had so much to say at one time.

“It’s hard to explain what jealousy is to someone who’s never felt it. One thing I do know is it’s not easy living with it. It’s like carrying around your own small version of hell, day after day. You should be thankful you’ve never felt that way.”

Yuko stopped speaking and looked straight at Mizuki with what might pass for a smile on her face. She really is lovely, Mizuki thought again. Nice clothes, a wonderful bust. What would it feel like to be like her—such a beauty you stop traffic wherever you go? Is it something you can simply be proud of? Or is it more of a burden?

Despite these thoughts, Mizuki never once felt envious of Yuko.

“I’m going back home now,” Yuko said, staring at her hands in her lap. “One of my relatives died and I have to go to the funeral. I already got permission from our dorm master. I should be back by Monday morning, but while I’m gone I was wondering if you would take care of my name tag.”

She extracted her name tag from her pocket and handed it to Mizuki. Mizuki didn’t understand what was going on.

“I don’t mind keeping it for you,” Mizuki said. “But why go to the bother of asking me? Couldn’t you just stick it in a desk drawer?”

Yuko looked even deeper into Mizuki’s eyes, which made her uncomfortable.

“I just want you to hold on to it for me this time,” Yuko said, point-blank. “There’s something that’s bothering me, and I don’t want to keep it in my room.”

“I don’t mind,” Mizuki said.

“I don’t want a monkey running off with it while I’m away,” Yuko said.

“I doubt there’re any monkeys here,” Mizuki said brightly. It wasn’t like Yuko to make jokes. And then Yuko left the room, leaving behind the name tag, the untouched cup of tea, and a strange blank space where she had been.

“On Monday Yuko still hadn’t returned to the dorm,” Mizuki told her counselor, Mrs. Sakaki. “The teacher in charge of her class was worried, so he phoned her parents. She’d never gone home. No one in her family had passed away, and there had never been any funeral for her to attend. She’d lied about the whole thing and then vanished. They found her body the following week, on the weekend. I heard about it after I came back from spending the weekend at home in Nagoya. She’d killed herself in a woods somewhere, slitting her wrists. When they found her she was dead, covered with blood. Nobody knew why she did it. She didn’t leave behind a note, and there wasn’t any clear motive. Her roommate said she’d seemed the same as always. She hadn’t seemed troubled by anything. Yuko had killed herself without saying a word to anybody.”

“But wasn’t this Miss Matsunaka trying to tell you something?” Mrs. Sakaki asked. “That’s why she came to your room, left her name tag with you. And talked about her jealousy.”

“It’s true she talked about jealousy with me. I didn’t make much of it at the time, though later I realized she must have wanted to tell someone about it before she died.”

“Did you tell anybody that she’d come to your room just before she died?”

“No, I never did.”

“Why not?”

Mizuki inclined her head and gave it some thought. “If I told people about it, it would only cause more confusion. No one would understand, and it wouldn’t do any good.”

“You mean that jealousy might have been the reason for her suicide?”

“Right. If I told people that, they might start thinking something’s wrong with me. Who in the world would a girl like Yuko be envious of? Everybody was pretty confused then, and worked up, so I decided the best thing was just to keep quiet. You can imagine the atmosphere in a girls’ school dorm—if I’d said anything it would have been like lighting a match in a gas-filled room.”

“What happened to the name tag?”

“I still have it. It’s in a box in the back of my closet. Along with my own name tag.”

“Why do you still keep it with you?”

“Things were in such an uproar at school then and I lost my chance to return it. And the longer I waited, the harder it became to just casually return it. But I couldn’t bring myself to throw it away, either. Besides, I started to think that maybe Yuko wanted me to keep that name tag. That’s why she came to my room just before she died and left it with me. Why she picked me, I have no idea.”

“It is sort of strange. You and Yuko weren’t very close, were you.”

“Living in a small dorm, naturally we ran across each other,” Mizuki said. “We exchanged a few words every once in a while. But we were in different grades, and we’d never once talked about anything personal. Maybe she came to see me because I was the student representative in the dorm. I can’t think of any other reason.”

“Perhaps Yuko was interested in you for some reason. Maybe she was attracted to you. Maybe she saw something in you she was drawn toward.”

“I wouldn’t know about that,” Mizuki said.

Mrs. Sakaki was silent, gazing for a time at Mizuki as if trying to make sure of something.

“All that aside, you honestly have never felt jealous? Not even once in your life?”

Mizuki didn’t reply right away. “I don’t think so. Not even once.”

“Which means that you can’t comprehend what jealousy is?”

“In general I think I can—at least what might cause it. But I don’t know what it actually feels like. How overpowering it is, how long it lasts, how much you suffer because of it.”

“You’re right,” Mrs. Sakaki said. “Jealousy goes through many stages. All human emotions are like that. When it’s not so serious, people call it fretting or envy. There are differences in intensity, but most people experience those less intense emotions as a matter of course. Like say one of your co-workers is promoted ahead of you, or a student in your class becomes the teacher’s pet. Or a neighbor wins the lottery. That’s just envy. It seems unfair, and you get a little mad. An entirely natural reaction. Are you sure you’ve never felt that? You’ve never even envied someone else?”

Mizuki gave it some thought. “I don’t think I have. Of course there’re plenty of people more fortunate than I am. But that doesn’t mean I’ve ever felt envious of them. I figure everybody’s life is different.”

“Since everybody’s different it’s hard to compare them?”

“I suppose so.”

“An interesting point of view…,” Mrs. Sakaki said, hands folded together on top of the desk, her relaxed voice betraying amusement. “Anyway, those are just mild cases, envy as we’ve said. In cases of intense jealousy, things aren’t so simple. With jealousy a parasite takes root in your heart, and as your friend said, it becomes like a cancer that eats away at your soul. In some cases it may even lead the person to death. They can’t control it, and their life does indeed become a living hell.”

After Mizuki got back home, she took out an old cardboard box wrapped in tape from the back of her closet. She'd put Yuko's name tag in there along with her own, inside an envelope, so they should still be there. All sorts of memorabilia of Mizuki's life were stuffed inside the box—old letters from grade school, diaries, photo albums, report cards. She'd been meaning to get rid of it, but had always been too busy, so she'd dragged it along every time she moved. But the envelope was nowhere to be found. She dumped out the contents of the box and sorted through them carefully, but came up empty-handed. She was bewildered. When she moved into the condo she'd done a quick check of the box's contents and distinctly remembered seeing the envelope. So I still have it, she'd thought then, impressed. She'd sealed the name tags back inside the envelope and hadn't opened the box once since then. So the envelope had to be here. Where could it have disappeared to?

Since she started going to the ward counseling office once a week and talking with Mrs. Sakaki, Mizuki didn't worry as much about forgetting her name. She still forgot it about as often as before, but the symptoms seemed to have stabilized, and nothing else had slipped from her memory. Thanks to her bracelet, she'd avoided any embarrassment. She'd even begun to feel, occasionally, that forgetting her name was just a natural part of life.

Mizuki kept her counseling sessions a secret from her husband. She hadn't intended to hide it from him, but explaining the whole thing just seemed like more trouble than it was worth. Knowing him, her husband would demand a detailed explanation. And besides, forgetting her name and going once a week to a ward-sponsored counselor weren't bothering him in any way. The fees were minimal.

Two months passed. Every Wednesday Mizuki made her way to the office on the third floor of the ward office for her counseling. The number of clients had increased a little, so they had to scale back their one-hour sessions to thirty minutes. The reduced time didn't matter, though, since they were already on the same wavelength and made the best use of their time together. Sometimes Mizuki wished they could talk longer, but with the absurdly low fees, she couldn't complain.

"This is our ninth session together," Mrs. Sakaki said, five minutes before the end of one session. "You aren't forgetting your name less often, but it hasn't gotten worse, has it?"

"No, it hasn't," Mizuki said. "The symptoms are holding steady."

“That’s wonderful,” Mrs. Sakaki said. She put her black-barreled ballpoint pen back in her pocket and tightly clasped her hands on the desktop. She paused for a moment. “Perhaps—just perhaps—when you come here next week we might make great progress concerning the issue we’ve been discussing.”

“You mean about me forgetting my name?”

“Exactly. If things go well, we should be able to determine a definite cause and even be able to show it to you.”

“The reason why I’m forgetting my name?”

“Precisely.”

Mizuki couldn’t quite grasp what she was getting at. “When you say a definite cause…you mean it’s something visible?”

“Of course it’s visible,” Mrs. Sakaki said, rubbing her hands together in satisfaction. “Something we can set down on a platter and say, Here you go! I can’t go into details until next week. At this point, I’m still not sure whether it will work out or not. I’m just hoping that it will. And if it does, don’t worry; I’ll explain the whole thing to you.”

Mizuki nodded.

“At any rate, what I’m trying to say is, we’ve gone up and down with this but things are finally heading toward a solution. You know what they say—about life being three steps forward and two steps back? So don’t worry. Just trust good old Mrs. Sakaki. I’ll see you next week, then. And don’t forget to make an appointment on your way out.”

Mrs. Sakaki punctuated all this with a wink.

The following week at one p.m. when Mizuki entered the counseling office, Mrs. Sakaki sat there behind her desk with the biggest smile Mizuki had ever seen on her.

“I’ve discovered the reason why you’ve been forgetting your name,” she announced proudly. “And we’ve found a solution.”

“So I won’t be forgetting my name anymore?” Mizuki asked.

“Correct. You won’t forget your name anymore. We’ve solved the problem and taken care of it.”

“What in the world was the cause of it?” Mizuki asked doubtfully.

From a black enamel handbag beside her Mrs. Sakaki took out something and laid it on the desk.

“I believe this is yours.”

Mizuki got up from the sofa and walked over to the desk. On the desk were two name tags. Mizuki Ozawa was written on one of them, Yuko Matsunaka on the other. Mizuki paled. She went back to the sofa and sank down, speechless for a time. She held both palms pressed against her mouth as if preventing the words from spilling out.

“It’s no wonder you’re surprised,” Mrs. Sakaki said. “But not to worry, I’ll explain everything. Relax. There’s nothing to be frightened of.”

“But how did you—?” Mizuki said.

“How did I happen to have your high school name tags?”

“Yes. I just don’t—”

“Don’t understand?”

Mizuki nodded.

“I recovered them for you,” Mrs. Sakaki said. “Those name tags were stolen from you and that’s why you have trouble remembering your name. So we had to get the name tags back so you could recover your name.”

“But who would—?”

“Who would break into your house and steal these two name tags? And for what possible purpose?” Mrs. Sakaki said. “Rather than having me respond to that, I think it’s best if you ask the individual responsible directly.”

“The person who did it is here?” Mizuki asked in astonishment.

“Of course. We captured him and took back the name tags. I didn’t nab him myself, mind you. My husband and one of the men under him did it. Remember I told you my husband is section head of the Shinagawa Public Works Department?”

Mizuki nodded without thinking.

“So what do you say we go meet the culprit? Then you can give him a piece of your mind face-to-face.”

Mizuki followed Mrs. Sakaki out of the counseling office, down the hallway, and into the elevator. They got off at the basement, walked down a long deserted corridor, came up to a door at the very end. Mrs. Sakaki knocked, a man’s voice told them to come in, and she opened the door.

Inside were a tall, thin man around fifty, and a larger man in his midtwenties, both dressed in light khaki work clothes. The older man had a name tag on his chest that read “Sakaki,” the younger man one that read “Sakurada.” Sakurada was holding a black nightstick in his hands.

“Mrs. Mizuki Ando, I presume?” Mr. Sakaki asked. “My name’s Yoshio Sakaki, Tetsuko’s husband. I’m section chief of the Public Works Department here. And this is Mr. Sakurada, who works with me.”

“Nice to meet you,” Mizuki said.

“Is he giving you any trouble?” Mrs. Sakaki asked her husband.

“No, he’s sort of resigned himself to the situation, I think,” Mr. Sakaki said. “Sakurada here has been keeping an eye on him all morning, and apparently he’s been behaving himself.”

“He’s been quiet,” Mr. Sakurada said, sounding disappointed. “If he started to get violent I was all set to teach him a lesson, but nothing like that’s happened.”

“Sakurada was captain of the karate team at Meiji University, and is one of our up-and-coming young men,” Mr. Sakaki said.

“So—who in the world broke into my place and stole those name tags?” Mizuki asked.

“Well, why don’t we introduce you to him?” Mrs. Sakaki said.

There was another door at the rear of the room. Mr. Sakurada opened it, and switched on the light. He made a quick sweep of the room with his eyes and turned to the others. “Looks OK. Please come on in.”

Mr. Sakaki went in first, followed by his wife, with Mizuki bringing up the rear.

The room looked like a small storage room of some kind. There was no furniture, just one chair, on which a monkey was sitting. He was large for a monkey—smaller than an adult human, but bigger than an elementary-school student. His hair was a shade longer than is usual for monkeys and was dotted with gray. It was hard to tell his age, but he was definitely no longer young. The monkey’s arms and legs were tightly tied by a thin cord to the wooden chair, and his long tail drooped on the floor. As Mizuki entered the monkey shot her a glance, then stared back down at the ground.

“A monkey?” Mizuki asked in surprise.

“That’s right,” Mrs. Sakaki replied. “A monkey stole the name tags from your apartment.”

I don’t want a monkey running off with it, Yuko had said. So that wasn’t a joke after all, Mizuki realized. Yuko had known all about this. A chill shot up Mizuki’s spine.

“But how could you—?”

“How could I know about this?” Mrs. Sakaki said. “As I told you when we first met, I’m a professional. A licensed practitioner, with lots of experience. Don’t judge people by appearances. Don’t think somebody providing inexpensive counseling in a ward office is any less skilled than someone working in some fancy building.”

“No, of course not. It’s just that I was so surprised, and I—”

“Don’t worry. I’m just kidding!” Mrs. Sakaki laughed. “To tell the truth, I know I’m a bit of an oddball. That’s why organizations and academia and I don’t exactly get along. I much prefer going my own way in a place like this. Since, as you’ve observed, my way of doing things is pretty unique.”

“But very effective,” her husband added.

“So this monkey stole the name tags?” Mizuki asked.

“Yes, he sneaked into your apartment and stole the name tags from your closet. Right around the time you began forgetting your name, about a year ago, I believe?”

“Yes, it was around then.”

“I’m very sorry,” the monkey said, speaking for the first time, his voice low but spirited, with almost a musical quality to it.

“He can talk!” Mizuki exclaimed, dumbfounded.

“Yes, I can,” the monkey replied, his expression unchanged. “There’s one other thing I need to apologize for. When I broke into your place to steal the name tags, I helped myself to a couple of bananas. I hadn’t planned to take anything besides the name tags, but I was so hungry, and though I knew I shouldn’t, I ended up snatching two bananas that were on the table. They just looked too good to pass up.”

“The nerve of this guy,” Mr. Sakurada said, slapping the black nightstick in his hands a couple of times. “Who knows what else he swiped. Want me to grill him a little to find out?”

“Take it easy,” Mr. Sakaki told him. “He confessed about the bananas himself, and besides, he doesn’t strike me as such a brutal sort. Let’s not do anything drastic until we hear more facts. If they find out we mistreated an animal inside the ward office we could be in deep trouble.”

“Why did you steal the name tags?” Mizuki asked the monkey.

“It’s what I do. I’m a monkey who takes people’s names,” the monkey answered. “It’s a sickness I suffer from. Once I spot a name I can’t help myself. Not just any name, mind you. I’ll see a name that attracts me, especially a person’s name, and then I have to have it. I sneak inside people’s homes and steal those kinds of names. I know it’s wrong, but I can’t control myself.”

“Were you the one who was trying to break into our dorm and steal Yuko’s name tag?”

“That’s correct. I was head over heels in love with Miss Matsunaka. I’ve never been so attracted to somebody in my life. But I wasn’t able to make her mine. I found this too much to handle, being a monkey, so I decided that no matter what, at least I had to have her name for myself. If I could possess her name, then I’d be satisfied. What more could a monkey ask for? But before I could carry out my plan, she passed away.”

“Did you have anything to do with her suicide?”

“No, I didn’t,” the monkey said, shaking his head emphatically. “I had nothing to do with that. She was overwhelmed by an inner darkness, and nobody could have saved her.”

“But how did you know, after all these years, that Yuko’s name tag was at my place?”

“It took a long time to trace it. Soon after Miss Matsunaka died, I tried to get hold of her name tag, before they took it away, but it had already vanished. Nobody had any idea where. I worked my butt off trying to track it down, but no matter what I did, I couldn’t locate it. I didn’t imagine at the time that Miss Matsunaka had left her name tag with you, since you weren’t particularly close.”

“True,” Mizuki said.

“But one day I had a flash of inspiration, that maybe—just maybe—she’d left her name tag with you. This was in the spring of last year. It took a long time to track you down—to find out that you’d gotten married, that your name was now Mizuki Ando, that you were living in a condo in Shinagawa. Being a monkey slows down an investigation like that, as you might imagine. At any rate, that’s how I came to sneak into your apartment to steal it.”

“But why did you steal my name tag too? Why not just Yuko’s? I suffered a lot because of what you did. I couldn’t remember my name!”

“I’m very, very sorry,” the monkey said, hanging his head in shame. “When I see a name I like, I end up snatching it. This is kind of embarrassing, but your name really moved my poor little heart. As I said before, it’s a kind of illness. I’m overcome by urges I can’t control. I know it’s wrong, but I do it anyway. I deeply apologize for all the problems I caused you.”

“This monkey was hiding in the sewers in Shinagawa,” Mrs. Sakaki said, “so I asked my husband to have some of his young colleagues catch him. It worked out well, since he’s section chief of Public Works and they’re in charge of the sewers.”

“Young Sakurada here did most of the work,” Mr. Sakaki added.

“Public Works has to sit up and take notice when a dubious character like this is hiding out in our sewers,” Sakurada said proudly. “The monkey apparently had a hideout underneath Takanawa that he used as a base for foraging operations all over Tokyo.”

“There’s no place for us to live in the city,” the monkey said. “There aren’t many trees, few shady places in the daytime. If we go aboveground, people gang up on us and try to catch us. Children throw things at us or shoot at us with BB guns. Huge dogs tear after us. If we take a rest up in a tree, TV crews pop up and shine a bright spotlight on us. We never get any rest, so we have to hide underground. Please forgive me.”

“But how on earth did you know this monkey was hiding in the sewer?” Mizuki asked Mrs. Sakaki.

“As we’ve talked over the past two months, many things have gradually become clear to me, like the fog lifting,” Mrs. Sakaki said. “I realized there had to be something that was stealing names, and that whatever it was it must be hiding underground somewhere around here. And if you’re talking about under a city, that sort of limits the possibilities—it’s got to be either the subway or the sewers. So I told my husband I thought there was some creature, not a human, living in the sewers and asked him to look into it. And sure enough, they came up with this monkey.”

Mizuki was at a loss for words for a while. “But—how did just listening to me make you think that?”

“Maybe it’s not my place, as her husband, to say this,” Mr. Sakaki said with a serious look, “but my wife is a special person, with unusual powers. Many times during our twenty-two years of marriage I’ve witnessed strange events take place. That’s why I worked so hard to help her open the counseling center here in the ward office. I knew that as long as she had a place where she could put her powers to good use, the residents of Shinagawa would benefit. But I’m really glad we’ve solved the mystery. I must admit I’m relieved.”

“What are you going to do with the monkey?” Mizuki asked.

“Can’t let him live,” Sakurada said casually. “No matter what he tells you, once they acquire a bad habit like this they’ll be up to their old tricks again in no time, you can count on it. Let’s destroy him. That’s the best thing to do. Give him a shot of disinfectant and that’s all she wrote.”

“Hold on, now,” Mr. Sakaki said. “No matter what reasons we might have, if some animal rights group found out about us killing a monkey, they’d lodge a complaint and you can bet there’d be hell to pay. You remember when we killed all those crows, the big stink about that? I’d like to avoid a repeat of that.”

“I beg you, please don’t kill me,” the bound monkey said, bowing its head deeply. “What I’ve done is wrong. I understand that. I’ve caused humans a lot of trouble. I’m not trying to argue with you, but there’s also some good that comes from my actions.”

“What possible good could come from stealing people’s names? Explain yourself,” Mr. Sakaki said sharply.

“I do steal people’s names, no doubt about that. In doing so, though, I’m also able to remove some of the negative elements that stick to those names. I don’t mean to brag, but if I’d been able to steal Yuko Matsunaka’s name back then, she may very well not have taken her life.”

“Why do you say that?” Mizuki asked.

“If I had succeeded in stealing her name, I might have taken away some of the darkness that was hidden inside her,” the monkey said. “Take her darkness, along with her name, back to the world underground.”

“That’s too convenient. I don’t buy it,” Sakurada said. “This monkey’s life is on the line, so of course he’s going to use any tricks he can to explain away his actions.”

“Maybe not,” Mrs. Sakaki said, arms folded, after she’d given it some thought. “He might have a point after all.” She turned to the monkey. “When you steal names you take on both the good and the bad?”

“Yes, that’s right,” the monkey said. “I have no choice. If there are evil things included in them, we monkeys have to accept those, too. We take on the whole package, as it were. I beg you—don’t kill me. I’m a monkey with an awful habit, I know that, but I may be performing a useful service.”

“Well—what sort of bad things were included in my name?” Mizuki asked the monkey.

“I’d rather not say in front of you,” the monkey said.

“Please tell me,” Mizuki insisted. “If you tell me that, I’ll forgive you. And I’ll ask all those present to forgive you.”

“Do you mean it?”

“If this monkey tells me the truth, will you forgive him?” Mizuki asked Mr. Sakaki. “He’s not evil by nature. He’s already suffered, so let’s hear what he has to say and then you can take him to Mount Takao or somewhere and release him. If you do that, I don’t think he’ll bother anyone again. What do you think?”

“I have no objection as long as it’s all right with you,” Mr. Sakaki said. He turned to the monkey. “How ’bout it? You swear if we release you in the mountains you won’t come back to the Tokyo city limits?”

“Yes, sir. I swear I won’t come back,” the monkey promised, a meek look on his face. “I will never cause any trouble for you again. Never again will I wander around the sewers. I’m not young anymore, so this will be a good chance for a fresh start in life.”

“Just to make sure, why don’t we brand him on the butt so we’ll recognize him again,” Sakurada said. “I think we have a soldering iron around here that brands in the official seal of Shinagawa Ward.”

“Please, sir—don’t do that!” the monkey pleaded, eyes welling up. “If you put a strange brand on my butt the other monkeys will never let me join them. I’ll tell you everything you want to know, but just don’t brand me!”

“Well, let’s forget about the branding iron, then,” Mr. Sakaki said, trying to smooth things over. “If we used the official Shinagawa seal, we’d have to take responsibility for it later on.”

“I’m afraid you’re right,” Sakurada said, disappointed.

“All right, then, why don’t you tell me what evil things have stuck to my name?” Mizuki said, staring right into the monkey’s small red eyes.

“If I tell you it might hurt you.”

“I don’t care. Go ahead.”

For a time the monkey thought about this, deep frown lines on his forehead. “I think it’s better that you don’t hear this.”

“I told you it’s all right. I really want to know.”

“All right,” the monkey said. “Then I’ll tell you. Your mother doesn’t love you. She’s never loved you, even once, since you were little. I don’t know why, but it’s true. Your older sister’s the same. She doesn’t like you. Your mother sent you away to school in Yokohama because she wanted to get rid of you. Your mother and sister wanted to drive you away as far as possible. Your father isn’t a bad person, but he isn’t what you’d call a forceful personality, and he couldn’t stand up for you. For these reasons, then, ever since you were small you’ve never gotten enough love. I think you’ve had an inkling of this, but you’ve intentionally turned your eyes away from it, shut this painful reality up in a small dark place deep in your heart and closed the lid, trying not to think about it. Trying to suppress any negative feelings. This defensive stance has become part of who you are. Because of all this, you’ve never been able to deeply, unconditionally love anybody else.”

Mizuki was silent.

“Your married life seems happy and problem-free. And perhaps it is. But you don’t truly love your husband. Am I right? Even if you were to have a child, if things don’t change it would just be more of the same.”

Mizuki didn’t say a thing. She sank down onto the floor and closed her eyes. Her whole body felt like it was unraveling. Her skin, her insides, her bones felt like they were about to fall to pieces. All she heard was the sound of her own breathing.

“Pretty outrageous thing for a monkey to say,” Sakurada said, shaking his head. “Chief, I can’t stand it anymore. Let’s beat the crap out of him!”

“Hold on,” Mizuki said. “What this monkey’s saying is true. I’ve known it for a long time, but I’ve always tried to avoid it. I always closed my eyes to it, shut my ears. This monkey’s telling the truth, so please forgive him. Just take him to the mountains and let him go.”

Mrs. Sakaki gently rested a hand on Mizuki’s shoulder. “Are you sure you’re OK with that?”

“I don’t mind, as long as I get my name back. From now on I’m going to live with what’s out there. That’s my name, and that’s my life.”

Mrs. Sakaki turned to her husband. “Honey, next weekend why don’t we drive out to Mount Takao and let the monkey go. What do you say?”

“I have no problem with that,” Mr. Sakaki said. “We just bought a new car and it’d make for a nice little test run.”

“I’m so grateful. I don’t know how to thank you,” the monkey said.

“You don’t get carsick, do you?” Mrs. Sakaki asked the monkey.

“No, I’ll be fine,” the monkey replied. “I promise I won’t throw up or pee on your new car seats. I’ll behave myself the whole way. I won’t be a bother at all.”

As Mizuki was saying goodbye to the monkey she handed him Yuko Matsunaka’s name tag.

“You should have this, not me,” she said. “You liked Yuko, didn’t you?”

“I did. I really did like her.”

“Take good care of her name. And don’t steal anybody else’s.”

“I’ll take very good care of it. And I’m not going to ever steal again, I promise,” the monkey said, a serious look on his face.

“But why did Yuko leave this name tag with me just before she died? Why would she pick me?”

“I don’t know the answer,” the monkey said. “But because she did, at least you and I have been able to meet and talk with each other. A twist of fate, I suppose.”

“You must be right,” Mizuki said.

“Did what I told you hurt you?”

“It did,” Mizuki said. “It hurt a lot.”

“I’m very sorry. I didn’t want to tell you.”

“It’s all right. Deep down, I think I knew all this already. It’s something I had to confront—someday.”

“I’m relieved to hear that,” the monkey said.

“Goodbye,” Mizuki said. “I don’t imagine we’ll meet again.”

“Take care of yourself,” the monkey said. “And thank you for saving the life of the likes of me.”

“You better not show your face round Shinagawa anymore,” Sakurada warned, slapping his palm with the nightstick. “We’re giving you a break this time since the chief says so, but if I ever catch you here again, you aren’t going to get out of here alive.”

The monkey knew this was no empty threat.

“Well, so what should we do about next week?” Mrs. Sakaki asked after they returned to the counseling center. “Do you still have things you’d like to discuss with me?”

Mizuki shook her head. “No. Thanks to you, I think my problem’s solved. I’m so grateful for everything you’ve done for me.”

“You don’t need to talk over the things the monkey told you?”

“No, I should be able to handle that by myself. It’s something I have to think over on my own for a while.”

Mrs. Sakaki nodded. “You should be able to handle it. If you put your mind to it, I know you can grow stronger.”

“But if I can’t, can I still come to see you?” Mizuki asked.

“Of course!” Mrs. Sakaki said. Her supple face broke into a broad smile. “We can catch something else together.”

The two of them shook hands and said goodbye.

After she got home Mizuki took the name tag with “Mizuki Ozawa” and the bracelet with Mizuki (Ozawa) Ando engraved on it, put them in a plain brown business envelope, and placed that inside the cardboard box in her closet. She finally had her name back, and could resume a normal life. Things might work out. And then again they might not. But at least she had her own name now, a name that was hers, and hers alone.

All God's Children Can Dance

Yoshiya woke with the worst possible hangover. He could barely open one eye; the left lid wouldn't budge. His head felt as if it had been stuffed with decaying teeth during the night. A foul sludge was oozing from his rotting gums and eating away at his brain from the inside. If he ignored it, he wouldn't have a brain left. Which would be all right, too. Just a little more sleep: that's all he wanted. But he knew it was out of the question. He felt too awful to sleep.

He looked for the clock by his pillow, but it had vanished. Why wasn't it there? No glasses, either. He must have tossed them somewhere. It had happened before.

Got to get up. He managed to raise the upper half of his body, but this jumbled his mind, and his face plunged back into the pillow. A truck came through the neighborhood selling clothes-drying poles. They'd take your old ones and exchange them for new ones, the loudspeaker announced, and the price was the same as twenty years ago. The monotonous, stretched-out voice belonged to a middle-aged man. It made him feel queasy, but he couldn't vomit.

The best cure for a bad hangover was to watch a morning talk show, according to one friend. The shrill witch-hunter voices of the showbiz correspondents would bring up every last bit left in your stomach from the night before.

But Yoshiya didn't have the strength to drag himself to the TV. Just breathing was hard enough. Random but persistent streams of clear light and white smoke swirled together inside his eyes, which gave him a strangely flat view of the world. Was this what it felt like to die? OK. But once was enough. Please, God, never do this to me again.

"God" made him think of his mother. He started to call out to her for a glass of water, but realized he was home alone. She and the other believers had left for Kansai three days ago. It takes all kinds to make a world: a volunteer servant of God was the mother of this hangover heavyweight. He couldn't get up. He still couldn't open his left eye. Who the hell could he have been drinking so much with? No way to remember. Just trying turned the core of his brain to stone. Never mind now: he'd think about it later.

It couldn't be noon yet. But still, Yoshiya figured, judging from the glare of what seeped past the curtains, it had to be after eleven. Some degree of lateness on the part of a young staff member was never a big deal to his employer, a publishing company. He had always evened things out by working late. But showing up after noon had earned him some sharp remarks from the boss. These he could

ignore, but he didn't want to cause any problems for the believer who had recommended him for the job.

It was almost one o'clock by the time he left the house. Any other day, he would have made up an excuse and stayed home, but he had one document on disk that he had to format and print out today, and it was not a job that anyone else could do.

He left the condo in Asagaya that he rented with his mother, took the elevated Chuo Line to Yotsuya, transferred to the Marunouchi Line subway, took that as far as Kasumigaseki, transferred again, this time to the Hibiya Line subway, and got off at Kamiya-cho, the station closest to the small foreign travel guide publishing company where he worked. He climbed up and down the long flights of stairs at each station on wobbly legs.

He saw the man with the missing earlobe as he was transferring back the other way underground at Kasumigaseki around ten o'clock that night. Hair half gray, the man was somewhere in his mid-fifties: tall, no glasses, old-fashioned tweed overcoat, briefcase in right hand. He walked with the slow pace of someone deep in thought, heading from the Hibiya Line platform toward the Chiyoda Line. Without hesitation, Yoshiya fell in after him. That's when he noticed that his throat was as dry as a piece of old leather.

Yoshiya's mother was forty-three, but she didn't look more than thirty-five. She had clean, classic good looks, a great figure that she preserved with a simple diet and vigorous workouts morning and evening, and dewy skin. Only eighteen years older than Yoshiya, she was often taken for his elder sister.

She had never had much in the way of maternal instincts, or perhaps she was just eccentric. Even after Yoshiya had entered middle school and begun to take an interest in things sexual, she would continue to walk around the house wearing skimpy underwear—or nothing at all. They slept in separate bedrooms, of course, but whenever she felt lonely at night she would crawl under his covers with almost nothing on. As if hugging a dog or cat, she would sleep with an arm thrown over Yoshiya, who knew she meant nothing by it, but still it made him nervous. He would have to twist himself into incredible positions to keep his mother unaware of his erection.

Terrified of stumbling into a fatal relationship with his own mother, Yoshiya embarked on a frantic search for an easy lay. As long as one failed to materialize, he would take care to masturbate at regular intervals. He even went so far as to patronize a porn shop while he was still in high school, using the money he made from part-time jobs.

He should have left his mother's house and begun living on his own, Yoshiya knew, and he had wrestled with the question at critical moments—when he entered college and again when he took a job. But here he was, twenty-five years old, and still unable to tear himself away. One reason for this, he felt, was that there was no telling what his mother might do if he were to leave her alone. He had devoted vast amounts of energy over the years to preventing her from carrying out the wild, self-destructive (albeit good-hearted) schemes that she was always coming up with.

Plus, there was bound to be a terrible outburst if he were to announce all of a sudden that he was leaving home. He was sure it had never once crossed his mother's mind that they might someday live apart. He recalled all too vividly her profound heartbreak and distress when he announced at the age of thirteen that he was abandoning the faith. For two solid weeks or more she ate nothing, said nothing, never once took a bath or combed her hair or changed her underwear. She only just managed to attend to her period when it came. Yoshiya had never seen his mother in such a filthy, smelly state. Just imagining its happening again gave him chest pains.

Yoshiya had no father. From the time he was born there had been only his mother, and she had told him again and again when he was a little boy, "Your father is our Lord" (which is how they referred to their god). "Our Lord must stay high up in Heaven; He can't live down here with us. But He is always watching over you, Yoshiya, He always has your best interests at heart."

Mr. Tabata, who served as little Yoshiya's special "guide," would say the same kinds of things to him:

"It's true, you do not have a father in this world, and you're going to meet all sorts of people who say stupid things to you about that. Unfortunately, the eyes of most people are clouded and unable to see the truth, Yoshiya, but Our Lord, your father, is the world itself. You are fortunate to live in the embrace of His love. You must be proud of that and live a life that is good and true."

"I know," responded Yoshiya just after he had entered elementary school. "But God belongs to everybody, doesn't He? Fathers are different, though. Everybody has a different one. Isn't that right?"

"Listen to me, Yoshiya. Someday our Lord, your father, will reveal Himself to you as yours and yours alone. You will meet Him when and where you least expect it. But if you begin to doubt or to abandon your faith, He may be so disappointed that He never shows Himself to you. Do you understand?"

"I understand."

“And you will keep in mind what I’ve said to you?”

“I will keep it in mind, Mr. Tabata.”

But in fact what Mr. Tabata told him did not make much sense to Yoshiya because he could not believe that he was a special “child of God.” He was ordinary, just like the other boys and girls he saw everywhere—or perhaps he was even a little bit less than ordinary. He had nothing that helped him to stand out, and he was always making a mess of things. It was like that all through elementary school. His grades were decent enough, but when it came to sports he was hopeless. He had slow and spindly legs, myopic eyes, and clumsy hands. In baseball, he missed most fly balls that came his way. His teammates would grumble, and the girls in the stands would titter.

Yoshiya would pray to God, his father, each night before bedtime: “I promise to maintain unwavering faith in You if only You will let me catch outfield flies. That’s all I ask (for now).” If God really was his father, He should be able to do that much for him. But his prayer was never answered. The flies continued to drop from his glove.

“This means you are testing our Lord, Yoshiya,” said Mr. Tabata sternly. “There is nothing wrong with praying for something, but you must pray for something grander than that. It is wrong to pray for something concrete, with time limits.”

When Yoshiya turned seventeen, his mother revealed the secret of his birth (more or less). He was old enough to know the truth, she said.

“I was living in a deep darkness in my teen years. My soul was in chaos as deep as a newly formed ocean of mud. The true light was hidden behind dark clouds. And so I had knowledge of several different men without love. You know what it means to have knowledge, don’t you?”

Yoshiya said that he did indeed know what it meant. His mother used incredibly old-fashioned language when it came to sexual matters. By that point in his life, he himself had had knowledge of several different girls without love.

His mother continued her story. “I first became pregnant in the second year of high school. At the time, I had no idea how very much it meant to become pregnant. A friend of mine introduced me to a doctor who gave me an abortion. He was a very kind man, and very young, and after the operation he lectured

me on contraception. Abortion was good neither for the body nor the spirit, he said, and I should also be careful about venereal disease, so I should always be sure to use a condom, and he gave me a new box of them.

“I told him that I had used condoms, so he said, ‘Well, then someone didn’t put them on right. It’s amazing how few people know the right way to use them.’ But I’m not stupid. I was being very careful about contraception. The minute we took our clothes off, I would be sure to put it on the man myself. You can’t trust men with something like that. You know about condoms, right?”

Yoshiya said that he did know about condoms.

“So, two months later I got pregnant again. I could hardly believe it: I was being more careful than ever. There was nothing I could do but go back to the same doctor. He took one look at me and said, ‘I told you to be careful. What have you got in that head of yours?’ I couldn’t stop crying. I explained to him how much care I had taken with contraception whenever I had knowledge, but he wouldn’t believe me. ‘This would never have happened if you’d put them on right,’ he said. He was mad.

“Well, to make a long story short, about six months later, because of a weird sequence of events, I ended up having knowledge of the doctor himself. He was thirty at the time, and still a bachelor. He was kind of boring to talk to, but he was a decent, honest man. His right earlobe was missing. A dog chewed it off when he was a boy. He was just walking along the street one day when a big black dog he had never seen before jumped on him and bit off his earlobe. He used to say he was glad it was just an earlobe. You could live without an earlobe. But a nose would be different. I had to agree with him.

“Being with him helped me get my old self back. When I was having knowledge of him, I managed not to think disturbing thoughts. I even got to like his little ear. He was so dedicated to his work he would lecture me on the use of the condom while we were in bed—like, when and how to put it on and when and how to take it off. You’d think this would make for foolproof contraception, but I ended up pregnant again.”

Yoshiya’s mother went to see her doctor lover and told him she seemed to be pregnant. He examined her and confirmed that it was so. But he would not admit to being the father. “I am a professional,” he said. “My contraceptive techniques are beyond reproach. Which means you must have had relations with another man.”

“This really hurt me. He made me so angry when he said that, I couldn’t stop shaking. Can you see how deeply this would have hurt me?”

Yoshiya said that he did see.

“While I was with him, I never had knowledge of another man. Not once. But he just thought of me as some kind of slut. That was the last I saw of him. I didn’t have an abortion, either. I decided to kill myself. And I would have. I would have gotten on a boat to Oshima and thrown myself from the deck if Mr. Tabata hadn’t seen me wandering down the street and spoken to me. I wasn’t the least bit afraid to die. Of course, if I had died then, you would never have been born into this world, Yoshiya. But thanks to Mr. Tabata’s guidance, I have become the saved person you know me as today. At last, I was able to find the true light. And with the help of the other believers, I brought you into this world.”

To Yoshiya’s mother, Mr. Tabata had had this to say:

“You took the most rigorous contraceptive measures, and yet you became pregnant. Indeed, you became pregnant three times in a row. Do you imagine that such a thing could happen by chance? I for one do not believe it. Three ‘chance’ occurrences are no longer ‘chance.’ The number three is none other than that which is used by our Lord for revelations. In other words, Miss Osaki, it is our Lord’s wish for you to give birth to a child. The child you are carrying is not just anyone’s child, Miss Osaki: it is the child of our Lord in Heaven; a male child, and I shall give it the name of Yoshiya, ‘For it is good.’ ”

And when, as Mr. Tabata predicted, a boy child was born, they named him Yoshiya, and Yoshiya’s mother lived as the servant of God, no longer having knowledge of any man.

“So,” Yoshiya said, with some hesitation, to his mother, “biologically speaking, my father is that obstetrician that you . . . had knowledge of.”

“Not true!” declared his mother with eyes blazing. “His contraceptive methods were absolutely foolproof ! Mr. Tabata was right: your father is our Lord. You came into this world not through carnal knowledge but through an act of our Lord’s will!”

His mother’s faith was absolute, but Yoshiya was just as certain that his father was the obstetrician. There had been something wrong with the condom. Anything else was out of the question.

“Does the doctor know that you gave birth to me?”

“I don’t think so,” his mother said. “I never saw him again, never contacted him in any way. He probably has no idea.”

The man boarded the Chiyoda Line train to Abiko. Yoshiya followed him into the car. It was after ten-thirty at night, and there were few other passengers on the train. The man took a seat and pulled a magazine from his briefcase. It looked like some sort of professional journal. Yoshiya sat down opposite and pretended to read his newspaper. The man had a slim build and deeply chiseled features with an earnest expression. There was something doctorish about him. His age looked right, and he was missing one earlobe. The right one. It could easily have been bitten off by a dog.

Yoshiya felt with intuitive certainty that this man had to be his biological father. And yet the man probably had no idea that this son of his even existed. Nor would he be likely to accept the facts if Yoshiya were to reveal them to him there and then. After all, the doctor was a professional whose contraceptive methods were beyond reproach.

The train passed through the Shin-Ochanomizu, Sendagi, and Machiya subway stops before rising to the surface. The number of passengers decreased at each station. The man never looked away from his magazine or gave any indication he was about to leave his seat. Observing him over the top of his newspaper, Yoshiya recalled fragments of the night before. He had gone out drinking in Roppongi with an old college friend and two girls the friend knew. He remembered going from the bar to a club, but he couldn’t recall whether he had slept with his date. Probably not, he decided. He had been too drunk: knowledge would have been out of the question.

The paper was filled with the usual earthquake stories. Meanwhile his mother and the other believers were probably staying in the church’s Osaka facility. Each morning they would cram their rucksacks full of supplies, travel as far as they could by commuter train, then walk along the rubble-strewn highway the rest of the way to Kobe, where they would distribute daily provisions to the victims of the quake. She had told him on the phone that her pack weighed as much as thirty-five pounds. Kobe felt light-years away from Yoshiya and the man sitting across from him absorbed in his magazine.

Until he graduated from elementary school, Yoshiya used to go out with his mother once a week on missionary work. She achieved the best results of anyone in the church. She was so young and lovely and seemingly well bred (in fact, she was well bred) that people always liked her. Plus she had this charming little boy with her. Most people would let down their guard in her presence. They might not be interested in religion, but they were willing to listen to her. She would go from house to house in a simple (but form-fitting) suit distributing pamphlets and calmly extolling the joys of faith.

“Be sure to come see us if you ever have any pain or difficulties,” she would tell them. “We never push, we only offer,” she would add, her voice warm, eyes shining. “There was a time when my soul was wandering through the deepest darkness until the day I was saved by our teachings. I was carrying this child inside me, and I was about to throw myself and him in the ocean. But I was saved by His hand, the One who is in Heaven, and now my son and I live in the holy light of our Lord.”

Yoshiya had never found it embarrassing to knock on strangers’ doors with his mother. She was especially sweet to him then, her hand always warm. They had the experience of being turned away so often that it made Yoshiya all the more joyful to receive a rare kind word. And when they managed to win over a new believer for the church it filled him with pride. Maybe now God my father will recognize me as His son, he would think.

Not long after he went on to middle school, though, Yoshiya abandoned his faith. As he awakened to the existence of his own independent ego, he found it increasingly difficult to accept the strict codes of the sect that clashed with ordinary values. But the most fundamental and decisive cause was the unending coldness of the One who was his father: His dark, heavy, silent heart of stone. Yoshiya’s abandonment of the faith was a source of deep sadness to his mother, but his determination was unshakable.

The train was almost out of Tokyo and just a station or two from crossing into Chiba Prefecture when the man put his magazine back into his briefcase and stood up, approaching the door. Yoshiya followed him on to the platform. The man flashed a pass to get through the gate, but Yoshiya had to wait in line to pay the extra fare to this distant point. Still, he managed to reach the line for cabs just as the man was stepping into one. He boarded the next cab and pulled a brand-new ten-thousand-yen bill from his wallet.

“Follow that cab,” he said.

The driver gave him a suspicious look, then eyed the money.

“Hey, is this some kind of mob thing?”

“Don’t worry,” Yoshiya said. “I’m just tailing somebody.”

The driver took the ten-thousand-yen bill and pulled away from the curb. “OK,” he said, “but I still want my fare. The meter’s running.”

The two cabs sped down a block of shuttered shops, past a number of dark empty lots, past the lighted windows of a hospital, and through a new development crammed with boxy little houses. The streets all but empty, the tail posed no problems— and provided no thrills. Yoshiya's driver was clever enough to vary the distance between his cab and the one in front.

"Guy havin' an affair or something?"

"Nah," Yoshiya said. "Head-hunting. Two companies fighting over one guy."

"No kidding? I knew companies were scramblin' for people these days, but I didn't realize it was this bad."

Now there were hardly any houses along the road, which followed a riverbank and entered an area lined with factories and warehouses. The only things marking this deserted space were new lampposts thrusting up from the earth. Where a high concrete wall stretched along the road, the taxi ahead came to a sudden stop. Alerted by the car's brake lights, Yoshiya's driver brought his cab to a halt some hundred yards behind the other vehicle and doused his headlights. The mercury vapor lamps overhead cast their harsh glare on the asphalt roadway. There was nothing to see here but the wall and its dense crown of barbed wire that seemed to defy the rest of the world. Far ahead, the cab door opened and the man with the missing earlobe got out. Yoshiya slipped his driver two thousand-yen bills beyond his initial ten-thousand-yen payment.

"You're never gonna get a cab way out here, mister. Want me to wait around?" the driver asked.

"Never mind," Yoshiya said and stepped outside.

The man never looked up after leaving his cab but walked straight ahead alongside the concrete wall at the same slow, steady pace as on the subway platform. He looked like a well-made mechanical doll being drawn ahead by a magnet. Yoshiya raised his coat collar and exhaled an occasional white cloud of breath from the gap between the edges as he followed the man, keeping far enough behind to avoid being spotted. All he could hear was the anonymous slapping of the man's leather shoes against the pavement. Yoshiya's rubber-soled loafers were silent.

There was no sign of human life here. The place looked like an imaginary stage set in a dream. Where the concrete wall ended, there was a scrap yard: a hill of cars surrounded by a chain-link fence. Under the flat light of a mercury lamp, the pile of withered metal was reduced to a single colorless mass. The man continued walking straight ahead.

Yoshiya wondered what the point could be of getting out of a cab in such a deserted place. Wasn't the man heading home? Or maybe he wanted to take a little detour on the way. The February night was too cold for walking, though. A freezing wind would push against Yoshiya's back every now and then as it sliced down the road.

Where the scrap yard ended, another long stretch of unfriendly concrete wall began, broken only by the opening to a narrow alley. This seemed like familiar territory to the man: he never hesitated as he turned the corner. The alley was dark. Yoshiya could make out nothing in its depths. He hesitated for a moment, but then stepped in after the man. Having come this far, he was not about to give up.

High walls pressed in on either side of the straight passageway. There was barely enough room in here for two people to pass each other, and it was as dark as the bottom of the nighttime sea. Yoshiya had only the sound of the man's shoes to go by. The leather slaps continued on ahead of him at the same unbroken pace. All but clinging to the sound, Yoshiya moved forward through this world devoid of light. And then there was no sound at all.

Had the man sensed he was being followed? Was he standing still now, holding his breath, straining to see and hear what was behind him? Yoshiya's heart shrank in the darkness, but he swallowed its loud beating and pressed on. To hell with it, he thought. So what if he screams at me for following him? I'll just tell him the truth. It could be the quickest way to set the record straight. But then the alley came to a dead end, where it was closed off by a sheet-metal fence. Yoshiya took a few seconds to find the gap, an opening just big enough to let a person through where someone had bent back the metal. He gathered the skirts of his coat around him and squeezed through.

A big open space spread out on the other side of the fence. It was no empty lot, though, but some kind of playing field. Yoshiya stood there, straining to see anything in the pale moonlight. The man was gone.

Yoshiya was standing in a baseball field, somewhere way out in center field amid a stretch of trampled-down weeds. Bare ground showed through like a scar in the one place where the center fielder usually stood. Over the distant home plate, the backstop soared like a set of black wings. The pitcher's mound lay closer to hand, a slight swelling of the earth. The high metal fence ringed the entire outfield. A breeze swept across the grass, carrying an empty potato chip bag with it to nowhere.

Yoshiya plunged his hands into his coat pockets and held his breath, waiting for something to happen. But nothing happened. He surveyed right field, then left field, then the pitcher's mound and the ground beneath his feet before looking up at the sky. Several chunks of cloud hung there, the moon tinging their hard edges a strange color. A whiff of dog shit mixed with the smell of the grass. The man had disappeared without a trace. If Mr. Tabata had been here, he would have said, "So you see, Yoshiya, our Lord reveals Himself to us in the most unexpected forms." But Mr. Tabata was dead.

He had died of urethral cancer three years ago. His final months of suffering were excruciating to see. Had he never once in all that time tested God? Had he never once prayed to God for some small relief from his terrible pain? Mr. Tabata had observed his own strict commandments with such rigor and lived in such intimate contact with God that he of all people was qualified to make such prayers (concrete and limited in time though they might be). And besides, thought Yoshiya, if it was all right for God to test man, why was it wrong for man to test God?

Yoshiya felt a faint throbbing in his temples, but he could not tell if this was the remains of his hangover or something else. With a grimace, he pulled his hands from his pockets and began taking long, slow strides toward home base. Only seconds earlier, the one thing on his mind had been the breathless pursuit of a man who might well be his father, and that had carried him to this ball field in a neighborhood he'd never seen before. Now that the stranger had disappeared, however, the importance of the succeeding acts that had brought him this far turned unclear inside him. Meaning itself broke down and would never be the same again, just as the question of whether he could catch an outfield fly had ceased to be a matter of life and death to him anymore.

What was I hoping to gain from this? he asked himself as he strode ahead. Was I trying to confirm the ties that make it possible for me to exist here and now? Was I hoping to be woven into some new plot, to be given some new and better-defined role to play? No, he thought, that's not it. What I was chasing in circles must have been the tail of the darkness inside me. I just happened to catch sight of it, and followed it, and clung to it, and in the end let it fly into still deeper darkness. I'm sure I'll never see it again.

Yoshiya's spirit now lingered in the stillness and clarity of one particular point in time and space. So what if the man was his father, or God, or some stranger who just happened to have lost his right earlobe? It no longer made any difference to him, and this in itself had been a manifestation, a sacrament: should he be singing words of praise?

He climbed the pitcher's mound and, standing on its worn footrest, stretched himself to his full height. He intertwined his fingers, thrust his arms aloft and, sucking in a lungful of cold night air, looked up once

more at the moon. It was huge. Why was the moon so big one day and so small another? Simple plank bleachers ran the length of the first- and third-base lines. Empty, of course: it was the middle of a February night. Three levels of straight plank seats ascended in long, chilly rows. Window-less, gloomy buildings—some kind of warehouses, probably— huddled together beyond the backstop. No light. No sound.

Standing on the mound, Yoshiya swung his arms up, over, and down in large circles. He moved his feet in time with this, forward and to the side. As he went on with these dancelike motions, his body began to warm and to recover the full senses of a living organism. Before long he realized that his headache was all but gone.

Yoshiya's girlfriend throughout his college years called him "Super-Frog" because he looked like some kind of giant frog when he danced. She loved to dance and would always drag him out to clubs. "Look at you!" she used to say. "I love the way you flap those long arms and legs of yours! You're like a frog in the rain!"

This hurt the first time she said it, but after he had gone with her long enough, Yoshiya began to enjoy dancing. As he let himself go and moved his body in time to the music, he would come to feel that the natural rhythm inside him was pulsing in perfect unison with the basic rhythm of the world. The ebb and flow of the tide, the dancing of the wind across the plains, the course of the stars through the heavens: he felt certain that these things were by no means occurring in places unrelated to him.

She had never seen a penis as huge as his, his girlfriend used to say, taking hold of it. Didn't it get in the way when he danced? No, he would tell her: it never got in the way. True, he had a big one. It had always been on the big side, from the time he was a boy. He could not recall that it had ever been of any great advantage to him, though. In fact, several girls had refused to have sex with him because it was too big. In aesthetic terms, it just looked slow and clumsy and stupid. Which is why he always tried to keep it hidden. "Your big wee-wee is a sign," his mother used to tell him with absolute conviction. "It shows that you're the child of God." And he believed it, too. But then one day the craziness of it struck him. All he had ever prayed for was the ability to catch outfield flies, in answer to which God had bestowed upon him a penis that was bigger than anybody else's. What kind of world came up with such idiotic bargains?

Yoshiya took off his glasses and slipped them into their case. Dancing, huh? Not a bad idea. Not bad at all. He closed his eyes and, feeling the white light of the moon on his skin, began to dance all by himself. He drew his breath deep into his lungs and exhaled just as deeply. Unable to think of a song to match his mood, he danced in time with the stirring of the grass and the flowing of the clouds. Before long, he began to feel that someone, somewhere, was watching him. His whole body—his skin, his bones—told

him with absolute certainty that he was in someone's field of vision. So what? he thought. Let them look if they want to, whoever they are. All God's children can dance.

He trod the earth and whirled his arms, each graceful movement calling forth the next in smooth, unbroken links, his body tracing diagrammatic patterns and impromptu variations, with invisible rhythms behind and between rhythms. At each crucial point in his dance, he could survey the complex intertwining of these elements. Animals lurked in the forest like trompe l'oeil figures, some of them horrific beasts he had never seen before. He would eventually have to pass through the forest, but he felt no fear. Of course—the forest was inside him, he knew, and it made him who he was. The beasts were ones that he himself possessed.

How long he went on dancing, Yoshiya could not tell. But it was long enough for him to perspire under the arms. And then it struck him what lay buried far down under the earth on which his feet were so firmly planted: the ominous rumbling of the deepest darkness, secret rivers that transported desire, slimy creatures writhing, the lair of earthquakes ready to transform whole cities into mounds of rubble. These, too, were helping to create the rhythm of the earth. He stopped dancing and, catching his breath, stared at the ground beneath his feet as though peering into a bottomless hole.

He thought of his mother far away in that ruined city. What would happen, he wondered, if he could remain his present self and yet turn time backward so as to meet his mother in her youth when her soul was in its deepest state of darkness? No doubt they would plunge as one into the muck of bedlam and devour each other in acts for which they would be dealt the harshest punishment. And what of it? "Punishment"? I was due for punishment long ago. The city should have crumbled to bits around me long ago.

His girlfriend had asked him to marry her when they graduated from college. "I want to be married to you, Super-Frog. I want to live with you and have your child—a boy, with a big thing just like yours."

"I can't marry you," Yoshiya said. "I know I should have told you this, but I'm the son of God. I can't marry anybody."

"Is that true?"

"It is. I'm sorry."

He knelt down and scooped up a handful of sand which he sifted through his fingers back to earth. He did this again and again. The chilly, uneven touch of the soil reminded him of the last time he had held Mr. Tabata's emaciated hand.

"I won't be alive much longer, Yoshiya," Mr. Tabata said in a voice that had grown hoarse. Yoshiya began to protest, but Mr. Tabata stopped him with a gentle shake of the head.

"Never mind," he said. "This life is nothing but a short, painful dream. Thanks to His guidance, I have made it through this far. Before I die, though, there is one thing I have to tell you. It shames me to say it, but I have no choice: I have had lustful thoughts toward your mother any number of times. As you well know, I have a family that I love with all my heart, and your mother is a pure-hearted person, but still, I have had violent cravings for her flesh—cravings that I have never been able to suppress. I want to beg your forgiveness."

There is no need for you to beg anyone's forgiveness, Mr. Tabata. You are not the only one who has had lustful thoughts. Even I, her son, have been pursued by terrible obsessions . . . Yoshiya wanted to open himself up in this way, but he knew that all it would accomplish would be to upset Mr. Tabata even more. He took Mr. Tabata's hand and held it for a very long time, hoping that the thoughts in his breast would communicate themselves from his hand to Mr. Tabata's. Our hearts are not stones. A stone may disintegrate in time and lose its outward form. But hearts never disintegrate. They have no outward form, and whether good or evil, we can always communicate them to one another. All God's children can dance. The next day, Mr. Tabata drew his last breath.

Kneeling on the pitcher's mound, Yoshiya gave himself up to the flow of time. Somewhere in the distance he heard the faint wail of a siren. A gust of wind set the leaves of grass to dancing and celebrated the grass's song before it died.

"Oh God," Yoshiya said aloud.

Super-frog Saves Tokyo

Katagiri found a giant frog waiting for him in his apartment. It was powerfully built, standing over six feet tall on its hind legs. A skinny little man no more than five-foot-three, Katagiri was overwhelmed by the frog's imposing bulk.

"Call me 'Frog,' " said the frog in a clear, strong voice.

Katagiri stood rooted in the doorway, unable to speak.

"Don't be afraid, I'm not here to hurt you. Just come in and close the door. Please."

Briefcase in his right hand, grocery bag with fresh vegetables and canned salmon cradled in his left arm, Katagiri didn't dare move.

"Please, Mr. Katagiri, hurry and close the door, and take off your shoes."

The sound of his own name helped Katagiri snap out of it. He closed the door as ordered, set the grocery bag on the raised wooden floor, pinned the briefcase under one arm, and unlaced his shoes. Frog gestured for him to take a seat at the kitchen table, which he did.

"I must apologize, Mr. Katagiri, for having barged in while you were out," Frog said. "I knew it would be a shock for you to find me here. But I had no choice. How about a cup of tea? I thought you would be coming home soon, so I boiled some water."

Katagiri still had his briefcase jammed under his arm. Somebody's playing a joke on me, he thought. Somebody's rigged himself up in this huge frog costume just to have fun with me. But he knew, as he watched Frog pour boiling water into the teapot, humming all the while, that these had to be the limbs and movements of a real frog. Frog set a cup of green tea in front of Katagiri, and poured another one for himself.

Sipping his tea, Frog asked, "Calming down?"

But still Katagiri could not speak.

“I know I should have made an appointment to visit you, Mr. Katagiri. I am fully aware of the proprieties. Anyone would be shocked to find a big frog waiting for him at home. But an urgent matter brings me here. Please forgive me.”

“Urgent matter?” Katagiri managed to produce words at last.

“Yes, indeed,” Frog said. “Why else would I take the liberty of barging into a person’s home? Such discourtesy is not my customary style.”

“Does this ‘matter’ have something to do with me?”

“Yes and no,” said Frog with a tilt of the head. “No and yes.”

I’ve got to get a grip on myself, thought Katagiri. “Do you mind if I smoke?”

“Not at all, not at all,” Frog said with a smile. “It’s your home. You don’t have to ask my permission. Smoke and drink as much as you like. I myself am not a smoker, but I can hardly impose my distaste for tobacco on others in their own homes.”

Katagiri pulled a pack of cigarettes from his coat pocket and struck a match. He saw his hand trembling as he lit up. Seated opposite him, Frog seemed to be studying his every movement.

“You don’t happen to be connected with some kind of gang by any chance?” Katagiri found the courage to ask.

“Ha ha ha ha ha ha! What a wonderful sense of humor you have, Mr. Katagiri!” he said, slapping his webbed hand against his thigh. “There may be a shortage of skilled labor, but what gang is going to hire a frog to do their dirty work? They’d be made a laughingstock.”

“Well, if you’re here to negotiate a repayment, you’re wasting your time. I have no authority to make such decisions. Only my superiors can do that. I just follow orders. I can’t do a thing for you.”

“Please, Mr. Katagiri,” Frog said, raising one webbed finger. “I have not come here on such petty business. I am fully aware that you are assistant chief of the Lending Division of the Shinjuku branch of the Tokyo Security Trust Bank. But my visit has nothing to do with the repayment of loans. I have come here to save Tokyo from destruction.”

Katagiri scanned the room for a hidden TV camera in case he was being made the butt of some huge, terrible joke. But there was no camera. It was a small apartment. There was no place for anyone to hide.

“No,” Frog said, “we are the only ones here. I know you are thinking that I must be mad, or that you are having some kind of dream, but I am not crazy and you are not dreaming. This is absolutely, positively serious.”

“To tell you the truth, Mr. Frog—”

“Please,” Frog said, raising one finger again. “Call me ‘Frog.’ ”

“To tell you the truth, Frog,” Katagiri said, “I can’t quite understand what is going on here. It’s not that I don’t trust you, but I don’t seem to be able to grasp the situation exactly. Do you mind if I ask you a question or two?”

“Not at all, not at all,” Frog said. “Mutual understanding is of critical importance. There are those who say that ‘understanding’ is merely the sum total of our misunderstandings, and while I do find this view interesting in its own way, I am afraid that we have no time to spare on pleasant digressions. The best thing would be for us to achieve mutual understanding via the shortest possible route. Therefore, by all means, ask as many questions as you wish.”

“Now, you are a real frog, am I right?”

“Yes, of course, as you can see. A real frog is exactly what I am. A product neither of metaphor nor allusion nor deconstruction nor sampling nor any other such complex process, I am a genuine frog. Shall I croak for you?”

Frog tilted back his head and flexed the muscles of his huge throat. Ribit! Ri-i-i-bit! Ribit-ribit-ribit! Ribit! Ribit! Ri-i-i-bit! His gigantic croaks rattled the pictures hanging on the walls.

“Fine, I see, I see!” Katagiri said, worried about the thin walls of the cheap apartment house in which he lived. “That’s great. You are, without question, a real frog.”

“One might also say that I am the sum total of all frogs. Nonetheless, this does nothing to change the fact that I am a frog. Anyone claiming that I am not a frog would be a dirty liar. I would smash such a person to bits!”

Katagiri nodded. Hoping to calm himself, he picked up his cup and swallowed a mouthful of tea. “You said before that you have come here to save Tokyo from destruction?”

“That is what I said.”

“What kind of destruction?”

“Earthquake,” Frog said with the utmost gravity.

Mouth dropping open, Katagiri looked at Frog. And Frog, saying nothing, looked at Katagiri. They went on staring at each other like this for some time. Next it was Frog’s turn to open his mouth.

“A very, very big earthquake. It is set to strike Tokyo at eight-thirty a.m. on February 18. Three days from now. A much bigger earthquake than the one that struck Kobe last month. The number of dead from such a quake would probably exceed a hundred and fifty thousand—mostly from accidents involving the commuter system: derailments, falling vehicles, crashes, the collapse of elevated expressways and rail lines, the crushing of subways, the explosion of tanker trucks. Buildings will be transformed into piles of rubble, their inhabitants crushed to death. Fires everywhere, the road system in a state of collapse, ambulances and fire trucks useless, people just lying there, dying. A hundred and fifty thousand of them! Pure hell. People will be made to realize what a fragile condition the intensive collectivity known as ‘city’ really is.” Frog said this with a gentle shake of the head. “The epicenter will be close to the Shinjuku ward office.”

“Close to the Shinjuku ward office?”

“To be precise, it will hit directly beneath the Shinjuku branch of the Tokyo Security Trust Bank.”

A heavy silence followed.

“And you,” Katagiri said, “are planning to stop this earthquake?”

“Exactly,” Frog said, nodding. “That is exactly what I propose to do. You and I will go underground beneath the Shinjuku branch of the Tokyo Security Trust Bank to do mortal combat with Worm.”

As a member of the Trust Bank Lending Division, Katagiri had fought his way through many a battle. He had weathered sixteen years of daily combat since the day he graduated from the university and joined the bank’s staff. He was, in a word, a collection officer—a post that carried little popularity. Everyone in his division preferred to make loans, especially at the time of the bubble. They had so much money in those days that almost any likely piece of collateral—be it land or stock—was enough to convince loan officers to give away whatever they were asked for, the bigger the loan the better their reputations in the company. Some loans, though, never made it back to the bank: they got “stuck to the bottom of the pan.” It was Katagiri’s job to take care of those. And when the bubble burst, the work piled on. First stock prices fell, and then land values, and collateral lost all significance. “Get out there,” his boss commanded him, “and squeeze whatever you can out of them.”

The Kabukicho neighborhood of Shinjuku was a labyrinth of violence: old-time gangsters, Korean mobsters, Chinese mafia, guns and drugs, money flowing beneath the surface from one murky den to another, people vanishing every now and then like a puff of smoke. Plunging into Kabukicho to collect a bad debt, Katagiri had been surrounded more than once by mobsters threatening to kill him, but he had never been frightened. What good would it have done them to kill one man running around for the bank? They could stab him if they wanted to. They could beat him up. He was perfect for the job: no wife, no kids, both parents dead, brother and sister he had put through college married off. So what if they killed him? It wouldn’t change anything for anybody—least of all for Katagiri himself.

It was not Katagiri but the thugs surrounding him who got nervous when they saw him so calm and cool. He soon earned a kind of reputation in their world as a tough guy. Now, though, the tough Katagiri was at a total loss. What the hell was this frog talking about? Worm?

“Who is Worm?” he asked with some hesitation.

“Worm lives underground. He is a gigantic worm. When he gets angry, he causes earthquakes,” Frog said. “And right now he is very, very angry.”

“What is he angry about?” Katagiri asked.

“I have no idea,” Frog said. “Nobody knows what Worm is thinking inside that murky head of his. Few have ever seen him. He is usually asleep. That’s what he really likes to do: take long, long naps. He goes on sleeping for years—decades—in the warmth and darkness underground. His eyes, as you might imagine, have atrophied, his brain has turned to jelly as he sleeps. If you ask me, I’d guess he probably isn’t thinking anything at all, just lying there and feeling every little rumble and reverberation that comes his way, absorbing them into his body, and storing them up. And then, through some kind of chemical process, he replaces most of them with rage. Why this happens I have no idea. I could never explain it.”

Frog fell silent, watching Katagiri and waiting until his words had sunk in. Then he went on:

“Please don’t misunderstand me, though. I feel no personal animosity toward Worm. I don’t see him as the embodiment of evil. Not that I would want to be his friend, either: I just think that, as far as the world is concerned, it is in a sense all right for a being like him to exist. The world is like a great big overcoat, and it needs pockets of various shapes and sizes. But right at the moment Worm has reached the point where he is too dangerous to ignore. With all the different kinds of hatred he has absorbed and stored inside himself over the years, his heart and body have swollen to gargantuan proportions—bigger than ever before. And to make matters worse, last month’s Kobe earthquake shook him out of the deep sleep he was enjoying. He experienced a revelation inspired by his profound rage: it was time now for him, too, to cause a massive earthquake, and he’d do it here, in Tokyo. I know what I’m talking about, Mr. Katagiri: I have received reliable information on the timing and scale of the earthquake from some of my best bug friends.”

Frog snapped his mouth shut and closed his round eyes in apparent fatigue.

“So what you’re saying is,” Katagiri said, “that you and I have to go underground together and fight Worm to stop the earthquake.”

“Exactly.”

Katagiri reached for his cup of tea, picked it up, and put it back. “I still don’t get it,” he said. “Why did you choose me to go with you?”

Frog looked straight into Katagiri’s eyes and said, “I have always had the profoundest respect for you, Mr. Katagiri. For sixteen long years, you have silently accepted the most dangerous, least glamorous assignments—the jobs that others have avoided—and you have carried them off beautifully. I know full well how difficult this has been for you, and I believe that neither your superiors nor your colleagues properly appreciate your accomplishments. They are blind, the whole lot of them. But you, unappreciated and unpromoted, have never once complained.

“Nor is it simply a matter of your work. After your parents died, you raised your teenage brother and sister singlehandedly, put them through college, and even arranged for them to marry, all at great sacrifice of your time and income, and at the expense of your own marriage prospects. In spite of this, your brother and sister have never once expressed gratitude for your efforts on their behalf. Far from it: they have shown you no respect and acted with the most callous disregard for your loving-kindness. In my opinion, their behavior is unconscionable. I almost wish I could beat them to a pulp on your behalf. But you, meanwhile, show no trace of anger.

“To be quite honest, Mr. Katagiri, you are nothing much to look at, and you are far from eloquent, so you tend to be looked down upon by those around you. I, however, can see what a sensible and courageous man you are. In all of Tokyo, with its teeming millions, there is no one else I could trust as much as you to fight by my side.”

“Tell me, Mr. Frog—” Katagiri said.

“Please,” Frog said, raising one finger again. “Call me ‘Frog.’ ”

“Tell me, Frog,” Katagiri said, “how do you know so much about me?”

“Well, Mr. Katagiri, I have not been frogging all these years for nothing. I keep my eye on the important things in life.”

“But still, Frog,” Katagiri said, “I’m not particularly strong, and I don’t know anything about what’s happening underground. I don’t have the kind of muscle it will take to fight Worm in the darkness. I’m sure you can find somebody a lot stronger than me—a man who does karate, say, or a Self-Defense Force commando.”

Frog rolled his large eyes. “To tell you the truth, Mr. Katagiri,” he said, “I’m the one who will do all the fighting. But I can’t do it alone. This is the key thing: I need your courage and your passion for justice. I need you to stand behind me and say, ‘Way to go, Frog! You’re doing great! I know you can win! You’re fighting the good fight!’ ”

Frog opened his arms wide, then slapped his webbed hands down on his knees again.

“In all honesty, Mr. Katagiri, the thought of fighting Worm in the dark frightens me, too. For many years I lived as a pacifist, loving art, living with nature. Fighting is not something I like to do. I do it because I have to. And this particular fight will be a fierce one, that is certain. I may not return from it alive. I may lose a limb or two in the process. But I cannot—I will not—run away. As Nietzsche said, the highest wisdom is to have no fear. What I want from you, Mr. Katagiri, is for you to share your simple courage with me, to support me with your whole heart as a true friend. Do you understand what I am trying to tell you?”

None of this made any sense to Katagiri, but still he felt that—unreal as it sounded—he could believe whatever Frog said to him. Something about Frog—the look on his face, the way he spoke—had a simple honesty to it that appealed directly to the heart. After years of work in the toughest division of the Security Trust Bank, Katagiri possessed the ability to sense such things. It was all but second nature to him.

“I know this must be difficult for you, Mr. Katagiri. A huge frog comes barging into your place and asks you to believe all these outlandish things. Your reaction is perfectly natural. And so I intend to provide you with proof that I exist. Tell me, Mr. Katagiri, you have been having a great deal of trouble recovering a loan the bank made to Big Bear Trading, have you not?”

“That’s true,” Katagiri said.

“Well, they have a number of extortionists working behind the scenes, and those individuals are mixed up with the mobsters. They’re scheming to make the company go bankrupt and get out of its debts. Your bank’s loan officer shoved a pile of cash at them without a decent background check, and, as usual, the one who’s left to clean up after him is you, Mr. Katagiri. But you’re having a hard time sinking your

teeth into these fellows: they're no pushovers. And there may be a powerful politician backing them up. They're into you for seven hundred million yen. That is the situation you are dealing with, am I right?"

"You certainly are."

Frog stretched his arms out wide, his big green webs opening like pale wings. "Don't worry, Mr. Katagiri. Leave everything to me. By tomorrow morning, old Frog will have your problems solved. Relax and have a good night's sleep."

With a big smile on his face, Frog stood up. Then, flattening himself like a dried squid, he slipped out through the gap at the side of the closed door, leaving Katagiri all alone. The two teacups on the kitchen table were the only indication that Frog had ever been in Katagiri's apartment.

The moment Katagiri arrived at work the next morning at nine, the phone on his desk rang.

"Mr. Katagiri," said a man's voice. It was cold and businesslike. "My name is Shiraoka. I am an attorney with the Big Bear case. I received a call from my client this morning with regard to the pending loan matter. He wants you to know that he will take full responsibility for returning the entire amount requested by the due date. He will also give you a signed memorandum to that effect. His only request is that you do not send Frog to his home again. I repeat: he wants you to ask Frog never to visit his home again. I myself am not entirely sure what this is supposed to mean, but I believe it should be clear to you, Mr. Katagiri. Am I correct?"

"You are indeed," Katagiri said.

"You will be kind enough to convey my message to Frog, I trust."

"That I will do. Your client will never see Frog again."

"Thank you very much. I will prepare the memorandum for you by tomorrow."

"I appreciate it," Katagiri said.

The connection was cut.

Frog visited Katagiri in his Trust Bank office at lunchtime. “That Big Bear case is working out well for you, I presume?”

Katagiri glanced around uneasily.

“Don’t worry,” Frog said. “You are the only one who can see me. But now I am sure you realize that I actually exist. I am not a product of your imagination. I can take action and produce results. I am a real, living being.”

“Tell me, Mr. Frog—”

“Please,” Frog said, raising one finger. “Call me ‘Frog.’ ”

“Tell me, Frog,” Katagiri said, “what did you do to them?”

“Oh, nothing much,” Frog said. “Nothing much more complicated than boiling Brussels sprouts. I just gave them a little scare. A touch of psychological terror. As Joseph Conrad once wrote, true terror is the kind that men feel toward their imagination. But never mind that, Mr. Katagiri. Tell me about the Big Bear case. It’s going well?”

Katagiri nodded and lit a cigarette. “Seems to be.”

“So, then, have I succeeded in gaining your trust with regard to the matter I broached to you last night? Will you join me to fight against Worm?”

Sighing, Katagiri removed his glasses and wiped them. “To tell you the truth, I’m not too crazy about the idea, but I don’t suppose that’s enough to get me out of it.”

“No,” Frog said. “It is a matter of responsibility and honor. You may not be too ‘crazy’ about the idea, but we have no choice: you and I must go underground and face Worm. If we should happen to lose our

lives in the process, we will gain no one's sympathy. And even if we manage to defeat Worm, no one will praise us. No one will ever know that such a battle even raged far beneath their feet. Only you and I will know, Mr. Katagiri. However it turns out, ours will be a lonely battle."

Katagiri looked at his own hand for a while, then watched the smoke rising from his cigarette. Finally, he spoke. "You know, Mr. Frog, I'm just an ordinary person."

"Make that 'Frog,' please," Frog said, but Katagiri let it go.

"I'm an absolutely ordinary guy. Less than ordinary. I'm going bald, I'm getting a potbelly, I turned forty last month. My feet are flat. The doctor told me recently that I have diabetic tendencies. It's been three months or more since I last slept with a woman—and I had to pay for it. I do get some recognition within the division for my ability to collect on loans, but no real respect. I don't have a single person who likes me, either at work or in my private life. I don't know how to talk to people, and I'm bad with strangers, so I never make friends. I have no athletic ability, I'm tone-deaf, short, phimotic, nearsighted—and astigmatic. I live a horrible life. All I do is eat, sleep, and shit. I don't know why I'm even living. Why should a person like me have to be the one to save Tokyo?"

"Because, Mr. Katagiri, Tokyo can only be saved by a person like you. And it's for people like you that I am trying to save Tokyo."

Katagiri sighed again, more deeply this time. "All right then, what do you want me to do?"

Frog told Katagiri his plan. They would go underground on the night of February 17 (one day before the earthquake was scheduled to happen). Their way in would be through the basement boiler room of the Shinjuku branch of the Tokyo Security Trust Bank. They would meet there late at night (Katagiri would stay in the building on the pretext of working overtime). Behind a section of wall was a vertical shaft, and they would find Worm at the bottom by climbing down a 150-foot rope ladder.

"Do you have a battle plan in mind?" Katagiri asked.

"Of course I do. We would have no hope of defeating an enemy like Worm without a battle plan. He is a slimy creature: you can't tell his mouth from his anus. And he's as big as a commuter train."

“What is your battle plan?”

After a thoughtful pause, Frog answered, “Hmm, what is it they say—‘Silence is golden’?”

“You mean I shouldn’t ask?”

“That’s one way of putting it.”

“What if I get scared at the last minute and run away? What would you do then, Mr. Frog?”

“ ‘Frog.’ ”

“Frog. What would you do then?”

Frog thought about this a while and answered, “I would fight on alone. My chances of beating him by myself are perhaps just slightly better than Anna Karenina’s chances of beating that speeding locomotive. Have you read Anna Karenina, Mr. Katagiri?”

When he heard that Katagiri had not read the novel, Frog gave him a look as if to say, What a shame. Apparently Frog was very fond of Anna Karenina.

“Still, Mr. Katagiri, I do not believe that you will leave me to fight alone. I can tell. It’s a question of balls—which, unfortunately, I do not happen to possess. Ha ha ha ha!” Frog laughed with his mouth wide open. Balls were not all that Frog lacked. He had no teeth, either.

Unexpected things do happen, however.

Katagiri was shot on the evening of February 17. He had finished his rounds for the day and was walking down the street in Shinjuku on his way back to the Trust Bank when a young man in a leather jacket leaped in front of him. The man’s face was a blank, and he gripped a small black gun in one hand. The gun was so small and so black it hardly looked real. Katagiri stared at the object in the man’s hand, not

registering the fact that it was aimed at him and that the man was pulling the trigger. It all happened too quickly: it didn't make sense to him. But the gun in fact went off.

Katagiri saw the barrel jerk in the air and, at the same moment, felt an impact as though someone had struck his right shoulder with a sledgehammer. He felt no pain, but the blow sent him sprawling on the sidewalk. The leather briefcase in his right hand went flying in the other direction. The man aimed the gun at him again. A second shot rang out. A small eatery's sidewalk signboard exploded before his eyes. He heard people screaming. His eyeglasses had flown off, and everything was a blur. He was vaguely aware that the man was approaching with the pistol pointed at him. I'm going to die, he thought. Frog had said that true terror is the kind that men feel toward their imagination. Katagiri cut the switch of his imagination and sank into a weightless silence.

When he woke up, he was in bed. He opened one eye, took a moment to survey his surroundings, and then opened the other eye. The first thing that entered his field of vision was a metal stand by the head of the bed and an intravenous feeding tube that stretched from the stand to where he lay. Next he saw a nurse dressed in white. He realized that he was lying on his back on a hard bed and wearing some strange piece of clothing, under which he seemed to be naked.

Oh yeah, he thought, I was walking along the sidewalk when some guy shot me. Probably in the shoulder. The right one. He relived the scene in his mind. When he remembered the small black gun in the young man's hand, his heart made a disturbing thump. The sons of bitches were trying to kill me! he thought. But it looks as if I made it through OK. My memory is fine. I don't have any pain. And not just pain: I don't have any feeling at all. I can't lift my arm . . .

The hospital room had no windows. He could not tell whether it was day or night. He had been shot just before five in the evening. How much time had passed since then? Had the hour of his nighttime rendezvous with Frog gone by? Katagiri searched the room for a clock, but without his glasses he could see nothing at a distance.

"Excuse me," he called to the nurse.

"Oh, good, you're finally awake," the nurse said.

"What time is it?"

She looked at her watch.

“Nine-fifteen.”

“P.M.?”

“Don’t be silly, it’s morning!”

“Nine-fifteen a.m.?” Katagiri groaned, barely managing to lift his head from the pillow. The ragged noise that emerged from his throat sounded like someone else’s voice. “Nine-fifteen a.m. on February 18?”

“Right,” the nurse said, lifting her arm once more to check the date on her digital watch. “Today is February 18, 1995.”

“Wasn’t there a big earthquake in Tokyo this morning?”

“In Tokyo?”

“In Tokyo.”

The nurse shook her head. “Not as far as I know.”

He breathed a sigh of relief. Whatever had happened, the earthquake at least had been averted.

“How’s my wound doing?”

“Your wound?” she asked. “What wound?”

“Where I was shot.”

“Shot?”

“Yeah, near the entrance to the Trust Bank. Some young guy shot me. In the right shoulder, I think.”

The nurse flashed a nervous smile in his direction. “I’m sorry, Mr. Katagiri, but you haven’t been shot.”

“I haven’t? Are you sure?”

“As sure as I am that there was no earthquake this morning.”

Katagiri was stunned. “Then what the hell am I doing in a hospital?”

“Somebody found you lying in the street, unconscious. In the Kabukicho neighborhood of Shinjuku. You didn’t have any external wounds. You were just out cold. And we still haven’t found out why. The doctor’s going to be here soon. You’d better talk to him.”

Lying in the street unconscious? Katagiri was sure he had seen the pistol go off aimed at him. He took a deep breath and tried to get his head straight. He would start by putting all the facts in order.

“What you’re telling me is, I’ve been lying in this hospital bed, unconscious, since early evening yesterday, is that right?”

“Right,” the nurse said. “And you had a really bad night, Mr. Katagiri. You must have had some awful nightmares. I heard you yelling, ‘Frog! Hey, Frog!’ You did it a lot. You have a friend nicknamed ‘Frog’?”

Katagiri closed his eyes and listened to the slow, rhythmic beating of his heart as it ticked off the minutes of his life. How much of what he remembered had actually happened, and how much was hallucination? Did Frog really exist, and had Frog fought with Worm to put a stop to the earthquake? Or had that just been part of a long dream? Katagiri had no idea what was true anymore.

Frog came to his hospital room that night. Katagiri awoke to find him in the dim light, sitting on a steel folding chair, his back against the wall. Frog's big, bulging green eyelids were closed in a straight slit.

"Frog!" Katagiri called out to him.

Frog slowly opened his eyes. His big white stomach swelled and shrank with his breathing.

"I meant to meet you in the boiler room at night the way I promised," Katagiri said, "but I had an accident in the evening— something totally unexpected—and they brought me here."

Frog gave his head a slight shake. "I know. It's OK. Don't worry. You were a great help to me in my fight, Mr. Katagiri."

"I was?"

"Yes, you were. You did a great job in your dreams. That's what made it possible for me to fight Worm to the finish. I have you to thank for my victory."

"I don't get it," Katagiri said. "I was unconscious the whole time. They were feeding me intravenously. I don't remember doing anything in my dreams."

"That's fine, Mr. Katagiri. It's better that you don't remember. The whole terrible fight occurred in the area of imagination. That is the precise location of our battlefield. It is there that we experience our victories and our defeats. Each and every one of us is a being of limited duration: all of us eventually go down to defeat. But as Ernest Hemingway saw so clearly, the ultimate value of our lives is decided not by how we win but by how we lose. You and I together, Mr. Katagiri, were able to prevent the annihilation of Tokyo. We saved a hundred and fifty thousand people from the jaws of death. No one realizes it, but that is what we accomplished."

"How did you manage to defeat Worm? And what did I do?"

"We gave everything we had in a fight to the bitter end. We—" Frog snapped his mouth shut and took one great breath, "—we used every weapon we could get our hands on, Mr. Katagiri. We used all the

courage we could muster. Darkness was our enemy's ally. You brought in a foot-powered generator and used every ounce of your strength to fill the place with light. Worm tried to frighten you away with phantoms of the darkness, but you stood your ground. Darkness vied with light in a horrific battle, and in the light I grappled with the monstrous Worm. He coiled himself around me, and bathed me in his horrid slime. I tore him to shreds, but still he refused to die. All he did was divide into smaller pieces. And then—"

Frog fell silent, but soon, as if dredging up his last ounce of strength, he began to speak again. "Fyodor Dostoevsky, with unparalleled tenderness, depicted those who have been forsaken by God. He discovered the precious quality of human existence in the ghastly paradox whereby men who had invented God were forsaken by that very God. Fighting with Worm in the darkness, I found myself thinking of Dostoevsky's 'White Nights.' I . . ." Frog's words seemed to founder. "Mr. Katagiri, do you mind if I take a brief nap? I am utterly exhausted."

"Please," Katagiri said. "Take a good, deep sleep."

"I was finally unable to defeat Worm," Frog said, closing his eyes. "I did manage to stop the earthquake, but I was only able to carry our battle to a draw. I inflicted injury on him, and he on me. But to tell you the truth, Mr. Katagiri . . ."

"What is it, Frog?"

"I am, indeed, pure Frog, but at the same time I am a thing that stands for a world of un-Frog."

"Hmm, I don't get that at all."

"Neither do I," Frog said, his eyes still closed. "It's just a feeling I have. What you see with your eyes is not necessarily real. My enemy is, among other things, the me inside me. Inside me is the un-me. My brain is growing muddy. The locomotive is coming. But I really want you to understand what I'm saying, Mr. Katagiri."

"You're tired, Frog. Go to sleep. You'll get better."

"I am slowly, slowly returning to the mud, Mr. Katagiri. And yet . . . I . . ."

Frog lost his grasp on words and slipped into a coma. His arms hung down almost to the floor, and his big wide mouth drooped open. Straining to focus his eyes, Katagiri was able to make out deep cuts covering Frog's entire body. Discolored streaks ran through his skin, and there was a sunken spot on his head where the flesh had been torn away.

Katagiri stared long and hard at Frog, who sat there now wrapped in the thick cloak of sleep. As soon as I get out of this hospital, he thought, I'll buy Anna Karenina and "White Nights" and read them both. Then I'll have a nice long literary discussion about them with Frog.

Before long, Frog began to twitch all over. Katagiri assumed at first that these were just normal involuntary movements in sleep, but he soon realized his mistake. There was something unnatural about the way Frog's body went on jerking, like a big doll being shaken by someone from behind. Katagiri held his breath and watched. He wanted to run over to Frog, but his own body remained paralyzed.

After a while, a big lump formed over Frog's right eye. The same kind of huge, ugly boil broke out on Frog's shoulder and side, and then over his whole body. Katagiri could not imagine what was happening to Frog. He stared at the spectacle, barely breathing.

Then, all of a sudden, one of the boils burst with a loud pop. The skin flew off, and a sticky liquid oozed out, sending a horrible smell across the room. The rest of the boils started popping, one after another, twenty or thirty in all, flinging skin and fluid onto the walls. The sickening, unbearable smell filled the hospital room. Big black holes were left on Frog's body where the boils had burst, and wriggling, maggotlike worms of all shapes and sizes came crawling out. Puffy white maggots. After them emerged some kind of small centipedelike creatures, whose hundreds of legs made a creepy rustling sound. An endless stream of these things came crawling out of the holes. Frog's body—or the thing that must once have been Frog's body—was totally covered with these creatures of the night. His two big eyeballs fell from their sockets onto the floor, where they were devoured by black bugs with strong jaws. Crowds of slimy worms raced each other up the walls to the ceiling, where they covered the fluorescent lights and burrowed into the smoke alarm.

The floor, too, was covered with worms and bugs. They climbed up the lamp and blocked the light and, of course, they crept onto Katagiri's bed. Hundreds of them came burrowing under the covers. They crawled up his legs, under his bedgown, between his thighs. The smallest worms and maggots crawled inside his anus and ears and nostrils. Centipedes pried his mouth open and crawled inside one after another. Filled with an intense despair, Katagiri screamed.

Someone snapped a switch and light filled the room.

“Mr. Katagiri!” called the nurse. Katagiri opened his eyes to the light. His body was soaked in sweat. The bugs were gone. All they had left behind in him was a horrible slimy sensation.

“Another bad dream, eh? Poor dear.” With quick, efficient movements the nurse readied an injection and stabbed the needle into his arm.

He took a long, deep breath and let it out. His heart was expanding and contracting violently.

“What were you dreaming about?”

Katagiri was having trouble differentiating dream from reality. “What you see with your eyes is not necessarily real,” he told himself aloud.

“That’s so true,” said the nurse with a smile. “Especially where dreams are concerned.”

“Frog,” he murmured.

“Did something happen to Frog?” she asked.

“He saved Tokyo from being destroyed by an earthquake. All by himself.”

“That’s nice,” the nurse said, replacing his near-empty intravenous feeding bottle with a new one. “We don’t need any more awful things happening in Tokyo. We have plenty already.”

“But it cost him his life. He’s gone. I think he went back to the mud. He’ll never come here again.”

Smiling, the nurse toweled the sweat from his forehead. “You were very fond of Frog, weren’t you, Mr. Katagiri?”

“Locomotive,” Katagiri mumbled. “More than anybody.” Then he closed his eyes and sank into a restful, dreamless sleep.

Thailand

There was an announcement: Lettuce angel men. We aren't countering some tah bulence. Please retahn to yah seat at thees time and fasten yah seat belt. Satsuki had been letting her mind wander, and so it took her a while to decipher the Thai steward's shaky Japanese.

She was hot and sweating. It was like a steam bath, her whole body aflame, her nylons and bra so uncomfortable she wanted to fling everything off and set herself free. She craned her neck to see the other business-class passengers. No, she was obviously the only one suffering from the heat. They were all curled up, asleep, blankets around their shoulders to counter the air-conditioning. It must be another hot flash. Satsuki bit her lip and decided to concentrate on something else to forget about the heat. She opened her book and tried to read from where she had left off, but forgetting was out of the question. This was no ordinary heat. And they wouldn't be touching down in Bangkok for hours yet. She asked a passing stewardess for some water and, finding the pill case in her pocketbook, she washed down a dose of the hormones she had forgotten to take.

Menopause: it had to be the gods' ironic warning to (or just plain nasty trick on) humanity for having artificially extended the life span, she told herself for the nth time. A mere hundred years ago, the average life span was less than fifty, and any woman who went on living twenty or thirty years past the end of her menstruation was an oddity. The difficulty of continuing to live with tissues for which the ovaries or the thyroid had ceased to secrete the normal supply of hormones; the possible relationship between the postmenopausal decrease in estrogen levels and the incidence of Alzheimer's: these were not questions worth troubling one's mind over. Of far more importance to the majority of mankind was the challenge of simply obtaining enough food to eat each day. Had the advancement of medicine, then, done nothing more than to expose, subdivide, and further complicate the problems faced by the human species?

Soon another announcement came over the PA system. In English this time. If there is a doctor on board, please identify yourself to one of the cabin attendants.

A passenger must have taken sick. For a moment Satsuki thought of volunteering, but quickly changed her mind. On the two earlier occasions when she had done so, she had merely had run-ins with practicing physicians who happened to be on the plane. These men had seemed to possess both the poise of a seasoned general commanding troops on the front line and the vision to recognize at a glance that Satsuki was a professional pathologist without combat experience. "That's all right, Doctor," she had been told with a cool smile, "I can handle this by myself. You just take it easy." She had mumbled a stupid excuse and gone back to her seat to watch the rest of some ridiculous movie.

Still, she thought, I might just be the only doctor on this plane. And the patient might be someone with a major problem involving the thyroidal immune system. If that is the case—and the likelihood of such a situation did not seem high—then even I might be of some use. She took a breath and pressed the button for a cabin attendant.

The World Thyroid Conference was a four-day event at the Bangkok Marriott. Actually, it was more like a worldwide family reunion than a conference. All the participants were thyroid specialists, and they all knew each other or were quickly introduced. It was a small world. There would be lectures and panel discussions during the day and private parties at night. Friends would get together to renew old ties, drink Australian wine, share thyroid stories, whisper gossip, update each other on their careers, tell dirty doctor jokes, and sing “Surfer Girl” at karaoke bars.

In Bangkok, Satsuki stayed mainly with her Detroit friends. Those were the ones she felt most comfortable with. She had worked at the university hospital in Detroit for almost ten years, researching the immune function of the thyroid gland. Eventually she had had a falling-out with her securities analyst husband, whose dependency on alcohol had grown worse year by year, in addition to which he had become involved with another woman—someone Satsuki knew well. They separated, and a bitter feud involving lawyers had dragged on for a full year. “The thing that finally did it for me,” her husband claimed, “was that you didn’t want to have children.”

They had finally concluded their divorce settlement three years ago. A few months later, someone smashed the headlights of her Honda Accord in the hospital parking lot and wrote “JAP CAR” on the hood in white letters. She called the police. A big black policeman filled out the damage report and then said to her, “Lady, this is Detroit. Next time buy a Ford Taurus.”

What with one thing and another, Satsuki became fed up with living in America and decided to return to Japan. She found a position at a university hospital in Tokyo. “You can’t do that,” said a member of her research team from India. “All our years of research are about to bear fruit. We could be nominated for a Nobel Prize—it’s not that crazy,” he pleaded with her to stay, but Satsuki’s mind was made up. Something inside her had snapped.

She stayed on alone at the hotel in Bangkok after the conference ended. “I’ve worked out a vacation for myself after this,” she told her friends. “I’m going to a resort near here for a complete rest—a whole week of nothing but reading, swimming, and drinking nice cold cocktails by the pool.”

“That’s great,” they said. “Everybody needs a breather once in a while—it’s good for your thyroid, too!” With handshakes and hugs and promises to get together again, Satsuki said goodbye to all her friends.

Early the next morning, a limousine pulled up to the hotel entrance as planned. It was an old navy blue Mercedes, as perfect and polished as a jewel and far more beautiful than a new car. It looked like an object from another world, as if it had dropped fully formed from someone's fantasies. A slim Thai man probably in his early sixties was to be her driver and guide. He wore a heavily starched white short-sleeved shirt, a black silk necktie, and dark sunglasses. His face was tanned, his neck long and slender. Presenting himself to Satsuki, he did not shake her hand but instead brought his hands together and gave a slight, almost Japanese, bow.

"Please call me Nimit. I will have the honor to be your companion for the coming week."

It was not clear whether "Nimit" was his first or last name. He was, in any case, "Nimit," and he told her this in a courteous, easy-to-understand English devoid of American casual-ness or British affectation. He had, in fact, no perceptible accent. Satsuki had heard English spoken this way before, but she couldn't remember where.

"The honor is mine," she said.

Together, they passed through Bangkok's vulgar, noisy, polluted streets. The traffic crawled along, people cursed each other, and the sound of car horns tore through the atmosphere like an air-raid siren. Plus, there were elephants lumbering down the street—and not just one or two of them. What were elephants doing in a city like this? she asked Nimit.

"Their owners bring them from the country," he explained. "They used to use them for logging, but there was not enough work for them to survive that way. They brought their animals to the city to make money doing tricks for tourists. Now there are far too many elephants here, and that makes things very difficult for the city people. Sometimes an elephant will panic and run amok. Just the other day, a great many automobiles were damaged that way. The police try to put a stop to it, of course, but they cannot confiscate the elephants from their keepers. There would be no place to put them if they did, and the cost of feeding them would be enormous. All they can do is leave them alone."

The car eventually emerged from the city, drove onto an expressway, and headed north. Nimit took a cassette tape from the glove compartment and slipped it into the car stereo, setting the volume low. It was jazz—a tune that Satsuki recognized with some emotion.

"Do you mind turning the volume up?" she asked.

“Yes, Doctor, of course,” Nimit said, making it louder. The tune was “I Can’t Get Started,” in exactly the same performance she had heard so often in the old days.

“Howard McGhee on trumpet, Lester Young on tenor,” she murmured, as if to herself. “JATP.”

Nimit glanced at her in the rearview mirror. “Very impressive, Doctor,” he said. “Do you like jazz?”

“My father was crazy about it,” she said. “He played records for me when I was a little girl, the same ones over and over, and he had me memorize the performers. If I got them right, he’d give me candy. I still remember most of them. But just the old stuff. I don’t know anything about the newer jazz musicians. Lionel Hampton, Bud Powell, Earl Hines, Harry Edison, Buck Clayton . . .”

“The old jazz is all I ever listen to as well,” Nimit said. “What was your father’s profession?”

“He was a doctor, too,” she said. “A pediatrician. He died just after I entered high school.”

“I am sorry to hear that,” Nimit said. “Do you still listen to jazz?”

Satsuki shook her head. “Not really. Not for years. My husband hated jazz. All he liked was opera. We had a great stereo in the house, but he’d give me a sour look if I ever tried putting on anything besides opera. Opera lovers may be the narrowest people in the world. I left my husband, though. I don’t think I’d mind if I never heard another opera again for as long as I live.”

Nimit gave a little nod but said nothing. Hands on the Mercedes steering wheel, he stared silently at the road ahead. His technique with the steering wheel was almost beautiful, the way he would move his hands to exactly the same points on the wheel at exactly the same angle. Now Erroll Garner was playing “I’ll Remember April,” which brought back more memories for Satsuki. Garner’s Concert by the Sea had been one of her father’s favorite records. She closed her eyes and let herself sink into the old memories. Everything had gone well for her until her father died of cancer. Everything—without exception. But then the stage suddenly turned dark, and by the time she noticed that her father had vanished forever from her life, everything was headed in the wrong direction. It was as if a whole new story had started with a whole new plot. Barely a month had passed after her father’s death when her mother sold the big stereo along with his jazz collection.

“Where are you from in Japan, Doctor, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“I’m from Kyoto,” answered Satsuki. “I only lived there until I was eighteen, though, and I’ve hardly ever been back.”

“Isn’t Kyoto right next to Kobe?”

“It’s not too far, but not ‘right next to’ Kobe. At least the earthquake seems not to have caused too much damage there.”

Nimit switched to the passing lane, slipping past a number of trucks loaded with livestock, then eased back into the cruising lane.

“I’m glad to hear it,” Nimit said. “A lot of people died in the earthquake last month. I saw it on the news. It was very sad. Tell me, Doctor, did you know anyone living in Kobe?”

“No, no one. I don’t think anyone I know lives in Kobe,” she said. But this was not true. He lived in Kobe.

Nimit remained silent for a while. Then, bending his neck slightly in her direction, he said, “Strange and mysterious things, though, aren’t they—earthquakes? We take it for granted that the earth beneath our feet is solid and stationary. We even talk about people being ‘down to earth’ or having their feet firmly planted on the ground. But suddenly one day we see that it isn’t true. The earth, the boulders, that are supposed to be so solid, all of a sudden turn as mushy as liquid. I heard it on the TV news: ‘liquefaction,’ they call it, I think. Fortunately we rarely have major earthquakes here in Thailand.”

Cradled in the rear seat, Satsuki closed her eyes and concentrated on Erroll Garner’s playing. Yes, she thought, he lived in Kobe. I hope he was crushed to death by something big and heavy. Or swallowed up by the liquefied earth. It’s everything I’ve wanted for him all these years.

The limousine reached its destination at three o’clock in the afternoon. They had taken a break at a service area along the highway at precisely twelve o’clock. Satsuki had drunk some gritty coffee and eaten half a donut at the cafeteria. Her week-long rest was to be spent at an expensive resort in the mountains. The buildings overlooked a stream that surged through the valley, the slopes of which were

covered in gorgeous primary-colored flowers. Birds flew from tree to tree emitting sharp cries. A private cottage had been prepared for Satsuki's stay. It had a big bright bathroom, an elegant canopy bed, and twenty-four-hour room service. Books and CDs and videos were available at the library off the lobby. The place was immaculate. Great care—and a great deal of money—had been lavished on every detail.

"You must be very tired, Doctor, after the long trip," Nimit said. "You can relax now. I will come to pick you up at ten o'clock tomorrow morning and take you to the pool. All you need to bring is a towel and bathing suit."

"Pool?" she asked. "They must have a perfectly big pool here at the hotel, don't they? At least that's what I was told."

"Yes, of course, but the hotel pool is very crowded. Mr. Rapaport told me that you are a serious swimmer. I found a pool nearby where you can do laps. There will be a charge, of course, but a small one. I'm sure you will like it."

John Rapaport was the American friend who had made the arrangements for Satsuki's Thai vacation. He had worked all over Southeast Asia as a news correspondent ever since the Khmer Rouge had run rampant in Cambodia, and he had many connections in Thailand as well. It was he who had recommended Nimit as Satsuki's guide and driver. With a mischievous wink, he had said to her, "You won't have to think about a thing. Just shut up and let Nimit make all the decisions and everything will go perfectly. He's a very impressive guy."

"That's fine," she said to Nimit. "I'll leave it up to you."

"Well then, I will come for you at ten o'clock tomorrow . . ."

Satsuki opened her bags, smoothed the wrinkles in a dress and skirt, and hung them in the closet. Then, changing into a swimsuit, she went to the hotel pool. Just as Nimit had said, it was not a pool for serious swimming. Gourd-shaped, it had a lovely waterfall in the middle, and children were throwing a ball in the shallow area. Abandoning any thought of trying to swim, she stretched out under a parasol, ordered a Tío Pepe and Perrier, and picked up reading where she had left off in her new John le Carré novel. When she grew tired of reading, she pulled her hat down over her face and napped. She had a dream about a rabbit—a short dream. The rabbit was in a hutch surrounded by a wire-mesh fence, trembling. It seemed to be sensing the arrival of some kind of thing in the middle of the night. At first, Satsuki was observing the rabbit from outside its enclosure, but soon she herself had become the rabbit. She could just barely make out the thing in the darkness. Even after she awoke, she had a bad taste in her mouth.

He lived in Kobe. She knew his home address and telephone number. She had never once lost track of him. She had tried calling his house just after the earthquake, but the connection never went through. I hope the damn place was flattened, she thought. I hope the whole family is out wandering through the streets, penniless. When I think of what you did to my life, when I think of the children I should have had, it's the least you deserve.

The pool that Nimit had found was half an hour's drive from the hotel and involved crossing a mountain. The woods near the top of the mountain were full of gray monkeys. They sat lined up along the road, eyes fixed on the passing cars as if to read the fates of the speeding vehicles.

The pool was inside a large, somewhat mysterious compound surrounded by a high wall and entered through an imposing iron gate. Nimit lowered his window and identified himself to the guard, who opened the gate without a word. Down the gravel driveway stood an old stone two-story building, and behind that was the long, narrow pool. Its signs of age were unmistakable, but this was an authentic three-lane, twenty-five-meter lap pool. The rectangular stretch of water was beautiful, surrounded by lawn and trees, and undisturbed by swimmers. Several old wooden deck chairs were lined up beside the pool. Silence ruled the area, and there was no hint of a human presence.

"What do you think, Doctor?" Nimit asked.

"Wonderful," Satsuki said. "Is this an athletic club?"

"Something like that," he said. "But hardly anyone uses it now. I have arranged for you to swim here alone as much as you like."

"Why, thank you so much, Nimit. You are an impressive man."

"You do me too great an honor," Nimit said, bowing blank-faced, with old-school courtesy. "The cottage over there is the changing room. It has toilets and showers. Feel free to use all the facilities. I will station myself by the automobile. Please let me know if there is anything you need."

Satsuki had always loved swimming, and she went to the gym pool whenever she had a chance. She had learned proper form from a coach. While she swam, she was able to thrust all unpleasant memories from her mind. If she swam long enough, she could reach a point where she felt utterly free, like a bird

flying through the sky. Thanks to her years of regular exercise, she had never been confined to bed with an illness or sensed any physical disorder. Nor had she gained extra weight. Of course, she was not young anymore; a trim body was no longer an option. In particular, there was almost no way to avoid putting on a little extra flesh at the hips. You could ask for only so much. She wasn't trying to become a fashion model. She probably looked five years younger than her actual age, which was pretty damn good.

At noon, Nimit served her ice tea and sandwiches on a silver tray by the pool—tiny vegetable and cheese sandwiches cut into perfect little triangles.

Satsuki was amazed. "Did you make these?"

The question brought a momentary change to Nimit's expressionless face. "Not I, Doctor. I do not prepare food. I had someone make this."

Satsuki was about to ask who that someone might be when she stopped herself. John Rapaport had told her, "Just shut up and let Nimit make all the decisions and everything will go perfectly." The sandwiches were quite good. Satsuki rested after lunch. On her Walkman she listened to a tape of the Benny Goodman Sextet that Nimit had lent her, after which she continued with her book. She swam some more in the afternoon, returning to the hotel at three.

Satsuki repeated exactly the same routine for five days in a row. She swam to her heart's content, ate vegetable and cheese sandwiches, listened to music, and read. She never stepped out of the hotel except to go to the pool. What she wanted was perfect rest, a chance not to think about anything.

She was the only one using the pool. The water was always freezing cold, as if it had been drawn from an underground stream in the hills, and the first dunk always took her breath away, but a few laps would warm her up, and then the water temperature was just right. When she tired of doing the crawl, she would remove her goggles and swim backstroke. White clouds floated in the sky, and birds and dragonflies cut across them. Satsuki wished she could stay like this forever.

"Where did you learn English?" Satsuki asked Nimit on the way back from the pool.

"I worked for thirty-three years as a chauffeur for a Norwegian gem dealer in Bangkok, and I always spoke English with him."

So that explained the familiar style. One of Satsuki's colleagues at a hospital where she had worked in Baltimore, a Dane, had spoken exactly this kind of English—precise grammar, light accent, no slang. Very clean, very easy to understand, and somewhat lacking in color. How strange to be spoken to in Norwegian English in Thailand!

"My employer loved jazz. He always had a tape playing when he was in the car. Which is why, as his driver, I naturally became familiar with it as well. When he died three years ago, he left me the car and all his tapes. The one we are listening to now is one of his."

"So when he died, you became an independent driver-guide for foreigners, is that it?"

"Yes, exactly," Nimit said. "There are many driver-guides in Thailand, but I am probably the only one with his own Mercedes."

"He must have placed a great deal of trust in you."

Nimit was silent for a long time. He seemed to be searching for the right words to respond to Satsuki's remark. "You know, Doctor, I am a bachelor. I have never once married. I spent thirty-three years as another man's shadow. I went everywhere he went, I helped him with everything he did. I was in a sense a part of him. When you live like that for a long time, you gradually lose track of what it is that you yourself really want out of life."

He turned up the volume on the car stereo a little: a deepthroated tenor sax solo.

"Take this music for example. I remember exactly what he told me about it. 'Listen to this, Nimit. Follow Coleman Hawkins' improvised lines very carefully. He is using them to tell us something. Pay very close attention. He is telling us the story of the free spirit that is doing everything it can to escape from within him. That same kind of spirit is inside me, and inside you. There—you can hear it, I'm sure: the hot breath, the shiver of the heart.' Hearing the same music over and over, I learned to listen closely, to hear the sound of the spirit. But still I cannot be sure if I really did hear it with my own ears. When you are with a person for a long time and following his orders, in a sense you become one with him, like husband and wife. Do you see what I am saying, Doctor?"

"I think so," answered Satsuki.

It suddenly struck her that Nimit and his Norwegian employer might have been lovers. She had no evidence on which to base such an assumption, merely a flash of intuition. But it might explain what Nimit was trying to say.

“Still, Doctor, I do not have the slightest regret. If I could live my life over again, I would probably do exactly the same thing. What about you?”

“I don’t know, Nimit. I really don’t know.”

Nimit said nothing after that. They crossed the mountain with the gray monkeys and returned to the hotel.

On her last day before leaving for Japan, Nimit took Satsuki to a nearby village instead of driving straight back to the hotel.

“I have a favor to ask of you,” he said, meeting her eyes in the rearview mirror. “A personal favor.”

“What is it?”

“Could you perhaps spare me an hour of your time? I have a place that I would like to show you.”

Satsuki had no objection, nor did she ask him where he was taking her. She had decided to place herself entirely in his hands.

The woman lived in a small house at the far edge of the village—a poor house in a poor village, with one tiny rice paddy after another crammed in layers up a hillside. Filthy, emaciated livestock. Muddy, pockmarked road. Air filled with the smell of water buffalo dung. A bull wandered by, its genitals swinging. A 50cc motorcycle buzzed past, splashing mud to either side. Near-naked children stood lined up along the road, staring at the Mercedes. Satsuki was shocked to think that such a miserable village could be situated so close to the high-class resort hotel in which she was staying.

The woman was old, perhaps almost eighty. Her skin had the blackened look of worn leather, its deep wrinkles becoming ravines that seemed to travel to all parts of her body. Her back was bent, and a flower-patterned, oversize dress hung limp from her bony frame. When he saw her, Nimit brought his hands together in greeting. She did the same.

Satsuki and the old woman sat down on opposite sides of a table, and Nimit took his place at one end. At first, only the woman and Nimit spoke. Satsuki had no idea what they were saying to each other, but she noticed how lively and powerful the woman's voice was for someone her age. The old woman seemed to have a full set of teeth, too. After a while, she turned from Nimit to face Satsuki, looking directly into her eyes. She had a penetrating gaze, and she never blinked. Satsuki began to feel like a small animal that has been trapped in a room with no way to escape. She realized she was sweating all over. Her face burned, and she had trouble breathing. She wanted to take a pill, but she had left her bottle of mineral water in the car.

"Please put your hands on the table," Nimit said. Satsuki did as she was told. The old woman reached out and took her right hand. The woman's hands were small but powerful. For a full ten minutes (though it might just as well have been two or three), the old woman stared into Satsuki's eyes and held her hand, saying nothing. Satsuki returned the woman's strong stare with her timid one, using the handkerchief in her left hand to mop her brow from time to time. Eventually, with a great sigh, the old woman released Satsuki's hand. She turned to Nimit and said something in Thai. Nimit translated into English.

"She says that there is a stone inside your body. A hard, white stone. About the size of a child's fist. She does not know where it came from."

"A stone?" Satsuki asked.

"There is something written on the stone, but she cannot read it because it is in Japanese: small black characters of some kind. The stone and its inscription are old, old things. You have been living with them inside you for a very long time. You must get rid of the stone. Otherwise, after you die and are cremated, only the stone will remain."

Now the old woman turned back to face Satsuki and spoke slowly in Thai for a long time. Her tone of voice made it clear that she was saying something important. Again Nimit translated.

"You are going to have a dream soon about a large snake. In your dream, it will be easing its way out of a hole in a wall—a green, scaly snake. Once it has pushed out three feet from the wall, you must grab its

neck and never let go. The snake will look very frightening, but in fact it can do you no harm, so you must not be frightened. Hold on to it with both hands. Think of it as your life, and hold on to it with all your strength. Keep holding it until you wake from your dream. The snake will swallow your stone for you. Do you understand?"

"What in the world—?"

"Just say you understand," Nimit said with the utmost gravity.

"I understand," Satsuki said.

The old woman gave a gentle nod and spoke again to Satsuki.

"The man is not dead," translated Nimit. "He did not receive a scratch. It may not be what you wanted, but it was actually very lucky for you that he was not hurt. You should be grateful for your good fortune."

The woman uttered a few short syllables.

"That is all," Nimit said. "We can go back to the hotel now."

"Was that some kind of fortune-telling?" Satsuki asked when they were back in the car.

"No, Doctor. It was not fortune-telling. Just as you treat people's bodies, she treats people's spirits. She predicts their dreams, mostly."

"I should have left her something then, as a token of thanks. The whole thing was such a surprise to me, it slipped my mind."

Nimit negotiated a sharp curve on the mountain road, turning the wheel in that precise way of his. "I paid her," he said. "A small amount. Not enough for you to trouble yourself over. Just think of it as a mark of my personal regard for you, Doctor."

“Do you take all of your clients there?”

“No, Doctor, only you.”

“And why is that?”

“You are a beautiful person, Doctor. Clearheaded. Strong. But you seem always to be dragging your heart along the ground. From now on, little by little, you must prepare yourself to face death. If you devote all of your future energy to living, you will not be able to die well. You must begin to shift gears, a little at a time. Living and dying are, in a sense, of equal value.”

“Tell me something, Nimit,” Satsuki said, taking off her sunglasses and leaning over the back of the passenger seat.

“What is that, Doctor?”

“Are you prepared to die?”

“I am half dead already,” Nimit said as if stating the obvious.

That night, lying in her broad, pristine bed, Satsuki wept. She recognized that she was headed toward death. She recognized that she had a hard, white stone inside herself. She recognized that a scaly, green snake was lurking somewhere in the dark. She thought about the child to which she never gave birth. She had destroyed that child, flung it down a bottomless well. And then she had spent thirty years hating one man. She had hoped that he would die in agony. In order to bring that about, she had gone so far as to wish in the depths of her heart for an earthquake. In a sense, she told herself, I am the one who caused that earthquake. He turned my heart into a stone; he turned my body to stone. In the distant mountains, the gray monkeys were silently staring at her. Living and dying are, in a sense, of equal value.

After checking her bags at the airline counter, Satsuki handed Nimit an envelope containing a one-hundred-dollar bill. “Thank you for everything, Nimit. You made it possible for me to have a wonderful rest. This is a personal gift from me to you.”

“That is very thoughtful of you, Doctor,” said Nimit, accepting the envelope. “Thank you very much.”

“Do you have time for a cup of coffee?”

“Yes, I would enjoy that.”

They went to a café together. Satsuki took hers black. Nimit gave his a heavy dose of cream. For a long time, Satsuki went on turning her cup in her saucer.

“You know,” she said at last, “I have a secret that I’ve never told anyone. I could never bring myself to talk about it. I’ve kept it locked up inside of me all this time. But I’d like to tell it to you now. Because we’ll probably never meet again. When my father died all of a sudden, my mother, without a word to me—”

Nimit held his hands up, palms facing Satsuki, and shook his head. “Please, Doctor. Don’t tell me anymore. You should have your dream, as the old woman told you to. I understand how you feel, but if you put those feelings into words they will turn into lies.”

Satsuki swallowed her words, and then, in silence, closed her eyes. She drew in a full, deep breath, and let it out again.

“Have your dream, Doctor,” Nimit said as if sharing kindly advice. “What you need now more than anything is discipline. Cast off mere words. Words turn into stone.”

He reached out and took Satsuki’s hand between his. His hands were strangely smooth and youthful, as if they had always been protected by expensive leather gloves. Satsuki opened her eyes and looked at him. Nimit took away his hands and rested them on the table, fingers intertwined.

“My Norwegian employer was actually from Lapland,” he said. “You must know, of course, that Lapland is at the northern-most tip of Norway, near the North Pole. Many reindeer live there. In summer there is no night, and in winter no day. He probably came to Thailand because the cold got to be too much for him. I guess you could call the two places complete opposites. He loved Thailand, and he made up his mind to have his bones buried here. But still, to the day he died, he missed the town in Lapland where

he was born. He used to tell me about it all the time. And yet, in spite of that, he never once went back to Norway in thirty-three years. Something must have happened there that kept him away. He was another person with a stone inside."

Nimit lifted his coffee cup and took a sip, then carefully set it in its saucer again without a sound.

"He once told me about polar bears—what solitary animals they are. They mate just once a year. One time in a whole year. There is no such thing as a lasting male-female bond in their world. One male polar bear and one female polar bear meet by sheer chance somewhere in the frozen vastness, and they mate. It doesn't take long. And once they are finished, the male runs away from the female as if he is frightened to death: he runs from the place where they have mated. He never looks back— literally. The rest of the year he lives in deep solitude. Mutual communication—the touching of two hearts—does not exist for them. So, that is the story of polar bears—or at least it is what my employer told me about them."

"How very strange," Satsuki said.

"Yes," Nimit said, "it is strange." His face was grave. "I remember asking my employer, 'Then what do polar bears exist for?' 'Yes, exactly,' he said with a big smile. 'Then what do we exist for, Nimit?' "

The plane reached cruising altitude and the FASTEN SEAT BELT sign went out. So, thought Satsuki, I'm going back to Japan. She tried to think about what lay ahead, but soon gave up. "Words turn into stone," Nimit had told her. She settled deep into her seat and closed her eyes. All at once the image came to her of the sky she had seen while swimming on her back. And Erroll Garner's "I'll Remember April." Let me sleep, she thought. Just let me sleep. And wait for the dream to come.

Haruki Murakami: On seeing the 100% perfect girl one beautiful April morning

One beautiful April morning, on a narrow side street in Tokyo's fashionable Harujuku neighborhood, I walked past the 100% perfect girl.

Tell you the truth, she's not that good-looking. She doesn't stand out in any way. Her clothes are nothing special. The back of her hair is still bent out of shape from sleep. She isn't young, either - must be near thirty, not even close to a "girl," properly speaking. But still, I know from fifty yards away: She's the 100% perfect girl for me. The moment I see her, there's a rumbling in my chest, and my mouth is as dry as a desert.

Maybe you have your own particular favorite type of girl - one with slim ankles, say, or big eyes, or graceful fingers, or you're drawn for no good reason to girls who take their time with every meal. I have my own preferences, of course. Sometimes in a restaurant I'll catch myself staring at the girl at the next table to mine because I like the shape of her nose.

But no one can insist that his 100% perfect girl correspond to some preconceived type. Much as I like noses, I can't recall the shape of hers - or even if she had one. All I can remember for sure is that she was no great beauty. It's weird.

"Yesterday on the street I passed the 100% girl," I tell someone.

"Yeah?" he says. "Good-looking?"

"Not really."

"Your favorite type, then?"

"I don't know. I can't seem to remember anything about her - the shape of her eyes or the size of her breasts."

"Strange."

"Yeah. Strange."

"So anyhow," he says, already bored, "what did you do? Talk to her?

Follow her?"

"Nah. Just passed her on the street."

She's walking east to west, and I west to east. It's a really nice April morning.

Wish I could talk to her. Half an hour would be plenty: just ask her about herself, tell her about myself, and - what I'd really like to do - explain to her the complexities of fate that have led to our passing each other on a side street in Harajuku on a beautiful April morning in 1981. This was something sure to be crammed full of warm secrets, like an antique clock build when peace filled the world.

After talking, we'd have lunch somewhere, maybe see a Woody Allen movie, stop by a hotel bar for cocktails. With any kind of luck, we might end up in bed.

Potentiality knocks on the door of my heart.

Now the distance between us has narrowed to fifteen yards.

How can I approach her? What should I say?

"Good morning, miss. Do you think you could spare half an hour for a little conversation?"

Ridiculous. I'd sound like an insurance salesman.

"Pardon me, but would you happen to know if there is an all-night cleaners in the neighborhood?"

No, this is just as ridiculous. I'm not carrying any laundry, for one thing. Who's going to buy a line like that?

Maybe the simple truth would do. "Good morning. You are the 100% perfect girl for me."

No, she wouldn't believe it. Or even if she did, she might not want to talk to me. Sorry, she could say, I might be the 100% perfect girl for you, but you're not the 100% boy for me. It could happen. And if I found myself in that situation, I'd probably go to pieces. I'd never recover from the shock. I'm thirty-two, and that's what growing older is all about.

We pass in front of a flower shop. A small, warm air mass touches my skin. The asphalt is damp, and I catch the scent of roses. I can't bring myself to speak to her. She wears a white sweater, and in her right hand she holds a crisp white envelope lacking only a stamp. So: She's written somebody a letter, maybe spent the whole night writing, to judge from the sleepy look in her eyes. The envelope could contain every secret she's ever had.

I take a few more strides and turn: She's lost in the crowd.

Now, of course, I know exactly what I should have said to her. It would have been a long speech, though, far too long for me to have delivered it properly. The ideas I come up with are never very practical.

Oh, well. It would have started "Once upon a time" and ended "A sad story, don't you think?"

Once upon a time, there lived a boy and a girl. The boy was eighteen and the girl sixteen. He was not unusually handsome, and she was not especially beautiful. They were just an ordinary lonely boy and an ordinary lonely girl, like all the others. But they believed with their whole hearts that somewhere in the world there lived the 100% perfect boy and the 100% perfect girl for them. Yes, they believed in a miracle. And that miracle actually happened.

One day the two came upon each other on the corner of a street.

"This is amazing," he said. "I've been looking for you all my life. You may not believe this, but you're the 100% perfect girl for me."

"And you," she said to him, "are the 100% perfect boy for me, exactly as I'd pictured you in every detail. It's like a dream."

They sat on a park bench, held hands, and told each other their stories hour after hour. They were not lonely anymore. They had found and been found by their 100% perfect other. What a wonderful thing it is to find and be found by your 100% perfect other. It's a miracle, a cosmic miracle.

As they sat and talked, however, a tiny, tiny sliver of doubt took root in their hearts: Was it really all right for one's dreams to come true so easily?

And so, when there came a momentary lull in their conversation, the boy said to the girl, "Let's test ourselves - just once. If we really are each other's 100% perfect lovers, then sometime, somewhere, we will meet again without fail. And when that happens, and we know that we are the 100% perfect ones, we'll marry then and there. What do you think?"

"Yes," she said, "that is exactly what we should do."

And so they parted, she to the east, and he to the west.

The test they had agreed upon, however, was utterly unnecessary. They should never have undertaken it, because they really and truly were each other's 100% perfect lovers, and it was a miracle that they had ever met. But it was impossible for them to know this, young as they were. The cold, indifferent waves of fate proceeded to toss them unmercifully.

One winter, both the boy and the girl came down with the season's terrible influenza, and after drifting for weeks between life and death they lost all memory of their earlier years. When they awoke, their heads were as empty as the young D. H. Lawrence's piggy bank.

They were two bright, determined young people, however, and through their unremitting efforts they were able to acquire once again the knowledge and feeling that qualified them to return as full-fledged members of society. Heaven be praised, they became truly upstanding citizens who knew how to transfer from one subway line to another, who were fully capable of sending a special-delivery letter at the post office. Indeed, they even experienced love again, sometimes as much as 75% or even 85% love.

Time passed with shocking swiftness, and soon the boy was thirty-two, the girl thirty.

One beautiful April morning, in search of a cup of coffee to start the day, the boy was walking from west to east, while the girl, intending to send a special-delivery letter, was walking from east to west, but along the same narrow street in the Harajuku neighborhood of Tokyo. They passed each other in the very center of the street. The faintest gleam of their lost memories glimmered for the briefest moment in their hearts. Each felt a rumbling in their chest. And they knew:

She is the 100% perfect girl for me.

He is the 100% perfect boy for me.

But the glow of their memories was far too weak, and their thoughts no longer had the clarity of fourteen years earlier. Without a word, they passed each other, disappearing into the crowd. Forever.

A sad story, don't you think?

Yes, that's it, that is what I should have said to her.

THE BOOGEYMAN

'I came to you because I want to tell my story,' the man on Dr Harper's couch was saying. The man was Lester Billings from Waterbury, Connecticut. According to the history taken from Nurse Vickers, he was twenty-eight, employed by an industrial firm in New York, divorced, and the father of three children. All deceased.

'I can't go to a priest because I'm not a Catholic. I can't go to a lawyer because I haven't done anything to consult a lawyer about. All I did was kill my kids. One at a time. Killed them all.'

Dr Harper turned on the tape recorder.

Billings lay straight as a yardstick on the couch, not giving it an inch of himself. His feet protruded stiffly over the end. Picture of a man enduring necessary humiliation. His hands were folded corpselike on his chest. His face was carefully set.. He looked at the plain white composition ceiling as if seeing scenes and pictures played out there.

'Do you mean you actually killed them, or -'

'No.' Impatient flick of the hand. 'But I was responsible. Denny in 1967. Shirl in 1971. And Andy this year. I want to tell you about it.'

Dr Harper said nothing. He thought that Billings looked haggard and old. His hair was thinning, his complexion sallow. His eyes held all the miserable secrets of whisky.

'They were murdered, see? Only no one believes that. If they would, things would be all right.'

'Why is that?'

'Because

Billings broke off and darted up on his elbows, staring across the room. 'What's that?' he barked. His eyes had narrowed to black slots.

'What's what?'

'That door.'

'The closet,' Dr Harper said. 'Where I hang my coat and leave my overshoes.'

'Open it. I want to see.'

Dr Harper got up wordlessly, crossed the room, and opened the closet. Inside, a tan raincoat hung on one of four or five hangers. Beneath that was a pair of shiny goloshes. The New York *Times* had been carefully tucked into one of them. That was all.

'All right?' Dr Harper said.

'All right.' Billings removed the props of his elbows and returned to his previous position.

'You were saying,' Dr Harper said as he went back to his chair, 'that if the murder of your three children could be proved, all your troubles would be over. Why is that?'

'I'd go to jail,' Billings said immediately. 'For life. And you can see into all the rooms in a jail. All the rooms.' He smiled at nothing.

'How were your children murdered?'

'Don't try to jerk it out of me!'

Billings twitched around and stared balefully at Harper.

'I'll tell you, don't worry. I'm not one of your freaks strutting around and pretending to be Napoleon or explaining that I got hooked on heroin because my mother didn't love me. I know you won't believe me. I don't care. It doesn't matter. Just to tell will be enough.'

'All right.' Dr Harper got out his pipe.

'I married Rita in 1965 - I was twenty-one and she was eighteen. She was pregnant. That was Denny.' His lips twisted in a rubbery, frightening grin that was gone in a wink. 'I had to leave college and get a job, but I didn't mind. I loved both of them. We were very happy.

'Rita got pregnant just a little while after Denny was born, and Shirl came along in December of 1966. Andy came in the summer of 1969, and Denny was already dead by then. Andy was an accident. That's what Rita said. She said sometimes that birth-control stuff doesn't work. I think that it was more than an accident. Children tie a man down, you know. Women like that, especially when the man is brighter than they. Don't you find that's true?'

Harper grunted non-commitally.

'It doesn't matter, though. I loved him anyway.' He said it almost vengefully, as if he had loved the child to spite his wife.

'Who killed the children?' Harper asked.

'The boogeyman,' Lester Billings answered immediately. 'The boogeyman killed them all. Just came out of the closet and killed them.' He twisted around and grinned. 'You think I'm crazy, all right. It's written all over you. But I don't care. All I want to do is tell you and then get lost.'

'I'm listening,' Harper said.

'It started when Denny was almost two and Shirl was just an infant. He started crying when Rita put him to bed. We had a two-bedroom place, see. Shirl slept in a crib in our room. At first I thought he was crying because he didn't have a bottle to take to bed any more. Rita said don't make an issue of it, let it go, let him have it and he'll drop it on his own. But that's the way kids start off bad. You get permissive with them, spoil them. Then they break your heart. Get some girl knocked up, you know, or start shooting dope. Or they get to be sissies. Can you imagine waking up some morning and finding your kid - your *son* - is a sissy?

'After a while, though, when he didn't stop, I started putting him to bed myself. And if he didn't stop crying I'd give him a whack. Then Rita said he was saying "light" over and over again. Well, I didn't know. Kids that little, how can you tell what they're saying. Only a mother can tell.

'Rita wanted to put in a nightlight. One of those wall-

plug things with Mickey Mouse or Huckleberry Hound or something on it. I wouldn't let her. If a kid doesn't get over being afraid of the dark when he's little, he never gets over it.

'Anyway, he died the summer after Shirl was born. I put him to bed that night and he started to cry right off. I heard what he said that time. He pointed right at the closet when he said it. "Boogeyman," the kid says. "Boogeyman, Daddy."

'I turned off the light and went into our room and asked Rita why she wanted to teach the kid a word like that. I was tempted to slap her around a little, but I didn't. She said she never taught him to say that. I called her a goddamn liar.

'That was a bad summer for me, see. The only job I could get was loading Pepsi-Cola trucks in a warehouse, and I was tired all the time. Shirl would wake up and cry every night and Rita would pick her up and sniffle. I tell you, sometimes I felt like throwing them both out a window. Christ, kids drive you crazy sometimes. You could kill them.

'Well, the kid woke me at three in the morning, right on schedule. I went to the bathroom, only a quarter awake, you know, and Rita asked me if I'd check on Denny. I told her to do it herself and went back to bed. I was almost asleep when she started to scream.

'I got up and went in. The kid was dead on his back. Just as white as flour except for where the blood had. . . had sunk. Back of the legs, the head, the a-the buttocks. His eyes were open. That was the worst, you know. Wide open and glassy, like the eyes you see on a moosehead some guy put over his mantel. Like pictures you see of those gook kids over in Nam. But an American kid shouldn't look like that. Dead on his back. Wearing diapers and rubber pants because he'd been wetting himself again the last couple of weeks. Awful, I loved that kid.'

Billings shook his head slowly, then offered the rubbery, frightening grin again. 'Rita was screaming her head off.

She tried to pick Denny up and rock him, but I wouldn't let her. The cops don't like you to touch any of the evidence. I know that -'

'Did you know it was the boogeyman then?' Harper asked quietly.

'Oh, no. Not then. But I did see one thing. It didn't mean anything to me then, but my mind stored it away.'

'What was that?'

'The closet door was open. Not much. Just a crack. But I knew I left it shut, see. There's dry-cleaning bags in there. 3 A kid messes around with one of those and bango. Asphyxiation. You know that?'

'Yes. What happened then?'

Billings shrugged. 'We planted him.' He looked morbidly at his hands, which had thrown dirt on three tiny coffins.

'Was there an inquest?'

'Sure.' Billings's eyes flashed with sardonic brilliance.

'So me back-country fuckhead with a stethoscope and a black bag full of Junior Mints and a sheepskin from some cow college. Crib death, he called it! You ever hear such a pile of yellow manure? The kid was three years old!'

'Crib death is most common during the first year,' Harper said carefully, 'but that diagnosis has gone on death certificates for children up to age five for want of a better -'

Bulishit!' Billings spat out violently.

Harper relit his pipe.

We moved Shirl into Denny's old room a month after the funeral. Rita fought it tooth and nail, but I had the last word. It hurt me, of course it did. Jesus, I loved having the kid in with us. But you can't get overprotective. You make a kid a cripple that way. When I was a kid my mom used to take me to the beach and then scream herself hoarse. "Don't go out so far! Don't go there! It's got an undertow! You only ate an hour ago! Don't go over your head!" Even to watch out for sharks, before God. So what happens? I can't even go near the water now. It's the truth. I get the cramps if I go near a beach. Rita got me to take her and the kids to Savin Rock once when Denny was alive. I got sick as a dog. I know, see? You can't overprotect kids. And you can't coddle yourself either. Life goes on. Shirl went right into Denny's crib. We sent the old mattress to the dump, though. I didn't want my girl to get any germs.

'So a year goes by. And one night when I'm putting Shirl into her crib she starts to yowl and scream and cry. "Boogeyman, Daddy, boogeyman, boogeyman!"

'That threw a jump into me. It was just like Denny. And I started to remember about that closet door, open just a crack when we found him. I wanted to take her into our room for the night.'

'Did you?'

'No.' Billings regarded his hands and his face twitched. 'How could I go to Rita and admit I was wrong? I *had* to be strong. She was always such a jellyfish. . . look how easy she went to bed with me when we weren't married.'

Harper said, 'On the other hand, look how easily *you* went to bed with *her.'*

Billings froze in the act of rearranging his hands and slowly turned his head to look at Harper. 'Are you trying to be a wise guy?'

'No, indeed,' Harper said.

'Then let me tell it my way,' Billings snapped. 'I came here to get this off my chest. To tell my story. I'm not going to talk about my sex life, if that's what you expect. Rita and I had a very normal sex life, with none of that dirty stuff. I know it gives some people a charge to talk about that, but I'm not one of them.'

'Okay,' Harper said.

'Okay,' Billings echoed with uneasy arrogance. He seemed to have lost the thread of his thought, and his eyes wandered uneasily to the closet door, which was firmly shut.

'Would you like that open?' Harper asked.

'No!' Billings said quickly. He gave a nervous little laugh. 'What do I want to look at your overshoes for?

'The boogeyman got her, too,' Billings said. He brushed at his forehead, as if sketching memories. 'A month later. But something happened before that. I heard a noise in there one night. And then she screamed. I opened the door real quick - the hall light was on - and. . . she was sitting up in the crib crying and. . . something *moved.* Back in the shadows, by the closet. Something *slithered.'*

'Was the closet door open?'

'A little. Just a crack.' Billings licked his lips. 'Shirl was screaming about the boogeyman. And something else that sounded like "claws". Only she said "craws", you know. Little kids have trouble with that "I" sound. Rita ran upstairs and asked what the matter was. I said she got scared by the shadows of the branches moving on the ceiling.'

'Crawset?' Harper said.

'Huh?'

'Crawset . . . closet. Maybe she was trying to say "closet".'

'Maybe,' Billings said. 'Maybe that was it. But I don't think so.I think it was "claws".' His eyes began seeking the closet door again. 'Claws, long claws.' His voice had sunk to a whisper.

'Did you look in the closet?'

'Y-yes.' Billings's hands were laced tightly across his chest, laced tightly enough to show a white moon at each knuckle.

'Was there anything in there? Did you see the -'

'I didn't see anything!' Billings screamed suddenly. And the words poured out, as if a black cork had been pulled from the bottom of his soul: 'When she died I found her, see. And she was black. All black. She swallowed her own tongue and she was just as black as a nigger in a minstrel show and she was staring at me. Her eyes, they looked like those eyes you see on stuffed animals, all shiny and awful, like live marbles, and they were saying it got me, Daddy, you let it get me, you killed me, you helped it kill me . .

His words trailed off. One single tear very large and silent, ran down the side of his cheek.

'It was a brain convulsion, see? Kids get those sometimes. A bad signal from the brain. They had an autopsy at Hartford Receiving and they told us she choked on her tongue from the convulsion. And I had to go home alone because they kept Rita under sedation. She was out of her mind. I had to go back to that house all alone, and I know a kid don't just get convulsions because their brain frigged up. You can scare a kid into convulsions. And I had to go back to the house where *it* was.'

He whispered, 'I slept on the couch. With the light on.,

'Did anything happen?'

'I had a dream,' Billings said. 'I was in a dark room and there was something I couldn't . . . couldn't quite see, in the closet. It made a noise. . . a squishy noise. It reminded me of a comic book I read when I was a kid. *Tales from the Crypt,* you remember that? Christ! They had a guy named Graham Ingles; he could draw every god-awful thing in the world - and some out of it. Anyway, in this story this woman drowned her husband, see? Put cement blocks on his feet and dropped him into a quarry. Only he came back. 'He was all rotted and black-green and the fish had eaten away one of his eyes and there was seaweed in his hair. He came back and killed her. And when I woke up in the middle of the night, I thought that would be leaning over me. With claws. . . long claws .

Dr Harper looked at the digital clock inset into his desk. Lester Billings had been speaking for nearly half an hour. He said, 'When your wife came back home, what was her attitude towards you?'

'She still loved me,' Billings said with pride. 'She still wanted to do what I told her. That's the wife's place, right? This women's lib only makes sick people. The most important thing in life is for a person to know his place. His. his.. .uh.

'Station in life?'

'That's it!' Billings snapped his fingers. 'That's it exactly. And a wife should follow her husband. Oh, she was sort of colourless the first four or five months after - dragged around the house, didn't sing, didn't watch the TV, didn't laugh. I knew she'd get over it. When they're that little, you don't get so attached to them. After a while you have to go to the bureau drawer and look at a picture to even remember exactly what they looked like.

'She wanted another baby,' he added darkly. 'I told her it was a bad idea. Oh, not for ever, but for a while. I told her it was a time for us to get over things and begin to enjoy each other. We never had a chance to do that before. If you wanted to go to a movie, you had to hassle around for a baby-sitter. You couldn't go into town to see the Mets unless her folks would take the kids, because my mom wouldn't have anything to do with us. Denny was born too soon after we were married, see? She said Rita was just a tramp, a common little corner-walker. Corner-walker is what my mom always called them. Isn't that a sketch? She sat me down once and told me diseases you can get if you went to a cor. . . to a prostitute. How your pri. . . your penis has just a little tiny sore on it one day and the next day it's rotting right off. She wouldn't even come to the wed-ding.'

Billings drummed his chest with his fingers.

'Rita's gynaecologist sold heron this thing called an IUD - interuterine device. Foolproof, the doctor said. He just sticks it up the woman's . . . her place, and that's it. If there's anything in there, the egg can't fertilize. You don't even know it's there.' He smiled at the ceiling with dark sweetness. 'No one knows if it's there or not. And next year she's pregnant again. Some foolproof.'

'No birth-control method is perfect,' Harper said. 'The pill is only ninety-eight per cent. The IUD may be ejected by cramps, strong menstrual flow, and, in exceptional cases, by evacuation.'

'Yeah. Or you can take it out.'

'That's possible.'

'So what's next? She's knitting little things, singing in the shower, and eating pickles like crazy. Sitting on my lap and saying things about how it must have been God's will. *Piss.'*

'The baby came at the end of the year after Shirl's death?'

'That's right. A boy. She named it Andrew Lester Billings. I didn't want anything to do with it, at least at first. My motto was she screwed up, so let her take care of it. I know how that sounds but you have to remember that I'd been through a lot.

'But I warmed up to him, you know it? He was the only one of the litter that looked like me, for one thing. Denny looked like his mother, and Shirl didn't look like anybody, except maybe my Grammy Ann. But Andy was the spitting image of me.

'I'd get to playing around with him in his playpen when I got home from work. He'd grab only my finger and smile and gurgle. Nine weeks old and the kid was grinning up at his old dad. You believe that?'

'Then one night, here I am coming out of a drugstore with a mobile to hang over the kid's crib. Me! Kids don't appreciate presents until they're old enough to say thank you, that was always my motto. But there I was, buying him silly crap and all at once I realize I love him the most of all. I had another job by then, a pretty good one, selling drill bits for Cluett and Sons. I did real well, and when Andy was one, we moved to Waterbury. The old place had too many bad memories.

'And too many closets.

'That next year was the best one for us. I'd give every finger on my right hand to have it back again. Oh, the war in Vietnam was still going on, and the hippies were still running around with no clothes on, and the niggers were yelling a lot, but none of that touched us. We were on a quiet street with nice neighbours. We were happy,' he summed up simply. 'I asked Rita once if she wasn't worried. You know, bad luck comes in threes and all that. She said not for us. She said Andy was special. She said God had drawn a ring around him.'

Billings looked morbidly at the ceiling.

'Last year wasn't so good. Something about the house changed. I started keeping my boots in the hall because I didn't like to open the closet door any more. I kept thinking: Well, what if it's in there? All crouched down and ready to spring the second I open the door? And I'd started thinking I could hear squishy noises, as if something black and green and wet was moving around in there just a little.

'Rita asked me if I was working too hard, and I started to snap at her, just like the old days. I got sick to rny stomach leaving them alone to go to work, but I was glad to get out. God help me, I was glad to get out. I started to think, see, that it lost us for a while when we moved. It had to hunt around, slinking through the streets at night and maybe creeping in the sewers. Smelling for us. It took a year, but it found us. It's back. It wants Andy and it wants me. I started to think, maybe if you think of a thing long enough, and believe in it, it gets real. Maybe all the monsters we were scared of when we were kids, Frankenstein and Wolfman and Mummy, maybe they were real. Real enough to kill the kids that were supposed to have fallen into gravel pits or drowned in lakes or were just never found. Maybe . .

'Are you backing away from something, Mr Billings?'

Billings was silent for a long time - two minutes clicked off the digital clock. Then he said abruptly: 'Andy died in February. Rita wasn't there. She got a call from her father. Her mother had been in a car crash the day after New Year's and wasn't expected to live. She took a bus back that night.

'Her mother didn't die, but she was on the critical list for a long time - two months. I had a very good woman who stayed with Andy days. We kept house nights. And closet doors kept coming open.'

Billings licked his lips. 'The kid was sleeping in the room with me. It's funny, too. Rita asked me once when he was two if I wanted to move him into another room. Spock or one of those other quacks claims it's bad for kids to sleep with their parents, see? Supposed to give them traumas about sex and all that. But we never did it unless the kid was asleep. And I didn't want to move him. I was afraid to, after Denny and Shirl.'

'But you did move him, didn't you?' Dr Harper asked.

'Yeah,' Billings said. He smiled a sick, yellow smile. 'I did.'

Silence again. Billings wrestled with it.

'I had to!' he barked finally. 'I had to! It was all right when Rita was there, but when she was gone, it started to get bolder. It started . . .' He rolled his eyes at Harper and bared his teeth in a savage grin. 'Oh, you won't believe it. I know what you think, just another goofy for your casebook, I know that, but you weren't there, you lousy smug head-peeper.

'One night every door in the house blew wide open. One morning I got up and found a trail of mud and filth across the hall between the coat closet and the front door. Was it going out? Coming in? I don't know! Before Jesus, I just don't know! Records all scratched up and covered with slime, mirrors broken . . . and the sounds . . . the sounds...

He ran a hand through his hair. 'You'd wake up at three in the morning and look into the dark and at first you'd say, "It's only the clock." But underneath it you could hear something moving in a stealthy way. But not too stealthy, because it wanted you to hear it. A slimy sliding sound like something from the kitchen drain. Or a clicking sound, like claws being dragged lightly over the staircase banister. And you'd close your eyes, knowing that hearing it was bad, but if you saw it. .

'And always you'd be afraid that the noises might stop for a little while, and then there would be a laugh right over your face and breath of air like stale cabbage on your face, and then hands on your throat.'

Billings was pallid and trembling.

'So I moved him. I knew it would go for him, see. Because he was weaker. And it did. That very first night he screamed in the middle of the night and finally, when I got up the cojones to go in, he was standing up in bed and screaming. "The boogeyman, Daddy. . . boogeyman.

wanna go wif Daddy, go wif Daddy."' Billings's voice had become a high treble, like a child's. His eyes seemed to fill his entire face; he almost seemed to shrink on the couch.

'But I couldn't,' the childish breaking treble continued, 'I couldn't. And an hour later there was a scream. An awful gurgling scream. And I knew how much I loved him because I ran, in, I didn't even turn on the light, I ran, ran, *ran,* oh, Jesus God Mary, it had him; it was shaking him, shaking him just like a terrier shakes a piece of cloth and I could see something with awful slumped shoulders and a

scarecrow head and I could smell something like a dead mouse in a pop bottle and I heard . .

He trailed off, and then his voice clicked back into an adult range. 'I heard it when Andy's neck broke.' Billings's voice was cool and dead. 'It made a sound like ice cracking when you're skating on a country pond in winter.'

'Then what happened?'

'Oh, I ran,' Billings said in the same cool, dead voice. 'I went to an all-night diner. How's that for complete cowardice? Ran to an all-night diner and drank six cups of coffee. Then I went home. It was already dawn. I called the police even before I went upstairs. He was lying on the floor and staring at me. Accusing me. A tiny bit of blood had run out of one ear. Only a drop, really. And the closet door was open - but just a crack.'

The voice stopped. Harper looked at the digital clock. Fifty minutes had passed.

'Make an appointment with the nurse,' he said. 'In fact, several of them. Tuesdays and Thursdays?'

'I only came to tell my story,' Billings said. 'To get it off my chest. I lied to the police, see? Told them the kid must have tried to get out of his crib in the night and. . . they swallowed it. Course they did. That's just what it looked like. Accidental, like the others. But Rita knew. Rita. finally. . . knew .

He covered his eyes with his right arm and began to weep.

'Mr Billings, there is a great deal to talk about,' Dr Harper said after a pause. 'I believe we can remove some of the guilt you've been carrying, but first you have to want to get rid of it.'

'Don't you believe I *do?'* Billings cried, removing his arm from his eyes. They were red, raw, wounded.

'Not yet,' Harper said quietly. 'Tuesdays and Thursdays?'

After a long silence, Billings muttered, 'Goddamn shrink. All right. All right.'

'Make an appointment with the nurse, Mr Billings. And have a good day.'

Billings laughed emptily and walked out of the office quickly, without looking back.

The nurse's station was empty. A small sign on the desk blotter said: 'Back in a Minute.'

Billings turned and went back into the office. 'Doctor, your nurse is -,

The room was empty.

But the closet door was open. Just a crack.

'So nice,' the voice from the closet said. 'So nice.' The words sounded as if they might have come through a mouthful of rotted seaweed.

Billings stood rooted to the spot as the closet door swung open. He dimly felt warmth at his crotch as he wet himself.

'So nice,' the boogeyman said as it shambled out. It still held its Dr Harper mask in one rotted, spade-claw hand.

'Go on,' Cressner said again. 'Look in the bag.'

We were in his penthouse apartment, forty-three stories up. The carpet was deep-cut pile, burnt orange. In the middle, between the Basque sling chair where Cressner sat and the genuine leather couch where no one at all sat, there was a brown shopping bag.

'If it's a payoff, forget it,' I said. 'I love her.'

'It's money, but it's not a payoff. Go on. Look.' Re was smoking a Turkish cigarette in an onyx holder. The air-circulation system allowed me just a dry whiff of the tobacco and then whipped it away. He was wearing a silk dressing gown on which a dragon was embroidered. His eyes were calm and intelligent behind his glasses. He looked just like what he was: an A-number-one, 500 carat, dyed-in-the-wool son of a bitch. I loved his wife, and she loved me. I had expected him to make trouble, and I knew this was it, but I just wasn't sure what brand it was.

I went to the shopping bag and tipped it over. Banded bundles of currency tumbled out on the rug. All twenties. I picked one of the bundles up and counted. Ten bills to a bundle. There were a lot of bundles.

'Twenty thousand dollars,' he said, and puffed on his cigarette.

I stood up. 'Okay.'

'It's for you.'

'I don't want it.'

'My wife comes with it.'

I didn't say anything. Marcia had warned me how, it would be. He's like a cat, she had said. An old tom full of meanness. He'll try to make you a mouse.

'So you're a tennis pro,' he said. 'I don't believe I've ever actually seen one before.'

'You mean your detectives didn't get any pictures?'

'Oh, yes.' He waved the cigarette holder negligently. 'Even a motion picture of the two of you in that Bayside Motel. A camera was behind the mirror. But pictures are hardly the same, are they?'

'If you say so.'

He'll keep changing tacks, Marcia had said. It's the way he puts people on the defensive. Pretty soon he'll have you hitting out at where you think he's going to be, and he'll get you someplace else. Say as little as possible, Stan. And remember that I love you.

'I invited you up because I thought we should have a little man-to-man chat, Mr Norris. Just a pleasant conversation between two civilized human beings, one of whom has made off with the other's wife.'

I started to answer but decided not to.

'Did you enjoy San Quentin?' Cressner said, puffing lazily.

'Not particularly.'

'I believe you passed three years there. A charge of breaking and entering, if I'm correct.'

'Marcia knows about it,' I said, and immediately wished I hadn't. I was playing his game, just what Marcia had warned against. Hitting soft lobs for him to smash back.

'I've taken the liberty of having your car moved,' he said, glancing out the window at the far end of the room. It really wasn't a window

at all: the whole wall was glass. In the middle was a sliding-glass door. Beyond it, a balcony the size of a postage stamp. Beyond that, a very long drop. There was something strange about the door. I couldn't quite put my finger on it.

'This is a very pleasant building,' Cressner said. 'Good security. Closed-circuit TV and all that. When I knew you were in the lobby, I made a telephone call. An employee then hot-wired the ignition of your car and moved it from the parking area here to a public lot several blocks away.' He glanced up at the modernistic sunburst clock above the couch. It was 8.05. 'At 8.20 the same employee will call the police from a public phone booth concerning your car. By 8.30, at the latest, the minions of the law will have discovered over six ounces of heroin hidden in the spare tyre of your trunk. You will be eagerly sought after, Mr Norris.'

He had set me up. I had tried to cover myself as well as I could, but in the end I had been child's play for him.

'These things will happen unless I call my employee and tell him to forget the phone call.'

'And all I have to do is tell you where Marcia is,' I said. 'No deal, Cressner, I don't know. We set it up this way just for you.'

'My men had her followed.'

'I don't think so I think we lost them at the airport.'

Cressner sighed, removed the smouldering cigarette holder, and dropped it into a chromium ashtray with a sliding lid. No fuss, no muss. The used cigarette and Stan Norris had been taken care of with equal ease.

'Actually,' he said, 'you're right. The old ladies-room vanishing act. My operatives were extremely vexed to have been taken in by such an ancient ruse. I think it was so old they never expected it.'

I said nothing. After Marcia had ditched Cressner's operatives at the airport, she had taken the bus shuttle back to the city and then to the bus station; that had been the plan. She had two hundred dollars, all the money that had been in ~ny savings account. Two hundred dollars and a Greyhound bus could take you anyplace in the country.

'Are you always to uncommunicative?' Cressner asked, and he sounded genuinely interested.

'Marcia advised it.'

A little more sharply, he said: 'Then I imagine you'll stand on your rights when the police take you in. And the next time you see my wife could be when she's a little old grandmother in a rocker. Have you gotten that through your head? I understand that possession of six ounces of heroin could get you forty years.'

'That won't get you Marcia back.'

He smiled thinly. 'And that's the nub of it, isn't it? Shall I review where we are? You and my wife have fallen in love. You have had an affair. . . if you want to call a series of one-nighters in cheap motels an affair. My wife has left me. However, I have you. And you are in what is called a bind. Does that summarize it adequately?'

'I can understand why she got tired of you,' I said.

To my surprise, he threw back his head and laughed. 'You know, I rather like you, Mr Norris. You're vulgar and you're a piker, but you seem to have heart. Marcia said you did. I rather doubted it. Her judgement of character is lax. But you do have a certain. . . verve. Which is why I've set things up the way I have. No doubt Marcia has told you that lam fond of wagering.'

'Yes.' Now I knew what was wrong with the door in the middle of the glass wall. It was the middle of winter, and no one was going to want to take tea on a balcony forty-three stories up. The balcony had been cleared of furniture. And the screen had been taken off the door. Now why would Cressner have done that?

'I don't like my wife very much,' Cressner said, fixing another cigarette carefully in the holder. 'That's no secret. I'm sure she's told you as much. And I'm sure a man of your experience knows that contented wives do not jump into the hay with the local tennis-club pro at the drop of a racket. In my opinion, Marcia is a prissy, whey-faced little prude, a whiner, a weeper, a bearer of tales, a -'That's about enough,' I said.

He smiled coldly. 'I beg your pardon. I keep forgetting we are discussing our beloved. It's 8.16. Are you nervous?'

I shrugged.

'Tough to the end,' he said, and lit his cigarette. 'At any rate, you may wonder why, if I dislike Marcia so much, I do not simply give her her freedom -'

'No, I don't wonder at all.'

He frowned at me.

'You're a selfish, grasping, egocentric son of a bitch. That's why. No one takes what's yours. Not even if you don't want it any more.

He went red and then laughed. 'One for you, Mr Norris. Very good.'

I shrugged again.

'I'm going to offer you a wager. If you win, you leave here with the money, the woman, and your freedom. On the other hand, if you lose, you lose your life.'

I looked at the clock. I couldn't help it. It was 8.19.

'All right,' I said. What else? It would buy time, at least. Time for me to think of some way to beat it out of here, with or without the money.

Cressner picked up the telephone beside him and dialled a number.

'Tony? Plan two. Yes.' He hung up.

'What's plan two?' I asked.

'I'll call Tony back in fifteen minutes, and he will remove the. . . offending substance from the trunk of your car and drive it back here. If I don't call, he will get in touch with the police.'

'Not very trusting, are you?'

'Be sensible, Mr Norris. There is twenty thousand dollars on the carpet between us. In this city murder has been committed for twenty cents.'

'What's the bet?'

He looked genuinely pained. 'Wager, Mr Norris, wager. Gentlemen make wagers. Vulgarians place bets.'

'Whatever you say.'

'Excellent. I've seen you looking at my balcony.'

'The screen's off the door.'

'Yes. I had it taken off this afternoon. What I propose is this: that you walk around my building on the ledge that juts out just below the penthouse level. If you circumnavigate the building successfully, the jackpot is yours.'

'You're crazy.'

'On the contrary. I have proposed this wager six times to six different people during my dozen years in this apartment. Three of the six were professional athletes, like you-one of them a notorious quarterback more famous for his TV Commercials than his passing game, one a baseball player, one a rather famous jockey who made an extraordinary yearly salary and who was also afflicted with extraordinary alimony problems. The other three were more ordinary citizens who had differing professions but two things in common: a need for money and a certain degree of body grace.' He puffed his cigarette thoughtfully and then continued. 'The wager was declined five times out of hand. On the other occasion, it was accepted. The terms were twenty thousand dollars against six

months' service to me. I collected. The fellow took one look over the edge of the balcony and nearly fainted.' Cressner looked amused and contemptuous. 'He said everything down there looked so small. That was what killed his nerve.'

'What makes you think -'

He cut me off with an annoyed wave of his hand. 'Don't bore me, Mr Norris. I think you will do it because you have no choice. It's my wager on the one hand or forty years in San Quentin on the other. The money and my wife are only added fillips, indicative of my good nature.'

'What guarantee do I have that you won't double-cross me? Maybe I'd do it and find out you'd called Tony and told him to go ahead anyway.'

He sighed. 'You are a walking case of paranoia, Mr Norris. I don't love my wife. It is doing my storied ego no good at all to have her around. Twenty thousand dollars is a pittance to me. I pay four times that every week to be given to police bagmen. As for the wager, however . . .' His

I thought about it, and he left me. I suppose he knew that the real mark always convinces himself. I was a thirty-six-year-old tennis bum, and the club had been thinking of letting me go when Marcia applied a little gentle pressure. Tennis was the only profession I knew, and without it, even getting a job as a janitor would be tough - especially with a record. It was kid stuff, but employers don't care.

And the funny thing was that I really loved Maria Cressner. I had fallen for her after two nine-o'clock tennis lessons, and she had fallen for me just as hard. It was a case of Stan Norris luck, all right. After thirty-six years of happy bachelorhood, I had fallen like a sack of mail for the wife of an Organization overlord.

The old tom sitting there and puffing his imported Turkish cigarette knew all that, of course. And something else, as well. I had no guarantee that he wouldn't turn me in if I accepted his wager and won, but I knew damn well that I'd be in the cooler by ten o'clock if I didn't. And the next time I'd be free would be at the turn of the century.

'I want to know one thing,' I said.

'What might that be, Mr Norris?'

'Look me right in the face and tell me if you're a welsher or not.'

He looked at me directly. 'Mr Norris,' he said quietly, 'I never welsh.'

'All right,' I said. What other choice was there?

He stood up, beaming. 'Excellent! Really excellent! Approach the door to the balcony with me, Mr Norris.'

We walked over together. His face was that of a man who had dreamed this scene hundreds of times and was enjoying its actuality to the fullest.

'The ledge is five inches wide,' he said dreamily. 'I've measured it myself. In fact, I've stood on it, holding on to the balcony, of course. All you have to do is lower yourself over the wrought-iron railing. You'll be chest-high. But, of course, beyond the railing there are no handgrips. You'll have to inch your way along, being very careful not to overbalance.'

My eye had fastened on something else outside the window . . . something that made my blood temperature sink several degrees. It was a wind gauge. Cressner's apartment was quite close to the lake, and it was high enough so there were no higher buildings to act as a windbreak. That wind would be cold, and it would cut like a knife. The needle was standing at ten pretty steadily, but a gust would send the needle almost up to twenty-five for a few seconds before dropping off.

'Ah, I see you've noticed my wind gauge,' Cressner said jovially. 'Actually, it's the other side which gets the prevailing wind; so the breeze may be a little stronger on that side. But actually this is a fairly still night. I've seen evenings when the wind has gusted up to eighty-five . . . you can actually feel the building rock a little. A bit like being on a ship, in the crow's nest. And it's quite mild for this time of year.'

He pointed, and I saw the lighted numerals atop a bank skyscraper to the left. They said it was forty-four degrees. But with the wind,

that would have made the chill factor somewhere in the mid-twenties.

'Have you got a coat?' I asked. I was wearing a light jacket.

'Alas, no.' The lighted figures on the bank switched to show the time. It was 8.32. 'And I think you had better get started, Mr Norris, so I can call Tony and put plan three into effect. A good boy but apt to be impulsive. You understand.'

I understood all right. Too damn well.

But the thought of being with Marcia, free from Cressner's tentacles and with enough money to get started at something made me push open the sliding-glass door and step out on to the balcony. It was cold and damp; the wind ruffled my hair into my eyes.

'Bon soir,' Cressner said behind me, but I didn't bother to look back. I approached the railing, but I didn't look down. Not yet. I began to do deep-breathing.

It's not really an exercise at all but a form of self-hypnosis. With every inhale-exhale, you ~row a distraction out of your mind, until there's nothing left but the match ahead of you. I got rid of the money with one breath and Cressner himself with two. Marcia took longer - her face kept rising in my mind, telling me not to be stupid, not to play his game, that maybe Cressner never welshed, but he always hedged his bets. I didn't listen. I couldn't afford to. If I lost this match, I wouldn't have to buy the beers and take the ribbing; I'd be so much scarlet sludge splattered for a block of Deakman Street in both directions.

When I thought I had it, I looked down.

The building sloped away like a smooth chalk cliff to the street far below. The cars parked there looked like those matchbox models you can buy in the five-and-dime. The ones driving by the building were just tiny pinpoints of light. If you fell that far, you would have plenty of time to realize just what was happening, to see the wind blowing your clothes as the earth pulled you back faster and faster. You'd have time to scream a long, long scream. And the sound you'made when you hit the pavement would be like the sound of an overripe watermelon.

I could understand why that other guy had chickened out. But he'd only had six months to worry about. I was staring forty long, grey, Marcia4ess years in the eye.

I looked at the ledge. It looked small, I had never, seen five inches that looked so much like two. At least the building was fairly new; it wouldn't crumble under me.

I hoped.

I swung over the railing and carefully lowered myself until I was standing on the ledge. My heels were out over the drop. The floor on the balcony was about chest-high, and I was looking into Cressner's penthouse through the wrought-iron ornamental bars. He was standing inside the door, smoking, watching me the way a scientist watches a guinea pig to see what the latest injection will do.

'Call,' I said, holding on to the railing.

'What?'

'Call Tony. I don't move until you do.'

He went back into the living room - it looked amazingly warm and safe and cosy - and picked up the phone. It was a worthless gesture, really. With the wind, I couldn't hear what he was saying. He put the phone down and returned. 'Taken care of, Mr Norris.'

'It better be.'

'Goodbye, Mr Norris. I'll see you in a bit. . . perhaps.'

It was time to do it. Talking was done. I let myself think of Marcia one last time, her light-brown hair, her wide grey eyes, her lovely body, and then put her out of my mind for good. No more looking down, either. It would have been too easy to get paralysed, looking down through that space. Too easy to just freeze up until you lost your balance or just fainted from fear. It was time for tunnel vision. Time to concentrate on nothing but left foot, right foot.

I began to move to the right, holding on to the balcony's railing as long as I could. It didn't take long to see I was going to need all the tennis muscle my ankles had. With my heels beyond the edge, those tendons would be taking all my weight.

I got to the end of the balcony, and for a moment I didn't think I was going to be able to let go of that safety. I forced myself to do it. Five inches, hell, that was plenty of room. If the ledge were only a foot off the ground instead of 400 feet, you could breeze around this building in four minutes flat, I told myself. So just pretend it is.

Yeah, and if you fall 'from a ledge a foot off the ground, you just say rats, and try again. Up here you get only one chance.

I slid my right foot further and then brought my left foot next to it. I let go of the railing. I put my open hands up, allowing the palms to rest against the rough stone of the apartment building. I caressed the stone. I could have kissed it.

A gust of wind hit me, snapping the collar of my jacket against my face, making my body sway op the ledge. My heart jumped into my throat and stayed there until the wind had died down. A strong enough gust would have peeled me right off my perch and sent me flying down into the night. And the wind would be stronger on the other side.

I turned my head to the left, pressing my cheek against the stone. Cressner was leaning over the balcony, watching me.

'Enjoying yourself?' he asked affably.

He was wearing a brown camel's-hair overcoat.

'I thought you didn't have a coat,' I said.

'I lied,' he answered equably. 'I lie about a lot of things.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'Nothing . . . nothing at all. Or perhaps it does mean something. A little psychological warfare, eh, Mr Norris? I should tell you not to linger overlong. The ankles grow tired, and if they should give way . . .' He took an apple out of his pocket, bit into it, and then tossed it over the edge. There was no sound for a long time. Then, a faint and sickening plop. Cressner chuckled.

He had broken my concentration, and I could feel panic nibbling at the edges of my mind with steel teeth. A torrent of terror wanted to rush in and drown me. I turned my head away from him and did deep-breathing, flushing the panic away. I was looking at the lighted bank sign, which now said: 8.46, Time to Save at Mutual!

By the time the lighted numbers read 8.49, I felt that I had myself under control again. I think Cressner must have decided I'd frozen, and I heard a sardonic patter of applause when I began to shuffle towards the corner of the building again.

I began to feel the cold. The lake had whetted the edge of the wind; its clammy dampness bit at my skin like an auger. My thin jacket billowed out behind me as I shuffled along. I moved slowly, cold or not. If I was going to do this, I would have to do it slowly and deliberately. If I rushed, I would fall.

The bank clock read 8.52 when I reached the corner. It didn't appear to be a problem - the ledge went right around, making a square corner - but my right hand told me that there was a crosswind. If I got caught leaning the wrong way, I would take a long ride very quickly.

I waited for the wind to drop, but for a long time it refused to, almost as though it were Cressner's willing ally. It slapped against me with vicious, invisible fingers, praying and poking and tickling. At last, after a particularly strong gust had made me rock on my toes, I knew that I could wait for ever and the wind would never drop all the way off.

So the next time it sank a little, I slipped my right foot around and, clutching both walls with my hands, made the turn. The crosswind pushed me two ways at once, and I tottered. For a second I was sickeningly sure that Cressner had won his wager. Then I slid a step further along and pressed myself tightly against the wall, a held breath slipping out of my dry throat.

That was when the raspberry went off, almost in my ear.

Startled, I jerked back to the very edge of balance. My hands lost the wall and pinwheeled crazily for balance. I think that if one of them had hit the stone face of the building, I would have been gone. But after what seemed an eternity, gravity decided to let me return

to the wall instead of sending down to the pavement forty-three stories below.

My breath sobbed out of my lungs in a pained whistle. My legs were rubbery. The tendons in my ankles were humming like high-voltage wires. I had never felt so mortal. The man with the sickle was close enough to read over my shoulder.

I twisted my neck, looked up, and there was Cressner, leaning out of his bedroom window four feet above me. He was smiling, in his right hand he held a New Year's Eve noisemaker.

'Just keeping you on your toes,' he said.

I didn't waste my breath. I couldn't have spoken above a croak anyway. My heart was thudding crazily in my chest. I sidled five or six feet along, just in case he was thinking about leaning out and giving me a good shove. Then I stopped and closed my eyes and deep-breathed until I had my act back together again.

I was on the short side of the building now. On my right only the highest towers of the city bulked above me. On the left, only the dark circle of the lake, with a few pinpricks of light which floated on it. The wind whooped and moaned.

The crosswind at the second corner was not so tricky, and I made it around with no trouble. And then something bit me.

I gasped and jerked. The shift of balance scared me, and I pressed tightly against the building. I was bitten again. No not bitten but pecked. I looked down.

There was a pigeon standing on the ledge, looking up with bright, hateful eyes.

You get used to pigeons in the city; they're as common as cab drivers who can't change a ten. They don't like to fly, and they give ground grudgingly, as if the sidewalks were theirs by squatters' rights. Oh, yes, and you're apt to find their calling cards on the hood of your car. But you never take much notice. They may be occasionally irritating, but they're interlopers in our world.

But I was in his, and I was nearly helpless, and he seemed to know it. He pecked my tired right ankle again, sending a bright dart of pain up my leg.

'Get,' I snarled at it. 'Get out.'

The pigeon only pecked me again. I was obviously in what he regarded as his home; this section of the ledge was covered with droppings, old and new.

A muted cheeping from above.

I cricked my neck as far back as it would go and looked up. A beak darted at my face, and I almost recoiled. If I had, I might have become the city's first pigeon-induced casualty. It was Mama Pigeon, protecting a bunch of baby pigeons just under the slight overhang of the roof. Too far up to peck my head, thank God.

Her husband pecked me again, and now blood was flowing. I could feel it. I began to inch my way along again, hoping to scare the pigeon off the ledge. No way. Pigeons don't scare, not city pigeons, anyway. If a moving van only makes them amble a little faster, a man pinned on a high ledge isn't going to upset them at all.

The pigeon backpedalled as I shuffled forward, his bright eyes never leaving my face except when the sharp beak dipped to peck my ankle. And the pain was getting more intense now; the bird was pecking at raw flesh . . . and eating it, for all I knew.

I kicked at it with my right foot. It was a weak kick, the only kind I could afford. The pigeon only fluttered its wings a bit and then returned to the attack. I, on the other hand, almost went off the side.

The pigeon pecked me again, again, again. A cold blast of wind struck me, rocking me to the limit of balance; pads of my fingers scraped at the bland stone, and I came to rest with my left cheek pressed against the wall, breathing heavily.

Cressner couldn't have conceived of worse torture if he had planned it for ten years. One peck was not so bad. Two or three were little more. But that damned bird must have pecked me sixty times before I reached the wrought-iron railing of the penthouse opposite Cressner's.

Reaching that railing was like reaching the gates of heaven. My hands curled sweetly around the cold uprights and held on as if they would never let go.

Peck.

The pigeon was staring up at me almost smugly with its bright eyes, confident of my impotence and its own invulnerability. I was reminded of Cressner's expression when he had ushered me out on to the balcony on the other side of the building.

Gripping the iron bars more tightly, I lashed out with a hard, strong kick and caught the pigeon squarely. It emitted a wholly satisfying squawk and rose into the air, wings flapping. A few feathers, dove grey, settled back to the ledge or disappeared slowly down into the darkness, swan-boating back and forth in the air.

Gasping, I crawled up on to the balcony and collapsed there. Despite the cold, my body was dripping with sweat. I don't know how long I lay there, recuperating. The building hid the bank clock, and I don't wear a watch.

I sat up before my muscles could stiffen up on me and gingerly rolled down my sock. The right ankle was lacerated and bleeding, but the wound looked superficial. Still, I would have to have it taken care of, if I ever got out of this. God know what germs pigeons carry around. I thought of bandaging the raw skin but decided not to. I might stumble on a tied bandage. Time enough later. Then I could buy twenty thousand dollars' worth of bandages.

I got up and looked longingly into the darkened pent-house opposite Cressner's. Barren, empty, unlived in. The heavy storm screen was over this door. I might have been able to break in, but that would have been forfeiting the bet. And I had more to lose than money.

When I could put it off no longer, I slipped over the railing and back on to the ledge. The pigeon, a few feathers worse for wear, was standing below his mate's nest, where the guano was thickest, eyeing me balefully. But I didn't think he'd bother me, not when he saw I was moving away.

It was very hard to move away - much harder than it had been to leave Cressner's balcony. My mind knew I had to, but my body, particularly my ankles, was screaming that it would be folly to leave such a safe harbour. But I did leave, with Marcia's face in the darkness urging me on.

I got to the second short side, made it around the corner, and shuffled slowly across the width of the building. Now that I was getting close, there was an almost ungovernable urge to hurry, to get it over with. But if I hurried, I would die. So I forced myself to go slowly.

The crosswind almost got me again on the fourth corner, and I slipped around it thanks to luck rather than skill. I rested against the building, getting my breath back. But for the first time I knew that I was going to make it, that I was going to win. My hands felt like half4rozen steaks, my ankles hurt like fire (especially the pigeon-pecked right ankle), sweat kept trickling in my eyes, but I knew I was going to make it. Halfway down the length of the building, warm yellow light spilled out on Cressner's balcony. Far beyond I could see the bank sign glowing like a welcome-home banner. It was 10.48, but it seemed that I had spent my whole life on those five inches of ledge.

And God help Cressner if he tried to welsh. The urge to hurry was gone. I almost lingered. It was 11.09 when I put first my right hand on the wrought-iron balcony railing and then my left. I hauled myself up, wriggled over the top, collapsed thankfully on the floor. . . and felt the cold steel muzzle of a *.45* against my temple.

I looked up and saw a goon ugly enough to stop Big Ben dead in its clockwork. He was grinning.

'Excellent!' Cressner's voice said from within. 'I applaud you, Mr Norris!' He proceeded to do just that. 'Bring him in, Tony.'

Tony hauled me up and set me on my feet so abruptly that my weak ankles almost buckled. Going in, I staggered against the balcony door.

Cressner was standing by the living-room fireplace, sipping brandy from a goblet the size of a fish-bowl. The money had been replaced in the shopping bag. It still stood in the middle of the burnt-orange rug.

I caught a glimpse of myself in a small mirror on the other side of the room. The hair was dishevelled, the face pallid except for two bright spots of colour on the cheeks. The eyes looked insane.

I got only a glimpse, because the next moment I was flying across the room. I hit the Basque chair and fell over it, pulling it down on

top of me and losing my wind.

When I got some of it back, I sat up and managed: 'You lousy welsher. You had this planned.'

'Indeed I did,' Cressner said, carefully setting his brandy on the mantel. 'But I'm not a welsher, Mr Norris. Indeed no. Just an extremely poor loser. Tony is here only to make sure you don't do anything . . . ill-advised.' He put his fingers under his chin and tittered a little. He didn't look like a poor loser. He looked more like a cat with canary feathers on its muzzle. I got up, suddenly feeling more frightened than I had on the ledge.

'You fixed it,' I said slowly. 'Somehow, you fixed it.'

'Not at all. The heroin has been removed from your car. The car itself is back in the parking lot. The money is over there. You may take it and go.'

'Fine,' I said.

Tony stood by the glass door to the balcony, still looking like a leftover from Halloween. The .45 was in his hand. I walked over to the shopping bag, picked it up, and walked towards the door on my jittery ankles, fully expecting to be shot down in my tracks. But when I got the door open, I began to have the same feeling that I'd had on the ledge when I rounded the fourth corner: I was going to make it.

Cressner's voice, lazy and amused, stopped me.

'You don't really think that old lady's-room dodge fooled anyone, do you?'

I turned back slowly, the shopping bag in my arms. 'What do you mean?'

'I told you I never welsh, and I never do. You won three things, Mr Norris. The money, your freedom, my wife. You have the first two. You can pick up the third at the country morgue.'

I stared at him, unable to move, frozen in a soundless thunderclap of shock.

'You didn't really think I'd let you have her? he asked me pityingly. 'Oh, no. The money, yes. Your freedom, yes. But not Marcia. Still, I don't welsh. And after you've had her buried -'

I didn't go near him. Not then. He was for later. I walked towards Tony,. who looked slightly surprised until Cressner said in a bored voice: 'Shoot him, please.'

I threw the bag of money. It hit him squarely in the gun hand, and it struck him hard. I hadn't been using my arms and wrists out there, and they're the best part of any tennis player. His bullet went into the burnt-orange rug, and then I had him.

His face was the toughest part of him. I yanked the gun out of his hand and hit him across the bridge of the nose with the barrel. He went down with a single very weary grunt, looking like Rondo Hatton.

Cressner was almost out the door when I snapped a shot over his shoulder and said, 'Stop right there, or you're dead.'

He thought about it and stopped. When he turned around, his cosmopolitan world-weary act had curdled a little around the edges. It curdled a little more when he saw Tony lying on the floor and choking on his own blood.

'She's not dead,' he said quickly. 'I had to salvage something, didn't I?' He gave me a sick, cheese-eating grin.

'I'm a sucker, but I'm not that big a sucker,' I said. My voice sounded lifeless, dead. Why not? Marcia had been my life, and this man had put her on a slab.

With a finger that trembled slightly, Cressner pointed at the money tumbled around Tony's feet. 'That,' he said, 'that's chickenfeed. I can get you a hundred thousand. Or five. Or how about a million, all of it in a Swiss bank account? How about that? How about -,

'I'll make you a bet,' I said slowly.

He looked from the barrel of the gun to my face. 'A -'

'A bet,' I repeated. 'Not a wager. Just a plain old bet. I'll bet you can't walk around this building on the ledge out there.'

His face went dead pale. For a moment I thought he was going to faint. 'You . . .' he whispered.

'These are the stakes,' I said in my dead voice. 'If you make it, I'll let you go. How's that?'

'No,' he whispered. His eyes were huge, staring.

'Okay,' I said, and cocked the pistol.

'No!' he said, holding his hands out. 'No! Don't! I. . all right.' He licked his lips.

I motioned with the gun, and he preceded me out on to the balcony. 'You're shaking,' I told him. 'That's going to make it harder.'

'Two million,' he said, and he couldn't get his voice above a husky whine. 'Two million in unmarked bills.'

'No,' I said. 'Not for ten million. But if you make it, you go free. I'm serious.'

A minute later he was standing on the ledge. He was shorter than I; you could just see his eyes over the edge, wide and beseeching, and his white-knuckled hands gripping the iron rail like prison bars.

'Please,' he whispered. 'Anything.'

'You're wasting time,' I said. 'It takes it out of the ankles.'

But he wouldn't move until I had put the muzzle of the gun against his forehead. Then he began to shuffle to the right, moaning. I glanced up at the bank clock. It was 11.29.

I didn't think he was going to make it to the first corner. He didn't want to budge at all, and when he did, he moved jerkily, taking risks with his centre of gravity, his dressing gown billowing into the night.

He disappeared around the corner and out of sight at 12.01, almost forty minutes ago. I listened closely for the diminishing scream as the crosswind got him, but it didn't come. Maybe the wind had dropped. I do remember thinking the wind was on his side, when I was out there. Or maybe he was just lucky. Maybe he's out on the other balcony now, quivering in a heap, afraid to go any further.

But he probably knows that if I catch him there when I break into the other penthouse, I'll shoot him down like a dog. And speaking of the other side of the building, I wonder how he likes that pigeon.

Was that a scream? I don't know. It might have been the wind. It doesn't matter. The bank clock says 12.44. Pretty soon I'll break into the other apartment and check the balcony, but right now I'm just sitting here on Cressner's balcony with Tony's .45 in my hand. Just on the off-chance that he might come around that last corner with his dressing gown billowing out behind him.

Cressner said he's never welshed on a bet.

But I've been known to.

THE LAST RUNG ON THE LADDER

I got Katrina's letter yesterday, less than a week after my father and I got back from Los Angeles. It was addressed to Wilmington, Delaware, and I'd moved twice since then. People move around so much now, and it's funny how those crossed-off addresses and change-of-address stickers can look like accusations. Her letter was rumpled and smudged, one of the corners dog-eared from handling. I read what was in it and the next thing I knew I was standing in the living room with the phone in my h8nd, getting ready to call Dad. I put the phone down with something like horror. He was an old man, and he'd had two heart attacks. Was I going to call him and tell about Katrina's letter so soon after we'd been in L.A.? To do that might very well have killed him.

So I didn't call. And I had no one I could tell. . . a thing like that letter, it's too personal to tell anyone except a wife or a very close friend. I haven't made many close friends in the last few years, and my wife Helen and I divorced in 1971. What we exchange now are Christmas cards. How are you? How's the job? Have a Happy New Year.

I've been awake all night with it, with Katrina's letter. She could have put it on a postcard. There was only a single sentence below the 'Dear Larry'. 'But a sentence can mean enough. It can do enough.

I remembered my dad on the plane, his face seeming old and wasted in the harsh sunlight at 18,000 feet as we went west from New York. We had 'just passed over Omaha, according to the pilot, and Dad said, 'It's a lot further away than it looks, Larry.' There was a heavy sadness in his voice that made me uncomfortable because I couldn't understand it. I understood it better after getting Katrina's letter.

We grew up eighty miles west of Omaha in a town called Hemingford Home - my dad, my mom, my sister Katrina, and me. I was two years older than Katrina, whom everyone called Kitty. She was a beautiful child and a beautiful woman - even at eight, the year of the incident in the barn, you could see that her cornsilk hair was never going to darken and that those eyes would always be a dark, Scandinavian blue. A look in those eyes and a man would be gone.

I guess you'd say we grew up hicks. My dad had three hundred acres of flat, rich land, and he grew feed corn and raised cattle. Everybody just called it 'the home place'. In those days all the roads were dirt except Interstate 80 and Nebraska Route 96, and a trip to town was something you waited three days for.

Nowadays I'm one of the best independent corporation lawyers in America, so they tell me - and I'd have to admit for the sake of honesty that I think they're right. A president of a large company once introduced me to his board of directors as his hired gun. I wear expensive suits and my shoe-leather is the best. I've got three assistants on full-time pay, and I can call in another dozen if [need them. But in those days I walked up a dirt road to a one-room school with books tied in a belt over my shoulder, and Katrina walked with me. Sometimes, in the spring, we went barefoot. That was in the days before you couldn't get served in a diner or shop in a market unless you were wearing shoes.

Later on, my mother died - Katrina and I were in high school up at Columbia City then - and two years after that my dad lost the place and went to work selling tractors. It was the end of the family, although that didn't seem so bad then. Dad got along in his work, bought himself a dealership, and got tapped for a management position about nine years ago. I got a football scholarship to the University of Nebraska and managed to learn something besides how to run the ball out of a slot-right formation.

And Katrina? But it's her I want to tell you about.

It happened, the barn thing, one Saturday in early November. To tell you the truth I can't pin down the actual year, but Ike was still President. Mom was at a bake fair in Columbia city, and Dad had gone over to our nearest neighbour's (and that was seven miles away) to help the man fix a hayrake. There was supposed to be a hired man on the place, but he had never showed up that day, and my dad fired him not a month later.

Dad left me a list of chores to do (and there were some for Kitty, too) and told us not to get to playing until they were all done. But that wasn't long. It was November, and by that time of the year the make-or-break time had gone past. We'd made it again that year. We wouldn't always.

I remember that day very clearly. The sky was overcast and while it wasn't cold, you could feel it *wanting* to be cold, wanting to get down to the business of frost and freeze, snow and sleet. The fields were stripped. The animals were sluggish and morose. There seemed to be funny little draughts in the house that had never been there before.

On a day like that, the only really nice place to be was the barn. It was warm, filed with a pleasant mixed aroma of hay and fur and dung, and with the mysterious chuckling, cooing sounds of the barnswallows high up in the third loft. If you cricked your neck up, you could see the white November light coming through the chinks in the roof and try to spell your name. It was a game that really only seemed agreeable on overcast autumn days.

There was a ladder nailed to a crossbeam high up in the third loft, a ladder that went straight down to the main barn floor. We were forbidden to climb on it because it was old and shaky. Dad had promised Mom a thousand times that he would pull it down and put up a stronger one, but something else always seemed to come up when there was time . . . helping a neighbour with his hayrake, for instance. And the hired man was just not working out.

If you climbed up that rickety ladder - there were exactly forty-three rungs, Kitty and I had counted them enough to know - you ended up on a beam that was seventy feet above the straw-littered barn floor. And then if you edged out along the beam about twelve feet, your knees jittering, your ankle joints creaking, your mouth dry and tasting like a used fuse, you stood over the haymow. And then you could jump off the beam and fall seventy feet straight down, with a horrible hilarious dying swoop, into a huge soft bed of lush hay. It has a sweet smell, hay does, and you'd come to rest in that smell of reborn summer with your stomach left behind you way up there in the middle of the air, and you'd feel . . . well, like Lazarus must have felt. You had taken the fall and lived to tell the tale.

It was a forbidden sport, all right. If we had been caught, my mother would have shrieked blue murder and my father would have laid on the strap, even at our advanced ages. Because of the ladder, and because if you happened to lose your balance and topple from the beam before you had edged out over the loose fathoms of hay, you would fall to utter destruction on the hard planking of the barn floor.

But the temptation was just too great. When the cats are away. . . well, you know how. that one goes.

That day started like all the others, a delicious feeling of dread mixed with anticipation. We stood at the foot of the ladder, looking at each other. Kitty's colour was high, her eyes darker and more sparkling than ever.

'Dare you,' I said.

Promptly from Kitty: 'Dares go first.'

Promptly from me: 'Girls go before boys.'

'Not if it's dangerous,' she said, casting her eyes down demurely, as if everybody didn't know she was the second biggest tomboy in Hemingford. But that was how she was about it. She would go, but she wouldn't go first.

'Okay,' I said. 'Here I go.'

I was ten that year, and thin as Scratch-the-demon, about ninety pounds. Kitty was eight, and twenty pounds lighter. The ladder had always held us before, we thought it would always hold us again, which is a philosophy that gets men and nations in trouble time after time.

I could feel it that day, beginning to shimmy around a little bit in the dusty barn air as I climbed higher and higher. As always about halfway up, I entertained a vision of what would happen to me if it suddenly let go and gave up the ghost. But I kept going until I was able to clap my hands around the beam and boost myself up and look down.

Kitty's face, turned up to watch me, was a small white oval. In her faded checked shirt and blue denims, she looked like a doll. Above me still higher, in the dusty reaches of the eaves, the swallows cooed mellowly.

Again, by rote:

'Hi, down there!' I called, my voice floating down to her on motes of chaff.

'Hi, up there!'

I stood up. Swayed back and forth a little. As always, there seemed suddenly to be strange currents in the air that had not existed down below. I could hear my own heartbeat as I began to inch along with my arms held out for balance. Once, a swallow had swooped close by my head during this part of the adventure, and in drawing back I had almost lost my balance. I lived in fear of the same thing happening again.

But not this time. At last I stood above the safety of the hay. Now looking down was not so much frightening as sensual. There was a moment of anticipation. Then I stepped off into space, holding my nose for effect, and as it always did, the sudden grip of gravity, yanking me down brutally, making me plummet, made me feel like yelling:

Oh, I'm sorry, I made a mistake, let me back Up!

Then I hit the hay, shot into it like a projectile, its sweet and dusty smell billowing up around me, still going down, as if into heavy water, coming slowly to rest buried in the stuff. As always, I could feel a sneeze building up in my nose. And hear a frightened field mouse or two fleeing for a more serene section of the haymow. And feel, in that curious way, that I had been reborn. I remember Kitty telling me once that after diving into the hay she felt fresh and new, like a baby. I shrugged it off at the time - sort of knowing what she meant, sort of not knowing - but since I got her letter I think about that, too.

I climbed out of the hay, sort of swimming through it, until I could climb out on to the barn floor. I had hay down my pants and down the back of my shirt. It was on my sneakers and sticking to my elbows. Hayseeds in my hair? You bet.

She was halfway up the ladder by then, her gold pigtails bouncing against her shoulderblades, climbing through a dusty shaft of light. On other days that light might have been as bright as her hair, but on this day her pigtails had no competition - they were easily the most colourful thing up there.

I remember thinking that I didn't like the way the ladder was swaying back and forth. It seemed like it had never been so loosey-goosey.

Then she was on the beam, high above me - now I was the small one, my face was the small white upturned oval as her voice floated down on errant chaff stirred up by my leap:

'Hi, down there!'

'Hi, up there!'

She edged along the beam, and my heart loosened a little in my chest when I judged she was over the safety of the hay. It always did, although she was more graceful than I was . . . and more athletic, if that doesn't sound like too strange a thing to say about your kid sister.

She stood, poising on the toes of her old low-topped Keds, hands out in front of her. And then she swanned. Talk about things you can't forget, things you can't describe. Well, I can describe it. . . in a way. But not in a way that will make you understand how beautiful that was, how perfect, one of the few things in my life that seem utterly real, utterly true. No, I can't tell you that. I don't have the skill with either my pen or my tongue.

For a moment she seemed to hang in the air, as if borne up by one of those mysterious updraughts that only existed in the third loft, a bright swallow with golden plumage such as Nebraska has never seen since. She was Kitty, my sister, her arms swept behind her and her back arched, and how I loved her for that beat of time!

Then she came down and ploughed into the hay and out of sight. An explosion of chaff and giggles rose out of the hole she made. I'd forgotten about how rickety the ladder had looked with her on it, and by the time she was out, I was halfway up again.

I tried to swan myself, but the fear grabbed me the way it always did, and my swan turned into a cannonball. I think I never believed the hay was there the way Kitty believed it.

How long did the game go on? Hard to tell, But I looked up some ten or twelve dives later and saw the light had changed. Our mom and dad were due back and we were all covered with chaff. . . as good as a signed confession. We agreed on one more turn each.

Going up first, I felt the ladder moving beneath me and I could hear - very faintly - the whining rasp of old nails loosening up in the wood. And for the first time I was really, actively scared. I think if I'd been closer to the bottom I would have gone down and that would have been the end of it, but the beam was closer and seemed safer. Three rungs from the top the whine of pulling nails grew louder and I was suddenly cold with terror, with the certainty that I had pushed it too far.

Then I had the splintery beam in my hands, taking my weight off the ladder, and there was a cold, unpleasant sweat matting the twigs of hay to my forehead. The fun of the game was gone.

I hurried out over the hay and dropped off. Even the pleasurable part of the drop was gone. Coming down, I imagined how I'd feel if that was solid barn planking coming up to meet me instead of the yielding give of the hay.

I came out to the middle of the barn to see Kitty hurrying up the ladder. I called: 'Hey, come down! It's not safe!'

'It'll hold me!' she called back confidently. 'I'm lighter than you!'

'Kitty -'

But that never got finished. Because that was when the ladder let go.

It went with a rotted, splintering crack. I cried out and Kitty screamed. She was about where I had been when I'd become convinced I'd pressed my luck too far.

The rung she was standing on gave way, and then both sides of the ladder split. For a moment the ladder below her, which had broken entirely free, looked like a ponderous insect - a praying mantis or a ladderbug - which had just decided to walk off.

Then it toppled, hitting the barn floor with a flat clap that raised dust and caused the cows to moo worriedly. One of them kicked at its stall door.

Kitty uttered a high, piercing scream.

Larry! Larry! Help me!'

I knew what had to be done, I saw right away. I was terribly afraid, but not quite scared out of my wits. She was better than sixty feet above me, her blue-jeaned legs kicking wildly at the blank air, then barnswallows cooing above her. I was scared, all right. And you know, I still can't watch a circus aerial act, not even on TV. It makes my stomach feel weak.

But I knew what had to be done.

'Kitty!' I bawled up at her. 'Just hold still! *Hold still!'*

She obeyed me instantly. Her legs stopped kicking and she hung straight down, her small hands clutching the last rung on the ragged end of the ladder like an acrobat whose trapeze has stopped.

I ran to the hayrnow, clutched up a double handful of the stuff, ran back, and dropped it. I went back again. And .again. And again.

I really don't remember it after that, except the hay got up my nose and I started sneezing and couldn't stop. I ran back and forth, building a haystack where the foot of the ladder had been. It was a very small haystack. Looking at it, then looking at her hanging so far above it, you might have thought of one of those cartoons where the guy jumps three hundred feet into a water glass.

Back and forth. Back and forth.

'Larry, I can't hold on much longer!' Her voice was high and despairing.

'Kitty, you've got to! You've got to hold on!'

Back and forth. Hay down my shirt. Back and forth. The haystick was high as my chin now, but the haymow we had been diving into was twenty-five feet deep. I thought that if she only broke her legs it would be getting off cheap. And I knew if she missed the hay altogether, she would be killed. Back and forth.

'Larry! The rung! It's letting go!

I could hear the steady, rasping cry of the rung pulling free under here weight. Her legs began to kick again in panic, but if she was thrashing like that, she would surely miss the hay.

'No!' I yelled. 'No! Stop that! Just let go! Let go, Kitty!' Because it was too late for me to get any more hay. Too late for anything except blind hope.

She let go and dropped the second I told her to. She came straight down like a knife. It seemed to me that she dropped forever, her gold pigtails standing straight up from her head, her eyes shut, her face as pale as china. She didn't scream. Her hands were locked in front of her lips, as if she was praying.

And she struck the hay right in the centre. She went down out of sight in it - hay flew up all around as if a shell had struck - and I heard the thump of her body hitting the boards. The sound, a loud thud, sent a deadly chill into me. It had been too loud, much too loud. But I had to see.

Starting to cry, I pounced on the haystack and pulled it apart, flinging the straw behind me in great handfuls. A blue-jeaned leg came to light, then a plaid shirt . . . and then Kitty's face. It was deadly pale and her eyes were shut. She was dead, I knew it as I looked at her. The world went grey for me, November grey. The only things in it with any colour were her pigtails, bright gold.

And then the deep blue of her irises as she opened her eyes.

'Kitty?' My voice was hoarse, husky, unbelieving. My throat was coated with haychaff. 'Kitty?'

'Larry?' she asked, bewildered. 'Am I alive?'

I picked her out of the hay and hugged her and she put her arms around my neck and hugged me back.

'You're alive,' I said. 'You're alive, you're alive.'

She had broken her left ankle and that was all. When Dr Pederson, the GP from Columbia City, came out to the barn with my father and me, looked up into the shadows for a long time. The last rung on the ladder still hung there, aslant, from one nail.

He looked, as I said, for a long time. 'A miracle,' he said to my father, and then kicked disdainfully at the hay I'd put down. He went out to his dusty DeSoto and drove away.

My father's hand came down on my shoulder. 'We're going to the woodshed, Larry,' he said in avery calm voice. 'I believe you know what's going to happen there.'

'Yes, sir,' I whispered.

'Every time I whack you, Larry, I want you to thank God your sister is still alive.'

'Yes, sir.'

Then we went. He whacked me plenty of times, so many times I ate standing up for a week and with a cushion on my chair for two weeks after that. And every time he whacked me with his big red calloused hand, I thanked God.

In a loud, loud voice. By the last two or three whacks, I was pretty sure He was hearing me.

They let me in to see her just before bedtime. There was a catbird outside her window, I remember that. Her foot, all wrapped up, was propped on a board.

She looked at me so long and so lovingly that I was uncomfortable. Then she said, 'Hay. You put down hay.'

'Course I did,' I blurted. 'What else would I do? Once the ladder broke there was no way to get up there.'

'I didn't know what you were doing,' she said.

'You must have! I was right under you, for cripe's sake!'

'I didn't dare look down,' she said. 'I was too scared. I had my eyes shut the whole time.'

I stared at her, thunderstruck.

'You didn't know? Didn't know what I was doing?' She shook her head.

'And when I told you to let go you. . . you just *did it?'*

She nodded.

'Kitty, how could you do that?'

She looked at me with those deep blue eyes. 'I knew you must have been doing something to fix it,' she said. 'You're my big brother. I knew you'd take care of me.'

'Oh, Kitty, you don't know how close it was.'

I had put my hands over my face. She sat up and took them away. She kissed my cheek. 'No,' she said. 'But I knew you were down there. Gee, am I sleepy. I'll see you tomorrow, Larry. I'm going to have a cast, Dr Pederson says.'

She had the cast on for a little less than a month, and all her classmates signed it - she even got me to sign it. And when it came off, that was the end of the barn incident. My father replaced the ladder up to the third loft with a new strong one, but I never climbed up to the beam and jumped off into the haymow again. So far as I know, Kitty didn't either.

It was the end, but somehow not the end. Somehow it never ended until nine days ago, when Kitty jumped from the top storey of an insurance building in Los Angeles. I have the clipping from the L.A. *Times* in my wallet. I guess I'll always carry it, not in the good way you carry snapshots of people you want to remember or theatre tickets from a really good show or part of the programme from a World Series game. I carry that clipping the way you carry something heavy, because carrying it is your work. The headline reads: *CALL GIRL SWAN-DIVES TO HER DEATH.*

We grew up. That's all I know, other than facts that don't mean anything. She was going to go to business college in Omaha, but in the summer after she graduated from high school, she won a beauty contest and married one of the judges. It sounds like a dirty joke, doesn't it? My Kitty.

While I was in law school she got divorced and wrote me a long letter, ten pages or more, telling me how it had been, how messy it had been, how it might have been better if she could have had a child. She asked me if I could come. But losing a week in law school is like losing a term in liberal-arts undergraduate. Those guys are greyhounds. If you lose sight of the little mechanical rabbit, it's gone for ever.

She moved out to L.A. and got married again. When that one broke up I was out of law school. There was another letter, a shorter one, more bitter. She was never going to get stuck on *that* merry-go-round, she told me. It was a fix job. The only way you could catch the brass ring was to tumble off the horse and crack your skull. If that was what the price of a free ride was, who wanted it? PS, Can you come, Larry? It's been a while.

I wrote back and told her I'd love to come, but I couldn't. I had landed a job in a high-pressure firm, low guy on the totem pole, all the work and none of the credit. If I was going to make it up to the next step, it would have to be that year. That was *my* long letter, and it was all about my career.

I answered all of her letters. But I could never really believe that it was really Kitty who was writing them, you know, no more than I could really believe that the hay was really there . . . until it broke my fall at the bottom of the drop and saved my life. I couldn't believe that my sister and the beaten woman who signed 'Kitty' in a circle at the bottom of her letters were really the same person. My sister was a girl with pigtails, still without breasts.

She was the one who stopped writing. I'd get Christmas cards, birthday cards, and my wife would reciprocate. Then we got divorced and I moved and just forgot. The next Christmas and the birthday after, the cards came through the forwarding address. The first one. And I kept thinking:

Gee, I've got to write Kitty and tell her that I've moved. But I never did.

But as I've told you, those are facts that don't mean anything. The only things that matter are that we grew up and she swanned from that insurance building, and that Kitty was the one who always believed the hay would be there. Kitty was the one who had said, 'I knew you must be doing something to fix it.' Those things matter. And Kitty's letter.

People move around so much now, and it's funny how those crossed-off addresses and change-of-address stickers can look like accusations. She's printed her return address in the upper left corner of the envelope, the place she'd been staying at until she jumped. A very nice apartment building on Van Nuys. Dad and I went there to pick up her things. The landlady was nice. She had liked Kitty.

The letter was postmarked two weeks before she died. It would have got to me a long time before, if not for the forwarding addresses. She must have got tired of waiting.

Dear Larry

I've been thinking about it a lot lately. . . and what I've decided is that it would have been better for me if that last rung had broken before you could put the hay down.

Your,

Kitty

Yes, I guess she must have gotten tired of waiting. I'd rather believe that than think of her deciding I must have forgotten. I wouldn't want her to think that, because that one sentence was maybe the only thing that would have brought me on the run.

But not even that is the reason sleep comes so hard now. When I close my eyes and start to drift off, I see her coming down from the third loft, her eyes wide and dark blue, her body arched, her arms swept up behind her.

She was the one who always knew the hay would be there.

QUITTERS, INC.

Morrison was waiting for someone who was hung up in the air traffic jam over Kennedy International when he saw a familiar face at the end of the bar and walked down.

'Jimmy? Jimmy McCann?'

It was. A little heavier than when Morrison had seen him at the Atlanta Exhibition the year before, but otherwise he looked awesomely fit. In college he had been a thin, pallid chain smoker buried behind huge horn-rimmed glasses. He had apparently switched to contact lenses.

'Dick Morrison?'

'Yeah. You look great.' He extended his hand and they shook.

'So do you,' McCann said, but Morrison knew it was a lie. He had been overworking, overeating, and smoking too much. 'What are you drinking?'

'Bourbon and bitters,' Morrison said. He hooked his feet around a bar stool and lighted a cigarette. 'Meeting someone, Jimmy?'

'No. Going to Miami for a conference. A heavy client. Bills six million. I'm supposed to hold his hand because we lost out on a big special next spring.'

'Are you still with Crager and Barton?'

'Executive veep now.'

'Fantastic! Congratulations! When did all this happen?' He tried to tell himself that the little worm of jealousy in his stomach was just acid indigestion. He pulled out a roll of antacid pills and crunched one in his mouth.

'Last August. Something happened that changed my life.' He looked speculatively at Morrison and sipped his drink. 'You might be interested.'

My God, Morrison thought with an inner wince. Jimmy McCann's got religion.

'Sure,' he said, and gulped at his drink when it came. 'I wasn't in very good shape,' McCann said. 'Personal problems with Sharon, my.dad died - heart attack - and I'd developed this hacking cough. Bobby Crager dropped by my office one day and gave me a fatherly little pep talk. Do you remember what those are like?'

'Yeah.' He had worked at Crager and Barton for eighteen months before joining the Morton Agency. 'Get your butt in gear or get your butt out.'

McCann laughed. 'You know it. Well, to put the capper on it, the doc told me I had an incipient ulcer. He told me to quit smoking.' McCann grimaced. 'Might as well tell me to quit breathing.'

Morrison nodded in perfect understanding. Non-smokers could afford to be smug. He looked at his own cigarette with distaste and stubbed it out, knowing he would be lighting another in five minutes.

'Did you quit?' He asked.

'Yes, I did. At first I didn't think I'd be able to - I was cheating like hell. Then I met a guy who told me about an outfit over on Forty-sixth Street. Specialists. I said what do I have to lose and went over. I haven't smoked since.'

Morrison's eyes widened. 'What did they do? Fill you full of some drug?'

'No.' He had taken out his wallet and was rummaging through it. 'Here it is. I knew I had one kicking around.' He laid a plain white business card on the bar between them.

QUITTERS, INC.

Stop Going Up in Smoke!

237 East 46th Street

Treatments by Appointment

'Keep it, if you want,' McCann said. 'They'll cure you. Guaranteed.'

'How?'

'I can't tell you,' McCann said.

'Huh? Why not?'

'It's part of the contract they make you sign. Anyway, they tell you how it works when they interview you.'

'You signed a *contract?'*

McCann nodded.

'And on the basis of that -'

'Yep.' He smiled at Morrison, who thought: Well, it's happened. Jim McCann has joined the smug bastards.

'Why the great secrecy if this outfit is so fantastic? How come I've never seen any spots on TV, billboards, magazine ads -'

'They get all the clients they can handle by word of mouth.'

'You're an advertising man, Jimmy. You can't believe that.'

'I do,' McCann said. 'They have a ninety-eight per cent cure rate.'

'Wait a second,' Morrison said. He motioned for another drink and lit a cigarette. 'Do these guys strap you down and make you smoke until you throw up?'

'No.'

'Give you something so that you get sick every time you light -'

'No, it's nothing like that. Go and see for yourself.' He gestured at Morrison's cigarette. 'You don't really like that, do you?'

'Nooo, but -'

'Stopping really changed things for me,' McCann said. 'I don't suppose it's the same for everyone, but with me it was just like dominoes falling over. I felt better and my relationship with Sharon improved. I had more energy, and my job performance picked up.'

'Look, you've got my curiosity aroused. Can't you just -' 'I'm sorry, Dick. I really can't talk about it.' His voice was firm.

'Did you put on any weight?'

For a moment he thought Jimmy McCann looked almost grim. 'Yes. A little too much, in fact. But I took it off again. I'm about right now. I was skinny before.'

'Flight 206 now boarding at Gate 9,' the loudspeaker announced.

'That's me,' McCann said, getting up. He tossed a five on the bar. 'Have another, if you like. And think about what I said, Dick. Really.' And then he was gone, making his way through the crowd to the escalators. Morrison picked up the card, looked at it thoughtfully, then tucked it away in his wallet and forgot it.

The card fell out of his wallet and on to another bar a month later. He had left the office early and had come here to drink the afternoon away. Things had not been going so well at the Morton Agency. In fact, things were bloody horrible.

He gave Henry a ten to pay for his drink, then picked up the small card and reread it - 237 East Forty-sixth Street was only two blocks over; it was a cool, sunny October day outside, and maybe, just for chuckles -When Henry brought his change, he finished his drink and then went for a walk.

Quitters, Inc., was in a new building where the monthly rent on office space was probably close to Morrison's yearly salary. From the directory in the lobby, it looked to him like their offices took up one whole floor, and that spelled money. Lots of it.

He took the elevator up and stepped off into a lushly carpeted foyer and from there into a gracefully appointed reception room with a wide window that looked out on the scurrying bugs below. Three men and one woman sat in the chairs along the walls, reading magazines. Business types, all of them. Morrison went to the desk.

'A friend gave me this,' he said, passing the card to the receptionist. 'I guess you'd say he's an alumnus.'

She smiled and rolled a form into her typewriter. 'What is your name, sir?'

'Richard Morrison.'

Clack-clackety-clack. But very muted clacks; the typewriter was an IBM.

'Your address?'

'Twenty-nine Maple Lane, Clinton, New York.'

'Married?'

'Yes.'

'Children?'

'One.' He thought of Alvin and frowned slightly. 'One' was the wrong word. 'A half' might be better. His son was mentally retarded and lived at a special school in New Jersey.

'Who recommended us to you, Mr Morrison?'

'An old school friend. James McCann.'

'Very good. Will you have a seat? It's been a very busy day.'

'All right.'

He sat between the woman, who was wearing a severe blue suit, and a young executive type wearing a herring-bone jacket and modish sideburns. He took out his pack of cigarettes, looked around, and saw there were no ashtrays.

He put the pack away again. That was all right. He would see this little game through and then light up while he was leaving. He might even tap some ashes on their maroon shag rug if they made him wait long enough. He picked up a copy of *Time* and began to leaf through it.

He was called a quarter of an hour later, after the woman in the blue suit. His nicotine centre was speaking quite loudly now. A man who had come in after him took out a cigarette case, snapped it open, saw there were no ashtrays, and put it away looking a little guilty, Morrison thought. It made him feel better.

At last the receptionist gave him a sunny smile and said, 'Go right in, Mr Morrison.'

Morrison walked through the door beyond her desk and found himself in an indirectly lit hallway. A heavy-set man with white hair that looked phoney shook his hand, smiled affably, and said, 'Follow me, Mr Morrison.'

He led Morrison past a number of closed, unmarked doors and then opened one of them about halfway down the hall with a key. Beyond the door was an austere little room walled with drilled white cork panels. The only furnishings were a desk with a chair on either side. There was what appeared to be a small oblong window in the wall behind the desk, but it was covered with a short green curtain. There was a picture on the wall to Morrison's left -a tall man with iron-grey hair. He was holding a sheet of paper in one hand. He looked vaguely familiar.

'I'm Vic Donatti,' the heavy-set man said. 'If you decide to go ahead with our programme, I'll be in charge of your case.'

'Pleased to know you,' Morrison said. He wanted a cigarette very badly.

'Have a seat.'

Donatti put the receptionist's form on the desk, and then drew another form from the desk drawer. He looked directly into Morrison's eyes. 'Do you want to quit smoking?'

Morrison cleared his throat, crossed his legs, and tried to think of a way to equivocate. He couldn't. 'Yes,' he said.

'Will you sign this?' He gave Morrison the form. He scanned it quickly. The undersigned agrees not to divulge the methods or techniques or et cetera, et cetera.

'Sure,' he said, and Donatti put a pen in his hand. He scratched his name, and Donatti signed below it. A moment later the paper disappeared back into the desk drawer. Well, he thought ironically, I've taken the pledge.

He had taken it before. Once it had lasted for two whole days.

'Good,' Donatti said. 'We don't bother with propaganda here, Mr Morrison. Questions of health or expense or social grace. We have no interest in why you want to stop smoking. We are pragmatists.'

'Good,' Morrison said blankly.

'We employ no drugs. We employ no Dale Carnegie people to sermonize you. We recommend no special diet. And we accept no payment until you have stopped smoking for one year.'

'My God,' Morrison said.

'Mr McCann didn't tell you that?'

'No.'

'How is Mr McCann, by the way? Is he well?'

'He's fine.'

'Wonderful. Excellent. Now . . . just a few questions, Mr Morrison. These are somewhat personal, but I assure you that your answers will be held in strictest confidence.'

'Yes?' Morrison asked noncommittally.

'What is your wife's name?'

'Lucinda Morrison. Her maiden name was Ramsey.'

'Do you love her?'

Morrison looked up sharply, but Donatti was looking at him blandly. 'Yes, of course,' he said.

'Have you ever had marital problems? A separation, perhaps?'

'What has that got to do with kicking the habit?' Morrison asked. He sounded a little angrier than he had intended, but he wanted - hell, he *needed* - a cigarette.

'A great deal,' Donatti said. 'Just bear with me.'

'No. Nothing like that.' Although things *had* been a little tense just lately.

'You just have the one child?'

'Yes. Alvin. He's in a private school.'

'And which school is it?'

'That,' Morrison said grimly, 'I'm not going to tell you.'

'All right,' Donatti said agreeably. He smiled disarmingly at Morrison. 'All your q~estions will be answered tomorrow at your first treatment.'

'How nice,' Morrison said, and stood.

'One final question,' Donatti said. 'You haven't had a cigarette for over an hour. How do you feel?'

'Fine,' Morrison lied. 'Just fine.'

'Good for you!' Donatti exclaimed. He stepped around the desk and opened the door. 'Enjoy them tonight. After tomorrow, you'll never smoke again.'

'Is that right?'

'Mr Morrison,' Donatti said solemnly, 'we guarantee it.'

He was sitting in the outer office of Quitters, Inc. ,the next day promptly at three. He had spent most of the day swinging between skipping the appointment the receptionist had made for him on the way out and going in a spirit of mulish co-operation - *Throw your best pitch at me, buster.*

In the end, something Jimmy McCann had said convinced him to keep the appointment - *It changed my whole fife.* God knew his own life could do with some changing. And then there was his own curiosity. Before going up in the elevator, he smoked a cigarette down to the filter. Too damn bad if it's the last one, he thought. It tasted horrible.

The wait in the outer office was shorter this time. When the receptionist told him to go in, Donatti was waiting. He offered his hand and smiled, and to Morrison the smile looked almost predatory. He began to feel a little tense, and that made him wa~t a cigarette.

'Come with me,' Donatti said, and led the way down to the small room. He sat behind the desk again, and Morrison took the other chair.

'I'm very glad you came,' Donatti said. 'A great many prospective clients never show up again after the initial interview. They discover they don't want to quit as badly as they thought. It's going to be a pleasure to work with you on this.'

'When does the treatment start?' Hypnosis, he was thinking. It must be hypnosis.

'Oh, it already has. It started when we shook hands in the hall. Do you have cigarettes with you, Mr Morrison?'

'Yes.'

'May I have them, please?'

Shrugging, Morrison handed Donatti his pack. There were only two or three left in it, anyway.

Donatti put the pack on the desk. Then, smiling into Morrison's eyes, he curled his right hand into a fist and began to hammer it down on the pack of cigarettes, which twisted and flattened. A broken cigarette end flew out. Tobacco crumbs spilled. The sound of Donatti's fist was very loud in the closed room. The smile remained on his face in spite of the force of the blows, and Morrison was chilled by it. Probably just the effect they want to inspire, he thought.

At last Donatti ceased pounding. He picked up the pack, a twisted and battered ruin. 'You wouldn't believe the pleasure that gives me,' he said, and dropped the pack into the wastebasket. 'Even after three years in the business, it still pleases me.'

'As a treatment, it leaves something to be desired. Morrison said mildly. 'There's a news-stand in the lobby of this very building. And they sell all brands.'

'As you say,' Donatti said. He folded his hands. 'Your son, Alvin Dawes Morrison, is in the Paterson School for Handicapped Children. Born with cranial brain damage. Tested IQ of 46. Not quite in the educable retarded category. Your wife -,

'How did you find that out?' Morrison barked. He was startled and angry. 'You've got no goddamn right to go poking around my -'

'We know a lot about you,' Donatti said smoothly. 'But, as I said, it will all be held in strictest confidence.'

'I'm getting out of here,' Morrison said thinly. He stood up.

'Stay a bit longer.'

Morrison looked at him closely. Donatti wasn't upset. In fact, he looked a little amused. The face of a man who has seen this reaction scores of times - maybe hundreds.

'All right. But it better be good.'

'Oh, it is.' Donatti leaned back. 'I told you we were pragmatists here. As pragmatists, we have to start by realizing how difficult it is to cure an addiction to tobacco. The relapse rate is almost eight-five per cent. The relapse rate for heroin addicts is lower than that. It is an extraordinary problem. *Extraordinary.'*

Morrison glanced into the wastebasket. One of the cigarettes, although twisted, still looked smokeable.

Donatti laughed good-naturedly, reached into the wastebasket, and broke it between his fingers.

'State legislatures sometimes hear a request that the prison systems do away with the weekly cigarette ration. Such proposals are invariably defeated. In a few cases where they have passed, there have been fierce prison riots. *Riots,* Mr Morrison. Imagine it.'

'I,' Morrison said, 'am not surprised.'

'But consider the implications. When you put a man in prison you take away any normal sex life, you take away his liquor, his politics, his freedom of movement. No riots - or few in comparison to the number of prisons. But when you take away his *cigarettes* - wham! bam!' He slammed his fist on the desk for emphasis.

'During World War I, when no one on the German home front could get cigarettes, the sight of German aristocrats picking butts out of the gutter was a common one. During World War II, many American women turned to pipes when they were unable to obtain cigarettes. A fascinating problem for the true pragmatist, Mr Morrison.'

'Could we get to the treatment?'

'Momentarily. Step over here, please.' Donatti had risen and was standing by the green curtains Morrison had noticed yesterday. Donatti drew the curtains, discovering a rectangular window that looked into a bare room. No, not quite bare. There was a rabbit on the floor, eating pellets out of a dish.

'Pretty bunny,' Morrison commented.

'Indeed. Watch him.' Donatti pressed a button by the window-sill. The rabbit stopped eating and began to hop about crazily. It seemed to leap higher each time its feet struck the floor. Its fur stood out spikily in all directions. Its eyes were wild.

'Stop that! You're electrocuting him!'

Donatti released the button. 'Far from it. There's a very low-yield charge in the floor. Watch the rabbit, Mr Morrison!'

The rabbit was crouched about ten feet away from the dish of pellets. His nose wriggled. All at once he hopped away into a corner.

'If the rabbit gets a jolt often enough while he's eating,' Donatti said, 'he makes the association very quickly. Eating causes pain. Therefore, he won't eat. A few more shocks, and the rabbit will starve to death in front of his food. It's called aversion training.'

Light dawned in Morrison's head.

'No, thanks.' He started for the door.

'Wait, please, Morrison.'

Morrison didn't pause. He grasped the doorknob . and felt it slip solidly through his hand. 'Unlock this.'

'Mr Morrison, if you'll just sit down -'

'Unlock this door or I'll have the cops on you before you can say Marlboro Man.'

'Sit down.' The voice was as cold as shaved ice.

Morrison looked at Donatti. His brown eyes were muddy and frightening. My God, he thought, I'm locked in here with a psycho. He licked his lips. He wanted a cigarette more than he ever had in his life.

'Let me explain the treatment in more detail,' Donatti said.

'You don't understand,' Morrison said with counterfeit patience. 'I don't want the treatment. I've decided against it.'

'No, Mr Morrison. *You're* the one who doesn't understand. You don't have any choice. When I told you the treatment had already begun, I was speaking the literal truth. I would have thought you'd tipped to that by now.'

'You're crazy,' Morrison said wonderingly.

'No. Only a pragmatist. Let me tell you all about the treatment.'

'Sure,' Morrison said. 'As long as you understand that as soon as I get out of here I'm going to buy five packs of cigarettes and smoke them all on the way to the police station.' He suddenly realized he was biting his thumb-nail, sucking on it, and made himself stop.

'As you wish. But I think you'll change your mind when you see the whole picture.'

Morrison said nothing. He sat down again and folded his hands.

'For the first month of the treatment, our operatives will have you under constant supervision,' Donatti said. 'You'll be able to spot some of them. Not all. But they'll always be with you. *Always.* If they see you smoke a cigarette, I get a call.'

'And I suppose you bring me here and do the old rabbit trick,' Morrison said. He tried to sound cold and sarcastic, but he suddenly felt horribly frightened. This was a nightmare.

'Oh, no,' Donatti said. 'Your wife gets the rabbit trick, not you.'

Morrison looked at him dumbly.

Donatti smiled. 'You,' he said, 'get to watch.'

After Donatti let him out, Morrison walked for over two hours in a complete daze. It was another fine day, but he didn't notice. The monstrousness of Donatti's smiling face blotted out all else.

'You see,' he had said, 'a pragmatic problem demands pragmatic solutions. You must realize we have your best interests at heart.

Quitters, Inc., according to Donatti, was a sort of foundation - a non-profit organization begun by the man in the wall portrait. The gentleman had been extremely successful in several family businesses - including slot machines, massage parlours, numbers, and a brisk (although clandestine) trade between New York and Turkey. Mort 'Three-Fingers' Minelli had been a heavy smoker - up in the three-pack-a-day range. The paper he was holding in the picture was a doctor's diagnosis: lung cancer. Mort had died in 1970, after endowing Quitters, Inc., with family funds.

'We try to keep as close to breaking even as possible,' Donatti had said. 'But we're more interested in helping our fellow man. And of course, it's a great tax angle.'

The treatment was chillingly simple. A first offence and Cindy would be brought to what Donatti called 'the rabbit room'. A second offence, and Morrison would get the dose. On a third offence, both of them would be brought in together. A fourth offence would show grave co-operation problems and would require sterner measures. An operative would be sent to Alvin's school to work the boy over.

'Imagine,' Donatti said, smiling, 'how horrible it will be for the boy. He wouldn't understand it even jf someone explained. He'll only know someone is hurting him because Daddy was bad. He'll be very frightened.'

'You bastard,' Morrison said helplessly. He felt close to tears. 'You dirty, filthy bastard.'

'Don't misunderstand,' Donatti said. He was smiling sympathetically. 'I'm sure it won't happen. Forty per cent of our clients never have to be disciplined at all - and only ten per cent have more than three falls from grace. Those are reassuring figures, aren't they?'

Morrison didn't find them reassuring. He found them terrifying.

'Of course, if you transgress *a fifth* time -'

'What do you mean?'

Donatti beamed. 'The room for you and your wife, a second beating for your son, and a beating for your wife.'

Morrison, driven beyond the point of rational consideration, lunged over the desk at Donatti. Donatti moved with amazing speed for a man who had apparently been completely relaxed. He shoved the chair backwards and drove both of his feet over the desk and into Morrison's belly. Gagging and coughing, Morrison staggered backward.

'Sit down, Mr Morrison,' Donatti said benignly. 'Let's talk this over like rational men.'

When he could get his breath, Morrison did as he was told. Nightmares had to end some time, didn't they?

Quitters, Inc., Donatti had explained further, operated on a ten-step punishment scale. Steps six, seven, and eight consisted of further trips to the rabbit room (and increased voltage) and more serious beatings. The ninth step would be the breaking of his son's arms.

'And the tenth?' Morrison asked, his mouth dry.

Donatti shook his head sadly. 'Then we give up, Mr Morrison. You become part of the unregenerate two per cent.'

'You really give up?'

'In a manner of speaking.' He opened one of the desk drawers and laid a silenced .45 on the desk. He smiled into Morrison's eyes. 'But even the unregenerate two per cent never smoke again. We guarantee it.'

The Friday Night Movie was *Bullitt,* one of Cindy's favourites, but after an hour of Morrison's mutterings and fidgetings, her concentration was broken.

'What's the matter with you?' she asked during station identification.

'Nothing . . . everything,' he growled. 'I'm giving up smoking.'

She laughed. 'Since when? Five minutes ago?'

'Since three o'clock this afternoon.'

'You really haven't had a cigarette since then?'

'No,' he said, and began to gnaw his thumb-nail. It was ragged, down to the quick.

'That's wonderful! What ever made you decide to quit?'

'You,' he said. 'And. . . and Alvin.'

Her eyes widened, and when the movie came back on, she didn't notice. Dick rarely mentioned their retarded son. She came over, looked at the empty ashtray by his right hand, and then into his eyes: 'Are you really trying to quit, Dick?'

'Really.' And if I go to the cops, he added mentally, the local goon squad will be around to rearrange your face, Cindy.

'I'm glad. Even if you don't make it, we both thank you for the thought, Dick.'

'Oh, I think I'll make it,' he said, thinking of the muddy, homicidal look that had come into Donatti's eyes when he kicked him in the stomach.

He slept badly that night, dozing in and out of sleep. Around three o'clock he woke up completely. His craving for a cigarette was like a low-grade fever. He went downstairs and to his study. The room was in the middle of the house. No windows. He slid open the top drawer of his desk and looked in, fascinated by the cigarette box. He looked around and licked his lips.

Constant supervision during the first month, Donatti had said. Eighteen hours a day during the next two - but he would never know *which* eighteen. During the fourth month, the month when most clients backslid, the 'service' would return to twenty-four hours a day. Then twelve hours of broken surveillance each day for the rest of the year. After that? Random surveillance for the rest of the client's life.

For the rest of his life.

'We may audit you every other month,' Donatti said. 'Or every other day. Or constantly for one week two years from now. The point is, *you won't know.* If you smoke, you'll be gambling with loaded dice. Are they watching? Are they picking up my wife or sending a man after my son right now? Beautiful, isn't it? And if you do sneak a smoke, it'll taste awful. It will taste like your son's blood.'

But they couldn't be watching now, in the dead of night, in his own study. The house was grave-quiet.

He looked at the cigarettes in the box for almost two minutes, unable to tear his gaze away. Then he went to the study door, peered out into the empty hall, and went back to look at the cigarettes some more. A horrible picture came: his life stretching before him and not a cigarette to be found. How in the name of God was he ever going to be able to make another tough presentation to a wary client, without that cigarette burning nonchalantly between his fingers as he approached the charts and layouts? How would he be able to endure Cindy's endless garden shows without a cigarette? How could he even get up in the morning and face the day without a cigarette to smoke as he drank his coffee and read the paper?

He cursed himself for getting into this. He cursed Donatti. And most of all, he cursed Jimmy McCann. How could he have done it? The son of a bitch had *known.* His hands trembled in their desire to get hold of Jimmy Judas McCann.

Stealthily, he glanced around the study again. He reached into the drawer and brought out a cigarette. He caressed it, fondled it. What was that old slogan? *So round, so firm, so fully packed.* Truer words had never been spoken. He put the cigarette in his mouth and then paused, cocking his head.

Had there been the slightest noise from the closet? A faint shifting? Surely not. But -Another mental image - that rabbit hopping crazily in the grip of electricity. The thought of Cindy in that room -He listened desperately and heard nothing. He told himself that all he had to do was go to the closet door and yank it open. But he was too afraid of what he might find. He went back to bed but didn't sleep for a long time.

In spite of how lousy he felt in the morning, breakfast tasted good. After a moment's hesitation, he followed his customary bowl of cornflakes with scrambled eggs. He was grumpily washing out the pan when Cindy came downstairs in her robe.

'Richard Morrison! You haven't eaten an egg for break-fast since Hector was a pup.

Morrison grunted. He considered *since Hector was a pup* to be one of Cindy's stupider sayings, on a par with *I should smile and kiss a pig.*

'Have you smoked yet?' she asked, pouring orange juice.

'No.'

'You'll be back on them by noon,' she proclaimed airily. 'Lot of goddamn help you are!' he rasped, rounding on her. 'You and anyone else who doesn't smoke, you all think ah, never mind.'

He expected her to be angry, but she was looking at him F with something like wonder. 'You're really serious,' she said. 'You really are.'

'You bet I am.' *You'll never know* how *serious. I hope.*

'Poor baby,' she said, going to him. 'You look like death warmed over. But I'm very proud.'

Morrison held her tightly.

Scenes from the life of Richard Morrison, October-November:

Morrison and a crony from Larkin Studios at Jack Dempsey's bar. Crony offers a cigarette. Morrison grips his glass a little more tightly and says: *I'm quitting.* Crony laughs and says: *I give you a week.*

Morrison waiting for the morning train, looking over the top of the *Times* at a young man in a blue suit. He sees the young man almost every morning now, and sometimes at other places. At Onde's, where he is meeting a client. Looking at 45s in Sam Goody's, where Morrison is looking for a Sam Cooke album. Once in a foursome behind Morrison's group at the local golf course.

Morrison getting drunk at a party, wanting a cigarette -but not quite drunk enough to take one.

Morrison visiting his son, bringing him a large ball that squeaked when you squeezed it. His son's slobbering, delighted kiss. Somehow not as repulsive as before. Hugging his son tightly, realizing what Donatti and his colleagues had so cynically realized before him: love is the most pernicious drug of all. Let the romantics debate its existence. Pragmatists accept it and use it.

Morrison losing the physical compulsion to smoke little by little, but never quite losing the psychological craving, or the need to have something in his mouth - cough drops, Life Savers, a tooth-pick. Poor substitutes, all of them.

And finally, Morrison hung up in a colossal traffic jam in the Midtown Tunnel. Darkness. Horns blaring. Air stinking. Traffic hopelessly snarled. And suddenly, thumbing open the glove compartment and seeing the half-open pack of cigarettes in there. He looked at them for a moment, then snatched one and lit it with the dashboard lighter. If anything happens, it's Cindy's fault, he told himself defiantly. I told her to get rid of all the damn cigarettes.

The first drag made him cough smoke out furiously. The second made his eyes water. The third made him feel light-headed and swoony. It tastes awful, he thought.

And on the heels of that: My God, what am I doing?

Horns blatted impatiently behind him. Ahead, the traffic had begun to move again. He stubbed the cigarette out in the ashtray, opened both front windows, opened the vents, and then fanned the air helplessly like a kid who has just flushed his first butt down the john.

He joined the traffic flow jerkily and. drove home.

'Cindy?' he called. 'I'm home.' No answer.

'Cindy? Where are you, hon?'

The phone rang, and he pounced on it. 'Hello? Cindy?'

'Hello, Mr Morrison,' Donatti said. He sounded pleasantly brisk and businesslike. 'It seems we have a small business matter to attend to. Would five o'clock be convenient?'

'Have you got my wife?'

'Yes, indeed.' Donatti chuckled indulgently.

'Look, let her go,' Morrison babbled. 'It won't happen again. It was a slip, just a slip, that's all. I only had three drags and for God's sake *it didn't even taste good!'*

'That's a shame. I'll count on you for five then, shall I?'

'Please,' Morrison said, close to tears. 'Please -He was speaking to a dead line.

At *5p.m.* the reception room was empty except for the secretary, who gave him a twinkly smile that ignored Morrison's pallor and dishevelled appearance. 'Mr Donatti?' she said into the intercom. 'Mr Morrison to see you.' She nodded to Morrison. 'Go right in.'

Donatti was waiting outside the unmarked room with a man who was wearing a **SMILE** sweatshirt and carrying a .38. He was built like an ape.

'Listen,' Morrison said to Donatti. 'We can work something out, can't we? I'll pay you. I'll-'

'Shaddap,' the man in the SMILE sweatshirt said.

'It's good to see you,' Donatti said. 'Sorry it has to be under such adverse circumstances. Will you come with me? We'll make this as brief as possible. I can assure you your wife won't be hurt. . . this time.'

Morrison tensed himself to leap at Donatti.

'Come, come,' Donatti said, looking annoyed. 'If you do that, Junk here is going to pistol-whip you and your wife is still going to get it. Now where's the percentage in that?'

'I hope you rot in hell,' he told Donatti.

Donatti sighed. 'If I had a nickel for every time someone expressed a similar sentiment, I could retire. Let it be a lesson to you, Mr Morrison. When a romantic tries to do a good thing and fails, they give him a medal. When a pragmatist succeeds, they wish him in hell. Shall we go?'

Junk motioned with the pistol.

Morrison preceded them into the room. He felt numb.

The small green curtain had been pulled. Junk prodded him with the gun. This is what being a witness at the gas chamber must have been like, he thought.

He looked in. Cindy was there, looking around bewilderedly.

'Cindy!' Morrison called miserably. 'Cindy, they -'

'She can't hear or see you,' Donatti said. 'One-way glass. Well, let's get it over with. It really was a very small slip. I believe thirty

seconds should be enough. Junk?'

Junk pressed the button with one hand and kept the pistol jammed firmly into Morrison's back with the other.

It was the longest thirty seconds of his life.

When it was over, Donatti put a hand on Morrison's shoulder and said, 'Are you going to throw up?'

'No,' Morrison said weakly. His forehead was against the glass. His legs were jelly. 'I don't think so.' He turned around and saw that Junk was gone.

'Come with me,' Donatti said.

'Where?' Morrison asked apathetically.

'I think you have a few things to explain, don't you?'

'How can I face her? How can I tell her that I. . .I . . 'I think you're going to be surprised,' Donatti said.

The room was empty except for a sofa. Cindy was on it, sobbing helplessly.

'Cindy?' he said gently.

She looked up, her eyes magnified by tears. 'Dick?' she whispered. 'Dick? Oh . . . Oh God . . .' He held her tightly. 'Two men,' she said against his chest. 'In the house and at first I thought they were burglars and then I thought they were going to rape me and then they took me someplace with a blindfold over my eyes and. . . and. . . oh it was *h-horrible -'*

'Shhh,' he said. 'Shhh.'

'But why?' she asked, looking up at him. 'Why would they -'

'Because of me,' he said 'I have to tell you a story, Cindy -'

When he had finished he was silent a moment and then said, 'I suppose you hate me. I wouldn't blame you.'

He was looking at the floor, and she took his face in both hands and turned it to hers. 'No,' she said. 'I don't hate you.'

He looked at her in mute surprise.

'It was worth it,' she said. 'God bless these people. They've let you out of prison.'

'Do you mean that?'

'Yes,' she said, and kissed him. 'Can we go home now? I feel much better. Ever so much.'

The phone rang one evening a week later, and when Morrison recognized Donatti's voice, he said, 'Your boys have got it wrong. I haven't even been near a cigarette.'

'We know that. We have a final matter to talk over. Can you stop by tomorrow afternoon?'

'Is it -,

'No, nothing serious. Book-keeping really. By the way, congratulations on your promotion.'

'How did you know about that?'

'We're keeping tabs,' Donatti said noncommittally, and hungup.

When they entered the small room, Donatti said, 'Don't look so nervous. No one's going to bite you. Step over here, please.'

Morrison saw an ordinary bathroom scale. 'Listen, I've gained a little weight, but -'

'Yes, seventy-three per cent of our clients do. Step up, please.'

Morrison did, and tipped the scales at one seventy-four.

'Okay, fine. You can step off. How tall are you, Mr Morrison?'

'Five-eleven.'

'Okay, let's see.' He pulled a small card laminated in plastic from his breast pocket. 'Well, that's not too bad. I'm going to write you a prescrip for some highly illegal diet pills. Use them sparingly and according to directions. And I'm going to set your maximum weight at. . . let's see . .

He consulted the card again. 'One eighty-two, how does that sound? And since this is December first, I'll expect you the first of every month for a weigh-in. No problem if you can't make it, as long as you call in advance.'

'And what happens if I go over one-eighty-two?'

Donatti smiled. 'We'll send someone out to your house to cut off your wife's little finger,' he said. 'You can leave through this door, Mr Morrison. Have a nice day.'

Eight months later:

Morrison runs into the crony from the Larkin Studios at Dempsey's bar. Morrison is down to what Cindy proudly calls his fighting weight: one sixty-seven. He works out three times a week and looks as fit as whipcord. The crony from Larkin, by comparison, looks like something the cat dragged in.

Crony: Lord, how'd you ever stop? I'm locked into this damn habit tighter than Tillie. The crony stubs his cigarette out with real revulsion and drains his scotch.

Morrison looks at him speculatively and then takes a small white business card out of his wallet. He puts it on the bar between them. You know, he says, these guys changed my life.

Twelve months later:

Morrison receives a bill in the mail. The bill says:

QUITTERS ,INC.

237 East 46th Street

New York, N.Y. 10017

1 Treatment $2500.00

Counsellor (Victor Donatti) $2500.00

Electricity $ .50

TOTAL (Please pay this amount) $5000.50

Those sons of bitches! he explodes. They charged me for the electricity they used to. . . to

Just pay it, she says, and kisses him.

Twenty months later:

Quite by accident, Morrison and his wife meet the Jimmy McCanns at the Helen Hayes Theatre. Introductions are made all around. Jimmy looks as good, if not better than he did on that day in the airport terminal so long ago. Morrison has never met his wife. She is pretty in the radiant way plain girls sometimes have when they are very, very happy.

She offers her hand and Morrison shakes it. There is something odd about her grip, and halfway through the second act, he realizes what it was. The little finger on her right hand is missing.

Stephen King: Survivor Type

ELECTRONIC VERSION 1.0 (Apr 02 00). If you find and correct errors in the text, please update the version number by 0.1 and redistribute.

Sooner or later the question comes up in every medical student's career. How much shock-trauma can the patient stand? Different instructors answer the question, in different ways, but cut to its base level, the answer is always another question: How badly does the patient want to survive?

January 26

Two days since the storm washed me up. I paced the island off just this morning. Some island! It is 190 paces wide at its thickest point, and 267 paces long from tip to tip

So far as I can tell, there is nothing on it to eat.

My name is Richard Pine. This is my diary. If I'm found *(when),* I can destroy this easily enough. There is no shortage of matches. Matches and heroin. Plenty of both. Neither of them worth doodlysquat here, ha-ha. So I will write. It will pass the time, anyway.

If I'm to tell the whole truth--and why not? I sure have the time!--I'll have to start by saying I was born Richard Pinzetti, in New York's Little Italy. My father was an Old World guinea. I wanted to be a surgeon. My father would laugh, call me crazy, and tell me to get him another glass of wine. He died of cancer when he was forty-six. I was glad.

I played football in high school. I was the best damn football player my school ever produced. Quarterback. I made All-City my last two years. I hated football. But if you're a poor wop from the projects and you want to go to college, sports are your only ticket. So I played, and I got my athletic scholarship.

In college I only played ball until my grades were good enough to get a full academic scholarship. Pre-med. My father died six weeks before graduation. Good deal. Do you think I wanted to walk across that stage and get my diploma and look down and see that fat greaseball sitting there? Does a hen want a flag? I got into a fraternity, too. It wasn't one of the good ones, not with a name like Pinzetti, but a fraternity all the same.

Why am I writing this? It's almost funny. No, I take that back. It *is* funny. The great Dr. Pine, sitting on a rock in his pajama bottoms and a T-shirt, sitting on an island almost small enough to spit across, writing his life story. Am I hungry! Never mind, I'I1 write my goddam life story if I want to. At least it keeps my mind off my stomach. Sort of.

I changed my name to Pine before I started reed school. My mother said I was breaking her heart. What heart? The day after my old man was in the ground, she was out hustling that Jew grocer down at the end of the block. For someone who loved the name so much, she was in one hell of a

hurry to change her copy of it to Steinbrunner.

Surgery was all I ever wanted. Ever since high school. Even then I was wrapping my hands before every game and soaking them afterward. If you want to be a surgeon, you have to take care of your hands. Some of the kids used to rag me about it, call me chickenshit. I never fought them. Playing football was risk enough. But there were ways. The one that got on my case the most was Howie Plotsky, a big dumb bohunk with zits all over his face. I had a paper route, and I was selling the numbers along with the papers. I had a little coming in lots of ways. You get to know people, you listen, you make connections. You have to, when you're hustling the street. Any asshole knows how to die. The thing to learn is how to survive, you know what I mean? So I paid the biggest kid in school, Ricky Brazzi, ten bucks to make Howie Plotsky's mouth disappear. Make it disappear, I said. I will pay you a dollar for every tooth you bring me. Rico brought me three teeth wrapped up in a paper towel. He dislocated two of his knuckles doing the job, so you see the kind of trouble I could have got into.

In med school while the other suckers were running themselves ragged trying to bone up--no pun intended, ha-ha--between waiting tables or selling neckties or buffing floors, I kept the rackets going. Football pools, basketball pools, a little policy. I stayed on good terms with the old neighborhood. And I got through school just fine.

I didn't get into pushing until I was doing my residency. 1 was working in one of the biggest hospitals in New York City. At first it was just prescription blanks. I'd sell a tablet of a hundred blanks to some guy from the neighborhood, and he'd forge the names of forty or fifty different doctors on them, using writing samples I'd also sell him. The guy would turn around and peddle the blanks on the street for ten or twenty dollars apiece. The speed freaks and the nodders loved it.

And after a while I found out just how much of a balls-up the hospital drug room was in. Nobody knew what was coming in or going out. There were people lugging the goodies out by the double handfuls. Not me. I was always careful. I never got into trouble until I got careless--and unlucky. But I'm going to land on my feet. I always do.

Can't write any more now. My wrist's tired and the pencil's dull. I don't know why I'm bothering, anyway. Somebody'll probably pick me up soon.

January 27

The boat drifted away last night and sank in about ten feet of water off the north side of the island. Who gives a rip? The bottom was like Swiss cheese after coming over the reef anyway. I'd already taken off anything that was worth taking. Four gallons of water. A sewing kit. A first-aid kit. This book I'm writing in, which is supposed to be a lifeboat inspection log. That's a laugh. Whoever heard of a lifeboat with no FOOD on it? The last report written in here is August 8, 1970. Oh, yes, two knives, one dull and one fairly sharp, one combination fork and spoon. I'll use them when I eat my supper tonight. Roast rock. Ha-ha. Well, I did get my pencil sharpened.

When I get off this pile of guano-splattered rock, I'm going to sue the bloody hell out of Paradise Lines, Inc. That alone is worth living for. And I am going to live. I'm going to get out of this. Make

no mistake about it. I am going to get out of this.

(later)

When I was making my inventory, I forgot one thing: two kilos of pure heroin, worth about $350,000, New York street value. Here it's worth el zilcho. Sort of funny, isn't it? Ha-ha!

January 28

Well, I've eaten if you want to call that eating. There was a gull perched on one of the rocks at the center of the island. The rocks are all jumbled up into a kind of mini-mountain there all covered with birdshit, too. I got a chunk of stone that just fitted into my hand and climbed up as close to it as I dared. It just stood there on its rock, watching me with its bright black eyes. I'm surprised that the rumbling of my stomach didn't scare it off.

I threw the rock as hard as I could and hit it broadside. It let out a loud squawk and tried to fly away, but I'd broken its right wing. I scrambled up after it and it hopped away. I could see the blood trickling over its white feathers. The son of a bitch led me a merry, chase; once, on the other side of the central rockpile, I got my foot caught in a hole between two rocks and nearly fractured my ankle.

It began to tire at last, and I finally caught it on the east side of the island. It was actually trying to get into the water and paddle away. I caught a handful of its tailfeathers and it turned around and pecked me. Then I had one hand around its feet. I got my other hand on its miserable neck and broke it. The sound gave me great satisfaction. Lunch is served, you know? Ha! Ha!

I carried it back to my "camp," but even before I plucked and gutted it, I used iodine to swab the laceration its beak had made. Birds carry all sorts of germs, and the last thing I need now is an infection.

The operation on the gull went quite smoothly, I could not cook it, alas. Absolutely no vegetation or driftwood on the island and the boat has sunk. So I ate it raw. My stomach wanted to regurgitate it immediately. I sympathized but could not allow it. I counted backward until the nausea passed. It almost always works.

Can you imagine that bird, almost breaking my ankle and then pecking me? If I catch another one tomorrow, I'll torture it. I let this one off too easily. Even as I write, I am able to glance down at its severed head on the sand. Its black eyes, even with the death-glaze on them, seem to be mocking me. Do gulls have brains in any quantity'? Are they edible?

January 29

No chow today. One gull landed near the top of the rockpile but flew off before I could get close enough to "throw it a forward pass," ha-ha! I've started a beard. Itches like hell. If the gull comes

back and I get it, I'm going to cut its eyes out before I kill it.

I was one hell of a surgeon, as I believe I may have said. They drummed me out. It's a laugh, really: they all do it, and they' re so bloody sanctimonious when someone gets caught at it. Screw you, Jack, I got mine. The Second Oath of Hippocrates and Hypocrites.

I had enough socked away from my adventures as an intern and a resident (that's supposed to be like an officer and a gentleman according to the Oath of Hypocrites, but don't you believe it) to set myself up in practice on Park Avenue. A good thing for me, to; I had no rich daddy or established patron, as so many of my "colleagues" did. By the time my shingle was out, my father was nine years in his pauper's grave. My mother died the year before my license to practice was revoked.

It was a kickback thing. I had a deal going with half a dozen East Side pharmacists, with two drug supply houses, and with at least twenty other doctors. Patients were sent to me and I sent patients. I performed operations and prescribed the correct post-op drugs. Not all the operations were necessary, but I never performed one against a patient's will. And 1 never had a patient look down at what was written on the prescrip blank and say, "I don't want this." Listen: they'd have a hysterectomy in 1965 or a partial thyroid in 1970, and still be taking painkillers five or ten years later, if you'd let them. Sometimes I did. I wasn't the only one, you know. They could afford the habit. And sometimes a patient would have trouble sleeping after minor surgery. Or trouble getting diet pills. Or Librium. It could alol be arranged. Ha! Yes! If they hadn't gotten it from me, they would have gotten it from someone else.

Then the tax people got to Lowenthal. That sheep. They waved five years in his face and he coughed up half a dozen names. One of them was mine. They watched me for a while, and by the time they landed, I was worth a lot more than five years. There were a few other deals, including the prescription blanks, which I hadn't given up entirely. It's funny, I didn't really need that stuff anymore, but it was a habit. Hard to give up that extra sugar.

Well, I knew some people. I pulled some strings. And I threw a couple of people to the wolves. Nobody I liked, though. Everyone I gave to the leds was a real son of a bitch. Christ, I'm hungry.

January 30

No gulls today. Reminds me of the signs you'd sometimes see on the pushcarts back in the neighborhood, so TOMATOES TODAY. I walked out into the water up to my waist with the sharp knife in my hand. I stood completely still in that one place with the sun beating down on me for four hours. Twice I thought I was going to faint, but I counted backward until it passed. I didn't see one fish. Not one.

January 31

Killed another gull, the same way I did the first. I was too hungry to torture it the way I had been promising myself. I gutted and ate it. Squeezed the tripes and then ate them, too. It's strange how you can feel your vitality surge back I was beginning to get scared there, for a while. Lying in the shade of the big central rockpile, i'd think i was hearing voices. My father. My mother. My ex-wife. And worst of all the big Chink who sold me the heroin in Saigon. He had a lisp, possibly from a partially cleft, palate.

"Go ahead," his voice came out of nowhere. "Go ahead and thnort a little. You won't notith how hungry you are then. It'h beautiful ..." But I've never done dope, not even sleeping pills.

Lowenthal killed himself, did I tell you that? That sheep. He hanged himself in what used to be his office. The way I look at it, he did the world a favor.

I wanted my shingle back. Some of the people I talked to said it could be done--but it would cost big money. More grease than I'd ever dreamed of. I had $40,000 in a safe-deposit box. I decided I'd have to take a chance and try to turn it over. Double or triple it.

So I went to see Ronnie Hanelli. Ronnie and I played football together in college, and when his kid brother decided on internal med, I helped him get a residency. Ronnie himself was in pre-law, how's that for funny? On the block when we were growing up we called him Ronnie the Enforcer because he umped all the stickball games and reffed the hockey. If you didn't like his calls, you had your choice--you could keep your mouth shut or you could eat knuckles. The Puerto Ricans called him *Ronniewop.* All one word like that. *Ronniewop.* Used to tickle him. And that guy went to college, and then to law school, and he breezed through his bar exam the first time he took it, and then he set up shop in the old neighborhood, right over the Fish Bowl Bar. I close my eyes and I can still see him cruising down the block in that white Continental of his. The biggest fucking loan shark in the city.

I knew Ronnie would have something for me. "It's dangerous," he said. "But you could always take care of yourself. And if you can get the stuff back in, I'll introduce you to a couple of fellows. One of them is a state representative."

He gave me two names over there. One of them was the big Chink, Henry Li-Tsu. The other was a Vietnamese named Solom Ngo. A chemist. For a fee he would test the Chink's product. The Chink was known to play "jokes" from time to time. The "jokes" were plastic bags filled with talcum powder, with drain cleaner, with cornstarch. Ronnie said that one day Li-Tsu's little jokes would get him killed.

February 1

There was a plane. It flew right across the island. I tried to climb to the top of the rockpile and wave to it. My foot went into a hole. The same damn hole I got it stuck in the day I killed the first bird, I think. I've fractured my ankle, compound fracture. It went like a gunshot. The pain was unbelievable. I screamed and lost my balance, pinwheeling my arms like a madman, but I went down and hit my head and everything went black. I didn't wake up until dusk. I lost some blood where I hit my head. My ankle had swelled up like a tire, and I'd got myself a very nasty sunburn. I think if there had been another hour of sun, it would have blistered.

Dragged myself back here and spent last night shivering and crying with frustration. I disinfected the head wound, which is just above the right temporal lobe, and bandaged it as well as I could. Just a superficial scalp wound plus minor concussion, I think, but my ankle ... it's a bad break, involved in two places, possibly three.

How will I chase the birds now?

It had to be a plane looking for survivors from the *Callas.* In the dark and the storm, the lifeboat must have carried miles from where it sank. They may not be back this way.

God, my ankle hurts so bad.

February 2

I made a sign on the small white shingle of a beach on the island's south side, where the lifeboat grounded. It took me all day, with pauses to rest in the shade. Even so, I fainted twice. At a guess, I'd say I've lost 25 lbs, mostly from dehydration. But now, from where I sit, I can see the four letters it took me all day to spell out; dark rocks against the white sand, they say HELP in characters four feet high.

Another plane won't miss me.

If there is another plane.

My foot throbs constantly. There is swelling still and ominous discoloration around the double break. Discoloration seems to have advanced. Binding it tightly with my shirt alleviates the worst of the pain, but it's still bad enough so that I faint rather than sleep.

I have begun to think I may have to amputate.

February 3

Swelling and discoloration worse still. I'll wait until tomorrow. If the operation does become necessary, I believe I can carry it through. I have matches for sterilizing the sharp knife, I have needle and thread from the sewing kit. My shirt for a bandage.

I even have two kilos of "painkiller," although hardly of the type i used to prescribe. But they would have taken it if they could have gotten it. You bet. Those old blue-haired ladies would have snorted Glade air freshener if they thought it would have gotten them high. Believe it!

February 4

I've decided to amputate my foot. No food four days now. If I wait any longer, I run the risk of fainting from combined shock and hunger in the middle of the operation and bleeding to death. And as wretched as I am, I still want to live. I remember what Mockridge used to say in Basic Anatomy. Old Mockie, we used to call him. Sooner or later, he'd say, the question comes up in every medical student's career: How much shock-trauma can the patient stand'? And he'd whack his pointer at his chart of the human body, hitting the liver, the kidneys, the heart, the spleen, the intestines Cut to its base level, gentlemen, he'd say. the answer is always another question: How badly does the patient want to survive?

I think I can bring it off.

I really do.

I suppose I'm writing to put off the inevitable, but it did occur to me that I haven't finished the story of how I came to be here. Perhaps I should tie up that loose end in case the operation does go badly. It will only take a few minutes, and I'm sure there will be enough daylight left for the operation, for, according to my Pulsar, it's only nine past nine in the morning. Ha!

I flew to Saigon as a tourist. Does that sound strange? It shouldn't. There are still thousands of people who visit there every year in spite of Nixon's war. There are people who go to see car wrecks and cockfights, too.

My Chinese friend had the merchandise. I took it to Ngo, who pronounced it very. high-grade stuff. He told me that Li-Tsu had played one of his jokes four months ago and that his wife had been blown up when she turned on the ignition of her Opel. Since then there had been no more jokes.

I stayed in Saigon for three weeks; I had booked passage back to San Francisco on a cruise ship, the *Callas.* First cabin. Getting on board with the merchandise was no trouble; for a fee Ngo arranged for two customs officials to simply wave me on after running through my suitcases. The merchandise was in an airline flight bag, which they never even looked at.

"Getting through U.S. customs will be much more difficult," Ngo told me. "That, however, is your problem."

I had no intention of taking the merchandise through U.S. customs. Ronnie Hanelli had arranged for a skin diver who would do a certain rather tricky job for $3,000. I was to meet him (two days ago, now that I think of it) in a San Francisco flophouse called the St. Regis Hotel. The plan was to put the merchandise in a waterproof can. Attacned to the can was a timer and a packet of red dye. Just before we docked, the canister was to be thrown overboard--but not by me, of course.

I was still looking for a cook or a steward who could use a little extra cash and who was smart enough--or stupid enough--to keep his mouth closed afterward, when the *Callas* sank.

I don't know how or why. It was storming, but the ship seemed to be handling that well enough. Around eight o'clock on the evening of the 23rd, there was an explosion somewhere belowdecks. I was in the lounge at the time, and the *Callas* began to list almost immediately. To the left ... do they call that "port" or "starboard"?

People were screaming and running in every direction. Bottles were falling off the backbar and shattering on the floor. A man staggered up from one of the lower levels, his shirt burned off, his skin barbecued. The loudspeker started telling people to go to the lifeboat stations they had been assigned during the drill at the beginning of the cruise. The passengers went right on running hither and yon. Very few of them had bothered to show up during the lifeboat drill. I not only showed up, I came early--I wanted to be in the front row, you see, so I would have an unobstructed view of everything. I always pay close attention when the matter concerns my own skin.

I went down to my stateroom, got the heroin bags, and put one in each of my front pockets. Then I went to Lifeboat Station 8. As I went up the stairwell to the main deck there were two more explosions and the boat began to list even more severely.

Topside, everything was confusion. I saw a screeching woman with a baby in her arms run past me, gaining speed as she sprinted down the slippery, canting deck. She hit the rail with her thighs, and flipped outward. I saw her do two midair somersaults and part of a third before I lost sight of her. There was a middle-aged man sitting in the center of the shuffleboard court and pulling his hair. Another man in cook's whites, horribly burned about his face and hands, was stumbling from place to place and screaming, "HELP ME! CAN'T SEE! HELP ME! CAN'T SEE!"

The panic was almost total: it had run from the passengers to the crew like a disease. You must remember that the time elapsed from the first explosion to the actual sinking of the *Callas* was only about twenty minutes. Some of the lifeboat stations were clogged with screaming passengers, while others were absolutely empty. Mine, on the listing side of the ship, was almost deserted. There was no one there but myself and a common sailor with a pimply, pallid face.

"Let's get this buckety-bottomed old whore in the water," he said, his eyes rolling crazily in their seekers. "This bloody tub is going straight to the bottom."

The lifeboat gear is simple enough to operate, but in his fumbling nervousness, he got his side of the block and tackle tangled. The boat dropped six feet and then hung up, the bow two feet lower than the stem.

I was coming around to help him when he began to scream. He'd succeeded in untangling the snarl and had gotten his hand caught at the same time. The whizzing rope smoked over his open palm, flaying off skin, and he was jerked over the side.

I tossed the rope ladder overboard, hurried down it, and unclipped the lifeboat from the lowering ropes. Then I rowed, something i had occasionally done for pleasure on trips to my friends' summer houses, something I was now doing for my life. I knew that if I didn't get far enough away from the dying *Callas* before she sank, she would pull me down with her.

Just five minutes later she went. I hadn't escaped the suction entirely; I had to row madly just to stay in the samne place. She went under very quickly. There were still people clinging to the rail of her bow and screaming. They looked like a bunch of monkeys.

The storm worsened. I lost one oar but managed to keep the other, i spent that whole night in a kind of dream, first bailing, then grabbing the oar and paddling wildly to get the boat's prow into the next bulking wave.

Sometime before dawn on the 24th, the waves began to strengthen behind me. The boat rushed forward. It was terrifying but at the same time exhilarating. Suddenly most of the planking was ripped out from under my feet, but before the lifeboat could sink it was dumped on this godforsaken pile of rocks. I don't even know where I am: have no idea at all. Navigation not my strong point, ha-ha.

But I know what I have to do. This may be the last entry, but somehow I think I'll make it. Haven't I always'? And they are really doing marvelous things with prosthetics these days. I can get along with one foot quite nicely.

It's time to see if I'm as good as I think I am. Luck.

February 5

Did it.

The pain was the part I was most worded about. I can stand pain, but I thought that in my weakened condition, a combination of hunger and agony might force unconsciousness before I could finish.

But the heroin solved that quite nicely.

I opened one of the bags and sniffed two healthy pinches from the surface of a flat rock, first the right nostril, then the left. it was like sniffing up some beautifully numbing ice that spread through the brain from the bottom up. I aspirated the heroin as soon as I finished writing in this diary yesterday--that was at 9:45. The next time I checked my watch the shadows had moved, leaving me partially in the sun, and the time was 12:41. I had nodded off. I had never dreamed that it could be so beautiful, and I can't understand why I was so scornful before. The pain, the terror, the misery . . . they all disappear, leaving only a calm euphoria.

It was in this state that I operated.

There was, indeed, a great deal of pain, most of it in the early part of the operation. But the pain seemed disconnected from me, like somebody else's pain. It bothered me, but it was also quite interesting. Can you understand that? If you've used a strong morphine-based drug yourself, perhaps you can. It does more than dull pain. It induces a state of mind. A serenity. I can understand whv people get hooked on it, although "hooked" seems an awfully strong word, used most commonly, of course, by those who have never tried it.

About halfway through, the pain started to become a more personal thing. Waves of faintness washed over me. I looked longingly at the open bag of white powder, but forced myself to look away. If I went on the nod again, I'd bleed to death as surely as if I'd fainted. I counted backward from a hundred instead.

Loss of blood was the most critical factor. As a surgeon, I was vitally aware of that. Not a drop could be spilled unnecessarily. If a patient hemorrhages during an operation in a hospital, you can give him blood. I had no such supplies. What was lost--and by the time I had finished, the sand beneath my leg was dark with it--was lost until my own internal factory could resupply. I had no clamps, no hemostats, no surgical thread.

I began the operation at exactly 12:45. I finished at 1:50, and immediately dosed myself with heroin, a bigger dose than before. I nodded into a gray, painless world and remained there until nearly five o'clock. When I came out of it, the sun was nearing the western horizon, beating a track of gold across the blue Pacific toward me. I've never seen anything so beautiful . . . all the pain was paid for in that one instant. An hour later I snorted a bit more, so as to fully enjoy and appreciate the sunset.

Shortly after dark I--

I--

Wait. Haven't I told you I'd had nothing to eat *for four days?* And that the only help I could look to in the matter of replenishing my sapped vitality was my own body? Above all, haven't i told you, over and over, that survival is a business of the mind? The superior mind? i won't justify myself by saying you would have done the same thing. First of all, you're probably not a surgeon. Even if you knew the mechanics of amputation, you might have botched the job so badly you would have bled to death anyway. And even if you had lived through the operation and the shock-trauma, the thought might never have entered your preconditioned head. Never mind. No one has to know. My last act before leaving the island will be to destroy this book.

I was very careful.

I washed it thoroughly before I ate it.

February 7

Pain from the stump has been bad excruciating from time to time. But I think the deep-seated itch as the healing process begins has been worse. I've been thinking this afternoon of all the patients that have babbled to me that they couldn't stand the horrible, unscratchable itch of mending flesh. And I would smile and tell them they would feel better tomorrow, privately thinking what whiners they were, what jellyfish, what ungrateful babies. Now I understand. Several times I've come close to ripping the shirt bandage off the stump and scratching at it, digging my fingers into the soft raw flesh, pulling out the rough stitches, letting the blood gout onto the sand, anything, anything, to be rid of that maddening horrible *itch.*

At those times I count backward from one hundred. And snort heroin.

I have no idea how much I've taken into my system, but I do know I've been "stoned" almost continually since the operation. It depresses hunger, you know. I'm hardly aware of being hungry at all. There is a faint, faraway gnawing in my belly, and that's all. It could easily be ignored. I can't do that, though. Heroin has no measurable caloric value. I've been testing myself, crawling from place to place, measuring my energy. It's ebbing.

Dear God, I hope not, but ... another operation may be necessary.

(later)

Another plane flew over. Too high to do me any good; all I could see was the contrail etching itself across the sky. I waved anyway. Waved and screamed at it. When it was gone I wept.

Getting too dark to see now. Food. I've been thinking about all kinds of food. My mother's lasagna. Garlic bread. Escargots. Lobster. Prime fibs. Peach melba. London broil. The huge slice of pound cake and the scoop of homemade vanilla ice cream they give you for dessert in Mother Crunch on First Avenue. Hot pretzels baked salmon baked Alaska baked ham with pineapple tings. Onion rings. Onion dip with potato chips cold iced tea in long long sips french fries make you smack your lips.

100, 99, 98, 97, 96, 95, 94

God God God

February 8

Another gull landed on the rockpile this morning. A huge fat one. I was sitting in the shade of my rock, what I think of as my camp, my bandaged stump propped up. I began to salivate as soon as the gull landed. Just like one of Pavlov's dogs. Drooling helplessly, like a baby. Like a baby.

I picked up a chunk of stone large enough to fit my hand nicely and began to crawl toward it. Fourth quarter. We' re down by three. Third and long yardage. Pinzetti drops back to pass (Pine, I mean, *Pine).* I didn't have much hope. I was sure it would fly off. But I had to try. If I could get it, a bird as plump and insolent as that one, I could postpone a second operation indefinitely. I crawled toward it, my stump hitting a rock from time to time and sending stars of pain through my whole body, and waited for it to fly off.

It didn't. It just strutted back and forth, its meaty breast thrown out like some avian general reviewing troops. Every now and then it would look at me with its small, nasty black eyes and I would freeze like a stone and count backward from one hundred until it began to pace back and forth again. Every time it fluttered its wings, my stomach filled up with ice. I continued to drool. I couldn't help it. I was drooling tike a baby.

I don't know how long I stalked it. An hour? Two? And the closer I got, the harder my heart pounded and the tastier that gull looked. It almost seemed to be teasing me, and I began to believe that as soon as I got in throwing range it would fly off. My arms and legs were beginning to tremble. My mouth was dry. The stump was twanging viciously. 1 think now that I must have been having withdrawal pains. But so soon? I've been using the stuff less than a week!

Never mind. I need it. There's plenty left, plenty. If I have to take the cure later on when I get back to the States, I'll check into the best clinic in California and do it with a smile. That's not the problem right now, is it?

When I did get in range, I didn't want to throw the rock. I became insanely sure that I would miss, probably by feet. I had to get closer. So I continued to crawl up the rockpile, my head thrown back, the sweat pouring off my wasted, scarecrow body. My teeth have begun to rot, did I tell you that? If I were a superstitious man, I'd say it was because I ate--

Ha! We know better, don't we?

I stopped again. I was much closer to it than I had been to either of the other gulls. I still couldn't bring myself to commit. I clutched the rock until my fingers ached and still I couldn't throw it. Because I knew exactly what it would mean if I missed.

I don't care if I use all the merchandise! I'll sue the ass off them! I'll be in clover for the rest of my life! *My long long life!*

I think I would have crawled right up to it without throwing if it hadn't finally taken wing. I would

have crept up and strangled it. But it spread its wings and took off. I screamed at it and reared up on my knees and threw my rock with all my strength. And I hit it!

The bird gave a strangled squawk and fell back on the other side of the rockpile. Gibbering and laughing, unmindful now of striking the stump or opening the wound, I crawled over the top and to the other side. I lost my balance and banged my head. I didn't even notice it, not then, although it has raised a pretty nasty lump. All I could think of was the bird and how I had hit it, fantastic luck, even on the wing I had hit it!

It was flopping down toward the beach on the other side, one wing broken, its underbody red with blood. I crawled as fast as I could, but it crawled faster yet. Race of the cripples! Ha! Ha! I might have gotten it I was closing the distance except for my hands. I have to take good care of my hands. I may need them again. In spite of my care, the palms were scraped by the time we reached the narrow shingle of beach, and I'd shattered the face of my Pulsar watch against a rough spine of rock.

The gull flopped into the water, squawking noisomely, and I clutched at it. i got a handful of tailfeathers, which came off in rny fist. Then I fell in, inhaling water, snorting and choking.

I crawled in further. I even tried to swim after it. The bandage came off my stump. I began to go under. I just managed to get back to the beach, shaking with exhaustion, racked with pain, weeping and screaming, cursing the gull. It floated there for a long time, always further and further out. I seem to remember begging it to come back at one point. But when it went out over the reef, I think it was dead.

It isn't fair.

It took me almost an hour to crawl back around to my camp. I've snorted a large amount of heroin, but even so I'm bitterly angry at the gull. If I wasn't going to get it, why did it have to tease me so'? Why didn't it just fly off?

February 9

I've amputated my left foot and have bandaged it with my pants. Strange. All through the operation I was drooling. Drooooling. Just like when I saw the gull. Drooling helplessly. But I made myself wait until after dark. I just counted backward from one hundred . . . twenty or thirty times! Ha! Ha!

Then . . .

I kept telling myself: Cold roast beef. Cold roast beef. Cold roast beef.

February 11 (?)

Rain the last two days. And high winds. I managed to move some rocks from the central pile, enough to make a hole I could crawl into. Found one small spider. Pinched it between my fingers before he could get away and ate him up. Very nice. Juicy. Thought to myself that the rocks over me might fall and bury me alive. Didn't care.

Spent the whole storm stoned. Maybe it rained three days instead of two. Or only one. But I think it got dark twice. I love to nod off. No pain or itching then. I know I'm going to survive this. It can't be a person can go through something like this for nothing.

There was a priest at Holy Family when I was a kid, a little runty guy, and he used to love to talk about hell and mortal sins. He had a real hobbyhorse on them. You can't get back from a mortal sin, that was his view. I dreamed about him last night, Father Hailly in his black bathrobe, and his whiskey nose, shaking his finger at me and saying, "Shame on you, Richard Pinzetti . . . a mortal sin . . . damt to hell, boy . . .damt to hell . . ."

I laughed at him. If this place isn't hell, what is'? And the only mortal sin is giving up.

Half of the time I'm delirious; the rest of the time my stumps itch and the dampness makes them ache horribly.

But I won't give up. I swear. Not for nothing. Not all this for nothing.

February 12

Sun is out again, a beautiful day. I hope they're freezing their asses off in the neighborhood.

It's been a good day for me, as good as any day gets on this island. The fever I had while it was storming seems to have dropped. I was weak and shivering when I crawled out of my burrow, but after lying on the hot sand in the sunshine for two or three hours, I began to feel almost human again.

Crawled around to the south side and found several pieces of driftwood cast up by the storm, including several boards from my lifeboat. There was kelp and seaweed on some of the boards. I ate it. Tasted awful. Like eating a vinyl shower curtain. But I felt so much stronger this afternoon.

I pulled the wood up as far as I could so it would dry. I've still got a whole tube of waterproof matches. The wood will make a signal fire if someone comes soon. A cooking fire if not. I'm going to snort up now.

February 13

Found a crab. Killed it and roasted it over a small fire. Tonight I could almost believe in God again.

Feb 14

I just noticed this morning that the storm washed away most of the rocks in my HELP sign. But the storm ended... three days ago? Have I really been that stoned? I'll have to watch it, cut down the dosage. What if a ship went by while I was nodding?

I made the letters again, but it took me most of the day and now I'm exhausted. Looked for a crab where I found the other, but nothing. Cut my hands on several of the rocks I used for the sign, but disinfected them promptly with iodine in spite of my weariness. Have to take care of my hands. No

matter what.

Feb 15

A gull landed on the tip of the rockpile today. Flew away before I could get in range. I wished it into hell, where it could peck out Father Hailley's bloodshot little eyes through eternity.

Ha! Ha!

Ha! Ha!

Ha!

Feb 17(?)

Took off my right leg at the knee, but lost a lot of blood. Pain excruciating in spite of heroin. Shock-trauma would have killed a lesser man. Let me answer with a question: How badly does the patient want to survive? *How badly does the patient want to live?*

Hands trembling. If they are betraying me, I'm through. They have no right to betray me. No right at all. I've taken care of them all their lives. Pampered them. They better not. Or they'll be sorry.

At least I'm not hungry.

One of the boards from the lifeboat had split down the middle. One end came to a point. I used that. I was drooling but I made myself wait. And then I got thinking of . . . oh, barbecues we used to have. That place Will Hammersmith had on Long Island, with a barbecue pit big enough to roast a whole pig in. We'd be sitting on the porch in the dusk with big drinks in our hands, talking about surgical techniques or golf scores or something. And the breeze would pick up and drift the sweet smell of roasting pork over to us. Judas Iscariot, the sweet smell of roasting pork.

Feb?

Took the other leg at the knee. Sleepy all day. "Doctor was this operation necessay?" Haha. Shaky hands, like an old man. Hate them. Blood under the fingernails. Scabs. Remember that model in med school with the glass belly? I feel like that. Only I don't want to look. No way no how. I remember Dom used to say that. Waltz up to you on the street comer in his Hiway Outlaws club jacket. You'd say Dom how'd you make out with her'? And Dom would say no way no how. Shee. Old Dom. I wish I'd stayed right in the neighborhood. This sucks so bad as Dom would say. haha.

But I understand, you know, that with the proper therapy, and prosthetics, I could be as good as new. I could come back here and tell people "This. Is where it. Happened."

Hahaha!

February 23 (?)

Found a dead fish. Rotten and stinking. Ate it anyway. Wanted to puke, wouldn't let myself. *I will*

survive. So lovely stoned, the sunsets.

February

Don't dare but have to. But how can I tie off the femoral artery that high up? It's as big as a fucking turnpike up there.

Must, somehow. I've marked across the top of the thigh, the part that is still meaty. I made the mark with this pencil.

I wish I could stop drooling.

Fe

You . . . deserve . . . a break today . . . sooo… get up and get away ... to McDonald's ,.. two all-beef patties ... special sauce… lettuce… pickles… onions... on a . . . sesame seed bun . . .

Dee... deedee… dundadee . . .

Febba

Looked at my face in the water today. Nothing but a skin-covered skull. Am I insane yet? I must be. I'm a monster now, a freak. Nothing left below the groin. Just a freak. A head attached to a torso dragging itself along the sand by the elbows. A crab. A *stoned* crab. Isn't that what they call themselves now? Hey man I'm just a poor stoned crab can you spare me a dime.

Hahahaha

They say you are what you eat and if so I HAVEN'T CHANGED A BIT! Dear God shock-trauma shock-trauma THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS SHOCK-TRAUMA

HA

Fe/40?

Dreaming about my father. When he was drunk he lost all his English. Not that he had anything worth saying anyway. Fucking dipstick. I was so glad to get out of your house Daddy you fucking greaseball dipstick nothing cipher zilcho zero. I knew I'd made it. I walked away from you, didn't I? I walked on my hands.

But there's nothing left for them to cut off. Yesterday I took my earlobes

left hand washes the right don't let your left hand know what your right hands doing one potato two potato three potato four we got a refrigerator with a store-more door hahaha.

Who cares, this hand or that. good food good meat good God let's eat.

lady fingers they taste just like lady fingers

Lamb to the Slaughter

THE room was warm and clean, the curtains drawn, the two table lamps alight—hers and the one by the empty chair opposite. On the sideboard behind her, two tall glasses, soda water, whisky. Fresh ice cubes in the Thermos bucket.

Mary Maloney was waiting for her husband to come home from work.

Now and again she would glance up at the clock, but without anxiety, merely to please herself with the thought that each minute gone by made it nearer the time when he would come. There was a slow smiling air about her, and about everything she did. The drop of the head as she bent over her sewing was curiously tranquil. Her skin—for this was her sixth month with child—had acquired a wonderful translucent quality, the mouth was soft, and the eyes, with their new placid look, seemed larger, darker than before.

When the clock said ten minutes to five, she began to listen, and a few moments later, punctually as always, she heard the tyres on the gravel outside, and the car door slamming, the footsteps passing the window, the key turning in the lock. She laid aside her sewing, stood up, and went forward to kiss him as he came in.

“Hullo, darling,” she said.

“Hullo,” he answered. She took his coat and hung it in the closet. Then she walked over and made the drinks, a strongish one for him, a weak one for herself; and soon she was back again in her chair with the sewing, and he in the other, opposite, holding the tall glass with both his hands, rocking it so the ice cubes tinkled against the side.

For her, this was always a blissful time of day. She knew he didn’t want to speak much until the first drink was finished, and she, on her side, was content to sit quietly, enjoying his company after the long hours alone in the house. She loved to luxuriate in the presence of this man, and to feel—almost as a

sunbather feels the sun that warm male glow that came out of him to her when they were alone together. She loved him for the way he sat loosely in a chair, for the way he came in a door, or moved slowly across the room with long strides. She loved the intent, far look in his eyes when they rested on her, the funny shape of the mouth, and especially the way he remained silent about his tiredness, sitting still with himself until the whisky had taken some of it away.

“Tired, darling?”

“Yes,” he said. “I’m tired.” And as he spoke, he did an unusual thing. He lifted his glass and drained it in one swallow although there was still half of it, at least half of it, left. She wasn’t really watching him but she knew what he had done because she heard the ice cubes falling back against the bottom of the empty glass when he lowered his arm. He paused a moment, leaning forward in the chair, then he got up and went slowly over to fetch himself another.

“I’ll get it!” she cried, jumping up.

“Sit down,” he said.

When he came back, she noticed that the new drink was dark amber with the quantity of whisky in it.

“Darling, shall I get your slippers?”

She watched him as he began to sip the dark yellow drink, and she could see little oily swirls in the liquid because it was so strong.

“I think it’s a shame,” she said, “that when a policeman gets to be as senior as you, they keep him walking about on his feet all day long.”

He didn’t answer, so she bent her head again and went on with her sewing; but each time he lifted the drink to his lips, she heard the ice cubes clinking against the side of the glass.

“Darling,” she said. “Would you like me to get you some cheese? I haven’t made any supper because it’s Thursday.”

“No,” he said.

“If you’re too tired to eat out,” she went on, “it’s still not too late. There’s plenty of meat and stuff in the freezer, and you can have it right here and not even move out of the chair.”

Her eyes waited on him for an answer, a smile, a little nod, but he made no sign.

“Anyway,” she went on, “I’ll get you some cheese and crackers first.”

“I don’t want it,” he said.

She moved uneasily in her chair, the large eyes still watching his face. “But you must have supper. I can easily do it here. I’d like to do it. We can have lamb chops. Or pork. Anything you want. Everything’s in the freezer.”

“Forget it,” he said.

“But, darling, you must eat! I’ll fix it anyway, and then you can have it or not, as you like.”

She stood up and placed her sewing on the table by the lamp.

“Sit down,” he said. “Just for a minute, sit down.”

It wasn’t till then that she began to get frightened.

“Go on,” he said. “Sit down.”

She lowered herself back slowly into the chair, watching him all the time with those large, bewildered eyes. He had finished the second drink and was staring down into the glass frowning.

“Listen,” he said, “I’ve got something to tell you.”

“What is it, darling? ‘What’s the matter?”

He had become absolutely motionless, and he kept his head down so that the light from the lamp beside him fell across the upper part of his face, leaving the chin and mouth in shadow. She noticed there was a little muscle moving near the corner of his left eye.

“This is going to be a bit of a shock to you, I’m afraid,” he said. “But I’ve thought about it a good deal and I’ve decided the only thing to do is tell you right away. I hope you won’t blame me too much.”

And he told her. It didn’t take long, four or five minutes at most, and she sat very still through it all, watching him with a kind of dazed horror as he went further and further away from her with each word.

“So there it is,” he added. “And I know it’s kind of a bad time to be telling you, but there simply wasn’t any other way. Of course I’ll give you money and see you’re looked after. But there needn’t really be any fuss. I hope not anyway. It wouldn’t be very good for my job.”

Her first instinct was not to believe any of it, to reject it all. It occurred to her that perhaps he hadn’t even spoken, that she herself had imagined the whole thing. Maybe, if she went about her business and acted as though she hadn’t been listening, then later, when she sort of woke up again, she might find none of it had ever happened.

“I’ll get the supper,” she managed to whisper, and this time he didn’t stop her.

When she walked across the room she couldn’t feel her feet touching the floor. She couldn’t feel anything at all—except a slight nausea and a desire to vomit. Everything was automatic now—down the stairs to the cellar, the light switch, the deep freeze, the hand inside the cabinet taking hold of the first object it met. She lifted it out, and looked at it. It was wrapped in paper, so she took off the paper and looked at it again.

A leg of lamb.

All right then, they would have lamb for supper. She carried it upstairs, holding the thin bone-end of it with both her hands, and as she went through the living-room, she saw him standing over by the window with his back to her, and she stopped.

“For God’s sake,” he said, hearing her, but not turning round. “Don’t make supper for me. I’m going out.”

At that point, Mary Maloney simply walked up behind him and without any pause she swung the big frozen leg of lamb high in the air and brought it down as hard as she could on the back of his head.

She might just as well have hit him with a steel club.

She stepped back a pace, waiting, and the funny thing was that he remained standing there for at least four or five seconds, gently swaying. Then he crashed to the carpet.

The violence of the crash, the noise, the small table overturning, helped bring her out of the shock. She came out slowly, feeling cold and surprised, and she stood for a while blinking at the body, still holding the ridiculous piece of meat tight with both hands.

All right, she told herself. So I’ve killed him.

It was extraordinary, now, how clear her mind became all of a sudden. She began thinking very fast. As the wife of a detective, she knew quite well what the penalty would be. That was fine. It made no difference to her. In fact, it would be a relief. On the other hand, what about the child? What were the laws about murderers with unborn children? Did they kill them both—mother and child? Or did they wait until the tenth month? What did they do?

Mary Maloney didn’t know. And she certainly wasn’t prepared to take a chance.

She carried the meat into the kitchen, placed it in a pan, turned the oven on high, and shoved it inside. Then she washed her hands and ran upstairs to the bedroom. She sat down before the mirror, tidied her face, touched up her lips and face. She tried a smile. It came out rather peculiar. She tried again.

“Hullo Sam,” she said brightly, aloud.

The voice sounded peculiar too.

“I want some potatoes please, Sam. Yes, and I think a can of peas.”

That was better. Both the smile and the voice were coming out better now. She rehearsed it several times more. Then she ran downstairs, took her coat, went out the back door, down the garden, into the street.

It wasn’t six o’clock yet and the lights were still on in the grocery shop.

“Hullo Sam,” she said brightly, smiling at the man behind the counter.

“Why, good evening, Mrs Maloney. How’re you?”

“I want some potatoes please, Sam. Yes, and I think a can of peas.”

The man turned and reached up behind him on the shelf for the peas.

“Patrick’s decided he’s tired and doesn’t want to eat out tonight,” she told him. “We usually go out Thursdays, you know, and now he’s caught me without any vegetables in the house.”

“Then how about meat, Mrs Maloney?”

“No, I’ve got meat, thanks. I got a nice leg of lamb, from the freezer.”

“ih.

“I don’t much like cooking it frozen, Sam, but I’m taking a chance on it this time. You think it’ll be all right?”

“Personally,” the grocer said, “I don’t believe it makes any difference. You want these Idaho potatoes?”

“Oh yes, that’ll be fine. Two of those.”

“Anything else?” The grocer cocked his head on one side, looking at her pleasantly. “How about afterwards? What you going to give him for afterwards?”

“Well what would you suggest, Sam?”

The man glanced around his shop. “How about a nice big slice of cheesecake? I know he likes that.”

“Perfect,” she said. “He loves it.”

And when it was all wrapped and she had paid she put on her brightest smile and said, “Thank you, Sam. Good night.”

“Good night, Mrs Maloney. And thank you.”

And now, she told herself as she hurried back, all she was doing now, she was returning home to her husband and he was waiting for his supper; and she must cook it good, and make it as tasty as possible because the poor man was tired; and if, when she entered the house, she happened to find anything unusual, or tragic, or terrible, then naturally it would be a shock and she’d become frantic with grief and horror. Mind you, she wasn’t expecting to find anything. She was just going home with the vegetables. Mrs Patrick Maloney going home with the vegetables on Thursday evening to cook supper for her husband.

That’s the way, she told herself. Do everything right and natural. Keep things absolutely natural and there’ll be no need for any acting at all.

Therefore, when she entered the kitchen by the back door, she was humming a little tune to herself and smiling.

“Patrick!” she called. “How are you darling?”

She put the parcel down on the table and went through into the living-room; and when she saw him lying there on the floor with his legs doubled up and one arm twisted back underneath his body, it really was rather a shock. All the old love and longing for him welled up inside her, and she ran over to him, knelt down beside him, and began to cry her heart out. It was easy. No acting was necessary.

A few minutes later she got up and went to the phone. She knew the number of the police station, and when the man at the other end answered, she cried to him, “Quick! Come quick! Patrick’s dead!”

“Who’s speaking?”

“Mrs Maloney. Mrs Patrick Maloney.”

“You mean Patrick Maloney’s dead?”

“I think so,” she sobbed. “He’s lying on the floor and I think he’s dead.”

“Be right over,” the man said.

The car came over quickly, and when she opened the front door, two policemen walked in. She knew them both—she knew nearly all the men at that precinct—and she fell right into Jack Noonan’s arms, weeping hysterically. He put her gently into a chair, then went over to join the other one, who was called O’Malley, kneeling by the body.

“Is he dead?” she cried.

“I’m afraid he is. What happened?”

Briefly, she told her story about going out to the grocer and coming back to find him on the floor. While she was talking, crying and talking, Noonan discovered a small patch of congealed blood on the dead man's head. He showed it to O'Malley who got up at once and hurried to the phone.

Soon, other men began to come into the house. First a doctor, then two detectives, one of whom she knew by name. Later, a police photographer arrived and took pictures, and a man who knew about fingerprints. There was a great deal of whispering and muttering beside the corpse, and the detectives kept asking her a lot of questions. But they always treated her kindly. She told her story again, this time right from the beginning, when Patrick had come in, and she was sewing, and he was tired, so tired he hadn't wanted to go out for supper. She told how she'd put the meat in the oven—"it's there now, cooking"—and how she'd slipped out to the grocer for vegetables, and come back to find him lying on the floor.

"Which grocer?" one of the detectives asked.

She told him, and he turned and whispered something to the other detective who immediately went outside into the street.

In fifteen minutes he was back with a page of notes, and there was more whispering, and through her sobbing she heard a few of the whispered phrases "… acted quite normal very cheerful… wanted to give him a good supper… peas… cheesecake… impossible that she..

After a while, the photographer and the doctor departed and two other men came in and took the corpse away on a stretcher. Then the fingerprint man went away. The two detectives remained, and so did the two policemen. They were exceptionally nice to her, and Jack Noonan asked if she wouldn't rather go somewhere else, to her sister's house perhaps, or to his own wife who would take care of her and put her up for the night.

No, she said. She didn't feel she could move even a yard at the moment. Would they mind awfully if she stayed just where she was until she felt better? She didn't feel too good at the moment, she really didn't.

Then hadn't she better lie down on the bed? Jack Noonan asked.

No, she said, she'd like to stay right where she was, in this chair. A little later perhaps, when she felt better, she would move.

So they left her there while they went about their business, searching the house. Occasionally one of the detectives asked her another question. Sometimes Jack Noonan spoke to her gently as he passed by. Her husband, he told her, had been killed by a blow on the back of the head administered with a heavy blunt instrument, almost certainly a large piece of metal. They were looking for the weapon. The murderer may have taken it with him, but on the other hand he may've thrown it away or hidden it somewhere on the premises.

"It's the old story," he said. "Get the weapon, and you've got the man."

Later, one of the detectives came up and sat beside her. Did she know, he asked, of anything in the house that could've been used as the weapon? Would she mind having a look around to see if anything was missing a very big spanner for example, or a heavy metal vase.

They didn't have any heavy metal vases, she said.

"Or a big spanner?"

She didn't think they had a big spanner. But there might be some things like that in the garage.

The search went on. She knew that there were other policemen in the garden all around the house. She could hear their footsteps on the gravel outside, and sometimes she saw the flash of a torch through a chink in the curtains. It began to get late, nearly nine she noticed by the clock on the mantel. The four men searching the rooms seemed to be growing weary, a trifle exasperated.

"Jack," she said, the next time Sergeant Noonan went by. "Would you mind giving me a drink?"

"Sure I'll give you a drink. You mean this whisky?"

"Yes, please. But just a small one. It might make me feel better."

He handed her the glass. “Why don’t you have one yourself,” she said. “You must be awfully tired. Please do. You’ve been very good to me.”

“Well,” he answered. “It’s not strictly allowed, but I might take just a drop to keep me going.”

One by one the others came in and were persuaded to take a little nip of whisky. They stood around rather awkwardly with the drinks in their hands, uncomfortable in her presence, trying to say consoling things to her. Sergeant Noonan wandered into the kitchen, came out quickly and said, “Look, Mrs Maloney. You know that oven of yours is still on, and the meat still inside.”

“Oh dear me!” she cried. “So it is!”

“I better turn it off for you, hadn’t I?”

“Will you do that, Jack. Thank you so much.”

When the sergeant returned the second time, she looked at him with her large, dark, tearful eyes. “Jack Noonan,” she said.

“Yes?”

“Would you do me a small favour—you and these others?”

“We can try, Mrs Maloney.”

“Well,” she said. “Here you all are, and good friends of dear Patrick’s too, and helping to catch the man who killed him. You must be terribly hungry by now because it’s long past your supper time, and I know Patrick would never forgive me, God bless his soul, if I allowed you to remain in his house without offering you decent hospitality. Why don’t you eat up that lamb that’s in the oven? It’ll be cooked just right by now.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Sergeant Noonan said.

“Please,” she begged. “Please eat it. Personally I couldn’t touch a thing, certainly not what’s been in the house when he was here. But it’s all right for you. It’d be a favour to me if you’d eat it up. Then you can go on with your work again afterwards.”

There was a good deal of hesitating among the four policemen, but they were clearly hungry, and in the end they were persuaded to go into the kitchen and help themselves. The woman stayed where she was, listening to them through the open door, and she could hear them speaking among themselves, their voices thick and sloppy because their mouths were full of meat.

“Have some more, Charlie?”

“No. Better not finish it.”

“She wants us to finish it. She said so. Be doing her a favour.”

“Okay then. Give me some more.”

“That is the hell of a big club the guy must’ve used to hit poor Patrick,” one of them was saying. “The doc says his skull was smashed all to pieces just like from a sledge-hammer.”

“That is why it ought to be easy to find.”

“Exactly what I say.”

“Whoever done it, they’re not going to be carrying a thing like that around with them longer than they need.”

One of them belched. “Personally, I think it’s right here on the premises.”

“Probably right under our very noses. What you think, Jack?”

And in the other room, Mary Maloney began to giggle.

Pig

ONCE upon a time, in the City of New York, a beautiful baby boy was born into this world, and the joyful parents named him Lexington.

No sooner had the mother returned home from the hospital carrying Lexington in her arms than she said to her husband, “Darling, now you must take me out to a most marvellous restaurant for dinner so that we can celebrate the arrival of our son and heir.”

Her husband embraced her tenderly and told her that any woman who could produce such a beautiful child as Lexington deserved to go absolutely anywhere she wanted. But was she strong enough yet, he inquired, to start running around the city late at night?

“No,” she said, she wasn’t. But what the hell.

So that evening they both dressed themselves up in fancy clothes, and leaving little Lexington in the care of a trained infant’s nurse who was costing them twenty dollars a day and was Scottish into the bargain, they went out to the finest and most expensive restaurant in town. There they each ate a giant lobster and drank a bottle of champagne between them, and after that they went on to a nightclub, where they drank another bottle of champagne and then sat holding hands for several hours while they recalled and discussed and admired each individual physical feature of their lovely newborn son.

They arrived back at their house on the East Side of Manhattan at around two o’clock in the morning and the husband paid off the taxi driver and then began feeling in his pockets for the key to the front door. After a while, he announced that he must have left it in the pocket of his other suit, and he suggested that they ring the bell and get the nurse to come down and let them in. An infant’s nurse at twenty dollars a day must expect to be hauled out of bed occasionally in the night, the husband said.

So he rang the bell. They waited. Nothing happened. He rang it again, long and loud. They waited another minute. Then they both stepped back on to the street and shouted the nurse’s name (McPottle)

up at the nursery windows on the third floor, but there was still n? response. The house was dark and silent. The wife began to grow apprehensive. Her baby was imprisoned in this place, she told herself. Alone with McPottle. And who was McPottle? They had known her for two days, that was all, and she had a thin mouth, a small disapproving eye, and a starchy bosom, and quite clearly she was in the habit of sleeping too soundly for safety. If she couldn't hear the front doorbell, then how on earth did she expect to hear a baby crying? Why this very second the poor thing might be swallowing its tongue or suffocating on its pillow.

"He doesn't use a pillow," the husband said.

"You are not to worry. But I'll get you in if that's what you want." He was feeling rather superb after all the champagne, and now he bent down and undid the laces of one of his black patentleather shoes, and took it off. Then, holding it by the toe, he flung it hard and straight through the dining-room window on the ground floor.

"There you are," he said, grinning. "We'll deduct it from McPottle's wages."

He stepped forward and very carefully put a hand through the hole in the glass and released the catch. Then he raised the window.

"I shall lift you in first, little mother," he said, and took his wife around the waist and lifted her off the ground. This brought her big red mouth up level with his own, and very close, so he started kissing her. He knew from experience that women like very much to be kissed in this position, with their bodies held tight and their legs dangling in the air, so he went on doing it for quite a long time, and she wiggled her feet, and made loud gulping noises down in her throat. Finally, the husband turned her round and began easing her gently through the open window into the dining-room. At this point, a police patrol car came nosing silently along the street towards them. It stopped about thirty yards away, and three cops of Irish extraction leaped out of the car and started running in the direction of the husband and wife, brandishing revolvers.

"Stick "em up!" the cops shouted. "Stick "em up!" But it was impossible for the husband to obey this order without letting go of his wife, and had he done this she would either have fallen to the ground or would have been left dangling half in and half out of the house, which is a terribly uncomfortable position for a woman; so he continued gallantly to push her upward and inward through the window. The cops, all of whom had received medals before for killing robbers, opened fire immediately, and although they were still running, and although the wife in particular was presenting them with a very small target indeed, they succeeded in scoring several direct hits on each body-sufficient anyway to prove fatal in both cases.

Thus, when he was no more than twelve days old, little Lexington became an orphan.

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The news of this killing, for which the three policemen subsequently received citations, was eagerly conveyed to all the relatives of the deceased couple by newspaper reporters, and the next morning the closest of these relatives, as well as a couple of undertakers, three lawyers, and a priest, climbed into taxis and set out for the house with the broken window. They assembled in the living-room, men and women both, and they sat around in a circle on the sofas and armchairs, smoking cigarettes and sipping sherry and debating what on earth should be done now with the baby upstairs, the orphan Lexington.

It soon became apparent that none of the relatives was particularly keen to assume responsibility for the child, and the discussions and arguments continued all through the day. Everybody declared an enormous, almost an irresistible desire to look after him, and would have done so with the greatest of pleasure were it not for the fact that their apartment was too small, or that they already had one baby and couldn't possibly afford another, or that they wouldn't know what to do with the poor little thing when they went abroad in the summer, or that they were getting on in years, which surely would be most unfair to the boy when he grew up, and so on and so forth. They all knew, of course, that the father had been heavily in debt for a long time and that the house was mortgaged and that consequently there would be no money it all to go with the child.

They were still arguing like mad at six in the evening when suddenly, in the middle of it all, an old aunt of the deceased father (her name was Glosspan) swept in from Virginia, and without even removing her hat and coat, not even pausing to sit down, ignoring all offers of a martini, a whisky, a sherry, she announced firmly to the assembled relatives that she herself intended to take sole charge of the infant boy from then on. What was more, she said, she would assume full financial responsibility on all counts, including education, and everyone else could go back home where they belonged and give their consciences a rest. So saying, she trotted upstairs to the nursery and snatched Lexington from his cradle and swept out of the house with the baby clutched tightly in her arms, while the relatives simply sat and stared and smiled and looked relieved, and McPottle the nurse stood stiff with disapproval at the head of the stairs, her lips compressed, her arms folded across her starchy bosom.

And thus it was that the infant Lexington, when he was thirteen days old, left the City of New York and travelled southward to live with his Great Aunt Glosspan in the State of Virginia.

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Aunt Glosspan was nearly seventy when she became guardian to Lexington, but to look at her you would never have guessed it for one minute. She was as sprightly as a woman half her age, with a small, wrinkled, but still quite beautiful face and two lovely brown eyes that sparkled at you in the nicest way. She was also a spinster, though you would never have guessed that either, for there was nothing spinsterjsh about Aunt Glosspan. She was never bitter or gloomy or irritable; she didn't have a moustache; and she wasn't in the least bit jealous of other people, which in itself is something you can seldom say about either a spinster or a virgin lady, although of course it is not known for certain whether Aunt Glosspan qualified on both counts.

But she was an eccentric old woman, there was no doubt about that. For the past thirty years she had lived a strange isolated life all by herself in a tiny cottage high up on the slopes of the Blue Ridge Mountains, several miles from the nearest village. She had five acres of pasture, a plot for growing vegetables, a flower garden, three cows, a dozen hens, and a fine cockerel.

And now she had little Lexington as well.

She was a strict vegetarian and regarded the consumption of animal flesh as not only unhealthy and disgusting, but horribly cruel. She lived upon lovely clean foods like milk, butter, eggs, cheese, vegetables, nuts, herbs, and fruit and she rejoiced in the conviction that no living creature would be slaughtered on her account, not even a shrimp. Once, when a brown hen of hers passed away in the prime of life from being eggbound, Aunt Glosspan was so distressed that she nearly gave up egg-eating altogether.

She knew not the first thing about babies, but that didn't worry her in the least. At the railway station in New York, while waiting for the train that would take her and Lexington back to Virginia, she bought six feeding-bottles, two dozen diapers, a box of safety pins, a carton of milk for the journey, and a small paper-covered book called The Care of Infants. What more could anyone want? And when the train got going, she fed the baby some milk, changed its nappies after a fashion, and laid it down on the seat to sleep. Then she read The Care of Infants from cover to cover.

"There is no problem here," she said, throwing the book out of the window. "No problem at all."

And curiously enough there wasn't. Back home in the cottage everything went just as smoothly as could be. Little Lexington drank his milk and belched and yelled and slept exactly as a good baby should, and Aunt Glosspan glowed with joy whenever she looked at him and showered him with kisses all day long.

By the time he was six years old, young Lexington had grown into a most beautiful boy with long golden hair and deep blue eyes the colour of cornflowers. He was bright and cheerful, and already he was learning to help his old aunt in all sorts of different ways around the property, collecting the eggs from the chicken house, turning the handle of the butter churn, digging up potatoes in the vegetable garden and searching for wild herbs on the side of the mountain. Soon, Aunt Glosspan told herself, she would have to start thinking about his education.

But she couldn't bear the thought of sending him away to school. She loved him so much now that it would kill her to be parted from him for any length of time. There was, of course, that village school down in the valley, but it was a dreadful-looking place, and if she sent him there she just knew they would start forcing him to eat meat the very first day he arrived "You know what, my darling?" the said to him one day when he was sitting on a stool in the kitchen watching her make cheese. "I don't really see why I shouldn't give you your lessons myself."

The boy looked up at her with his large blue eyes, and gave her a lovely trusting smile. "That would be nice," he said.

"And the very first thing I should do would be to teach you how to cook."

"I think I would like that, Aunt Glosspan."

"Whether you like it or not, you're going to have to learn some time," she said. "Vegetarians like us don't have nearly so many foods to choose from as ordinary people, and therefore they must learn to be doubly expert with what they have."

"Aunt Glosspan," the boy said, "what do ordinary people eat that we don't?"

"Animals," she answered, tossing her head in disgust.

"You mean live animals?"

"No," she said. "Dead ones."

The boy considered this for a moment.

“You mean when they die they eat them instead of burying them?”

“They don’t wait for them to die, my pet. They kill them.”

“How do they kill them, Aunt Glosspan?”

“They usually slit their throats with a knife.”

“But what kind of animals?”

“Cows and pigs mostly, and sheep.”

“Cows!” the boy cried. “You mean like Daisy and Snowdrop and Lily?”

“Exactly, my dear.”

“But how do they eat them, Aunt Glosspan?”

“They cut them up into bits and they cook the bits. They like it best when it’s all red and bloody and sticking to the bones. They love to eat lumps of cow’s flesh with the blood oozing out of it.”

“Pigs too?”

“They adore pigs.”

“Lumps of bloody pig’s meat,” the boy said. “Imagine that. What else do they eat, Aunt Glosspafl?”

“Chickens.”

“Chickens!”

“Millions of them.”

“Feathers and all?”

“No, dear, not the feathers. Now run along outside and get Aunt Glosspan a bunch of chives, will you, my darling.”

Shortly after that, the lessons began. They covered five subjects, reading, writing, geography, arithmetic, and cooking, but the latter was by far the most popular with both teacher and pupil. In fact, it very soon became apparent that young Lexington possessed a truly remarkable talent in this direction. He was a born cook. He was dextrous and quick. He could handle his pans like a juggler. He could slice a single potato in twenty paper-thin slivers in less time than it took his aunt to peel it. His palate was exquisitely sensitive, and he could taste a pot of strong onion soup and immediately detect the presence of a single tiny leaf of sage. In so Young a boy, all this was a bit bewildering to Aunt Glosspan, and to tell the truth she didn’t quite know what to make of it. But she was proud as proud as could be, all -a. the same, and predicted a brilliant future for the child.

“What a mercy it is,” she said, “that I have such a wonderful little fellow to look after me in my dotage.” And a couple of years later, she retired from the kitchen for good, leaving Lexington in sole charge of all household cooking. The boy was now ten years old, and Aunt Glosspan was nearly eighty.

With the kitchen to himself, Lexington straight away began experimenting with dishes of his own invention. The old favourites no longer interested him. He had a violent urge to create. There were hundreds of fresh ideas in his head. “I will begin,” he said, “by devising a chestnut souffle.” He made it and served it up for supper that very night. It was terrific. “You are a genius!” Aunt Glosspan cried, leaping up from her chair and kissing him on both cheeks, “You will make history!”

From then on, hardly a day went by without some new delectable creation being set upon the table. There was Brazilnut soup, hominy cutlets, vegetable ragout, dandelion omelette, creamcheese fritters, stuffed-cabbage surprise, stewed foggage, shallots a la bonne femme, beetroot mousse piquant, prunes Stroganoff, Dutch rarebit, turnips on horseback, flaming spruceneedle tans, and many many other

beautiful compositions. Never before in her life, Aunt Glosspan declared, had she tasted such food as this; and in the mornings, long before lunch was due, she would go out on to the porch and sit there in her rocking-chair, speculating about the coming meal, licking her chops, sniffing the aromas that came wafting out trough the kitchen window.

“What’s that you’re making in there today, boy?” she would call out.

“Try to guess, Aunt Glosspan.”

“Smells like a bit of salsify fritters to me,” she would say, sniffing vigorously.

Then out he would come, this ten-year-old child, a little grin of triumph on his face, and in his hands a big steaming pot of the most heavenly stew made entirely of parsnips and lovage.

“You know what you ought to do,” his aunt said to him, gobbling the stew. “You ought to set yourself down this very minute with paper and pencil and write a cooking-book.”

He looked at her across the table, chewing his parsnips slowly.

“Why not?” she cried. “I’ve taught you how to write and I’ve taught you how to cook and flow all you’ve got to do is put the two things together. You write a cooking-book, my darling, and it’ll make you famous the whole world over. “All right,” he said. “I will.”

And that very day, Lexington began writing the first page of that monumental work which was to. occupy him for the rest of his life. He called it Eat Good and Healthy.

Seven years later, by the time he was seventeen, he had recorded over nine thousand different recipes, all of them original, all of them delicious.

But now, suddenly, his labours were interrupted by the tragic death of Aunt Glosspan. She was afflicted in the night by a violent seizure, and Lexington, who had rushed into her bedroom to see what all the noise was about, found her lying on her bed yelling and cussing and twisting herself into all manner of complicated knots. Indeed, she was a terrible sight to behold, and the agitated youth danced around her

in his pyjamas, wringing his hands, and wondering what on earth he should do. Finally in an effort to cool her down, he fetched a bucket of water from the pond in the cow field and tipped it over her head, but this only intensified the paroxysms, and the old lady expired within the hour.

“This is really too bad,” the poor boy said, pinching her several times to make sure that she was dead. “And how sudden! How quick and sudden! Why only a few hours ago she seemed in the very best of spirits. She even took three large helpings of my most recent creation, devilled mushroomburgers, and told me how succulent it was.”

After weeping bitterly for several minutes, for he had loved his aunt very much, he pulled himself together and carried her outside and buried her behind the cowshed.

The next day, while tidying up her belongings, he came across an envelope that was addressed to him in Aunt Glosspan’s handwriting. He opened it and drew out two fifty-dollar bills and a letter.

Darling boy [the letter said], I know that you have never yet been down the mountain since you were thirteen days old, but as soon as I die you must put on a pair of shoes and a clean shirt and walk down to the village and find a doctor. Ask the doctor to give you a death certificate to prove that I am dead. Then take this certificate to my lawyer, a man called Mr Samuel Zuckermann, who lives in New York City and who has a copy of my will. Mr Zuckermann will arrange everything. The cash in this envelope is to pay the doctor for the certificate and to cover the cost of your journey to New York. Mr Zuckermann will give you more money when you get there, and it is my earnest wish that you use it to further your researches into culinary and vegetarian matters, and that you continue to work upon that great book of yours until you are satisfied that it is complete in every way. Your loving aunt-Glosspan.

Lexington, who had always done everything his aunt told him, pocketed the money, put on a pair of shoes and a clean shin, and went down the mountain to the village where the doctor lived.

“Old Glosspan?” the doctor said. “My God, is she dead?”

“Certainly she’s dead,” the youth answered. “If you will come back home with me now I’ll dig her up and you can see for yourself.”

“How deep did you bury her?” the doctor asked.

“Six or seven feet down, I should think.”

“And how long ago?”

“Oh, about eight hours.”

“Then she’s dead,” the doctor announced. “Here’s the certificate.”

***

Our hero now sets out for the City of New York to find Mr Samuel Zuckermann. He travelled on foot, and he slept under hedges, and he lived on berries and wild herbs, and it took him sixteen days to reach the metropolis.

“What a fabulous place this is!” he cried as he stood at the corner of Fifty-seventh Street and Fifth Avenue, staring around him. “There are no cows or chickens anywhere, and none of the women looks in the least like Aunt Glosspan.”

As for Mr Samuel Zuckermann, he looked like nothing that Lexington had ever seen before.

He was a small spongy man with livid jowls and a huge magenta nose, and when he smiled, bits of gold flashed at you marvellously from lots of different places inside his mouth. In his luxurious office, he shook Lexington warmly by the hand and congratulated him upon his aunt’s death.

“I suppose you knew that your dearly beloved guardian was a woman of considerable wealth?” he said.

“You mean the cows and the chickens?”

“I mean half a million bucks,” Mr Zuckermann said.

“How much?”

“Half a million dollars, my boy. And she’s left it all to you.” Mr Zuckermann leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands over his spongy paunch. At the same time, he began secretly working his right forefinger in through his waistcoat and under his shirt so as to scratch the skin around the circumference of his navel-a favourite exercise of his, and one that gave him a peculiar pleasure. “Of course, I shall have to deduct fifty per cent for my services,” he said, “But that still leaves you with two hundred and fifty grand.”

“I am rich!” Lexington cried. “This is wonderful! How soon can I have the money?”

“. ” Well, Mr Zuckermann said, luckily for you, I happen to be on rather cordial terms with the tax authorities around here, and I am confident that I shall be able to persuade them to waive all death duties and back taxes.”

“How kind you are,” murmured Lexington.

“I should naturally have to give somebody a small honorarium.”

Thatever you say, Mr Zuckermann.”

I think a hundred thousand would be sufficient.

Good gracious, isn’t that rather excessive?”

Never undertip a tax inspector or a 265 policeman,” Mr Zuckermann said. “Remember that.”

“But how much does it leave for me?” the youth asked meekly.

“One hundred and fifty thousand. But then you’ve got the funeral expenses to pay out of that.”

“Funeral expenses?”

“You’ve got to pay for the funeral parlour. Surely you know that?”

“But I buried her myself, Mr Zuckermann, behind the cowshed.”

“I don’t doubt it,” the lawyer said. “So what?”

“I never used a funeral parlour.”

“Listen,” Mr Zuckermann said patiently. “You may not know it, but there is a law in this state which says that no beneficiary under a will may receive a single penny of his inheritance until the funeral parlour has been paid in full.”

“You mean that’s a law?”

“Certainly, it’s a law, and a very good one it is, too. The funeral parlour is one of our great national institutions. It must be protected at all costs.

Mr Zuckermann himself, together with a group of public-spirited doctors, controlled a corporation that owned a chain of nine lavish funeral parlours in the city, not to mention a casket factory in Brooklyn and a postgraduate school for embalmers in Washington Heights. The celebration of death was therefore a deeply religious affair in Mr Zuckermann’s eyes. In fact, the whole business affected him profoundly, almost as profoundly, one might say, as the birth of Christ affected the shopkeeper.

“You had no right to go out and bury your aunt like that,” he said. “None at all.”

“I’m very sorry, Mr Zuckermann.”

“Why, it’s downright subversive.”

“I’ll do whatever you say, Mr Zuckermann. All I want to know is how much I’m going to get in the end, when everything’s paid.”

There was a pause. Mr Zuckermann sighed and frowned and continued secretly to run the tip of his finger around the rim of his navel.

“Shall we say fifteen thousand?” he suggested, flashing a big gold smile. “That’s a nice round figure.”

“Can I take it with me this afternoon?”

“I don’t see why not.”

So Mr Zuckermaim summoned his chief cashier and told him to give Lexington fifteen thousand dollars out of the petty cash, and to obtain a receipt. The youth, who by this time was delighted to be getting anything at all, accepted the money gratefully and stowed it away in his knapsack. Then he shook Mr Zuckermann warmly by the hand, thanked him for all his help, and went out of the office.

“The whole world is before me!” our hero cried as he emerged into the street. “I now have fifteen thousand dollars to see me through until my book is published. And after that, of course, I shall have a great deal more.” He stood on use pavement, wondering which way to go. He turned left and began strolling slowly down the street, staring at the sights of the city.

“What a revolting smell,” he said, sniffing the air. “I can’t stand this.” His delicate olfactory nerves, tuned to receive only the most delicious kitchen aromas, were being tortured by the stench of the diesel-oil fumes pouring out of the backs of buses.

“I must get out of this place before my nose is ruined altogether,” he said. “But first, I’ve simply got to have something to eat. I’m starving.” The poor boy had had nothing but berries and wild herbs for the past two weeks, and now his stomach was yearning for solid food. I’d like a nice hominy cutlet, he told himself. Or maybe a few juicy salsify fritters.

He crossed the street and entered a small restaurant. The place was hot inside, and dark and silent. There was a strong smell of cookingfat and cabbage water. The only other customer was a man with a brown hat on his head, crouching intently over his food, who did not look up as Lexington came in.

Our hero seated himself at a corner table and hung his knapsack on the back of his chair. This he told himself, is going to be most interesting. In all my seventeen years I have tasted only the cooking of two people, Aunt Glosspan and myself-unless one counts Nurse McPottle, who must have heated my bottle a few times when I was an infant. But I am now about to sample the art of a new chef altogether, and perhaps, if I am lucky, I may pick up a couple of useful ideas for my book.

A waiter approached out of the shadows at the back, and stood beside the table.

“How do you do,” Lexington said. “I should like a large hominy cutlet please. Do it twentyfive seconds each side, in a very hot skillet with sour cream, and sprinkle a pinch of lovage on it before serving-unless of course your chef knows a more original method, in which case I should be delighted to try it.”

The waiter laid his head over to one side and looked carefully at his customer. “You want the roast pork and cabbage?” he asked. “That’s all we got left.”

“Roast what and cabbage?”

The waiter took a soiled handkerchief from his trouser pocket and shook it open with a violent flourish, as though he were cracking a whip. Then he blew his nose loud and wet.

“You want it or don’t you?” he said, wiping his nostrils.

“I haven’t the foggiest idea what it is,” Lexington replied, “but I should love to try it. You see, I am writing a cooking-book and…”

“One pork and cabbage!” the waiter shouted, and somewhere in the back of the restaurant, far away in the darkness, a voice answered him.

The waiter disappeared. Lexington reached into his knapsack for his personal knife and fork. These were a present from Aunt Glosspan, given him when he was six years old, made of solid silver, and he had never eaten with any other instruments since. While waiting for the food to arrive, he polished them lovingly with a Piece of soft muslin.

Soon the waiter returned carrying a plate on which there lay a thick greyish-white slab of something hot. Lexington leaned forward anxiously to smell it as it was put down before him. His nostrils were wide open to receive the scent, quivering and sniffing.

“But this is absolute heaven!” he exclaimed. “What an aroma! It’s tremendous!”

The waiter stepped back a pace, watching his customer carefully.

“Never in my life have I smelled anything as rich and wonderful as this!” our hero cried, seizing his knife and fork. “What on earth is it made of?”

The man in the brown hat looked around and stared, then returned to his eating. The waiter was backing away towards the kitchen.

Lexington cut off a small piece of the meat, impaled it on his silver fork, and carried it up to his nose so as to smell it again. Then he popped it into his mouth and began to chew it slowly, his eyes half closed, his body tense.

“This is fantastic!” he cried. “It is a brand-new flavour! Oh, Glosspan, my beloved Aunt, how I wish you were with me now so you could taste this remarkable dish! Waiter! Come here at once! I want you!”

The astonished waiter was now watching from the other end of the room, and he seemed reluctant to move any closer.

“If you will come and talk to me I will give you a present,” Lexington said, waving a hundreddollar-bill. “Please come over here and talk to me.”

The waiter sidled cautiously back to the table, snatched away the money, and held it up to his face, peering at it from all angles. Then he slipped it quickly into his pocket.

“What can I do for you, my friend?” he asked.

“Look,” Lexington said. “If you will tell me what this delicious dish is made of, and exactly how it is prepared, I will give you another hundred.”

“I already told you,” the man said. “It’s pork.”

“And exactly what is pork?”

“You never had roast pork before?” the waiter asked, staring.

“For heaven’s sake, man, tell me what it is and stop keeping me in suspense like this.”

“It’s pig,” the waiter said. “You just bung it in the oven.”

“Pig!”

“All pork is pig. Didn’t you know that?”

“You mean this is pig’s meat?”

“I guarantee it.”

“But…but…that’s impossible,” the youth stammered. “Aunt Glosspan, who knew more about food than anyone else in the world, said that meat of any kind was disgusting, revolting, horrible, foul, nauseating, and beastly. And yet this piece that I have here on my plate is without doubt the most delicious thing that I have ever tasted. Now how on earth do you explain that? Aunt Glosspan certainly Wouldn’t have told me it was revolting if it Wasn’t”

“Maybe your aunt didn’t know how to cook it,” the waiter said.

“Is that possible?”

“You’re damned right it is. Especially with pork. Pork has to be very well done or you can’t eat it.”

” Eureka!” Lexington cried. “I’ll bet that’s exactly what happened! She did it wrong!” He handed the man another hundred-dollar bill. “Lead me to the kitchen,” he said. “Introduce me to the genius who prepared this meat.”

Lexington was at once taken to the kitchen, and there he met the cook who was an elderly man with a rash on one side of his neck.

“This will cost you another hundred,” the waiter said.

Lexington was only too glad to oblige, but this time he gave the money to the cook. “Now listen to me,” he said. “I have to admit that I am really rather confused by what the waiter has just been telling me. Are you quite sure that the delectable dish which I have just been eating was prepared from pig’s flesh?”

The cook raised his right hand and began scratching the rash on his neck.

“Well,” he said, looking at the waiter and giving him a sly wink, “all I can tell you is that I think it was pig’s meat.”

“You mean you’re not sure?”

“One can never be sure.”

“Then what else could it have been?”

“Well,” the cook said, speaking very slowly and still staring at the waiter. “There’s just 9 chance, you see, that it might have been a piece of human stuff”

“You mean a man?”

“Yes.”

“Good heavens.”

“Or a woman. It could have been either. They both taste the same.”

“Well-now you really do surprise me,” the youth declared.

“One lives and learns.”

“Indeed one does.”

“As a matter of fact, we’ve been getting an awful lot of it just lately from the butcher’s in place of pork,” the cook declared.

“Have you really?”

“The trouble is, it’s almost impossible to tell which is which. They’re both very good.”

“The piece I had just now was simply superb.”

“I’m glad you liked it,” the cook said. “But to be quite honest, I think that it was a bit of pig. In fact, I’m almost sure it was.”

“You are?”

“Yes, I am.”

“In that case, we shall have to assume that you are right,” Lexington said. “So now will you please tell me-and here is another hundred dollars for your trouble-will you please tell me precisely how you prepared it?”

The cook, after pocketing the money, launched Upon a colourful description of how to roast a loin of pork, while the youth, not wanting to miss a single word of so great a recipe, sat down at the kitchen table and recorded every detail in his notebook.

“Is that all?” he asked when the cook had finished.

“That’s all.”

“But there must be more to it than that, surely?”

“You got to get a good piece of meat to start off with,” the cook said. “That’s half the battle. It’s got to be a good hog and it’s got to be butchered right, otherwise it’ll turn out lousy whichever way you cook it.”

“Show me how,” Lexington said. “Butcher me one now so I can learn.”

“We don’t butcher pigs in the kitchen,” the cook said. “That lot you just ate came from a packinghouse over in the Bronx.”

“Then give me the address!”

The cook gave him the address, and our hero, after thanking them both many times for all their kindnesses, rushed outside and leapt into a taxi and headed for the Bronx.

The packing house was a big four-storey brick building, and the air around it smelled sweet and heavy, like musk. At the main entrance gates, there was a large notice which said VISITORS WELCOME AT ANY TIME, and thus encouraged, Lexington walked through the gates and entered a cobbled yard which surrounded the building itself. He then followed a series of signposts (THIS WAY FOR THE GUIDED

TOURS), and c2me eventually to a small corrugated-iron shed set well apart from the main building (VISITORS' wA1T1N00M). After knocking politely on the door, he went in.

There were six other people ahead of him j the waiting-room. There was a fat mother with her two little boys aged about nine and eleven. There was a bright-eyed young couple who looked as though they might be on their honeymoon. And there was a pale woman with long white gloves, who sat very upright, looking straight ahead, with her hands folded on her lap. Nobody spoke. Lexington wondered whether they were all writing cooking-books like himself, but when he put this question to them aloud, he got no answer. The grown-ups merely smiled mysteriously to themselves and shook their heads, and the two children stared at him as though they were seeing a lunatic.

Soon, the door opened and a man with a merry pink face popped his head into the room and said, "Next, please." The mother and the two boys got up and went out.

About ten minutes later, the same man returned "Next, please," he said again, and the honeymoon couple jumped up and followed him outside.

Two new visitors came in and sat down a middle-aged husband and a middle-aged wife, the wife carrying a wicker shopping-basket containing groceries.

"Next, please," said the guide, and the woman With the long white gloves got up and left.

Several more people came in and took their Places on the stiff-backed wooden chairs.

Soon the guide returned for the fourth time, and now it was Lexington 's turn to go outside. "Follow me, please," the guide said, leading the youth across the yard towards the main building.

"How exciting this is!" Lexington cried, hopping from one foot to the other. "I only wish my dear Aunt Glosspan could be with me now to see what I am going to see."

"I myself only do the preliminaries," the guide said. "Then I shall hand you over to someone else."

"Anything you say," cried the ecstatic youth.

First they visited a large penned-in area at the back of the building where several hundred pigs were wandering around. “Here’s where they start,” the guide said. “And over there’s where they go in.”

“Where?”

“Right there.” The guide pointed to a long wooden shed that stood against the outside wall of the factory. “We call it the shackling-pen. This way, please.”

Three men wearing long rubber boots were driving a dozen pigs into the shackling-pen just as Lexington and the guide approached, so they all went in together.

“Now,” the guide said, “watch how they shackle them.”

Inside, the shed was simply a bare wooden room with no roof, and there was a steel cable with hooks on it that kept moving slowly along the length of one wall, parallel with the ground, about three feet up. When it reached the end of the shed, this cable suddenly changed direction and climbed vertically upward through the open roof towards the top floor of the main building.

The twelve pigs were huddled together at the far end of the pen, standing quietly, looking apprehensive. One of the men in rubber boots pulled a length of metal chain down from the wall and advanced upon the nearest animal, approaching it from the rear. Then he bent down and quickly looped one end of the chain around one of the animal’s hind legs. The other end he attached to a hook on the moving cable as it went by. The cable kept moving. The chain tightened. The pig’s leg was pulled up and back, and then the pig itself began to be dragged backwards. But it didn’t fall down. It was rather a nimble pig, and somehow it managed to keep its balance on three legs, hopping from foot to foot and struggling against the pull of the chain, but going back and back all the time until at the end of the pen where the cable changed direction and went vertically upward, the creature was suddenly jerked off its feet and borne aloft. Shrill protests filled the air.

“Truly a fascinating process,” Lexington said.

But what was the funny cracking noise it made as it went up?”

“Probably the leg,” the guide answered.

Either that or the pelvis.”

“But doesn’t that matter?”

“Why should it matter?” the guide asked.

You don’t eat the bones.”

The rubber-booted men were busy shackling up the rest of the pigs, and one after another they were hooked to the moving cable and hoisted up through the roof, protesting loudly as they went.

“There’s a good deal more to this recipe than just picking herbs,” Lexington said. “Aunt Glosspan would never have made it.”

At this point, while Lexington was gazing skyward at the last pig to go up, a man in rubber boots approached him quietly from behind and looped one end of a chain around the youth’s own ankle, hooking the other end to the moving belt. The next moment, before he had time to realize what was happening, our hero was jerked off his feet and dragged backwards along the concrete floor of the shackling-pen.

“Stop!” he cried. “Hold everything! My leg is caught!”

But nobody seemed to hear him, and five seconds later, the unhappy young man was jerked off the floor and hoisted vertically upward through the open roof of the pen, dangling upside down by one ankle, and wriggling like a fish.

“Help!” he shouted. “Help! There’s been a frightful mistake! Stop the engines! Let me down!”

The guide removed a cigar from his mouth and looked up serenely at the rapidly ascending youth, but he said nothing. The men in rubber boots were already on their way out to collect the next batch of pigs.

“Oh, save me!” our hero cried. “Let me down! Please let me down!” But he was now approaching the top floor of the building where the moving belt curled like a snake and entered a large hole in the wall, a kind of doorway without door; and there, on the threshold, waiting to greet him, clothed in a dark-stained yellow rubber apron, and looking for all the world like Saint Peter at the Gates of Heaven, the sticker stood.

Lexington saw him only from upside down, and very briefly at that, but even so he noticed at once the expression of absolute peace and benevolence on the man’s face, the cheerful twinkle in the eyes, the little wistful smile, the dimples in his cheeks-and all this gave him hope.

“Hi there,” the sticker said, smiling.

“Quick! Save me!” our hero cried.

“With pleasure,” the sticker said, and taking Lexington gently by one ear with his left hand, he raised his right hand and deftly slit open the boy’s jugular vein with a knife.

The belt moved on. Lexington went with it. Everything was still upside down and the blood was pouring out of his throat and getting into his eyes, but he could still see after a fashion, and he had a blurred impression of being in an enormously long-room, and at the far end of the room there was a great smoking cauldron of water, and there were dark figures, half hidden in the steam, dancing around the edge of it, brandishing long poles. The conveyor-belt seemed to be travelling right over the top of the cauldron, and the pigs seemed to be dropping one by one into the boiling water, and one of the pigs seemed to be wearing long white gloves on its front feet.

Suddenly our hero started to feel very sleepy, but it wasn’t until his good strong heart had pumped the last drop of blood from his body that he passed on out of this, the best of all possible worlds, into the next.

Skin

THAT year—1946—winter was a long time going. Although it was April, a freezing wind blew through the streets of the city, and overhead the snow clouds moved across the sky.

The old man who was called Drioli shuffled painfully along the sidewalk of the rue de Rivoli. He was cold and miserable, huddled up like a hedgehog in a filthy black coat, only his eyes and the top of his head visible above the turned-up collar.

The door of a cafŽ opened and the faint whiff of roasting chicken brought a pain of yearning to the top of his stomach. He moved on glancing without any interest at the things in the shop windows—perfume, silk ties and shirts, diamonds, porcelain, antique furniture, finely bound books. Then a picture gallery. He had always liked picture galleries. This one had a single canvas on display in the window. He stopped to look at it. He turned to go on. He checked, looked back; and now, suddenly, there came to him a slight uneasiness, a movement of the memory, a distant recollection of something, somewhere, he had seen before. He looked again. It was a landscape, a clump of trees leaning madly over to one side as if blown by a tremendous wind, the sky swirling and twisting all around. Attached to the frame there was a little plaque, and on this it said: CHAIM SOUTINE (1894—1943).

Drioli stared at the picture, wondering vaguely what there was about it that seemed familiar. Crazy painting, he thought. Very strange and crazy—but I like it… Chaim Soutine Soutine… “By God!” he cried suddenly. “My little Kalmuck , that’s who it is! My little Kalmuck with a picture in the finest shop in Paris ! Just imagine that!”

The old man pressed his face closer to the window. He could remember the boy—yes, quite clearly he could remember him. But when? The rest of it was not so easy to recollect. It was so long ago. How long? Twenty—no, more like thirty years, wasn’t it? Wait a minute. Yes—it was the year before the war, the first war, 1913. That was it. And this Soutine, this ugly little Kalmuck , a sullen brooding boy whom he had liked—almost loved—for no reason at all that he could think of except that he could paint.

And how he could paint! It was coming back more clearly now—the street, the line of refuse cans along the length of it, the rotten smell, the brown cats walking delicately over the refuse, and then the women, moist fat women sitting on the doorsteps with their feet upon the cobblestones of the street. Which Street? Where was it the boy had lived?

The Cite Falgui□re, that was it! The old man nodded his head several times, pleased to have remembered the name. Then there was the studio with the single chair in it, and the filthy red couch that the boy had used for sleeping; the drunken parties, the cheap white wine, the furious quarrels, and always, always the bitter sullen face of the boy brooding over his work.

It was odd, Drioli thought, how easily it all came back to him now, how each single small remembered fact seemed instantly to remind him of another.

There was that nonsense with the tattoo, for instance. Now, that was a mad thing if ever there was one. How had it started? Ah, yes—he had got rich one day, that was it, and he had bought lots of wine. He could see himself now as he entered the studio with the parcel of bottles under his arm the boy sitting before the easel, and his (Drioli's) own wife standing in the centre of the room, posing for her picture.

"Tonight we shall celebrate," he said. "We shall have a little celebration, us three."

"What is it that we celebrate?" the boy asked, without looking up. "Is it that you have decided to divorce your wife so she can marry me?"

"No," Drioli said. "We celebrate because today I have made a great sum of money with my work."

"And I have made nothing. We can celebrate that also."

"If you like." Drioli was standing by the table unwrapping the parcel. He felt tired and he wanted to get at the wine. Nine clients in one day was all very nice, but it could play hell with a man's eyes. He had never done as many as nine before. Nine boozy soldiers and the remarkable thing was that no fewer than seven of them had been able to pay in cash. This had made him extremely rich. But the work was terrible on the eyes. Drioli's eyes were half closed from fatigue, the whites streaked with little connecting lines of red; and about an inch behind each eyeball there was a small concentration of pain. But it was evening now and he was wealthy as a pig, and in the parcel there were three bottles—one for

his wife, one for his friend, and one for him. He had found the corkscrew and was drawing the corks from the bottles, each making a small plop as it came out.

The boy put down his brush. “Oh, Christ,” he said. “How can one work with all this going on?”

The girl came across the room to look at the painting. Drioli came over also, holding a bottle in one hand, a glass in the other.

“No,” the boy shouted, blazing up suddenly. “Please—no!” He snatched the canvas from the easel and stood it against the wall. But Drioli had seen it.

“I like it.”

“It’s terrible.”

“It’s marvellous. Like all the others that you do, it’s marvellous. I love them all.”

“The trouble is,” the boy said, scowling, “that in themselves they are not nourishing. I cannot eat them.”

“But still they are marvellous.” Drioli handed him a tumblerful of the pale-yellow wine. “Drink it,” he said. “It will make you happy.”

Never, he thought, had he known a more unhappy person, or one with a gloomier face. He had spotted him in a cafŽ some seven months before, drinking alone, and because he had looked like a Russian or some sort of an Asiatic, Drioli had sat down at his table and talked.

“You are a Russian?”

“Yes.”

“Where from?”

” Minsk .”

Drioli had jumped up and embraced him, crying that he too had been born in that city.

“It wasn’t actually Minsk ,” the boy had said. “But quite near.”

“Where?”

“Smilovichi, about twelve miles away.”

“Smilovichi!” Drioli had shouted, embracing him again. “I walked there several times when I was a boy.” Then he had sat down again, staring affectionately at the other’s face. “You know,” he had said, “you don’t look like a western Russian. You’re like a Tartar, or a Kalmuck . You look exactly like a Kalmuck .”

Now, standing in the studio, Drioli looked again at the boy as he took the glass of wine and tipped it down his throat in one swallow. Yes, he did have a face like a Kalmuck —very broad and high-cheeked, with a wide coarse nose. This broadness of the cheeks was accentuated by the ears which stood out sharply from the head. And then he had the narrow eyes, the black hair, the thick sullen mouth of a Kalmuck, but the hands the hands were always a surprise, so small and white like a lady’s, with tiny thin fingers. “Give me some more)” the boy said. “If we are to celebrate then let us do it properly.”

Drioli distributed the wine and sat himself on a chair. The boy sat on the old couch with Drioli’s wife. The three bottles were placed on the floor between them.

“Tonight we shall drink as much as we possibly can,” Drioli said. “I am exceptionally rich. I think perhaps I should go out now and buy some more bottles. How many shall I get?”

“Six more,” the boy said. “Two for each.”

“Good. I shall go now and fetch them.”

“And I will help you.”

In the nearest cafŽ Drioli bought six bottles of white wine, and then carried them back to the studio. They placed them on the floor in two rows, and Drioli fetched the corkscrew and pulled the corks, all six of them; then they sat down again and continued to drink.

“It is only the very wealthy,” Drioli said, “who can afford to celebrate in this manner.”

“That is true,” the boy said. “Isn’t that true, Josie?”

“Of course.”

“How do you feel, Josie?”

“Fine.”

“Will you leave Drioli and marry me?”,, “Beautiful wine,” Drioli said. “It is a privilege to drink it.”

Slowly, methodically, they set about getting themselves drunk. The process was routine, but all the same there was a certain ceremony to be observed, and a gravity to be maintained, and a great number of things to be said, then said again—and the wine must be praised, and the slowness was important too, so that there would be time to savour the three delicious stages of transition, especially (for Drioli) the one when he began to float and his feet did not really belong to him. That was the best period of them all—when he could look down at his feet and they were so far away that he would wonder what crazy person they might belong to and why they were lying around on the floor like that, in the distance.

After a while, he got up to switch on the light. He was surprised to see that the feet came with him when he did this, especially because he couldn’t feel them touching the ground. It gave him a pleasant sensation of walking on air. Then he began wandering around the room, peeking slyly at the canvases stacked against the walls.

“Listen,” he said at length. “I have an idea.” He came across and stood before the couch, swaying gently. “Listen, my little Kalmuck .”

“What?”

“I have a tremendous idea. Are you listening?”

“I’m listening to Josie.”

“Listen to me, please. You are my friend my ugly little Kalmuck from Minsk and to me you are such an artist that I would like to have a picture, a lovely picture— “Have them all. Take all you can find, but do not interrupt me when I am talking with your wife.”

“No, no. Now listen. I mean a picture that I can have with me always… for ever wherever I go… whatever happens… but always with me… a picture by you.” He reached forward and shook the boy’s knee. “Now listen to me, please.”

“Listen to him,” the girl said.

“It is this. I want you to paint a picture on my skin, on my back. Then I want you to tattoo over what you have painted so that it will be there always.”

“You have crazy ideas.”

“I will teach you how to use the tattoo. It is easy. A child could do it.”

“I am not a child.”

“Please… “You are quite mad. What is it you want?” The painter looked up into the slow, dark, wine-bright eyes of the other man. “What in heaven’s name is it you want?”

“You could do it easily! You could! You could!”

“You mean with the tattoo?”

“Yes, with the tattoo! I will teach you in two minutes!”

“Impossible!”

“Are you saying I do not know what I am talking about?”

No, the boy could not possibly be saying that because if anyone knew about the tattoo it was he Drioli. Had he not, only last month, covered a man’s whole belly with the most wonderful and delicate design composed entirely of flowers? What about the client who had had so much hair upon his chest that he had done him a picture of a grizzly bear so designed that the hair on the chest became the furry coat of the bear? Could he not draw the likeness of a lady and position it with such subtlety upon a man’s arm that when the muscle of the arm was flexed the lady came to life and performed some astonishing contortions?

“All I am saying,” the boy told him, “is that you are drunk and this is a drunken idea.”

“We could have Josi’ for a model. A study of Josie upon my back. Am I not entitled to a picture of my wife upon my back?”

“Of Josie?”

“Yes.” Drioli knew he only had to mention his wife and the boy’s thick brown lips would loosen and begin to quiver.

“No,” the girl said.

“Darling Josie, please. Take this bottle and finish it, then you will feel more generous. It is an enormous idea. Never in my life have I had such an idea before.”

“What idea?”

“That he should make a picture of you upon my back. Am I not entitled to that?”

“A picture of me?”

“A nude study,” the boy said. “It is an agreeable idea.”

“Not nude,” the girl said.

“It is an enormous idea,” Drioli said.

:‘It’s a damn crazy idea,” the girl said.

‘It is in any event an idea,” the boy said. “It is an idea that calls for a celebration.”

They emptied another bottle among them. Then the boy said, “It is no good. I could not possibly manage the tattoo. Instead, I will paint this picture on your back and you will have it with you so long as you do not take a bath and wash it off. If you never take a bath again in your life then you will have it always, as long as you live.”

“No,” Drioli said.

“Yes—and on the day that you decide to take a bath I will know that you do not any longer value my picture. It will be a test of your admiration for my art.”

“I do not like the idea,” the girl said. “His admiration for your art is so great that he would be unclean for many years. Let us have the tattoo. But not nude.”

“Then just the head,” Drioli said.

“I could not manage it.”

“It is immensely simple. I will undertake to teach you in two minutes. You will see. I shall go now and fetch the instruments. The needles and the inks. I have inks of many different colours—as many different colours as you have paints, and far more beautiful..

“It is impossible.”

“I have many inks. Have I not many different colours of inks, Josie?”

“Yes.”

“You will see,” Drioli said. “I will go now and fetch them.” He got up from his chair and walked unsteadily, but with determination, out of the room.

In half an hour Drioli was back. “I have brought everything,” he cried, waving a brown suitcase. “All the necessities of the tattooist are here in this bag.”

He placed the bag on the table, opened it, and laid out the electric needles and the small bottles of coloured inks. He plugged in the electric needle, then he took the instrument in his hand and pressed a switch. It made a buzzing sound and the quarter inch of needle that projected from the end of it began to vibrate swiftly up and down. He threw off his jacket and rolled up his sleeve. “Now look. Watch me and I will show you how easy it is. I will make a design on my arm, here.”

His forearm was already covered with blue markings, but he selected a small clear patch of skin upon which to demonstrate.

“First, I choose my ink—let us use ordinary blue—and I dip the point of the needle in the ink… so… and I hold the needle up straight and I run it lightly over the surface of the skin like this… and with the little motor and the electricity, the needle jumps up and down and punctures the skin and the ink goes in and there you are. See how easy it is… see how I draw a picture of a greyhound here upon my arm… The boy was intrigued. “Now let me practise a little—on your arm.”

With the buzzing needle he began to draw blue lines upon Drioli's arm. "It is simple," he said. "It is like drawing with pen and ink. There is no difference except that it is slower."

"There is nothing to it. Are you ready? Shall we begin?"

"At once."

"The model!" cried Drioli. "Come on, Josie!" He was in a bustle of enthusiasm now, tottering around the room arranging everything, like a child preparing for some exciting game. "Where will you have her? Where shall she stand?"

"Let her be standing there, by my dressingtable. Let her be brushing her hair. I will paint her with her hair down over her shoulders and her brushing it."

"Tremendous. You are a genius."

Reluctantly, the girl walked over and stood by the dressing table, carrying her glass of wine with her.

Drioli pulled off his shirt and stepped out of his trousers. He retained only his underpants and his socks and shoes, and he stood there swaying gently from side to side, his small body firm, white-skinned, almost hairless. "Now," he said, "I am the canvas. Where will you place your canvas?"

"As always, upon the easel."

"Don't be crazy. I am the canvas."

"Then place yourself upon the easel. That is where you belong."

"How can I?"

"Are you the canvas or are you not the canvas?"

“I am the canvas. Already I begin to feel like a canvas.”

“Then place yourself upon the easel. There should be no difficulty.”

“Truly, it is not possible.”

“Then sit on the chair. Sit back to front, then you can lean your drunken head against the back of it. Hurry now, for I am about to commence.”

“I am ready. I am waiting.”

“First,” the boy said, “I shall make an ordinary painting. Then, if it pleases me, I shall tattoo over it.” With a wide brush he began to paint upon the naked skin of the man’s back.

“Ayee! Ayee!” Drioli screamed. “A monstrous centipede is marching down my spine!”

“Be still now! Be still!” The boy worked rapidly, applying the paint only in a thin blue wash so that it would not afterwards interfere with the process of tattooing. His concentration, as soon as he began to paint, was so great that it appeared somehow to supersede his drunkenness. He applied the brush strokes with quick jabs of the arm, holding the wrist stiff, and in less than half an hour it was finished.

“All right. That’s all,” he said to the girl, who immediately returned to the couch, lay down, and fell asleep.

Drioli remained awake. He watched the boy take up the needle and dip it in the ink; then he felt the sharp tickling sting as it touched the skin of his back. The pain, which was unpleasant but never extreme, kept him from going to sleep. By following the track of the needle and by watching the different colours of ink that the boy was using, Drioli amused himself trying to visualize what was going on behind him. The boy worked with an astonishing intensity. He appeared to have become completely absorbed in the little machine and in the unusual effects it was able to produce.

Far into the small hours of the morning the machine buzzed and the boy worked. Dnoli could remember that when the artist finally stepped back and said, “It is finished,” there was daylight outside and the sound of people walking in the street.

“I want to see it,” Drioli said. The boy held up a mirror, at an angle, and Drioli craned his neck to look.

“Good God!” he cried. It was a startling sight. The whole of his back, from the top of the shoulders to the base of the spine, was a blaze of colour—gold and green and blue and black and scarlet. The tattoo was applied so heavily it looked almost like an impasto. The boy had followed as closely as possible the original brush strokes, filling them in solid, and it was marvellous the way he had made use of the spine and the protrusion of the shoulder blades so that they became part of the composition. What is more, he had somehow managed to achieve—even with this slow process—a certain spontaneity. The portrait was quite alive; it contained much of that twisted, tortured quality so characteristic of Soutine’s other work. It was not a good likeness. It was a mood rather than a likeness, the model’s face vague and tipsy, the background swirling around her head in a mass of dark-green curling strokes.

“It’s tremendous!”

“I rather like it myself.” The boy stood back, examining it critically. “You know,” he added, “I think it’s good enough for me to sign.” And taking up the buzzer again, he inscribed his name in red ink on the right-hand side, over the place where Drioli’s kidney was.

The old man who was called Drioli was standing in a sort of trance, staring at the painting in the window of the picture-dealer’s shop. It had been so long ago, all that almost as though it had happened in another life.

And the boy? What had become of him? He could remember now that after returning from the war—the first war—he had missed him and had questioned Josie.

“Where is my little Kalmuck ?”

“He is gone,” she had answered. “I do not know where, but I heard it said that a dealer had taken him up and sent him away to CŽret to make more paintings.”

“Perhaps he will return.”

“Perhaps he will. Who knows?”

That was the last time they had mentioned him. Shortly afterwards they had moved to Le Havre where there were more sailors and business was better. The old man smiled as he remembered Le Havre . Those were the pleasant years, the years between the wars, with the small shop near the docks and the comfortable rooms and always enough work, with every day three, four, five sailors coming and wanting pictures on their arms. Those were truly the pleasant years.

Then had come the second war, and Josie being killed, and the Germans arriving, and that was the finish of his business. No one had wanted pictures on their arms any more after that. And by that time he was too old for any other kind of work. In desperation he had made his way back to Paris , hoping vaguely that things would be easier in the big city. But they were not.

And now, after the war was over, he possessed neither the means nor the energy to start up his small business again. It wasn’t very easy for an old man to know what to do, especially when one did not like to beg. Yet how else could he keep alive?

Well, he thought, still staring at the picture. So that is my little Kalmuck . And how quickly the sight of one small object such as this can stir the memory. Up to a few moments ago he had even forgotten that he had a tattoo on his back. It had been ages since he had thought about it. He put his face closer to the window and looked into the gallery. On the walls he could see many other pictures and all seemed to be the work of the same artist. There were a great number of people strolling around. Obviously it was a special exhibition.

On a sudden impulse, Drioli turned, pushed open the door of the gallery and went in.

It was a long room with thick wine-coloured carpet, and by God how beautiful and warm it was! There were all these people strolling about looking at the pictures, well-washed dignified people, each of whom held a catalogue in the hand. Drioli stood just inside the door, nervously glancing around, wondering whether he dared go forward and mingle with this crowd. But before he had had time to gather his courage, he heard a voice beside him saying, “What is it you want?”

The speaker wore a black morning coat. He was plump and short and had a very white face. It was a flabby face with so much flesh upon it that the cheeks hung down on either side of the mouth in two fleshy collops, spanielwise. He came up close to Drioli and said again, “What is it you want?”

Drioli stood still.

“If you please,” the man was saying, “take yourself out of my gallery.”

“Am I not permitted to look at the pictures?”

“I have asked you to leave.”

Drioli stood his ground. He felt suddenly overwhelmingly outraged.

“Let us not have trouble,” the man was saying. “Come on now, this way.” He put a fat white paw on Drioli’s arm and began to push him firmly to the door.

That did it. “Take your goddam hands off me!” Drioli shouted. His voice rang clear down the long gallery and all the heads jerked around as one—all the startled faces stared down the length of the room at the person who had made this noise. A flunkey came running over to help, and the two men tried to hustle Drioli through the door. The people stood still, watching the struggle. Their faces expressed only a mild interest, and seemed to be saying, “It’s all right. There’s no danger to us. It’s being taken care of.”

“I, too!” Drioli was shouting. “I, too, have a picture by this painter! He was my friend and I have a picture which he gave me!”

“He’s mad.”

“A lunatic. A raving lunatic.”

“Someone should call the police.”

With a rapid twist of the body Drioli suddenly jumped clear of the two men, and before anyone could stop him he was running down the gallery shouting, “I’ll show you! I’ll show you! I’ll show you!” He flung off his overcoat, then his jacket and shirt, and he turned so that his naked back was towards the people.

“There!” he cried, breathing quickly. “You see? There it is!”

There was a sudden absolute silence in the room, each person arrested in what he was doing, standing motionless in a kind of shocked, uneasy bewilderment. They were staring at the tattooed picture. It was still there, the colours as bright as ever, but the old man’s back was thinner now, the shoulder blades protruded more sharply, and the effect, though not great, was to give the picture a curiously wrinkled, squashed appearance.

Somebody said, “My God, but it is!”

Then came the excitement and the noise of voices as the people surged forward to crowd around the old man.

“It is unmistakable!”

“His early manner, yes?”

“It is fantastic, fantastic!”

“And look, it is signed!”

“Bend your shoulders forward, my friend, so that the picture stretches out flat.”

“Old one, when was this done?”

“In 1913,” Drioli said, without turning around. “In the autumn of 1913.”

“Who taught Soutine to tattoo?”

“I taught him.”

“And the woman?”

“She was my wife.”

The gallery owner was pushing through the crowd towards Drioli. He was calm now, deadly serious, making a smile with his mouth. “Monsieur,” he said, “I will buy it.” Drioli could see the loose fat upon the face vibrating as he moved his jaw. “I said I will buy it, Monsieur.”

“How can you buy it?” Drioli asked softly.

“I will give two hundred thousand francs for it.” The dealer’s eyes were small and dark, the wings of his broad nose-base were beginning to quiver.

“Don’t do it!” someone murmured in the crowd. “It is worth twenty times as much.”

Drioli opened his mouth to speak. No words came, so he shut it; then he opened it again and said slowly. “But how can I sell it?” He lifted his hands, let them drop loosely to his sides. “Monsieur, how can I possibly sell it?” All the sadness in the world was in his voice.

“Yes!” they were saying in the crowd. “How can he sell it? It is part of himself!”

“Listen,” the dealer said, coming up close. “I will help you, I will make you rich. Together we shall make some private arrangement over this Picture, no?”

Drioli watched him with slow, apprehensive eyes. “But how can you buy it, Monsieur? What will you do with it when you have bought it? Where will you keep it? Where will you keep it tonight? And where tomorrow?”

“Ah, where will I keep it? Yes, where will I keep it? Now, where will I keep it? Well, now… ” The dealer stroked the bridge of his nose with a fat white finger. “It would seem,” he said, “that if I take the picture, I take you also. That is a disadvantage.” He paused and stroked his nose again. “The picture itself is of no value until you are dead. How old are you, my friend?”

“Sixty-one.”

“But you are perhaps not very robust, no?” The dealer lowered the hand from his nose and looked Drioli up and down, slowly, like a farmer appraising an old horse.

“I do not like this,” Drioli said, edging away. “Quite honestly, Monsieur, I do not like it.” He edged straight into the arms of a tall man who put out his hands and caught him gently by the shoulders. Drioli glanced around and apologized. The man smiled down at him, patting one of the old fellow’s naked shoulders reassuringly with a hand encased in a canarycoloured glove.

“Listen, my friend,” the stranger said, still smiling. “Do you like to swim and to bask yourself in the sun?”

Drioli looked up at him, rather startled.

“Do you like fine food and red wine from the great ch‰teaux of Bordeaux ?” The man was still smiling, showing strong white teeth with a flash of gold among them. He spoke in a soft coaxing manner, one gloved hand still resting on Drioli’s shoulder. “Do you like such things?”

“Well yes,” Drioli answered, still greatly perplexed. “Of course.”

“And the company of beautiful women?”

“Why not?”

“And a cupboard full of suits and shirts made to your own personal measurements? It would seem that you are a little lacking for clothes.”

Drioli watched this suave man, waiting for the rest of the proposition.

“Have you ever had a shoe constructed especially for your own foot?”

“You would like that?”

“Well… “And a man who will shave you in the mornings and trim your hair?”

Drioli simply stood and gaped.

“And a plump attractive girl to manicure the nails of your fingers?”

Someone in the crowd giggled.

“And a bell beside your bed to summon your maid to bring your breakfast in the morning? Would you like these things, my friend? Do they appeal to you?”

Drioli stood still and looked at him.

“You see, I am the owner of the Hotel Bristol in Cannes . I now invite you to come down there and live as my guest for the rest of your life in luxury and comfort.” The man paused, allowing his listener time to savour this cheerful prospect. “Your only duty—shall I call it your pleasure—will be to spend your time on my beach in bathing trunks, walking among my guests, sunning yourself, swimming, drinking cocktails. You would like that?”

There was no answer.

“Don’t you see all the guests will thus be able to observe this fascinating picture by Soutine. You will become famous, and men will say, ‘Look, there is the fellow with ten million francs upon his back.’ You like this idea, Monsieur? It pleases you?”

Drioli looked up at the tall man in the canary gloves, still wondering whether this was some sort of a joke. “It is a comical idea,” he said slowly. “But do you really mean it?”

“Of course I mean it.”

“Wait.” the dealer interrupted. “See here, old one. Here is the answer to our problem. I will buy the picture, and I will arrange with a surgeon to remove the skin from your back, and then you will be able to go off on your own and enjoy the great sum of money I shall give you for it.”

“With no skin on my back?”

“No, no, please! You misunderstand. This surgeon will put a new piece of skin in the place of the old one. It is simple.”

“Could he do that?”

“There is nothing to it.”

“Impossible!” said the man with the canary gloves. “He’s too old for such a major skingrafting operation. It would kill him. It would kill you, my friend.”

“It would kill me?”

“Naturally. You would never survive. Only the picture would come through.”

“In the name of God!” Drioli cried. He looked around aghast at the faces of the people watching him, and in the silence that followed, another man’s voice, speaking quietly from the back of the group, could be heard saying, “Perhaps, if one were to offer this old man enough money, he might consent to kill himself on the spot. Who knows?” A few people sniggered. The dealer moved his feet uneasily on the carpet.

Then the hand in the canary glove was tapping Drioli again upon the shoulder. “Come on,” the man was saying, smiling his broad white smile. “You and I will go and have a good dinner and we can talk about it some more while we eat. How’s that? Are you hungry?”

Drioli watched him, frowning. He didn’t like the man’s long flexible neck, or the way he craned it forward at you when he spoke, like a snake.

“Roast duck and Chamberlin,” the man was saying. He put a rich succulent accent on the words, splashing them out with his tongue. “And perhaps a soufflŽ aux marrons, light and frothy.”

Drioli’s eyes turned up towards the ceiling, his lips became loose and wet. One could see the poor old fellow beginning literally to drool at the mouth.

“How do you like your duck?” the man went on. “Do you like it very brown and crisp outside, or shall it be…

“I am coming,” Drioli said quickly. Already he had picked up his shirt and was pulling it frantically over his head. “Wait for me, Monsieur. I am coming.” And within a minute he had disappeared out of the gallery with his new patron.

It wasn’t more than a few weeks later that a picture by Soutine, of a woman’s head, painted in an unusual manner, nicely framed and heavily varnished, turned up for sale in Buenos Aires . That and the fact that there is no hotel in Cannes called Bristol—causes one to wonder a little, and to pray for the old man’s health, and to hope fervently that wherever he may be at this moment, there is a plump attractive girl to manicure the nails of his fingers, and a maid to bring him his breakfast in bed in the mornings.

The Landlady

BILLY WEAVER had travelled down from London on the slow afternoon train, with a change at Swindon on the way, and by the time he got to Bath it was about nine o'clock in the evening and the moon was coming up out of a clear starry sky over the houses opposite the station entrance. But the air was deadly cold and the wind was like a flat blade of ice on his cheeks.

"Excuse me," he said, "but is there a fairly cheap hotel not too far away from here?"

"Try The Bell and Dragon," the porter answered, pointing down the road. "They might take you in. It's about a quarter of a mile along on the other side."

Billy thanked him and picked up his suitcase and set out to walk the quarter-mile to The Bell and Dragon. He had never been to Bath before. He didn't know anyone who lived there. But Mr Greenslade at the Head Office in London had told him it was a splendid city. "Find your own lodgings," he had said, "and then go along and report to the Branch Manager as soon as you've got yourself settled."

Billy was seventeen years old. He was wearing a new navy-blue overcoat, a new brown trilby hat, and a new brown suit, and he was feeling fine. He walked briskly down the street. He was trying to do everything briskly these days.

Briskness, he had decided, was the one common characteristic of all successful businessmen. The big shots up at Head Office were absolutely fantastically brisk all the time. They were amazing.

There were no shops in this wide street that he was walking along, only a line of tall houses on each side, all of them identical. They had porches and pillars and four or five steps going up to their front doors, and it was obvious that once upon a time they had been very swanky residences. But now, even in the darkness, he could see that the paint was peeling from the woodwork on their doors and windows, and that the handsome white fa□ades were cracked and blotchy from neglect.

Suddenly, in a downstairs window that was brilliantly illuminated by a street-lamp not six yards away, Billy caught sight of a printed notice propped up against the glass in one of the upper panes. It said BED AND BREAKFAST. There was a vase of pussy-willows, tall and beautiful, standing just underneath the notice.

He stopped walking. He moved a bit closer. Green curtains (some sort of velvety material) were hanging down on either side of the window. The pussy-willows looked wonderful beside them. He went right up and peered through the glass into the room, and the first thing he saw was a bright fire burning in the hearth. On the carpet in front of the fire, a pretty little dachshund was curled up asleep with its nose tucked into its belly. The room itself, so far as he could see in the half-darkness, was filled with pleasant furniture. There was a baby-grand piano and a big sofa and several plump armchairs; and in one corner he spotted a large parrot in a cage. Animals were usually a good sign in a place like this, Billy told himself; and all in all, it looked to him as though it would be a pretty decent house to stay in. Certainly it would be more comfortable than The Bell and Dragon.

On the other hand, a pub would be more congenial than a boarding-house. There would be beer and darts in the evenings, and lots of people to talk to, and it would probably be a good bit cheaper, too. He had stayed a couple of nights in a pub once before and he had liked it. He had never stayed in any boarding-houses, and, to be perfectly honest, he was a tiny bit frightened of them. The name itself conjured up images of watery cabbage, rapacious landladies, and a powerful smell of kippers in the living-room.

After dithering about like this in the cold for two or three minutes, Billy decided that he would walk on and take a look at The Bell and Dragon before making up his mind. He turned to go.

And now a queer thing happened to him. He was in the act of stepping back and turning away from the window when all at once his eye was caught and held in the most peculiar manner by the small notice that was there. BED AND BREAKFAST, it said. BED AND BREAKFAST, BED AND BREAKFAST, BED AND BREAKFAST. Each word was like a large black eye staring at him through the glass, holding him, compelling him, forcing him to stay where he was and not to walk away from that house, and the next thing he knew, he was actually moving across from the window to the front door of the house, climbing the steps that led up to it, and reaching for the bell.

He pressed the bell. Far away in a back room he heard it ringing, and then at once -it must have been at once because he hadn’t even had time to take his finger from the bell-button -the door swung open and a woman was standing there.

Normally you ring the bell and you have at least a half-minute's wait before the door opens. But this dame was like a jack-in-the-box. He pressed the bell -and out she popped! It made him jump.

She was about forty-five or fifty years old, and the moment she saw him, she gave him a warm welcoming smile.

"Please come in," she said pleasantly. She stepped aside, holding the door wide open, and Billy found himself automatically starting forward into the house. The compulsion or, more accurately, the desire to follow after her into that house was extraordinarily strong.

"I saw the notice in the window," he said, holding himself back.

"Yes, I know."

"I was wondering about a room."

"It's all ready for you, my dear," she said. She had a round pink face and very gentle blue eyes.

"I was on my way to The Bell and Dragon,"

Billy told her. "But the notice in your window just happened to catch my eye."

"My dear boy," she said, "why don't you come in out of the cold?"

"How much do you charge?"

"Five and sixpence a night, including breakfast."

It was fantastically cheap. It was less than half of what he had been willing to pay.

“If that is too much,” she added, “then perhaps I can reduce it just a tiny bit. Do you desire an egg for breakfast? Eggs are expensive at the moment. It would be sixpence less without the egg.”

“Five and sixpence is fine,” he answered. “I should like very much to stay here.”

“I knew you would. Do come in.”

She seemed terribly nice. She looked exactly like the mother of one’s best school-friend welcoming one into the house to stay for the Christmas holidays. Billy took off his hat, and stepped over the threshold.

“Just hang it there,” she said, “and let me help you with your coat.”

There were no other hats or coats in the hall. There were no umbrellas, no walking-sticks -nothing.

“We have it all to ourselves,” she said, smiling at him over her shoulder as she led the way upstairs. “You see, it isn’t very often I have the pleasure of taking a visitor into my little nest.”

The old girl is slightly dotty, Billy told himself. But at five and sixpence a night, who gives a damn about that? “I should’ve thought you’d be simply swamped with applicants,” he said politely.

“Oh, I am, my dear, I am, of course I am. But the trouble is that I’m inclined to be just a teeny weeny bit choosey and particular -if you see what I mean.”

“Ah, yes.”

“But I’m always ready. Everything is always ready day and night in this house just on the offchance that an acceptable young gentleman will come along. And it is such a pleasure, my dear, such a very great pleasure when now and again I open the door and I see someone standing there who is just exactly right.” She was half-way up the stairs, and she paused with one hand on the stair-rail, turning her head and smiling down at him with pale lips. “Like you,” she added, and her blue eyes travelled slowly all the way down the length of Billy’s body, to his feet, and then up again.

On the first-floor landing she said to him, “This floor is mine.”

They climbed up a second flight. “And this one is all yours,” she said. “Here’s your room. I do hope you’ll like it.” She took him into a small but charming front bedroom, switching on the light as she went in.

“The morning sun comes right in the window, Mr Perkins. It Is Mr Perkins, isn’t it?”

“No,” he said. “It’s “Weaver.”

“Mr Weaver. How nice. I’ve put a waterbottle between the sheets to air them out, Mr Weaver. It’s such a comfort to have a hot water-bottle in a strange bed with clean sheets, don’t you agree? And you may light the gas fire at any time if you feel chilly.”

“Thank you,” Billy said. “Thank you ever so much.” He noticed that the bedspread had been taken off the bed, and that the bedclothes had been neatly turned back on one side, all ready for someone to get in.

“I’m so glad you appeared,” she said, looking earnestly into his face. “I was beginning to get worried.”

“That’s all right,” Billy answered brightly. “You mustn’t worry about me.” He put his suitcase on the chair and started to open it.

“And what about supper, my dear? Did you manage to get anything to eat before you came here?”

“I’m not a bit hungry, thank you,” he said. “I think I’ll just go to bed as soon as possible because tomorrow I’ve got to get up rather early and report to the office.”

“Very well, then. I’ll leave you now so that you can unpack. But before you go to bed, would you be kind enough to pop into the sitting-room on the ground floor and sign the book? Everyone has to do that because it’s the law of the land, and we don’t want to go breaking any laws at this stage in the proceedings, do we?” She gave him a little wave of the hand and went quickly out of the room and closed the door.

Now, the fact that his landlady appeared to be slightly off her rocker didn't worry Billy in the least. After all, she was not only harmless-there was no question about that-but she was also quite obviously a kind and generous soul. He guessed that she had probably lost a son in the war, or something like that, and had never got over it.

So a few minutes later, after unpacking his suitcase and washing his hands, he trotted downstairs to the ground floor and entered the living-room. His landlady wasn't there, but the fire was glowing in the hearth, and the little dachshund was still sleeping in front of it. The room was wonderfully warm and cosy. I'm a lucky fellow, he thought, rubbing his hands. This is a bit of all right.

He found the guest-book lying open on the piano, so he took out his pen and wrote down his name and address. There were only two other entries above his on the page, and, as one always does with guest-books, he started to read them. One was a Christopher Mulholland from Cardiff. The other was Gregory W. Temple from Bristol.

That's funny, he thought suddenly. Christopher Mu; holland. It rings a bell.

Now where on earth had he heard that rather unusual name before?

Was he a boy at school? No. Was it one of his sister's numerous young men, perhaps, or a friend of his father's? No, no, it wasn't any of those. He glanced down again at the book.

Christopher Mulholland

231 Cathedral Road, Cardiff

Gregory W. Temple

27 Sycamore Drive, Bristol

As a matter of fact, now he came to think of it, he wasn't at all sure that the second name didn't have almost as much of a familiar ring about it as the first.

“Gregory Temple?” he said aloud, searching his memory. “Christopher Mulholland?

“Such charming boys,” a voice behind him answered, and he turned and saw his landlady sailing into the room with a large silver tea-tray in her hands. She was holding it well out in front of her, and rather high up, as though the tray were a pair of reins on a frisky horse.

“They sound somehow familiar,” he said.

“They do? How interesting.”

“I’m almost positive I’ve heard those names before somewhere. Isn’t that queer? Maybe it was in the newspapers. They weren’t famous in any way, were they? I mean famous cricketers or footballers or something like that?”

“Famous,” she said, setting the tea-tray down on the low table in front of the sofa. “Oh no, I don’t think they were famous. But they were extraordinarily handsome, both of them, I can promise you that. They were tall and young and handsome, my dear, just exactly like you.”

Once more, Billy glanced down at the book.

“Look here, he said, noticing the dates. This last entry is over two years old.”

“It is?”

“Yes, indeed. And Christopher Mulholland’s is nearly a year before that-more than three Years ago.”

“Dear me,” she said, shaking her head and heaving a dainty little sigh. “I would never have thought it. How time does fly away from us all, doesn’t it, Mr Wilkins?”

“It’s Weaver,” Billy said. “W-e-a-v-e-r.”

“Oh, of course it is!” she cried, sitting down on the sofa. “How silly of me. I do apologize. In one ear and out the other, that’s me, Mr Weaver.”

“You know something?” Billy said. “Something that’s really quite extraordinary about all this?”

“No, dear, I don’t.”

“Well, you see both of these names, Mulholland and Temple, I not only seem to remember each of them separately, so to speak, but somehow or other, in some peculiar way, they both appear to be sort of connected together as well. As though they were both famous for the same sort of thing, if you see what I mean-like-like Dempsey and Tunney, for example, or Churchill and Roosevelt.”

“How amusing,” she said. “But come over here now, dear, and sit down beside me on the sofa and I’ll give you a nice cup of tea and a ginger biscuit before you go to bed.”

“You really shouldn’t bother,” Billy said. “I didn’t mean you to do anything like that.” He stood by the piano, watching her as she fussed about with the cups and saucers. He noticed that she had small, white, quickly moving hands, and red finger-nails.

“I’m almost positive it was in the newspapers I saw them,” Billy said. “I’ll think of it in a second. I’m sure I will.”

There is nothing more tantalizing than a thing like this which lingers just outside the borders of one’s memory. He hated to give up.

“Now wait a minute,” he said. “Wait just a minute. Muiholland…Christopher Muiholland…wasn’t that the name of the Eton schoolboy who was on a walking-tour through the West Country, and then all of a sudden “Milk?” she said. “And sugar?”

“Yes, please. And then all of a sudden ” Eton schoolboy?” she said. “Oh no, my dear, that can’t possibly be right because my Mr Muiholland was certainly not an Eton schoolboy when he came to me. He was a Cambridge undergraduate. Come over here now and sit next to me and warm yourself in front of this lovely fire. Come on. Your tea’s all ready for you.” She patted the empty place beside her on the sofa, and she sat there smiling at Billy and waiting for him to come over.

He crossed the room slowly, and sat down on the edge of the sofa. She placed his teacup on the table in front of him.

“There we are,” she said. “How nice and cosy this is, isn’t it?”

Billy started sipping his tea. She did the same. For half a minute or so, neither of them spoke. But Billy knew that she was looking at him. Her body was half-turned towards him, and he could feel her eyes resting on his face, watching him over the rim of her teacup. Now and again, he caught a whiff of a peculiar smell that seemed to emanate directly from her person. It was not it, the least unpleasant, and it reminded him well, he wasn’t quite sure what it reminded him of Pickled walnuts? New leather? Or was it the corridors of a hospital?

“Mr Mulholland was a great one for his tea,” she said at length. “Never in my life have I seen anyone drink as much tea as dear, sweet Mr Muiholland.”

“I suppose he left fairly recently,” Billy said. He was still puzzling his head about the two names. He was positive now that he had seen them in the newspapers in the headlines.

“Left?” she said, arching her brows. “But my dear boy, he never left. He’s still here. Mr Temple is also here. They’re on the third floor, both of them together.”

Billy set down his cup slowly on the table, and stared at his landlady. She smiled back at him, and then she put out one of her white hands and patted him comfortingly on the knee. “How old are you, my dear?” she asked.

“Seventeen.”

“Seventeen!” she cried. “Oh, it’s the perfect age! Mr Mulholland was also seventeen. But I think he was a trifle shorter than you are, in fact I’m sure he was, and his teeth weren’t quite so white. You have the most beautiful teeth, Mr Weaver, did you know that?”

“They’re not as good as they look,” Billy said. “They’ve got simply masses of fillings in them at the back.”

“Mr Temple, of course, was a little older,” she said, ignoring his remark. “He was actually twenty-eight. And yet I never would have guessed it if he hadn’t told me, never in my whole life. There wasn’t a blemish on his body.”

“A what?” Billy said.

“His skin was just like a baby’s.”

There was a pause. Billy picked up his teacup and took another sip of his tea, then he set it down again gently in its saucer. He waited for her to say something else, but she seemed to have lapsed into another of her silences He sat there staring straight ahead of him into the far corner of the room, biting his lower lip.

“That parrot,” he said at last. “You know something? It had me completely fooled when I first saw it through the window from the street. I could have sworn it was alive.”

“Alas, no longer.”

“It’s most terribly clever the way it’s been done,” he said. “It doesn’t look in the least bit dead. Who did it?”

“I did.”

“You did?”

“Of course,” she said. “And have you met my little Basil as well?” She nodded towards the dachshund curled up so comfortably in front of the fire. Billy looked at it. And suddenly, he realized that this animal had all the time been just as silent and motionless as the parrot. He put out a hand and touched it gently on the top of its back. The back was hard and cold, and when he pushed the hair to one side with his fingers, he could see the skin underneath, greyish-black and dry and perfectly preserved.

“Good gracious me,” he said. “How absolutely fascinating.” He turned away from the dog and stared with deep admiration at the little woman beside him on the sofa. “It must be most awfully difficult to do a thing like that.”

“Not in the least,” she said. “I stuff all my little pets myself when they pass away. Will you have another cup of tea?”

“No, thank you,” Billy said. The tea tasted faintly of bitter almonds, and he didn’t much care for it.

“You did sign the book, didn’t you?”

“Oh, yes.”

“That’s good. Because later on, if I happen to forget what you were called, then I can always come down here and look it up. I still do that almost every day with Mr Mulholland and Mr-“

“Temple,” Billy said. “Gregory Temple. Excuse my asking, but haven’t there been any other guests here except them in the last two or three years?”

Holding her teacup high in one hand, inclining her head slightly to the left, she looked up at him out of the corners of her eyes and gave him another gentle little smile.

“No, my dear,” she said. “Only you.”