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Preface

The five stories here collected are set in a college town in “California’s Kansas,” as Elna Bakker calls it, “the vast flat floor of the Great Valley” (An Island Called California, 1971). The college itself figures prominently in two stories, marginally in a third, as background in a fourth and not at all in a fifth. The progression is from the shortest piece to the longest, which is novella length, but readers who prefer a chronological arrangement might begin with the third story, “Wilderness.” The period covered is about twenty years, starting, say, in the mid-nineteen sixties. I would like to think, however, that Yana City exists beyond specifics of time and place, like Flaubert’s Yonville-l’Abbaye or George Eliot’s Raveloe (“never reached by the vibrations of the coach-horn or public opinion.”)
Cézanne’s Fingers

They left abruptly, piling what they could in the U-Haul trailer and abandoning the rest. Two thousand miles on baloney, bread, jug wine and benzedrine. Stopped only at gas stations. Then in Nebraska they hit a blizzard and the wipers quit. He doubled up his fist and punched out the glass. In Utah the trailer broke an axle. He unhooked it and left it for the Mormons. “You should have seen the crap I got from the U-haul people,” he would say later, when they had arrived in abundant time. (There had been no need to hurry.) Then he would lean forward, his gravelly voice, low, gleeful and triumphant. “I used to be in real estate,” he would confide. “I was good, damn good, but I couldn’t hack the pressure.”

This was probably true. There was a snapshot he used to display: himself, two-hundred and forty pounds, ballooning from a light seersucker suit, dark shirt and white tie (as though in photographic negative)—a man from whom you would not readily buy anything, and yet, no doubt as he said, “damn good.”

When he came to the town, however, he was a chunky one hundred and eighty, dressed in tweeds and guards ties and silent about real estate. He taught American Studies at the college while Ruth tended Howie and Jennifer and meditated dinner parties, and they both fretted in a fierce enlightened way over the rotten schools. Soon they were absorbed: PTA, Women’s League, Pop Warner, Cub Scouts, Youth Soccer, fights for curbstones and streetlights—all this in the California Sudan where the winter rains are torrential and the summer light like powdered glass. You could, without much
trouble, have imagined him in Rotary or Kiwanis (he talked cautiously now of “leverage” and “carrying paper”), her running for school board. You could have, I say, and you would have been a damn fool.

For suddenly, you see, during those lost, sad drunken years they too discovered they were artists. It was now that they fled to the foothills, and Harris began his sculpture while Ruth attempted ceramics. Now he appeared on campus in lederhosen, tanktop and sandals, thick dark hair sprouting in whorls on his legs and chest and peeking in tufts from beneath his arms. A drooping moustache and the lank, shoulder-length black hair gave him the air of a Mexican bandido. Oh and Ruth! Her long dark hair, formerly so wavy and soft, was yanked in a painful ponytail, turning her sharp-boned face to a blade. Saks and I. Magnin vanished, and she padded about in paint-speckled jeans and a floppy man’s shirt, cheap “go-aheads” flapping on her dirty feet. Bitterly too and repeatedly she announced that she was sick, sick unto death of “this fucking hole!”

He collected coteries, not the brightest students but disciples all the same, to nourish on cocaine and Jung. Soon he brought a young woman into his house and bed, then nagged Ruth into affairs and bragged of them. There was the legend of the Rebecca chair in his office; there were stories, which he encouraged, and several times he shoved beneath ambivalent eyes more photographs: himself, Ruth and various unidentified persons tightjawed and gloomily naked. With us, he announced, anything goes!

Meanwhile he published—or threatened to. “Read that!” he would command. “This baby is coming out in Artyfuss: a journal of the smarts!” (by which he meant Artifice: a journal of the arts.) “That,” he would tell you, “is the way you gotta write. You gotta zing it in there!” The prose hardly zang, but you got only a glimpse before he snatched away the cloudy Xerox sheets.

. . . here it may be proper to remark that the “lost sheep” unquestionably represent an aspect of the self, often depicted in such symbology as friendly animals. The imperative to leave them alone and the assurance that they will faithfully return verbalizes an insistent plea for trust in the subconscious . . .
A colleague was moved to parody.

_The Greedy Man is he who sits_
_And bites bits out of plates,
_Or else takes up an almanac_
_And gobbles all the dates._

_Obviously [the satirist wrote], the plates represent the Tai-git-tu, the Chinese symbol of eternity, and the biting is an attempt to reduce the instantaneous whole of eternity to time which measures change (v. Summa Theolgiae, 1A, 10, 4.). The third and fourth lines reverse the process. Thus, the Greedy Man gobbling all the dates is ravenous for both immortality and the gratifications of this life . . ._

And so on.

Copies distributed in the Department coffee room provoked wry amusement, except in the case of one phlegmatic graduate student who seemed to miss the point.

“It’s a put-on,” the author explained. “You see, Harris is publishing this impossible thing about ‘Little Bo Peep’—I’m not making this up—and he’s running around bragging about it.”

“You mean,” the young man asked, “the one about archetypes and reliance on the subconscious?”

“Right. It goes on and on. So I dreamed this up for the hell of it. I couldn’t stop myself. There’s something about Charlie that brings out the worst in me.” And the wit permitted himself a chuckle.

The young man nodded. “But the thing is,” he said tonelessly, “is that Harris didn’t write it. I did—in his seminar.”

This is the part which, related at cocktail parties or on the cooling twilight patios, produces the shrillest laughter. It never fails, and why should it? You can almost see it: Abbott-and-Costello Harris opening a closet and bringing flatirons, teddy bears, girdles, washboards and roller skates crashing down upon him. A limp inner tube settles about
his neck. A lampshade crowns him briefly. A bowling ball conks him cross-eyed and rubber-legged.


“Because,” someone else will offer, “he’s Charlie. Why else?”

“No,” the first will protest. “I don’t mean why did he steal it. That I can understand. What I don’t get is what possessed him to tell everybody. He must have known what would happen.”

“Well,” the second will reply, “that’s Charlie too.”

Old Philip Moore—if I may now speak of myself as having acquired the third person—was delegated to treat with him. Authorized to flourish the Education Code and mutter darkly about the Chancellor’s Office and “legal action,” he was to induce Harris to resign, which, it was agreed, would be best for all. This commission Moore accepted and set forth one burning day—a tall grave man near retirement who wore tweeds and neckties all year round, without affectation.

East of the highway the land begins to rise. The flat tawny fields give way to forest, creek and canyon: first the sparse Digger pine, then cedar, black oak, then tall columns of plated yellow pine. Bounding over the twisting road, jolted into chuckholes and abrupt depressions, Moore flew over sudden rises and yanked the car around sharp turns, blinking at sunbursts through shadowy leaves. His head throbbed. Pine dust itched his nose and throat. Now and then a glare seared his eyes—creek flashes like molten tin.

It had been ages since he had come this way, yet when he and Melissa (dead these nine years) had first arrived in town—long before the westside freeway was done—when the children had been truly that (flopping like chimpanzees across the front seat) and he a brainy young historian certain (he thought) to make his mark—why then they would take this route, racing for a weekend in San Francisco: the river, the rice fields, the live oaks, the scored volcanic rock, the shining mountains far away. Sometimes on an autumn evening you would see the rice stubble on fire, the flames silky in the dusk, and sometimes after dark, zipping through the small towns, you would start at the looming shadow of a sawmill cone and the bright flurries of sparks.
But that was long ago. And since? Spouses traded round. Children passed about like the furniture. Friends, enemies, colleagues shovelled out of sight. The sleepy town a humming city. And now? Widower, grandfather, elder statesman, more than a little ridiculous with his old-fashioned courtesy and impractical clothes, he would do for fools’ errands like this. Too removed, too dispassionate to care greatly, he would lend to the whole silly proceeding an air of judicial earnestness and dignified fairness. 

*Hell, that crazy Harris can’t blow up at old Phil!* He was, of course, being used—precisely because he would allow it, because it seemed a thing of no importance. He had dutifully rendered service. He could do so once again. Really, it wasn’t much to ask.

A wooden box with a steep tin roof, the house sat well back from the road. It snowed here (it never snowed in town), and sometimes drifts reached the second story. Maybe, he thought, Harris rising of a frozen morning contemplated a Christmas card world: the meadow gleaming with powder, tree limbs stark as lace.

Climbing out, he was staggered by the sun. He sucked in the hot dusty air—like breathing through gauze! Then he moved toward the weathered garage. From it there now issued a furious hissing, then a burst of light in the open door. Showers of sparks rose and fell, and a foul smell reached his nose, mingling with pine dust and soiled air.

A silhouette—booted, armored, helmeted—sat upon an upturned crate, squeezing fire from its crotch. The hiss grew louder. The smell pricked Moore’s nose and throat—a rank sulfur aroma. Now he could make out the tall tanks chained together, the hoses and gauges. Lost in the fierce light, the manic rushing sound, the craftsman toiled on.

Legs weak, Moore pressed forward. The helmet jerked. The clumsy gloves fumbled the torch. The flame edge diminished to a spear of blinding light, then popped and vanished. The last orange sparks bounced about the booted feet.

“Harris?”

The black shield regarded Moore, and in the small glass rectangle he saw a blurry image: a stall, skinny man in suit and tie staring from a sunlit doorway—himself! Then the helmet shifted and the picture fled. A memory: eight years old, kneeling before a shadowy grille.
Moore cleared his throat and entered. “Look, Charlie,” he said, a little too loudly, “you probably know what’s up. What it comes down to is, you can resign or fight it. If you fight it the college will too, and so will the Chancellor’s Office—if they have to. The more public the thing becomes—if you ask me—the worse for everybody.” He paused. His words seemed to clatter, and the sudden stillness was oppressive. Limply, he said, “I’m sorry.”

The helmet stared.

Uneasily, Moore looked around: tools, anvil, sander, brazing rods, burnt-out water heaters lying on their sides, crumpled five gallon cans, a heap of small junk: bent forks, stiffened paint brushes, burst flashlight batteries, buttons, cups . . . Some of this trash would be glued to a board and coated with resin, garter snaps and fanbelt pulleys coyly juxtaposed. The smashed cans would be sanded raw and exposed on floodlit turntables. Through it all you felt some rage against the smooth and simple and pleasing, some fury to compel the fastidious eye to wallow in crud.

A gloved hand cocked up the helmet, and peering beneath this visor, this lid, Moore saw the dirty sheepskin pad across the forehead, the drooping black moustache, the ragged fringe of beard. The face studied him, the throat speckled with tiny scars, spark holes in the limp shirt as though tiny teeth had nibbled there.

Moore cleared his throat again. “Listen,” he said—more quietly now—“there are nine causes for dismissal—as you may know. The first three are immoral conduct, unprofessional conduct and dishonesty.” He thought all at once: had it ever really happened?

Harris grunted and spat. Glaring, passionate, he said, “Know what I did one time?”

“What, Charlie?”

“We were coming out here see,” (The voice was hoarse, wild.) “And I threw everything I could in this U-Haul trailer . . .” Then it all poured out again, Harris, bard and hero both, celebrating his own saga, while Moore fidgeted and pointedly drew breath. But suddenly, in the midst of so much nonsense—The Charlie Harris Story crashing about you like cheap crockery—suddenly in the open door a figure appeared, blocking the light. Both men turned. Harris looked up.
Slim and bony in the dirty jeans and loose shirt, she approached, the ratty hair falling over the shoulders. Now Moore saw the narrow, high-cheeked face—bitter and sullen. The dark eyes flashed.

Reaching Harris, she turned and glared. In the proud head tilt, the silent sneer, you caught an absurd queenly belligerence, something both protective and childish. Literally now, she stood beside her man. Harris extended a gloved hand—an extravagant gesture that might have included the world.

“You know something?” he said softly. “Language doesn’t make it.”

“What?”

“I can’t get off on anything verbal anymore.”

Suddenly, Moore understood. With the force of a vision it struck him: it had happened before, would happen again. Harris would cheat, run into debt, lose jobs, infuriate anyone on whose good will he depended, and she would endure, victim and consort. Here was one more humiliation, one more defeat, one more excuse for her to leave him finally. In his elliptical, self-lacerating way (language didn’t make it) he insisted: *You can’t love me. Look what I’ve done now!* Then would follow—what? Charlie on his knees? Tears? Ecstasy? Frantic sex? It would start all over: another place, a different job, a fresh crisis. Like gypsies the Harrises packed up and moved on, abandoning along the road every impediment to their crazed love.

And Moore was moved—abruptly, mindlessly—shoved to the brink of stinging tears and wished, absurdly, to lift his hand in blessing. All at once he felt himself as old as the earth itself, but it wasn’t for *him* to offer gestures. Now Harris cleared *his* throat.

“The painter Paul Cézanne,” he intoned, shucking off the gloves, “used to link his fingers like this, to show how everything is locked together. You know?” Harris looked up.

Moore nodded, wincing at the pedantry. Then Harris said: “It’s all right.”

“What’s all right?”

“You don’t have to be sorry.”

“Who said I was sorry?”

Moore blinked, and again a ridiculous memory seized him: kneeling; the patient knowing face beyond the shadowy grate.
Harris shrugged. “I’ll send in a letter.”

“That would be best.”

“Yes.” Then he rose—a short, squat, round-shouldered man wearing a great tin hat, a gnome, a troll surely, hunched and stealthy with that glittering eye and sallow skin. Didn’t he live beneath some bridge? Grandly now, he placed his arm around Ruth, who pouted and sagged against him. Then her chin lifted. Her eyes blazed. His free hand—dirt-caked, nails rimmed—Harris extended.

“Thanks, Phil.”

“For what?” With distaste Moore shook hands.

“Listen,” Harris said, dropping his hand. “You want something?”

“Want something?”

“I got ten dollar twenty-four grams of Mex, twenty-four dollar full ounce—”

“No, no. I don’t want anything.”

“Quarter gram of coke? Hardly cut?”

“No,” Moore said. “I don’t want it.”

Harris shrugged, the face-shield tilted above his head like an enormous beak. Then he lifted his hand.

“Well,” he said, “see you, huh?”

Below, the valley spread—flat, dun, field upon field stretching toward the misty Coast Range. Down there grazed dozens of newly sheared sheep—scrawny, dust-colored, heads low, rumps to the south (often depicted in such symbology as friendly animals). North, where the freeway began, dark shapes of cattle emerged under scraggly oaks. Further on, the town trembled in the haze, sunken among trees. Here a water tower shone; there a radio spire glinted; and closer now a man-made lake quivered, flat and polished like old silver, reflecting the milky sky. And all of it—trees, lake, spire, town—swam and shimmered in the heat, some fragment of a dream.

Moore could breathe now, though the air was thick and soiled and smelled of exhaust, tar and burning pavement, and though his heart pained him still. “Heartache,” he thought, a silly phrase, a metaphor, but now, eyes stinging, he felt it again—a dull throb, a gnawing—and blindly, he plunged on.
Elections

When their anger had smoldered down into stony silence, she flung herself on the bed while he stomped toward the kitchen and the gin. He could get blind drunk for all she cared, though he wouldn’t. Alcohol turned him bitter and gave a nasty edge to his tongue but made him more ponderously reasonable than ever. Anyway, they had worn themselves out. They had said their say.

“What do you want me to do?” he had thrown at her. “Tell them the rules don’t apply because he wouldn’t have won in any case? Tell him we only go by the book if you’re ‘popular’?” He had pronounced the word with elaborate distaste, as though biting into something vile. His square handsome face had been flushed and scowling under the pewter-colored hair. He stood there, fifty-three years old, still snapping to attention, with that stiffness about the shoulders, as though he swiveled from the waist but not the neck. And glaring at her, he had really wanted to know.

She hadn’t replied. She had lacked an answer, but there were things she had wanted to pelt him with. Does it really matter? Is it worth it? Is it really worth it, Harry? Think! Think of the cost! Isn’t it all pretty silly?

He wouldn’t have agreed, and knowing that, she hadn’t bothered, turning in upon herself, sour and stoical. It’s so like you, Harry, she had thought. It really is! God, is it ever like you!

Which didn’t mean he wasn’t “right.”

Oh, he was, she would grant. He was, as always, integrity personified—and what had it gotten them? Just once she wished he could see how irrelevant, how irresponsible
his precious sense of honor was. Look at the results, she wanted to scream. For God's Sake! How can you think this is victory?

He would, of course. He would balm himself with gin and rationalization. He had gone, once again, by the “book,” producing pedantic justice and general disaster, and now was there anyone in the school or the town itself (barring a few obscene exceptions) who didn’t hate his guts?

And he and she had been there exactly three months.

Who could have predicted it? She possibly, but no one else. He had made a marvelous impression; he always did. He was Central Casting’s idea of a high school principal—tall, elegant, silver-haired, dignified, with that mellow baritone, that wry sparkle in the searching eye, and that playfulness at the mouth corners. Distinguished in Harris tweeds (as he had formerly been in dress blues), he was firm, composed, knowledgeable, good-natured and rarely pompous. He was the answer to a school board’s prayer, divine intervention, someone at last to shape up Glen Oaks Senior High!

And hadn’t it needed shaping? Indeed, it had! And hadn’t Harry shaped? Hadn’t he tried? You couldn’t deny it. And when the devilish Ray Harmon, the senior genius with the 1450 SAT score and the whiz-bang word processor, when he had ventured to strike a bargain—a fair effort by seniors on the state achievement test in return for smoking privileges—Harry had been amused but untempted. In any case, he had told Ray calmly (eyes dancing, she imagined, smile flickering), he wasn’t cutting any deals.

The boy had turned and gone without a word, and when the results were in weeks later—scores down, mostly because of an inexplicable senior collapse—Harry had pacified the Board. “. . . These kids are pretty hip. They know this doesn’t count on their records, so they don’t exert themselves.” There would be no increased funding—a disappointment—but no one was induced to blame Harry personally. It was just too bad.

Only—she wondered (blasphemously)—what if he had given it? Would it have mattered? So the kids smoked on school grounds during lunch instead of fouling and trampling the neighbors’ yards. So what? The mysterious Ray Harmon might have energized his peers to put forth genuine effort, resulting in new band and football uniforms, books for the library, a first class literary magazine, plausible sets for the
drama club, additional computers, and more. But, as Harry loftily said, not only did the end not justify the means, certain means called in question the end itself.

Yet again . . . she wasn’t sure.

She was rarely sure of anything—her lifelong curse and fatal disadvantage in debate with Harry. She was constantly questioning people, wanting to know how they lived, what they believed, what values they held, even what brands of food and appliances they bought. Invited to their houses, she sometimes examined medicine chests and peeked into shower stalls, not out of common snoopiness but from that insatiable curiosity that left her forever wondering—what did people choose and shouldn’t she do the same?

Harry naturally felt no such gnawing. At some distant time he had apparently considered and resolved all burning questions and put them comfortably behind him. Take religion. She was forever plowing through books about different faiths—not just the innumerable Christian sects, but Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism—and more—alternately intrigued, confused, troubled, put off and enchanted once again. Such amateur scholarship both amused and irritated Harry. Firmly but without ostentation, he would announce—if the occasion seemed to demand it, or if there appeared to be any doubt about the matter—that he was an atheist. That settled that, he implied—courteously.

Still, she had her doubts. Would a man truly sure of himself retire so abruptly from the Navy after long years? And would he, at this age, pull up stakes and abandon a secure if not terribly profitable teaching job to go larking after an “administrative credential” and a principalship—something in which for all his impressive demeanor he had no practical experience? Was this certainty? A man at peace with himself? Or wasn’t this, as she secretly believed, a man whose career had never quite achieved what he (and most people) expected?

Oh yes, “lieutenant commander” sounded splendid, if you didn’t know the Navy, but when it became clear Harry would advance no further, you could bet that something had gone askew, and she knew what—that blinkered perception of right and wrong that made failure inevitable if undramatic.
In the service a senior officer wrote numerous evaluations, but if a subordinate were diligent and reliable, it wasn’t enough simply to say so. Oh no! If you wished the person promoted, you described said person in admiring terms suitable for Lord Nelson or Francis Drake. It was understood, but Harry declined. He would tell you your faults—frankly and with good humor—and look you in the eye. Worse, he would tell other people your faults (with that same frank good humor) if asked—though he wouldn’t neglect your virtues as he perceived them. This, he believed, was only doing what one should—and he was right.

But—she sometimes wanted to shriek—the result was that inferior people were promoted and the more deserving, if they carried Harry’s restrained appraisal, were not, with consequent resentment and subtle forms of non-cooperation and revenge, something Harry never seemed to grasp. If things went badly, he became philosophical but refused to blame himself. He had done what was proper. If the world chose not to respect it, the world might go its own dismal way.

The trouble was, you had to live in that world. There were no others. This he didn’t seem to understand, atheist or no—not as she had been made to understand it, now that her small but pleasant world had fallen about her like so much crumbling stucco.

She yearned for friendship, she always had, but more than ever now that the children were grown and gone their own questionable directions. After a nomadic life as an officer’s spouse she had expected to die in the last town, where Harry, now a civilian, had finally put down roots. And laboriously but relentlessly, she had made friends, there and now here, something that didn’t come easily.

Oh, she put people off, she knew, asking too many questions, growing abruptly personal and inquisitive, striking new acquaintances as flighty and unpredictable, as she tested ideas and opinions. (“But didn’t you want more children?” she might ask people she hardly knew.) At times she must have sounded almost nutty. Taking any side in an argument to provoke a rebuttal, she could seem dangerous, lunatic and nosey. And it wasn’t exactly that she didn’t mean what she said. Rather, she hoped through some sort of conversational dialectic to discover what she did mean, for she hardly knew herself. Somehow she expected people to know this and forgive. Not everyone did.
Some did, though: Colleen Devereux for one, and Amanda Harris, Selina Jacoby and Thelma Sorenson among others—bright, self-confident women (younger than she), who had welcomed her eagerly, unfazed by questions and probings, finding her enthusiasm and avid curiosity delightful. They had had her to lunches and taken her “antiquing” (which she adored), putting her onto a local eccentric who had miraculously corralled eighteenth-century Imari and English tin-glazed tile and would part with both for a ridiculously small sum. Women like these knew “good goods,” as she called them, and appreciated her passion for such. Spurred in turn by her interest, they had planned and promised trips to The City—to civilization in other words, meaning first rate restaurants, theaters, boutiques, fabric stores and antique shops that featured something besides old license plates and farm equipment. They had promised, in short, to take her where the spirit could breathe.

Nor was that all. Colleen Devereux was putting her up for Lambda Tau, a service organization—a little snobbish (mostly doctors and attorneys’ wives) but well meaning, given to charity drives and social functions—a barn dance in the fall and once a year a formal dinner, to which she hoped to persuade Harry to wear his uniform. An artist of some talent and flair, she had already contributed ideas and sketches for decorations, notions proclaimed “smashing” and “fabulous!” Well, really, they weren’t bad!

It was a tidy, silly little world no doubt, something to smile at, but it stimulated and fulfilled her. And it was a charm of sorts against the long lonely hours in this blistering valley that suggested from certain angles the backside of the moon. Laugh if you wanted. She had been grateful, even at times ecstatic.

Then had come the business with Ray Harmon, the blank-faced inventive prankster who was said to have mailed one female teacher a pair of falsies, and made a second absurd by giving a report on a non-existent book which the teacher, showing off, claimed to have read. It was Ray too who recited soundlessly in German class, lips moving, causing Mr. Vogel to turn up his hearing aid, whereupon Ray blasted out his recitation so that the poor man quailed and fiddled frantically with his apparatus.

Harry had found all this funny, though not, possibly, as funny as he pretended. It was his habit—developed in the Navy—never to appear shocked or surprised by folly or impudence. If you thought you could get his goat, the pose said, think again. Such
equanimity discouraged jests and rebellion, he believed, and probably he was right.
When, therefore, Ray had been caught throwing a paper airplane from a third floor
classroom window and was sent to the principal, Harry had smiled his measured smile,
eyes almost impish (she could bet), and told the offender that he would police the quad
after school.

“Police?” the boy said indignantly. “Do I get a gun and a badge?”
“What you get,” Harry had said mildly—in that imperturbable baritone—“is a
plastic bag into which you put whatever shouldn’t be lying around.”

“Police?” the culprit had said again, making it his exit line. Harry had folded his
arms (so he claimed), and his smile no doubt had flickered still. “Police” was
unfortunate, he admitted, a slip of the old military tongue, but what the hell?

Less amusing and less trivial was the fraternity—illegal but flourishing. “My
predecessor evidently looked the other way,” Harry explained. “That’s what Grant tells
me. To get along, go along, and all that. He seems to have accepted the smoking deal
too, to get the seniors galvanized for the achievement test, or so I’m informed. I told
Grant that wasn’t my style.” “Grant” was Grant Nichols, Dean of Boys, a round,
unprepossessing little man who had been at Glen Oaks for twenty years, but a shrewd old
boy, Harry maintained, very like a certain chief he remembered from Subic Bay.

“But I wonder . . . ,” she had objected, in her tentative, faltering way.

“You wonder what?”

“I mean . . . ,” she said, “well, Harry, I mean if they’re not hurting anything, the
boys . . . .”

“Ah,” he said, “if they’re not!” And he described the lunch period
congregation—the men of Delta Kappa Omega hanging out on the steps, lordly and
vulgar, blighting the noon hour of fourteen hundred students, most of whom adolescent
Calvinism now designated not of the elect.

She had nodded and pondered, not telling him—not then anyway—that many of
her newfound friends had sons at Glen Oaks, most of whom were D.K.O.’s.

Yet it wouldn’t have mattered, she felt sure, if it hadn’t been for the election. Oh
God, the election! How she cursed it!

Running on a “ticket” or “slate” was strictly forbidden, but when Paul Devereux,
Eric Jacoby, Todd Sorenson and Jerry Harris entered the lists—D.K.O.’s all and sons of her dearest friends and benefactors—Harry and Grant conferred and decided that as long as the affiliation wasn’t mentioned, the rules were honored, technically at least. Besides, Harry wished they would win, he said, especially Paul, a shy charming boy who was running for President against Alan Shields, a blustering self-confident type, who in “real” life probably would be a politician. The students seemed to share Harry’s feelings, for Paul was elected; Jerry was Vice President, Eric Secretary and Todd Treasurer. None of the races was close. Harry was pleased that a potentially difficult incident had been avoided, and she, delighted for Colleen, had spent much of the joyous evening on the phone.

Then came the dawn, as melodrama might put it, and a few hours later Alan Shields and his glowering parents waiting outside Harry’s office. As Harry described it, they sat, faces stiff, eyes sharp. Their lips might have quivered; he couldn’t be sure. They followed him into the office, and he shut the door, hearing a quick sucking of breath. When all were seated, Alan, tall and sullen, flanked by his dumpy wounded mother and glaring father, had wordlessly laid before Harry what had appeared at first to be a business card: LADIES AND GENTLEMEN OF SOCIETY, ENDORSE A GOOD GROUP OF CANDIDATES. There followed the names of the victors.

“I felt,” Harry said—with a sigh—“pretty much like a punctured tire.”

Alan claimed he had found the card in his locker the day of the election and assumed that someone shoved it through the vent. “It’s against the rules!” Mr. Shields had cried, pointing out the obvious. “It’s running on a ticket!”

“It’s not fair!” Mrs. Shields had thrown in.

They were right, Harry had said, which hadn’t made him like them any better. They were in fact remarkably unpleasant and unattractive people, and how they had produced their tall well-favored son was to him a mystery.

Harry had asked if they knew where the card came from. “That Harmon boy!” Mrs. Shields said with a snort. She was wearing black double-knit slacks, Harry remembered, and a loose tunic-thing with a splashy design, and her hair was a stiff beet-shaped blossom tinted a pale smoke. The owlish glasses, framed in dark plastic, had been trained on him like gun barrels.
“Alan knows,” the husband had offered, nostrils flaring, brow furrowed, a man simmering in slacks, open shirt and a windbreaker. (Except for two side patches, greased and fiercely brushed, he was bald.)

“Ray’s got all this equipment,” Alan had said. “He makes up cards like this all the time. He’s got all these different fonts and stuff.”

“Did you see this before the election?” Harry had asked. Alan had given a pained sniff. “Not personally,” he said. (Harry wasn’t sure he believed him but supposed it didn’t matter.)

“All right,” he had promised. “I’ll look into it.”

“How?” they had wanted to know.

“I guess,” he had said, “I’ll have to ask some questions.”

Questions he had asked all right, without delay. That too was the Navy in him. Summoned at once, Ray Harmon skulked in, chin down, lip out, pale eyes wary. (Harry described him vividly: tall and bony, with a wan blank face, colorless eyes and dark hair cut in the stiff paintbrush fashion that made him look faintly startled. The clothes—pleated and baggy—seemed draped rather than worn, and when at Harry’s command he took a chair, they bagged further.)

Harry presented the card. Well? Well, what? the boy sparred. He knew what, Harry said and wanted to know if Ray had seen it before. Standing then, Harry hovered over the kid, and she knew just how he must have looked, much as he had looked this evening: shoulders hunched, big hands lifted, the mouth thin and grim, dark eyes hard.

Ray had shrugged and said he didn’t know. Harry had said that he did. “Did you print these things up?” he asked. “On your machine?” No answer, the eyes darting up, then away. “Goddamnit!” Harry had snapped, his voice now rough and bullying. “Did you do this?” Then Ray had swallowed and guessed that he had, and Harry had asked how many. Three hundred and fifty. Well, what had he done with them? A shrug. Harry had suggested he had given them out.

And so it had gone. Harry could recall every twitch, every evasion of the glass-like shifty eyes.

“Kind of,” the kid said.

“Kind of?” Harry barked.
“Uhuh.”

“When?”

Ray had claimed not to know. The hell he didn’t, Harry said, voice climbing. Was it before the election? Well, Ray guessed so. No, he didn’t guess so, Harry told him; he knew damn well. All right. He had given them out. Why?

“To help Paul and those guys.”

Did he really think they needed his help? Ray supposed not. Did he know it was against the rules, Harry asked, and Ray wrinkled his face in a fake-quizzical look that had made Harry want to kick him. Well, said the kid, he didn’t know exactly if it was, but . . . But he thought that it was? Harry suggested. Ray shrugged again. He thought it might have been.

By then the depressing truth must have been clear, she realized, but Harry had pushed on, as she knew he would.

“But you knew it was illegal to run on a ticket?” Harry had asked. Ray had conceded that he had. And, Harry pursued, Ray had been willing to jeopardize his buddies’ chances. Ray claimed he hadn’t looked at it like that. Oh? Then how had he looked at it?

There had come another shrug. Ray didn’t know. He had just wanted to do it—that is, he guessed he thought the guys were going to win, and . . .

He wanted to be a part of it?

“Yeah,” Ray had said with another swallow. Then he summoned his nerve. “What are you going to do?” he asked. “You’re not going to cancel the election?” (Now his voice had risen.) “I mean,” he had plunged on, “this stuff didn’t make any difference. It wasn’t even close!”

“So the rules don’t apply?” Harry had asked coldly.

Well, they applied, he guessed . . .

Then Harry asked if Paul and the others had known about the cards. Probably, Ray said, though he hadn’t informed them. Harry told him to go. Ray stood then, looking alarmed.

“Don’t punish innocent people,” he protested. “That isn’t right.”

“Spare me,” Harry ordered. “Just go!”
Ray had gone.

Paul Devereux had seemed genuinely shocked and saw at once the implications. So did the others. They all had declared themselves ignorant and astounded, and, Harry had told her later, “They may well be. I am inclined to sympathize. But is that really the point?”

For him points were always clear, choices obvious, and, sensing within him some gathering and ghastly momentum, she had opposed him with stiffened spine, tightened jaw and a silence more crushing than sarcasm. He, understanding, had been moved to eloquence.

“... He’s their buddy. It’s up to them to control him. It was done in their names. Maybe it didn’t have much effect on the election, but people know. Alan knows. His parents know. Anybody who saw one of those cards or heard about them knows ...”

She had listened blankly, without a word, knowing what he would do.

He did it too, without any more conferences with Nichols or anyone else. “... I’ve cancelled the election,” he informed the School Board (in closed session). The Board, like most, was a depressing combination of gravity and ignorance. Vain and touchy as judges, they were nevertheless tractable if gently handled. Porter, the contractor, had wanted to know what Harry was going to do to Ray. Nothing, Harry said. To make him the villain (though he was) was to absolve the people just disqualified. Anyway, getting your friends chucked out of office was a considerable punishment in itself—or should be. The Board had grumbled and demurred. Harry had reminded them, a little sharply, that they had asked for someone to shape things up. He hadn’t made the rules, but he intended to enforce them. The Board brightened then and came around, and she was willing to bet that as they rose to go, Ruth Gordon, the hair “stylist,” patted Harry’s arm.

At school there had been hell to pay, though some of it was simply the teenage love of drama and the thrill of indignation. As Harry walked down the corridor a girl had said, “Oh, that asshole! I can’t believe he did this!” Meant to hear, Harry had pretended not to. The outraged had switched huffily away, slim thighs flashing beneath her scrap of skirt, painted mouth fashioning more obscenities. “Astarte in braces and Clerasil,” Harry said sourly.
The assembly was another matter. The speeches had to be done again, and the auditorium rocked. Harry confessed that he jumped on stage (for once losing that insufferable public equanimity) and told them they would all be back in their classrooms in two minutes if they didn’t shut up. They shut—sort of, muttering and snarling but shying from open defiance. Alan Shields hadn’t helped with his goofy grin and tactless rejoicing. So I lucked out. Hey, you don’t see me crying! Harry said he could have cheerfully throttled him.

Then Alan won. The senior class buffoon opposed him, but the seniors boycotted the election, and the sophomores and juniors refused to back a joke candidate even in protest, and she on the phone could only blurt, “Oh, Colleen, I’m so sorry! I really am!” and to her humiliation she began to sob.

Colleen had been cool and laconic, saying in a voice that seemed to come from the stars, “I’ve got to go now,” and the phone had clicked dead. Then it rang again, but it was only another furious caller—nameless, male and possibly drunk.

“I hope the son of a bitch is proud of himself!” the man shouted hoarsely—and hung up.

That was when she began to cry, and Harry blew up, exasperated by this misery which he took as accusation. Goddamnit! What did she expect him to do?

“I don’t expect you to do anything!” she bawled hysterically. “I don’t care what you do!” She wasn’t making sense, but all at once some wall came down inside her, and she was pouring abuse on him, giving way to an astonishing grief and bitterness. When had he ever thought about her? When had he? He just went blundering along in his know-it-all way and never mind who got hurt and how! And it wasn’t just her! Why had the children rebelled? Well, they had! He couldn’t deny it. And she knew she was right, though she had never meant to say this, not to his face, but still, the bad marriages and destructive love affairs, the meaningless smothering jobs they had stumbled into—what was all this but a blind and fitful flight from his stern omniscience and relentless rule?

He had been wounded, had stiffened, his head coming up as though she had slapped him. Well good! Good! Good! Good! It served him right. But she couldn’t sustain her fury or take any joy in his hurt, and sickness and despair had flowed over her, and a single thought remained like flotsam: she had ruined her life. It had all gone bad.
Then she sank into a chair and gave herself up to her wretchedness, crying convulsively, letting go great hoots and honks of pain, while he stood there appalled, stricken mute by these grotesque wails. His lands lifted an inch or two, fingers apart in dumb surrender. Then the spasms had subsided. She had sniffed and blown her nose and moved quickly into the bedroom. He made for the gin.

And now she lay here, listening to him fuss with ice and glass and bottle, withdrawing like her. Let someone else bury the dead and minister to the wounded. He was quitting the field.

For a few minutes they had been naked, in a way that no marriage could withstand. Now she felt them slipping toward uneasy and dishonest truce. It couldn’t be helped. The fires did burn down, and you had to look at one another, if only with sidelong glances. And eventually you had to talk. They would pretend this hadn’t happened, but things would not be as before.

Was he thinking this too? She didn’t know, but all at once she heard footsteps—heavy and measured—and knew he was standing in the doorway, as though waiting for permission to enter. And she knew how he was standing, flatfooted but straight, the weight back on the heels, that pinched cast to his shoulders, as though frozen in incipient shrug. His eyes would be dark and grave, his mouth solemn. The light would glint flatly off the pewter-colored hair and the glass with its clinking ice and clear bright liquid.

And so it was, and his voice, a notch lower than usual, seemed to paw and rummage words, though as always they came easily enough.

“. . . Peg,” he said quietly, “I know how much your friendship with Colleen means to you, but I can’t let that affect what I have to do. I’m sorry. I genuinely am.”

He managed, with a kind of genius, to weld humility and dignity, to be apologetic and yet paternal—and barely righteous. It was that “genuinely” that annoyed her, as though he had considered sham sorrow, as though even now he made careful distinctions and went by the rules.

“I admit,” he said in his rumbling homiletical way, “that those damn cards probably didn’t affect the election greatly. It may seem just a technicality, but the thing I find unbearable is Ray getting away with this, letting all those kids—and I do think of
them as that—believe he has some special dispensation to foul up other people’s lives and not have to account for it.”

She hadn’t intended to reply, but now she heard herself say, “You mean you think it teaches them to defy authority?” The words carried a thin freight of bitchiness, but she tried to keep her voice neutral.

“No,” he said heavily, taking his cue (he too spoke in that level reflective style). “No, most of them don’t have the nerve and never will, but I think it teaches them something worse—that authority is impotent and stupid. I think it throws them back on themselves too much. It mocks any discipline and order, and without that, as I see it, there isn’t any real freedom. Well!” he said abruptly, “I’m starting to make a speech, and not a very good one. I’m sorry.”

He would trick her from her anger, but she couldn’t help it; it was sliding from her. She didn’t forgive him or agree, but once again (how many times!) she had to admit that he had acted as he thought best, no matter the cost to himself. He could stand being hated for doing what he believed right, and this was admirable. Only, he could bear for her to be hated too; without a qualm he sacrificed her happiness, and maybe it should be sacrificed, but shouldn’t it count for more? Shouldn’t he struggle with his conscience a bit?

But she knew too it was just that bullheaded certainty she had craved and married for, just as he had sought in her something playful and free and enchanting to relieve his own gloomy authority. Really, what they hated in each other was the reverse side of what they loved. They had made their choices, and they were still learning the price of these elections. Nowadays people traded spouses in on different models or gave up quickly, deciding with a shrug to cut losses and move on. Not they. They accepted the consequences, because you had to if you claimed any sort of self-respect. And maybe this determination more than anything else was what they loved in one another.

Because she did love him, though she understood now that love could take many forms, was not to be confused with tenderness or desire or even intimacy, was a vocation and a discipline, the very thing she had yearned for. Its costs could be terrible and had to be paid.
So when he sat upon the creaking bed and clumsily took her hand, she didn’t resist or draw away. The ice tinkled in his glass while he cleared his throat, on the point of saying something in that sepulchral chastened tone she knew so well when the doorbell sounded—not a bell at all but an inane succession of lilting chimes promising more drama and significance than the house could provide, this glum board-and-batten affair beyond decorative redemption.

“Probably the tar and feathers,” Harry said. “I wonder if they brought a noose.” He chuckled and rose. The bed yelped and sprang back, and he went smoothly down the hall, detouring through the kitchen to clink the glass down upon the counter, then moved with steady muffled tread to the door, which he opened in a pop and squeal of jambs.

“Hi, Harry. Sorry to bother you but—”

“Not at all!” Harry was abruptly jovial. “Come in. I was just about to open a vein or two.”

There was a brief laugh, and someone stepped inside, and the door whammed shut. “Grant Nichols is here,” Harry called in a stage-husband voice, hospitable and expansive now, almost the country squire.

“I’ll be right out, Grant!” she cried, appalled at her false and cheery words.

“Oh, don’t bother, Peg!”

She stood, hiking her skirt into place, then she was in the bathroom, running water, dabbing at her eyes and inspecting them for redness and puffiness. With hard practiced strokes she tugged a brush through her hair, quickly reglossed her lips, and wetted a fingertip with cologne to anoint her throat. Was the skirt too wrinkled? Oh, it didn’t matter! But of course it did. This too was a part of the discipline, this united front they would suddenly contrive, this performance. Places, everyone! Curtain going up!

Probably Grant wouldn’t care if she appeared naked or in rags, but it mattered to her, was a sort of honor which neither he nor Harry need understand.

Entering the living room, however, she dropped her bright welcoming smile and swore. Harry had conducted their guest into what he liked to call his “study,” a dreary cell of walnut, leather and brass, where he presided at an enormous desk on which rested the LT. CMDR. BREELAND nameplate, under a framed and overexposed photograph of officers (Harry among them) standing on a carrier deck, hands behind backs in a
modified Parade Rest. In the dazzling light the khaki uniforms looked bathtub white, recalling the ice cream vendors of her girlhood.

“Hi, Grant?”

“Oh, hi, Peg!”

From ignorance or tact—impossible to tell—he didn’t stand. Some men (not Harry), afraid of patronizing, had abandoned the conventions, so that these days rudeness merged with exquisite courtesy.

He was friendly as always, a round, doughy sort of man in slacks and shapeless blue cardigan, plumped down in the armchair beside the vast and immaculate prairie of Harry’s desk. Near its edge rested a highball glass, and the sweetish bourbon smell mingled with hints of beeswax, saddle soap, Lemon Pledge and metal polish. Harry, she saw, had treated himself to another gin.

“Let me get you gentlemen something to nibble on.”

“Oh, that’s all right,” Grant protested. “I just dropped in for a minute.” He smiled, lifting his chubby placid face. Heaped in the chair, he suggested an amiable hedgehog or porcupine. Probably it was the bristling auburn hair.

“It’ll just take a minute.” She clicked off to the kitchen, scurrying expertly for board and knife, wheat crackers, blocks of cheddar and Swiss, a half-moon of Camembert, a clutch of cold black olives and a tiny sheaf of cocktail napkins. From the study in hearty celebration Harry’s voice now rolled.

“. . . Well, we’ve taken a couple direct hits, lad, but I think we’ll get ‘er into port!” There came the tiny crash of ice cubes as he tilted his glass.

She stopped her flurry—amazed. He pretended triumph after all! Was that bedroom abasement pure act? Had that been the charade? Or was it that Grant, fellow male and properly deferential, prodded him to swagger? Yes, he was sorry if he had destroyed her life in this town, but really (so his pose and voice seemed to say), it couldn’t be helped. Casualties of war.

A slow, steady heat rose in her throat and face, and she took deep indignant breaths, lifting the tray.

“. . . Well,” Grant was saying, “I hope so.”

“Hope so?”
In the pause that followed she started for the study. “You know,” Grant continued, “I kind of wish you’d said something to me before you told the Board.”

“Oh?”

“I understand. It was your call.”

“It was,” Harry said, casting an eye toward her as she entered, “and if somebody had to take the flak—and somebody did—I thought it had better be me alone.”

She set the tray on the end table. “Oh,” Grant said, “you shouldn’t have, Peg! I didn’t want you to go to any trouble.”

“It’s hardly trouble,” she told him with a smile, “and it’s not exactly a feast.”

“Well, it looks awful good!”

He popped an olive in his mouth and with thick freckled fingers cautiously lifted a cracker bearing a wedge of cheddar. “No,” he said to Harry, “I understand.” And he bit into his cracker.

Did he understand? Did he suspect that Harry had slogged on alone out of fear that he was becoming too dependent on Grant? Sometimes, it seemed, he was hellbound to assert, if only for himself, who was in charge.

To her Harry said, “Why don’t you join us? There’s some white wine in the refrigerator.”

“Well . . .” At her entrance Grant, for all his agreeableness, had flashed a questioning glance at his superior. Now with this lord-of-the-manor invitation Harry put his lieutenant neatly in his place. What you say to me you may say to my wife! All the same, she was nettled.

“In a minute,” she said shortly, and returned to the kitchen. In the study Harry said:

“Why? You think I blew it?”

Chewing vigorously, Grant said, “I don’t know.”

“You think,” Harry asked, a little menacingly, “I should have looked the other way?”

She paused before the refrigerator. The voices drifted in, clear but hollow, as though calling down a rain pipe.

“ . . . No,” Grant said, “I don’t. If Ray did it you didn’t have any choice.”
“If!” Harry, ruffled, yanked a drawer. “You saw this?”
“No,” Grant said mildly. “No, I didn’t.”
Absently now, she opened the refrigerator and withdrew the bottle, uncorked it and poured half a wineglass. “. . . Well,” Harry was saying, “our boy Ray printed and distributed several hundred. I can tell you that.”
“Did he?”
“He said he did. I bullied it out of him, but, hell, I was upset. I don’t mind admitting it.”
Corking the bottle, she set it on the shelf and closed the door. From the study came the sound of Grant meditatively tapping the card on the desk.
“This came from Alan?”
“You bet.”
Slowly, as though masticating his words, Grant said, “You saw it, and Alan saw it, and Ray. And you showed it to Paul and the others?”
“That’s right.”
She started back, walking briskly.
“And that,” Grant mused, “is probably about it.”
Entering the study, she saw him flopped back in the chair, staring straight ahead in a glazed way, under Harry’s frown.
“. . . I can’t prove it,” he was saying now, “but I bet you’d be hard put to find another one of these.” His eyes met Harry’s and held his look. “I mean,” he went on, “I didn’t see any, and I don’t think anyone else did either, no matter what Ray said.”
She stood, glass in hand—breath suddenly shallow—looking from one to the other. Harry’s face darkened.
“You’re telling me,” he said, “that Ray never made these up—and didn’t hand them out?”
“That’s my belief.”
“Then why—”
“Because,” Grant said, “he wanted you to think he did. And he wanted Alan to think he did.”
Harry shook his head. “Even if it cost his friends the election?”
They had forgotten her. Or rather, she did not count. Wine untasted, she remained on her feet, beginning to tremble, looking down upon Grant’s auburn quills and pale scalp, and on Harry’s thin, wavy, pewter hair. His lips thickened now; his brow grew heavier, his dark eyes more troubled and perplexed.

“... Ray doesn’t have any friends,” Grant explained. “Not really. Sometimes I think he doesn’t want any. That’s what you have to understand.”

“But,” Harry said, “he told me—”

“He’ll deny it,” Grant said. “He’ll deny he made the damn things in the first place. If he’s bastard enough, he might suggest that Alan invented the whole business. Who knows?”

“No!” It was out before she knew it.

Harry ignored her, shaking his head once more in wondering denial. “But,” he insisted, “he said—”

“Sure he did,” Grant agreed. “And you can’t prove it. And if you try, you look like you’re covering your own rear, because Ray will ask, ‘where are those damn cards? And who says I did it?’”

Wincing, she closed her eyes, then opened them. “Oh God!”

Stunned, fumbling still, Harry said, “When somebody tells you—”

She took a step, set the glass upon the table. “But,” she broke in, “what about the Board?”

The round earnest face turned. “The Board probably won’t know what to believe,” Grant said, “but they’ll wonder where all those cards went to, I can promise you that. Of course, the Board went along with it, so they’re in it too.”

“I see.” She drew a short, painful breath, and her legs went weak. Then she nodded slowly, her throat filling once more, her pulse beating in her temples, and for a moment the pale crafty face of Ray Harmon leaped before her, the colorless eyes shining with a triumph so subtle and bright it passed for fear. Probably he had been frightened—and exhilarated too, living for the risk and these cheap victories. Oh, but she saw! Even as Harry was beginning to see.

Word would get out. Ray would take care of that. And as long as they lived here this would follow them. Principal claimed there were all these cards, but I don’t know...
. .  *Tried to blame it on the kid*. . . . Yes, Ray spied you out. The defective ear, the flat chest, the harmless intellectual vanity, the pigheaded regard for justice—these he noticed and turned to account, a desperate and lonely boy possibly, finding in others what he railed against in himself—which did not console her. When had Harry ever understood the Ray Harmons of the world? Oh when? He thought himself wise and shrewd and experienced, but in certain places his imagination failed.

Harry leaned forward. His lip came out and his big hand turned into a fist. Thumping the desk, he said fiercely, “I could kill the son of a bitch! I really could!”

She was not impressed, knowing now the full, hideous meaning of a choice made long ago. She had picked badly, and succumbed unwisely, yet it would have been all right. But now . . . They could pretend, could play their parts, but he would not recover, would not shake free of her contempt, which would grieve her more than him. Oh yes! He could storm about, but it would be mere noise and pointless strut, and if he thought he could posture himself back into her esteem—or his own either—he was wrong. But he knew that too, she saw, for his eyes, clawing at her, were great with panic and appeal.
Wilderness

What he remembered most—for decades in fact—was the anger, the bitterness, the hot words and dark looks, some directed at him, though he couldn’t be sure. (Why would anyone suppose . . . ?) He had found himself lost and confused, baffled really, and looked for assistance.

It came, of a sort, downstairs, in the office he shared with Reynolds Blair, whose specialty was Elizabethan Drama and whose manner was elegantly arch and relentlessly detached. Blair, it turned out, wasn’t surprised in the least.

“Welcome,” he said, with a smile, “to the academic world.”

Cathcart forced a smile of his own. He was green, he guessed, in Blair’s eyes anyway, and would admit as much, if only from politeness. It was a hick town and a hick school, truth be told, and he, a San Francisco-Berkeley kid, hadn’t been exactly overwhelmed. Yana State College was all right, he conceded, with its pseudo-Romanesque architecture and its trout stream, but it was hardly the big leagues. Nor was he smitten with Yana City itself, elevation 105, population 17,321, ten miles from the Sacramento River, at the dead center of Nowhere. All the same, the previous hour had shaken him—still did. So much he would freely confess.

“You don’t quite get it?” Blair asked. “Is that what you’re thinking?” Idly, he swiveled his chair and smiled again, a short handsome man with sharp features, a small trim moustache and thick dark hair beginning to gray.

“I guess I don’t,” Cathcart said, leaning forward in his own chair, feet spread, forearms on his thighs, cuffs rolled a couple of natty turns. Both men wore khakis and
Oxford shirts. It was a Saturday morning, but a few of the older gang—the males anyway—had appeared in suits and ties, as though classes were in session.

“What I don’t understand,” Cathcart said, “is what’s going to happen now?”

Blair swiveled a bit and smiled, amused and at ease. He had seen it all before, his manner said. “What’s going to happen now,” he explained, coolly, “is that the Chairman will resign.”

Cathcart was astonished. “Resign?” He sat up. “Did Mallow tell you he would? How do you know?”

The smile widened. “I just do.” I know John.”

Cathcart remained dumbfounded. “When would he do it?”

“Monday probably.”

“Because he didn’t get the vote?”

“Yes.”

Cathcart frowned. It didn’t make sense. None of it did. None of it had. “So,” he asked, “Mallow’s just going to give everything up?”

“No,” Blair said slowly. “What he’s hoping is, the Department will be so shaken they’ll rescind their action today.”

Cathcart blinked. At least he thought he blinked. He felt he had been smartly slapped. “And will they?”

“No.”

“How do you know that?”

Blair sighed. “If,” he said firmly, “John didn’t have the votes today, he won’t have them Monday.”

“But,” Cathcart protested, “maybe somebody will change?”

Blair seemed to be studying his young office-mate, not exactly narrowing an eye or pushing his tongue into his cheek, but considering him thoughtfully with amusement. “It won’t even come to a vote,” he said mildly. “The fight’s gone out of his backers. Anyway, he’ll lose support. Resigning will alienate people, not bring them over.”

“But he’ll do it?”

“I think so.”
Cathcart frowned again and pondered. “I don’t see,” he said, “why people feel so bitter about the thing.”

“Don’t you?”

“No.” Cathcart drew a long breath. “I mean,” he said. “I thought Hastings made some pretty good points, and he did it very neatly, in a civilized way.”

Blair laughed. “Yes,” he said, tipping back in his chair. “Hastings is civilized all right. He’s the only man I know who speaks in perfectly shaped paragraphs. You could transcribe his talk and have flawless periodic prose.”

“I know,” Cathcart said, “but I mean he didn’t seem bitter or upset.”

“Didn’t he?”

Cathcart shrugged. “I didn’t think so.”

“Well, he is.”

“Bitter?”

“Bitter as hell.”

Cathcart frowned. “Why?”

Blair swung away, then back, looking at the newcomer. “Who,” he asked, “do you suppose was Chairman before Mallow?”

“Hastings?”

“Hastings indeed.”

“What happened?”

“Well,” Blair said with relish, “the old boy canned him. Didn’t like his politics, so he removed him.”

“He could do that?”

“The President? Yes, he could do that and he did it. He’s been here since God was a boy. He can do what he damn pleases. He’s the patriarch. It’s his little kingdom.”

Cathcart nodded. He had the sense of mists clearing upon a forbidding vista.

“And,” he asked, “the old guy hired Mallow to replace him—replace Hastings?”

“Yes.”

“And so there’s bad feeling against Mallow?”

“You could put it that way.” Blair was smiling once more.

Cathcart shook his head. “But it isn’t Mallow’s fault.”
“No. But he’s the usurper, and they aren’t going to forgive him.”

It seemed to Cathcart that he was beginning to understand. He had been a little slow, which was embarrassing. “So,” he asked, “there’s this clique against him?”

“Yes,” Blair said, “but there’s also one for him. The people he’s hired are his people, you see—people like you.”

“You mean I’m in his camp?”

“I would think so. Aren’t you?”

Cathcart shrugged again. “I guess I am,” he said, “but I still think Hastings made some pretty good arguments.”

Blair nodded. “He did, yes. John’s scheme is a little dubious. ‘Too clever by half.’ I think that’s the way the Brits put it. I mean I’m not defending Mallow. I’m only trying to fill you in, give you a little history.” He smiled. “So you don’t walk into something you don’t understand.”

Cathcart nodded in gratitude. Yes, it was good to know what you were getting into. You didn’t want to be a damn fool. Only . . . He wasn’t going to tell Reynolds Blair, but it might be a little late.

*

At that time—long before the freeways, malls and big box stores—if you came from civilization, you entered from the south on two-lane blacktop, bumping along the railroad tracks, past the big frame with the lodge and club escutcheons, past auto repair and discount tires, dusty car lots with shiny banners, past the 99 Club and Good Will, Belknap Resale and the ice house, until you reached the city plaza with its elms, orange trees, and gazebo and the downtown proper: the Municipal Building (pediment and columns), the Roman Revival Post Office, Harrison Clothiers, restaurants, banks, the Roxie Theater, delicatessens, coffee shops (pre-expresso), the Valley Oaks Hotel, the quaint Carnegie Library and bars, lots of bars, Yana City being a college town with a vengeance.

To David Cathcart it was a little amazing. He knew about towns, had read *Winesburg, Ohio* and other classics, but he had grown up in San Francisco and gone to college across the Bay at the University, a sort of Vatican or state unto itself. What he truly knew were cities and “towns” hooked together by bridges, highways, railroads and
ferries—Marin County and “the Peninsula” and the East Bay and “the City” (a peninsula
too), all connected, like small nations, forming one great and varied union, and you could
practically jump from one to another, shoot across the Golden Gate, say, then up the
grade and through the tunnel and down you plunged into sunny Marin. Oakland,
Berkeley, San Mateo—you could be there quickly and go further if you wanted, and there
was always a sense of vibrant and unceasing life.

Here now in Yana City you were aware of your surroundings all right—
mountains and valley floor and the great slow river—and the sky, always the sky—but
the town seemed lost in space and in time, as though it had drifted from its moorings or
fled from its orbit. Really, it was like a secret village you stumbled upon in a fairytale, an
astonishing little world going busily about its affairs, undiscovered and uncaring.

Oh, but the heat! The late summer blast had been murderous! (In the old days,
Cathcart had been told, farmers harvested at night lest the horses expire.) Then one
morning the temperature dropped, and by noon autumn had arrived, and soon high
overhead the geese and ducks were beating south in long quivering V’s, crying tragically
against the failing light. Leaves drifted from the walnut trees—much of the residential
area had been orchards—and people raked the debris into piles and burnt them, and heaps
smoldered for days, pungent smoke filtering through the quiet streets.

At the college there had been a reception, and Cathcart met the President, a
friendly, gray-haired man with a keen eye and firm grip, and the President’s wife—small,
gray-haired and sharp-eyed too—had pressed his hand and pushed her patrician face up
into his. “I thought she wanted to kiss me,” Cathcart told Blair with a laugh.

“What she wanted,” said Blair, “was to smell your breath.”

“Oh?”

“Speaking of which, you might join the Presbyterian Church.”

“I might?”

“Many new faculty do. It could help your chances.”

“For what?”

“Tenure, promotion, long life and happiness.”

“You’re kidding?”

“Not I, my boy. Not I!” And he wasn’t.
It was Blair too who showed him a copy of the old print: Yana City 1871: a simple grid between two placid streams, a railroad in the distance, a lovely greensward, orchards, a farmer threshing. Peace and Plenty

“Oh, it wasn’t all that bucolic,” Blair said. “There were Indian wars and lynchings, and the Chinese labor force wasn’t all that popular. In fact, there were demonstrations against ‘the leprous and diseased Mongolians.’ And there were the usual frontier amenities: gambling, whores and one hell of a lot of drinking, which didn’t set well with the founder and his wife.”

“It didn’t?”

“Not hardly,” said Blair. “They were ardent prohibitionists. ‘The ‘Wilderness.’ That’s what Mrs. Founder called the town. Vowed she’d ‘civilize’ it too—kind of like the Widow Douglas in *Huckleberry Finn*.”

Cathcart was amused. “Obviously,” he said, “this institution was a part of the ‘civilizing’ campaign?”

“Indeed it was. ‘Yana Normal’ back then, whose ‘Code of Conduct’ recommends cheerfulness and warns against keeping company with the opposite sex.”

Oh, it wasn’t U.C. Berkeley! *That* Cathcart had already discovered. On his first day of classes, at the end of “Great Books,” a woman student—a girl, really—freckled, blue-eyed and troubled, had approached.

“You said *Candide* is funny?”

“I did, yes. Why?”

She grimaced. “Well see,” she began, “I read it this summer, and I didn’t think it was funny at all!”

“You didn’t?”

“No!” She shook her head vigorously. “I mean,” she explained, “all the terrible things that happen!” Then she grimaced once more, then a sudden fierceness seized her, and her eyes grew wide. “Unless!” she cried. “Unless it’s . . . i-ronic!”


And Cathcart, frowning too, had asked, “What about the *Iliad*?”
“Oh . . . maybe in a prose translation.” Then Mallow had ventured on other subjects.

“. . . You see, Dave, one of the problems is that a lot of the preparation students get in school right now—especially in reading literature—just isn’t very good. They show up here and can’t handle the work. Of course, school administrators are always sticking teachers into classes they’re not qualified for. The music instructor needs another hour, so why not give her that leftover English class?

“Well, I applied for federal funding and succeeded in getting enough money for a summer institute . . .”

Cathcart had been convinced and prepared to back Mallow. It was only just before the meeting, when he was summarizing the Chairman’s explanations for Blair that doubt crept in.

“Yes,” Blair said, “and what John didn’t say is that some of that money finds its way into the pockets of those instructors he selects to work with the teachers, and some of it goes to the administrator himself.”

“Who is—?”

Blair smiled, his small teeth white and even under the perfect moustache. “Who do you think it is?”

Cathcart was mildly indignant. “But,” he objected, “shouldn’t they be paid?”

“Oh of course!” Blair laughed. “I don’t begrudge anybody pay for honest work.” Then he laughed again. “Oh hell,” he said. “I wouldn’t worry about it. I’m pretty sure John has the votes he needs.”

“You are?”

“Yes. And so is John. Or at least his supporters are. John’s kind of a worry-wort, but his tribe has counted the house I’ll bet. And they know how they’re voting. You can be sure of that!”

And so it had appeared, for the curious thing, Cathcart thought later, was how quiet Mallow’s forces were. Most of the supporters sat in the back of the room and sneered beneath their breath at those declaring themselves reluctant or confused. The thing was already settled. That was how it seemed.
It was all very odd, though: this emergency gathering on a Saturday morning, some of the older members—including Mallow and Hastings, the chieftains of the contending forces—dressed in suit-and-tie (Mallow in navy blue, Hastings in sober brown), the women in knit dresses, stockings and “heels”. And this dispute mattered! Laugh if you wished; call it Lilliputian if that amused you, but egos clashed—more than egos—sensibilities and emotions, and though Cathcart hadn’t known it then, the wounds would fester and endure.

The instructors had gathered in a classroom: “blackboards” (actually pea green) on the west and north sides, windows in aluminum frames on the south, where below, the town spread, not fully awake.

But nothing seemed to exist except this tense box with twenty-nine adults coming together to decide—what? Cathcart didn’t know but it appeared momentous, though he couldn’t say why. He hadn’t been prepared for so much implicit drama, but you could almost hear the pawing hooves, snorts, grumblings and the sharp intake of breath.

Mallow, standing near the front of the room, back to the window, explained carefully and quietly what he had already told Cathcart. Tall and heavy, round-shouldered and tipped at the waist, he proceeded quietly from point to point, making it all clear and reasonable. The eyeglasses and high shiny dome and the habit of pressing spread fingertips together gave him a pontifical cast that spoke of cloisters, vestments and liturgy. In fact, Blair had said, Mallow was a skeptic, impatient with piety and devotion. Still, the voice was soft and tired, pleasant on the ear and so mild the occasional sarcasm eluded the inattentive, which, thought Cathcart, was probably just as well.

There was a sadness about the man, however. Did he expect betrayal and defeat? You did your best, he seemed to say. You worked with a will, but the loud, the crazed, the unreliable and the foolish were all about, and prospects were poor.

“. . . Well, that’s pretty much all I have to say.” Finishing, Mallow sat down.

His argument was clear. Reduced to basic terms, it was familiar: the end justified the means. No fools, the federal government attached conditions, and since the participants might not be qualified to proceed toward the established degree, and since, in any case, the Department appeared unwilling to count the prospective teachers’ coursework toward that degree, Mallow had proposed a new one, a “master’s in Language
Arts.” That anyone would achieve this distinction was unlikely, but the government conditions would be met.

Cathcart didn’t know. From a practical standpoint—Mallow’s—the argument made sense. Still, the newcomer was uneasy. “Two clever by half,” Blair had said, and his officemate was inclined to agree. Then again, Blair hadn’t said that he was voting against the proposal, and there was much to be said in its favor. Besides, you had to live in the world, didn’t you, preferring the proverbial half a loaf to none at all?

Clearing his throat, Ralph Hastings, sat composed and enthroned in his chair-desk. To Cathcart he seemed square, in a literal physical way—a rectangular prism in a bronze-colored double-breasted suit, a figure of convincing and oppressive dignity who really did look as if he hadn’t removed the hanger from his shirt and seldom unknotted his tie. Upright, jaw lifted, head back, he was splendidly poised, the tufts of stiff gray hair above each ear framing the cool-eyed face.

“I wish simply to say . . .” The voice was mellow, quietly forceful and wonderfully cultivated, and as Blair had noted, the man’s speech issued in perfect increments, each utterance coming to rest with a sonnet’s finality.

“. . . that having read and now heard the descriptions of the proposed degree, one finds oneself moved to ask certain inevitable questions.” Hastings cleared his throat again. “Allowing,” he resumed, “for the Chairman’s comforting reassurance that this credential or degree—whatever one deigns to call it—is unlikely to be attained, or to compete with our extant degree, one nevertheless finds oneself compelled to inquire as to the urgent necessity of establishing and authorizing a certificate which no one is apparently going to attain or even seek!” Hastings paused, allowing the smothered laughter its play.

“Therefore,” he continued, “at the risk of obnoxious repetition, I again simply ask, do we really have any overwhelming interest in this adventure, and . . .” He paused, as if to draw himself up. “. . . when one comes right down to it, isn’t the entire project better left to the Education Department? That is to say, we aren’t, as a matter of course, concerned with equipping fourth grade schoolmarms—if the term may be allowed—with the intellectual resources necessary for introducing their charges to the literary subtleties of Black Beauty or James and the Giant Peach or whatever may be currently purveyed.”
The performance was pompous and self-indulgent yet masterful, and the man had greatly enjoyed himself. Only later did Cathcart fully appreciate the malice, the sharp edge of resentful triumph under the casually biting delivery. Hastings’ tone had been one of polite, orotund boredom—a faintly annoyed protest or demurral, but the words throbbed with scorn and—incredibly—with pain! Yes! The oration was a lashing back by one whose own flesh burned. In fact, thought Cathcart, wasn’t this sardonic inquiry, condensed to essentials, really a cry of rage? *Take that, you bastard!*

There was a long ticking silence, and it seemed at first that there would be no answer or rebuttal. Then, slowly, Mallow rose once more and stepped forward, tall, ponderous, a little stooped, thoughtful and prepared, yet once again sad, expressing the patient doomed resolution of someone rolling the stone up the slope one more time.

“I don’t know,” he said quietly, looking at the floor. Then he lifted his hands to his sternum, tapping his fingertips against each other in the prayerful pose while he considered. Bishop Mallow!

“I guess,” he began, “my feeling is that we still have an obligation here. Eventually, we’re going to be receiving these fourth graders—actually, we’re receiving them now—as students, and the sad truth is, they’re not very well equipped to read what we assign them.” He paused. “Of course,” he said, “we can take the view that it’s not our concern, but aside from ignoring a rather formidable crisis, we’re making our own jobs damned difficult—if you want to know my honest reaction.”

Again he paused, looking down once more in meditation. “So,” he said quietly to the floor, “I don’t see these institutes as frivolous, and I think that they will serve a worthwhile purpose. I understand the reluctance to award credit for what may seem an ‘education’ course, but I wonder about the wisdom of leaving the introduction of literature to our friends and colleagues in the Ed Department. Is that what we really want?”

He looked up. “Anyway,” he said, “this is why some of us have worked up what we think is a pretty decent post-graduate degree for those ambitious souls who do want and feel the need for the kind of thing we do—and do well in my opinion. And for what it’s worth, the kind of program we’re offering is certainly in keeping with the original
purpose of this institution. We are in effect charged with bringing light to the provinces, and I guess I persist in thinking that we’re equipped to do it better than anyone else!”

Once more Mallow paused, nodded slowly in agreement with himself, then blew out his breath. “That’s it I guess.” He sat down.

Cathcart was impressed, moved even, yet he wondered why Mallow had to carry the fight by himself. Blair said the Chairman had the votes, and probably he did, but there was something plaintive about his appeal. And Cathcart couldn’t help but be irritated by that backbench cadre—that “clique” in which he apparently had been enrolled, Mallow’s “people”—who found discussion and argument beneath them, smug in their conviction that they would prevail. And it seemed too that Hastings’ remarks deserved a response by someone other than Mallow, a counter-attack less wistful. And how pure was all this commitment? Blair had said that some of this money would find its way into the pockets of those who supported the program, but the chosen couldn’t be bothered explaining why they favored it. All in all, Cathcart was sympathetic but resented the arrogance and complacency of those who stood to profit.

Marguerite Ferris, who ran the remedial English program, was standing at the blackboard, chalk in hand. A short, slim woman in an oatmeal-colored dress, she sometimes dryly explained to Cathcart the difficulties of her lot. Now she printed YES and NO, then turned and waited. Her face—alert, pale and receptive—revealed nothing. What she thought of all this, how she would vote, he had no idea.

Arnold McKenzie, dignified in necktie and houndstooth sportcoat, passed out slips of paper. McKenzie was short, bald and self-assured. Like many of the old guard, he could be expected to know his own mind yet was thought to be in Mallow’s “camp.”

Receiving a ballot, Cathcart produced his ballpoint pen, hesitated, then impulsively wrote NO, folded the paper and folded it again. Then he looked around.

Almost everyone had finished. No one seemed to have pondered or delayed. Had discussion been needless? Smoothly, McKenzie navigated the aisles, collecting ballots and dropping them in a cardboard box. Then he returned to the front of the room and set the box before Martin Guntner, whose specialty was the eighteenth century. Seated in a chair-desk near the door, Guntner selected and unfolded a paper.

“Yes!”
Marguerite chalked a short vertical line.

“Yes!”

She scratched again.

“No!” A mark appeared several inches to the right.


A rhythm began: unfold . . . speak . . . mark. The chalk made scratching sounds.

The tally grew.

**YES** 1111 1111

**NO** 1111 11

Now ‘Yes’ pulled ahead—twelve to eight, then thirteen to ten.

“No! . . . No! . . . No! . . .”

Munter’s voice was brisk, loud and clear. “Yes! . . . No!”

He unfolded the last paper, looked at it and lifted his head again.

“ . . . NO! . . .”

The instructors stared at the board. Someone sitting in the rear let out a long sigh. Then a chair-desk scraped, then another. People were getting up, moving forward, surging past Cathcart.

He stood and turned, and it was then that it struck him: the smothered fury in those suddenly risen from the back row.


“You wait! Just wait!”

The threats and curses were hissed, but carelessly. *Let ’em hear, the sons of bitches!* That was what he read in the dark glaring faces, burning eyes and tight jaws. These people hated someone’s guts! His? He didn’t know. He had stationed himself in the middle of the room and couldn’t tell if the hot stares and bitter words were directed at him, as if the outraged through some telepathy knew his vote. Had someone seen? He
had been careful. But did he just *look* like a traitor? Was his face a giveaway? That seemed absurd. Still, he felt exposed, revealed as a fraud, someone who treated with the enemy for some unclear but contemptible advantage. *My God!* he thought. *Who expected it would come to this!*

Alone that afternoon, Cathcart raked leaves. Call it therapy if you wished. He didn’t care. There was something soothing in scraping the metal teeth over the withering grass, clawing the ragged spears and tongues from the cold earth and shaping this leathery harvest into flimsy piles. For sixty-five dollars a month he had rented an entire house and yard, the building small, venerable and wooden but well made, with two bedrooms, a cellar, swamp cooler, and a big linoleum-floor chamber to serve as living room or living and dining room if you weren’t going to eat in the kitchen. It was more house than he needed, but he had plans, not entirely clear but persistent.

He intended to return to the Bay Area as soon as possible, but if by chance that shouldn’t happen . . . At noon he had called Marilyn in San Francisco, the morning’s debacle still whirling in his head, and because he had been keeping her informed, told her all about it. (There was nothing resembling a formal “commitment,” but she showed an interest, and it had become natural—expected really—for him to report.)

She reassured him, which he needed. He had done what he felt right. That was the important thing. He agreed but—well, it was too complicated to put into words, but he doubted his own motives. Had he wanted to prove to himself his independence, to be sure that he wasn’t in anyone’s “camp” and shouldn’t be taken for granted? Had he let his resentments dictate, unclear though they were? Of course, he pointed out, it wouldn’t have mattered if the vote hadn’t been so close. His vote—

“It wasn’t just *your* vote,” she broke in. “*Every* vote is a ‘single’ vote. And you don’t know why other people voted as they did. You did what seemed right at that moment. You can’t know all the consequences, Dave, but that’s *always* the case in an election!”

It was good to hear her clear, strong, sensible voice, and Cathcart felt better. Still, he fretted. About one thing, though, he was confident. Mallow wouldn’t resign. Blair might be an old hand and know department history, but he couldn’t know everything. A
sober meditative type like the chairman wasn’t going to deliver the department over into the hands of his enemies. That would be madness.

Cathcart raked away. The air turned cold, the daylight leaked out, but still he toiled, tumbling leaves onto a small tarp and hauling them to the street. There were no sidewalks or curbs in his neighborhood. You dumped your burden next to the pavement and set it afire, and the smoke pumped out in wooly rolls, with that faint acrid aroma that carried you back to childhood—restored and safe as the night came on.

* 

Monday was Monday: a clamorous and unnerving return to the workweek, for the next five days would be a sprint, a sustained dash to classroom, office and house again for preparation and marking of papers: scrawling grave comments meant to encourage yet clarify and warn, sealing off questionable avenues, indicating but not insisting upon pathways (it was the student’s paper after all) and offering tentative evaluation (while punctuating independent clauses and nailing botched modifiers and garish spelling.) You led and directed but tried not to intrude or annex. It’s your work, for God’s sake! That was what you longed to confide and hoped to imply, wondering at the perversity of it all: Express what you truly feel and think and we’ll tell you what you did wrong!

There was nothing unusual or disturbing in his mailbox. Relieved, he descended to the ground floor office, whose only window was sealed above eye-level in the west wall, revealing a bit of dull sky and a flurry of wan ginko leaves. (“Below decks,” Blair called the room.) Though Cathcart felt himself at the bottom of a well, the neophyte sometimes worked in dimness until Blair entered, calling “Up periscope!” and snapped the switch to produce a flutter and wash of pale fluorescent light.

This morning the man was already at his desk, and though Cathcart had no intention of reviewing Saturday’s painful clash, he heard himself blurt:

“You know Hastings?”

Blair swung around, his small handsome face lifted in question. “Ralph? Yes. What about him?”


Blair pursed his lips and made a kissing sound, a long contemplative smack.
“What’s Ralph like?” He mused. “Well,” he said judiciously, “Ralph lives to teach. In fact, he’s the only person I know who’s unhappy when vacation comes.”

No kidding?”

“No.”

“You mean he likes to hold forth?”

“I guess so.” Blair paused. “All I know for sure,” he said, “is that every semester during registration he hovers around the gym, checking sign-ups. Wants to know how his classes are doing.”

Cathcart was intrigued. “What’s his specialty? What’s he like to teach? Who’s his favorite author?”

Blair looked away, then back, a glint in his eye. “I. W. Harper.”

“Really!”

“Yep.” Blair considered. “Ralph pounds away during daylight hours, but at sundown he goes off duty.”

Cathcart was amazed. “I wouldn’t have thought it.”

“I know.”

The morning wore on, going its own predictable way, and Cathcart felt a thickening within him, a dull anxiety, which passed, however, beneath the pressure of routine. Entering the classroom, you became a public person—at once authority and performer—charged with creating structure, progression and, with luck, revelation. At the hour’s end you made your exit, and that brooding, troubled private self had receded and no longer seemed quite so importunate or even real. Time to move on!

Which he did. And Mallow too would move on, because the man was, when you got right down to it, a practical, realistic sort who could be counted on to scramble unfortunately broken eggs into a passable meal. Indeed, certain truths, hoary and familiar came to mind. Everyone knew what spilled substance it was no good crying over, and what universal force healed all wounds. In fact, Cathcart suspected that a year from now—or possibly by the semester’s end—certainly in time to come, the whole embarrassing business would seem at worst unfortunate and even a little silly.
Thus buoyed, he went to his one-o’clock with surprising zest and briskly announced the next assignment. Each student was to review a film, any film; it didn’t matter. A hand shot up. What, a young man wanted to know (trying to hide his smile), if you couldn’t afford a film? Cathcart nodded, restraining his own amusement.

“Apply for a grant.”

Laughter all around.

At the hour’s end the teacher strode confidently down the corridor and into the mailroom, where to his surprise single sheets of white paper protruded from every box. The Department, he found, would meet again that afternoon.

*  

Saturday morning the sun had been high in the southeast, splashing the room with lemony light. Now at four-thirty a soft October glow slid over the chair-desks and floor, and Cathcart thought of pumpkins and falling leaves.

He chose the middle again—no man’s land. Up front near the window, not far from where the Chairman had resumed his post, Rosemarie Gibbons, Department secretary, sat, legs crossed demurely beneath her plaid skirt, steno-book folded open on her lap.

When it seemed that the room was as full as it was likely to get, Mallow rose, once more presentable in the neat dark suit and modest tie, hefting a sheaf of papers, which he handed to Guntner, seated again in the first row.

“If you would start these around, please . . .”

The pages seemed to flow about the room. Cathcart, swallowing, took one, turned and offered the bundle to Marguerite Ferris.

“Thank you, Dave.”

“Sure.”

He turned back, surprised to find himself reading the “vita” or life in outline of John Philip Mallow, born fifty years ago in Mansfield, Ohio, married at twenty-five to Annabelle Margaret Gorman of Toledo, and father of two children. After Saint Stephen’s (a prep school?), John Philip had entered Bowling Green in the year of Cathcart’s birth, leaving after two years to work at United Parcel as supervisor of express, then serve in the United States Army Supply Corps as Master Sergeant (Fort Benning, Georgia),
returning to graduate. Two years later he had achieved his M.A. at Penn and some seven years after this—when Cathcart was about to graduate—Mallow had received his doctorate from the University of Indiana.

It was a little hard to follow. You had to jump back and forth between “Academic Experience” and “Other Experience,” and you had to factor in the military. Prior to the doctorate Mallow had been an instructor at the University of Missouri, then teaching assistant and lecturer at Indiana. After the Ph.D he had been Assistant (later Associate) Professor at Bowling Green, until hired as Professor and Chairman of English at Yana State College. (Whether he had been hired as Chairman wasn’t clear.)

Elected to three honor societies and recipient of several scholarships and fellowships, Mallow had joined the better known professional organizations and boasted half a dozen publications—reviews, source notes, and a contribution to the *Journal of Secondary Education*. Co-editor of an anthology of Romantic poetry, he had quarreled in print over Keats. (“Unheard Melodies: A Rebuttal to Jonas J. Zelinsky.”)

What were you to think? Cathcart was embarrassed and uncomfortable, as though Mallow had appeared naked before them. Here, the paper said, is the man, the human being! But wasn’t the handout arrogant and shameless, pathetic even, yet autocratic too? Some details were impressive—the honors and fellowships, an Ivy League college—but there was something earnest and plodding about the summary. Then again, war and financial need seemed to have interrupted the scholar’s career, which was hardly his fault. He had persevered. You couldn’t deny it!

Mallow remained on his feet, almost exactly where he had stood the other morning, but he held himself stiffly and seemed to stare into space. Saturday, he had been resourceful and insinuating, working upon his audience. Now his mood and purpose were obscure.

“I pass this out,” he said quietly, “because it occurred to me that after our last meeting I should present something in the way of credentials. As I interpret it, by its action Saturday the Department has in effect called in question my capability and my qualifications to draw up a program for a graduate degree.” He paused. “I guess,” he said, “my sense of the vote is that it’s an expression of no confidence, in which case I don’t see how I can—or why I should—remain as Chairman.”
He stopped again, meditating his words. His audience waited—stunned, so far as Cathcart could tell, blinking, patient and silenced—stupefied and wondering, as though happening upon some catastrophe: an automobile wreck or a collapsed building.

Mallow lifted his head, staring at the door. “Either,” he continued, in the same quiet and reasonable way, “I have the qualifications to chair this department or a I don’t have them, and if I don’t—and if that is the sense and the will of the Department—then I must of course step down.” He paused once more and cleared his throat. “It seems,” he said, “appropriate then, that at this time I inform you of my resignation.” He swallowed. “And so,” he resumed dryly, “I now leave you to your own devices.”

Collecting himself, he walked stiffly toward the door, opened it and moved into the hall, pulling the door closed behind him. The click hung in the air.

It seemed to Cathcart that time was suspended, yet you could sense it dripping away, as though from a faucet. Then from somewhere came a grunt, then a “hunh!” Guntner turned and raising his eyebrows, looked at Hastings. “Mack” MacDonald rolled his eyes.

“Well!”

“I must say!”

“If he thinks . . .”

Heads shook. There was more rolling of eyes, blowing out of breath and annoyed shrugging, though the back row remained silent, stony and passive.

“Well!” someone said with a sniff. “If he thinks we’re going to go running after him and beg his pardon, he’s very much mistaken!”

*

Blair, good enough not to say ‘I told you so,’ swiveled in his chair. Cathcart, leaned forward in his, forearms once more on his thighs. Glumly, he inflated his cheeks and exhaled.

Blair had been right. True, he had gotten the balloting wrong but only by a single wavering vote. And Mallow had resigned and the ploy had failed, but was it a ploy? That, to Cathcart, was still unclear. Had it been a desperate scheme or a man overcome with pity for himself? Was it a painful and helpless baring of the soul or a calculated
gesture or some confusion of both, and how could you ever know? How could the man himself be sure?

Cathcart felt sorrow for Mallow but also resentment. That someone should be driven to this seemed appalling. But he remembered Blair: Too clever by half! Then it came to him that he had been right all the same, that a principle had been at stake, and despite their malice and desire for revenge, the rebels (he saw them as such) had been right too. Yes, their gloating and superiority and general nastiness disgusted him, just as the surly muttering and idiotic threats had revolted him two days ago. Today’s grinning faces were obscene, but so were the glowering visages of Mallow’s gang. Anyway, there was a point to be made!

Somehow during the long mad ordeal of graduate school he had come to think of himself as a moral person and an independent thinker, one who couldn’t be bought, weighing alternatives and selecting those that seemed to be truly right, no matter the consequences. And this sense of himself was crucial to his self-respect. Well, how else could you live with yourself? What did other people do? If you cut deals, discreetly took your pay-off and carried out instructions, how could you end up but despising yourself? And wasn’t this damnation? Wasn’t that ancient, worn out and melodramatic word another term for self-hatred?

He was no one’s creature. Call it pride and read aloud as many sermons as you wished on what that particular sin went before. He would do what he believed just! And yes, damn the torpedos!

“IT wasn’t pretty to see,” he said now, trembling a little, “but weren’t they right to vote the thing down? I mean wasn’t it too damn clever, just as you said? I didn’t like the gloating, but there was a principle at stake!” He clung to this and to what Marilyn had said: he had done what he thought right! That couldn’t be denied.

With a light in his eyes and the hint of a smile Blair considered his office-mate, and Cathcart shrugged, suddenly embarrassed. Then Blair laughed.

“Oh, hell!” he said. “Hastings and his bunch don’t care about the damned institute. They’d have done it themselves if they’d thought of it.”
Cathcart looked up. The room seemed to revolve. He didn’t believe Blair, wouldn’t believe him, not for a second! Then as the floor itself slid beneath him, he heard himself say:

“You think so?”

“Sure!” Blair laughed. “Actually, Mallow’s mistake was not including *them*. He should have spread the wealth around and corrupted everybody! That’s what I think!”
When Evildoers Come at Me

Motel Capri
San Francisco, CA
March 24, 1978

Dear Father O’Connor,

I write this reluctantly and unwisely, not because I think you deserve an explanation, but because you need to understand the absurdity of what you have suggested. You need to be told my reasons, even if you do not grasp them. Or rather, you need to understand the situation in detail. “Reasons” have nothing to do with it, I suppose.

You, of course, having renounced so much, secretly feel that we others—we “lay” people—are selfish and sinful. From your point of view we never go far enough, though you are shrewd enough not to say so. And too, a certain resentment and envy sours your estimation of us—forgivable if not entirely Christian. So you make your incredible proposals in that offhand way, slapping your knees and winking and departing, sure that you have planted a seed which, nourished by prayer, will come to fruition. I think you are wrong. Let me explain why. (It will take some time and paper, but here now on spring “break,” 180 miles south of the town named for the tribe the founders exterminated, I have both.)

Four years ago I, Alan Maeghers, trained to be dropped behind enemy lines, was sent to the Sacramento Valley to prepare others for Turkey, Ethiopia and Japan. To kill the boredom I took extension courses at Yana State College, and upon my release moved
to Yana City and enrolled fulltime. Before joining the Army I had finished two years at Kent State in Ohio and now lacked roughly two semesters of graduating. I was twenty-four.

Yana State requires every undergraduate to demonstrate proficiency in prose composition by taking a course called “Communication Skills.” I thought the thing beneath me but had no choice. As it happened, my particular class was taught by a goodlooking woman about thirty—breezy and flip but knowledgeable. I did not care for her.

The first assignment was to “narrate a personal experience.” I wrote of my engagement—broken after my first year in the Army. My instructress—“Miss Blake”—read the paper to the class. I was furious.

“You had no right to do that!” I told her afterwards. “That was a very personal paper.”

“Alan,” she said, “I told you. I told everyone. ‘If there’s anything you don’t want to, uh, share with the group, as they say in therapy, just tell old Auntie Joan.’ Didn’t you hear me?”

“You had no right!” I said.

“I had every right,” she insisted. “If you didn’t want me to read it, why didn’t you write ‘Don’t Read’ on it? I told you.”

I wasn’t mollified. Later, though, I began to think she was right, and I wondered if I shouldn’t apologize. Possibly that was the whole point—to do something so I would have to apologize.

In any event, I appeared one evening at the Lakewood Apartments, knapsack slung dashingly over one shoulder, my heart thumping.

“Oh, Alan!” she said. “It’s you.”

“It is indeed, Miss Blake,” I said—and realized my ghastly mistake.

Her hair was puffed, swirled and stiff. She wore glossy lipstick and something dark around her eyes, making them bigger than ever. She wore heels too, stockings and a tobacco-colored suede suit. She seemed somehow lacquered, but she was lovely.

“You’re going out?” I said.
She patted her hair. “Incredible as it may seem,” she said, “I have what I believe is called a ‘date.’”

I tried to make amends. From my knapsack I produced a bottle of carefully selected wine. She refused to think of it. And, she said, she really did have to get ready. I said (poor joke) that she looked sort of ready already.

“At my age,” she said, “a gull needs aw da help she can get!” (Often in class she plays the dumb Bronxy broad.)

So I departed, humiliated, and had I gone straight home there would have been an end to it all, but I lingered, waiting near the corner with my bike. I wasn’t trying to be a creep. I just wanted to see.

Before long, a navy blue Dodge appeared and parked in the driveway, blocking it. A man in a dark suit got out—tall, tanned, blackhaired. Whistling, chinking keys against the rail, he bounded up the stairs and banged the door. Ready-or-not-here-I-come!

So, I thought bitterly, that’s the kind she goes for.

In class I became withdrawn, but one day I surprised myself and everyone else. For some reason the irrepressible Miss Blake had required us to attend a student poetry reading—a vulgar, tasteless thing—and now, as we prepared to “discuss” the event, I spoke up.

“We shouldn’t have had to go!”

Her smile faded. What did I mean? I said people might have been offended. Was I offended? she asked. That wasn’t the point, I snapped.


“Well,” I said, “as a matter of fact—”

“I didn’t realize,” she said, “that you were Christian, Alan. The last I remember, you were into Tibetan Buddhism.”

“What I may or may not have been into,” I protested, “is irrelevant. The point is—”

“Well,” she said with a sigh, “all I can say, class, is that if anyone was offended, I’m sorry. Now then . . . ”

You know, I wrote in my journal, I don’t have to take this!
To file a complaint you go to the office of the Executive Assistant—who was out. I waited, examining family photographs and an old football program covered in protective vinyl—some sort of all-star game long ago. Idly flipping the pages, I saw a face, crewcut and callow. It couldn’t be! It simply couldn’t be. But it was. Twenty years had passed, but I stared at the man who called for Joan.

Routed, I fled.

Here, if you can stand it, Father, are entries from the journal I compulsively keep.

**September 13**

*They live on the west side, where the town fades into fields and trees. Big Spanish style home, stucco, wrought-iron, geraniums on the balcony. Pampas grass, olive tree. The ten-speed and the basketball hoop rather work against the Ciento Lindo effect, and the whole thing is a little too Architectural Digest.*

**September 22**

*Haircut today, in the murky little hole with the hunting prints and By Faith Alone Are Ye Saved on the wall. I mentioned his name.*

“Oh yeah,” the barber said, parting my hair in the wrong place. “Pistol Pete Sherman. Just about the biggest thing that ever came out of this town.”

**September 26**

*This much is established. There are four Shermans and they they attend St. Kevin’s. The pictures on the desk are old. The boy must be eighteen now—tall and lanky, taller than his father, blond; thin freckled face. The girl is probably thirteen. The wife is short, almost “petite,” but trim, well dressed. His age I should guess.*

*God bless our happy home.*
Well, Father, I was determined to allow the benefit of the doubt. Could Joan and Sherman be on some committee or something? Was it all innocent? But then why had she been so elaborately done up? And she had said a date.

I continued to probe.

October 2

Let the record show, my friends, the Dodge was parked outside the Lakewood from 3:35 p.m. until nearly five o’clock.

More committee work?

October 6

Q. Give Mr. Sherman’s favorite drinking spots (in order of preference).

A. Pat & Mike’s on Third (many cronies, much back slapping, handshaking, clumsy male humor). LeGrand’s on Broadway (elegant in a San Francisco Union Street way: clash of texture—raw brick and mortar, pale varnished wood, ferns and hovering jungle growth, Tiffany lamps.)

Here, though, he drinks alone.

Enough quotation. At any rate, I began to attend mass. My major as you know, was Religious Studies, mostly from perversity. Believing only that I am incapable of belief, I have always been fascinated and irritated by those like you who do assent. And I was fascinated too by this classic small town soap opera into which I had stumbled.

St. Kevin’s is, of course, a turn-of-the-century imitation Romanesque basilica, in my eyes a ponderous lump of whitewashed cement with ghastly stained windows, clerestory portholes of yellow bathroom glass, and a crucified modernistic Jesus who seems to have expired from malnutrition.

The Shermans, it turned out, were pillars of the parish, Harriet president of Christian Ladies Relief; Michael on the softball team; Dora in Choir; and Peter S. himself a “lector,” reading designated passages in a clear, ringing and surprisingly boyish voice.
Well, absorbed in the drama, I became careless, and one day, following the Dodge on my bike, I wheeled around a corner and discovered the car parked and Peter Sherman standing beside it in shirtsleeves, arms folded.

“Hey you!”

Heart banging, I skidded to a stop and straddled the bar.

“How come you’re following me?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You were following me.”

I faked a laugh, my heart slamming still. “I’m afraid,” I said, “I don’t—”

“You’ve been following me for weeks,” he growled, and I must have paled.

“How come?”

The face was square and grim. Later it came to me that he must be a restless, unreflective man. He wants to settle all problems, I wrote, with a punch, a drink or a screw. Probably deep down he approves of confession and penance because it’s something to DO.

He glared, arms crossed, the face dark above the white shirt. The hair was black and bristly, suggesting still the gladiator’s crewcut. The lifted chin was pugnacious.

“Maybe,” I said, “you’re paranoid.”

“Don’t be a smartass,” he told me. “You’re Maeghers, right?”

“Alan Maeghers,” I said, “graduating senior, soon to be grad student and aspiring part-time instructor.”
“Part-time?”

“Part-time,” I said. “Like Miss Blake.”

Points of light appeared in Sherman’s eyes. “What about Miss Blake?”

“Nothing,” I said and shrugged. “Isn’t she part-time?”

“Look,” he said, “lay off Miss Blake.”

“I’m not laying on her,” I said and thought: Now it’s coming—I’m going to get decked.

He cocked his head and squinted. “And quit following me around.”

“I’m not following you,” I said, a little shrill. “Look, Mister Sherman, I don’t have time to play games.”

He nodded slowly. “Is that a fact?”

Later again, when I thought about the scene and myself, I was aghast. Who was it, I wondered, who did these things?

And yet I couldn’t stop. The next week, filing my application for assistantship and required to furnish references, I put down two faculty names and Sherman’s. What gets into me? I inquired in my journal and really wanted to know.

In class now Joan was correct, friendly (in a measured way), not quite so breezy, though she still flung into the room, asking, “So, gang, you guys ready to write your little hearts out today?” I could see that I made her nervous.

Soon after this I was accepted to Graduate School and received the assistantship, which amazed me further. What, I mused, had Sherman done when the recommendation form crossed his desk? And then I understood: Sherman was afraid.

Imperative that I see La Blake, I wrote. Essential that she understand. But what? That wasn’t clear.

This time she was bored rather than anticipatory, and not so chic. Brown trousers with floppy cuffs. Peach-colored blouse. Hair bunched at the shoulders, not whipped and sprayed into a confection.

Opening the door, she looked at me blankly.

“Miss Blake,” I said. “A minute. A single solitary minute—then I must fly!”

She looked at me warily. “What do you want, Alan?”

“I just told you,” I said. “A moment of your time.”
“What’s it about?”

“What it’s about,” I said, “that which it most immediately concerns, is Mister Sherman.”

She blinked, drew a breath and stepped aside. I entered. “Why,” Miss Blake,” I said, “this is charming!”

It was. She had a feel for warm muted colors and subtle contrast: mud-colored carpet, polished teak (Scandinavian lines), looming philodendron, tropical fish, florid Imare in little stands, prints: Mt. Kilimanjaro in clouds, cave painting bison in shades of clay and dust.

“Alan,” she said, “what do you want?”

I lifted and dropped my hands. “May I sit down?”

“I guess so.”

I sat. She stood. I was afraid she might cross her arms and tap a foot. *Class, I’m waiting!*

“Someone’s coming by in a few minutes,” she said. “I’m sorry, but I don’t have a lot of time.”

I knew better. “Fair enough!” I said and slapped the couch. “I shall be brief. And to the point.”

“Alan,” she said, “why have you been following Mister Sherman around?”

“My God!” I said. “Has he told you that? Look, Miss Blake, I haven’t the time—or the inclination—to follow anyone. We did run into each other a couple of times. In fact, that’s why I’m here. Mister Sherman’s rather manic suspiciousness has confused things, I’m afraid. You see, on one occasion he came on a little strongly, and I—for a joke—put his name down as a reference. I’m afraid he saw more than was there. I mean it was just a prank, you see.”

She looked away, growing heavy and thoughtful. Then she sighed and her breasts rose and fell.

“Miss Blake,” I said (once more out of control), “I have no desire or talent for judging my fellow human beings. My own approach to life is shamelessly pagan—*carpe diem*—a tack which, I notice, has been taken over by the beer commercials. I simply feel that people should get whatever happiness they can from life . . .” I stopped, shocked by
my antsy eloquence. Then I said, “I want to assure you and Mister Sherman that I am extremely discreet.”

“Alan,” she said—her voice distant.

“Yes?”

“Will you promise me something?”

“Anything, Miss Blake.”

“Will you promise me,” she said, “not to follow Mister Sherman any more?”

Now I heaved a pointed sigh. “Since,” I said, “number one, I haven’t been following said gentleman, and since—number two—I have no idea of doing same, why, yes, I believe that on this particular score I can settle your uneasiness.” I smiled. “And now,” I said, “may I ask you a favor, not in exchange—just as a favor?”

“I suppose so.”

“May I,” I said, “in future, if our paths should cross, may I call you something a little less absurd than ‘Miss Blake?’ Not in class, you understand. That is, might I call you ‘Joan?’” I tilted my head winningly. At least I aimed at being winning.

She pondered. “All right,” she said. “I guess so.”

“Thank you,” I said, “Joan,” and I leaped up. “And now,” I said, “I depart—as good as my word—before you can throw me out!”

Recalling that scene, I am appalled. What made me so pompous, so mouthy, so godawful phony? I leave it to you.

Well, the days passed, and things continued as before, but of course I being I couldn’t simply let them continue, had to give life a nudge. I came to mass regularly, as you may have observed. (It is none of my business, but recent changes have had a deplorable effect on liturgy.) I was especially intrigued by the plethora of little clubs and societies, and I was particularly drawn toward Christian Ladies Relief, which Harriet Sherman chaired. Men, I saw, were solicited.

And so one night I appeared chez Sherman, finding that inside, the Spanish motif had been willfully jettisoned for cloisonné and Chinese rosewood, and I considered Mrs. S.—short and dark, with the lightly powdered doll face, thin lips, clinking bracelets and smart, gray dress. (Magnin’s? Saks?)

“Excuse me,” I said. “I saw in the bulletin—”
“Oh yes!” she said, giving me her hand. “You’ve come about the meeting. Wonde

derful!” She towed me into the living room. “Surprise!” she called, lilt ing and triumphant. “We have a new member!”

Sherman wasn’t present. I didn’t think he would be. At any rate, the next morning I found myself riding shotgun in Mrs. Sherman’s Country Squire station wagon, helping deliver high chairs and diapers to the Mexican farmhands. Making agreeable smalltalk, I observed that her husband hadn’t been present the previous night.

“No,” she said, laughing sadly, “I can’t seem to get Peter interested at all.”

“Peter Sherman?” I said with an overdone frown. “Is he at the college?”

“Why, yes he is,” she said brightly, and as we flew down the freeway, past wind-whipped oleanders, I declared with fake astonishment that I knew Mr. Sherman myself.

Which, it seems, should have produced some result. Peter? Guess what? We have a new recruit, a college student named . . . And Sherman: What? Oh no!

But either she didn’t tell, or Sherman, for his own dark reasons, played dumb, and so I was swept into a life of good works. Is this how God gets even? We would roll around the country in the roaring station wagon, I often holding some ball of a child—great-eyed and solemn—or an infant sleepy and warm, fitting itself to my bony contours with drowsy trust.

Once, I remember, returning from some errand, we stopped at St. Kevin’s, and I was introduced to the assistant pastor, you, whom until then I had seen only on the altar in gleaming vestments. Up close you proved to be a rumpled Irishman with a mop of brown hair and humorous blue eyes. Your black serge glared in the winter sun while you squeezed my hand and asked how things were going. I said pretty well.

“Good man!” You patted my back.

“Father,” Mrs. Sherman said a little shortly, “something has to be done about the Liturgy Committee.”

“Oh,” you said, “T’ere doin’ fine, Hahryet.”

“They’re not,” she said. “And what about the lights? Isn’t there any way to replace them?”

“Ah, sure t’ere is,” you said. “I got a man coming. He’s a three climber. He trows a rope ovr the beams and climbs up.”
“Father!”

The gleam left your blue eyes. Your lip thickened.

Slowly, I began to understand her point of view: There is much that is awful in the world, but a good Christian woman doesn’t fling up her hands and run for the smelling salts. The world needs its ears cleaned, its neck scrubbed and its shoes shined, needs to be turned out into the sunshine. Men get in the way, swaggering and strutting, but they can be dealt with.

What I didn’t understand, however, was my role. Surely, I had learned enough to drive the Mexicans about myself, conversing in bastard Spanish.

Then one afternoon as we sped down the freeway she said, “Alan, I want to thank you. You’ve been a great help.”

“But,” I protested, “I haven’t done anything.”

“You’ve done a lot,” she said, with so much meaning that I was amazed.

That was nothing, though. The next week I was rocked.

My God! I wrote. The world is a curiouser place than even thou, Maeghers lad, could have thought. Truly, it is.

I try to visualize still, mettre en scène. It isn’t easy.

Evening. The rectory. You and Father Flanagan linger over coffee and wine. (Or so I imagine.) Redfaced blustering Flanagan yaps about his selfish parishioners. You’ve heard it all before. Oh God! Won’t the old one talk the legs off a donkey! Then, providentially, Mrs. Riordan pokes her blade of a face inside: Missus Sherman wants to see Father O’Connor. Mrs. Riordan has informed her that Father is engaged, but you spring up. Sure, that’s all right now. You’ll be there directly. Ask her will she sit down.

(I supply the dialogue.)

FATHER FLANAGAN: Mrs. Sharman?”

FATHER O’CONNOR: A good Christian woman, Terry.

F.F.: I know her. One of t’ose throublesome types wants to meddle in everyt’ing. You know, Jim, I t’ink she might be just a bit taken wit’ you.

F.O.: Ah, go way wit’ you!
F.F.: Oh now. You know what one of ’em said the ot’er day? “Fat’ar,” she said, “why is it you Irish priests never look a woman in t’eye? Is it because you’ve been thrained to t’ink of us as ayvil temptation?” I almost said, “In yar case I wouldn’t be warryin.””


F.F.: Well, just so t’at’s the only place.

F.O.: Isn’t t’at the thrut? Some of t’em, t’ere’s a fair amount of territory to be seen.

F.F. (smiling): I thry to make allowances far the climate.

F.O.: Do you now, Terry?

Here I imagine you going into the parlor where “Hahryet” stands in gray pleated Calvin Klein, head cocked, offering that sad little smile. Ah, you think, some thing wrong here. What’s she been up to lately? And that Maeghers chap. Funny sort to be mixing with the C.L.R. crowd. Is he a bloody chancer do you suppose? Ah well, it’s all in the name of charity, and don’t they say charity begins at home?

HARRIET (dramatically): Father, can I talk with you?

F.O.: (taking her hand): A carse you can. You can indeed. How are you, Hahryet?

Keeping well, I hope?

H.: Oh God, Father, I don’t know.


H. Thank you, Father.

Here you go into the kitchen and, lowering your voice, ask for two cups of coffee if Mrs. R. will be so kind. Mrs. R. sniffs, swells and draws herself up, savoring her martyrdom.

F.: (coming back, fearing the worst): Now t’en. What is it, Hahryet?

H.: (plaintive smile): Don’t you know, Father?

F.: Well, I raylly t’ink you ought to tell me.

H.: It’s Peter.

F.: Ah!

H.: You knew, didn’t you?

F.: To tell the thrut,’ Hahryet, I’ve had some suspicions.
H.: I’m sure you did, Father. I seem to be the last to know.
F.: Oh now, I wouldn’t say t’at.
H.: Wouldn’t you?
F.: I don’t t’ink I would.
H.: (lifting her chin): Father, what should I do?
F.: Have you told him t’at you know?
H.: No, I haven’t.
F.: It might be best, don’t you know, if the two of yous wahr to come have a little talk wit’ me. I’m t’inking now t’at might be just the t’ing.
H.: Do you know something, Father? I’m not sure I want him back.
F.: T’at’s natural, Hahryet. T’at’s understandable.
H.: No, I mean it.
F.: T’ere the kids.
H.: I know, Father. Father, do you know what June Hagler said the other day? “Harriet,” she said, “you have been a saint. I don’t know how you do it.”
F.: Ya’re a good woman. You mustn’t go and blame yarself.
H.: Oh, I’m not. But I’m not a saint. I know that.

(Here let Mrs. Riordan bang open the door, sweeping in with the tray and setting it all down—coffee pot, cups, saucers, cream and sugar, etc.)

F.: (chirping): Ah, Missus Riordan! What would we evar do wit’out you?
Mrs. R. (vague, lofty): I’m sure I don’t know. (She sails out.)
H.: “You are a saint. When I think what you have done for your family—”
F.: Right enough. Crame and sugar?
H.: Thank you, Father. Father, he’s got to want to come back.
F.: (looking up): But he hasn’t moved out?
H.: No, but he might just as well. I will not sleep under the same roof with him.
F.: Well now, I don’t know about t’at, Hahryet. I wouldn’t advise anyt’ing precipitous now. And could you be wrong by any chance? It would be a tarble t’ing to have the suspicion—
H.: Father, I know.

F.: Ya’re sure? Couldn’t you be makin’ a tarble misthake, Harhyet?

H.: (softly): I wish I were, Father. I wish I were!

You nod gravely and sigh. You both ponder in silence, and when enough time has passed, you promise prayers and see her to the door. Out she goes, down the stairs, up the steep brick stairs of St. Kevin’s.

Possibly it wasn’t like that. I don’t know. What isn’t speculation is what happened next: Harriet lingering in the vestibule, staring at the shadowy nave, the flickering votive candles and the skinny, sand-colored Christ floating on the Cross without evident pain. What else did she see? It must have struck her as a miracle.

I can’t explain. Call it an impulse, a failed experiment. Self-conscious, feeling a fool, I rose and kicked the kneeler up, shaking myself like a wet dog, as though to fling off any drop of piety.

“Hello, Alan?”

I nearly jumped. “Mrs. Sherman!”

“Imagine finding you here.”

“Imagine,” I said, wary of the glint in her eye, which I mistook for evangelical zeal.

We walked up the street, I wheeling my bike, listening to the tap of her heels and the click and whirl of my machine. Passing beneath a streetlamp, I stole a look. Her face was bone-white, her lips a garish carmine, her eyes big, liquid and dark. I swallowed. Our shadows stretched and sharpened, then faded as we left the nimbus.

“Alan,” she said, “if you’d like to put your bike in my station wagon, I can give you a ride.”

“Oh,” I said, “I couldn’t really trouble you, Missus Sherman. Anyway, it’s not far.”

“No, really,” she said. “I insist. It’s dark and all . . .”

In prickly silence we drove the Alameda, the street lights like dwindling balloons. When we pulled up before the crumbling apartment house, I jumped out and tugged at the bike.

“I wondered, Alan . . .”
“Yes?”
“Would you mind terribly,” she asked, “if I came up?”
I gulped. “Came up?”
“For a minute,” she said. “Just to talk.” She gave me a fetching little-girl look, almost batting her eyes. I quailed.

Chaining my bike to the stair-rail, I showed her “up.” “I’m afraid,” I said, “you’ll have to excuse me. The place is a shambles.”

“Oh,” she said gaily, “I don’t care!”

I did. I hated her seeing how meanly I lived: the brick-and-plank bookcases, the cheap art prints, the usual grad student tackiness.

“My,” she said, “what a lot of books.” She ran her finger over the spines. “... The Way of Life ... The Bhagavad-Gita ... The Silence of Saint Thomas ... The Koran ... The Upanishads ...”

“A veritable smorgasbord of spiritual progress,” I said. “The advantage of majoring in Religious Studies—‘Rel Studs,’ as the schedule has it—is that you can appear extremely sensitive without actually having to believe anything.”

She said nothing, which threw me further. “Um,” I asked, “would you care for a drink?”

She brightened. “I would,” she said. “Why that would be very nice.”

“You would?” I said. “Actually, I didn’t know if you drank, Missus Sherman.”

“You didn’t?” She gave a tinny laugh. “How funny,” she said. “You must have some strange ideas about me.” Smiling, she approached and laid her hand on my wrist.

“Harriet,” she said. “Please, Alan.”

“Oh,” I said, “sure—uh, Harriet. Just let me see what the larder holds.”

I knew what it held. It held bourbon and a special port I’d been saving.

“I’m afraid,” I said, “all there is is bourbon.”

“Bourbon will be fine.”

“With water?”

“Please.”

I made the drinks. She sat on the daybed, I on the chair. Crossing her slim fine legs, she smiled over her glass. I forced a grin.
“Alan,” she said in that tinkly voice, “why don’t you come sit over here?”

I will spare you more details, Father. They are easily imagined. Let me give you a few more excerpts from my manic diar- ing, to convey the flavor of the next few weeks.

December 17

It’s as though some current has been turned up—or on. A sparkle comes into their eyes. Their skin seems fresher. And do they whisper to themselves that eternal female triumph: “I have a lover!”?

December 18

A thought today: what is the statistical probability of simultaneous mutual climax for all parties—that is, the ardent pair at the Lakewood and the beast with two backs chez moi? All trains arriving on time. Same time, as it were.

December 19

Clinky Christmas decorations downtown. Bing Crosby in the stores. Deck us all.

December 21


December 27

Xmas with la famiglia and this afternoon with me. Can she really split her life so neatly in two?

I was astonished, you see, but I realized that I had provided some rare chance, unlocked a door.
She liked to arrive unannounced, enjoyed taking me unawares, liked the idea of my availability. It fired her. Well, didn’t it fire me too? I mean the not knowing, or rather knowing that at any moment one might be called to strip and rise to the occasion.

Yet for Christmas she gave me a scarf and bicycle gloves, and often when leaving she dispensed a chaste peck on the cheek, something almost sisterly. I wondered: were these things she dared not offer Sherman?

More depositions:

December 29

Text for today: My rod and my staff shall comfort thee. Or: Blessed is he that comes in the name of the Lord.

December 30

If we keep at it, I swear, we will burst into flame.

Then one day in early January there was a knock at the door—a different knock—and there before me, glowering in his blue suit, checked shirt and navy blue tie (she selects his clothes) stood Sherman.

My mouth fell open. I expected a gun to fire, a grenade to explode.

The square face was dark—smoldering. The lip protruded. He gave the impression of clenched teeth, swelling chest and balled fists. My pulse slammed.

He pushed by me. “Okay if I come in?”

I shrugged. “To what,” I said (heart banging) “do I owe my sudden popularity?”

He looked around, scowled at my books, plopped on the daybed, fumbled and produced cigarettes and matches. Lighting up, he exhaled, picked a tobacco shred from his teeth, grimaced and dropped it in the ashtray on the coffee table.

“Maeghers,” he said, “what do you want?”

Limbs quivering, I forced myself to sit. “I fail to understand,” I said. “Come again?”
“No,” he said, glaring, “you don’t fail to understand. You understand fine. Look, is it money? If it is, I don’t have it.”

“Is what money?” I said.

He flicked ashes. “What the hell are you up to?” he asked. “What are you hanging around Harriet for? Huh? What are you trying to do—destroy me?”

“I am not,” I said, “interested in destroying anybody. I am interested in the truth.”

(This was pompous, but he did that to me.)

He frowned. “You mean me and Joan?”

“Precisely.”

He shrugged—and gave a snort. “All right,” he said. “We’re having an affair.”

“Oh,” I said.

“Does that make your day, Maeghers?”

“No,” I said, “not particularly.”

“You going to tell my wife?” He scowled again, then puffed.

“No,” I said. “It’s none of my business.”

“Right,” he said, flicking ashes. “You wouldn’t want to butt in where you don’t belong.”

“No,” I said with dignity. “I wouldn’t.”

“Not you.” He rammed out the cigarette and a film of blue smoke floated up. I winced at the stink. “Look,” he said, “will you leave me the hell alone? Will you leave Joan alone? And for God’s sake, will you leave my wife alone?”

“I’m working with her,” I said. “Missus Sherman, I mean.”

“Quit.”

“Well,” I said, “if it’s going to cause so much trouble, maybe I’d better.”

He jerked his chin. “I’ll tell her.”

“I can tell her,” I said.

“No need.” He cocked his head and scrutinized me, much as that day on the street. “Goddamn, Maeghers!” he said. “What is wrong with you? Don’t you have any life of your own?”

Blood rushed to my face. Hotly, I said, “I have plenty of life! Plenty!”

“Good,” he said. “Then go live it, will you?”
I stood up. “I think,” I said—trembling yet aware of my absurdity—“you’d better go!” (I know, I know. Under pressure I inevitably speak like somebody in a bad film.)

He shrugged and offered a silly slice of a smile. “Sure,” he said, getting up. “Whatever you say.”

When he was gone I couldn’t stop shaking. It wasn’t fear but the sense of his scorn. He had crushed me. I admit it. In a few careless words he had annihilated me. I saw myself as clearly, I think, as it is given a man to see anything, and I was appalled. I saw myself possibly as you see me emerging from this tiresome letter. To you it is nothing much, but to me, Father, it was a revelation.

And yet—I couldn’t leave well enough alone. Once more I was impelled to gesture.

This time she was wearing the loose brown trousers and a sleeveless tan blouse. She was barefoot too, almost peasantish, not enamelled as on that first disastrous evening.

“Joan,” I said, “I just stopped by to tell you that I’m leaving.”

“Oh?”

“I’m leaving town,” I explained. “Now that the quarter has rolled to its rather dismal conclusion. Thanks, by the way, for the grade.” My frantic cheerfulness depressed me, but I couldn’t rein it in.

“You earned it,” she said—stiffly.

“I know,” I said, “but thanks anyway.”

She blinked, seemed fuddled and thick. “Um,” she said, “where will you be going?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Oh.” She nodded in that drugged way. “Um,” she said again, “would you like to come in?”

I was incredulous. “Only,” I said, “if I’m not imposing.”

She didn’t seem to care, so I entered and found myself once more among the gleaming teak and hulking philodendron, the mud-colored rug, the figurines and the fish winking through the green water like bits of shiny silk.

“Alan,” she said, “would you like a glass of wine?”

That is what she said. I swear it.
We sat and sipped jug burgundy, and I remembered that September evening and
the wretched figure I cut with my despised Beaujolais.

“If I may say so,” I ventured, “you seem a little down.”

She smiled. “Nothing a bullet in the head wouldn’t fix.”

“I can imagine,” I said.

“Can you?”

“Well,” I said, retreating, “I think I can.”

“What I need,” she said whimsically, “is what they call in the beauty salons a
‘makeover.’ You know: they redo you completely—hair, clothes, skin, make-up.
You’re a totally new you.” She considered. “Every hundred years or fifty thousand
miles.” Then she smiled again. “Drink up, Alan,” she said. “Let’s have another. Not
exactly vintage stuff, but it does do the job. At least it has on occasion.”

I drank and surrendered my glass. In a minute she was back, padding barefoot
and faintly haggard across the thick carpet.

“Here you go.”

“Merci mille fois,” I said. In the aquarium light the wine looked like shiny blood.

“Just a naïve domestic burgundy,” she said, “but I think you’ll be amused by its
presumption. Oh Gawd, I must get some new material. That’s the first funny thing I’ve
said in weeks, and I stole it.”

I was distressed. “Joan,” I said, lowering my voice and assuming gravity, “can I
ask you something?”

“Ask away, Alan.”

I nervied myself. “Would you say,” I asked, “that I kind of feed on people?” I
waited tensely.

She frowned. “I guess so,” she said.

I was stricken—pierced.

“You see,” I said miserably, “Mister Sherman kind of said something like that.”

She nodded. “Sometimes,” she said, “Mister Sherman can be a little thoughtless.”

“He could also be right,” I said bitterly. “I mean it could be the truth.”

“Sometimes,” she said, “the truth can be a little thoughtless.”

“I guess,” I said, “that’s the nature of truth.”
Again she nodded. “But you’re going away,” she said. “You’re leaving?”

I smiled. “You could come with me,” I said.

“Oh,” she said, “I’m too old for you.”

“Hardly,” I said.

“Oh yes,” she said. “Tonight I’m ancient.”

“That will pass,” I said, wondering at myself.

And then it was over and I was leaving. But suddenly—wonderful to say—I had a revelation. I understood. Don’t ask how. I just did. I who had no experience in these matters realized all at once that each morning she considered the calendar grimly and possibly checked the bedsheets. And each day, I believed, her terror grew. Or was it that? Or just that? Wasn’t it various things?

* 

I didn’t leave. I couldn’t, not now. And so for a while nothing really changed. Then one day on a whim I went down to the college tennis courts and tried to hit serves, quite awful really, swinging with suppressed fury, spraying balls across adjoining courts and hauling myself before a tribunal (which was also myself).

Why won’t you bend your knees? Etc.

Then I saw the tennis team—limber and springy as deer, in shiny red and black warm-up suits, cracking fluffy yellow balls back and forth, lobbing, smashing, volleying, serving, playful as kittens. One young Viking caught my eye—a tall, sandy-haired, freckled sort with the grace of a ballerina. Suddenly, I knew him: Mick (or as his mother prefers, “Michael.”) I had forgotten that he was a freshman, though why, I wondered, given Harriet’s social pretensions, was he enrolled here?

Further ironies: Spring Quarter began and I commenced my teaching career, just as I’d planned, undertaking a section of the introductory course in “Rel Studs.” With false smile and beating heart, I entered the room and called the roll, pronouncing ethnic names with the pedantic correctness generations had struggled to evade. Then I came upon it: SHERMAN MICHAEL PET. (“Peter” no doubt, but the computer allowed only nineteen letters and spaces.)

It was he: the tennis ace, slouched in a chair-desk as though he might topple the thing. Same square face—Sherman’s when young but pale and freckled, the sandy hair
falling like drapes on either side and over the forehead like a valance, the same thin
straight nose squeezed just above the tip, the same grim mouth and staring eyes (china
blue, however). But this face was callow and uncertain. Solemn, a little mopey, it
watched me dubiously, its owner dressed in tan Adidas, plum-colored corduroys, and a
sky-blue T-shirt advertising PRIMO HAWAIIAN BEER. (At least he hadn’t brought a
skateboard.)

I was edgy, of course, but there seemed no need. The boy was to prove diligent if
uninspired. So far as I could tell, he neither comprehended nor questioned anything I
said, yet remained convinced that I would make it all clear. His faith was touching.

Then one afternoon at the tennis courts he spotted me and came loping over.

“Mister Macghers! Mister Macghers!”

“Yes?” We stood on either side of the net, each fingering a racket.

“Mister Macghers,” he said a little breathlessly, “I don’t think I dig evil.”

I frowned. “You don’t—”

“Well, you know,” he said, “the concept.”

“Oh,” I said, “well, why don’t you come by the office?”

I had an office, all to myself, in the oldest and dingiest building on the campus,
where there was little traffic. I assumed he would show up the next day, during the
appointed hours, and I waited impatiently. Every so often I would walk the hall,
sometimes reading the door cards. The one across from me seemed especially worthy of
note: Miriam Hotchkiss, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Human Needs. Life Transitions
MWF 10:00, Cosmic Awareness MWF 11:00, Alternative Life Styles, TuTh 9:30, Anxiety
Reduction, W 1:00. Unable to reduce my own anxiety, though, I lost interest.

Class didn’t meet the following day, but I held office hours again, wondering if
Mick would appear and going over in my mind what I might say: that evil is the absence
of something, a defect, wound or mutilation and has no power by itself. (orthodox
Christian); that it is simply there, a principle, like gravity or electricity (Manichean); that
it is an illusion, appears real only from a partial vision (Buddhist et al.) There was much
to sort out, or so I hoped to indicate.

I was walking up and down, muttering to myself when I noticed that the door
across the hall was open, yet no one was there. The room, I discovered, was cozy:
sagging armchair, floorlamp, Navajo rug on the wall, ball bearing mobile and a poster (grinning Amazon, booted feet spread, hands on hips, starry cloak thrown back, breasts cupped in bronze). The desk was a chaos, piled with brightly colored paperbacks: *How to Make ESP Work for You. You can Cope. Getting Yours. Total Orgasm (Illustrated). Become the Person You Want to Be*, and more.

Mick failed to arrive, and several evenings later the telephone rang at my apartment: his mother.

“I understand,” Harriet said, “that you and Michael have been playing tennis.”

“We rally,” I said, “on occasion.”

“And he asks you questions?”

“About his schoolwork.” I imagined a shadow passing over her face. Her voice was tight, wary.

“I want that to stop.”

I played dumb. “You want his schoolwork to stop?”

“I want you to leave him alone.”

“I’m not pestering him,” I said. “I am his teacher, you know.”

“I want you to stay away from him.”

“I see,” I said, and suddenly I did. I started to tremble. “I’m good enough to sleep with,” I said, “but not good enough to know your son.”

“Oh, Alan!” she said, “it isn’t that. It isn’t that at all!”

“Isn’t it?”

“It’s just that . . . well, lately he’s begun to talk about you. He quotes you. ‘Mister Maeghers said this . . . Mister Maeghers thinks so-and-so . . . ’ The other night he wanted to invite you to dinner.”

“He didn’t?”

“He did. Peter’s face was practically black!”

“I see.” I found myself hanging up—enormously pleased. Black-faced Peter! And a disciple! A follower! It was something to consider.

I compromised. I didn’t go down to the courts. But as it turned out, I didn’t need to. Mick came to me.
“. . . It’s like this,” he said, frowning and struggling to explain (we were walking down the hall to my office). “There are rules provided, but you don’t have to follow them. It’s like . . . um, there’s a line drawn on the board you’re sawing, but you could go off the line. Huh?”

“Well,” I said as we reached the room, “I guess that’s one way of putting it.” I unlocked the door and flicked the switch. Long tubes fluttered into watery life. Then behind us, in the hall:

“Hi, guys!”

She was my age—short, skinny, flatchested, with a thin pale face and tight blond curls, and she wore what seemed a comic version of a business suit: blue-gray pinstripe, enormous pant-cuffs, nipped-in jacket, wide lapels. Her blouse was open-collared, the pink neck-scarf slashed with purple.

“Hi!” she said again. “I’m Miriam!”

Mick gaped. I introduced us. Hearty handshakes. Then, lifting a leg, she flung it before her, jerking herself across the hall with agile lurches.

“So!” she asked Mick, raking him with her eyes. “What are you studying, sport?”

That was a beginning—of what I wasn’t sure, but three days later I broke my resolve and went to the tennis courts. Mick was there, resplendent in his warm-up clothes shiny as racing silks. We stood across the net once more.

“Do you think,” he asked, “I should be in analysis?”

“In analysis?”

“Miriam is.”

“Is she?”

“Uuhh. It had to be someone older.”

“Oh?” I said.

“So she wouldn’t get emotionally involved.”

“I see.”

“And it had to be somebody she respected, cause she’s intellectually elitist.”

“Is she now?”

“Uuhh. Rully. See, Bernie’s framework is basically existential, but his tools are T.A. and Gestalt.”
“No kidding?”
“The thing is,” Mick said, staring into the distance, “I’ve been going out mainly in groups. I didn’t notice that.”
“Me either.”
“It’s defensive behavior.”
“Oh?”
He gave a little sniff. “I need to become more aware of my behavioral manifestations,” he said, “my strengths and limitations.”
“I hope you’re not giving up tennis?”
“Oh no. I mean,” he said quickly, “anybody that works with their mind needs some noncognitive activity.”
I was a little bitter, I admit, and a little sorry for myself. Thus:

March 15

My trouble is I don’t limp. I mean when you think of la belle Hotchkiss with her loud rambling mouth, easy certainties and stumbling gait, and Mick pratfalling through the English language and the life of the mind (he who is grace incarnate on the tennis court)—well, there is some allegory here. I’m sure of it.

I wonder, though. When you cross the campus and a reverberant boom rolls over the place, followed by a sonic thud, then the ground thumps, the air quivers while squeals, honks, bleats and twangs make your ears ring and your head pound; when on a wooden platform tall skinny youths—stiffly bent—pluck electric guitars as a seated drummer bobs and thrashes and stomps, banging his glittering traps and crashing the wobbly cymbals, when—I say—you shrink from the shattering beat, deafening blare and fake Negro bass (Ah feel so good! Ah feel so good!), and half-naked men, hairy as huns sail frisbees on the mild air, and young women, all breasts, buttocks, suntan and hair like sunlit straw saunter by, and up the street a van shoots past, painted with vivid flames and blazing with some metallic stuff driving blades of light into your eyes (WHEN IN
DOUBT, the bumper advises, WHIP IT OUT), well, how should one who lives a spider-life presume to instruct the young in how to live?

Do I need to say that suddenly I felt I had been right all along? I mean I should have left. Why had I stayed? What had I achieved? Sherman had humiliated me. I had lost my only disciple almost before I knew I had one. And as the days had passed and the telephone declined to ring and no one knocked at the door, I understood with a jolt that Harriet had dropped me, the mother in her suppressing the lover. Yes, she had come to her senses, abruptly, even if I hadn’t. Probably she was contrite, but in any case she saw her duty and saw that I, a man schooled in subterfuge, had better be kept at a distance.

And then? Who did come to see me? Who arrived unannounced and unexpected in that dismal office directly across from Cosmic Awareness and You Can Cope? Who but Father O’Connor plopping himself down in the chair, slapping his knees, the blue eyes dancing and the crooked grin turned on me like a gun, all that shiny black serge (or whatever it is) and the stiff round collar and the shrewd, red, farmboy face sizing me up.

... Well, Alan,” you said, “we were just after finishing supper last night, and sure the ould one passed a remark. Well, I t’ought, you’re not bloody serious? Will I say anyt’ing? Now, funnily enough, it’s my own private and candid opinion t’at Flanagan’s dead right on a number of points . . .” (a noombar a pints).

Will you come to the point? I thought.

... Now on the one hand,” you said, “the Charch teaches renunciation—”

“Yes,” I said, “he who would gain his life must lose it.”

“Right you are!” you said with that crooked boyish grin. “You know, Alan, t’ere’s a very thricky text in the farst epistle of John. For all t’at is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Faht’er, but is of the world. The Albigenses seized on t’at one—you can see how t’ey would. Now of course what some people seize on is Christ—”

“Whom they killed,” I said.

“Right you are,” you said. “And don’t people kill Him every day, Alan? Oh, we’re a nasty bit o’ goods all right, but funnily enough, a good portion of the time it’s love t’at makes us do the t’ings we do, don’t you know? But the great t’ing is not to go and t’ink you’re virtuous and everybody else is a tarble sinner or t’at t’ey’re all the
bloody salt o' the eart' and you're an awful old reprobate, because t'en you're all alone, and eit'ar way it's pride.”

I let you ramble.

You smiled again. “Oh sure,” you said, “we’re all pretty much thrying to cut a figger, too much taken wit’ ourselves. Right?”

I folded my arms.

“And along t’ose lines,” you said, “I’ve always t’ought t’at when we’re exharted not to judge, it doesn’t mean we’re to close our eyes to ot’ar people’s misthakes, but t’at we’re not to judge finally, don’t you know? T’at’s not our province. What we’re supposed to do is see our face in ot’ars. Which means seizing t’ oppartunities t’at come our way. And it’s all a mysthery. We just go along thryin’ to do our poor best and be alive to the chances when t’ey come, because it’s like you yourself said, he who would gain his life has to lose it.” (Grinning and slapping your knees again). “Well, t’at’s all I had on my mind. Nice havin’ a little chat once in a while.”

You stood, looking me keenly in the eye, then pumped my hand. “Good man!” you said.

Somehow it reminded me of a coach sending in his fourth string quarterback.

I didn’t understand, of course. I was obtuse. And maybe you expected that, knew that I wouldn’t understand but would make still another visit to the Lakewood Apartments. Maybe that’s what you were counting on, in which case you were right and knew me better than I have given you credit for.

Because I did go, prompted by God knows what urge, certainly not any impulse to “seize the opportunities” or even to try and do my “poor best.”

She was different. “Bemused” I guess is the word, but not down like the previous time, not depressed. She wore a blue sweater and a plaid, fringed skirt with an ornamental safety pin. White socks and loafers. The effect was inappropriately schoolgirlish, but even so . . . I remember the faintly glazed skin, the wide smile, the tilted eyes—meditative for once, not so mocking and careless. She offered wine again, a decent Riesling, properly chilled if a little lush and overstated like most things Teutonic.
“You know,” she said, sitting down, “the other night I was going through some old papers, and I came across that essay you wrote, the one that caused all the trouble between us.”

“The narrate-a-personal-experience number?” I said.

“Yes.”

“Most of the class favored auto wrecks.”

“But you—”

“I wrote about my engagement,” I said, “the emotional equivalent of a head-on collision.”

She frowned. “I didn’t understand, though,” she began. “I mean—”

“Oh,” I said, “there was nothing very complicated about it. Frieda was a wretched service brat sick of PX’s and parade grounds. Her father was a colonel. I just realized that her passion for civilian life wasn’t a very firm basis for marriage. The whole thing was one of those ghastly mistakes people make.”

Joan smiled. “You know,” she said, “what I liked was how it revealed a side of you most people never see.” The smile widened. “I’ve often wondered,” she said, “did you go to prep school?”

Now I smiled. “Joan,” I said, “you see before you the dismal product of American public education.”

“I mean,” she said, “because of the way you talk, and you seem—”

“A little weird?” I suggested.

“No,” she said, refusing to banter. “Tell me something, Alan. When you first met me, did I seem maybe a little loud and pushy?”

“Well—”

“Because,” she said, “when you’re a woman and all. I mean I had to establish something.”

“I guess so.”

She smiled again. “But then,” she said, “if you’re always trying to keep people in their places, well, it gets a little dull don’t you think?”

“I guess it does,” I said—gently. And I smiled.
“It’s all so strange,” she said, and something a little wild and helpless came into her voice, into her face too. “I went to this woman,” she said, “for counseling. I went to see Father O’Connor too. Because of Pete . . . ” She mused, drifting about. “Actually,” she said, “you ought to be a priest, Alan. You’d be good—I mean hearing confessions and all . . . ”

But I wasn’t really listening. It was then, I believe, that I understood—what you had in mind, what you were proposing, and I was shocked, appalled—I who would try to look mildly bored on Judgement Day. Oh, I admit to a desire that evening to comfort and protect, feeling very clumsy and male, and I did think of my jaunts about the country with Harriet, doing good for dubious reasons. Yes, at times I had been touched. I know that, and I was moved there in the Lakewood. But it should be clear from all that I have written that I am not likely, should I be put on, to prove most royally. I forgive you, though, because I don’t think that in this matter you do know what you do. I must decline—respectfully and firmly. Father, let this cup pass from me.

Yours truly,

Alan Maeghers

*

March 27

For a while, I understand, the north wind cooled the Valley and there were bursts of rain. Now the heat has arrived, circling the building like a gas and seeping through cracks. The wind is dry, soft and breathless. By the afternoon the air is still and heavy, and your pores feel sealed.

April 1

Read over my letter tonight to Father O’C. Self-indulgent. Stupid. I will not send it.

April 5
The hydrangeas have blossomed—lovely explosions of cobalt blue, big as your head. The wild grape vines tumble and trail over the fence. The walnut trees brood.

April 9

What a mistake! Her face answering the door. Oh, it’s you... And bustling about the apartment, wrapping the Imare and the knick-knacks in newspaper and hardly a word. Well, I thought, do I really deserve this? I mean after all!... I shouldn’t have called! I never should have. A silly piece of sentimentality. What was I thinking of?

The furniture was gone. There were dark squares where the pictures had hung. The empty aquarium sat on the floor, glass clouded. She paced back and forth, pulling the few remaining odds and ends from cabinets and drawers—kitchen implements mainly—her chin lifted, eyes glazed.

Then she was wrapping dishes in newspaper and stuffing them in cardboard boxes, bending over, slim and aloof in the tight jeans and the red and white T-shirt, her hair tumbled.

I was dumbfounded. I didn’t expect... I mean just chucking her job and everything else...

“So,” I said, “what are you going to do?”

“Go back to the Bay Area,” she said.

“What about a trip?”

She looked up, frowning. “A trip?”

“Like a cruise,” I said. “You know.”

“Actually,” she said, bending to her tasks, “my credit isn’t all that good just now.”

“I see,” I said and looked around, though I didn’t see at all. Then, inanely, I said, “What about your fish?”

“What about them?”

“Did you give them away?”

She stopped her fussing again, straightened and looked at me. Her chest rose and fell and she sighed. “Yes,” she said shortly. “I gave them away.”
“I don’t,” I began. “I just don’t . . . ”
“You went to San Francisco,” she said, as though it were an accusation.
“Yes.”
“I went to Sacramento.”
“You did?” I said.
“Yes,” she said. “I did.”
I still didn’t understand. I almost said, ‘What’s in Sacramento?’
Then I knew.

April 15

This morning that stuttering whistle-cry: the flicker.

May 16

The first walnuts fall. All over town plumes of bright water spin or dance across the lawns. From a distance they seem bursts of shiny smoke.

May 21

On the north side the glass looks murky. He suffers in the gloom of stony prisons or beneath grumbling thunderheads. Only the white of His robe and the rags about His loins are vivid, though nowhere as bright as the orange EXIT.

June 7

South side: yellows, whites, pinks gleam like neon. Brilliant halos, borders, crosses.

June 16

Seen from below and in perspective, the portholes in the clerestory diminish moving toward the apse. The nearest is a gibbous moon, the next a rugby ball, the farthest a thin curve of yellow light.

June 22
And he cometh upon his disciples . . .

June 23

and findeth them asleep . . .

June 26

This afternoon I drove up into the foothills, to the little pond near the rifle club. A hawk swept down from the hills, wheeling and soaring and gliding in circles. Across the water: sorrowful dove-hoots.

On the way back: meadowlark on a fencepost singing—the brilliant greenish-yellow breast.
A Thing Decided

May 13, 1983

On no account, the old lady says, am I to ask about Stephen. I said I wouldn’t.
(Who Stephen is I have no idea. Possibly the man who hauls away the trash.)

May 22

Since my cottage has neither stove nor refrigerator, Mrs. Ridgeway, the niece, has kindly granted me kitchen privileges in the “Big House.” Each noon now I return from the library to take a light lunch in the sunny dinette—pleasant enough if it weren’t for the hovering old gal determined to blight my meal.

If I am reading she shuffles in, insisting I need more light and fumbling with the floor lamp which goes off altogether. If I have finished a front-page article—the Pope’s trip to South America, say—she recommends that I read about the Pope. And she’s full of trivial information dramatically confided with fierce but unclear meaning. (Most banks close at three, she announced, but hers remains open until four—this delivered with a defiant glare.)

May 23

This afternoon I was walking around the back yard, near the wire fence, when I noticed the posts are pocked and splintered, as though raked by gunfire. Just then the old woman crept up behind me, making me jump.

“Stephen did that.”
“Stephen did?”
“Yes,” she said. “He loved to shoot.”

May 24
Latest lunchtime bulletin: “He took very good care of himself!” (This in a lowered confidential voice.)
“Oh?” I said.
“He was really very trim and very muscular.”
“Really?” (I still in the dark.)
“He was always lifting weights.”
“Who was?”
“Stephen.”
“Oh,” I said. “I see.”

May 25
Today I was given to understand that something remarkable happened about the time Mrs. Barlow went into the hospital. Mrs. B was a lovely lady, I was told, and I received an enthusiastic account of her virtues. (She sounds like a dreadful old bore.) Then, leaning over my shoulder and stage-whispering Aunt Olive said:
“He had a wandering eye!” (She straightened in what-do-you-think-of-that? triumph.)
“He did?”
“Don’t tell her I said so,” the old lady cautioned, “but he was interested in . . . other women!”
“He was?”
“It was a shame. It really was!”

May 26
Returning this afternoon, I found my landlady nailing vines to grape-stakes near my quarters and looking very rustic in jeans and a man’s floppy shirt, tail out. Her dark hair was pulled back in a ponytail, sharpening her profile. She has fine bones and clear skin and curious blue-gray eyes with tiny laugh wrinkles. Taking the nails from her
mouth, she did laugh, telling me in that misleading little girl’s voice that she loves this time of year, before the real heat arrives. When it does come, she warned, it will be brutal.

“So I’ve heard,” I said.
“You don’t know what you’re in for,” she promised.
“I guess not,” I admitted.

Putting down her equipment, she asked—surprise—if I would like a glass of wine. We sat on the redwood deck, sipping and chatting. She’s probably a year or two younger than I but doesn’t look her age, despite the crow’s-feet and a gray streak like paint in her hair. (As always around attractive women, I grew conscious of my own appearance.) She didn’t apologize or give me the old I-must-look-like-a-fright business. Well, she didn’t look like a fright and she knew it.

In her odd tinkly voice she asked how my work was going. I said very well and talked about the college library until I feared I was boring her, which may have been the case.

“My daughter may be staying with me for a while,” she said abruptly.
“Oh?”
“She lives with my ex-husband and his wife up in Dornville.”
“I see,” I said and asked how far that was. Seventy miles, she said, adding that “Gregory,” her youngest, is there too. She hates not having him but his grades are better.
“As my ex loves to point out,” she said.
“I see,” I said. “This is Stephen—your ex-husband?”
“No, no,” she said. “Gilbert.”
“Oh,” I said.

She seemed amused. “Where did you hear of Stephen?” she asked. “From Aunt Olive?”

“Actually,” I said, “I did.”
“What did she say?”
“That he lifted weights.”
“He did,” she told me. “Religiously. He was your predecessor.”
“In the Little House?”
“Mm-hmm.” She smiled.

The fresh paint, new trim and a few wood-shavings had convinced me that I was the first tenant, but evidently things have been remodeled in the post-Stephen era.

May 27

You can’t altogether avoid speaking to the old lady. If I am washing my few dishes she is certain to perk up.

“Somebody at the door!”

“No,” I say. “I just knocked a plate.”

“Oh, I thought somebody was at the door.”

The other day I asked to borrow a pair of sewing scissors. She came alive.

“Would you rather have nail clippers?”

“Sewing scissors will be fine,” I said. “If you have them.”

“Sometimes nail clippers are better.”

Yesterday my head began to throb from the heat, growing daily as prophesized. I asked for an aspirin.

“Would you rather have Tylenol?”

“No,” I said. “Aspirin will be fine.”

“Tylenol’s very good. It doesn’t irritate the stomach.” She paused. “You know,” she said, “they still might have some of his suits.”

“Suits?” I was thoroughly fuddled.

“At the Discovery Shop.”

“Oh?”

“I’m sure they’d fit you,” she said. “You’re about his size. They’re beautiful suits. It was a shame to give them away.”

“Really?”

“You could probably pick them up for a song,” she said, “but, you couldn’t wear them when she’s around!”

May 28
Aunt Olive’s place, Mrs. Ridgeway tells me, was once a farm with a barn, pump
house and chicken coop, and Mrs. R when visiting as a girl used to ride horses in the field
behind. Now, of course, much is gone or hidden by this quiet suburban neighborhood,
but it’s quite delightful: the garden, deck, big yard and the field beyond the ravaged
posts. The main house shields you from the street. My landlady is appealing, sexy,
friendly and younger looking than her actual years.

May 31

A sublime evening! Almost a dream!

Yesterday afternoon Mrs. Ridgeway said she was cooking a leg of lamb, and I
was welcome to join Aunt Olive and her on the deck for dinner. I accepted and took care
to produce a decent Pinot noir.

I wasn’t disappointed. There was a checked tablecloth, a centerpiece of
wildflowers, and citronella candles against the bugs. The evening was cool, the wind
dropped, and the crows pumped toward the river as they do every night. In the gathering
dusk the trees became silhouettes. An owl hooted, and with a squeak and gibber a bat
flitted by like a crazed dark mouth.

Candlelight is magical, isn’t it? A woman’s eyes become deep, dark and liquid,
and shadows mold the face, bringing out the lovely bones. The perfect teeth gleam when
she laughs in a frank exuberant way, head thrown back.

Prawns appeared, then the lamb, with wild rice and puréed spinach, then a salad—
after the entrée. (“French style! I’m very French!”) Then came blackberries and ice
cream and coffee. The old lady picked at the exquisite food, but her niece lowered her
voice and said that Aunt Olive believes a lady shouldn’t be seen eating much. Alone in
the kitchen, she’ll do herself proud.

We talked of the old brick-and-boardwalk days captured in the sepia-toned
photographs. Wine, jasmine and the thickening darkness left me warm and dizzy,
overwhelmed by life’s sad beauty. While the old lady cleared the table, I blurted some
sort of foolishness. My hostess took my hand and smiled and my pulse thumped. Or was
it hers? Or both? I couldn’t tell.

We are “Joanne” and “Harlan” now.
June 1

Today I was eating lunch at the dinette table, steeled against assault. The aunt didn’t arrive, but I discovered on the oilcloth her old-fashioned missal with its soft black covers and chamois-like yellow pages. Latin in red runs down one column, English in black alongside. *Domine, exaudi orationem meum:* O Lord, hear my prayer. There are colored strings to mark your place, and illustrations—everything rendered as quivering tendrils—and the little book was stuffed with mass cards, ordination notices and memorial brochures, one of which seemed to spring forth. The cover shows a maple tree and drifting leaves beneath *Remembering.* Inside, I found the Twenty-third Psalm and:

_In loving Memory of_

_Stephen Rodney Bard_

_Born_

_December 22, 1948_

_Kaiserslauten, Germany_

_Entered Into Rest_

_June 21, 1978_

_Yana City, California_

_Memorial Service_

_Holy Innocents Catholic Church_

_Friday, June 23_

_Service Concludes at the Church_

June 2

I am sitting in the Little House, trying to control my breathing. Outside in full view, in blazing sunlight, a young woman (twenty?) lies on a mattress, wearing a blue “bikini,”—scraps of brilliant cloth at each nipple and the crotch. Her skin is golden, her hair long, silky and so blonde it looks white in the blast of light. Her nose is pert, her
mouth stern, as if tanning is some grim chore. Greased and burning, she seems locked in
a coma—blind, petulant, naked, gorgeous. I have an urge to moan.

This noon as usual I returned. The old woman was bustling about in great
excitement.

“Well!” she cried. “She’s here!”

“Who is?” I asked.

“Debbie!”

I made lunch, eating in the dinette and wondering about this new event.
Finishing, I washed my dishes and went out into the yard, and though the screen door
banged behind me, the young woman lay motionless on her pad, a small white disk
covering each eye. My shoes scraped the flagstones, but the sunbather never stirred. Had
I stumbled upon a corpse?

June 3

We have met, or at least been introduced, Joanne doing the honors. The girl was
dressed (white blouse, apple-green slacks). Her look and voice are polite but vague. I
fail to interest her.

Yet she takes pains, washing and “styling” the long silky hair, anointing the
golden skin, glossing the lips and shadowing the blue-gray eyes (her mother’s). Each day
she creates herself anew, lustrously, as though from some shining sea. Yet for her it is
simply a routine, a nymph’s obligation.

Her voice, I find, is low and murmurous but not edged with sex, and deeper than I
first realized. Isn’t there, I wonder, something enormously erotic yet bitterly chaste about
American female beauty?

June 6

This noon, when both mother and daughter were out and Aunt Olive no longer on
the horizon, I, on some dubious impulse, wandered to the Big House rear bedroom. The
impression is of backstage chaos: a stereo and headphones, a clock-radio faintly playing,
posters of epicene rock stars, clothes strewn about, paperback romances, dresser drawers
hanging open festooned with filmy garments, a litter of uncapped tubes and bottles . . .

Suddenly, I heard the old woman on the telephone ("Yes, dear . . . I will, dear"), and I slipped quickly back to the kitchen, just before Aunt Olive appeared.

"Don’t let me forget to tell her Andrea Wilkinson called," she commanded and I said that I wouldn’t.

This evening I took a glass of Chardonnay with Joanne, hoping that Debbie would appear, or that we might talk about her. I wanted her name on my tongue. Instead, we got the aunt sweeping importantly forward.

"Joanne," she said, “Angela Wilkinson called.”

“Andrea,” I corrected.

“Oh no! Angela Wilkinson!”

“Who’s Andrea Wilkinson?” Joanne asked.


“What woman?”

“You know. The one you took the class with.”

“You mean,” Joanne asked darkly, “Margaret Williams?”

“That’s it!” the aunt cried. “Margaret Williams! *She* called.”

“‘Angela Wilkinson,’” Joanne muttered.

June 7

Is the room a shrine? Or a witch’s cellar? Brushes, powders, mirrors, razors, pencils, tweezers and instruments of unclear function. And the mysterious potions with exotic names: Bain de Soleil, Lait Bronzant Hydraiant, Swedish Botanical Shampoo, China Rain Lotion . . . Sometimes I touch various objects, as if to ascertain their reality: the headphones, a watch, a key, an artificial rose, a roll of film, a shoelace, a bra.

Carefully, I move over stereo tapes and cases, underfoot like plastic rubble.

June 8

I have grown reckless, courting disaster. Today I failed to hear the old woman’s methodical approach. Suddenly, she was there, her mouth open in amazement. I tried to recover.
“Oh!” I said in alarm. “I was just looking for . . . an aspirin!”

Her astonished stare lost its keenness. “Tylenol’s better,” she said. “It doesn’t irritate the stomach.”

Will she tell Joanne? She loves announcing things. But a man in search of an aspirin is innocent enough. Isn’t he?

June 10

A breakthrough! Something at last. At least I think it’s progress, though I may be wrong.

This noon I was eating lunch when Debbie entered the dinette, carrying a bowl of tomato soup. The blonde hair was pulled back and fastened in her mother’s gardening style. The costume was both severe and raffish: plain white blouse and tight jeans that appear to have been doused with Clorox. She sat primly, eyes lowered, blowing on the hot liquid, and the budlike mouth nearly made me moan. Then she began spooning the stuff into those perfect lips, in a slow fastidious drill. I was struck again by the paradox: demure yet sensual, ripe yet austere.

“Are you going back to the library?” she asked.

“Probably,” I said. “I’m not sure.”

“Are you writing a book or something?”

“Well,” I said, “I may try. I haven’t made up my mind.” I sounded obtuse, I know, knew it then in fact and plunged on. “I like these old towns,” I said. “I’m not sure why. I think there’s something to be said about them, but I don’t know what. I guess that’s what I’m hoping to find out.”

She nodded. I am impressed by her economy of speech and movement. Bombs may have exploded in her room, but everything else about her is streamlined and classic. Even the bikini is a triumph of restraint, if you think about it.

Well, just then (I’ve grown to expect it) Aunt Olive labored in, hands joined before her in a liturgical pose. Drawing herself up, she frowned at Debbie.

“Now then,” she snapped. “I’ll just tell you: you must pick up the bathmat when you’ve finished your shower. You must!”
Eyes lowered beneath the scowl, the girl continued to spoon her soup. “All right,” she said at last. The tone was neither snotty nor abject but deliciously cool. I marveled.

When the aunt had shuffled off, Debbie, without looking up, asked, “Do you take pictures?”

“I do,” I said. “I’ve got some of the old courthouses and post offices around here. They’re amazing.”

“There’s a big courthouse in Dornville,” she said between sips. “It’s pretty fancy.”

“I know,” I said. “I’ve seen pictures. I hope—”

“Well!” Aunt Olive declared coming back. “It seems that Missus Schafer down the street has all these clippings and branches out in front of her house, and the trash people won’t pick them up. It’s really awful! No, it is!”

She hadn’t heard us speaking. How alike she and the girl are—lost in remote galaxies where occasionally weak signals arrive.

June 11

I am encouraged. We exchange smiles, have become almost cordial. Joanne seems not to care. I obviously am no threat, not that I mean to become such. Still, I want to know all about her. I admit it.

We were sitting on the deck today, Joanne and I, savoring the Sauvignon blanc I have stashed in the refrigerator. She was wearing the floppy gardening outfit, hair tied back. She asked about my work, then said maybe it wasn’t always good to try and dig up the past.

“I don’t know,” she offered, smiling, “if I’d want mine dug up. Would you?”

“Would I want your past dug up?”

“No.” She laughed. “Would you want your past dug up?”

“Oh no,” I said. “I wouldn’t.”

“Do you have a lot of secrets, Harlan?”

“Some I guess,” I conceded, seeing that the talk was going where she wished.

“I just wondered,” she said. “Actually, I don’t know much about you. Do you
realize that?”

“Well,” I said, “there probably isn’t much to know.”

“I doubt that,” she said.

“You see,” I said glibly, “I grew up mainly in Europe, so I’m doing everything backwards. Lots of people go there looking for their so-called ‘roots,’ but I came here.”

She considered. “It’s none of my business,” she said, “but how to you live?”

“Frugally.”

“No, I mean—”

“I know,” I said chuckling. “I do a little teaching from time to time. And I’ve had one or two grants, and for a while there was a small inheritance. I’m afraid I’m a confirmed dilettante. That’s probably why I’m so fascinated by permanence—because I can’t stay put.”


“Yes,” I said. “Well, maybe. But sometimes people miss things. They think they’re being realistic, but they’re just being unimaginative. You know,” I blundered on, “there’s a lot of poetry here.”

“Where?”

“In this town,” I said, “this house, this yard.” (I suppose I was thinking of the glistening sunbather, motionless as the dead.)

“There’s a lot of lying,” Joanne said. “That’s what there is. You can call it poetry if you want.” Suddenly, she stood, the man’s old shirt loose about her, and smiling again, she approached, stopped, bent and kissed my high bare forehead—daintily, as you might kiss a child.

June 12

Where did I get that nonsense about Europe and grants and inheritance? It’s appalling what comes out of my mouth at times.

June 13

The irony is patent. My curiosity has been aroused, but so has Joanne’s. If I attack I must also defend.
June 14

It’s amazing how one misses the obvious, taking for “normal” what is extraordinary and incredible. Only consider: this girl, beautiful as a starlet, lacks male attention (unless you count my fumbling worship). True, she has only arrived, but she has lived here previously and must know people. Indeed, she does gossip on the telephone, but no swains come or call. Joanne too lacks squires, and though the old lady has outlived much of her generation, shouldn’t she know more people after so many years? The house is a sort of nunnery. But what are they thinking of me? Who is this figure who lives so quietly and makes so little contact? (Except for young Tolliver I have met no one really, outside of this place.)

June 15

I was right. Today, stimulated by wine and curiosity, Joanne began to probe on the redwood deck. Have I, she wanted to know, ever been married?

“No,” I said and smiled. “Too big a coward.”

“Were you ever engaged?”

“Not formally,” I said. “There were one or two understandings—or misunderstandings—but never a proper synchronization of moods. When A was willing, B wasn’t, and when B was, A wasn’t. That kind of thing.”

“But you were willing?” she pursued.

“Oh very at times,” I said. “Fortunately for all, my enthusiasm wasn’t reciprocated.”

“Maybe,” she said, smiling over her glass, “you only fell in love with women who wouldn’t marry you?”

“That’s occurred to me,” I said.

“Well,” she said, “you’ve probably avoided a lot of heartbreak.”

“I’m sure I’ve avoided a lot of things,” I told her, “but not necessarily things I wanted to avoid.”

“Crotchety old bachelor?” she said. “You just haven’t met the right person.”

“I’d rather meet the wrong person,” I said. “It sounds like more fun.”
“I didn’t know you were after fun,” she teased.
“I don’t object to a little.”
“You can probably find it,” she told me. “You’re a man.” This isn’t a great town for single women—in my opinion.”
I shrugged and smiled. “That was before,” I said.
“Before what?”
“Why,” I said, “before I came.”
Clowning, mocking myself, I had become almost vivacious (for me), yet I was keeping her at bay, which comes as a surprise. Is this what I want?

June 16
A new development. At least I think it’s such, and astounding, like others.
I have been walking to and from the college library in the mornings, returning after lunch by car. The heat continues to grow, and you inhale dust, tar, oil and exhaust. Still, clomping along as I do, I seem to sense the old invisible town swallowing me up, that eternal village where the pace is glacier slow and the talk forever of seed, crops and weather. But by the time I reach Hemlock Street, my back has begun to ache, and the hot soiled air presses upon me like a giant hand. I’ve thought of abandoning my hikes. Today I was glad that I haven’t.
Crossing Yana Creek (a weary trickle now), I saw up ahead a moving form. How well I know that slim back’s curve, the shoulders’ faint hunch, the head-up robotic walk! On she glided, as though towed.
I was wild to catch up but dared not arrive like some panting shambling dog. Then to my surprise she turned into an old-fashioned soda fountain, somebody’s ill advised attempt to revive the ‘fifties, which have come to seem quaint and innocent.
I hurried along. The creamery squats on a small triangular block and was probably once a drive-in restaurant and before that a gas station. Presently it’s a round building painted hospital white, with a low overhanging roof like a hat brim—all in all, a whimsical structure from Oz.
I entered, catching my wind and pretending not to see the divine one slouched in a booth. Perching on a counter stool, I made a show of looking about, taking in the ceiling
fans, fluorescent tubes and the Venetian blinds slanted nearly shut. Drumming the Formica, I sniffed cream, syrup and Lysol, blinked at chromium juke box selectors and affected to study the posters celebrating Elvis, Marilyn, James Dean and the fat sausage cars on whitewall tires, the grilles like orthodontic braces. But I could see her, the cloudy light glazing her hair. In the belted, sleeveless, one-piece thing—royal blue with white piping—she looked vaguely nautical.

Well, our glances met, of course. I faked surprise, slid from the stool and approached. She smiled: a flash of pinkish gum and brilliant teeth.

Would she mind if I joined her? Uh-uh, she said. That would be “neat.” So I slipped into the booth, grinning affably and drunk already on the bare shoulders, straw-colored hair and the long glorious legs crossed beneath the table. Then, under Dean’s tragic pout, we began to chat—really!

June 19

There are secrets to be uncovered, and with them, I believe, may be found the key to unlocking the Sleeping Beauty of Hemlock Street.

June 20

A fresh and I think promising approach: This noon while eating lunch and considering Aunt Olive wandering pointlessly about in her meditative way, I was inspired. Bluntly, without preface or explanation (her technique), I broached my subject.

“How did he die?”

She stopped and turned, hands folded before her, eyes fixed solemnly on the wall. “It was a tragedy,” she told me. “It really was.”

“Oh?”

“You mustn’t bring it up when she’s here.”

“No,” I said.

She turned again and drifted off, and I supposed that I would get nothing more, but suddenly she stopped and revolved in her slow, stagy fashion. “It was terrible!” she threw out. “No, it really was!”
That announcement told me little, but I see my path. The thing to remember is that for Aunt Olive all conversations are one.

June 21

I was right. Indeed, I didn’t have to say a word. Today at lunch, as though twenty-four hours hadn’t intervened, she said abruptly:

“I blame myself.”

“You do?”

“It was my fault.”

“It was?”

“I’m supposed to take my medicine,” she said, “but I forgot.”

“Really?”

“I forgot my pills,” Aunt Olive said, “and Joanne got mad. She gets upset with me. She’s very impatient. When you get old you don’t remember things so well. You just don’t!”

“No,” I said.

She settled herself, hands crossed before her. “It seems they have to thin my blood,” she explained. “My blood’s too thick.” She glared as if I might deny it. “But if they thin it too much,” she continued, “I could faint.”

“Right.”

“For a long time I went to Doctor Robinson,” she said. “His son’s a doctor now. He’s taken over the practice. I liked old Doctor Robinson. Well, Doctor Robinson the Son had me on this medication, but you know something?” Her voice became low and confidential. “He overprescribes! They don’t want to take a lot of time, so they just write out a prescription and get rid of you!” She waved her hand in disgust. “Well,” she said, “it seems I was supposed to take these pills . . .” Then she led me on a detailed excursion of her ailments and treatment, I nodding and looking attentive, throwing in “Yes” and “I see” and “Oh really?” when it seemed a good idea.

“Oh,” she concluded, “I should have remembered. I blame myself! I do!”

June 22
Though willing to wait, I maintain my second front. Each afternoon I stop at the soda fountain, and there she is, in the same booth, as if she never left. She appears to enjoy our talk, but I have had little luck bringing her round.

June 23

Progress at last! Or is it? I’m not sure, but I believe I have gone forward.

We were in the soda place today, eating sugary globs of “Rainbow Delight.” I grew irritable, not at her I think, but at matters in general. Catching sight of a poster, I said, “It wasn’t like that.”

“Like what?” she asked, naturally enough.

“The way it was,” I said, waving toward the wall. “Elvis and Marilyn and all that. A lot of people didn’t care. Later on somebody comes along and talks about the ‘significance,’ but that just tells you about the people doing the talking.” Then I shut up, afraid I had begun to lecture.

“I know,” she said, which amazed me. “Everybody gets things wrong.”

I was stunned. I leaned toward her. “What things?” I asked (a little hoarsely).

“What things do people get wrong?”

“Oh—” she said, wrinkling up her lovely face, “just everything.”


“Like,” she said with a sigh, “the way it was that summer.”

“That summer?”

“Uh-huh.”

“The summer of ‘seventy-eight?”

“Uh-huh.”

I swallowed. “When Stephen died?”

She looked at the Formica and nodded. I sat back, watching her carefully. Then I said it:

“How did he die?”

“He just did,” she said.

“I know that.”
She shrugged and looked at the Venetian blinds. “You can read about it,” she said, “if you want.”

I was dumbfounded. I think my mouth actually fell open. “Read about it?” I said. “Uh-huh.” She continued to look away, retreating to Mars or Neptune or Pluto, wherever she lives so much of the time.

June 27

I have come to realize that I inhabit a haunted house—two haunted houses, actually. You don’t think of such places that way, so sunny and tastefully arranged. Ghosts among the Tylenol and hair curlers? But what are ghosts if not memories and obsessions, the past sneaking into the present? Don’t some buildings cry out? And those riddled fence posts—are they a kind of stigmata, if you choose to look at it in a certain way? (Which I do.)

June 28

Suddenly, I’m forestalled. The girl evidently regrets opening up. Around the house and yard she has taken to wearing flimsy earphones with a wire running between her small breasts to a plastic box hooked to her shorts or skirt or jeans. Every so often the contraption clicks and clucks, and she snatches out a cartridge and slaps a new one in. Then comes an electronic chuckling while she turns wheels and slides buttons, always with a delighted pink-gummed smile but quickly, as though some precious current might fail. And if I try to speak, she lifts a finger, commanding silence.

But I am already hushed, can hardly talk while she is rigged and wired, plugged into some universal rock and roll pulse—which seems to be the idea. She looks, I have decided, more than ever as if she has arrived from outer space. (Worse, she has stopped showing up at the creamery.)

June 29

This afternoon we were both in the dinette when she was called to the phone and set her equipment on the table. Fitting the pads over my own ears, I fooled with the wheels and buttons. Nothing! It was all a ruse. There was no tape at all!
June 30

Suddenly, I understand! Epiphany!

She said I could “read” about it. But where? But of course! Isn’t research my calling? Don’t I pass each day those steel drawers stuffed with microfilm? Only, it’s Thursday evening, and the library is closed for the week, which means four more days of earphones and vacant smiles and Aunt Olive dribbling out cryptic hints. (Monday is of course a holiday.)

I am anxious but wary. Putting on knowledge, I will lose something of value, so understanding isn’t pure gain. My appeal for these three women is precisely my ignorance.

July 1

I meddle; therefore, I am.

July 3

“Whatever you do,” the old lady warned me, “don’t ask.” I said that I wouldn’t. But I do ask, have been asking all along, can’t stop if I tried.

July 5

I understand! I see it all! My God! Oh, my God!

The moody silences, the cool endurance, that air of serving a sentence. Of course! Now it all makes sense.

This morning as soon as the library opened I was there, went promptly to the second floor and the long steel cases, pulled out the drawer, took the cardboard box stamped June 15—30, 1978 and made for the row of hooded machines. There I sat, as I have so often, threading the film over the glass rollers and through the guides, switching on the blinding light and turning the knob. Headlines and crises hurtle by with a faint roar. You flinch and blink and snap the rush of print to a banging stop. Then you start to read . . .

Somehow the detachment and formality make it all the more incredible.
Q. . . Please state your name.
A. Henry A. Cooper

Q. What is your occupation?
A. Doctor of Medicine.

Q. Did you perform an autopsy or post-mortem examination on Stephen Rodney Bard?
A. I did . . .

It’s all there: transcript excerpts, front page shock, courtroom drama, lurid details. I emerged into the sunshine a different man, stunned, practically reeling. But I see now that I was wrong when I wrote that I understand everything. There are matters that confuse me. And specifics. Is the “Miles Tolliver” so frequently mentioned related to Charley Tolliver, whom I see almost every day? Not necessarily, but in a town this small you would think so. Wouldn’t you?

June 6

This child! This lovely creature! But how to reach her? I can hardly begin with small talk.

July 7

“She gets very huffy,” the old lady announced today. The “she” was Debbie. I am learning Olivespeak, an abrupt plunge into an unspecified subject, pronouns splashing. Previously, I have noticed the old woman’s hardness and occasional cruelty toward the girl, but if Joanne criticizes her daughter the aunt grows protective. There is a shifting pattern of alliances and enmities, and nobody stays on anybody’s side for long.

July 8

Disaster! I can hardly bear to record it. And yet . . . I don’t know.

Today, early, employing a ruse of my own, with a loud slamming of the front door, I pretended to leave the Big House. Then I circled back to my quarters and waited until the girl appeared in the kitchen. Then I approached, ponderously cheerful.

“Good morning!”
She gave a cry, almost a whimper, and nearly dropped the bowl of cereal. Lacking her electronic apparatus, she was defenseless, unless you count her beauty (always formidable).

We faced each other across the dinette table, I as ruthlessly bright as the lemony sunlight streaming through the gauzy curtains.

“You know,” I said, “I took your advice.” I paused, then reached across the table and seized her wrist. Her mouth came open; her eyes flared. “I went to the library,” I said. “I read about it.”

She stared at me in a choked baleful way.

“I understand,” I said soothingly. “It must have been a terrible ordeal.”

She glared, chin down like a boxer.

Gently, I said, “I’d like to talk to you.”

“What about?” She looked at her wrist, which I released, sitting back in the creaking chair.

“I just think,” I said, “it would be good for you. And for me too.” I smiled.

“You need someone who isn’t family.”

“I did that,” she said sullenly. “Already.”

“I don’t mean counseling,” I said. “That’s no good. No, I mean it might be good for you to go over in detail what happened, so you can put it behind you.”

“I already have,” she told me, with an edge in her voice, something I haven’t heard before.

“Put it behind you?” I said. “I don’t think so. I think it’s what’s making you unhappy.”

“I’m not unhappy!” she snapped. Belligerently childish, she simmered, lip out. I was touched.

“I think you are,” I said, bestowing my sad smile.

Then it happened. She shot to her feet, sending the chair crashing over. “You’re unhappy!” she hurled at me. “You’re pathetic! Everybody thinks so!” Her face was livid and contorted. Suddenly, the room began to reel.

“Do they?” I asked, holding my melancholy smile, though I was pierced and shaken, I admit, trembling like the dinette.
She flung out and rushed away. I swallowed and felt sick, and now, half an hour afterwards, I am still trembling. Yet I don’t know. It may be a beginning after all.

July 9

She has resumed her stoical tanning—motionless, entranced, silently frying.

From the Little House, the den of my lust, I peer at the oiled bronze skin and those bits of vinyl on her buttons and cleft. Now the exhibition does seem lascivious and punishing.

_There!_ she seems to be saying. _Serves you right!_

Possibly it does.

*July 10, 1983*

_Dear Debbie,_

_I’m very sorry that I upset you. I didn’t mean to. That was not my intention at all._

_For a long time now I have sensed your suffering, extraordinary in someone so young and beautiful. I can’t help feeling that you need to talk, and when you suggested that I read about “it,” I believed you were inviting me to share your distress—which flattered me greatly._

_Believe me, Debbie, I know better than you can imagine how a single ghastly event can maim one’s life. Indeed, it is just because there is no one to whom I can speak freely that I sometimes think of talking to you, for I feel that you hold some curative power, whether you know it or not, like a figure in fairytale. I am convinced, in fact, that you were intended to be my healer and I yours, for one thing is certain: we have both been wounded. We are both in pain!_

*July 11*

_Left my letter in an envelope (sealed) on her dressing table—offering upon an altar._

*July 12*
This afternoon as Joanne and I took our wine on the deck, I said, trying not to make my voice portentous: “Joanne?” And when she responded: “I know.”

“You know what?” she asked, irritably.

“I know all about it,” I said softly. “I know what happened five years ago.”

“Do you?” She seemed unimpressed and reluctant to talk. I suppose I can’t blame her.

“Has she had any counseling?” (I knew that she has).

“Yes.”

I waited but nothing more came. “She seems so remote,” I said at last.

“She’s always been like that,” Joanne said shortly. “It’s been five years. You didn’t know her before.”

“It must have been terrible for you,” I suggested.

“Yes,” she said coldly. “It was.”

July 13

Rebuffed by the mother, I tried the great-aunt. “She doesn’t speak of it, does she?” I said today. This is the right approach I have decided. Jump right in, like the old girl herself. It seems to work. Ironic, though. She will catch the most obscure allusion, but ask if the mail has come or if it’s going to rain, and she will fail to comprehend.

“We don’t talk about it,” she said heavily. “It’s better that way.”

“Yes,” I said. “I can see that it is.”

She turned and faced me, drawing herself up, as though before an audience. “You see,” she began, “there was such a big to-do and all. You’ve never seen anything like it. You can’t imagine.”

“I guess not,” I said.

“I mean,” she said, “there were people from the newspapers and television. It was awful!” She made the shoving motion—pushing away something repulsive. “Well!” she said eagerly. “Her father took her home. He wouldn’t let anyone see her. And Joanne went to the Bay Area. There was all this talk, you see.”

“There always is,” I said to encourage her. “People love to gossip.”
“Oh, it was terrible!” Aunt Olive cried. “The things people were saying! You wouldn’t believe it! No, you wouldn’t!”

She glared, daring me to try.

July 14

Stopped at LeGrand’s tonight. The unpleasant Mr. Davis was on his stool, washed in by some alcoholic surf and wearing the same rumpled seersucker suit and cockeyed bowtie. The adjoining stool wasn’t taken, so I hoisted myself aboard. We exchanged greetings. I noticed his empty glass and asked would he have another. He said a bird never flew on one wing. I signaled the bartender and asked Davis about the practice of law in Yana City. He began a rambling discourse, which I didn’t entirely follow, and when I judged the moment appropriate, I asked if he knew a Miles Tolliver. He nodded vigorously and laughed.

“Old Miles!” he said. “Damn good lawyer. Did some amazing stuff.”

“Such as?” I asked.

“Huh?”

The drinks arrived, two gold and silver beaded glasses—my overchilled Chardonnay and the multi-winged Davis’s martini. I reached for my wallet while my guest fumbled half-heartedly for his.

“So Tolliver did some amazing things?” I prodded.

Davis passed a hand over his curly dark hair. “You might say that,” he allowed. “You might . . . say that.”

Inching the man along is a bore. Then he stroked the sly beefy face, as if to smear it. “Really surprised me,” he said. “I mean Miles is such a cutie.” He picked up his glass and sipped.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Huh?”

“What happened?” I said again. “That night—the night in ‘seventy-eight?”

Davis swallowed. “Hell, man,” he said. “I don’t know.”

“Yes, you do,” I said.

“Why should I tell you?”
“Why not?”
He laughed and cocked his head. “Good point,” he said.
I would have willingly grabbed the sodden fool and shaken him, but our voices had risen and heads turned.

July 15
This from my research:
Q. . . . Please state your name.
   A. John R. Everett.
Q. What is your occupation?
   A. Police Lieutenant, Yana City.
Q. On the night of June 21, 1978 did you take a statement from Miss Deborah Ridgeway?
   A. Affirmative.
Q. Where was this statement given?
   A. It was rendered to me by the subject in the sheriff’s station on Fair Oaks Road.

And this:
Q. . . . And every time you talked to her, Lieutenant, she told you the same story?
   A. Affirmative. She did.

And:
Q. . . . Please answer the question asked, if you can, Mrs. Ridgeway.
   A. I’m sorry.
Q. All I want is for you to describe your emotions and reactions when you discovered he was there.
   A. Well, naturally, I was surprised. I mean I didn’t expect it, and then he had been drinking . . .

July 17
This morning Charley arrived in Special Collections—tall, lanky, appealingly boyish and, as always, good-natured. I asked if he were related to Miles Tolliver, the attorney.

“Brother,” he said. “Miles is twelve years older. I was kind of an afterthought.”

He laughed. “Why?” he said. “Where’d you hear about Miles?”

“Well,” I said, “you see—”

“You heard about the trouble at Joanne’s?” he asked. “Five years ago?”

“I did,” I said. “I read about it too.”

He frowned. “Read about it?”

“The old newspapers,” I said.

“Oh,” he said. “The Yana Courier. And that’s where you heard about Miles?”

“Yes,” I said, “but I don’t understand—”

“He helped with her divorce settlement,” Charley said. “And she used to call whenever she had a problem. So when it happened—”

“I see,” I said. “It’s just that, well, the girl is here now, Debbie. It explains a lot, I guess, about her.”

“I guess so.” Charley shook his head. “It was terrible,” he said. “It affected Miles pretty badly, believe me. I mean he’s divorced too, you know, no kids, and well, anyway—”

“You mean,” I suggested, “Joanne was a little more than a client?”

Charley shrugged. “I think he would have liked her to be a little more,” he said, “but I don’t think she ever was.”

“Do you see your brother a lot?” I asked.

“Not a lot,” he said. “I’m just here for a few weeks. I’m doing a feature on the Valley, working in the old stomping grounds. We don’t see Joanne either. I didn’t know Debbie was around. I don’t think she’s been back since it happened, back to stay I mean. Her father grabbed her and hustled her off to Dornville.” He thought for a moment. “I guess,” he said, “people just went their separate ways.”

“Which makes sense,” I said.

But does it? That’s what I wonder.
July 18

This morning I was sitting in the dinette when the telephone rang—again and again and again. At last I picked up the receiver, but before I could put it to my ear I heard an electronic chortle and Joanne.

“Yes?”

“Who the hell,” a man’s gravelly voice asked, “is Harlan Fort?”

“My tenant. Why?”

“Well—”

“He rents the Little House. Seems to be a confirmed bachelor.”

“Which makes you wonder.”

“Not the way he looks at Debbie,” she said. “Actually, he’s nice. A little sad and nosy but nice.”

“Typical psychopath. Know him anywhere.”

“Oh, Miles! The thing is, he wrote Debbie this godawful sappy letter. Wants to be her soulmate. Confess his sins or something.”

“I can imagine the penance he’s hoping for. She let you read it?”

“She left it on her vanity. I assume I was to read it. She was outside, catching her ‘rays.’ I said I thought maybe I should speak to him. She said, ‘I can handle it, Mom.’ I asked if she was encouraging him. She said, ‘Why should I encourage him?’ I told her I didn’t know, but I didn’t think he needed much.”

“I see.” The voice thickened. “So how’ve you been otherwise?”

“Good. Pretty good.”

“And Aunt Olive?”

“She’s amazing.”

“And Debbie’s here for the summer?”

“Most of it.”

“What’s the news from the north country?”

“Not much.”

“Gil still scheming away?”

“Probably.”
The man cleared his throat, but his voice stayed husky. “Well,” he said, “it’s been good talking to you.”

“Good talking to you too.” Her voice too seemed to change.

July 19

Today in the library Charley asked, to my amazement if I would like to meet his brother. If I really wanted to know what happened, he (Charley) could arrange it. There wouldn’t be a fee or anything.

Astonished, I said all right.

July 20

Miles Tolleriver’s office is in the old Municipal Building on the town square. He’s alone. He was with a firm, the oldest in town, Charley says, but he got mad and resigned in a huff, which wasn’t smart and pretty much torpedoed his marriage, which was pretty shaky anyway. He probably regrets it now, Charley says, but he’s still mad.

The office is full of old dark wood and ancient law books, though Charley maintains that Tolleriver does most of his research in the college library. There’s a musty smell—age, I think—but the man himself isn’t exactly Victorian.

The brothers don’t look much alike. There’s a resemblance, but you have to search for it. Charley’s tall and slim, with a narrow, thoughtful face and a winning youthfulness. The older Tolleriver is a burly man, dark-eyed and craggy-faced with a swoop of brown hair. He speaks in a salty growl, chopping and scraping the English language. Well, but what impression did I make? A shapeless, heavy-browed lout in dark slacks and a white dress shirt, I entered winded from the stairs, hardly a dashing figure.

“Well!” he began, his mouth working as if he savored a chaw. “I hope I can make this worth your while. To tell the truth, I’m not too sure what you’re after. Charley tried to explain, but I didn’t really follow. That’s often the case when Charley explains something.”

He chuckled, I forced a laugh, and Charley grinned in his boyish way. Then Tolleriver sat up, turning solemn.
“You understand the situation—what happened?” He frowned.

“Well,” I said, “as I get it—from the newspaper—this Bard person was abusing Mrs. Ridgeway—” I stopped. “Were they lovers?” I asked.

Tolliver lifted and dropped his broad shoulders and opened his thick hands.

“Well,” he said, “for a while Bard was living in the Little House.”

“Where I am now?”

“Right.”

“But actually,” Charley said, “when Debbie came to spend the summer, Joanne made him move out.”

“Oh,” I said.

“But,” Tolliver explained, “he still kept some of his guns and reloading junk there.”

“In the Little House?”

“Yeah.”

“So he was around?”

“Right.”

“So,” I pursued, “on this night he was manhandling Missus Ridgeway—Joanne—and Debbie got a gun and—”

“Exactly.” Tolliver winced. “Now see,” he said, “in a thing like this, there’s an inquest and the coroner’s jury brings in a verdict. Then there’s a closed hearing in Juvie—Juvenile Court—and the judge makes a decision. But, see, it could’ve gone to trial. Debbie could’ve been bound over to Superior Court, but that didn’t happen.”

He paused, sizing me up. “I’ll spare you the gory part,” he said. “The only thing is, see, this was a Magnum, which shoots a fast bullet, ricochets a lot—why police don’t use it. Well, the poor bastard gets drilled, and the slug goes right through the wall. See, it’s the size of the exit wound that determines the damage, how much tissue’s messed up. In this case a lot. Believe me!”

He was watching me carefully. “Now,” he said, “you wanted to know about the legal stuff?”

“Yes,” I said. “I did.”
“In California,” he began, “justifiable homicide can include defense of a third person—wife, husband, parent, child, servant, whoever.”

“I see,” I said.

“The test is apparent necessity. You have to believe on reasonable grounds that such— a defense is necessary and the threatened act is unlawful. See, you can defend yourself.”

“Right,” I said.

“But it isn’t enough to be scared,” he cautioned, holding up a warning finger. “It has to be reasonable fear, and the apparent peril has to be great and imminent.” He dropped his hand and lowered his voice. “Where you’ve got fear of great bodily harm,” he continued, “and an intruder—somebody not a family member entering forcibly and unlawfully—there’s a presumption that force within the residence is reasonable.”

I nodded. “I understand.”

Tolliver nodded too. “Well anyway,” he said, “that’s how the jury saw it. The judge sent her off to her father.” Tolliver threw up his palms and let them fall, sinking back in his chair and grinning crookedly. “That’s it!” he said. “That’s all she wrote. There ain’t no more!”

I gave another nod. “What I did on my summer vacation.”

“Huh?” Then he caught on and laughed. “Yeah,” he said, “I guess you could put it that way.”

July 21

This afternoon at Bolo’s, the college beer joint, Charley filled me in—background stuff, about Joanne and Miles and Stephen Bard.

At first, Charley says, Joanne was only a voice on the telephone asking if Mr. Tolliver could look at her settlement, and Charley, who was helping his brother, said that Mr. Tolliver didn’t do divorce any more (too depressing after his own blown-out marriage), and the voice said she already was divorced. It was her papers she wanted him to see. Then Charley covered the mouthpiece and consulted Miles, who growled that he guessed he could review “the goddamn stuff,” and Charley uncovered and said that Mr. Tolliver would be delighted.
And he was, it turned out, when she appeared in high heels, stockings, a black
knit dress, pearls and matching earrings. The dark hair was pulled back to accent the
sharp-boned features. Miles’ voice dropped half an octave, Charley says, and his brother
adjusted his tie and cleared his throat.

What Joanne had, they found, was “an integrated property settlement merged in a
judgment,” which couldn’t be modified unless the parties had previously agreed that it
could, which they hadn’t.

Could her ex be sent to jail? No, because that would be sanctioning imprisonment
for debt, but there was a gray area regarding modification of child support. Ridgeway’s
lawyer had claimed the obligations were contractual and negotiated, not marital or
imposed by law, so they couldn’t be enforced by contempt. Tolliver claimed that the
Civil Code (as amended) allowed the court to enforce a support order by execution.

“Actually,” Charley told me, “Ridgeway was lucky Larry Davis had tried the
damn thing without much discovery or adverse party interrogatories. Well, Miles said he
was prepared to do what Davis hadn’t, no matter how many goddamn oral exams and
subpoenas it took.”

“So,” I asked, wanting to speed things up, “her husband—”

“Her husband,” Charley said, “who’s a trial lawyer himself—and a bear—signed
a separate agreement upping the ante. That’s what happened.”

And according to Charley, Miles and Joanne began meeting for drinks at
Dorado’s.

There is more, of course, much more, and from Charley I received a good deal of
background information. Indeed, I feel I understand the life and hard times—and they
have indeed been hard—of Joanne Ridgeway. Tempting to see it all as allegory: the
‘fifties sliding into the ‘sixties and chaos come again.

Joanne, it turns out, was a Berkeley girl, at the University when Tolliver was
there, back in the days of Dutch collars, angora sweaters, long hobbling skirts, powdered
white shoes and scarlet lipstick. (Gil Ridgeway I see as tall and tightjawed, with polished
loafers, white socks, starched khaki’s and Pendleton shirts.)

Evidently, the couple was young, ambitious and intense and believed they could
transcend limits established for ordinary people. But not all limits, as I get it, because all
at once she found herself whisked to a Reno “chapel” where a justice united them, assisted by his bathrobed wife, who presented the bride with a plastic bag of casino tickets and douche powder. Then back in California “Gil,” as though pulling a rabbit from a hat, enlightened the two astonished families, and Joanne tried to bubble radiantly—until her mother asked if she were pregnant and she burst into tears.

So Gil studied law at Boalt Hall, and in November Arnold Ridgeway entered the world, big, squalling and fretful, like his cranky father. Then, before Joanne could believe it, Gil had passed the bar, Arnie was in kindergarten, and they were moving to the Ridgeway family seat in Dornville with its red clay, sticky pines, blazing summers and furious winter rains. Whereupon she was pregnant again.

Debbie, born just before the Cuban missile crisis, was colicky and whiny but beautiful (created for Gil’s Nikon) and grew like her father: tall, straight, humorless and self-absorbed. The years rushed by, and the country tore itself apart over the war it could neither win nor abandon. Arnie was in fourth grade now, Debbie starting kindergarten. Joanne was twenty-seven, haggard, overweight and pregnant again.

Gregory was born in the spring and grew to be tall like his father, blond like his sister, and shy, moody and unself-confident like neither. Joanne put it down to the shouting and arguments and raucous parties Gil insisted on throwing from some unstated but royal obligation. She hoped for a reprieve and six years later it came, though not as she had wanted.

Arnie was a high school sophomore. Debbie was in fifth grade. Gregory was timidly emerging from kindergarten. Joanne was urged to face facts: the marriage wasn’t “working,” meaning Gil was involved with somebody and wanted a divorce, and the more Joanne carried on, the more she confirmed the Ridgeway clan’s opinion that she was “unstable.” And she did lose her temper at times, Charley says, shouting and throwing things, but who wouldn’t? Anyway, she told Tolliver, if you wanted a world class tantrum with upended furniture, smashed crockery and foul language at full throat, you should apply to the master of the house, who on a good day really could tear a passion to tatters.

She couldn’t win. That was the thing. Her husband was armed and supported by the whole gang, “as murderous a bunch of uncharitable, backbiting, redneck bastards as
you could hope to find in the whole goddamn Valley!” as she sweetly put it. And Ridgeway did have other interests—in particular, a young, blonde, ex-cheerleader real estate lady who didn’t make “scenes” and approved adorable Gil about to storm heaven’s gates, once rid of impediments. Not that the blonde was the first, just the winner in the trial heats the man had been conducting. And when Joanne realized that he had tried to seduce her best friend, she drank a bottle of cleaning fluid and blew unintended bubbles while awaiting death—which failed to come. Sent to a clinic, she was monitored by inscrutable therapists until she realized that even her corpse wouldn’t sober the yammering Ridgeways.

Two years passed before the divorce was final, by which time she was living in Yana City, where she had spent summers as a girl and now discovered that Larry Davis, faced with iron-willed Gil and his legal firepower, had backed down, meaning she had backed down too.

She had always loved the town, however, and she no longer shared a home with somebody who turned all relationships into mine fields and on boisterous New Year’s Eves, flushed with Glenlivet and champagne, hurled firecrackers into the bursting night and forgot to kiss his wife—that smoldering woman who never though about adjustable mortgages and carrying paper and so failed to touch what was deepest within him.

And Miles Tolliver? This, as I understand it, is the word on Miles. At Berkeley he had known neither Gil Ridgeway nor Joanne, and in 1977, when the latter came into his life, the Tolliver boys were a bit mournful, Miles living alone in a little house by the park, Charley keeping himself in the friend’s trailer he makes use of at present. The parents had left for a Santa Maria retirement community, loving their sons but not missing them or afflicted with nostalgia.

Charley had graduated from U.C. Davis in history and was working for Miles under the pretence of preparing himself for law school (lacking other ideas). Miles, though, wasn’t made for a monkish life and was fascinated by Joanne the moment she appeared in his office.

In those days, says Charley, it was the custom to adjourn to LeGrand’s on Main Street, where a good part of the legal establishment gathered, and Larry Davis was as
much a part of the place as the hanging ferns and Tiffany lamps. (All you need to know about Davis, Tolliver claims, is that he doesn’t carry malpractice insurance.) He had messed up Joanne’s divorce but still called her, though she had switched lawyers. Once, she told Tolliver, he bothered her at two a.m. Charley recounts it thusly:

   *Was he soused?*
   
   Yes.
   
   *Wha’d he want?*
   
   *He wasn’t sure, but he thought he might be falling in love with me.*
   
   *Wha’d you say?*
   
   *I told him to be sure and let me know when he found out.*

Her spirit attracted Tolliver, along with her looks and stylish clothes, though sometimes she lost her temper with *him* and stalked out, rocking blindly along the musty old corridor, head down, butt switching, bag swinging like a ball on a chain.

   One thing is clear: the two attorneys don’t care for each other. “Larry Davis!” Tolliver likes to say. “One time he drew an agricultural lease in four pages. Well, Larry’s a little short, but then Larry’s always been a little short.”

   Davis for his part calls Miles “the lone wolf of the Yana City legal scene,” and needles him over leaving Harris, Harris, Wheatley and Burdick, sore because young Jeremy Harris, who never brought in a bit of business, was made partner before Tolliver, the rising star. “Ripem, Cheatem, Gouge-em and Screwe,” Miles calls the firm, not because they’re particularly crooked or push everything to the edge like some firms, but because when Tolliver gets mad he stays that way. He has a talent for indignation, his brother says, and it probably cost him his marriage.

   Here, though, is the main thing, at least from my point of view. One evening Davis was in his usual spot (his “office” Miles called it), heaped on a barstool in a rumpled seersucker suit and crooked bowtie, and there was a certain amount of needling between the two attorneys; then a peal of laughter sounded from the other end of the bar, and Davis snorted.

   “There he is!”
   
   “Who?”
   
   “Your client’s boyfriend.”
“What client? I’ve got a few.”
“The sweet Joanne. Who’d you think?”
“What are you talking about?”
“Listen!”

Tolliver heard nothing clearly, but what Charley describes is “a guy in his late twenties, maybe five-ten and stocky,” wearing boots, tight-butted jeans and a gray T-shirt so snug the swelling chest and biceps threatened to burst the cloth. Aviator’s sunglasses were pushed up among the blond curls, and the flushed face was impish and sardonic. The overall impression was of big white teeth, mocking blue eyes, vibrant health and pulsing blood.

July 22

I don’t know if Charley is an inspired narrator or just happened to reach his car yesterday at what seems to me the key point in his story. The figure at the end of the bar was of course Stephen Bard.

Impatiently, I waited for this morning, and as we left Special Collections, I said:
“**Well?**”

He frowned. “‘Well’ what?” he asked, and I’m still not sure he wasn’t putting me on. “Well,” I said, “then what? You can’t stop now!”

“Oh!” he said. “You mean what I was talking about Tuesday?”

“Of course, I mean that,” I told him. “What do you think I meant?”

He grinned. “Well,” he said, “About Bard, some things I know, and some things I kind of have to assume.”

“Assume away!” I said. “Let’s have it.”

He did not, however, return immediately to the man himself, finding it necessary to establish a context and set a scene. The point seems to be that back in ‘seventy-eight life had finally begun to improve for Joanne, though not as she might have expected. Arnie was off to college. Gregory and Debbie lived with her, spending their vacations with their father, who claimed the move had hurt their schoolwork. (She denied it but admitted privately that he had a point.)
Most of what Charley knows must have come from her or from Miles. (I think
from her. I don’t see her confiding so much to Miles. I can’t say why. Did Charley’s
youth make him safe in a way that Miles wouldn’t be? Who can say?)

Anyway, the children sustained her, and the little life she made for them was
special in a fashion no Ridgeway could understand. If life had a meaning, she felt, it
probably centered around the family hearth, so the idea of returning the children to
Dornville and “that glittery-eyed bitch” must have seemed like asking that in the interest
of some higher good she cut her throat.

Gil pretended to be reasonable. Suppose they give it a try? Wasn’t that fair? She
thought not but gave in and found advantages.

She hadn’t “dated” since she was practically Debbie’s age, and she wasn’t eager
to start again. Too many Larry Davises. Too many escorts who had lost their boyish
charm while retaining adolescent ineptitude. Dating them was like testing used cars, she
said, each with its peculiar clunks and jerks and rumbles—all right if you just wanted
transportation, but she wanted more.

Then one day there appeared on her aunt’s doorstep an amazing creature with
impressive teeth, golden curls and ballooning muscles. The jeans and T-shirt bound him
like tape. The sunglasses rode the shiny hair like a coronet. Grinning, he looked her over
and seemed to inflate. Then he shoved a paper beneath her nose. Read that. Would she
just read that?

She did—a petition against gun control. Personally she favored as much
controlling of guns as possible, but the teasing blue eyes hinted at other programs, and
she found herself signing and yielding her phone number. Two days later he called.
Would she care to go to an informational meeting concerning government conspiracy to
undermine the Bill of Rights? She had never given thirty seconds’ thought to such
matters, but she said all right and wondered what to wear.

Suddenly, her life was moving at a breathless tempo, and she, a graduate of
the Anna Head Academy and a U.C. Theta, was now an Annie Oakley in jeans, boots and
down vest, lifting the heavy pistol and wincing at the thunder and smoke. And soon the
big black pickup was parked all night outside Aunt Olive’s, and probably nobody
believed the owner rented the little house in back, which in fact held his barbells and
reloading equipment. Aunt Olive grew philosophical. “Young people just do what they want these days,” she complained—in her rueful voice no doubt.

On weekends, when Debbie and Gregory were coming, Stephen Bard removed his things and pickup and disappeared, threatening not to return. He had never lived with a woman more than three months, he told Joanne—frequently, to keep her unnerved. Soon, though, she had cost him his record and was secretly proud, but she wondered if all men were compelled to lie.

“Oh, for God’s sake, Stephen!” she would yell. “Just tell the truth—for once!”

“I am telling the truth!” he would shout—and add on more nonsense.

What was it with men, she would ask Miles (and eventually Charley), and the little bitches they couldn’t stop chasing? What caused Bard to suggest, in his airy way, fixing up the place in back and renting it to the twitchy little number who had left her husband (or more likely been left), and with whom he was thinking of entering the team-shooting competition? Joanne told him coldly that she was a lot better shot than this nifty new markswoman, but she knew what he thought. “My thirty-eight-year-old girlfriend,” he called her to his friends, or “Joanne-that-I-live-with.” Men never believed they were really loved, she claimed, so they couldn’t stop scheming, which was a judgment on themselves.

But he did care for her. Of that she was sure. And he could be protective in his self-important way, insisting that she be prepared if anyone came prowling. Who was going to prowl she didn’t know, but she obeyed, blazing away at targets, ears padded, nose full of smoke. Squeeze, don’t jerk! Breathe in, breathe out, hold it! Then would come the shudder and bam, the gun kicking and smoke everywhere.

She got to like it, because she was good, which caused him to hug her, as though she had made love as he wanted. They seemed closest then, and afterward her shoulder hurt, because he made her fire the rifle too. She was better with that, but so was everyone. Hitting something with a pistol wasn’t easy, and he scoffed at the TV chases and gunfire. Try it from a moving car, he claimed, and you would likely put a round in your engine. Police almost never attempted it. She promised not to try.

“Oh, Joanie!” he cried. “You’re a kick!”
That was how they lived, banging away in one fashion or another, and when he was upset, he would shoot up the backyard fence posts. Aunt Olive’s place wasn’t within the city limits, but shooting guns wasn’t legal. Joanne expected someone to turn him in, but no one did.

It was easy to get the wrong idea, she knew, and plenty of people had. He liked to imply that he endured her while she was on her good behavior, which mostly involved the bedroom and shooting range, but aroused, he was humble and worshipful, which frightened him and seemed a little shameful—or so she gathered. She thought it the best thing about him but understood how most people regarded him as a jerk.

It must have stood to reason. What else were you going to think when he cruised the bars in his boots and tight clothes, the pilot’s sunglasses caught in the golden curls? One look at the splash of teeth and the hungry blue eyes was enough, though she believed what drove him was the excitement of the chase rather than the end.

You didn’t want to be taken in, however. From the pickup and gunrack you would never conclude that he spent little time outdoors and only fired his weapons at fence posts and targets. His other life was selling office furniture and supplies, hustling up and down the Valley in the company van to let the world know the good deals on lateral files and embossing tape.

But he lived for the guns and loved to instruct. You couldn’t stand perfectly still, he told her, so don’t try. Let your muscles move but control the movement, make a tiny figure eight and when the lines cross, fire. Always do it the same. Become a machine.

She tried, shooting the forty-five, the forty-four, the Magnum three fifty-seven and the Omega ten millimeter and listening attentively when he read from *Guns and Ammo* or *National Rifleman* or the *Springfield Armory Catalogue*.

She was good, he told her. In fact, she was terrific. Well then, she asked, how come he wanted to team-shoot with that little bitch who couldn’t hit her own sexy butt?

She was changing, she knew, becoming a little coarse. She didn’t care. She liked living in sin, if that was what it was, and the Ridgeway women up in Dornville could clack their stupid gabbling tongues. She hadn’t intended to wind up like this. In the sweet innocence of youth she had meant there to be only one man in her life, but that one man was willing to spread himself around, rather like the sun.
Men wanted it, she said, as if that were news. They looked at you as if you were something to eat, but really they were afraid of themselves—that was her theory—and ran from woman to woman like criminals making a getaway.

With Stephen, she said, a lot had to do with his growing up a service brat in a foreign country. At thirteen he had learned he could purchase the services of a whore for cigarettes. And his drunken father, all grunts and snorts, would toss an empty beer can at the kid, meaning *Get me another!* He would shut him in the closet too and whack him pretty good, even hang him upside down. Thinking about it made her cry, because of her own children, who seemed so vulnerable, Debbie and Gregory especially. Arnold was like his father, but still . . .

“One thing,” Bard would say, expanding on his youth. “It taught me you better look out for yourself. Listen!” (He would actually shove out his chest.) “Somebody’s going to knock you around if you let ‘em! You gotta stand up for your rights!” He was pretty tiresome, but he had a point. Only, she said, he sounded like such a little boy. And when he had worked himself up, he would go out in back with the Magnum. She would see him facing the fence, bent at the knees and frowning through the dark glasses. Both arms would be straight out, as if pointing a magic wand while he said a spell. Then the barrel would kick and puff and the gun would bark like backfire. The hell with you! Keeping the world at a distance—and her too.

Poor Stephen, she would think. Poor man. Poor everybody.

She took his sermons to mind, however, and got to dwelling on her rotten settlement. Then she started to simmer. He was right, she decided. You had to look out for yourself.

Which was how she happened to show up at the former municipal building and Miles Tolliver’s makeshift office.

July 21

Tonight at LeGrand’s I was at the bar, prompting the beefy-faced Davis, so infuriatingly smug and coy, when I saw Charley Tolliver alone at a nearby table, watching us with interest. (I suspect that he heard every word.) I nodded. He lifted his
hand but didn’t offer that shy smile I have come to know. He looked, in fact, more than a bit concerned.

He seems a likable sort, unclearly troubled, like so many of the young. In some ways he reminds me of myself at another time. I haven’t really cross-examined him, but once when we were having a beer, I remember him saying that parts of his life he didn’t like to talk about, and didn’t I think most people were like that? (I said that I did.)

“I don’t know,” he told me. “There just seem to be blank spots where nothing really happened. I mean I was helping Miles and thinking about law school, but then I realized I didn’t want to do that.”

“So what did you do?” I asked.

“Traveled,” he said, “wandered around, went back to school, but I didn’t have any real plan or purpose. I think I chose my courses on whims, and I never seemed to finish anything.” He shrugged. “I don’t know,” he said again. “There just didn’t seem to be any point. It was kind of like being in a dream.”

“I know,” I said.

He had gathered a little force. “I don’t know what I was looking for,” he said. “Or what I wanted.”

“So what happened?” I asked.

“Well,” he said, “nothing really. I mean that’s sort of the point. I think I finally realized there wasn’t going to be any flash of lightning or voice out of the clouds, you know, nothing to knock me flat or blind me or whatever. I just saw that my life was moving on, and I had to live it, one way or another.” He gave another shrug. “So that’s what I’ve done.”

But like me, I suspect, he’s drunk on the past, and if he isn’t directly searching for himself (whatever that pompous phrase means), he’s doing it obliquely, plowing around in the archives—again like myself.

July 25

This morning Charley said he had forgotten his wallet and wondered if he could use my driver’s license to check out books. I said why didn’t he give me the numbers,
and I’d check them out on my card, but he insisted that he needed to leave some kind of identification at the desk. It would only be for about half an hour, he said. He wasn’t going to be very long. I pointed out that my license didn’t identify him, and anyway, the clerk knows us both by now, since we’ve been there practically every day. I couldn’t believe any kind of I.D. was really needed at this point, but Charley said it didn’t matter. If you couldn’t show a card, you had to leave something as a pledge. It was just the idea. He repeated that it wouldn’t be for long.

I agreed, though I thought his reasoning crazy and the stubbornness astonishingly out of character. He hardly seemed the Charley I’ve known these past weeks. I suspect it may be from dealing with his brother again. He has never said it, but it seems relevant that his Wanderjahre or whatever came after the melodramatic events of ’78.

July 26

I believe I am under control now, enough to write anyway. The sickness is still inside me, that misery that gnaws like a cancer in my stomach, but let me not give way. Let me not get romantic and self-pitying and strike poses. The thing is to see clearly, to understand. Let my prose at least not run a fever. Let’s strike this cancer-in-the-stomach business. No straining for effect. All right?

It’s hard, though, to have the past come crashing down upon you, as if you were some comic Oedipus marked out for a deity’s amusement. To have flung in your face all that you’ve struggled so hard to elude, and even—if the word weren’t so self-glorifying—to transcend. If not Oedipus, then Job asking vainly, why me? What have I done to deserve this?

It was a little after midday. I was leaving Special Collections, passing the display cases and copy machines on the second floor, moving soundlessly over the carpet, through that great glass and concrete mausoleum washed with artificial light. Suddenly, I became aware of a man approaching in rhythmic lunges, heaving one dead leg along.

I stopped, then tried to move aside, but he slid before me, tall, bald and tanned, about sixty, with cold pale eyes. He wore an ash-colored suit, a white shirt and a flowered tie—the sort of generic department store clothes that are never altogether in or out of fashion.
I was alarmed, thought he was a lunatic trying to play a stupid game, but all at
once he produced a wallet and flipped it open in my face, revealing some kind of badge.
The whole business was very much like the films or TV.

“Joe Gillespie,” he said—rather roughly, I thought. “Yana City Police. Like to
talk to you a minute if I may.” He snapped the billfold shut and stuffed it inside his
jacket.

I suppose I blinked and looked thoroughly addled. That is certainly how I felt.
Finally, I collected myself, shrugged and frowned, attempting a put-upon, make-it-
snappy-air which probably didn’t fool him in the least.

We were facing each other still. Gillespie tilted his head lazily, looking me over
like a movie gunslinger. His voice was husky—faintly mocking.

“You, uh, use this library a lot, do you, Mister Fort?”
“Every day, would you say?”
“When it’s open,” I said.
“Right,” he said. “And you’re here late sometimes?”
“Sometimes I am,” I said. “Yes. Now look, you’re going to have to tell me what
you want?” I jerked my shoulders. I had spoken gruffly and impatiently, but I don’t
know that my voice carried any convincing threat.

“And you’re here after dark sometimes, are you, Mister Fort?”
“On Wednesdays,” I said, “when it stays open late.”
“Right,” he said.
“Really now,” I told him, “you’re going to have to tell me what this is about, or
I’m going to leave.”

He considered me drily. “I wouldn’t do that, Mister Fort.”
“Well,” I said, “maybe you wouldn’t—”
“I mean,” he broke in, “I wouldn’t advise it.”
“I wasn’t asking your advice,” I said, “Mister—”

Our voices had risen. Someone was disturbed by our noise—a man standing near
the legal reference section holding an open book: Tolliver!
He was jacketless, the big crest of brown hair gleaming in the watery light. Seeing us, he frowned, closed the book and replaced it, then coughed and walked in our direction.

“Mister Fort?” he said in wonder. “Joe?”

“Miles?”

“Some trouble here?”

Gillespie shrugged. “Nothing that need concern you, Miles.”

I protested. “The inspector here seems to want to ask me some questions,” I said, “but he won’t—or can’t—make clear what it’s all about.”

Tolliver seemed to flinch. Then he shook his head. “Joe!” he said sternly. “This isn’t Russia.”

“I know it isn’t, Miles.”

Tolliver continued to shake his head—mournfully almost. “Articulable and reasonable suspicion that criminal activity is afoot,” he said. “Isn’t that the test?”

“Something like that.” Gillespie drew an ostentatious breath. “Excuse us a minute,” he ordered. He jerked his head and Tolliver and he moved toward the bookcases, out of my hearing. The inspector talked quickly. Tolliver listened, nodding and frowning and sometimes glancing my way.

I swallowed, closed my eyes and sighed. Old thoughts, bad memories came flying back. When I opened my eyes Tolliver’s frown had deepened, and the lines at the corners of his mouth were sharper, and his mouth itself seemed to have stiffened. He nodded again and cleared his throat. Then he returned.

For the first time I realized how natty he was: charcoal slacks, a blue Oxford shirt and a tie of deep blue flecked with gold. He looked pained, as though I were both distressing and pitiful.

“Look,” he said, “I sort of cut a deal, Mister Fort—if that’s all right with you?”

“Yes?” My voice was disgustingly anxious. (Gillespie was lurking near the bookcases, watching us.)

Tolliver drew a breath. “See,” he explained, “the other night it seems, this girl, this student, was attacked over near the creek...”
I sucked in a breath, blinked, steadied myself and tried to withstand the panic. My knees were weak and my stomach churned. “But,” I said finally, “what has that got to do with me?”

“Nothing,” Tolliver said, “I hope. The thing is, though—”

“Yes?” The word leaped from me, making me cringe.

Tolliver studied me in a thoughtful way. “You had some trouble,” he said, “what, fifteen, sixteen years ago?” He seemed all at once a weary old priest.

I sighed. My voice was a whisper now. “Yes!” I said.

Leaning against a bookcase, Gillespie produced a toothpick and began sawing and poking at his surly mouth.

I frowned. “But,” I said, “why would they know my name or anything about that?”

Tolliver shrugged. “Who can say? People see you around here a lot. I guess somebody got a hunch, and they cranked up the old computer.”

I flushed and went hot. “I never attacked anyone!” I cried. “I never assaulted anyone. I couldn’t if I tried—I don’t believe.” The qualification is of course ludicrous, but I didn't think of that at the time.

Tolliver shook his head. “I know,” he said, “but that isn’t really the point.”

“Well,” I demanded, “what is?” (Gillespie continued his industrious dental chores.)

Tolliver sighed. “The thing is,” he said, “there’s a lot of hysteria about this stuff and a lot of pressure on law enforcement people. And you’ve got a record. I mean—”

“But nobody’s identified me,” I pointed out. “Nobody—”

“I know, I know,” he said soothingly, but I was wild now, and he seemed to sense it. “Look,” he said, “let’s go outside. We can’t talk about this crap here. You know?” He crooked a finger at Gillespie, who pocketed his toothpick and worked his jaws in an interested way.

We went silently down the staircase, through the muttering scanner and out the glass doors, into the courtyard. Three stories overhead, steel girders scored the sky. We seemed to be standing in the bottom of a cage.
Tolliver nodded for Gillespie to withdraw again, and he did. We stood beside a crude concrete bench like a dolmen.

“Here’s the thing,” Tolliver said. “They want to talk to you.”

“Yes?” (Almost a yip.)

“They don’t really want to book you.”

“I hope not.”

“But,” he said, “they might have to.”

“How could they arrest me?” I asked. My dignity was shredded now. My fear was open and humiliating.

Tolliver didn’t answer immediately. We just stood there. The air was hot and soiled, the plaza streaked with burning light. The glassy sky seemed to quiver. I nearly staggered. I was beginning to perspire.

Tolliver shrugged. “You can arrest anyone,” he said, “any time there’s probable cause to believe the person’s committing or has committed a crime.”

“But there isn’t probable cause!” I burst out. “Nobody’s identified me! Nobody’s accused me of anything! It just happens that—”

“True,” he said. “And without identification a judge probably wouldn’t find sufficient grounds to hold you. You’re right.”

My voice lost its sharpness, was less a squeal but still insistent. “So,” I said, “I don’t see why I should ‘talk’ to anyone.” A slick bead ran down my temple. I must have looked wretched.

Tolliver stared at me—coldly, I thought. “The thing is,” he said, “it isn’t that simple.”

“What do you mean?”

His eyes flared but his voice was smooth. “This is still basically a rural county,” he said. “We don’t have judges available twenty-four hours a day. Sure, you’re supposed to appear in court without unnecessary delay, but that could still mean a night in jail.”

“In other words,” I said, “I can be harassed if I don’t cooperate?”

“More or less.”
“So what do you advise?” My spirit was crushed. I was seeking help shamelessly.

Tolliver considered, running his tongue in and out of his cheek. “What I suggested to Joe over there,” he said, “is that tomorrow morning bright and early you will turn up at Don Pettigrew’s office and give a deposition. I’ll be glad to go with you. Or if you want, I can recommend somebody. You’re entitled to counsel. Frankly, you’d be a fool to go in there without some kind of representation, but it doesn’t have to be me.”

“I see,” I said. “And this ‘deal’ would keep me out of jail?”

“Exactly.”

I swallowed again and tried to summon my almost vanished pride. “I still don’t see,” I said, “why I can’t confront this woman and have her say I’m not the one. Wouldn’t that settle the whole thing?”

“It might,” Tolliver said, “if she’s in town.”

“It all seems absurd,” I said. “I just don’t understand.”

Tolliver’s eyebrows went up, then fell. “Well,” he said, “let me put it as delicately as I can. You have your rights, true, but you also have a record. That puts you in a different category. It shouldn’t but it does. Hell, you know that. And the D.A.’s office is under a lot of pressure, like I told you. I’m not saying they wouldn’t be scrupulous about this. In fact, I think once you talk to ‘em, they’ll see they haven’t got enough to hold you, and that’ll be an end to it. At least I hope it will. But still . . . I just don’t see any point in frustrating ‘em. You know what I mean? Face it: you’re vulnerable, man! The rules change in your case, and they know it!”

I nodded, swallowing once more and drawing another deep breath. The fight had gone out of me.

“Yes,” I said. “I see.” I stared at nothing for a moment, and when I spoke my voice was dead. “Of course,” I told him, “I owe you for your services.”

He shrugged. “For this?” he said. “Forget it. Call it a favor. If I go down to the D.A.’s office, yeah, then I’d charge you for my time, but that’s up to you.”

“All right,” I said. “I appreciate it.” And I was grateful and suddenly ashamed of my grudging tone.
“No big deal,” he said. Then he turned and nodded to Gillespie, who jumped off a bench and limped briskly toward us.

Oh God!

(Later)

Some people it doesn’t bother. It’s just another form of being sent to the principal. I wasn’t like that.

The disinfectant and cigarette smoke . . . the endless babble of the TVs tuned to different channels . . . the card games, the cursing and banter and noise . . . The evenings are the worst, watching your shadow creep up the wall . . . just hanging around, shambling and humiliated and bored—so damn bored!

Maybe if you lose yourself in volleyball and chatter, if you’re a healthy, mindless animal . . . and the weekends . . . the drunks, the old winos with the loads in their pants . . . the delousing equipment breaking down . . . Maybe if it were really prison and not just the county jail, or if you were enduring it for your faith or some cause or something . . . And after all I’d been taught . . . To feel so useless and ignoble . . .

I can’t go through it again! I can’t!

July 27

A reprieve—or maybe it isn’t. Nothing is resolved. I would rather have faced whatever music there is to face. The not knowing is worse.

This morning I went to Tolliver’s office, dressed in my “good” clothes, the thoroughly inappropriate black wool suit and the skinny soot-colored necktie. I must have looked like a particularly glum mortician.

It was much as before: Tolliver in shirtsleeves across that great plank of a desk, books leaning drunkenly on the shelves, the big half-moon window looking out on the city plaza with its elms and gazebo, the faint smell of ancient brick and stone.

“No, then!” Tolliver began, fixing his craggy face on me. “Just remember: this isn’t a trial. And the record won’t show pauses, so don’t answer anything you don’t understand. If you can answer yes or no, do it. Don’t elaborate. Don’t guess. It’s
perfectly all right to say, ‘I don’t know.’ And don’t volunteer stuff. Be natural but don’t mouth off.”

“I wasn’t planning to,” I said a little sharply, feeling the knot of my tie. Tolliver ran his hand through that sweep of brown hair. “Yeah,” he said, “I guess you’ve been through some of this before. It’s just that they might try and rile you, to see how you’d be on the stand.”

“If I should have to testify in court, you mean?”

“Uh-huh.” He nodded. “Although,” he said, “if it comes to that, you probably won’t testify. Don’t like to put the defendant on. Opens up too much. Oh and listen: let ‘em finish the question before you answer, give me time to butt in. See, if they ask something they shouldn’t, I want to be able to cut ‘em off at the pass. You hear me clear my throat, shut up. Okay?”

“Okay,” I said, “but I’m not sure I understand.”

“Well,” he said, “if they ask something improper I’ll make ‘em drop it, or file a motion for a ruling. Just let me handle it. Give me time.”

“All right,” I said.

His head bobbed. He pondered a moment or two. “Now,” he said, “I know Don. He’ll be nice to you. He’ll probably ask if you want a glass of water or if you have to go to the bathroom. You know? Just remember: I’m your counsel. And listen: we don’t have to answer if we don’t want. We can give ’em oral notice and see ’em tomorrow morning. We can walk out too.”

I nodded, a dutiful student, but I wasn’t really paying close attention. I wanted to ask if all this was really necessary, but just then the telephone rang. Tolliver picked up the receiver. “. . . Hey, Don!” I heard him say. “How’s it going?” Then he covered the mouthpiece and mouthed, ‘Dee Ay!’


He hung up, sighed and threw himself back in the leatherette chair.

“Shit!”

“What?”
“They want to put it off until later today,” he said. “Don’s got to be in court most of the morning it turns out.”

I must have frowned. My voice held the trace of a whine. “Do I have to see the district attorney himself?” I asked.

“Don’s not so great at delegating authority,” Tolliver said, “if you want to know the truth.”

“What was that about the Grand Jury?” I asked.

Tolliver blinked. “Huh? Oh,” he said, “just that a prelim isn’t mandatory. They could try and get the Grand Jury to indict you.”

“For God’s sake!”

“I know.” He wrinkled his face. “It sort of fries me too,” he said. “Frankly, I think it’s more bluff, but you never know.” He pondered—or pretended to—a hint for me to leave, but I clung grimly on.

“I looked in the newspaper,” I ventured. “I didn’t see anything about a woman being attacked.”

“No,” he said, “and you won’t. They tend not to print that stuff in the daily. It makes the old burg look not too safe, which it isn’t. It’s a sore point too. Some of these women’s groups insist there’s a cover-up. Well, the campus is badly lit. And there’s so goddamn much foliage it’s a pervert’s paradise.” He shook his head slowly—in amazement, I suppose.

“I still don’t see,” I said stubbornly, “why I can’t just be brought before this woman, or put in a line-up or whatever they do. It seems to me that would clear the whole thing up in a minute, at least as far as I’m concerned.”

He looked at me a little sadly. “It might,” he said. “It might.”

“Well,” I demanded, “why wouldn’t it? I didn’t do it, you know. I swear I didn’t.”

Tolliver was gentle. “I believe you, Harlan.”

“Well then—”

He waved me silent. Suddenly, I realized that he and I are almost the same age—a shock. He has those quick eyes and that yappy voice, and no doubt pounds his restless body into trim in some manic “fitness” den, while I, so shapeless and stolid, probably
look as though I’ve never swung a bat or kicked a ball in my life, which isn’t far from the truth. When he seemed so gloomily wise, though, it was as if I was the younger man, he the elder statesman.

“For one thing,” he said, “it was dark. She might not be able to identify the guy.”

“Well!” I cried. “All the more reason for leaving me alone! Then there isn’t any case at all!” Choked and stifled in my dress clothes, I sat up, belligerent and timidly victorious.

Tolliver grew thoughtful, running his tongue in and out of his cheek.

“There was a case a few years ago,” he said quietly. “Woman attacked over near the park. This did get in the papers, by the way. No names, of course, but people were pretty upset. It wasn’t so common back then.” Tolliver nodded. “So they arrest a guy on parole from San Quentin,” he said, “living in the area. He’d done time on a similar charge, see? And the gal identifies him. No question. Then another guy comes out of the woodwork and confesses, and she corrects herself. This is the one, she says. She’s sure now. But you know what, Harlan?”

I played my part. “What?”

“The two guys don’t look anything alike. One’s tall and blond. The other’s short and dark—”

“But,” I said, “I wouldn’t think—”

“You’ve got a law enforcement agency that’s desperate,” he rolled on. “You’ve got a hysterical woman. Look, you’re putting a lot of faith in this identification crap, and I want to caution you. That’s all.”

“Still—” I began.

“Presumption of innocence is fine,” he said, “but when you’ve got people in authority determined to nail somebody’s butt to the barn door—well, just don’t trust too much in the system. I’m only trying to be realistic.”

I nodded and shut up, too sick for speech. I understood. I saw what he was telling me, and I know he’s right. I just don’t want to admit it. That’s all.

(Later)
I have been thinking of the old days, of being a child taken with the others to the top of the hill, where we would look at the stars. I think too of Lichtfest in October, the Festival of Lights. (Halloween of course was pagan and satanic and never observed.)

The whole idea was that in everything, even the simplest act, we were to bear witness and avoid the profane, to empty ourselves out, rid ourselves of ego so the Spirit could enter. “Live,” we were told, “so the proof of God will be seen in your conduct.” In this way we were going to reclaim the territory lost to the forces of Darkness. There was an ongoing battle, which we were never to forget.

It’s tempting to smile, and yet I remember the year’s great occasions—Advent, Christmas, Easter and especially Pentecost. *I am come to send a fire on the earth, and what will I if it be already kindled?* And the Libesmahle—love meals—so simple and touching, all the trembling candlelight and warm baked bread. How beautiful, really!

And yet there was another side to it. We daren’t presume. If you needed a hammer you had to say, “I wonder if it’s possible that I might have . . . ” You had to be perpetually meek. And in Sitzung, the assemblies, someone would get up and confess that the Devil had seduced him into wanting to be noticed or wanting to “get ahead,” which was illusion, for even spiritual “progress” was a snare of pride.

But, oh, how these things mattered! You couldn’t be a little bit sinful any more than you could be a little bit pure, and so we were forever denouncing each other, for you couldn’t abandon the struggle, not for a second. *Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come!* How deeply we believed!

But wonder can turn to skepticism, and one night when you’re seventeen you’re called into a bare room before a posse of grown men who understand you better than you understand yourself. The Gemeinshaft doesn’t want dead wood, you’re told, people clinging because they don’t know anything else. It would be better if you went away for a while; then if you return it will be of your own free will. That was the message. “You’re not the first person to doubt, Harlan,” I was informed, “and you won’t be the last.” I asked how they knew that I doubted, and they didn’t bother to answer. They knew all right—and knew that I knew they knew.

And now . . . after all that . . . I am filled with despair.
July 28

I sit here stunned and depressed beyond words, and yet there is a sense of acceptance too, a realization that it has to be, that I—being I—was never destined to remain here, no matter what I allowed myself to think. I have been more or less in motion most of my adult life. It was quixotic to believe that I had at last come to rest—or that I could. I know this, have begun already to pack, yet I take time out to record these thoughts and facts, if only to ease my whirling brain.

I was to meet Tolliver this morning at the municipal court building, where the district attorney has an office. Charley was sent to fetch me. Evidently, driving was thought to be beyond me in my present condition. I don’t know. At any rate, we were early (and Tolliver was late) and lacking anything better to do, at Charley’s suggestion we went into the Criminal Division and sat in those theater-type seats that thunk up indignantly when you stand. It was a bad idea, bringing back so much that I have tried to exorcise.

“. . . Mister Gifford, does your client wish to enter a plea?”

“He does, Your Honor. My client wishes to enter a plea of guilty.

“Mister Leroy, do you enter this plea freely and voluntarily? . . .”

It’s never like the movies—I know that. Despite the flags and bailiff, it’s about as dramatic as a shoe store. The mumbling judge goes on with his paperwork like a teacher correcting homework, and there are endless time-outs and conferences and fumbled documents.

Well, at last we got up and went out onto the modernistic portico, and Tolliver arrived, impressive in a Glenplaid suit and Guards tie, toting his attaché case.

“Well,” he said, “the good news is, I talked to Pettigrew, and they don’t want to mess with you—if they don’t have to.”

I sighed. “I’m relieved,” I said.

“Well now,” he cautioned, holding up his free hand. “See, you kind of present a problem.” (His hand fell.)

Charley frowned. “Why?” he asked, looking from his brother to me.
I must have seemed dense. At any rate, I began to smolder. “Why?” I asked.

“Why do I present a problem?”

“Because,” Tolliver said, “one, this is still a small town in many ways, and confidentiality is difficult, and two, your past followed you out here. Right?”

I was dumbfounded. For a moment I couldn’t speak. “What you’re saying . . .” I finally got out, but I wasn’t allowed to finish.

“What I’m saying,” he cut in roughly, “is that Don’s people don’t want to hold you, but the longer you stick around, the more they’re going to be tempted to try. And another thing: once word gets out and people know you’re staying at Joanne’s, they’ve got an excuse to dig all that up again. If you know what I mean.” He jerked his head. “Get the picture, my friend?”

I didn’t care for his tone, but I was too confused to give rein to my resentment.

“You mean,” I asked, “the district attorney’s office would like it if I just disappeared?”

Charley stirred. “They can’t say that, but—”

“But,” I objected, “doesn’t it look as if they’re letting a prime suspect slip through their hands?”

“No,” Tolliver said. “Not if he disappears before he gets too prime—if you follow.”

“I see,” I said, and I do, with immense weariness but maybe with some obscure peace, as though something, finally, has been decided.

Charley drove me back to Hemlock Street, since it had been ordained that he should act as chauffeur. I stared miserably out the window, now and then heaving a sigh.

“I suppose,” I said at one point, “there are some things I should explain.”

“Not unless you want to,” he said.

I thought it over. Maybe it would have been better to keep silent, but who knows what people might imagine? “One day,” I said, “Joanne asked me how I live. I wasn’t totally frank.”

“Whoever is?”

We rode on wordlessly, and once again I thought better of pressing revelation upon him, but then we were parked, the motor running, my hand on the door handle.

“Come on in,” I said.
He shut off the engine and obeyed.

July 28 Evening

I think now it was a mistake. I can see the two of them, across from each other in a booth at Dorado’s. Should have kept my mouth shut. Oh, I can see them all right!

“. . . He was an orphan,” Charley’s saying. “Never knew his parents. Doesn’t remember them anyway . . . ”

Tolliver nods, slumped in the booth, tie loose, looking around at the ficus and brass and the popcorn machine and making a half-hearted effort to be polite.

“. . . They were tenant farmers evidently,” Charley goes on, “downstate, near the Kentucky line. They never really recovered from the Depression. ‘Rehabilitation borrowers’ I think they were called.”

“And he was adopted out?”

“Uhuh. To this childless middle-aged couple technically, but actually to this religious community. I mean, as I get it, kids had parents but were kind of raised in common, because there was this suspicion of privacy—drawing apart. It was all supposed to be one big family, not a bunch of little ones.”

Tolliver nods and toys with his glass.

“The thing was, though,” Charley says, “when the kids got to be high school age they had to go to public school. And after that they sort of kicked him out. I mean not entirely. They paid to send him to college—”

“Where?”

“Southern Illinois. Carbondale. See,” Charley explains, “after he graduated he lived in Saint Louis for a while, but he ended up back where he’d come from, near the Ohio River, teaching in the same high school he’d gone to. Well, one of his students was this farmer’s stepdaughter—”

“Ahah!”

“No, but really,” Charley says. “It wasn’t like you think. She’d really been treated rotten by her stepdad. I think he maybe abused her. She wasn’t quite eighteen, and anyway—”

“The old hardbitten son of the soil found out?”
“Well, yeah, but see, he was willing to overlook it.”
“For a consideration.”
“Uhuh. But Harlan didn’t have it.”
“But the Community did?”
“Right,” Charley says. “Two thousand dollars was the price, but Harlan wouldn’t ask them. He couldn’t bear the disgrace, he says.”
Tolliver frowns. “So he went to jail? First offense?”
“Well,” Charley says, “see, the thing was, the Community was kind of unpopular. I mean they were anti-war and everything. They’re an offshoot of the Anabaptists or something. It’s kind of weird, I guess. I mean it’s all very organized. Ther’re bells all during the day.”
“Cool.”
“Everybody tries not to be showy. Some people take the chrome off their cars.”
“Sounds like a lot of fun.” Tolliver shakes his empty glass and looks for a waitress. Then he sits up and thunks the glass down. “All right!” he says. “I feel for the old nymphet-humper and his deeply religious sensibility. He gets into his teens and shows disturbing signs of spiritual deviance, so they pack him off to college to confront Satan in the form of a liberal education, but you know what gets me is how, despite, the World, the Devil and the Flesh, these jaspers are such damn good businessmen.”
Charley blinks. “What do you mean?”
“Gumps carries their stuff. So does Williams-Sonoma. I get the catalogues.”
He would be right of course, and Charley remembers me saying the Disciples make upscale merchandise for the retail trade.
“So there you have it,” Tolliver continues. “From the goddamn industrious elves in the Black Forest of lower Illinois to San Francisco’s Post Street, the proceeds allowing too-smart-for-his-own-good Harlan to go forth and seek the enemy in his lair. And when was this anyway?”
“And he comes through,” Tolliver charges on, “though not unscathed if he puts up at the county jail.”
“That was later.”
“Right.” Tolliver laughs and shakes his head. “Vietnam time,” he says. “Protesting the war by fromping teeny-boppers. And the kid’s charming stepfather wants two K, and Darlin’ Harlan doesn’t have it, and the outraged party prosecutes. Nice for the girl.”

“There was a lot of resentment,” Charley says. “The Community was against the war, like I said, and they pool their belongings and—”

“And this is the Ozarks,” Tolliver breaks in. “And this little band of saints looks pretty suspicious. Pacifists! Commies right in the heart of redneck evangelical Middle America. Hell, wasn’t it around there they zapped the Mormons?”

“I don’t know.”

Tolliver runs his hand through his bushy hair. “So one of these weirdos makes it with the local jailboat, and some fiery-eyed ignoramus of a judge throws Il Fortissimo in jail. I guess you have to feel sorry for the stiffnecked son of a bitch, but in my opinion he should have done the Prodigal Son bit: ‘Oh, Brother Amos! I have sinned most grievously, and my heart is sore afflicted!’” Tolliver laughs again. “Get some of these woodworking trolls to pop for the hush money,” he says. “Shut the old bastard up. Must have been a rare old shithead to let his stepdaughter be humiliated, but then she wasn’t flesh and blood. ‘Naught is lost save honor,’ and all that.”

“I don’t know,” Charley says, losing heart.

“Well, it’s a touching story,” Tolliver offers. “Too bad our man didn’t touch his brethren for the bread, but it’s all ancient history now. I’m sorry he’s distressed, Charley, but I think Portly-Fortly is bad news and best discouraged from lingering.”

Charley nods. He doesn’t want to argue and possibly sees his mistake. He should never have gone to his brother.

Maybe I’m wrong. Maybe Charley won’t go to Tolliver, but I think he will, and it isn’t hard to imagine the response. And there isn’t any way to make someone else understand, though I tried—vainly, I’m sure.

The town haunted the Community, I told him, much as the Community haunted the town, that city of the plain into which we teenagers warily ventured on the high school bus, the girls with their braided hair and long skirts, the stiff faces bare of makeup.
“We were a pretty drab bunch,” I confessed, “but we couldn’t get the town out of our heads.”

I still can’t, don’t believe I ever will. I can’t help seeing it: the old bank with the fluted columns and stern pediment; the clapboard houses and brick stores; the rotting boardwalks and stoical Negroes. It all comes swirling back, that bleak post-Depression world of console radios, cast-iron stoves, kerosene lanterns, Mason jars, firewood, coal, mule-drawn plows and tin-roof ads: BEST CLOTHES IN EGYPT . . . GARRET’S SNUFF . . . EATMORE OLEO . . .

The people of the town and farms belonged, as we Disciples never would, which we knew. I knew it all right but learned that I couldn’t belong to the Community either—or to Yana City, though I guess I believed that I could, trying to inhale the past like a fragrance and reverse time, forever trying to catch sight of two dim figures—a man and a woman—who keep vanishing around a corner.

Well, where do we belong? Where is home? Say a man stands on a bluff above a river, and a boy lies on a hill looking at the stars, and the man is the boy and the river is the Ohio and Sacramento both, and the stars have burnt out long ago, gone like the buildings in the old photographs, yet their light travels still. Say that. What then?

July 29

Better now. The fever almost gone. Last night’s madness seems a ghastly dream in which I, or rather some impossible anti-self (Harlan Fort turned inside out, transformed by the magic of rage into a man of noise and violence), that absurd figure fades—to my grateful relief.

I said those things! I of all people rushed into LeGrand’s and hauled Miles Tolliver off his stool (to the immense delight of Larry Davis), filling the smoky air with ridiculous wails about “collusion” and “malfeasance,” and barely hearing his elegant riposte: Will you shut the fuck up? Will you shut your goddamn mouth?

Out on the sidewalk we bawled at each other, bent forward, as if to get our weight into the abuse.

“You haven’t any right!” I yelled.

“Will you shut up?” he cried.
“You can’t play with people’s lives!” I screamed.
“Will you shut your fucking mouth?”

Neither of us was drunk, but you wouldn’t have known it. Pop-eyed and flushed, we kept on shrieking, bathed in the vile yellow light, our reflections swimming in the windows of a parked car. Traffic roared by in furious waves, drowning our wild voices, and it was all part of the chaos—pickups vrooming past on monster tires, hurling apocalyptic music into the night to the beat of some thudding cosmic heart.

“I can sue!” I threw at him.
“Do it!” he threw back.

“A football coach!” I bellowed. “A stupid retired football coach!” This seemed the most unbearable thing of all.

“He sure the shit fooled you!” Tolliver gloated. “Look, you reap what you sow, fucker! Just remember that!”

“I can—” But whatever insane thing I was about to yell was lost in a roar and backfire and what sounded like sonic booms.

“File charges!” he cried. “See what it gets you!” (It occurs to me now that it might get me a lot, but with his next jeer he unmanned me completely.) “Won’t that be nice for Joanne?”

I was trembling, close to tears, fists clenched, nostrils flared. I felt myself swelling toward some explosion, but all at once I turned and walked stiffly off, and just as I left Charley came around the corner.

“You told him!” Tolliver bellowed. “Goddamnit! You let him know!”

(Later)

It was after dark, before I went rushing around but already past sunset. Joanne’s Toyota and my dusty Escort parked in the driveway, where the Big House windows throw trapezoids of yellow light on the pavement and grass. The door to the Little House was open, the screen door shut, but I didn’t hear him. He saw me well before I knew he was there, saw behind the mesh a man in shirtsleeves and dark slacks, a busy man taking pictures off the walls and stacking cardboard boxes (my primitive filing system), the gooseneck lamp flinging shadows on the walls.
I went into the bathroom and returned with my toilet kit, and he knocked on the screen door, making it rattle and I jumped.

“Oh!”

“It’s me,” he said.

“It’s you?” I asked—mindlessly.

“Right.”

He pulled open the creaking door and stepped inside. The spring made a \textit{why-yang}! noise, and he slowed the screen so it wouldn’t crash. It seemed as though a great spoon had stirred the place, and nothing was where it had been hours before when we talked. I looked at him, no doubt in a troubled, uncomprehending way.

He swallowed. “You don’t have to go,” he said and I blinked and frowned. “There isn’t any girl,” he said, “or any assault. The district attorney doesn’t know you exist.”

I blinked again—stupidly, holding my kit, which could have become a loaf of bread for all I noticed.

“What do you mean?” I said—thickly.

“Sit down,” he ordered, and I sat on the squeaking bed, next to a bulging garment bag, still cradling the toilet kit. “You ask too many questions,” he said. “You need to let things alone.”


“But what?”

“Well, if the district attorney . . . I mean how did your brother know? How’d he find out?”

Charley swallowed. “You remember that morning,” he said, “the one when I borrowed your driver’s license?”

“Yes. But I still don’t see—”

“I needed your birthdate.”

“For your brother?”

“Yes. D.O.B.’s very big. You can find out a lot.”

“Well,” Charley said, “for fifty dollars Miles got a friend in the Sheriff’s Office to do a little phoning. Which is illegal, of course.”

“Yes.”

“Well, first he tried the F.B.I. raps from the Federal Offense File, but there was nothing there.”

“Nothing?”

“No,” Charley said, “but then he got into the Interstate Identification Index. Better luck there.”

“Oh,” I said in that same blank way.

“Got an arrest date back in Illinois fifteen years ago, and that was a start. So then Miles phoned the court back there, told ‘em he was an interviewer with the California Division of Narcotics. Had the interstate I.D. number, which is amazing. Even a lot of law enforcement people aren’t supposed to know that.” Charley shook his head. “Well,” he said, “Miles got the records people to ring up what they had, and fortunately they didn’t ask for a case number.”

“Fortunately?”

Charley grinned. “Yes,” he said. “Miles couldn’t get auxiliary info, things like a probation report if any, but he got a disposition. It turned out you’d done time for unlawful sexual intercourse—‘statutory rape’ in the old days.”

“So then—”

“So then,” Charley said, “Miles got an old buddy—”

“Gillespie?”

“Yes, but that isn’t his name—”

“And he isn’t a cop?”

“No, of course not. He used to coach high school football.”

I thought about all this. “But,” I said, “I still don’t understand why—”

“All right.” He pulled up the wooden chair and sat down. “Just listen,” he ordered. “Don’t say anything til I’m done.”

So I did. I heard it all. And I don’t think there’s anything more I could have heard. It’s enough—more than enough, more than I would ever have believed. Only, when he was done, he shot up and walked to the door and left—without a word, as if
he couldn’t bear my pain and indignation and was sick of language and everything
connected with the stupid and miserable business.

(And this time he let the door bang)

*

Observation (à propos of nothing): At night, I think, Yana City seems to dwindle
and crouch, and the land stretches away in every direction. The downtown glows with
lurid neon, and the sodium lamps throw a urine-colored cast over everything. Drunks and
people on the prowl appear, and the sinister lights give the town a science fiction look,
but the old contentious frontier village creeps back too.

July 31 Williams, California

I know! This time I really do. At last I have it right.

You ask too many questions, he said. You need to let things alone. True. And I
compounded my sin by seeking him out in that depressing trailer he inhabits. It was
afternoon. He was sitting inside, in shadow, drinking a beer, and as he lifted the can to
his mouth I thought, ‘He’s surrounded by tin and drinking the stuff too.’

“Why do I ask too many questions?” I asked, which made him laugh. “What is it
I’m not supposed to know?”

He looked at me coolly, thinking matters over, and for all his good nature, he
wanted to be rid of me.

“All right,” he said. “You want to know? I’ll tell. But on one condition.”

“What’s that?” I said.

“When I’m finished, you get up and leave—leave this town.”

“Leave this town?” I said.

“Yes.”

“When?”

“Today. When I’m done. Take off—for good!”

I thought about it. And I realized that it was the only way. For in much wisdom
is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow. And the fierceness—
so unlike Charley—convinced me too. It was another side, but isn’t that what this whole
adventure has been about—the unsuspected people within us?
He reached into the cooler at his feet and pulled out two chilled cans of beer—one for me and a refill for himself.

“Take!” he ordered. “Drink!”

I nodded, then accepted the can and snapped the top. It seemed right: a symbolic libation shared by a couple of cynical conspirators in a shadowy cave.

“You see,” he began, “Gil Ridgeway was really stoked—about losing to Miles, I mean, and about Joanne getting the new settlement. But he knew about Bard, so—”

“This was in ‘seventy-eight?” I said. “The summer?”

“Right. Anyway, he phoned Joanne and told her that Gregory would be in Christian Youth Camp and Cindy—‘New Wife’ Joanne called her—was going to visit her grandmother in Seattle, and Gil himself was going to Arizona on business, and Debbie could stay by herself, but she was almost sixteen and kind of boy-crazy—which Joanne knew.”

He paused, maybe wondering if he should proceed after all.

“So,” I prompted, “Joanne agreed to have her?”

“Right.” Charley laughed and shook his head. “Joanne told Miles. You know what Miles said?”

“What?”

“‘God almighty’” (The imitation was good. He had his brother’s rusty growl down.) “‘If we’d fought him for custody he’d’ve killed us, and now he fires the kid off to this little den of common law sin! And who did all the browbeating about how the chillun just mope and flunk their classes here in Greater Yana? So what does the guardian of public rectitude do but exile Miss Teenage America to the old love nest with Aunt Olive as duenna!’”

Charley laughed, a little embarrassed. “Well,” he said, “Bard was mad too. ‘Where’m I going to stay?’ he kept saying, and Joanne would ask, ‘Well, where’ve you been staying?’ and tell him it was just for a while.”

“I get it,” I said.

“Well, Debbie arrived, and maybe she wasn’t the knockout you know, but she was pretty formidable all the same . . .”
The narration began to take hold of him. He grew less self-conscious, his voice more normal, and as he became caught up in the events, I began to see them and to hear the voices, and now at this remove with so much behind me, I find that in setting it all down, I seem to be there, watching everything, invisible, like someone in a darkened theater before the brilliant screen. And now as so much is bodied forth in my imagination, I dissolve . . .

. . . It’s afternoon. Joanne comes home, and there on the deck is Bard in his tight jeans and Debbie skinny and sullen in shorts and a tanktop, and Aunt Olive hovers about. Bard says he’s stopped by to pick up his Magnum, and Joanne says he’s already taken his guns.

“It has to be here, Joanie,” he says. “I know it!” Then he suggests wine.

“I’ve got to fix dinner,” she tells him. “You’re welcome to stay, but you’ll be drinking alone.”

“Thanks,” he says. “Can’t hang around. Hot date!” And he winks at Debbie, who smiles. Now Aunt Olive creeps in, wanting to know if Stephen is staying. Joanne says he isn’t, and Aunt Olive says “what?” and Joanne says, “HE SAYS HE ISN’T!” and Bard says he can’t do it, has to strike while the iron is hot, and Joanne says she doesn’t want the old iron to cool off, so he had better go.

“But a chance!” he says, winking at Debbie. Good times and careless adventure, he wants to imply. Stick with me, kid! It’s all to annoy Joanne, and it does, but she walks him to the pick-up and they kiss as always. Only, afterwards she tells Debbie not to wear her bikini when Stephen is around. “Her friends tell her she looks cute,” she says to Tolliver. “She doesn’t realize.” “About that,” Tolliver tells Charley, “we’ll reserve judgment.”

Then the next day while the girl is sunbathing Joanne wanders into the cobwebby old shed with the barbells and ammo boxes and reloading trays, and there in a drawer is the Magnum. The clip is out and the bullets loose. She thinks of them as seeds—“deadly metal seeds”—and tells Tolliver about Bard always yapping about “back-ups” and training her to stand with her elbows in and hold the Magnum in one hand and the Omega in the other. Back-up for what? she always asks him. He doesn’t really know, but he and his gun-crazy buddies thrive on these scenarios.
Bard continues to drop by. Debbie makes a half-hearted effort at finding a job but mostly sunbans, works on her nails and hair, listens to her music and gossips on the telephone. Ridgeway has maintained that she is too young to ‘date,’ and Joanne agrees. Then one afternoon Joanne comes home, and the back yard is full of powder smells and smoke. Bard has found his gun, and inside, Aunt Olive drifts fretfully from window to window in her round-shouldered forbearing way.

“He’s teaching her to shoot now!” she says.


Outside, Bard wears his big, goofy, look-at-the-fun-we’re-having grin, and Debbie looks both sly and wary. She figures correctly that her mother isn’t going to take this well. Joanne sends Bard off and takes the gun and the remaining ammunition and stashes the ordnance in the table drawer beside her bed.

The days pass. Sometimes it’s lovely having Debbie home, and sometimes it’s hell. One evening the girl says that she and some friend named Mandy O’Keefe are going to the mall, and Joanne says they aren’t, or at least Debbie isn’t. So Debbie whines and nags. It isn’t right! She never gets to do anything! And so on. Joanne has had enough.

“I don’t want you hanging out like some little pick-up!”

“Oh right!” Debbie fires back. “I forgot we’re all so pure around here!”

This is as close as she ever gets to it, but her mother isn’t in the mood. Crossing the room, she slaps the girl with a sound like crackling glass. A pink splotch blooms on her cheek. Then her shoulders jerk, hot tears come, and as her mother moves to touch her—gently, because the girl isn’t some hot-to-trot parking lot queen—Debbie breaks away and runs to her room, slamming the door and flinging herself on the bed which jolts over the floor with a crash even Aunt Olive hears.

It was a mistake, Joanne sees later. Better to have the girl pawed in somebody’s van. Keeping her home just makes her more lonely and vulnerable, and the scene itself turns her cold-eyed and crafty. But you want to protect your children and spare them your hurt. Sometimes she thinks that it isn’t the sense of her own death that frightens her but the idea of being cut off from the sweetness and perils of her children’s lives—as if they are the ones going into the dark forest.
Which is why on the night three drunken high school boys in a four-by-four appear with their dirty laughter hooting for Debbie, Joanne in a terrycloth bathrobe, hair down, goes out and orders them away—fast. They jeer and mock and she produces the three fifty-seven, and the laughter dies in their throats and their eyes grow wide.

“You were that mad?” Tolliver asks when she tells him.

“No,” she says. “I was scared—of myself.”

He can believe it: the sharp pale face in the streetlight, the dark hair loose over the shoulders, the fire in her eyes . . .

They flee—dogs in heat chased off. She returns to bed, putting the Magnum in the table drawer. “Keep the gun and the clip separate,” Bard insists, but he also says that you never can tell.

Oh but men! Their eternal rut! Their secretiveness. That refusal to share their precious selves! It drives her wild, but when she complains, Bard says she doesn’t understand; few women do.

“It’s like a goddamn toothache,” he says poetically. It starts when you’re ten or eleven and continues for fifty or sixty years or more; he doesn’t know. At ninety, she says, he will still be eyeing every short skirt and tight sweater in sight. He takes it as praise.

And yet she maintains that he isn’t just some big healthy animal. Desire makes him loving. Itch evolves, turning him tender and shy. Others have failed, but she will hold him. (“Female vanity!” she will later admit.) She will bleed him of his male craziness, though sometimes she wonders if he hasn’t gotten it into his head to do something so awful it will constitute a permanent and unforgivable betrayal and preserve his splendid integrity once and for all.

This much established, we came at last to the truth, the untold story of Hemlock Street. Charley looked at me dubiously, took another swallow of beer and prepared himself, as though for some mysterious and troublesome rite. I swallowed too—not beer but from apprehension—because I understood all at once that I had arrived at the brink. I had wanted to know—everything. Now, like it or not, I would!

Here, then, it is—as I imagine and fashion it:
Midsummer Eve 1978. Aunt Olive, who rarely ventures anywhere, is to travel by train to her granddaughter’s in Portland, not that a train runs through Yana City, because, as Tolliver likes to say, “Why send an interstate train through the Valley’s second biggest city when you can run it through a podunky town twenty miles west?” So Joanne is going to drive her aunt to the Amtrak stop at Soissons, pronounced “Soyzens” in Mesa County and known as “Hammeldorf” until World War One.

Aunt Olive has fussed herself into readiness hours before, but as departure time approaches, she feels a need to dither, and Joanne isn’t much better. Bard once observed that if they were all leaving for Europe in ten minutes, one or both women would start scrubbing the bathroom floor or otherwise wreaking order.

Joanne sends Debbie to prod the old lady. The girl returns saying that her great aunt declares herself prepared. Joanne asks if Debbie wants to ride along. Debbie pretends to think about it, her eyes darkening as always when she lies, but she lies so often her mother takes it as normal. “Really,” Joanne will say, “I should have entered her in a contest against Stephen.” Debbie decides not to go.

She wears white shorts and a man’s white long-sleeve shirt, the tail knotted above her midriff. She has shaved her legs, washed and blow-dried her hair and curled the bangs, pulling the rest back in her mother’s pony-tail style. She looks fresh, youthful and wholesome, if you ignore the lip gloss and midnight blue eye-shadow, but she has experimented upon herself since the age of eight, when she took Barbie as her ideal.

The small suitcase is deposited in the Pontiac’s trunk, and the two women cross the town and head west, passing billboards and car lots. Soon the orchards slide by, and the sun, still high above the coast, strikes the travelers like a blow. They wince, pull down the visors and speed on. There is abundant time.

It’s good to be free of Yana City and whizzing past the row crops, hay bales and tufted rice checks. Roaring along, you make out the distant smear of foliage marking the river. Then, coming into Las Pulgas, you slow while everything, even the high school, hunkers beneath a sky scoured with light. The town drops away, and you speed up again.

The flatland makes every tree and silo dramatic. You smell the river, then it slips beneath you—wide, brown and shimmering under zipping swallows. You roll on, past shaggy oaks and almond trees, dark-booted English walnut and rice paddies burning a
lurid emerald. Black and white magpies flap up; pheasants scoot across the road; a hawk glides low, and an egret, incandescent white, stands motionless and coiled.

Meanwhile Bard’s truck chugs through Yana City’s silent streets, into the older part of town, under leafy sycamores and past the two-story homes with their pitched roofs and ancient porches. Satin-black on its oversize tires, the pick-up moves slowly, with a throaty mutter, and inside the house on Hemlock the girl dawdles and checks her image until she hears a rumble stop, a door slam and boots thump.

Meanwhile again, Aunt Olive, bundled in her traveling coat, which is also her raincoat, and wearing a prim little vinyl hat, sits wordless and composed, regal as the egret.

And back in town the man raps the screen door, then opens it and steps inside, grinning at the solemn barefoot girl. With a flourish he produces a pint of vodka. Would there be any orange juice by any chance? Debbie believes there would be.

His style is perpetual celebration, an endless ratifying of life’s good things. His god is instinct, he implies, though in fact, all his moves are elaborately contrived.

He makes screwdrivers. Hostess and guest sit at the kitchen table and sip.

How long will Aunt Olive be away?

A week.

Really?

Uuh.

She (Debbie) looks great. No, he means it. She really does. Actually, she’s a knockout. No kidding.

She blushes.

His eyes brighten, like coins. He devours the long legs, the bare stomach and open shirt, the curious unformed face, the blond hair severely gathered. Then, lest he be false to his deepest faith, the one he holds with himself, he stands; the boots creak, and he comes around the table and stops. For a moment he looks down at her, then slides the backs of his fingers along her cheek, as though petting a cat. Then he cups and tilts her chin—a caress he has seen in some movie—and traces her lips with his finger. She stares up with trusting dignity. He lifts her hand. She rises.
“Now!” Joanne yells over the car’s noise. “You call me when you get to Heather’s. All right?”

“They don’t have to meet me,” Aunt Olive says. “I can take a cab.”

“They’ll meet you,” Joanne tells her, “but you be sure and call.”

“I won’t fall,” Aunt Olive assures her. “I only fell that once. The streets were wet.”

“No. CALL!”

“Oh. All right.”

The car sweeps on. “You have your tickets?”

“Oh yes.”

“You didn’t forget your medicine?”

“My what?”

“Your MEDICINE!” Joanne shouts. “You brought your MEDICINE?”

“You’re going back to bed again?”

“No—MEDICINE! You have it I hope?”

Aunt Olive considers. “You know,” she says gravely, “I don’t believe I do.”

Bard kisses hungrily. Debbie responds. They swell, stiffen and quiver. “Oh damnit!”

Tires squeal. Dust swirls. Joanne hurls the car around and tromps the pedal. The machine squats and lunges, flinging Aunt Olive against the seat, and they pound down the road, past clumps of nodding oleander while the eastern foothills show dimly under puffy clouds. A grain elevator leaps up, bone white against the sky. A row of frazzled palms drifts by.

“Goddamnit! Damnit to hell! Well, shit!”

Strapped tightly, Aunt Olive shrinks and chews her lip, peering straight ahead.

Bard throws a burly arm around Debbie, and they stumble down the hall to her cluttered room. He kisses her and undoes the last shirt-buttons, then fumbles with the knot until hesitantly she unties it herself. Sliding the shirt off, he unhooks the bra and slips it over her arms. He fondles then bends to suck the small pale breasts. Then, unzipping her shorts, he hikes them down and places her palm against his own aching groin. Shyly, she rubs, but there is a subdued terror within her. She thinks of her mother,
yet thinks that she should do this, but she wishes to be rescued too. He unbuttons his shirt, drawing ponderous breaths.

The car shoots down the road, slapping over little rugs of fur and feathers. Bugs splatter the windshield. Ragged eucalyptus spring up, walling off field and sky. Now billboards whip by, then dung-colored sheetmetal, cyclone fences, car lots’ blazing flags. Glass, chrome and tin explode with light.

“Joanne! You’ll get arrested!”

“At this point I don’t really care!”

On they fly.

Bard unstitches Debbies. She gasps and cries and digs her fingers into his flexing back. The room reeks of sex, cosmetics and hair lotion. Pinned to the wall, the poster rock stars wordlessly watch the lovers surge.

The orchards fall away. The malls, gas stations and fast-food hovels jump up, bursting with words and numbers. A traffic light halts the Pontiac and its sprawling shadow. The town throbs and trembles, and the hot air ripples from the softening asphalt. Joanne’s hair is limp, stringy and damp and she sweaty, foul, thirsty and mad. Twenty-five minutes to get the damn medicine and go careening back. Possible. Depending on traffic.

The light changes. She hits the pedal. They barrel up Rincon Avenue. At fourth and Bonita she runs a light, then rolls through the yellow a block away. Aunt Olive flinches and lifts her chin.

The lovers sob and sigh.

Joanne slams the car on and off the freeway, peels by the quiet houses, slides through stop signs and takes the corner with a screech, then roars down the block. The brakes squeal.

She sees the black truck propped high on its grotesque tires . . .

The screen door bangs. The bed-squeak stops. Footsteps. A drawer yanked. 

Don’t, Joanie! Don’t! He’s on his feet, bounding over the bed. The girl’s mouth opens. Her eyes grow huge.

In the ticking car Aunt Olive, bound fast, hears the crash.

*
Charley grew quiet. I blinked, then simply stared. He was appraising me—coldly, I think—no doubt wondering what I thought of it all, and if I was satisfied. *Well!* his eyes said. *You wanted to know. Now you do!*

But I didn’t, not everything.

“What, I asked, “about your brother?”

“Miles?”

“Where does he come in?”

Charley smiled. “You know,” he said, “I’ve often wondered.”

“Wondered what?” I asked.

“What would have happened if he hadn’t been home that evening.”

“But he was?” I said.

“He was—home to receive an hysterical phone call. If he’d been out . . .”

Charley paused and shrugged. “Well,” he said, “all I know is that things would have been very different.”

“How?” I asked.

“I’m not sure,” he said. “Anyway, he *was* home, and he understood right away what to do.”

“Call the police? I suggested.

“No,” Charley said. “*Not* call the police—not right away.”

“An ambulance?”

Charley sighed. “Listen,” he said, “Bard was beyond medical miracles, and there were three crazed women to deal with, three generations to be soothed and reassured, needing to see order restored. Only, the thing was . . .”

“Yes?”

“Order was exactly what you *didn’t* want.”

“You didn’t?”

“No,” he said. “Hey, have you ever tried to dress a corpse?”

“Have I ever tried to dress a corpse?”

“Yeah.”

“No.”

“You know what Miles said?”
“What?”
Charley smiled, then, imitating his brother’s slangy drawl: “‘Lemme tell you, kid, it can be a bitch!’” He laughed at Tolliver’s wild humor.
“I suppose it can,” I said and I do. And probably in Tolliver’s fierce memory the light is phosphorescent and the sounds deafening, a lot of crashes and bangs, though what they are probably remains unclear. (Does his inflamed imagination supply them?) The blood has a rich salty smell I’m sure, and all his senses are on fire.
“The thing was,” Charley began, and immediately I did see it—and see it still! The victim lies face down, naked on the floor, one foot caught in the sheets, as if he’s tripped and brained himself, and from the way he’s splayed out you know he isn’t getting up.
“If—” Charley said. “If he hadn’t jumped up and rushed at Joanne, she might have fired a couple of shots over their heads and sent him off in panic, then tongue-lashed Debbie.”
“But she didn’t?”
“Shedidn’t,” he said. “What she did do was drill him between the nipples, which, actually, was fortunate because of the angle of entry.”
“I see.”
“There wasn’t much time for thinking things out,” Charley said. “Miles told me later it was like coming upon a car wreck. So what he did was pull the skivvies up over the bloody legs. ‘But the goddamn jeans!’ he said. ‘Even the boots were a bastard!’ He tore up the shirt.”
“Why?”
“Because there wasn’t any hole. Tore it up and wadded it against the chest ‘to staunch the wound.’ Then he rolled Bard over and pulled the sheets down, trying to create the greatest possible mess in the name of first aid. Confusion was desirable, you see. Same with the gun. ‘We all handled it!’ he said. He wanted as many prints as possible on the damn thing!”
I saw it, understood, or thought I did: the rescuer running around in a dream, unaffected by the stony face and vacant blue eyes. Well, it probably does get to him, but he remains the quarterback, yelling at Joanne to tell Aunt Olive to call an ambulance,
which will occupy her and produce the necessary scenario. By now Joanne is almost
detached, under a spell like him. It must be like an earthquake or tornado. And Debbie is
shivering. Shock? I don’t know, but she has hurried into her clothes—the wrinkled
white shirt hanging out—and offers a wooden unblinking look. That’s how I see it.

“Do what I say!” Tolliver roars (at whom isn’t clear). “Let me take care of this!
Do what I tell you! Now calm down! Now listen. Here’s what we’re going to do . . . ”

The hardest part must be knocking Joanne around. “It’ll hurt!” he warns, but
maybe it doesn’t. He smacks her under the eye, say, then slaps her, scratches her cheek,
thumps the upper arm and her thigh, hoping to raise bruises, and rips her shirt at the
throat. She gasps, stiffens and blinks, then sighs, licks her lips and tightens for the next
blow.

“That’s what he did!” Tolliver yells at Debbie. “He hit your mother with his fist,
punched her in the face and kicked her in the leg and ripped her clothes. You thought he
was going to kill her. You heard her scream. You knew where the gun was. He’d taught
you all about it, but you didn’t know it was loaded. You meant to scare him off. That’s
all. Understand?”

She nods, shivering still, face stiff, eyes glazed. Then Tolliver becomes truly
desperate. The ambulance will be there, and he can’t delay much longer calling the
police.

“You understand?” he yells at Debbie again.

She says that she does. Then her mother squints at her, the swelling beneath her
eye.

“There was a fight,” Tolliver says. “Your mother’d kicked him out, and he didn’t
like it . . .” (Here the lawyer remembers to run around, overturning chairs and end-
tables.) “He’d had a few drinks. Goddamn! We’ve got to do something about the
kitchen!” And he rushes in to achieve more chaos, and mother and daughter follow. “He
showed up drunk,” Tolliver cries, inventing freely. “With a pint of vodka. He didn’t
know your mother’d taken Aunt Olive to the train. You tried to reason with him. Then
your mother and Aunt Olive came back . . . because of the medicine . . . Your mother
walked in. He became abusive . . . He started cursing and beating her. She cried for help.
. . . He followed her into Aunt Olive’s room. Then she ran in the bedroom . . . ”
That’s how it was, I’m sure! And Tolliver is amazed at himself but hasn’t time to enjoy his own resourcefulness. “. . . He threw her on the bed,” he says in the same hoarse voice. “She tried to get up and around him, but he had her cornered. Then you came in with the gun. He turned around. You warned him. You told him to stop. He came at you. You aren’t sure what happened next.”

And Debbie listens, shivering! And Tolliver asks again if she understands. “Yes,” she says faintly, and her face is pale above the white clothes. “I think so.”

Tolliver has his doubts but hears the ambulance wail.

“All right,” he says, catching his breath. “Now I’ll call the cops!”

* 

IT was over. Once again I was a man sitting in a shadowy trailer, drinking beer and listening. It was like coming out of a movie, say, or when the lights go up.

Charley leaned forward, the narrow bony face under the shock of dark hair. Then he rocked back, lifted the can, tipped his head and drank in big, pulsing swallows.

“And?” I said timidly.

He lowered the can, leaning forward again and drawing the back of his hand across his mouth.

“Well,” he said quietly, “I’m pretty sure Miles had second thoughts, but it was too late. Fortunately, just about everybody was prepared to believe the worst about Bard. Even his relatives—and there weren’t many—claimed they weren’t surprised. ‘Stevie’s been heading this way all along,’ his dismal brother-in-law claimed. Joanne said that was nonsense. And actually, I don’t think Bard was fated. He did like abrupt exits, though, which might be the real meaning of all those guns.”

I frowned. “How so?”

“Well,” Charley said, “I guess nothing has to be endured forever while there’s a gun in the house.”

“And what about Joanne?” I asked.

“Joanne?” Charley considered. “Well, sometimes she’d get tearful. I mean she really did love the guy. I think she tended to see him as a little boy. ‘They can’t believe it,’ she told Miles, and Miles asked what men couldn’t believe. ‘They can’t believe
they’re loved,’ she said. I don’t know about that, but it does seem that sometimes we’re hell-bent to make it so.”

“There must have been a lot of explanations to produce,” I said. “I mean—”

“Oh yeah!” he said, sitting back and smiling. “You better believe it!” He nodded. “This is where Debbie was so good,” he said. ‘Magnificent!’ Miles called her. And I guess she was—in a chilly way. And Joanne kind of took your breath away too. And Aunt Olive was so confused nobody could tell what she really knew.” Charley smiled. “Of course,” he said, “Miles wasn’t complaining.”

I thought about it: a series of locks clicking smartly shut on the truth.

“You see,” Charley said, “there was Debbie’s closed hearing and the probation officer’s recommendation. Then she went back to her father, and the whole thing was over—officially anyway—but I don’t know that Don Pettigrew really bought it.”

“Why not?”

“He said Bard wasn’t the type to beat up women.”

I nodded. “There must have been a lot of gossip and cynicism?”

“Tons!” Charley said. “Not everyone was convinced. Pettigrew was sorry he hadn’t handled the coroner’s inquest himself, although he said the jury would probably have brought in the same verdict.”

“Why?”

“The house. That’s what he told Miles. The idea of someone barging into your home, supposed to be drunk and all. You put that idea in a jury’s heads, Don said, and they aren’t going to care if you blew him up with a hand grenade.”

“And your brother?” I asked. “He just played it along?”

“Pretty much.” Charley shrugged. “See, Pettigrew said Miles seemed to have made a holy mess of the place—and Bard too—but Miles just shrugged and said he didn’t know much about C.P.R. Then Pettigrew wanted to know if Miles thought he could bring Bard around by getting his clothes on or off—and did he have them on in the first place? Miles said he did. Pettigrew wasn’t so sure. In fact, he said flat out he didn’t believe Miles’ deposition and Gil Ridgeway wouldn’t believe it either. Miles just shrugged. ‘I can’t help that,’ he said.”

I nodded. I understood. It was over and done with, because things at some point
have to be over and done with. Well, I thought, who should know that better than I?

Suddenly, I caught Charley looking at me—in a grim, different way.

“You remember?” he said.

I must have looked blank. “Remember what?” I asked.

“What you promised.”

“Oh,” I said. “Yes.”

“We made a deal.”

“Yes,” I said. “We did.”

“And I kept my end.”

“Right. You did.”

He was still looking at me, hard. It was like a shove, a push out the door, and I understood and swallowed.

“All right,” I said. “But you told me once I didn’t have to go.”

“That was before,” he said.

I nodded. I didn’t know I was going to, but I did. He was right, of course. We had made a deal.

May 28, 1984

Dear Joanne,

Last night I dreamed, and today I am moved to trouble you after long silence. I live and work here in Berkeley, in a second-hand bookstore on Telegraph Avenue, and sometimes I feel I have been transported to the Tangiers medina: graffiti, wheelchairs, zombie-addicts, beggars, garbage can foragers, obstreperous vendors flogging shoddy wares, a bewildered tourist strapped with cameras. Is this where I belong? I can’t say. At any rate, I have joined the local hospice group, dedicated, cheerfully despotic volunteers trying to convince the expiring to go gentle into that good night—morbid, even medieval work possibly, but satisfying.

Well, I dreamed of water last night—rivers and floods and the strange midwestern town of my youth. Then, waking, I thought of your town and river and my final night: the
surreal yellow light, our shadows on the sidewalk, Tolliver’s and mine, two foolish men bawling at each other, on the point of blows.

Sometimes in my imagination I see the area as it must have been a thousand years ago—a low, level valley of oak trees and meandering streams, populated by naked dark-skinned figures subsisting on acorns, venison and fish—figures now vanished like the mist off the creeks as the day grows hot.

I find that our inevitable anonymity sustains me, and I am comforted by the fact that we too vanish and leave no lasting trace, not in the truly long run. It may be the best thing about us. Such thoughts reconcile me, though to what isn’t clear.

I’m a bit of a “character” now, part of the local scene. I’ve even grown a beard, which gives me a spurious rabbinical look and pledges a timid faith with those grimly joyful Anabaptists who raised and deformed me. And why do I feel compelled to share all this with you? I can’t truly say, but it seems relevant and might, I hope, offer you too a sort of comfort, if comfort you need. I can’t know, of course.

Well, that’s really all I have to relate. At present, outside on the Avenue, an enormous black man is sitting before a makeshift drum set: two empty purified water containers inverted in milk crates. Thumping the bottoms and whacking the edges with his sticks, he produces mellow rumbles and tonic clatter. And swathed in robes and sporting a rat-colored fez, he too seems vaguely ecclesiastical in a self-anointed way. Is the moral, then, that sanctification comes from ourselves and involves an inevitable amount of performance and fraud? That too I can’t answer.

That’s all. Love to you, Aunt Olive and Debbie. May you prosper and thrive.
Harlan

September 23, 1984

It’s very strange. You think something is over and finished, done with, and has begun to drift away, fading like the memory of a dream. You believe you’ve understood, and then, from nowhere, a revelation comes, when you’re least expecting it and no longer sure you want such a thing.

It was late afternoon. I was here, the day’s labor done, in this big shabby apartment—these second story back rooms with the railed porch, a sort of veranda—and
the view of the Bay. Sitting outside, looking at all that stir—the bridges leaping from point to isle and point again—I was musing upon the enormous busy-ness of modern life, and a line came to me: *And all that mighty heart is lying still!* But the verse roused neither reverence nor true contemplation. Instead, I entertained a bit of irreverent mirth: “lying still:” *encore mentir*—civilization as persistent lie. Why is it that when I aspire to think deep and beautiful thoughts, something puckish and flippant chases out honest feeling and genuine perception?

It was just then that I heard the gate below open and close and footsteps on the walk. I thought of my landlady, but the step wasn’t Mrs. Douthit’s. There was the crisp rapid scrape of leather soles—a man’s long and purposeful stride. Then, to my astonishment, the shoes were thudding up the wooden stairs!

I started. How few people know how to find me! Isn’t it my gift to burrow in, assuming invisibility? Who could be seeking me, driving me from cover?

I rose and walked to the head of the staircase, and there, ascending loudly and rapidly with the spring of youth, was Charley Tolliver in washed jeans and a worn leather jacket—tall and vibrant with his shock of brown hair and that marvelous energy of the young.

“Charley!” I cried.

“Harlan!” He grinned, climbed the remaining stairs and shoved out his hand. We shook.

“Come up!” I said. “Come in! How in the world—”

“Your address?” he inquired. “I got it from your letter.”

I was dumbfounded. “The one I wrote Joanne? Last May?”

“Yes!”

“She showed it to you?”

“She let me read it.”

“Oh my!” I said. “What did she say?”

Charley’s smile widened. “Well,” he said, “we both felt it was very eloquent but maybe—”

“A little too jaunty?” I ventured.

“I guess so.”
“Too much an overture?”
“Something like that.”
“Well, it was, I guess,” I said. “But come in!” Then I corrected myself. “No,” I told him. “Let’s stay out here on the porch and have a drink. The view is marvelous at this time.”
“All right.” He was affable as always, free spirited and generous, owning the best qualities of youth. How different from his brother!
So we sat on the deck or porch or whatever you call it and drank my fumé blanc and watched the sun drop like a hot red coin below the Golden Gate, and we chatted about various things, but I knew he hadn’t come to kick matters around. All his graceful small talk would lead somewhere I felt sure, if I were sufficiently patient, but I wasn’t.
“So,” I said, “you’re still living in the Valley?”
“No,” he said. “I’m not. I went back to San Francisco, right after that night.”
The night when—”
“Yes,” he said. “I couldn’t take it.”
“And your brother was mad at you.”
“Of course.”
“Because you’d told me?”
“Right,” Charley said. “Miles was furious, but I didn’t care. I just wanted out.”
I thought about that. “But,” I said, “then how did you know—”
“About the letter?”
“Yes.”
“Joanne phoned me. I’d given her my number. She got me to come back.”
“For what?”
“To make it up with Miles.”
“And did you?”
“Yes,” he said. “She told me that everything was different now. She said I wouldn’t believe it, and she was right.”
I think I frowned. “How?” I asked. “How are matters different?”
“Well,” he began, “for one thing . . . ”
Then he told me, and indeed, it’s hard to credit, and it makes you wonder once again: is the past only a dream?

*

Put it like this, because this is how I see it:

Charley drives the hot one hundred and eighty miles north, through the simmering table-flat Valley, to the town named for the tribe the founders exterminated, and calls from the motel. Come on over, she says, and he says that he will. Not to the house, she says. To Bedford Hill on Third Street.

“There’s a hill on Third Street?”

“Come and see?” she says.

Wedged between Asquith & Sons’ Menswear and Serendipity (on the block his brother calls good taste run amok), ‘Bedford Hill’ turns out to be a dim cave of French wicker, Danish pine and Blue Willow Spode. High heels clicking, Joanne sweeps toward him in a bronze-colored leather skirt and gold blouse, a scarf around her shoulders, the knot rakishly off-center. Seizing his hands, she offers him her cheek, then insists he go see his brother.

So he walks the four blocks, past the plaza’s elms, benches and derelicts, to that former Municipal Building with its smudged yellow brick, and he crosses the stained tile floor and goes up the old stairs and finds ALTACAL FINANCIAL SERVICES, with a waiting room of hunting prints and Chippendale. Then Tolliver appears, a little heavier and worn, and it’s Hey, kid! How ya doin’? (and of certain things they do not speak.)

“You seen Joanne’s layout?” Tolliver asks. “I helped her set it up: licenses, fictitious business statements, that kind of crud. I told her, ‘Well, at least you’re not opening a restaurant.’ She’s going to Spain in the fall. Really excited. ‘Those armoires!’ she says. ‘Those hutches!’”

Charley shakes his head.

“Who’d a thunk it?” Tolliver asks. “Me hustling IRA’s and Joanne the merchant queen, and Dental Debbie flossing her victims—that girl was meant to cause pain—Oh, and I got Ridgeway off!”

“You got him off what?” Charley asks.
“Well, see, he got a little too cute, but we pled to false financial statement, one count, and Don dropped business fraud, which makes no sense, but what the hell? Most of this stuff is settled by a couple of lawyers out in the corridor anyway. You know what they say: *res judicata pro veritate accipitur!*”

“What’s that mean?” Charley asks.

“A case decided is considered as just,”

“Oh,” Charley says and goes back to Bedford Hill, where Joanne throws on an eggplant-colored cape trimmed in lime, then takes his arm. They walk to Dorado’s and find a booth, and Joanne fills him in.

“I can’t believe it! She took eighteen units her first semester and sixteen her second and did her clinical practicum and management course during the summer. And she passed her Boards on the first try! She’d be down for a weekend, really into *Histology of the Tooth* or some awful thing. Oh, and Gil’s delighted. Bertram has all the right labels.”

Charley frowns. “Bertram?”

“Didn’t I tell you?” Joanne asks. “She’s engaged. He’s older. He went to Cornell.”

“Oh,” Charley says. “How’d they meet?”

“She cleaned his teeth. By the way, he collects.”

“Collects what?”

“Needlepoint and American miniatures.”

“And he’s adding Debbie to his treasures?” Charley asks.

“What he thinks.”

Then Charley nods. “‘A rare and important piece.’”

Joanne laughs but something’s missing, and all this gaiety and persiflage seem meant to cover the past.

September 24, 1984

*Res judicata pro veritate accipitur.* “A case decided is considered as just,” or as I would render it: “A thing decided is considered as true,” meaning, as Tolliver explained, there has to be a finish. At some point you say, “this is how it was” (even if it wasn’t)
and proceed, because nothing can be re-examined forever, not in the practical world. And so a lie can serve as a foundation, if you build solidly enough upon it.

But there will always be those who want to know, who can’t stop searching, doomed to keep asking, those meddlesome pests, and there are those who do know and are longing to disgorge information, even if they don’t realize it, aching to bear a tale. And somehow a refusal to honor the past, recalling and preserving it, seems to insult life itself and repudiate experience, because what am I—what are any of us?—but the sum of all we have known and done?

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**About Author Clark Brown**

Clark Brown has published a novel, *The Disciple* (Viking), and *About Chico*, a collection of pieces about the California town where, with San Francisco, he divides his time. Stories appeared in journals and quarterlies and in such anthologies as *The Pushcart Prize; The Interior Country: Stories of the Modern West* and *Highway 99: A Literary Journey Through California’s Great Central Valley*. Nonfiction has been published in journals, quarterlies, and anthologies (*California Childhood: Stories and Recollections of the Golden State; Where Coyotes Howl and Wind Blows Free; Karamu Looking Back on the Sixties*). Reflections on various subjects were published as *San Francisco Sunday Chronicle This World* “end papers,” 1988–1999.