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: Full Issue

THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN
PERIODICAL READING ROOM
NEW MEXICO
QUARTERLY

FICTION ISSUE

N. SCOTT MOMADAY

EVAN S. CONNELL, JR.

MAX- STEELE

EDWARD LOOMIS

LOUIS DELL LOGAN

ONE DOLLAR

SUMMER 1967

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Tell It Like It Is: *The Experimental Traditionalists*

General terms, like mastiffs, need restraint. Their tether is definition, which is always limiting and involves a principle of value, hence of prejudice and personal idiosyncrasy—one thing is preferred to another. Once the limits are set, distinctions and divisions follow as neatly as theorems in a formal system.

Experimental is a word sorely in need of leashing. Applied to writing, an endeavor markedly unlike chemistry or physics, the word becomes literary, the concept shadowy; like many literary terms it may even need to be muzzled or put to sleep.

Experimental writing is often regarded as a kind of writing, a genre like science fiction or pornography. Yet a piece of writing is experimental only by degrees. Nothing is unqualifiedly experimental even though much bad writing passes for good by donning this disguise—thus entrenching the forward posturings of the advance guard.

A work is experimental only insofar as it is a controlled deviation from a form mastered and a tradition understood. Apprenticeship, that slow learning, precedes experimentation, though all too often this irreversible order is reversed and the mystery of experiment precludes the mastery of craft—a license permitted writers but not stonemasons or carpenters. What small good is unearthed from the rubble is the result of chance, not of understanding.

Formal work establishes expectations: that these things will happen in these vague, general ways. If the anticipated events fall out in the manner prescribed, we have genre. Yet the pieces of writing that remain most remarkable, most memorable, are those which successfully, subtly, defeat the expectations aroused by their chosen forms. The conceptual scheme is nudged and an old familiar ~~variable~~ receives a new range, a new interpretation, and a new value. The writers presented here demonstrate a few of the ways in which this nudge can be achieved.

There are detectable influences in all writers. But the distinction to be borne in mind is between derivation and deviation. In a trivial sense every writer is derivative because he is influenced by whatever he reads and likes. To be derivative is to declare that a craft is being learned; to deviate from a form is to state that the craft is mastered, the form understood, and the traditions explored. All of these writers are well beyond the years of apprenticeship; all are journeymen; a few are obviously masters of their chosen work; and the pieces collected here fulfill certain criteria of excellence.

—Gus Blaisdell

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Two Sketches from *House Made of Dawn*

BY N. SCOTT MOMADAY

THE BEAR AND THE COLT

HE was a young man, and he rode out on the buckskin colt to the north and west, leading the hunting horse, across the river and beyond the white cliffs and the plain, beyond the hills and the mesas, the canyons and the caves. And once, where the horses could not go because the face of the rock was almost vertical and unbroken and the ancient handholds were worn away to shadows in the centuries of wind and rain, he climbed among the walls and pinnacles of rock, pressing with no force at all his whole mind and weight upon the sheer ascent, running the roots of his weight into invisible hollows and cracks, and he heard the whistle and moan of the wind among the crags, like ancient voices, and saw the horses far below in the sunlit gorge. And there were the caves. He came suddenly upon a narrow ledge and stood before the mouth of a cave. It was sealed with silver webs, and he brushed them away. He bent to enter and knelt down on the floor. It was dark and cool and close inside, and smelt of damp earth and dead and ancient fires, as if centuries ago the air had entered and stood still behind the web. The dead embers and ashes lay still in a mound on the floor, and the floor was deep and packed with clay and glazed with the blood of animals. The chiselled dome was low and encrusted with smoke, and the one round wall was a perfect radius of rock and plaster. Here and there were earthen bowls, one very large, chipped and broken only at the mouth, deep and fired within. It was beautiful and thin-shelled and fragile looking, but he struck the nails of his hand against it, and it rang like metal. There was a black metate by the door, the coarse, igneous grain of the shallow bowl forever bleached with meal, and in the ashes of the fire were several ears and cobs of corn, each no bigger than his thumb, charred and brittle, but whole and hard as wood. And there among the things of the dead he listened in the stillness all around and heard only the lowing of the wind . . . and then the plummet and rush of a great swooping,

bird—out of the corner of his eye he saw the awful shadow which hurtled across the light—and the clatter of wings on the cliff, and the small, thin cry of a rodent. And in the same instant the huge wings hove with calm, gathering up the dead weight, and rose away.

All afternoon he rode on toward the summit of the blue mountain, and at last he was high among the falls and the steep timbered slopes. The sun fell behind the land above him and the dusk grew up among the trees, and still he went on in the dying light, climbing up to the top of the land. And all afternoon he had seen the tracks of wild animals and heard the motion of the dead leaves and the breaking of branches on either side. Twice he had seen deer, motionless, watching, standing away in easy range, blent with light and shadow, fading away into the leaves and the land. He let them be, but remembered where they were and how they stood, reckoning well and instinctively their notion of fear and flight, their age and weight.

He had seen the tracks of wolves and mountain lions and the deep prints of a half-grown bear, and in the last light he drew up in a small clearing and made his camp. It was a good place, and he was lucky to have come upon it while he still could see. A dead tree had fallen upon a bed of rock; it was clear of the damp earth and the leaves, and the wood made an almost smokeless fire. The timber all around was thick, and it held the light and the sound of the fire within the clearing. He tethered the horses there in the open, as close to the fire as he could, and opened the blanket roll and ate. He slept half sitting against the saddle and kept the fire going and the rifle cocked across his waist.

He awoke startled to the stiffening of the horses. They stood quivering and taut with their heads high and turned round upon the dark and nearest wall of trees. He could see the whites of their eyes and the ears laid back upon the bristling manes and the almost imperceptible shiver and bunch of their haunches to the spine. And at the same time he saw the dark shape sauntering among the trees, and then the others, sitting all around, motionless, the short, pointed ears and the soft shining eyes, almost kindly and discreet, the gaze of the gray heads bidding only welcome and wild good will. And he was young and it was the first time he had come among them and he brought the rifle up and made no sound. He swung the sights slowly round from one to another of the still, shadowy shapes, but they made no sign except to cock their heads a notch, sitting still and away in the darkness like a litter of pups, full of shyness and wonder

and delight. He was hard on the track of the bear; it was somewhere close by in the night, and it knew of him, had been ahead of him for hours in the afternoon and evening, holding the same methodical pace, unhurried, certain of where it was and where he was and of every step of the way between, keeping always and barely out of sight, almost out of hearing. And it was there now, off in the blackness, standing still and invisible, waiting. And he did not want to break the silence of the night, for it was holy and profound; it was rest and restoration, the hunter's offering of death and the sad watch of the hunted, waiting somewhere away in the cold darkness and breathing easily of its life, brooding round at last to forgiveness and consent; the silence was essential to them both, and it lay out like a bond between them, ancient and inviolable. He could neither take nor give any advantage of cowardice where no cowardice was, and he laid the rifle down. He spoke lowly to the horses and soothed them. He drew fresh wood upon the fire and the gray shapes crept away to the edge of the light. And in the morning they were gone.

It was gray before the dawn and there was a thin frost on the leaves, and he saddled up and started out again, slowly, after the track and into the wind. At sunrise he came upon the ridge of the mountain. For hours he followed the ridge, and he could see for miles across the land. It was late in the autumn and clear, and the great shining slopes, green and blue, rose out of the shadows on either side, and the sunlit groves of aspen shone bright with clusters of yellow leaves and thin white lines of bark, and far below in the deep folds of the land he could see the tops of the black pines, swaying. At midmorning he was low in a saddle of the ridge, and he came upon a huge outcrop of rock and the track was lost. An ancient watercourse fell away like a flight of stairs to the left, the falls broad and shallow at first, but ever more narrow and deep farther down. He tied the horses and started down the rock on foot, using the rifle to balance himself. He went slowly, quietly down until he came to a deep, open funnel in the rock. The ground on either side sloped sharply down to a broad ravine and the edge of the timber beyond, and he saw the scored earth where the bear had left the rock and gone sliding down, and the swath in the brush of the ravine. He thought of going the same way; it should have been quick and easy, and he was close to the kill, closing in and growing restless. But he must make no sound of hurry. The bear knew he was coming, knew better than he how close he was, was even now watching him from the wood, waiting, but still

he must make no sound of hurry. The walls of the funnel were deep and smooth, and they converged at the bank of the ravine some twenty feet below, and the ravine was filled with sweet clover and paintbrush and sage. He held the rifle out as far as he could reach and let it go; it fell upon a stand of tall sweet clover with scarcely any sound, and the dull stock shone, and the glint of the long barrel among the curving green and yellow stalks. He let himself down into the funnel, little by little, supported only by the tension of his strength against the walls. The going was hard and slow, and near the end his arms and legs began to shake, but he was young and strong and he dropped from the point of the rock to the sand below and took up the rifle and went on, not hurrying, but going only so fast as the bear had gone, going even in the bear's tracks, across the ravine and up the embankment and through the trees, unwary now, sensible only of closing in, going on and looking down at the tracks.

And when at last he looked up, the timber stood round a pool of light, and the bear was standing still and small at the far side of the brake, careless, unheeding. He brought the rifle up, and the bear raised and turned its head and made no sign of fear. It was small and black in the deep shade and dappled with light, its body turned three-quarters away and standing perfectly still, and the flat head and the small black eyes that were fixed upon him hung round upon the shoulder and under the hump of the spine. The bear was young and heavy with tallow, and the underside of the body and the backs of its short, thick legs were tufted with winter hair, longer and lighter than the rest, and dull as dust. His hand tightened on the stock and the rifle bucked and the sharp report rang upon the walls and carried out upon the slopes, and he heard the sudden scattering of birds overhead and saw the darting shadows all around. The bullet slammed into the flesh and jarred the whole black body once, but the head remained motionless and the eyes level upon him. Then, and for one instant only, there was a sad and meaningless haste. The bear turned away and lumbered, though not with fear, not with any hurt, but haste, mere and merely reflexive, a single step, or two, or three, and it was overcome. It shuddered and looked round again and fell.

The hunt was over, and only then could he hurry; it was over and well done. The wound was small and clean, behind the foreleg and low on the body, where the fur and flesh were thin, and there was no blood at the mouth. He took out his pouch of pollen and made yellow streaks above the bear's eyes. It was almost noon, and he hur-

ried. He disembowelled the bear and laid the flesh open with splints, so that the blood should not run into the fur and stain the hide. He ate quickly of the bear's liver, taking it with him, thinking what he must do, remembering now his descent upon the rock and the whole lay of the land, all the angles of his vision from the ridge. He went quickly, a quarter of a mile or more down the ravine, until he came to a place where the horses could keep their footing on the near side of the ridge. The blood of the bear was on him, and the bear's liver was warm and wet in his hand. He came upon the ridge and the colt grew wild in its eyes and blew, pulling away, and its hooves clattered on the rock and the skin crawled at the roots of its mane. He approached it slowly, talking to it, and took hold of the reins. The hunting horse watched, full of age and indifference, switching its tail. There was no time to lose. He held hard to the reins, turning down the bit in the colt's mouth, and his voice rose a little and was edged. Slowly he brought the bear's flesh up to the flaring nostrils of the colt and smeared the muzzle with it.

And he rode the colt back down the mountain, leading the hunting horse with the bear on its back, and like the old hunting horse and the young black bear, he and the colt had come of age and were hunters too. He made camp that night far down in the peneplain and saw the stars and heard the coyotes away by the river. And in the early morning he rode into the town. He was a man then, and smeared with blood of a bear. He fired the rifle four times in the air, and the women came out to meet him. They came with meal and switches of cane and willow, singing, calling out. They spoke to the dead bear and sprinkled meal upon it and laid their switches to the soft black fur of the bear's body. He rode above them on the buckskin colt, looking straight ahead.

THE EAGLES OF THE VALLE GRANDE

HE had seen a strange thing, an eagle overhead with its talons closed upon a snake. It was an awful, holy sight, full of magic and meaning.

The Eagle Watchers Society was the sixth to go into the kiva at the summer and autumn rain retreats. It was an important society, and it stood apart from the others in a certain way. This difference—this superiority—had come about a long time ago. Before the middle of the last century there was received into the population of the town

a small group of immigrants from the Tanoan city of Bahkyula, a distance of seventy or eighty miles to the east. These immigrants were a wretched people, for they had experienced great suffering. Their land bordered upon the Southern Plains, and for many years they had been an easy mark for marauding bands of buffalo hunters and thieves. They had endured every kind of persecution until one day they could stand no more and their spirit broke. They gave themselves up to despair and were then at the mercy of the first alien wind. But it was not a human enemy that overcame them at last; it was a plague. They were struck down by so deadly a disease that, when the epidemic abated, there were fewer than twenty survivors in all. And this remainder, too, should surely have perished among the ruins of Bahkyula had it not been for these *patrones*, these distant relatives who took them in at the certain risk of their own lives and the lives of their children and grandchildren. It is said that the *cacique* himself went out to welcome and escort the visitors in. The people of the town must have looked narrowly at those stricken souls who walked slowly towards them, wild in their eyes with grief and desperation. The Bahkyush immigrants brought with them little more than the clothes on their backs, but even in this moment of deep hurt and humiliation, they thought of themselves as a people. They carried three things that should serve thereafter to signal who they were: a sacred flute; the bull mask of Pecos; and the little wooden statue of their patroness *Maria de los Angeles*, whom they called *Porcingula*. Now, after the intervening years and generations, the ancient blood of this forgotten tribe still ran in the veins of men.

The Eagle Watchers Society was the principal ceremonial organization of the Bahkyush. Its chief, *Patiestewa*, and all its members were direct descendants of those old men and women who had made that journey along the edge of oblivion. There was a look about these men, even now. It was as if, conscious of having come so close to extinction, they had got a keener sense of humility than their benefactors, and paradoxically a greater sense of pride. Both attributes could be seen in such a man as old *Patiestewa*. He was hard, and he appeared to have seen more of life than had other men. In their uttermost peril long ago, the Bahkyush had been fashioned into seers and soothsayers. They had acquired a tragic sense, which gave to them as a race so much dignity and bearing. They were medicine men; they were rainmakers and eagle hunters.

He was not thinking of the eagles. He had been walking since day-

break down from the mountain where that year he had broken a horse for the rancher John Raymond. By the middle of the morning he was on the rim of the Valle Grande, a great volcanic crater that lay high up on the western slope of the range. It was the right eye of the earth, held open to the sun. Of all the places that he knew, this valley alone could reflect the great spatial majesty of the sky. It was scooped out of the dark peaks like the well of a great, gathering storm, deep umber and blue and smoke-colored. The view across the diameter was magnificent; it was an unbelievably great expanse. As many times as he had been there in the past, each first new sight of it always brought him up short, and he had to catch his breath. Just there, it seemed, a strange and brilliant light lay upon the world, and all the objects in the landscape were washed clean and set away in the distance. In the morning sunlight the Valle Grande was dappled with the shadows of clouds and vibrant with rolling winter grass. The clouds were always there, huge, sharply described, and shining in the pure air. But the great feature of the valley was its size. It was too great for the eye to hold, strangely beautiful and full of distance. Such vastness makes for illusion, a kind of illusion that comprehends reality, and where it exists there is always wonder and exhilaration. He looked at the facets of a boulder that lay balanced on the edge of the land, and the first thing beyond, the vague, misty field out of which it stood, was the floor of the valley itself, pale and blue-green, miles away. He shifted the focus of his gaze, and he could just make out the clusters of dots that were cattle grazing along the river in the faraway plain.

Then he saw the eagles across the distance, two of them, riding low in the depths and rising diagonally towards him. He did not know what they were at first, and he stood watching them, their far, silent flight erratic and wild in the bright morning. They rose and swung across the skyline, veering close at last, and he knelt down behind the rock, dumb with pleasure and excitement, holding on to them with his eyes.

They were golden eagles, a male and a female, in their mating flight. They were cavorting, spinning and spiralling on the cold, clear columns of air, and they were beautiful. They swooped and hovered, leaning on the air, and swung close together, feinting and screaming with delight. The female was full-grown, and the span of her broad wings was greater than any man's height. There was a fine flourish to her motion; she was deceptively, incredibly fast, and her pivots and wheels were wide and full-blown. But her great weight was stream-

lined, perfectly controlled. She carried a rattlesnake; it hung shining from her feet, limp and curving out in the trail of her flight. Suddenly her wings and tail fanned, catching full on the wind, and for an instant she was still, widespread and spectral in the blue, while her mate flared past and away, turning round in the distance to look for her. Then she began to beat upward at an angle from the rim until she was small in the sky, and she let go of the snake. It fell, slowly, writhing and rolling, floating out like a bit of silver thread against the wide backdrop of the land. She held still above, buoyed up on the cold current, her crop and hackles gleaming like copper in the sun. The male swerved and sailed. He was younger than she and a little more than half as large. He was quicker, tighter in his moves. He let the carrion drift by; then suddenly he gathered himself and stooped, sliding down in a blur of motion to the strike. He hit the snake in the head, with not the slightest deflection of his course or speed, cracking its long body like a whip. Then he rolled and swung upward in a great pendulum arc, riding out his momentum. At the top of his glide he let go of the snake in turn, but the female did not go for it. Instead she soared out over the plain, nearly out of sight, like a mote receding into the haze of the far mountain. The male followed, and he watched them go, straining to see, saw them veer once, dip and disappear.

Now there was the business of the society. It was getting on towards the end of November, and the eagle hunters were getting ready to set forth to the mountains. He brooded for a time, full of a strange longing; then one day he went to old Patiestewa and told him of what he had seen. "I think you had better let me go," he said. The old chief closed his eyes and thought about it for a long time. Then he answered: "Yes, I had better let you go."

The next day the Bahkyush eagle watchers started out on foot, he among them, northward through the canyon and into the high timber beyond. They were gone for days, holding up here and there at the holy places where they must pray and make their offerings. Early in the morning they came out of the trees on the edge of the Valle Grande. The land fell and reached away in the early light as far as the eye could see, the hills folding together and the gray grass rolling in the plain, and they began the descent. At midmorning they came to the lower meadows in the basin. It was clear and cold, and the air was thin and sharp like a shard of glass. They needed bait, and they circled out and apart, forming a ring. When the circle was formed, they con-

verged slowly towards the center, clapping and calling out in a high, flat voice that carried only a little way. And as they closed, rabbits began to jump up from the grass and bound. They got away at first, many of them, while the men were still a distance apart, but gradually the ring grew small and the rabbits crept to the center and hid away in the brush. Now and then one of them tried to break away, and the nearest man threw his stick after it. These weapons were small curved clubs, and they were thrown with deadly accuracy by the eagle hunters, so that when the ring was of a certain size and the men only a few feet apart, very few of the animals got away.

He bent close to the ground, his arm cocked and shaking with tension. A great jackrabbit buck bounded from the grass, straight past him. It struck the ground beyond and sprang again, nearly thirty feet through the air. He spun round and hurled the stick. It struck the jackrabbit a glancing blow just as it bounded again, and it slumped in the air and fell heavily to the ground.

The clapping and calling had stopped. He could feel his heart beating and the sweat growing cold on his skin. There was something like remorse or disappointment now that the rabbits were still and strewn about on the ground. He picked one of the dead animals from the brush—it was warm and soft, its eyes shining like porcelain, full of the dull lustre of death—then the great buck, which was not dead but only stunned and frozen with fear. He felt the warm living weight of it in his hands; it was brittle with life, taut with hard, sinewy strength.

When he had bound the bait together and placed it in the sack, he gathered bunches of tall grass and cut a number of evergreen boughs from a thicket in the plain; these he tied in a bundle and carried in a sling on his back. He went to the river and washed his head in order to purify himself. When all was ready, he waved to the others and started off alone to the cliffs. When he came to the first plateau he rested and looked out across the valley. The sun was high, and all around there was a pale, dry uniformity of light, a winter glare on the clouds and peaks. He could see a crow circling low in the distance. Higher on the land, where a great slab of white rock protruded from the mountain, he saw the eagle-hunt house; he headed for it. The house was a small tower of stone, built round a pit, hollow and open at the top. Near it was a shrine, a stone shelf in which there was a slight depression. There he placed a prayer offering. He got into the house, and with boughs he made a latticework of beams across the top and covered it with grass. When it was finished there was a small

opening at the center. Through it he raised the rabbits and laid them down on the boughs. He could see here and there through the screen, but his line of vision was vertical, or nearly so, and his quarry would come from the sun. He began to sing, now and then calling out, low in his throat.

The eagles soared southward, high above the Valle Grande. They were almost too high to be seen. From their vantage point the land below reached away on either side to the long, crooked tributaries of the range; down the great open corridor to the south were the wooded slopes and the canyon, the desert and the far end of the earth bending on the sky. They caught sight of the rabbits and were deflected. They veered and banked, lowering themselves into the crater, gathering speed. By the time he knew of their presence, they were low and coming fast on either side of the pit, swooping with blinding speed. The male caught hold of the air and fell off, touching upon the face of the cliff in order to flush the rabbits, while the female hurtled in to take her prey on the run. Nothing happened; the rabbits did not move. She overshot the trap and screamed. She was enraged and she hurled herself around in the air. She swung back with a great clamor of her wings and fell with fury on the bait. He saw her in the instant she struck. Her foot flashed out and one of her talons laid the jack-rabbit open the length of its body. It stiffened and jerked, and her other foot took hold of its skull and crushed it. In that split second when the center of her weight touched down upon the trap he reached for her. His hands closed upon her legs and he drew her down with all of his strength. For one instant only did she recoil, splashing her great wings down upon the beams and boughs—and she very nearly broke from his grasp; but then she was down in the darkness of the well, hooded, and she was still.

At dusk he met with the other hunters in the plain. San Juanito, too, had got an eagle, but it was an aged male and poor by comparison. They gathered round the old eagle and spoke to it, bidding it return with their good will and sorrow to the eagles of the crags. They fixed a prayer plume to its leg and let it go. He watched it back away and crouch on the ground, glaring, full of fear and suspicion. Then it took leave of the ground and beat upward, clattering through the still shadows of the valley. It gathered speed, driving higher and higher until it reached the shafts of reddish-gold final light that lay like bars across the crater. The light caught it up and set a dark blaze upon it. It levelled off and sailed. Then it was gone from sight, but

he looked after it for a time. He could see it still in the mind's eye and hear in his memory the awful whisper of its flight on the wind. He felt the great weight of the bird which he held in the sack. The dusk was fading quickly into night, and the others could not see that his eyes were filled with tears.

That night, while the others ate by the fire, he stole away to look at the great bird. He drew the sack open; the bird shivered, he thought, and drew itself up. Bound and helpless, his eagle seemed drab and shapeless in the moonlight, too large and ungainly for flight. The sight of it filled him with shame and disgust. He took hold of its throat in the darkness and cut off its breath.

✻ N. SCOTT MOMADAY's first publication was a poem in *NMQ*, Summer, 1959. Three other poems appeared in the Spring 1961 issue of this magazine. An associate professor of English at the University of California, Santa Barbara, Momaday is the editor of *The Complete Poems of Frederick Goddard Tuckerman*. His novel, *House Made of Dawn*, from which these sketches were drawn, will be published later this year by Harper and Row, and Mr. Momaday is currently working on a book of criticism tentatively entitled, *Anti-Romantic American Poetry of the 19th Century*. He has spent 1966-67 on a Guggenheim Fellowship. His work has appeared in the *New York Times Book Review*, *The Reporter*, and *The Southern Review*. A truly remarkable piece appeared in *The Reporter* for January 27, 1967.

Alligator's Hopes in a Tadpole Town

BY LOUIS DELL LOGAN

THE DAY he left Texas, Alligator said, "I'm twisting free of the oil-drilling rigs and I'm going to learn something new."

Confidently pursuing that objective, he parked his car on the eastern edge of Ranger, Wyoming, at a roadside cafe. He went inside and ordered coffee. A man entered and talked to the waitress. He came over to Alligator and asked, "Are you a truck driver?"

"Yes."

"Where'd you drive?"

"Down home. Water truck, servicing the rigs."

"Gas?"

"Huh?" said Alligator trying desperately to manage the vapory situation.

"Was the truck gas or diesel?"

"It ran on gas."

"Did you ever drive a diesel?"

"No," admitted Alligator.

"Well, I'm sorry. I'd give you a try at it, but I'm pushing a fleet of new ones and I'm responsible for them. Diesels are a lot different than gas rigs. You can't lug them. You got to watch the tack, so it don't run into the pump. No, I can't chance it and I'm sorry. You understand I'm responsible for the new trucks."

"That's okay," said Alligator and he returned to drinking coffee. Just after lunch Bearfoot approached him. "You want a job?"

"Sure."

"You can have mine. I worked for that poorboy outfit long enough."

"Is it a truck driving job?" asked Alligator.

"Yeah, if you call that dog a truck. You can make a student run right now if you want to. The boss is standing over there by the green Mack. See him? That's the other driver with him."

Alligator walked to the truck and asked the boss for a job. It was a double bottom with insulated tanks.

"Fellow in the cafe said you might need a driver."

"You mean Bearfoot. Yeah, he just quit. He gets impatient when the truck isn't running right. More than once I've said, 'Man, you got to have patience. These trucks break down once in a while.'"

Alligator was impatient to get hired. "What's she hold?" he asked, nodding toward the empty truck.

"Hundred barrels on the truck and eighty barrels on the pup-trailer. As I was saying, 'You got to have patience, Bearfoot,' I'd tell him. 'Patience, hell,' he'd yell, 'you got to blow and go to make any money. Otherwise you're going to get sucked under.'" The boss laughed at his story. "Are you a truck driver?" he asked when he stopped laughing.

"Yes."

"Ever drove smoker before?"

"Sure."

"Know how to split gears?"

"Yeah."

"What did you drive?"

"Hauled water down home to the rigs. It was a diesel semi."

"Never run a dog and pup?"

"No."

"It takes a while to get the hang of it. Make a couple student runs and you'll be an old hand at it. Pups are a little tricky, if you've never pulled one. They get obstinate sometimes and try to pass you and then you jackknife all over hell."

Alligator rode with the other driver and made his student runs. The driver soon found out that Alligator didn't know the first thing about driving a diesel; but that was all right, he said he would teach him; and so for three days Alligator drove and the other man supervised. And when the boss asked the driver how Alligator was doing, the man said, "Fine, fine. He's a good driver. But give him a few more days to get used to the pup. You know how tricky they are."

A few days after Alligator started working at his new job, he met Bearfoot in the cafe. "Hey, man," called Bearfoot, "I saw you got the job. Has that dog eat your lunch yet?"

"No. She goes right on down the road, pulling and making that pup the most mindful thing you ever saw."

"How do you like working for Jim?"

"He's okay so far," said Alligator, still playing his new role cautiously. He did not feel his position was secure; and so he remained reserved when he was around the other drivers. It was best, he had thought, if he didn't push his luck and advertise his worminess. So he played his role cautiously and said, "He's okay."

"Well, he wasn't okay with me," said Bearfoot. "I tried to be his friend. But he wouldn't listen to me. I'd say, 'Jim, this poorboying won't do. You got to highroll. You got to blow and go to make money. Them other truckers ain't poorboying it and they're going to suck you under.' Then he'd say, 'Patience, Bearfoot. Have patience.' 'Patience, hell,' I'd say."

"I'LL LET YOU DO THE DRIVING," the man told him, "except for Williston Grade. You wake me up for that, if I'm sleeping."

"Okay," said Alligator.

The trucks are big and it is a long way from the ground to the driver's seat. A diesel has a way of quivering like a big horse. When the driver puts one foot on the running board and gives that little bounce up to catch the handle on the side of the cab, he can feel the shiver like the nervous shiver a horse gets when he wants to go. The driver catches the feeling. He feels the restraint like reins and he pops the clutch to release the energy. Hop, hop, the truck stands and bucks up and down.

"I told you before, not to clutch so fast. The pup's got eighty barrels on her and she's got to be nursed out of her standstill."

So the clutch was gently slipped and the pup responded. "There, that's better, Alligator." There were two gearshift levers on the floor in the cab. One was the over-and-under shift and the other was the main box. It was necessary for the driver to use both hands on every other shift.

"When she's loaded start her in low-under. Each gear has an over and under. When you got rpm, then shift to low-over. Now you're splitting gears. That's right, now hook your arm through the steering wheel, so you can steer with your elbow and shift her to second-under. Now the rpm again. One hand, that's it, second-over. Good. Now walk her that way. Half a gear at a time, to fifth-over. Dollar gets you a doughnut, you don't get past fourth-under and the little hill up there will take you down again. That's right, you got to walk her

down the same way you just came up. A half gear at a time. A truck driver never stops shifting in this rolling country."

After the fifth day Alligator was making the hauls by himself. It was ninety miles to Pipecity and he liked to drive it at night. It had been daylight when he had made his first student run; and when the other driver had said, "Guess you can take it now," he had crawled across the two gearshift levers and taken his place behind the wheel. The steering wheel was at least twice the diameter of the one in his own car. And it was during that fateful second that he first doubted his wisdom in changing occupations. Through the mirrors on each side of the truck, he could see back along the truck, and then after that, back along the side of the trailer. The double-bottom was sixty feet long and the distance seemed longer since the total length of his own car, which he was used to driving, was barely more than twice the width of the cab he rode in. "Well, let's go," the other driver had said. Alligator with no more idea of how to move a truck than a trail said, "Wait a minute now. Maybe you better draw me a shift pattern on the dash. I think maybe the shift is different on this one than the one I drove."

The other man had bluntly guessed Alligator's predicament. "Never drove a truck before huh?" So the other man had taught him how to drive. He even said Alligator caught on fast and after a few trips, he began to sleep while Alligator drove. "I'll let you do all the driving, except for Williston grade. You wake me up for that, if I'm sleeping."

So Alligator learned to drive in the daylight, but he preferred to make the trips at night. After loading from the tank batteries north of town, he would stop at the all-night cafe before going south of Pipecity. Climbing down from the seat of his truck and jumping finally the last little way to the ground, he always felt something go out of him. It was as if he had relinquished something of himself and left it shuddering with the truck when he went inside the cafe.

After he had visited the cafe where it was warm and varnished, and he had eaten and filled his thermos bottle, he would return to the parking lot to sort through the trucks for his own. It was like the other trucks except maybe older, and the clearance lights of red and amber, which marked well in the night, were perhaps dimmer than those on the others, but there was something about it. And he would find it and it would be gently rocking from the uneven throw of the motor. And that unevenness was like a pride pulse which he inherited

as he climbed into the cab. For an instant he would wish it was daylight all the way to Texas, so his friends could see him. And he could say, "You got to admit old Alligator's not roughnecking this year. Unless you can't see to tell a diesel truck from a hole in the ground."

Then he would release the air brakes and it would sound like the grease rack in a service station coming down. And when the eighteen wheels were free to roll, he would put the transmission in low-under and move away from the parking lot. Above the right-hand mirror was a smaller one, and it was called a stack mirror. And through the mirror he could see the top of the exhaust pipe extending above the cab. In the daytime, smoke, like ribbon, unfurled out of the top of the pipe and hung above the road for miles in the rear. But at night-time there was only fire coming out of the top; and if it was a foot high and had a nice point, that meant the truck was running right.

So we would move away from the all-night cafe and shift to low-over. When the rpm was back up again, he would glance up at the stack mirror. And the flame would be just right. Then he would hook his arm through the steering wheel and move both shift levers to second-under. A half gear at a time, he would work his way through the dark night, the red and amber clearance lights bouncing in the side mirrors and the pointed flame standing in the stack mirror. He was conscious of it all, the light, the stack, the night, and the complex of gears which kept him busy.

ONE DAY Alligator's boss came to wake him and tell him the truck had had a fire. "What kind of fire?" asked Alligator, still too sleepy to comprehend.

"Under the hood. All the wiring burned."

"Guess that means I won't make a trip tonight, huh?"

"That's about right. But we'll get it back on the road faster if you will come over today and help me and the other driver rewire it."

He had returned from Pipecity that morning and had been in bed only a few hours, but he agreed to help rewire the truck. It was his first taste of being driver by night and mechanic by day. Poorboying it, Bearfoot had called it. They started with a roll of electrical tape, but by the afternoon they were using Band-Aids from the boss's medicine cabinet; and all day they used old wire for the job. So Alligator was disgusted with poorboying and went up to town when they stopped for the evening.

He went to Slim's Cafe for dinner and after that he planned to go to the Center Bar. Slim's food was always half-cooled and greasy so that it turned white and thick before it reached the customer's stomach. The roughnecks ate there because Slim's prices were reasonable and he stayed open late and also he was near the Center Bar. Everything on the menu was a dollar and a quarter except the T-bone steaks and they were two dollars and a half. After the roughnecks got drunk at the Center Bar they ate mostly T-bone steaks.

Slim and his wife wore greasy aprons. Mrs. Slim wore her hair long, stringy and stiff, and some of it always managed to get in the food. The place was a thriving enterprise, a regular bubbling pot of oil-field workers, called roughnecks, coming and going all the time. Mrs. Slim liked to serve a carrot and mayonnaise salad; and most of the roughnecks growled and said, "Do I look like a goddam rabbit?" So she took it back and served it again to another customer. Sometimes it was served three or four times before it was touched. She served vanilla pudding several times a week and the rest of the time she served tapioca pudding. Pie and cake did not come with the meal and were extra. The regular dessert reminded the men of cat snot and fish eyes. So they paid extra for pie.

Through the front window of the cafe, Alligator could see the people passing on their way to the movie theatre. The moviegoers parked their cars up by the auction barn and walked by the cafe. Soon a line began to form of people going to the movie. They stared in the window and Alligator's gaze retreated. Slim's Cafe was a sharp contrast to the trucker's all-night cafe where Alligator had been eating since he arrived. The green walls were discolored and yellow. The highly varnished walls of the trucker's cafe were clean and he had enjoyed his meals there. But he couldn't think of the varnished walls without thinking of trucking and that made his anger come up with the recollection of the day. Bearfoot hadn't stood for the poorboying and he wondered if he could. Suddenly Slim's greasy cafe took on new meaning in Alligator's mind. It was old fashioned, solid comfort, a roughneck cafe, and he was a little bit proud to be there.

"What you gonna have?" asked Mrs. Slim, her hair falling straight like rain.

"Pork steak," said Alligator in a very happy mood. It was as if he had been walking on eggs. All the lies about truck driving in Texas had gotten to him, and always knowing in the back of his mind that

the lie-story would have fallen apart if it had been questioned closely. But Slim's Cafe was oil-field ground. And he understood it. He could talk rig talk all night and be able to tell the worms from the weevils, and be able to tell the roughnecks from both. It was real solid comfort to be able to feel loose like that, and he decided to eat in accordance.

"Hey, ma'am. Change that pork order to T-bone, will you?"

Slim's wife turned and wiped the hair from her eyes. "It's kind of early to be eating so good, ain't it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Mostly you roughnecks get drunk before you eat T-bone steaks."

"Well, I plan on doing that too, ma'am. Just as soon as I finish eating."

All the stools at the bar were taken and the television was going. There was a bowling machine in the corner and the large crowd around it blocked the passageway to the dance floor.

"Are they going to dance tonight?" Alligator asked the man next to him.

"No. They only have dances on Friday and Saturday night."

The bar was brightly lighted with bar bulbs and it was warm in the room. "I'll have another beer," Alligator instructed the bartender. And when he got it he said to the man sitting beside him, "Why don't they have dances on Wednesday night?"

The man thought about it for a little while and then said, "I don't know. Guess they just don't, that's all."

Occasionally there would be great shouts and laughter from the men surrounding the bowling machine. "He did it again. You keep that up, Bearfoot, and you'll never have to work. How much did you win that time?"

Alligator thought about getting up and going over to Bearfoot and telling him that he was right. That poorboying wasn't worth it. Any man who hooked up with a poorboy outfit was crazy. But when he glanced over to where he heard Bearfoot's name called, he only saw the backs of the crowd drawn close once again. And he could hear the balls slamming down the runway and the click, click of the score registering. But he couldn't see Bearfoot. So he said to the man next to him, "Well, tell me. Is there anyplace where a man can dance on Wednesday night?"

"Not that I know of."

There was no reason to continue talking along those lines so Alligator got to wondering what Bearfoot was doing there. He ordered another beer and watched television. The bartender came over during the sports broadcast. "I think Sanchez will take the Canadian Friday night."

"I don't know," said Alligator.

"It'll be on the TV Friday night. I don't let the dance start till after the fight, come on by and watch it."

"I'll do that," said Alligator, and he watched the television. Someone had won ten thousand dollars playing golf that day. Much later Bearfoot emerged from the crowd surrounding the bowling machine.

"Hey there, friend," he said to Alligator, "how you getting along with that dog and pup?"

"Okay," said Alligator, "you want a beer?"

"Sure," said Bearfoot. "I hear you had a fire on the truck this morning. Sure glad I quit. Has Jim got you out there rewiring it?"

"Yeah."

"He's pretty smart that way. He's a poorboy's poorboy. Why don't you quit and get a better driving job? There's better outfits than him around to drive for."

"Maybe I will later on. I'll stay with him for a while."

"I don't think I'll ever go back to work. I found me a gold mine right here in this roughneck bar. Found out I'm a natural bowler on the machine. And these old boys are suckers for a bet. Look at that." Bearfoot reached into his pocket and produced a hand full of currency. "There's over seventy bucks there. Do you know how much that is in wages? That's three and a half trips to Pipecity with a load of crude."

"Sounds like you're doing okay."

"Doing great. You bet I am. And when I get through with these guys I think I'll buy myself a bowling machine and take it wherever they strike oil. And break each town. You ought to learn to bowl. Maybe I'll let you be my partner and we'll buy two machines."

WHEN THE TRUCK was fixed and back on the road, Alligator felt better. But his pleasure with truck driving never reached the point it had before the fire. That something special had gone. He got rough with the truck and became a faster driver. "You got to blow and go," Bearfoot had said; Alligator chose to interpret literally. When

he caught whole gears and took his share of the road from the center, he found he cut the driving time to eight and a half over his previous trips. Still he banged away like a maniac trying to break his own records.

The hills to Pipecity came even and frequent like ribs on a washboard. His method of conquering them was simple and timeworn. It was to barrel the truck off the top of the hill and let the momentum, and all the acceleration he could get from the pedal, carry him most of the way up the next one, so that after the wild, roller-coaster ride was over, the truck was far enough up to make the lug-power speed tolerable on his nerves. So well did the strategy work that hill after hill fell like objections on a Friday night.

The day of the dance he was in a particular hurry. He was making a record run by catching more whole gears than usual and for a while it seemed he would be back in Ranger long before the dance started. But he got behind a little old lady with a statue of the Virgin on her dashboard. And she didn't seem to have any particular destination. Spring had arrived and the little flowers were peeping through the generous growth. And there was a tremendous lot of daring on their part among the sage. Colors clashed as if it was a church holiday. And the little old lady nosily took it all in.

When he first saw her she was driving very slowly across the dead spot between the two hills. He tried to pass her, but was instantly aware of his mistake. The misjudged situation came in the form of a car on the horizon and in an effort to correct it, he pulled the air-brake lever. The pup hunched and squealed and left black marks on the highway trying to stop. But the little gray car disappeared under the radiator anyway. He thought he had killed her, but when he looked up again, she darted away like a jackrabbit.

She quickly outdistanced him and he forgot the near accident. Happily he followed her new speed over the hills. As he would top a hill he could see her top the one beyond. So they went crest after crest like a chase, until the little gray car got winded, or slowed down from habit, and his truck caught it again. Then his old problem was back. He couldn't get the down-hill speed because she was in the valley. And without it he couldn't make the hills.

The truck in low-under pulled and strained against the gravity of the last valley. The power of the engine decreased with each turn, and it began to whine and moan like a galley slave, until a balance of

pull was found at the top of the hill. Then the sound of the motor changed and it grew stronger as the truck went over the top and down. And with each forward, plunging foot it got more aggressive and the engine screamed in deadly anger. But the little old lady was in the valley. And that little sheep of a woman in a rabbit-colored car would quell the fury and the power and the drive of the truck but not of the man. He was at wit's end and his anger grew like something huge and awesome which controls the destiny of things.

It was spring and the sage smell was fresh in the air; and he rolled down his window and listened to the motor lug its way up another hill. His anger mounted like a storm cloud, as he watched the nervous lady who refused to let him pass. She watched his truck in her rear-view mirror, and he knew her feeling because he too had glanced up at different times in his life and had seen a huge truck's radiator blocking out everything else in the mirror; and he knew too that to a driver of a little car there was nothing to do but speed up or move over. Yes, he knew the feeling. And he knew he was squeezing the orange now. He hated the woman with the skinny little neck who drove with both hands, and hunched over the wheel like a dog making dung. So great was his wrath that he couldn't appreciate the courage or faith she had in her conviction; he only understood force and power and size. She watched him closely in her mirror. And he thought to himself, you better watch me close, ma'am, 'cause I'm going to suck you up on the next hill. Then he saw her replace the statue on the dash. He hadn't noticed it was gone; but he took strength from her act of replacing it, because he knew she had been holding it since the near accident. It meant she was scared and that was what he wanted. Finally her car went over the top of the hill and slowly disappeared. His patience for revenge carried him to the top and he went over like a storm. And down, down he went catching whole gear after whole gear. The black smoke poured out of the stack and there was no faltering or let up in the assault. Just before her car was consumed by his radiator, and with no concern for life or property on the highway, he swung to the left lane and grabbed the air-horn chain. So great was the momentum that he nearly crested the next hill. When he looked in the mirror he saw the car in the ditch and the little old lady shaking her statue at him.

She could wave her artifact until she thought it was a baton. He didn't care. And he wasn't going to stop. After that each mile was

sweeter because it had been good revenge. It had poured out of him like smoke out of the stack. And she had felt his anger. She had gone for the ditch like a rabbit for a hole.

He was feeling very good when he arrived at the truck turnaround in Pipecity. He parked and stretched in the wind. It made him feel cool and he went up and over the cab to his work. The hatches on top had to be opened to prevent the tanks from collapsing when the belly hoses were attached and the suction pumps started. Usually the lids were stuck like bottle caps and had to be pried open. And when the seals were opened, strong vapors escaped from the tanks. Intoxicating fumes rose on the wind like honky-tonk music on a Saturday night.

"Don't want to smoke around them fumes," Alligator had been told on the first trip. "You can dump the oil but you can't get the fumes out. Only way to get the fumes out is to steam the tank. So don't get careless."

Twenty minutes later Alligator shined his flashlight in the tank. Its light ricocheted from the empty bottom. Impatient to get to Ranger, he slammed the hatches and drove away.

When Alligator got back from Pipecity, he cleaned up, and hurriedly ate at Slim's Cafe before he went to the dance. The dance had started and the bar was crowded. He could hear the Western music coming from the dancing floor in the next room. "Give me a bourbon and water." When the bartender brought it Alligator asked, "Is it always this crowded?"

"It's not crowded yet. Wait till later, its gets better. Hey, I thought you were going to come by and watch the fight tonight."

"I was," said Alligator, "but I met some slow traffic on my trip and got put behind time. Who won?"

"The Canadian. I lost on Sanchez. Well, I got to go, the place is hopping tonight."

The usual large crowd was around the bowling machine and the traffic from the bar to the dance floor was having difficulty squeezing past it.

"Why in the hell don't they move the machine out of here?"

"Cause it pays the rent, that's why."

It was getting more crowded all the time and everyone was carrying his drink high with his elbows in. But even that didn't do much good and the drinks were spilled frequently. Alligator bought a spare

drink and went over to talk to Bearfoot. He hadn't heard Bearfoot's name called but he was sure he was there somewhere in the middle of those people. "Hey, Bearfoot," he called when he found he couldn't penetrate the crowd. "Are you there?"

"Who's that?" came the answer from the center.

"It's me, Alligator. If you get a break after a while, I'll buy you a drink."

"That's just fine, Alligator. I'll talk to you later, I'm working right now."

Finally he worked his way around the end of the bar, through the edge of the bowling crowd, and into the darkened dance area. There were dark wooden booths on each side of the rectangular room. And for a few moments he could see nothing except the band. They wore brilliant rodeo clothing that sparkled in the stage light. "Move over, I can't see." Alligator felt someone touch his arm and he turned to see a group of men standing along the wall. He had been standing in front of them and so he stepped back and joined them against the wall.

"I'm sorry."

As his eyes became adjusted he began to look into the dark booths. The confines of each were a shade darker than the room and even after his eyes had become accustomed to the dark, he could barely distinguish between men and women. After his survey of the crowd, he put the number of women at about one fifth of the total. But that wasn't bad odds for a Texas country boy who liked hoedown music. He peered intently through the darkness, trying to fix his gaze on some particular girl, but he couldn't see well enough.

"What's supposed to happen?" he asked, turning to the man leaning on the wall nearest him. "Do them gals get up and come asking us to dance?"

"I never seen them ask anybody to dance."

"What do you do then? Go over there?"

"I don't know, I don't dance."

Alligator figured the odds on the Texas country boy finding a gal were going up by the minute. He wished the room was lighter because it was hard to see into the booths. Even up close, he couldn't see that well. The evil of darkness cancelled all expression in the booths and it was like talking on the telephone. He liked to see reaction when he spoke, but it was impossible standing outside the booth.

Besides he hated to ask just any old gal to dance, because he might get an ugly one. But on second thought, he guessed that wouldn't be too bad. At least he would get into a booth that way and maybe he could work on a better looking one.

So he stood before a booth which had five figures and three of them women and he said, "You want to dance?" And a voice said "Which one of us?" And he couldn't tell which one said it. So he pointed at one and said, "You." She arose and he saw he could have done worse. As they started, she said, "I don't normally dance with strangers."

"Who do you dance with, then?"

"My brother-in-law. My husband don't dance."

"Well, I feel mighty privileged you danced with me, ma'am."

"I like to dance."

"Which one of the other two is single?"

"The one on the end," said his partner pointing toward the dark figures at the booth. "But she's not single. She just came with us tonight. Her husband's working and they live next door in the same trailer court as us."

"Do you reckon it would be all right if I joined you at the table? I'm getting mighty tired standing against that wall."

She said she thought it would be okay and when the dance was over the group at the table said, "Sure, come on and join us." They all moved over and he sat next to the one on the end.

"Is everybody comfortable?" Alligator asked, but he directed his question at the woman sitting next to him. She looked like a pioneer's wife, or someone who had worked all her life in a jerky factory. She put out a leathery hand and said, "Don't think I ever saw you in here before. Call me Billy."

"Folks call me Alligator."

He bought a round of drinks and everyone wanted to know what he did. After that, it was his turn to find out what everyone else did. And then they were quiet until the brother-in-law bought a round of drinks. Alligator said to Billy, "You want to dance, honey?" She nodded in a sort of big-eyed watery way so he got to thinking that maybe her eyes were kind of pretty at that. She danced well and he said, "Have you lived in Ranger long?" And she shook her head, no, in a dreamy way like the movies. So he said, "Talk." She said, "What can I say?"

"Where do you come from?"

She said, "Louisiana."

He said, "You know what people call Louisianians?"

"Yes, I know, but I don't like to hear it."

So he said, "I come from Texas." And he was feeling romantic and wished the music wasn't so ragged.

She said, "That's where my husband is from."

"Where is he now? Working?"

And she nodded. They continued to dance around and around and with each turn Billy got softer and finally didn't look leathery at all. She was a little more on the skinny side than Alligator liked but that was all right. He wouldn't mind taking her with him. She could probably wear clothes pretty good. Some of them could and some of them couldn't. A man couldn't be cheap though, when it came to dressing his woman. It took a payday at least to dress them right. Then he had something he could be proud of. You got to dress them up, if you want them to look good while you travel. A woman would be a good thing to have along if a man was going to hop around a lot.

"Do you like the music?" he asked.

She nodded in that delicious way of hers and so he bent and kissed her fresh on the mouth. She responded with pressure.

"I like smoother music," he said, "this is rougher than a stucco bathtub."

"I like smooth music too," she said.

They rejoined the group at the table and fresh drinks. They were the only ones in the group still friendly to all. The brother-in-law had asked his sister-in-law to dance once too often, according to the husband.

The harsh words distracted from their fun, so they went back to dancing. With each turn she got softer and softer until she was so soft, he thought he could separate her into little pieces with his fingers as he could with jello. And on they danced and he said, "How do you spend your days?"

"I read a lot of romance," she said.

They danced on and he spun her madly as if trying to spin her out of her familiar axis. Sometimes when they took a turn she would glance up almost shyly and her big eyes would be watering and his heart would kind of thump out to her. And he felt as if he could pick her up, because she wouldn't weigh anymore than a sack of groceries,

and fold her into him so he could hold on to her good like a football and then after that he wanted to run through some kind of line of objection. He wanted to smash hell out of someone who objected to his taking her. It was mad and it was jungle. And still she got softer and softer and was as soft as he thought anything could get, as soft as a thigh all over.

When they went back to the table, the group was ready to leave. The brother-in-law's wife wanted to go home; and they were all mad about something.

"I'll drive you home," said Alligator to Billy. She nodded. She hadn't said anything for a long time.

"She's coming with us," said the brother-in-law.

"I'll take her home," said Alligator firmly.

"You better come with us, honey," said the sister. "You know who will be home from work pretty soon."

"I'll take her home," said Alligator.

"Let's all go over to Slim's and get something to eat," said the sister's husband. Alligator conceded and he walked with Billy. She wasn't saying a word. And, he noticed for the first time, she was wobbling very badly.

Slim's cafe was busy and all the booths were filled. So they sat at the counter. Slim's wife was grinning and she said very jerky-happy, "Well, what are you going to have. T-bones?"

Alligator turned to Billy and said, "What are you going to have, honey?"

She mumbled something and he said, "Huh? What did you say, honey?"

The sister said, "She said she's going to get sick."

"Are you going to get sick, honey?" he asked.

Another mumble.

"Are you sure she said she was going to get sick?" he asked the sister.

"That's what she said."

"Why don't you go in the toilet if you're going to get sick?" he asked her. She didn't even mumble anymore. And she was very, very white.

"Don't get sick in here, little lady," said Mrs. Slim. Then she continued, "What are the rest of you going to have?"

Alligator wasn't hungry and he watched Billy's head jerkily go down to the counter. Then she vomited and he got up and went back to the bar.

He found a stool at the bar and ordered a drink. "That was quite a fight," said the bartender, "you should have seen it. I thought Sanchez had it. I thought he did, right up to the end. Oh well, you can't win them all."

"I guess not," said Alligator.

"Did you dance yet?" asked the bartender.

"Yeah. I danced a lot. I did everything in here except bowl."

"I'd advise you to stay away from the bowling machine. Bearfoot will get your money if you do."

After a while Alligator heard Bearfoot call him. "Hey there, did Jim see you?"

"No," said Alligator.

"He was in here looking for you earlier."

"Why?"

"He wanted to tell you he lost his trucking contract."

"What?"

"Something to do with the license. He was using a borrowed license on the pup, and when they found out they canceled him."

"How did they find out about it?"

"Somebody turned the license number in this evening. Claimed the truck tried to run them off the road today. Anyway Jim says you can get your check at the dispatch office."

Bearfoot bought Alligator a drink. "I'm buying this for you because I know how much you liked that job. I tried to get you to quit but no, you wouldn't quit. So the job quit you and you are to be congratulated and not to be felt sorry for."

"I don't feel bad about it, Bearfoot. It's just that it comes so sudden and all. Tomorrow is soon enough to worry about what to do."

"You know what I been thinking, Alligator? Now that you aren't working, the two of us ought to get in that car of yours and go on down and see what's doing in Utah. Or the Four Corners Area. This bowling machine isn't paying like it used to and it's not because I forgot how to bowl. It's that people are getting wise to betting with me."

"That might not be a bad idea," said Alligator and he laughed to himself when he thought about the little old lady in the gray car. "She sure had the spunk, that one."

✿ A recipient of a Wallace Stegner Creative Writing Fellowship at Stanford, LOUIS DELL LOGAN is completing his novel, which bears the same title as his story. He received the Joseph Henry Jackson Award for "Alligator's Hopes" when it was in manuscript, and he remarks, regarding influences upon his writing, that he is fond of any writer with "a leafy delivery," going on to mention the specific influences of D. H. Lawrence, Malcolm Lowry, and James Agee.

Puig's Wife

BY EVAN S. CONNELL, JR.

MUHLBACH listens uneasily to the droll French wit of Huguette Puig. He tries again to interrupt but she's too quick, she waiting for him to say only one thing and until he says it she will not stop talking. He looks at the clock on his desk. Eight minutes. Eight minutes with scarcely a pause. In the outer office the Hanover agent is waiting, so is somebody else.

But of course, Huguette is saying, you must understand that you would become involved with *une vraie femme du monde*

All right! All right! Muhlbach finds himself laughing. He knows he will agree to whatever she wishes; she knows it too and immediately stops.

It's nearly five o'clock now, he says, I expect I could be there by six-thirty.

Marvelous! I shall put on my black peignoir. . . .

So, having given in, having agreed to a closer look at the apple, Muhlbach hangs up the telephone and rocks back in his chair with a thoughtful expression. Is she joking, or is she not? What if she does indeed open the door dressed in a black peignoir? Then what? How far do you carry a joke? And what time does Puig arrive? Muhlbach tries to remember. He remembers asking, but she was vague. Something about eight o'clock, but she was very vague. Muhlbach frowns and taps his fingertips together. She's joking, of course. But of course! As she would say. Just the same, he thinks, I suggested twice that we meet in the cocktail lounge and twice she kept on as though she didn't hear what I said. I don't like it. I should have said I'd meet them later. I don't like this situation.

The green light on his desk winks importantly; he stares at it for a moment, wondering again how such a simple device could cost so much, and also why he bought it. Then he leans forward and touches the key.

Yes, Gloria, what is it?

The Hanover agent has left because he had another appointment; Mrs. Fichte called a few minutes ago and wants you to call her as soon as possible; a Mr. Arnauldi would like to see you about a new filing system.

There's more. Muhlbach listens without much interest. Finally Gloria runs out of news. Hanover will be back tomorrow or the next day, never fear. About Mrs. Fichte, I'll get in touch with her. I'll see Mr. Arnauldi in a couple of minutes—I want to call home first.

Is it okay if I take off a little bit early?

I suppose, Muhlbach answers, but don't overdo it. Now get my house, will you?

At home Donna answers the telephone and suddenly Muhlbach wishes that Mr. Arnauldi would go away and that the Hanover agent and Mrs. Fichte would elope to Persia with Mr. Fichte in mad pursuit, and Huguette Puig, yes, and Gloria and whoever it was from Chase Manhattan and the briefcase salesman and everybody else on earth would somehow disappear. A world has been shattered by the sound of Donna's voice. But before he has time to answer he hears a light scuffling and an argument and next, inevitably, the asthmatic Scandinavian accents of Mrs. Grunthe lugubriously informing him that this is Mr. Muhlbach's residence.

Mrs. Grunthe, I won't be home for supper tonight.

Ooh?

Muhlbach is just able to keep from echoing this noise. Sooner or later, he thinks, I'm going to do it. Then she's going to feel insulted and quit.

Not coming to supper, you say?

That's right. An old friend of mine is going to be in the city. I've decided to have supper with him and his wife. His name is Commander Puig. I won't be late. I expect I should be home by ten or eleven. If you want to reach me before then, they're staying at the Murray. Commander Puig. That's spelled p-u-i-g. At the Murray Hotel on Sixth Avenue.

He waits, knowing that she has been setting down this information carefully, every bit of it, even the fact that Puig is an old friend.

Now, let me talk to Donna.

Mrs. Grunthe replies that Donna has gone outside to play.

Don't bother her, I just—oh, never mind. What's Otto doing?

Otto is somewhere in the neighborhood playing basketball.

When he comes in remind him of his homework. His grades could

certainly stand improvement. Muhlbach pauses, but can think of nothing more. Goodnight, Mrs. Gunthe. You needn't wait up, although as I say I don't expect to be late.

Now there is Arnauldi to deal with, next there is somebody else and somebody else, then mysteriously the office is quiet. The telephone no longer rings. The white plastic hood has been drawn over Gloria's typewriter. As to the demon secretary herself, at this moment where is she? Muhlbach tries to remember where Gloria goes for the evening parade. The Golden Lion? Slattery's? Not that it matters, doors open everywhere very much the same. In she will swagger and promptly be appraised by the men at the bar as though she was a piece of livestock. That's how she wants it, so all's right with the world. Like Donna, she's gone outside to play.

He stops a minute near the window, gazes down on the evening rush, listens to the remote honk of taxicabs, whistles, small voices shouting. Another day ended. Nothing much accomplished. A reasonable amount of money was earned, enough to get by and a few dollars more. It's necessary, nothing to be ashamed of, no reason to feel dissatisfied. After all, no intelligent man can spend his life on a Polynesian beach gathering driftwood. And unless you were born with an IQ of 200, say, or a voice that would make people forget Caruso, or—well, unless you're somehow exceptional what's left but to put in the days of your life like this?

Muhlbach answers the question by sharply tapping the window with his index finger, then turns and goes out the door and rings for the elevator. It, too, is empty. Silence. Emptiness. He looks at his watch and is surprised. Already past six-thirty. He realizes that he's been wasting time, but why? Of course the puzzle's not very intricate. Huguette. How much safer it would be to take the subway home, telephone her and apologize. That's what I'd like to do, he thinks, but I can't. I'm going to see her. I'm cursed with this Protestant conscience that forces me to do what I say I will do, and I hate it. What I want right now is to go home to my children and Mrs. Grunthe's casserole. That's just about all I want. Not that I like casserole so much, at least not every single Thursday. Why on earth doesn't she try something different? But in a way the certainty of it is reassuring. In fact I suppose the certainty of casserole on Thursday is worth the monotony of eating it. What reassuring habits I have. I'm afraid of them and yet I can't give them up. I dislike the strain of defending myself against the unexpected. I suppose I must be getting tired as I

grow older. Tonight I don't want to exert myself, I just want to go home. Instead of doing that I'm on my way to see Huguette. I don't look forward to sitting in that hotel room with her, defending myself against whatever she has in mind. I really don't want to sit there for an hour trying to balance a loaded drink until Puig arrives. If he's late I'll be forced to have a second drink, and somehow I think he's going to be late.

Muhlbach looks at a woman getting on the bus. She resembles Huguette—that sharp French profile suggesting both the bulky provincial shopkeeper's wife and the arrogant Madame of the seventeenth-century chateau. The history of a nation, he reflects, is in that face, even to the untidy hair. Other than the profile, what is it about her that reminds me of Huguette? Her coat? The way she stands? The packages? I can't be sure. How long since I've seen Huguette? Two years? No, longer than that. I don't understand why she called. Did I make such an impression? That's a flattering thought, but not likely. Puig must have told her to get in touch with me. But why was she determined to see me alone? Why did she insist that I come to the hotel so early? If he told her to invite me for supper—well, I can't make it out. There's no sense to it. I just don't understand what she wants. I can't believe the obvious, that would be too absurd. Whatever it is, I should have refused, told her flatly I couldn't get there until eight.

He stoops to look out of the bus, finds himself nearly face to face with one of the stone lions in front of the library and straightens up. He looks again at his watch. Another ten minutes, then a long block to walk. Thirty minutes late, at least. Forty if the lights are red. Meanwhile she's drifting around that hotel room in a black peignoir. If she's not decently dressed, he says almost aloud, I won't go into the room. I'll tell her to put on some clothes and meet me downstairs. I should have made it clear on the phone. I'm not an explorer and after so many years I've realized the fact, thank God. Why didn't I make it clear? I should have been firm, but she kept talking. I didn't have a chance to explain. Now I've gotten into this ridiculous situation. Well, I won't go in, no matter what she's wearing.

Huguette, in a short pink bathrobe and slippers, opens the door as soon as he knocks.

You're late, she scolds, pulling him firmly into the room, but then so am I you see! I went shopping, little idiot that I am. . . .

Muhlbach notices that she scanned the corridor while greeting him,

a cold survey more revealing than the bathrobe. He feels a nearly forgotten astonishment at the lies women tell. And the most unbelievable part of their rôle is that they expect to be believed. Of course they don't, not completely, but at the same time of course they do. He almost laughs.

And how have you been? Huguette is saying. So good to see you! Sit down, I won't bite you, at least not yet. Sit down. You haven't changed. But as for me—oh la! pauvre Huguette. . . .

Seated opposite him on the couch she continues talking while she pretends that something is wrong with her slipper. She leans forward and he is gradually presented with a deep, snowy bosom. The act is outrageous, but instead of smiling he finds himself gazing solemnly at the delicate weighted flesh. For a moment it is not Huguette that he sees but the marvel of a woman entering the beautiful middle age of womanhood.

She goes right on talking, perhaps unconscious of what she has done, but just then a white and rather boney knee pops out as though to see what's going on. She covers it and sits erect.

La! she exclaims, patting the knee. Le cinéma, alors.

This invitation to discuss her knee is a bit too direct; Muhlbach clears his throat and takes a sip of the drink she has poured. It tastes like a drug. She must be desperate, he thinks. Why did I come here?—I knew it was a mistake. Now I've got to juggle this woman for an hour. By the time Puig gets off duty and gets to the hotel my tongue's going to be thick as a paintbrush. Why did I let her talk me into this?

But almost as quickly as the question comes the answer. Yes, he thinks, I know why I'm in this room. All these years of hating Puig for what he did to me and now I've got the chance to pay him back. There's no other reason. She didn't persuade me, I wanted to come. I might as well be honest about it. Both of us have been pretending but she's more honest than I am—she's not deceiving herself. She wants another man and decided I might be available. I knew that. I knew it right away, I knew it after the first minute on the telephone, and I was willing to accept but pretended that I wasn't. So that's why I'm here, to use his wife. The timeless insult. These years of waiting for revenge, not quite admitting how much I've hated him. I'd have gone along another twenty years without making a move against him because I didn't really know how I hated him until she called. Now I can use his wife. I can take her in a moment, or put it off a while, just as I please. She's mine. She's told me half a dozen times already

that she's mine. Puig's wife! Puig's wife, Muhlbach repeats to himself, tasting it like an oyster in his mouth.

He glances directly into her eyes; she looks back without the least embarrassment.

Do I want her now? he asks himself. Do I want this woman now? Now while the offering is fresh? Or should I wait? Let the sea fruit ripen. When would it be sweetest? Now or later?

But the pleasure of the thought becomes a little sickening; he shifts around on the couch as if the cushions were uncomfortable. Then an ugly thought obtrudes and he glances at her again. How much does she know? Did Puig ever tell her what happened? Probably not. No, probably not, because to him it was never a matter of much importance. He won and I lost, so for him it ended. Ended successfully and therefore insignificantly, so I doubt if he told her about it. In fact, he's probably forgotten. He forgets easily. I was always the one who remembered. Sometimes it seems I don't forget anything that happens to me, Muhlbach thinks bitterly. Not anything. Twenty years and what he did is almost as humiliating now as it was then. Why can't I forget?—throw it away somehow. My God, I've bottled it up and I've smelled it ever since. Twenty-three years it must have been, because that was our second year at college. He laughed about it afterwards and he kept waiting for me to laugh, I can still see his face. He thought the whole thing was a joke. Maybe so. Maybe he was right and sensible and I was wrong. Anyway, he's forgotten. He'd forgotten about it long before he got married and all this time I've never once referred to it. There'd be no point in telling her even if he did remember, so this can't be a plot against me. Besides, the winner doesn't plot against the loser. I read too much into everything. She didn't lure me here so Puig could jump out of the closet and catch us *flagrante delicto*. What's wrong with her is no great mystery, her husband's been at sea for several months and she's made up her mind to punish him for leaving her, it's that simple. She wants to injure him at the moment of his return. No, a moment before he returns, meaning she won't let him know that he's been punished. And as long as they live together she won't tell him what took place. She loves him, she doesn't want to hurt him; at least she doesn't want to destroy him.

How intricate women are, thinks Muhlbach while he listens to Huguette talking, and yet how naive. This one, for instance. What did she expect her husband to do? Was Puig supposed to call up the Chief of Staff and say he'd rather stay home than go on duty with the

fleet? She didn't think about it, not as a man would, she merely had a Feeling. My husband is leaving me alone, so when he comes back I'm going to get even. I'll teach him not to treat me like that! How obvious, yes, but at the same time how extremely curious. So I'm here—I'm here not because she was attracted to me. I'm here to provide a service. And afterwards, of course, the three of us will go out to dinner. I can even guess just how she'll look—delightful! As talkative as usual, brightly witty, the charming continental wife. There would sit Puig full of ignorance at her right hand while I sat full of guilt at her left. And she'd insist I be there. Absolutely. Very curious, Muhlbach reflects as he takes another drink.

Huguette is chatting as though nothing of any consequence was on her mind. She is Mrs. Puig who got home late from shopping; she is entertaining her husband's friend for a few minutes before excusing herself to get ready for dinner.

Muhlbach pokes the ice in his glass and avoids looking at her. He wonders if she will give up, if she will in fact ask to be excused so that she may put on some clothes. It would be awkward if Puig came in just now and found them sitting this close together, with her suggested nudity. He remembers an unpleasant scene not so different from this—visiting a relative, taking off his coat and rolling up his sleeves because the evening was warm, talking with the wife while they waited, at last the door opening and then that sudden suspicion like an evil jewel glittering in the night. Remembering this makes him uneasy; he stands up and wanders around the narrow room while Huguette goes on talking.

Presently the telephone rings but she doesn't answer. Again it rings, and again. Huguette is almost reclining on the couch, her lips pursed, her expression vague and troubled, and Muhlbach begins to wonder if she is insane. It occurs to him that he knows practically nothing about her. Huguette Fanchon. A war bride out of some obscure Breton village, she's been married to Puig for a long time, nearly a full generation. But that's all I know, he thinks. I don't know anything else about her.

With an impatient gesture Huguette reaches for the telephone.

Allo? Yes?

Muhlbach stares at her face, at the profile so totally French, as though etched by the needle strokes of some icy French master. Ingres. David. She will always be French, not American. She is still a Breton woman, oddly transported and far from home.

He realizes that she is speaking in French, completely absorbed by the telephone. She listens, her expression changes, becoming no softer yet unmistakably relieved. She's talking to a man, but not to her husband, who's no linguist.

Muhlbach turns away, slightly embarrassed at having stared and embarrassed that he must listen to the conversation. He sees himself reflected in the window—standing alone near the center of the room, a tall and consciously dignified businessman with a drink held safely in both hands; and it occurs to him that he himself could be the insane party, as mad as any creature beyond the Looking-Glass.

Plus tard! Pas maintenant! Come j'ai déjà . . .

Quite obviously she is not talking to her husband. But then who is it? and what's the conversation about? Hearing only what she says is rather like trying to read through the slots of a stencil. Is it somebody in the hotel? Muhlbach can hear the man's voice, rising as if he was getting angry. Huguette offers a peculiar hissing noise, sighing between her teeth.

Restlessly Muhlbach walks toward the far end of the room and stands gazing across the city. A short distance away in space his reflection stands gazing into the room with an irritated expression. Then the severe features of the phantom are broken by a smile. He studies himself sardonically. What are you waiting for out there? Are you waiting for a woman to stop talking on the telephone or are you waiting for the end of your life? Which is it? You've been standing around for a long time, why don't you do something? When was the last time you simply did something instead of trying to make up your mind about it? Quite a while. Quite a long while.

I'm too sensible and always have been, Muhlbach decides. I'm too cautious. I can't behave like a simpleton even when I'm drunk, I only double into myself. It doesn't seem fair. Here I stand in a hotel room with a woman who for all I know may be a whore, but I'm too sensible to make a move. I've been talking decorously with a half-naked strumpet. Why? Why is that?

What are you doing? asks Huguette. Are you planning to jump out in order to escape from me? She walks toward him without pulling the robe across her breast. I'll get you something fresh to drink, she says, draws the glass slowly from his hand and walks away.

Not a word about that call, he thinks as he watches her putting ice into the glass. Not that she owes me any sort of explanation but an American wife would probably say something, even if it was a lie.

But not a word from this one. How long has she been in the hotel? I wonder. I wonder. I assumed she got here this afternoon, but I wonder if she might have been here several days. If men are calling while you pretend to wait for your husband is he ever coming? Dear Huguette, is my friend Puig really on his way? Or am I one more on your list? Then other questions begin taking shape, questions that previously had seemed not worth asking.

Why didn't I hear from Puig himself? He's been at sea for quite a while, yes, but the fleet must have stopped at any number of ports—he could easily have sent a postcard letting me know he'd be here. When she telephoned why didn't she mention that Puig suggested we get together? But she didn't mention it. She's hardly mentioned her husband. Is he coming? Is he? And if he isn't how soon will she tell me the truth! Yes, that also could explain the phone call. Somebody else wanted in this room, but two men at once is one too many. Isn't that so, Huguette? Or is it? Maybe three at once would suit you!

The implications multiply. Is she—is she a whore? Does she come to New York every so often in order to work here? Maybe that's what it's all about. Muhlbach feels his vitals begin to contract. When she hands him the second drink he accepts it reluctantly, as though the glass was contaminated, and continues to look out the window. It seems to him that her hand is the hand of a whore. The shape of her ankle, the whiteness of her skin. Whatever she says. Each gesture. The open suitcase. Cigarette stubs in the ashtray—how many men have been in this room? The closet door is not quite shut, he can see one of her dresses and maybe that too is not without meaning, meant to excite him. Many significant facts that had seemed as unrelated as the stars now appear to form a constellation. The room key lying on the desk, why is it there instead of in her purse? Why did she look up and down the corridor so efficiently? And he begins to remember the items in the newspaper—women caught in raids, jailed, the men sneaking away guiltily. He begins to feel obscurely frightened. He knows that his feelings do not show on his face, or in his movements, not as they would have shown twenty years ago; nor is he as frightened as if he was a college boy locked in some carpeted suite. But still he feels anxious, tense, and irritated with himself because of it. All in all, how much better it would be to be at home eating Mrs. Grunthe's casserole or playing with the children. Where would they be now? Otto is probably in his room working on another airplane that soon will be hanging by a thread from the ceiling. And

Donna? Where is she? Muhlbach feels himself softening. He blinks, looks around, and discovers Huguette gazing at him expectantly. She has asked something. Would you like to sit down?—was that what she asked? He tries to recall her words but can't.

I'm sorry Huguette, I'm afraid I wasn't paying much attention. I was thinking about my children.

Oh! You're excused, she laughs. And do you know that we have four boys? Four!

Muhlbach notices that he is being led to the couch again. Why does she keep pulling at me? he wonders. Doesn't she ever get discouraged? I can't understand why she's so persistent. What does she expect me to do? Do I have to tell her I don't want any part of it? This is ridiculous, and pretty soon I'm going to look like a fool. If I keep on resisting she's going to say what's wrong with him? She'll decide that there really is something wrong with me and then how do I convince her that there isn't? It's what she'll think, I know it. It's what every woman thinks when a man doesn't come bounding toward her at the signal. He's inadequate. He's nothing. But what am I supposed to do? pull out my wallet and give her some money? Then do I simply get undressed? Is it as simple as that? I should have learned how these things are handled years ago, I should have gone to a cathouse at least once. I wouldn't feel so ignorant. Now I don't know what to do. I've walked into this by myself but I don't know how to behave. She thinks I understood the situation from the very beginning. Probably there were some clues she gave me on the telephone and I accepted them without knowing what I was accepting, now she can't figure out what's wrong. Good God, this is absurd! She must be thinking it was a waste of time to call me—I suppose that's it. Yes, because she's one of them. The Murray Hotel. The Murray. It sounds familiar. There were some professionals in this place, I'm sure of it. Flushed out a few months ago.

Huguette is talking about her boys; Muhlbach takes a long swallow of his drink and gazes at her. To be what she is, that's not amazing, but to sit there on the couch with her bathrobe half undone and talk about her boys. It's incredible. And Muhlbach has no more doubts, she's a professional. He is deeply surprised, not that such whores exist but that he should find himself in the company of one. Then, too, the fact that she is married makes it all the more unbelievable. Housewives, secretaries—there's no longer a division. The old order has collapsed. Life used to be a reasonably simple business. There were cer-

tain things you did and things you didn't, or if you did—well, then, at least you realized what you were doing. It was as plain as the painted line in the middle of the highway, you stayed in one lane or another and if you crossed over you were blind not to know it. But now? An officer's wife! By day a housewife in New Jersey, the wife of Commander Puig. Neighbors see him coming home and they see him when he leaves, wearing the uniform of a United States naval officer. The neighbors know, therefore, that Puig and Puig's wife must be respectable. That's so. It must be so because it must. But is it? What about Puig himself? What does he do when his ship drops anchor at Marseilles?

Muhlbach realizes that he wants to see Puig again. Until this minute it hadn't mattered very much. He had looked forward to Puig's arrival merely because it was expected, with no particular enthusiasm, as if an old movie was returning to the neighborhood, or as if somebody was giving him a book he'd read years ago; but now he does want to see this man who had once been his closest friend. Thinking about the past they shared revives in him the affection he once felt for Puig. Four years of college life, sleeping in the same room practically side by side and waking up together, eating together, shaving one right after the other, borrowing and lending—the proximity seemed convincing, yet was it? Was it really? Puig no doubt will seem as real as ever when he walks in the door, although not what he used to be. When he comes in will he stir up the quietly mouldering leaves? or have they flaked and crumbled? so that he will walk in with nothing but some canvas baggage of the present. Muhlbach wonders. How intimately did we know each other? Perhaps not as well as both of us assumed. Since then how many times have I seen him? Four times. Five times, maybe. The world has gone through another war since we were in college, affecting us in more ways than we could imagine. That, too, was an experience we shared several thousand miles apart, just about as equally as we shared the end of our adolescence. How does he feel about the war? We've seen each other since it happened, but never talked about it. I'll ask him. He must have liked the Navy, otherwise he wouldn't have stayed in. Or is that true? The last time we met—let's see, he talked mostly about playing golf. He got every Wednesday afternoon off and went out to the course. Talked about a set of clubs he'd bought. Except for that—I can't remember but I'm pretty sure he enjoys the Navy. The peacetime Navy, that's what he called it. Yes, he does like it. But

how much longer is it going to be a peacetime Navy? I'll ask about that, too. Another war seems to be on the way. Powers forming. We do our part to promote it, testing all possible enemies, trying to make up our minds whether or not to fight, and who. Aim one way, then another, like a bunch of kids with beebie guns, but maybe the indecision is better than any possible decision. Puig might know what's going to happen, he's worked his way high enough that he ought to have some idea. I'll find out what he thinks. It's strange I don't already know what his opinions are. Strange I know so little about him. Suppose somebody asked me about Puig, what should I say? Married to a Frenchwoman and they have four children. Been in the Navy since the war. Likes to play golf. What else?

That's all! Muhlbach thinks with astonishment. I've assumed I know practically everything about him but the truth is I couldn't explain to anybody how he's felt or what he's done during the last twenty years. If anybody had asked me how well I know him I'd have said I know him better than anybody else does, except his wife. Yet this is what it comes to. Married, with four children. A career in the Navy. And that's all I know. What does he look like? Well, he's medium height, sandy reddish hair getting thin, a melon face that used to look like the face of a boxer. And his eyelashes turn white during summer. At least I think they do. It seems to me that every summer he turned red and white instead of brown. After those hours on the sun deck I looked like a Mohawk but he came down like a piece of veal or fish. Covering himself with unguent, wincing, grunting. Yes, I could answer if somebody asked what Puig looks like, but that really tells nothing about him. His wife is what tells about him. Huguette Fanchon. Madame Puig. Madame Huguette Puig.

Muhlbach realizes that he has been tipping the glass and rattling the ice cubes more than he intended. In fact, there's not much left of the second drink. His stomach, however, feels receptive; he decides he might even have a third drink before they step out for dinner, unless Puig shows up very soon. He smiles at Huguette and reaches across in front of her to pick up a cigarette. She lights it for him, holding his hand warmly.

She's beginning to get drunk, Muhlbach thinks. I can tell from the way she's been rambling along talking about nothing of any importance. However, let her talk, I don't care. Reflectively he looks around the room. The situation doesn't seem as ominous as it did half an hour earlier.

Oh la—the time! Huguette exclaims, and claps her hands. You know I should be dressing. If we are going out

Muhlbach looks at his watch. After eight o'clock! He lifts the watch to his ear with an expression of concern. The watch sounds all right. But seven minutes after eight! That doesn't seem possible. And where's Puig?

Huguette is examining her fingernails. The bathrobe somehow has managed to slip aside and expose one of her shoulders, yet she isn't aware of this. He wonders if he should mention it. But how do you express a thing like that? It would be a good idea to let her know, but what do you say? 'Huguette, pull yourself together!' or 'Huguette, what's going on here?'

Muhlbach frowns at her shoulder and decides to say nothing. She's old enough to look out for herself. Then, too, there's always the chance that she knows exactly what's going on. They're usually aware of these things, they know how much is exposed. He looks with interest at the curve of her breast—a large amount. Just then the robe slides another inch, still she hasn't noticed. And the way it slipped—Huguette didn't move a muscle but the robe fell down anyway.

Muhlbach clears his throat. The time has passed when he could decently have ~~spoken~~ of the matter; to say anything now would be embarrassing.

What in the world has become of your husband?

Huguette shrugs.

I suppose he'll walk in any minute.

Oh yes, any minute! She appears to be dissatisfied with one of her fingernails. She squints at it, turns the finger around, and sighs.

Muhlbach gets up and walks around the room gazing at the pictures on the walls. How splendid if Puig should open the door and find them seated together like that. It would make a nice tableau. Very nice indeed!

The telephone rings again. This time she answers without hesitation and Muhlbach suddenly understands that there has been an arrangement. Puig has told her that he would call at eight o'clock. That explains why she didn't want to answer the telephone an hour ago—she didn't know who it was. Or maybe she did know but didn't want to talk to him, whoever he was. It also explains why she's been in no hurry to get dressed—she knew Puig wouldn't get here at eight.

Muhlbach listens. Yes, she's talking to her husband.

Only after the call is finished does he realize that he has been lis-

tening for some reference to himself, in fact that he had been half-waiting for Huguette to beckon him over and give him the telephone. But she talked to her husband as though she was alone.

He says he will be a little late . . .

How late? Muhlbach interrupts. What time did he say he would get here?

Huguette looks up in surprise. She explains that there has been an accident aboard the ship. A sailor was injured, that's why Puig will be late, but he will be on his way in a few minutes.

Why do you stare at me? she asks. Have I done something wrong? and she stands up and comes close to him.

Muhlbach feels excited and angry. There's no doubt she is waiting for him to untie the belt of her bathrobe.

What a strange man you are! Talk to me, please. Do say something. I don't like you when you behave like this. She reaches for his hands as though to squeeze them.

He turns away but knows that whatever she is, she's not a whore. Something she has done—something she's said—something he couldn't quite perceive has proved she's not. What was it? What proved her innocence? Innocence! Innocent of being a professional, that all. She's innocent of very little else. 'I don't like you when you behave like this!' Could that be it? Or the moment when she got up from the couch instead of smiling and leaning back. She seemed distressed, worried—he shakes his head, not certain what to believe. If it isn't money she wants, what does she want? because I can't be what she's after. She hasn't seen me for the past two years, so why should she want me? I know how cold I look. Even if she told me that she thought I was attractive I wouldn't believe it. Well, then, is she simply auditioning lovers? Was somebody else here at five o'clock? And after I'm gone who will it be?

He turns toward her and sees that Huguette's face is the face of a woman obsessed—not fixed and professional. Her eyes are luminous. Her eyes remind him of someone else. For a few seconds he stands in front of Huguette, stricken by those eyes, trying to remember, then he thinks of his grandmother as she lay dying. There was that same look a few hours before her death. Nothing else he has ever seen resembles it. The brilliant gaze of an old woman finally emptied of all pretense.

Why do you look at me so?

This is how they ask, but Muhlbach doesn't answer. Plainly she is offering her body, not as a gift, but in exchange for the use of his, a cold bargain. He tries to estimate how much he wants her. The fact is, not very much. When she telephoned the office he first assumed she wanted to buy some insurance, that's how little she means. Not once has he thought of her these past several years except as Puig's wife. Now, tonight, almost inexplicably she shows this naked willingness; instead of a wife she becomes a woman and displays the queer values of women.

If I was twenty I wouldn't hesitate, he thinks. Or would I say to myself that she's too old? She must be at least thirty-five, maybe older. She could be forty. If I was twenty again how would I be looking at her? Not as I do now. I'd think she was a joke. I'd see myself telling about it in the fraternity house. I never had an adventure like this when I was young—it was always somebody else who did the telling—but I know what it would have meant to me. Now? Now is it amusing?

Muhlbach realizes that he is still gazing at her, and that she is trying to interpret his gaze. Why has she arranged this? he wonders. What's happened between her and Puig? and suddenly he's convinced that Puig is impotent. There can't be any other explanation. The endless boasting, chasing after one college girl and then another—nobody doubted that Puig was nailing them to the cross. In the Navy it must have been the same. So many conquests, but all of them too obvious, too apparent. How many were actual and how many did Puig invent? Or were all three hundred of them invented? No, Puig's not that empty. Maybe a few have been so real that Huguette's disgusted.

Well, whatever's the cause, thinks Muhlbach, I'm not going to play my part. I can almost read the script: we're no sooner in bed that the door opens, the husband enters, hangs up his hat and announces cheerily that he's home. Well, Huguette, I'm not very good at farce, so I think I can do without that royal scene. I'm not going to spend ten minutes as your leading man, thank you just the same. Find yourself another actor. Revenge is what you want. I don't know why. I don't know what he's done to you, or what you imagine he's done—I don't know why you're disappointed but look somewhere else, not at me. I'm not the man.

Eh bien. . . .

Somehow she has understood. Muhlbach knows that somehow she

has understood his thoughts well enough. It's over. 'Eh bien!' As if she has compressed the history of her sex in a phrase.

And because it's over and he has ended it by doing absolutely nothing—exactly as so many other affairs of his life have ended at the beginning, because he has done nothing—he feels his head swelling with anger. What's the matter with me? he demands. Puig's wife is here! Mine for the taking. And I hate him. Christ how I've despised him all these years. So take her! Use her! Use her like the bitch that she is!

But of course the moment has gone, and the anger he feels is toward himself. Once again he has caught up with life too late.

It occurs to him that maybe they should talk the whole thing over. She might like to know how he feels. But she already knows, at least it's probable; she seems to have sensed the situation. The best thing might be to let the curtain drop and simply wait for Puig. Muhlbach shuts his eyes for a few seconds and imagines himself at home in his old green leather chair, the children running around upstairs while Mrs. Grunthé plods back and forth from the kitchen to the dining room as she sets the table. That's where I ought to be, he thinks, that's where I ought to be!

Opening his eyes he discovers Huguette bending down patting a pillow, her great box-like hips solidly in front of him. He looks at her hips in despair. He feels crushed and ruined, and decides angrily that he will go over, throw his arms around her waist and see what happens next.

Just then somebody turns the handle of the door. Puig's voice calls through the gilded panel—he's locked out. Huguette goes to let him in, but before opening the door she pulls her robe together and tightens the belt.

Puig, discovering Muhlbach in the room, is quite obviously dumbfounded. He can't believe what he sees; he remains on the threshold with a Navy overnight bag in his hand and the remnants of a husbandly smile on his peeling face—it's plain that he has been in the sun recently, his nose is bright pink and looks extremely tender. He glares at Muhlbach and breathes hoarsely through his mouth; but Huguette is already at work and within a very few minutes Puig is inside, has taken off his garrison cap and is comfortably seated with a drink in his hand, still confused but gradually accepting the situation—as much of it as she has chosen to tell.

It's been a long time! Puig exclaims. A long time!

Muhlbach agrees.

I didn't expect to see you here, says Puig.

Huguette points out that it was meant to be a surprise.

Jesus! remarks Puig without much sign of humor.

Muhlbach asks where the fleet will be going next. Puig doesn't know, or claims he doesn't; he adds that he has been in the Mediterranean for the past few weeks.

How tired I am of winter! Huguette exclaims. Why didn't you take me? I'm so sick of this cold weather! Snow! But then it snows again. . . .

Puig soon stops listening to her. He loosens his tie and speaks to Muhlbach. When was the last time we met?

You'd just recently been transferred from the *Huxtable*.

Oh yeah, what a scow. And the old man nuts for Navy regs. That was one tour I won't forget. He talks about this for a while and when he has finished Muhlbach asks if he has been playing much golf.

Sure. Every chance.

You should be in the low seventies by now.

Nope. Hooking off the tee, same as usual. I got a weak wrist, that's what kills me. High seventies. Low eighties. He looks thoughtfully at Huguette, who gets up without a word and goes into the bathroom and shuts the door.

How about you? he continues. You still play?

Nope, haven't held a club in my hands for ten years, Muhlbach answers, conscious that he is beginning to sound like Puig.

At school you had a pretty good swing. Pick it up again and see what you can do. You ought to break ninety.

I might. I might start playing again. Being behind a desk most of the day I don't get much exercise. They say it's a good game for us at our age.

Puig laughs unpleasantly. I'm not old. If I had time for a couple of weeks at the gym I'd be as fast as I was in college. Don't make any mistake. I can still handle myself.

Muhlbach looks at him curiously. It's as though Puig is hinting at something, and has switched from golf to boxing.

You weren't bad, Puig goes on in a condescending voice. One time at Lakewood you tied me on the front nine. Both of us shot a forty-three. I had a thirty-six on the back, you had a forty-eight. My

shoulder was stiff that morning. It took a while to get warmed up.

Muhlbach remembers, and remembers Puig mentioning his shoulder for at least a month after that day.

I guess I never told you how much it bugged me, you tying me. You never appreciated how competitive I am. I hate to get beat. I couldn't stand losing marbles when I was a kid. I felt like killing the other kid, get him down in the dust and pound hell out of him. Puig laughs and begins unbuttoning his coat. Now how about you? What've you been up to since I saw you last?

Business. I'm never up to anything else.

Whose fault is that?

You say it's a fault. Well, maybe it is. Maybe it is. My days are practically identical. No variety. Lack of excitement. So you could be right—fault's the word.

Muhlbach listens to this lordly pronouncement and decides he has had enough to drink. My own voice, he thinks, but I've lost control of it. Somebody inside me is talking. However, I'm not mimicking Puig any longer, there's that much to be grateful for.

Variety! Puig answers with an ice cube in his mouth, and spits the cube back into the glass.

He's tired, Muhlbach thinks. Or is it nervousness? He hasn't said anything about what happened on the ship. He could just possibly have been responsible for the accident. He's upset, but what about?

I might as well tell you, Puig remarks as though the thought had communicated itself, finding you here doesn't make me too happy.

The remark is almost impossible to believe. Muhlbach tries to believe he has imagined it—Puig didn't actually say that. Yet he did.

I been gone such a long while. Cruising around. Storing it up inside. Then I come back and open the door expecting to find Huguette by herself. Forget it, he adds, scratching his jaw with one finger. Don't pay any attention to me. I'm in a bad mood. You were about to say something. Go ahead. I interrupted. What's on your mind?

I shouldn't be here. Huguette—that is, since you didn't know. You weren't expecting me. I thought you were.

What about Huguette?

The challenge in Puig's voice is unmistakable; with bright watery eyes he watches the wall an inch above Muhlbach's head.

I'm asking again: what about Huguette?

Muhlbach realizes that there have been other scenes like this. Puig suspects her. He suspects every man who comes near her. He has

never seemed dangerous so the idea of him in a jealous rage is rather funny, but he is tense and this might not be an appropriate time to laugh. Muhlbach considers how to answer. Puig is waiting. The answer begins to seem important.

Such a violent age! Muhlbach says carefully. How violent we are these days.

Amen! Puig answers, squinting with annoyance.

At that moment Huguette turns on the shower. She has been listening. Puig, however, hasn't noticed; he leans back, rolling his head from side to side as though he was in pain.

Individually, but also as nations, Muhlbach continues, cautiously pulling at the conversation. I've been wanting to ask. Apparently another war is shaping up but for some reason we can't recognize the enemy. Yesterday we thought it was Russia. Today, China. Now what about tomorrow? Name tomorrow's enemy. What would be your guess? India?

Puig doesn't turn his head; he looks across his nose to see if this is a joke.

Four years together—four years! but what makes you tick I'll be diddled if I know. I never could understand you. You used to sit in the library annex with a gooseneck lamp curled over a book. I used to look at you and ask myself what you were really like inside. What makes him go? I asked myself. Is it money? I figured you must want to earn a lot of money after you graduated. Maybe you did. I have the impression you're doing all right.

Let's trade jobs.

Puig laughs and settles more comfortably into the chair. On account of money? We get benefits, sure. Dental work. Cut-rate movies at the base. Except for that it's nothing much. You don't want to trade with me.

Not on account of money. On account of the travel. I'm rotting away behind a desk. At certain times I catch myself trying to guess where you are—envying you because you're somewhere on the other side of the globe. I imagine the fleet anchored off Ceylon. If you've ever gotten there or not I don't know, it doesn't matter. I stop by the fountain in the office for a drink of water but just then I see you in Marrakesh, or walking along the esplanade at Palma. Maybe you're two thousand miles from there, that doesn't matter. I see you in these places.

Hell's bells, says Puig with a cheerful expression, if you want to

go why don't you go? Lock up the shop for a while and go! You sit on your butt and complain, just like you always did.

I don't think of it quite that way, but I won't argue. I ought to go. And I would except for my affair—carrying on with that gooseneck lamp.

As soon as the word slips out he knows it was a poor choice; but Puig, tenderly feeling the tip of his sunburnt nose, only looks mildly thoughtful.

What is it about this man, Muhlbach reflects, that bores me half to death? Why don't I care what he believes, or what he's done, or what finally becomes of him? When we were students I was interested in his ideas. I thought he was profound. I thought there were reservoirs in him, but there aren't any. He's commonplace. I suppose he always was. His forehead shows practically no expression, strange I never noticed. It's the forehead of a facist or of a priest. His mind lacks resonance, I believe; even when he surprises me I realize the surprise is shallow. There's no deliberate evil in him, nor much magnificence. He's like other men. I guess that's why he bores me. He's bored with me, too, because he thinks I'm dull and cold, because I'm restrained, but that doesn't insult me in the least. How could it? I'm not concerned with what he thinks about me. I know there's more of me than there is of him. Remind myself that from a distance we're the same size—yes, but I know better, although I don't know how. Given enough to drink he'd announce that he doesn't amount to much, which is a confession I'd never make. Not now, drunk as I may be, or ever, or anywhere. Not even before Jehovah's throne. Let him abase himself if that pleases him, I respect myself too much. Three gold stripes, considerable prestige, yet his confidence is still that of a sophomore. How is it possible? He doesn't—what is it that he doesn't? A sort of growth must be what I have in mind, the way coral grows. But that doesn't explain him because we're not marine organisms, or plants with rings to count. You can't analogize a man. It must be some lack of human deepening that I can't describe. He hasn't deepened since I saw him last. Two years. He was in a good humor then and now he's annoyed at me for something that isn't my fault, otherwise it's as though these two years had never been. Which means it'll be the same when we meet again. Which means I haven't anything else to learn about him or from him. Which makes me wonder what I ever learned from being around him. Is he a great waste of

time? And if he is, can I afford it? My life's half over. Come back as a white bull along the Ganges and I wouldn't mind so much, but I'm not expecting that. So what am I doing here with him? because he's nothing more than he appears to be. I doubt if he's ever gotten absolutely and hopelessly lost inside of himself. Never peeled away the leaves looking for the innermost bulb. He doesn't know it's there, and that's why I don't think about him, only where he is in my imagination. I don't dislike him, not really. I suppose I like him. However, I'm not sure about that either, he's so fatally easy to forget.

How long have you been here? asks Puig, pretending to pick a bit of lint from his sleeve. And it's this—the calculated gesture—that betrays him. The question isn't casual. Puig is troubled; he opened the door and discovered another man.

How long? Muhlbach asks, and pretends to consider. Quite a while. We were beginning to think you'd never get here.

What'd you and my wife talk about?

Not 'Huguette' but 'my wife.' What did you talk about with my wife? What were you and my wife doing before I got here?

To be decently honest, I'll say only that your wife did most of the talking.

Puig laughs.

Why do I sit here acting like a friend? Muhlbach wonders. I manipulate him and consider myself superior. I could have had his wife and that, too, makes me feel I'm better than he is but maybe I'm not as good. He's artless and coarse, and he's destructible, but his passions are honest. Mine are contaminated. Who's better? I don't know. I don't know. Maybe I worry it too much.

In the bathroom the shower is turned off.

Takes them forever, Puig remarks. Hey! Huguette! he calls.

A moment later the door opens a crack, a wisp of steam curls out, and Muhlbach can see her eye.

Somebody wants me?

Snap it up, will you? Puig answers without turning around.

Are you hungry, cheri? I'll hurry. One minute. Okay? And then before disappearing the eye regards Muhlbach. The look is very brief, but unequivocal. The eye of Cleopatra, or of Messalina, gazing across her husband's shoulder.

I should have done it, Muhlbach says to himself. That's what she wanted, so why didn't I? What difference would it make. I should

have taken my cheap revenge. Puig would never know.

And then while the steam is clearing he realizes that he can see the interior of the bathroom; not much, because the door is almost shut, but it isn't completely shut.

Getting back to war, says Puig. This 'peace' is just an introduction to what's coming up next. We're in the middle of another Hundred Years War, that's how I figure. All right, India. Sure, why the hell not?

Muhlbach can make no sense of what Puig is saying; it's as though the words conceal something more important, but what? Puig is not really talking about war, he's explaining something.

It's not going to blow over, you can lay a bet. Not for a long while. Maybe never. You sit in an office so you forget what most people actually are like under the surface. At each other's throat. That's human nature. You ought to remember that. Puig takes a swallow of his drink, belches and wipes his lips on the back of his fist. People can be bloody unpleasant if they got a good reason.

The meaning becomes clear as soon as he finished; nearly everything Puig says is an allusion to his wife.

You've got to treat people with respect, he adds; but then changes the subject. What kind of food you want? Any preference?

Muhlbach lifts his glass slightly to indicate that he doesn't care.

Pizza's good enough for me, Puig mutters, fumbling around in the pockets of his uniform. Out comes a crumpled package of cigarettes which he holds up with a questioning expression.

Muhlbach shakes his head.

Ten days is all I'm going to be here. I put in for shore duty last October but so far not a word. Ten short days. Then out we go. Ten bloody days.

You must like New York.

What do you mean?

You're here instead of at home.

How did you know about that?

About you buying a house in Trenton? She told me.

Puig settles back thoughtfully and feels the tip of his nose again. I've been at sea such a long while I wanted—oh, you know how it is. Lie in your bunk and think about it and think about it. So I wrote her to meet me here. We'll leave in the morning. I didn't want to lose any time. You know how it is.

I shouldn't have come. I assumed Huguette called me because you suggested it.

That's all right, Puig says awkwardly, and seems to say something else but shrugs and sips at his drink.

Maybe some other. . . .

Sit still, Puig replies irritably. You're here so you're here. If my wife ever gets dressed—I don't know what takes so long. You look like you lost a few pounds, he goes on without much interest.

Muhlbach nods.

You look younger. I usually put on weight aboard ship, he adds suddenly and then calls: Huguette! God damn it!

But, cheri, I am hurrying! she answers from the bathroom. Do be patient. One minute more, I promise.

Did I tell you that last year I was in the Orient? Some difference the way those people look at life. Means nothing to them. So courteous but the next thing you know they're torturing some poor bastard. You remember that time we went to New Orleans?

What's he doing? Muhlbach wonders. It's as though his brain has been short-circuited.

Puig smiles. We bought that old rattletrap car for twenty bucks to drive down. Seems like yesterday. You remember?

Yes. Of course. Muhlbach remembers. Rainy green bluffs along the Mississippi. The soft dialect of the people. Negroes everywhere. Crisp greasy fried shrimp and gray beans with red-eye gravy. Lying on the warm salty beach at Pontchartrain, a Gulf breeze blowing stiffly through the late afternoon. But then he hears Puig mention the street fight. That, too, had been part of the trip. A slow, savage beating more like a ritual than a fight. Muhlbach remembers the grotesque figure in a painted leather vest, with a black nail-studded belt and loose motorcycle boots. The fleshless wolf-like Slavic features, Asiatic eyes peeping out from beneath the dinky cap with a look of amusement while he kicked and beat the victim. A pair of gloves flapped from his back pocket when he swaggered away, the vest dangling from the muscular shoulders. Puig calls it a fight, but it was an assault. And the people standing around asking each other how it started, waiting to see if the thug would come stalking out of the night to attack his victim again—a man sprawled against the curb, resting near the base of the streetlight because he had held on to the streetlight with all his strength while being beaten, but at last slid to the sidewalk where he sat gazing up at the spectators until he was kicked in the back of the head and dropped over lifelessly. Muhlbach remembers the deep sexual pleasure in the hoodlum's face, and how

slowly the victim was beaten. He remembers thinking that a man's body is like a heavy rubber ball without much air in it. The body scarcely moved when it was kicked.

Too bad we missed out on the beginning, says Puig, and Muhlbach finds Puig looking at him with mockery or contempt.

Now don't tell me you were going to stop it. Come on, mister, you must think I'm stupid. Nobody was going to—nobody in the whole crowd. That punk was dangerous. You knew it, I knew it, everybody knew it. So don't tell me you were about to step up and shake your finger in his face. You didn't make a move. You stood right next to me quiet as a lamb and watched a man get his brains kicked loose. Let's see—what street was that on? Dauphine, was it? Dumaine? It was close to the convent. We ate someplace near Jackson Square, afterwards we walked around. Bought some pralines for dessert. Listened to a jazz outfit. Then what'd we do?

Puig continues reminiscing but Muhlbach no longer listens. What Puig has said is true, he had stood watching quietly while a man was being kicked in the head. He remembers standing on tiptoe to find out what was going on, wondering if there had been an accident, or if it was a play being performed under the streetlight. It had seemed almost like a play, as though at any minute the hoodlum would bow to the applause, then take off his cap and approach for a donation, and the motionless man who lay there bleeding from the mouth and ears would jump to his feet with a grin, wipe away the blood, and the two of them would move along the street to a different corner.

Puig is still talking. You couldn't let the thing alone. After it was done you had to go through it again and again. But while it was actually happening you didn't risk your neck, did you? No, you watched. Then an hour later you decide we ought to go to the cops to report what we witnessed. Sometimes you make me sick at my stomach.

The one act in my life that I'm still ashamed of, thinks Muhlbach with astonishment. How did he guess? After all these years how does he know I've never gotten over that feeling of shame? We did talk about it, yes, and I suppose I was the one who kept bringing it up, but of course we used to talk about all sorts of things. And he himself didn't try to stop the fight.

How many people in the world? Puig inquires. Worry about what happens to one of them and you got to start worrying about the others. I didn't lose any sleep over it. I never pretended I did. I didn't

go around for the next two weeks throwing ashes on myself. I'm no hypocrite.

Everything Puig has said is the truth. And yet, thinks Muhlbach, why am I suspicious? He's trying to degrade me, that's clear enough, but I don't know why. He was as afraid as I was, maybe more, because he was the fine physical specimen, not I. He was the one who might have been a match for that thug, but he knew I wasn't. So! Is it possible? Does he feel as guilty as I do? Is he condemning himself?

But why did he bring it up now? What were we talking about—war, for some reason I've forgotten, then all at once he asked about New Orleans. How strange! Muhlbach looks again at Puig. War. Violence. Threats. The shapeless conversation while waiting for Huguette to dress. There it is! Of course! She can hear us talking.

Muhlbach glances toward the bathroom. The door has opened a few more inches and he sees Huguette brushing her hair. As she turns toward the cabinet he sees that she is naked.

What's she doing? asks Puig.

Brushing her hair.

Then there is nothing to do but wait, and Muhlbach waits. One more word may cause Puig to look around.

He knows the bathroom door is open, Muhlbach says to himself, and he knows I've been watching his wife. But that's all he knows. What will I do if he looks around? What could I say—nothing. Good God. And it's her fault, not mine.

Puig mutters. He scratches his jaw, swallows the rest of his drink and seems about to stand up.

He's warned me. This ridiculous talk about fighting in the street—he was telling me how he feels. And he's convinced I've had his wife. He's almost certain. The only thing he needs is some proof. The way he's been peeking at me I should have guessed. If he makes a move to get up I've got to stop him. If he gets up he'll look around. If he sees her like that he'll know we were in bed together. What will I do if he starts to get up?

Then the solution appears, as obvious as a cartoon.

What's so funny? asks Puig.

Your suspicions.

Puig grins uncomfortably.

Now that you've asked, I don't mind telling you. I can practically see them. They're all over you like the measles. What if the

bed had been wrinkled when you came in? Let's suppose your wife decided to lie down for a while before I got here but didn't straighten the bed when she got up. You were hardly in the door before you glanced at the bed. Isn't that right?

Puig continues grinning because he has no choice.

You suspected me before you bothered to say hello. And you've kept right on hunting for evidence. You decided I was a cuckoo and all you wanted was proof. Isn't that true? It is, isn't it?

Puig wipes his face, bites his lip, and grins again.

Let's try another example. Let's suppose that while I happened to see Huguette brushing her hair she wasn't fully dressed. Suppose that had been the case, what would you have thought? No doubt you'd have manufactured something from that, too. Am I right?

Puig hesitates, but then accepts the stroke; and now unless he doesn't mind being ridiculous he can't possibly turn around. Muhlbach after studying him decides that the position is fixed. However, there's no particular reason to stop, so he continues.

What might happen, I asked myself, if he started misinterpreting? What might happen if—well, it hasn't been very pleasant to contemplate.

Puig is deeply embarrassed, unable to speak. For the first time he feels defensive.

If I'm going to be hanged for a thief, Muhlbach goes on, I must admit I wish I'd stolen something.

Puig is writhing on the couch.

You practically challenged me to a duel, but I was so puzzled by the way you were acting

Oh come on, says Puig very miserably. Knock it off, will you?

If you want to drop the subject, all right.

This should be enough, Muhlbach thinks. This should satisfy me. Why do I feel like torturing him some more? But the fact is, I do. I finally got a taste of revenge and I like it. I want more, I guess because of what he did to me.

The scene in all of its glorious and ferocious schoolboy stupidity comes streaming back; wrestling with each other on the dormitory sun deck because half a dozen girls were watching, even though they pretended they weren't. Muhlbach remembers rolling closer and closer to the edge. I gave up, he remembers, to keep us from being killed. If I'd held on we'd have gone over and dropped sixty feet. And he was so pleased with himself. So proud that he'd won. We both

knew he'd won. So did the audience. But what was the sense of it? Why did we do it? For what? For the admiration of a few girls who were busily snubbing us both. On account of that one absurd juvenile defeat I've hated him. And of course at the same time I've always liked him. Hated? That's not quite right, because hate is total. I never have hated him. What I feel is the nub of something stiff, like a cork or a corroded plug, that he forced down into me. I think only some kind of revenge could soften it. But I suppose I can go on living with it, I've lived this long in spite of what he did to me. And of course I've always liked him. I couldn't have spent four years in one room with him unless I liked him. With all those sorry masculine traits I like him. He's my friend. He always has been, although sometimes I'd like to split his skull. He always had to prove he was better than I was. He had to prove he was stronger, which he was, and smarter, which he wasn't and better with the girls which is something only they could answer. Well, that's how he was made, and it's how I was made, and otherwise I guess there's not much to choose between us.

Muhlbach, lifting his glass to finish the drink, because surely Huguette must be ready by now, finds himself looking into the bathroom again. She is standing in full view, leaning toward the mirror to add the last touch of lipstick. Her hair is beautifully brushed and arranged. She has put on her shoes and stockings and a red garter belt, but nothing else. She is watching him from the corner of her eye. She has been standing there waiting.

Muhlbach is too shocked to look away. This is no accidental tableau—if Puig should look. This is not the same as a door that's not quite shut. This is something out of the depths.

For an instant she gazes at him. Then as though he did not exist she turns her back, the worst and oldest insult.

Do you see? she seems to ask. This is what I think of you! And with that she pushes the door shut.

For the rest of her life, Muhlbach reflects, that's what she's going to think of me, because I denied us a round of cheap pleasure—a loveless struggle on a rented bed. Have I humiliated her so much?

A few minutes later Huguette reappears, exquisitely dressed and ready.

I am sorry to take so long but there are certain things a woman must do, she begins brightly. Now if you gentlemen will be good enough to get to your feet

They stand up, neither saying a word. Muhlbach is too amazed to

Speak and Puig obviously is bored by the idea of three for dinner. Huguette takes each of them by an arm. Alors, she asks, shall we go?

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A Caracole in Paris

BY MAX STEELE

LATER, after the blood had been properly shed, I realized what I had always known: all it takes for melodrama is two Southerners.

The Embassy estimated there were ten thousand Americans living that year on the Left Bank. But Mary David Clark was the only Southern woman I met in Paris; and so far as anyone seemed to know, I was the only man there from the Deep South.

I had had, a few weeks before meeting Mary David, a final and spectacular fight with a rather beat and bustless French girl named Claudia who lived at Montparnasse. To avoid seeing her, I had found a cafe on the Place St. Sulpice, near the Cathedral itself.

It is there one morning that I first hear Mary David Clark. She is speaking English in the most wonderful of Delta accents. Her words, slow as the River, delight me; and I smile inwardly, without taking my eyes from the article I am translating for a New York law firm. I do not want, in my present mood, to meet her, or any woman from anywhere; but there is no harm, I think, in letting the soft, familiar words pour over and about me.

"Heah we wuh," she is saying, "sittin on the dining cah." She describes in charming detail, the car, the passengers, their clothes, the rock walls passing by, the stone houses and runted apple trees, the short-legged cows and the fields of flowers. I glance up to see a thin woman. Probably about five years older than myself, say about forty, neat, and fresh in a crisp brown linen suit.

The man she is talking to is eagle-like in his sharpness, and could be anywhere between thirty and forty-five. He catches my eye, knows I am listening, and I know he is not. His face is one I have seen vividly somewhere before.

"... and all these American tourists on the dining cah wanting to know if this is Normandy or Brittany and every last one ashamed to ask. So the next time that cute little waiter came prissing up I said

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in my best Alabama French, 'Is this Normandy or Brittany, sir?' In French, of course, and he said, 'It's cauliflower, Madame, *choufleur*,' and put another spoonful on my plate."

The eagle-faced man laughs without true amusement; his intense, pale-blue eyes are ceaselessly scanning the square and terrace for moving prey. I have seen him before in some unpleasant circumstances.

She is almost whispering: "That was four days ago and I haven't spoken one word of French since then."

"How do you manage?" His eyes follow coldly the muscular thighs of Robert, the young waiter, who in his shiney tight pants is pirouetting in and out among the chairs and tables.

"English," she says. "If you speak English plainly enough and slowly enough, anybody in the world can understand you."

The next morning I am there in time to see her come out of the hotel on the square and cross to the fountain where she shakes crumbs out of a napkin for the pigeons strutting and bobbing at her feet. She wets her fingertips in the fountain pool and turns round and round, leisurely drying her fingertips on the napkin and studying the plane trees and the unclouded sky.

With one hand she is clasping now a camel's hair coat in cape fashion about her shoulders; and with the other she swings with a reserved abandon, a beautifully worn, leather satchel. She turns slower and slower, evidently astonished still and pleased to find herself here, at last, alone, at the beginning of adventure, in the heart of Paris.

In the authoritative way she surveys the mansard rooftops, in the proprietary ways she scatters the pigeons of St. Sulpice, one can see the headstrong person she has always been: the tomboy riding a mare with mane as roan as her own straight hair, across a gravel drive to shout for icewater from an overworked Negro cook or a bullied step-mother. Refused, she caracoles in the jonquils until a glass is fetched and a pitcher. And years later, caracoling through a short marriage with a lieutenant who comes back from the Cuban crises, but not to her. Her divorce almost undoes her thousand relatives in Montgomery and Troy and has shaken even her father in his bedside manner where charm heals perhaps more sick than his licensed ignorance can kill.

She comes across the square, her ghosts in file: the not-quite sorority girl, not-quite debutante, not-quite garden club lady, the not-quite wife, the not-quite virgin old maid. And by paradox, she who is not quite anybody, gives, by the result of that same breeding, the appearance of being completely at home everywhere. Graciously she steps

aside and allows the domestics in their saddest black coats to trudge the mica-flecked pavement of her square and even to disturb with their heavy shopping bags the gathering storm of her pigeons.

Thus she arrives and settles herself and tells Robert in her "perfectly good English" that she wants coffee, bread and butter. With other tourists, Robert, who is more athlete than scholar, has always pretended not to understand a word of any language; but he simply asks her in French whether she wants coffee black or with. She reckons milk would be best on such a windy morning. As he attends her he becomes a real, though virile, dandy, adjusting chairs with sharp clicks and wiping tables with smart flicks of his towel. Inside, waiting for the coffee, he tightens his bow tie, tugs his short white jacket toward his waist, and smooths the shiny cloth of his pants across his rounded little buttocks. No one has ever seen Robert smile before but he smiles this morning as he places the coffee before Mary David. Even Robert cannot resist the smile of a freckled-face woman.

Much later, when I rest my eyes again, I see she has finished her breakfast and is rolling up her linen napkin. She reaches efficiently into her satchel and brings out a massively wrought silver napkin ring which she shoves the napkin unceremoniously through. And as if she is certain Robert is hovering near, which he is, she tells him she will be eating breakfast here every morning and asks if she may leave the napkin with him. He is delighted that he does understand English. From the corner of my eye I can see him telling his mother, who sits all day at the cash register. Madame Vavin, the patroness, examines the quality of the silver in the holder, the linen in the napkin, the craftsmanship in both and nods her approval. They have never encouraged tourists; they have tolerated me; but now Robert returns to the door and lingers there, instant to the needs of this soft-spoken woman, new to him in his experiences with American women.

Mary David has taken from her satchel a pad, a sort of bamboo fountain pen with a secret source of ink, and is sketching the lions of the fountain, the pillars of the church, the dome with its copper-green pelican plucking its metal breast for blood, the iron grillwork at the base of the trees, the Vespasian, even the Cinzano ashtrays, all with great speed and a minimum of detail. Robert draws closer to admire the results of her noisy scratchings. He is obviously proud that the new customer is, in addition to being a gentlewoman who appreciates his complete and sudden command of English, an artist as well.

When the sun begins to hit my paper and writing hand, I look up from my translating and am surprised to see the eagle-faced man standing at Mary David's table. He is trying to see the sketches on her pad, but she has flung her hand out casually across them. She says: "No. You mustn't look, I'm sorry. They're croissant. Cafe au lait. Gendarme. Concierge. All that."

"What do you mean, they are all croissant?" Today I can hear his accent is Germanic. And like all Germans when they are being obtuse, he lets his voice become thick and guttural, making up in force what it lacks in intelligence. "You have drawn croissants and gendarmes?"

"I've drawn a picture of 'que voulez-vous'." She motions that he should sit down rather than stand at what he obviously hopes is an informal stance, but suggests rather a soldier at attention who intends to scratch his armpit the second the sergeant's back is turned.

She explains: "They're sketches of the square . . . the cathedral."

"And your concierge?" He sits quickly and clicks on her cup with a spoon to summon Robert.

"Not literally. Before I came here I got so tired of reading and hearing about Paris from people who had to throw in every word of guidebook French they knew: apéritifs, rues, and pensions. You know, and if they're really with it they throw in a merde every page. That's what these drawings are: guidebook sketches. Something every tourist who's been here a week knows."

"But it is for Americans. This fabric you design, isn't it?"

She says: "Certainly. But Americans are more sophisticated now. They don't want the Eiffel tower on their shower curtains. It's a competitive business." It is strange to imagine this slow-talking woman in a competitive fashion- or garment-industry world. "Nobody's going to catch me on a hardtop road."

He settles back and suddenly swells his chest as if he is about to light a cigar. "The apartment I promised you. It is yours."

Apparently she does not understand how hard apartments are to find, what an impossible thing this man has done for her. "I have only to go to his lawyers on the rue de Rennes to sign the lease and the inventory."

"I looked as I crossed the square. I couldn't tell which it is but there's an adorable one up above here," she points with the bamboo over her shoulder, "with hanging baskets and a boxwood hedge."

He is overjoyed. "That is it! That is the one! Morning sun! Everything!" He wants everyone to see his joy, what a bright happy man

he is. His pale eyes take in the street and terrace and stop at me. His smile dissipates. I return his stare which becomes a hostile glint.

Now I know where I have seen him before: at the gate of the American Embassy, circulating a petition to stop our meddling in Asian affairs. He has put on some weight since then, but the harsh angularity is there, the skull head, the nose that could be Roman, Jewish or hawk.

A legal attaché from the Embassy has said he was not to be taken seriously as an agitator. The Communists have refused his advances; the Neo-Fascists do not trust him, and in any case, even if one could determine his rather confused and naive political beliefs, his unreasonable temper makes him unattractive to any party as a propagandist or agitator. As I remember the pamphlet, which I have in my hotel, he was charging American Communists of extreme sophistication in trying to entice America into a war against Asian Communists. Something like that. And I remember now he is the same man who caused a scandal of sorts at the American Express.

He is said by some Americans to be violent and dangerous and certainly he looks it. His tense hands ball into hard fists when he talks, and his jaw muscles work furiously when he is silent. It is said he was in a concentration camp; but Claudia who was with me at the Embassy when he was demonstrating said simply: "If he was in a concentration camp I am certain he was a guard. No one—I have never known one single human being who was in a camp as an inmate—ever calls attention to himself in any way. Above all in a public place." She watched him a while longer, shouting his abuse at the people walking by ignoring him. "He's a Nazi. And a psychotic besides."

Mary David, however, seems to find nothing strange in his manner, and seems even a little charmed by him. But she is Southern, woman, alone in a foreign city; and he has found her an apartment her first week and will sign the lease in his own name to save her from, as he is explaining, paying the exorbitant rent which would be demanded of any American. Still, I can imagine easily her confiding in me after she has the key to the apartment and a knowledge of the community: "Honey, he's got this peculiar odor. I doan know whether it's that awful skin rash or those clothes he sponges himself, but he smells so much like kerosene I'm afraid to strike a match neah him." I will agree that she can't have somebody like that around who might blow up at any moment and she'll pull on her velvet ax-gloves and say: "I mean he's sweet and he found me an apartment and all that and he's

certainly been a perfect gentleman" And she'll be the perfect lady and he'll never even see the ax coming down.

He is being a perfect gentleman now. He leans forward and shows her the price written on a card. Then, as if he has offended me by his exclusive whisper, he leans back and smiles seductively at me. It is that dangerous, latent smile which Claudia observed and which a man, even without warning does not return without risking an outright accusation of flirting. He continues the smile until it becomes a stare, a dare, and then a mockery. Yes, it is the same man who made a scene at the American Express by shouting that all American men are perverted. There should be some way to warn this compatriot, this unbeguiling Southern woman, that she is dealing with a madman.

He looks deliberately away and leans forward and whispers something to Mary David. She waits an appropriate moment before glancing my way. Now I am the one who feels perverted, politically suspect, paranoid. He gulps his coffee and with a Germanic briskness, a clicking of cup to saucer, chair to table, heels to terrace, shakes her hand and leaves.

Before he is out of sight she says to me: "Do you know that man?" Her voice is easy, lazy with me as if she knows I will speak with a Southern accent too.

"I've seen him around," I say.

"He doesn't live near here," she half-explains, half-questions.

"I've seen him at the American Express and near the Embassy."

"Do you know anything about him," she says. "I just met him through a friend on the boat and I don't know anything at all about him. Except his name: Kretzer."

I laugh suddenly. This might as well be Opeleika, Alabama, after church. "You mean you don't even know what his daddy does?"

She laughs. "Honey, I don't even know who his granddaddy was and where his folks come from."

We look at each other fondly. We speak the same language. Later we can give all the unnecessary and similar pages of our biographies. We are both, I am sure, liberal, optimistic about the outcome of the struggle in the South, sure of a new prosperity there for everyone, annoyed with the Northern press, bored to hell and back with aggressive Yankee liberals who will continue to discover in superb innocence what we have protested about for fifteen or twenty or even more years.

"What about him?" she asks.

"I think he's insane." It is strange to be quoting Claudia still and still with perfect confidence in her intuitions.

She feints. She wants not to hear. "I think he's sweet. He's gone to lease an apartment for me. He couldn't be sweeter."

"I think he's dangerous," I say. Maybe later she will tell him what I've said; but at least I will have done my duty by her whatever happens.

"You really think so," she asks.

"I really think he's on the verge of violence." Perhaps I should tell her he had to be dragged, fighting, from the American Express.

"Violent," she says slowly. The word lights up the sky and in its perculiar light everything in sight becomes magic to her. I have said the wrong thing. She is committed to him now. "You really think he might be violent." Again sheet lightning whitens the square and engraves the cathedral against the sky.

"I think," I try again, "he is insane."

"Oh, I don't think *that*," she says. "I think he's just a little nuhvous."

She pulls the camel's hair coat about her shoulders and I cannot tell whether it is the word nervous or the word violent that brings a slight and rather attractive shiver to her wide shoulders.

The rest of the day I am a little uneasy and I cannot tell whether I am about to become infatuated with Mary David or to be caught up in another bout of homesickness. At any rate I hope she heeds my words; but that afternoon, unable to stay away, I return to the square and see them moving her luggage from the hotel and I watch as they cross the square and go through the grilled gateway in the building next to the Vavin's cafe.

As I stand on the cathedral steps in the late afternoon sun, I wonder if this uneasy feeling I have is fear, or jealousy, or lonesomeness. One thing I'm sure of: I will not go back to the Vavin's cafe. Maybe I will go back to Montparnasse. By now Claudia will have found a Frenchman "who understands tenderness" and perhaps gone with him to a new cafe.

It is a long time, several months, before I see Mary David again. Winter has come and is worse than the winter before. Mary David, huddled deep in a leather and fur coat is walking with Kretzer through the bright bare alleys of the Luxembourg. From the upturned collar of his greatcoat he is staring at me and apparently has been watching my approach. I speak to her when she speaks to me and nod to him. I

am prepared to go on past when suddenly she lifts her head and says on a cloud of breath, "It doesn't get this cold even in Nashville, Tennessee, does it?"

"Nashville?" Kretzer says angrily before I can answer. "You mean Asheville." His tone is officious, his voice forced, deep and guttural. I suspect they have been quarreling. We look at each other, Mary David and I, and know to let his correction pass uncorrected.

"You never come to our cafe anymore," she says.

"It's too cold now to cross the park."

"You live on the other side?"

"Near the Lion," I say and point toward the Lion of Belfort.

"I've often wondered. Near the Cloture de Lilas?" she asks.

On an impulse I decide it might be wise for her to know how to find me. Ignoring the suspicion in Kretzer's incredibly mean eyes I say: "I go to the cafe almost directly across Montparnasse from there. The Margot."

Apparently she does not believe in his paranoia yet for she says, disarmingly, "Maybe we will find you there sometime."

I say please do and she is Southern enough to know that the lack of enthusiasm means please don't. I try to see in her face if she is trying to say more than her words. But her brown eyes are watery from the cold and her nose red and her freckles are standing out on her winter-white cheeks.

"Maybe we will see you there or at St. Sulpice?" There is no question that her tone is wistful and for the first time guarded. Has he tightened his grip on her elbow? Is she afraid of him? "Come see us sometime," she says. "If we're not in the cafe, we're in my apartment."

Though I know, I tell her I do not know where her apartment is. She asks Kretzer to give me a card, and it is when he opens his great-coat and his jacket at the collar and reaches for his billfold in the jacket that I see the shoulder holster and the metallic gleam of the pistol's handle.

For some days the conversation and the glimpse of the pistol have naturally worried me; and I have been asking around about the German who caused trouble at the American Embassy. He has, it turns out, caused trouble also at an American cafe off the Odéon. He is generally avoided by almost everyone. No American will go to the cafe at St. Sulpice. I am not at all alone in regarding him as mad.

Tonight in a Montparnasse restaurant I mention him during supper. Claudia who is there with a red-headed Englishman (does he

understand tenderness, Claudia, does he?) is anxious to appear cool and undisturbed by my presence. She holds forth, ready not only to diagnose Kretzer's sickness but to proscribe its cure: "If he'd find himself a boyfriend he'd know what his trouble is. Maybe then he could relax before he goes completely mad."

I point out he has a girlfriend.

"That tomboy!" Claudia is derisive. "A substitute won't do." She smiles that knowing smile which used to infuriate me but which now leaves me calm, for she seems to know instinctively that Mary David might appeal to me and that my interest in Kretzer is malign. "It'll take a real boy, not a sexless spinster." She smiles at me sweetly and I smile back and glance at the Englishman and back to her with a laugh. "Anyway," she says, "why must we always talk about Nazis? They bore me."

Unfortunately for her, Mary David's ambiguous relationship to the German does not bore the others at the table. I am surprised there has already been so much talk about them. It seems there has been a good bit of speculation. There seems to be little doubt that he will eventually beat or even kill her. Claudia shrugs and shakes her head. "No, he's the one who wants to be beat and killed." She speaks with the authority of one who has not wasted her childhood reading anything lighter than Kraft-Ebbing, though in fact all her judgments are from instinct. "She can have him. He's not an interesting type if its the boudoir one has in mind."

Even though I have no plans concerning Mary David for myself, Claudia's words relieve me and I feel inclined either to sigh or smile to relax the muscles in my jaw. Perhaps then they are not actually living together.

Marron, a ridiculously fat girl who has earned the nickname by carrying, as other girls carry purses, a paper cone of roasted chestnuts on the street (it is said she chooses her subway stops and maps her days by the braziers of the chestnut vendors) raises her voice almost hysterically high and the sound is like that of air escaping from the pinched neck of a balloon: "I think he'll kill her."

"Why?" I ask. Nothing is quite real to Marron, except perhaps food, but still I wonder what perceptions have penetrated this ponderous weight.

She feels challenged and not up to it. "Maybe he won't. I don't know. Most of the time I can't take it seriously. I just keep thinking she is Katherine Hepburn caught up in a Carson McCullers' play."

Always she refers life back to art, reality back to mirrors. Someday she will find in a street carnival a mirror that makes her tall and thin and she will accept the price of dreaming through the days as the Fat Lady for the privilege of living brilliantly at night as the thin lady in the mirror and we will see no more of Marrón and her paper cones on these boulevards and terraces.

"Marrón?" Mary David is saying one afternoon some days later at the cafe near St. Suplice. "She's that poor pitiful overweight creature you see everywhere?"

I nod.

"But it's not her name. It's terrible to call her that. Her name is Bernice something. She's from Brooklyn Heights."

"You know her?"

"She just sat down here one day to rest and started talking. The most astonishing intimate things. The kind of things if you're from the South you lie about forever or at least make jokes about; but she's so deadly earnest. Her mother sent her to those awful health food farms, very expensive she'll tell you, till she got thin, bought her a wardrobe, very expensive clothes, and sent her over here to get married. Frankly that. She's gained forty pounds, she says, I suspect sixty's nearer the truth, and is afraid to go home till she can go back as she says, 'in the same wardrobe.' I wanted to tell her she'll be lucky to go back in the same boat if she doesn't hurry."

This is the first time I've been back to the cafe. Since I caught sight of the pistol, I have come back several times to talk with her but each time he was here and I would pass on down to the rue Bonaparte. Today, I have not seen him and I have entered when she waved to me: Kretzer has gone to see a doctor and is there this afternoon. She has persuaded him at last to go because he is having trouble sleeping. "I can hear him tossing all night." It slips out. She does not turn red but explains in a no-nonsense air: "He's run completely out of money except for some sort of little pension and I'm letting him sleep in the small bedroom I never used anyway." He eats practically nothing but he has begun to drink too much. But only in the last month has he begun to drink so much and sleep so little.

"I thought he lived here at the cafe. This is the first time I've ever passed he wasn't here."

"He said he'd seen you pass. He sees everything." She must see something near panic in my face because she changes her tone. "He loves the Vavins. Especially Robert. They're very sweet to him. He helps

Robert move the tables and chairs in at night and out in the morning and cleans up back of the bar and is teaching him German and English. Mama and Papa Vavin are impressed because no one has been able to interest Robert in anything except athletics before." Today, even though the weather is still cold, Robert is wearing short sleeves that show his biceps and his thin summer pants that show his sturdy thigh and calf muscles. He moves among the tables, his tray held high, with the grace of a football player, not of a ballet dancer. He is very body-conscious, I realize, and very body-proud. I think of Claudia's diagnosis of Kretzer. Is Robert to be his cure?

Mary David glances at her watch. "I hope the doctor will give him some sleeping pills. He won't take tranquillizers. They're part of a Communist plot to lull America to sleep. He's so nervous." She says 'nervous' now, not 'nuhvous.'

At last I can say again what I feel I must say, the reason I have been seeking this meeting. "I think it's more than nerves."

She is prepared to listen. She studies her hands and then sits as still as a cat about to be stroked.

"I'm not the only one who thinks you're being foolish."

She shakes her head impatiently. She can not bear to hear more. "He's just nervous."

"Claudia said"

"Claudia," Mary David says with sudden venom. "Is she that friend of Bernice's . . . ?"

"Yes," I say, "the one in black, always"

"Black hair down her back, black stretch pants"

I nod.

"That slattern," she says. "But I must say she's the only French woman I've ever seen who could wear stretch pants. Why do they" she shakes her head; it's not worth pursuing. I realize now how tense she has become. "Claudia! Back home she'd be a hill-billy"

"Careful," I say. She knows I am from the foothills. "Anyway," I say, "it's none of my business"

"Sweetie, please don't." She looks as though she can't bear to hear more about what people think of Kretzer. I know now she sees him as clearly as I do. She knows even if she will not admit to herself or to him that he is a dangerous man.

We sit watching a beautiful pair of dray horses pulling a flat of wine kegs toward the Buci market. "That's the only thing that makes

me homesick. Animals. And one other thing, you know what it is?"

"Watermelons in the Arab quarters."

She shakes her head. "The French men when they say 'comment'. Sometimes they drawl it out and it sounds just like 'Come on' the way Daddy used to when he was going to take me with him walking."

She checks the sentimentality in her eyes and laughs it from her voice. "Isn't the South impossible?"

"The rest of the country seems to think so," I say.

"Oh, I'm not worried about that. Soon as it gets some money all that will work itself out. Marching around won't do it, alone. Money, it's going to take money." But she is as tired of saying the same old things over and over as I am. "That's where we should be this minute."

I agree, but I know that neither of us feels militant enough to go back. "Claudia," I begin again.

"Claudia! Do you know the first word that came to my mind when I saw her?"

"Slattern," I say. It is strange how women know what type woman will attract a man they are talking to. Claudia is not slatternly at all.

"Common," Mary David says. "She's common."

"Tacky?" I ask.

"No, she's got too much style for that. Marron . . . Bernice is tacky."

For the rest of the afternoon, until it is almost time for Kretzer to come back, we list all the people we know who are common or not, tacky or not. George Washington is common and Martha is tacky; Abraham Lincoln was neither; Robert E. Lee was elegant and so is James Baldwin; Marilyn Monroe ended up not common or tacky. Queen Elizabeth was tacky. Jackie is not. We both agree about the Duchess of Windsor. We ourselves are not of course common or tacky because like all good Southerners we are descended from Pocahontas through the Randolphs of Virginia. This mutual, snobbish nonsense seems, sitting here in the heart of Paris, outrageously funny to us; but gradually it becomes funnier to Mary David than it is to me and as she coughs and dries her eyes with her napkin and begins laughing all over again, I know it is a deeper anguish than homesickness that is shaking her, and making her face wet with laugh-tears. When she controls herself enough to try to see the watch on her wrist, I rise to leave and this time she does not try to stop me. She

quits laughing completely and says: "Honey, thank you for coming by." I say that I have enjoyed being in this common tacky place with her. "Will I see you again?" she asks.

"Certainly," I say.

"Is there any way to get in touch with you?" she keeps the question light, unimportant.

"I'm still looking for a better place, but in the meantime I'm stuck here. It's near the cafe, near the Belfort." I give her my card and write the telephone number of the hotel on it.

"Is it all right to call?"

"They're very good about calls," I say. "They believe they speak English there. Especially over the telephone."

The following morning I have business on the Right Bank and so do not go as usual for breakfast at my cafe. When I arrive there toward noon for a sandwich and to read my mail, the waiter holds open the door for me and corners me near the pinball machine. An American lady has been looking for me. Has she found me? Yes, he says, she has come by early this morning asking for me and has returned an hour or so later and has left a note which he produces from his vest pocket. All it says is that she would like to see me today. "She asks if I know your hotel. I remember you planned to move. I told her I thought it the one nearest the corner. Perhaps I should not" I do not know how to give him the tip he expects, but I study the note and then hand him the money. "It's all right," I say. "Thank you."

"You do still live there."

"Yes, I haven't found anything better."

The waiter is curious about the note. "She walked, I believe, in that direction. Perhaps," he glances at the clock, "no, I doubt she would still be there."

His curiosity is unsatisfied but he can think of nothing else to say to prompt me to talk. My impassivity whets his imagination. "It's probably," I say slowly, "about the stolen diamonds." That will give him something to think about today. My appetite has left and I cross the street making an effort not to run. I should have stayed with her to see what sort of shape Kretzer was in when he returned from the doctor. Through the scrolled iron-and-glass door of my hotel I can see Mary David is not in the narrow hallway lobby. I start to go straight on to her cafe but happen to see the note hanging with my

key. It says: "I do need to talk to you. I will be at the Museum of Man (Trocadero stop) all afternoon (from about noon until closing time, 5?). Please do not go near St. Sulpice or my apartment. If you are not at the Museum before five I will call you here. Please do not call my cafe. MDC." The family which runs the hotel is at lunch in the small dining-room kitchen beyond the bedroom-office. Nevertheless, before I am through reading the note Madame herself has found business at the desk. "Ah you found the note." She waits and when I simply nod she adds. "The young lady seemed rather agitated."

She is curious but since I know nothing I cannot even annoy her by withholding information. "Perhaps it is the march on the Embassy," I say. That will give her something to occupy her mind as she cuts the *Figaro* into squares. She can think of no immediate word to detain me and I am gone, the heavy door sighing shut behind me.

At the Musée d'Homme, I find Mary David, not lingering where she can easily be found, near the entrance, but on a rented stool in the Hottentot room. She is sketching, copying almost every design in the showcases, floor, ceiling, any geometrical design that can be seen in the room or from the window.

She sees me, smiles, holds up her finger to indicate "one second" before finishing a design and closing the book.

I tell her to continue if she likes. But she wants rather to show me the section on American Indians. Here are wonderful prints made by French printmakers three centuries ago showing Indians in the wilderness, where trees are planted in neat, parallel, endless rows, the tops trimmed as square as those of the Luxembourg. I am looking closer at her than at the prints but I can see no puffiness from tears, no bruises from rough handling. "And these marvelous skin paintings done by the Indians themselves." She wants to copy them but later. She has worked enough today. Her tone is too matter-of-fact; she has something important to say.

We cross the wide avenue and find a table in the sun. It is only after the waiter has left us with our drinks that she speaks. She is direct as I knew she would be. "It was a mistake to send Kretzer to a doctor, one I knew nothing about." She drinks almost half her Pernod in one avid gulp "He came back raving. I can't find out what the doctor asked him but whatever it was it was exactly the wrong thing." She sighs and holds her mouth open as if it were parched. "I got absolutely no sleep all night."

"Which doctor? At the American Hospital?"

"He won't go near there. No. The Vavins suggested a neurologist who teaches at the Medical school."

"They're usually good. The faculty."

"Oh, I'm sure," she says. "But he got the wrong one for him. He shouldn't have known the Vavins suggested him. He came back wishing he'd killed the doctor and before morning he had it in his head the Vavins had plotted the entire examination. Now he's got the strange idea Robert was there watching the examination and listening. There's no reasoning with him."

"But Robert was waiting on us. He was in the cafe"

"Oh, I know," she waves her hand impatiently. "Do you mind if I have another." She picks up the Pernod. Again I wait to speak but when I do my voice surprises both of us with its authority: "Have you told the Vavins?"

She has not told them. Kretzer is not serious, he can't be. I say he is. She must tell them. She does not want to disturb them. Especially since she and Kretzer have run up such a bill. Already the Vavins are beginning to be less attentive to them. Robert lets them sit there sometimes twenty minutes, waiting on everyone else before them. Didn't I notice yesterday? Well, she did. That much, at least, is not Kretzer's imagination. It infuriates him. He says there are other reasons Robert is ignoring us, the real reasons, but he won't tell her what they are. And now since the visit to the doctor, he talks of smashing the cafe to smithereens.

I am still puzzling about the debt at the Vavins. "But you're selling your designs, aren't you?"

"My agent's had that thing everybody in New York is getting . . . hepatitis." She gives a brief financial account of herself. She has never really been able to live away from home on her earnings, without subsidy from her father. And now he has become a perfect bastard and has cut her checks in half, trying to get her to come back to the States, if not home. Kretzer not only makes nothing now but also spends a great deal. If he lived somewhere else she could rent his room. Or if he were a different type person she could rent the third bedroom. But he will not hear of any one else in the flat with them. The doctor yesterday took absolutely the last dollar she had. She can understand Kretzer's fury about the fee.

"Are you afraid of him?" I am wondering whether she wants to borrow money, and how much I can lend.

"No," she says. "he's not mean to me." She looks very tired. "He's

just nervous." I advise her to warn the Vavins and to go somewhere else to sleep tonight. But that she says would really make Kretzer mad. Truly mad.

"If you want a place to stay" I am saying as I pay for the second Pernod. I leave the change on the table and she can not look away from it until she realizes she is staring.

"Could you," she asks, "I hate to ask . . . but can you lend me some money until the first. Ten days. I'll be quite frank, that's why I was looking for you."

I give her all the money in my wallet, about twenty dollars, and tell her I can bring her some more in five days when my own check arrives. We both are too embarrassed to go into how much she actually needs; but apparently the twenty dollars is more than she expected and the prospect of additional money in five days is more than she had dreamed of.

She says casually, "Oh, that would be wonderful." But her eyes are full of gratitude and affection and she looks at me as if she has never really seen me before. "I may have to give you my solid-silver cream pitcher, honey."

We laugh and begin telling stories of impoverished old Southern ladies who have sold their chandeliers and poster beds. She knows one who sold her doorknobs and had a closet full of quilts she couldn't get to because the dealer forgot to replace them all with ordinary knobs as he had promised. We both sound a little homesick, but mainly Mary David sounds very tired. She looks at her watch and stands almost immediately. "I'm late." She seems frightened whether she admits it or not. "Honey," she says, "thank you. You don't have to go now. Finish your drink."

"Well, Miss Mary David," I say as I walk her toward the subway, "I think everything's going to be all right when you get your 'front room rented out to some nice working gentleman'." She turns from the subway entrance to the taxi stand. "They're so depressing when they're crowded. I think I'll just take a cab." She is saving face and I am glad. She is making it clear that if you want to lend a lady money you should buy her expensive drinks in a nice part of town and send her home in a cab.

Two days later I am sitting, worrying, at the Cafe near the Belfort. I know the second I glance up and see Marron bearing down toward me that something is wrong. My heart actually jumps in my chest and my throat goes dry. My hand shakes visibly as I try to pick up a glass.

"Have you seen Mary David Clark?" she asks before she sits heavily into the chair I have pulled out for her. "Has she gotten in touch with you?" I shake my head. "She's been phoning your hotel all morning."

"I've been here."

"None of us knew the name of this place. Maybe that's why its never caught on." She breathes short rapid breaths as though to inflate herself like a balloon. I wait. Part of me does not want to hear the news. She looks white and I can tell she has walked at that terrible pace all the way from Montparnasse.

"It is Kretzer," I say.

She nods and takes a deep breath. "He shot Robert. The cafe owner's son. Robert?"

"Vavin. What about Mary David?"

"She's all right."

"Is she all right?"

"She said don't worry about her. But she wants to see you."

"He didn't kill him did he? Robert. Kretzer didn't kill him?"

"He's in the hospital. It went through his shoulder and he's lost a lot of blood."

"And Kretzer. Where is he?"

"He's in jail."

Marron gives me the key which Mary David has sent with a message for me to wait in her apartment until she returns. All afternoon I am in and about the apartment and even when I am out I keep a watch on the entrance. Toward evening I go in and have just turned on the light in the kitchen and the gas jets on the stove for heat when I hear Mary David come in the front door. I call to her so as not to frighten her and her voice is surprisingly cheerful, almost girlish. "Honey, I'm so glad you're here." She is taking off her coat and gloves and scarf and is combing her hair with her fingers before the mirror in the hall.

At the door of the kitchen she lets her pretense of energy fall and she throws her arms around my neck and her whole body trembles against mine but she does not cry as I pat her back. "Ohhh," she says in a long wavering cry. "What a day! Those damned little snotty bureaucrats . . ." Her hair has an auburn smell just as I knew it would. "Those important little people . . ." She pushes herself out of my arms.

"They're tacky, aren't they?"

"You couldn't be more right." She goes past me as if I am a coat-rack she has hung all her troubles on in passing. "They couldn't be more tacky, even if they drove around in Cadillacs." She begins putting pots and skillets on the stove.

"Do you know what I did?" she asks. Again her voice is all bright and party. "I went all the way to the store back of the Madeleine and bought a box of three-minute hominy grits." She turns and laughs and no one could tell she'd spent her day in hospital wards and jails and lawyer's offices. "We're going to have grits and eggs and coffee and buttered toast! Don't you think that would be good?"

"Grits?" I ask.

"Yes!" she says. "Imagine!"

"And ham," I say. "Let me get some ham!"

"And we'll have red ham gravy."

I want an excuse to be out for awhile. All afternoon I've been adjusting myself for long consolations, philosophical probings, psychological speculations. But I should have known that we ~~are~~ both too Southern for immediate directness. We have had practice in avoiding a direct glance at violence and misfortune.

Mary David and I drink without talking until the ham begins to smoke and pop. As she takes up the eggs and the ham, she turns from the frying pans and says: "Now I can rent my rooms."

I am not sure whether she means to me or not, but I have been thinking the same thing and if she mentions it again after supper I will let her know I would like to move in. I try not to look pleased but I have always known this would happen.

"Why are you smiling?" she asks. "What are you laughing at?"

"'Miss Mary David's Boarding House'."

She smiles. "Wouldn't you know I'd come over here and end up taking in boarders? You think all Southerners are cursed forever with genteel poverty?"

"You know what Kipling said." I have been thinking about it all afternoon. "They change their skies above them but not their hearts that roam'."

The muscles in her face begin to play tricks on her and I want to look away while she regains control of it. I realize the words apply not only to Mary David and to me, three thousand miles from the South and still involved in violence; but even more to Kretzer who miles and years away from his Germany is still speaking the beloved language of his concentration camp.

When I look up from the wineglass I see that she has won the struggle. Her face is smooth, as if she'd patted each betraying muscle back into place. "Isn't that funny? That's what Daddy wrote me last week. Only he was quoting from Horace. He loves Horace: 'They change their climates not their dispositions who run beyond the sea'."

For awhile we are silent. Then as though we had worked together every night taking up supper, we put the grits, eggs, ham, toast and coffee on the table, and the cream in the silver pitcher she owes me. She is proud of her pledge.

"Have you tried sherry on grits?" she asks as I hold her chair for her. "You wouldn't believe how good it is."

"You are getting international," I say.

"Wouldn't you know," she says, and now her voice goes flat as the delta, "I'd come over here and get myself in a mess of trouble like this."

I have been determined not to say 'I told you so'; but I have been asked and a certain jealousy of Kretzer (who has sat how many nights in this chair where I am sitting?) pervades me and I cannot resist. "I told you he was dangerous."

"Honey," she says in real surprise, "you didn't need to tell me anything. I told everybody from the beginning he was nervous."

"Nuhvous," I say. "You used to say nuhvous."

"Well, I told you he was nuhvous. Be honest. Didn't I?"

I nod agreement and look up from the grits at the flowered tile around the stove. So here we sit, I think, under a Gallic sky, in one of those ambiguous Southern relationships that will never be quite brother-sister and never quite lover.

She seems to know the nature of my musings and says: "Is it 'who run beyond the sea' or 'who roam beyond the sea'?"

Before I can say that she is mixing up the two quotations, she raises her hand to stop me. "Listen," she whispers.

From far off through the Paris dusk comes the cry of a street haggler on his way home. "Ahhh-bee shee-fon . . . aah-beee sheee-fon." He is begging to buy old clothes and rags, but his words are sung out on that plaintive rhythm of street merchants all over the world. It makes no difference be the cry for bones and hides or the love of Allah. "Aah-bee shee-fon . . . aah-bee shee-fon!" Mary David listens, as if to the rhythm of her own heart's blood and calls back in a voice as soft and far away as the rag-merchant's own: "Shwim-pee wah-wah . . . shwim-pee wah-wah" and to her sea island chant of shrimp fresh

out of water, I add my own mountain lullaby of young corn and fresh vegetables: "Roastn-ears green peas . . . rose-nears green peas!" In the candlelight with the dark sky at the windows it is too lovely for Mary David to bear, and with the heel of her hand she brushes her cheeks dry and she sings out again in answer to the far-off ragman: "Shwimp-pee wah-wah. Shwimp-pee wah-wah!"

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Three Love Stories

BY EDWARD LOOMIS

THE WOLF

WHAT I have to contribute is mainly an act of recognition, for this story comes out of my reading, some years back.

I remember the book, vaguely, a translation from the French, with lots of illustrations, mostly etchings, engravings, prints, all very highly "stylized," which is to say, clumsy-looking and disagreeable.

I might further plead that I am exercising some "imagination"; but since I mean by that word something like "a sense of fact," I daresay this claim is not likely to be allowed.

But "imagination" is a convenient term; it looks out into the indefinite blue . . . a rickety gentleman on the parapet—

So imagine a French nobleman, on horseback, proceeding through a winter landscape, in the late sixteenth century, say. Snow on the ground.

Heavy boots, a fur cap that covers his ears, a fur coat, and a cavalry saber at his side—a broad, heavy-feeling blade.

He is of course an important person in this part of the country—a pillar of society; he is still fairly young, about thirty-five years old.

He is on his way to the chateau of a friend, and this is a social call.

On the way he encounters a wolf—a big bitch wolf. She appears out of a grove of trees to his right, and trots along a course parallel to his.

Hungry, very probably. This region is always terrorized by wolves in the wintertime.

He thinks it odd that she is alone, and he keeps an eye out for the pack.

He is not worried, of course. Being a hunter and a soldier with eleven campaigns behind him in five countries, he is even pleased to have something on his mind as he rides along.

The bitch wolf is to him a source of pleasure: he thinks about her that way. It is all a question of getting close enough so that he can

use his saber, with which he has already cleanly decapitated two men.

Somberly he remembers those men, a peasant on the other side of the Rhine who had been carrying a club, and a Spanish pikeman. Clear, dark colors elaborate the images—his arm ringing as he rode by!

Then bringing the horse up, and turning him to see what next was to be done—

An attentive shrewdness is the expression of his face; and the wolf has been coming closer. It is now apparent that she is not behaving normally. Suddenly she runs at him, dodging off when she is eight to ten feet away, and then facing him with her front paws spread, and her head down, looking up.

Her tongue appears. The yellow eyes are on him, and it is like staring into the face of a familiar dog gone crazy.

He finds the saber in his hand; he had been ready. He grins a little.

She seems to be fawning on him—playing with him, and he does not care for this.

Checks his horse. She stops moving.

"Come closer," he says.

She moves her hips obscenely, so it seems to him, as if she were in heat, and he decides that this is the explanation for her behavior.

He spurs his horse forward, seeming to have forgotten her. She moans—gives a little yelping bark.

He senses that something is going on, rises a little in the stirrups, feels her approaching, and with a sudden graceful whirl of the true horseman, he is leaning over her with the saber raised, then striking backhanded as she dodges away to the right—a terrible whistling blow that grates pleasingly on something at the bottom of its course.

He pulls the horse up and raises the blade; the bitch wolf is getting away, going steadily for the woods, and lurching rhythmically.

His hand knows that it has caught her. He looks down, and there in the snow with three drops of blood beside it rapidly sinking in, is the front paw of the wolf, neatly severed two inches up the leg.

He considers whether he wants to follow her, and decides against it, for he is already a little late.

He watches her go into the woods, shifting along awkwardly; and he grins after her.

Casually he dismounts, picks up the paw, and drops it into a leather sack he carries tied to the saddle; ordinarily he has a feed of oats for the horse in there, but today the sack is empty because he can expect his host to provide oats in the stable.

Then he mounts and rides on, arriving just before dark; he gives his horse to the care of the groom at the stable, then takes the leather sack containing the wolf's paw and goes up to the house. It is in his mind to tell the story of the wolf at dinner: there will be a moment when it will be suitable—

A cold night. A dark sky over the pale grey house.

The host welcomes him, a man about his own age. They go into a room where there are two fires burning, the leather sack goes under a chair, and the talk begins.

These are old friends, comrades of the wars—there is always something to say: “*de litteris et de armis*,” the usual conversation of intelligent men,” as Ezra Pound has laid it out for us. The visitor feels at home here, with a real affection for his host; it is about time for the wife to appear, who is a handsome, rough-faced woman always welcome in the company of men. She has a sort of acne, and fierce bright eyes very deep brown in color.

The host interrupts what he is saying in order to summon her, for he feels that she is late; a servant is sent off, who returns in a little while to say that his lady requests permission not to come down for a while because she is feeling ill.

The host considers this for a moment, hesitates, then has her sent for, smiling urbanely as he instructs the servant. It is clear that he is a gentle husband who yet knows when he must insist on his rights. He makes a little face at his friend.

When the lady appears, she is wearing a heavy fur robe and carrying a muff; and her face is pale—evidently there is something really wrong with her, and the visitor is disappointed by this, for he had been thinking her illness merely a ruse to free her from her husband's attention that night, so that she could get away to join him in his bedroom where they have already had some violent meetings.

The scene which now occurs is not very interesting in itself—nobody is cooperating. The host grows sullen, the visitor tries vivacity, then curbs it; and the wife will not look at either the husband or the lover.

Finally the husband dismisses her, with something in his manner that suggests he will be visiting the topic of her behavior this evening, and in serious vein.

They drink a little heavily of the brandy in an effort to revive their merriment, and the visitor, thinking to try something new, recalls the wolf; with a little start (for he had altogether forgotten the episode),

he reaches down under the chair and picks up the sack, and immediately notices that it feels different from what it had been when he set it down—lighter, perhaps.

He raises the sack in his right hand; it is an oddity, displayed thus, and he is happy to be getting his effect.

He tells the story, and then, completing it with his exhibit loosens the pucker string and stares into the sack. For a moment he is perplexed, thinking he has made a mistake—a glance at the sack persuades him that it is not so, that the sack is the one he had brought into the room.

It is plain, however, that something is there which he had not put there. The light is ineffective. He gets up and goes over to the fire, noticing the look of astonishment on the face of his host.

In the glare of the firelight, he peers in and sees a woman's hand, a left hand, with two rings. It is a large, beautifully white hand perfectly familiar to him as the hand of his mistress—it has touched his cheek, his eyebrows—

He bends over, identifies both rings, one set with a large diamond, the other with three matched rubies, and drops the sack with a yell of horror.

He kicks at it—some trick of the devil rising from the verge of hell; staggers away.

Meanwhile the host has risen, seizes him by the shoulder and stares into his eyes giving him a look of anxious, frightened kindness; then he hurries across the room to the sack, which he picks up and opens, then turns upside down so that the hand drops to the floor, hitting with a little thud, and the fingers seem to flex momentarily.

The host's recognition of the hand is accompanied by an instant severity of expression; his lips begin moving, and the visitor hears the patter of Latin, in a prayer.

He too has begun to pray, and now falls to his knees, as yet uncertain whether to beg for help or forgiveness.

The host is growing strong with bewilderment and rage—this is visible. He is in his own house, he has family portraits looking down down on him, there are famous lances gathered in clusters on the walls.

The visitor is ready to die, certain that he has been found out, and he bows his head for the shock of the blow he has himself known how to inflict, though not for this cause.

Then he hears his friend's voice speaking a rapid accusation directed

against his wife, and the complaint is witchcraft, a serious matter in this region which has been plagued with it for centuries and has been suffering especially in the last twenty years, and the visitor takes this for a momentary reprieve until the thought comes to him that witchcraft surely it has been which thus confounds him.

The husband is accusing his wife of being a witch who can take the form of a wolf, and when the spell wears off must return to her own form; and thus her hand—

The visitor meanwhile is recalling that there has always been something strange and wild about this woman—indeed, her power of making an adventure out of common moments has endeared her to him above any other woman he has known, for with her it has not been possible to be bored.

And a wolf—there has always been something noticeable in her character as of a big, unruly dog; she is not graceful after the fashion of other women, though she is very graceful—

She had been courting him, out there in the snow, a vile creature—those yellow eyes had been looking for weakness, for a way in, endangering his soul.

He shudders, on his knees, and presently he feels a hand on his shoulder—his host's hand, urging him to rise so that they might make common cause against the witch who inhabits this house.

The visitor gets to his feet, is uncertain, then for a moment dizzy, and then ready for what must come. He takes up his saber, left on a table near the door; and the host has armed himself with a dagger and a little ebony cross taken down from the wall.

"We must confine her," the host says, and the visitor agrees, now wondering briefly if she will betray him and knowing that he must take the risk that she will try to; and with this, the story has reached its end, for the work of justice in such a case was in those times very rapid and very secure.

The wife was tortured, indeed her toenails were ripped out with red-hot tongs and her knees and the mutilated forearm broken with strokes of an iron bar, among other torments applied by the civil authority, and she confessed to being a witch, finally, though she would not name her associates and did not say that as a woman she had known a lover as well as a husband.

She was burned at the stake in the marketplace of the nearby town, with husband and lover looking on, and as the flames rose against her, the lover was suffering vividly, for the flames reminded him very

naturally of his passion, which had similarly enfolded her. She did not cry out; the great dark eyes were fixed on him, so he believed—

He maintained his composure on the whole quite well, given the love for her which he still felt strongly, for he understood a duty to do battle with witchcraft as perhaps we all ought to do, though in this century there has developed a sympathy for the ~~witches~~ on the ground that they were women interested in love—

What went on at the meetings of the witches?—who were women, you understand. Men were present—their eyes glittering out from behind the mask, feeling the odd pressures of the shoe taken out of a hollow tree for this occasion.

Love, I think it was (among other things), as I gloss this tale; and so the lover thought, who had known in his bones that she knew others beside himself, and would not complain for fear of losing the felicity that he had.

He never learned to doubt that she had loved him, and some days after her death he found his way to the cleft tree where they had left messages for each other, and there was a message which he decided must have been sent after her arrest, for it said, "I will love you for all eternity in the fires of hell," and they had never in their happy days been given to talking like this.

Not long after he went to the tree, he began to sicken, with terrible pains in the back and a paralysis in the right leg, and though he recovered in time, he was never quite the same man again.

He hurt his leg in a fall from a horse, and afterward limped a little; he gave up hunting; he grew old, having learned that even a strong man is capable of tears, and in spite of all this he kept up his duties in that country, and was generally welcome in the important houses.

He died at the age of thirty-nine, alone in his own bed, and the husband survived him by forty-one years to become the oldest man anyone knew in that part of the world, and he had seven sons and a daughter by his second wife. . . .

Most of this is vouched for in my source, and what is not will have to go it alone, for I don't know any arguments that will tend to support it.

I suppose my notion is that morality is the subject of literature, and if this is so then something moral will have been said here, for you say your subject and can do no more.

Say it. And say that I love the thought of her who died secure in her utmost fidelity.

THREE LOVE STORIES

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HUNGER

EXCEPTIONAL PEOPLE aren't very interesting in stories, I believe, and I want to start by saying that Liza was—probably still is—un-exceptional. (She was remarkable; that's something else again.) Given her circumstances, she did what many a girl might have done.

Her name was Elizabeth Thompson Schofield—Liza, a beautiful girl: you'd think about her face in those terms, As to her body, it wouldn't surprise you to see a good tennis player built like that, with shapely, heavy legs, flat chest, long straight back; she had a lot of energy.

Her particular gift was to be good at understanding things in a generally literary and philosophical way—like a young Santayana, trustfully examining the world. Genius would not be an excessive claim about her; genius is not so rare—accomplishment is rare. She used to make notes on scraps of paper that would surprise you.

She liked to sing, and she liked to dance, though she was no music-lover: I believe she found music indefinite as an experience in itself.

Her line was the conceptual—holding the long antique sequences in order. This was her particular and constant pleasure.

She made good sense, except when she was telling stories under the influence of schizophrenia—charming sense! (Schizophrenia, or something around near there.) Her stories were not to be relied on: those candid eyes often looked out upon the rueful expression of someone who was doubting. She was like this from the time she came to Valley State, and, of course, it was a serious matter.

People talked about her, even joked about her, and though this did not modify her, it modified her circumstances—she set things going which came back to her, and then sometimes she had to sigh, painfully.

How did this thing happen to her? Nobody knew; maybe it was an unhappy love affair. Lord, it might have been: she gave each love affair a chance to affect her.

No knowing, however. Her malady was part of the given, in this little sequence of events, like the great heat, and the smell of creosote in the summertime.

Her plight was that, having no money, she would not take a job to support herself; this—which may have been a kind of madness—occurred in Taupe, where she was an undergraduate student at Valley State, living in a rooming house for elderly men operated by an aunt,

and Liza had no privileges there—I saw the old woman once or twice, on her porch.

That's a funny way to live, all right; but of course the having shelter is what caused Liza to come to Taupe, and be a student. . . .

Her own family was in Florida, sisters and brothers and the mother, all poor, because the father had died in his forties without insurance (he had made fun of *life insurance*).

There she was, hungry in the midst of the affluent society, turning her lovely head to answer the summons of life. . . . I, as it were, *imagine* all that energy and intelligence compelled by penury, and I could weep, remembering that I had not helped. She never complained; she was very gallant.

I have believed that people get what they want in life, saving only those who are coerced by financial circumstances (the poor), and Liza doesn't quite fit either the generalization or the exception.

"One has a duty to be happy," she used to say, and she tried to keep to her duty, she really did. She studied hard; and that's why she was such a trial to the Dean of Women, it may be; for she was a fine student and *also* immoral. She made love to quite few, young and old, and who can say why she did that? She was a giving nature; she was exerting a sexual charm against the curse of having a boy's flat chest, maybe that was it.

I say immoral because that's how she felt about it. She liked doing it, of course; but she understood that she was a transgressor.

Both sides of the balance in perfect order: an intellectual feat.

Also she very probably told other girls about the diaphragm (nowadays it would be The Pills)—how to get one, mainly, and she was expelled from a dormitory on suspicion of this—a very obscure episode that has a certain clarity in the mind of the Dean of Women, perhaps.

This is being pressed out toward an essay, I see, and I would like to think that the reason is in her being as she was—she was unstable, not suitable for a plot, even for the plot I would like to imagine for her.

Humm! While in high school, she had an illegitimate child, now being cared for by her mother.

She fell in love with her teachers.

She went to church—the Presbyterian Church, usually, for she liked their hymnal—and said about her religion, "It's a pure source of energy."

She tried smoking and didn't like it.

She took the serious course in physics and got a B all four semesters:

enjoyed the calculus; studied foreign languages with pleasure.

And when this brilliant student got really hungry, none of her lovers had the sense to notice her plight (it's not the sort of thing one looks for), and she would not tell them, for that would be an attempt to reform them, and she was against that, on principle. Scholarships did not come her way—she was not the type to get a scholarship. . . .

I imagine for her a spirit that she enacted here among us in the real world. Spirit is what one gathers from the consideration of such details as are here apparent.

She was here and there—refusing to comment. She always only said her thought, as it came along—a girl who never read the newspapers.

So she had to steal from the supermarkets just to continue in a day, and for a while she got away with it, doing well in her studies, happy with just two men, one a student and the other a motorcycle mechanic with intellectual pretensions. Being well-fed, she had energy for this much and more.

I knew a painter once who went about a portrait in oil somewhat as I am doing here: definite strokes about two inches long and a third of an inch wide, a sort of incipient cubism—then something glares up off the canvas. That's what I'm after—Liza—

Liza! By God, this is more like action painting!

Hunger intensified the schizophrenia which was her secret—by how much are we impoverished who quarantine our insane with definitions which none of them can escape? Those poor devils are adequately known about, hence discardable. One plays another card.

Three centuries ago, Liza could have been accommodated in the mind of everybody, and been a brilliant poet, perhaps. Well, some sort of poet, with curious meters.

—Then she got caught and was turned over to the Dean of Women, who was severe with her, and this brought on a state of mind—pretty wild—which came to the notice of some of her teachers; and thus she came under the care of the Student Health Service, which employs several counsellors and a psychiatrist, all of whom agreed that Liza was in danger.

They didn't do anything about it except to converse rather haphazardly among themselves. Nothing came of it; she got better.

Once again she was hungry all the time, for she still refused to take a job; she raided the icebox at the boarding house, but there was never anything there—not even an egg, usually, because the old woman bought just enough each day for the next day's breakfast.

She went back to stealing from the supermarkets, and after a week she got caught again, and this time was turned over to the police instead of the academic authorities, who took her down to the City Prison, booked her, and rather kindly explained that it was now up to her to get bail, a thing she ought to be able to do, somehow—

It was difficult because her two regular boyfriends were no help; neither had a phone, and she guessed that neither would have enough money anyway (she did not know how much would be required).

She had to call somebody, though. She applied herself to this problem (feeling her world beginning to crack, as it had done before).

Not smiling now, and not very intelligent, either. One puts all such aside when the world's grip is strict; there were Mexican girls looking at her—

The matron was wearing a navy blue skirt and a khaki blouse over a majestic bosom. A grumpy, youngish woman.

The toilets visible in the cells were formidable in appearance.

She repeated the phrase, "In distress," as she leafed through the pages of the telephone book, trying to find a name that was to the purpose; it would have to be somebody she loved, or who loved her. . . .

This is difficult to do, on sudden demand, when the first few candidates are ruled out.

From distress she went over into despair, and spent a dreadful night—well, how would you like it?

The next morning under the pressure of this situation, she recalled that one of the female physical education instructors had taken a friendly interest in her at the pool, and so she called her, explained her situation, and received an instantaneous promise of help: "I'll cancel my class and be right down," she said—Miss McIntyre, this was: "You poor dear!"

Yeah, she was a Lesbian, and Liza was happy to go with her and be seduced, and this is not at all wonderful; Liza (on probation) lived with Miss McIntyre for six months, gained twenty pounds, found a new boy friend (the freshman baseball coach), and returned Miss McIntyre's love pretty well, though without great pleasure.

When they parted, Miss McIntyre was miserable, even permitting herself to have thoughts of suicide—it was a question here of youth and age, Miss McIntyre in her late forties—and Liza continued on her path.

The end of this was that she got married (her child still living with her mother), and is married now, very probably, to that one or another.

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A crazy girl, and one wonders what has happened to the genius, which comes and goes like happiness, exactly like happiness, it may be!

PEYOTE

HE PROPOSED IT, and she thought it would be a pretty neat thing to do—hitchhike up the coast to Big Sur, camp there, maybe eat some peyote (she was dubious about this part), and hitchhike back on Sunday for the wedding party of a friend. They would miss the wedding, and that was all right with her.

She was twenty, he was twenty-two, both students at the State University, Indian-looking people with dark hair and prominent dark eyebrows. A big girl, her hair was long, well down past her shoulder blades—sweet, beautiful face.

His hair was really black, worn fairly long, and he had a sort of Texas face; even the part in his hair looked Western—

They might have been taken for brother and sister.

She was an English major and so was he—both looking around. They were lovers, had been for almost two months now: she'd stay at his apartment two or three nights a week. They were both working hard as students—read those novels, studied those poems, wrote those papers!

She had had two other lovers, not of his type, and liked them both very well.

Now she liked him very well. She was deliberate about such matters as about everything, a girl of good family who could think along pretty steadily—people liked her, and many even loved her, on sight.

She was quiet and shy, but you'd notice her instantly in a crowd.

No Bohemian, either one of them. She looked too aristocratic for that; and he too strong for it, like some sturdy, watchful young man just in from a ranch on the west Texas plains.

You'd notice him, too. He was a man.

Not good material for Bohemia. What would they be good material for? Citizens of the Republic, on the march to the good life, one way or another, and they'll get there before most of us, I think.

They were vivid, and she was smart, too—had an artist's way of taking her experience. She photographed things with those large eyes.

He was a little too stern—maybe too independent—to do that; subtlety was not his game.

So they set out, carrying packs with sleeping bags—got a friend to drive them to the northbound on-ramp of the freeway, and caught a ride immediately. This was a little before noon.

A middle-aged man in a Buick was the driver, fascinated by this pair, and before they'd gone ten miles he was offering to drive them all the way, veering off his course to do this.

He drove fast, held it at well over eighty going up 101. The boy sat in front, talking a little to be polite. She sat in back, looking out slowly—didn't say anything.

On Highway One, where the road narrows and gets curvy, he slowed down. Some sports cars passed him.

They got to the campground at Big Sur at four-thirty, walked a long way around the Ranger Station (not wanting to pay for a camp site), chose a place and took possession of it by spreading out their sleeping bags. Then they prepared a meal—some fruit, some things out of cans. After eating they walked around, took things in (the big sycamores and the sycamore leaves on the bottom of the river), and just passed the time until they were sleepy. They went to bed without making love—no harm in that. There were people around, and it had been a long day; they knew what they wanted, like married people.

It got cold during the night (it was late October), and they rolled against each other in the sleeping bags—the heads were together, and he said nice things into her little ear.

The next morning after breakfast, he got out the peyote, smallish disks, wrinkled, like dried apricots, and at first she was reluctant, as she had been right along; she had come for the camping—she was used to that, for her family had always done a lot of camping. He talked her around, though—made fun of her reluctance.

They cut it up into pieces for easy chewing, and there was some cottage cheese and sections of lemon to help with the taste, and neither helped at all. Frightful it was, like a warning from Mother Nature that one is not supposed to be eating this thing!

She got angry with him silently about this bitter new experience.

Once having eaten their assignment, and there was quite a lot of it, they went off through the woods, going up the river, and stopped after half an hour to sit down under the trunk of a big sycamore; there, some fifteen minutes later, she began to feel nausea, and very quickly was really sick, wanting to vomit and unwilling to do it.

She made a scene—spoke roughly to him on the theme that you've made me sick, and why should you have wanted to do that, you

bastard. She said some other swear words, very naturally, as nice girls can do, sometimes. She domesticated them.

Still, they stung him.

As she got sicker, he tried to comfort her. She lay down with her head in his lap, weeping now; he patted her, kissed her cheek, talked to her, and under the stimulus of the situation talked rather better than he normally did, so that she was really rather pleased with the way things were going; and after a time the nausea passed away, and he smiled happily at the news of this.

Then they settled themselves to have the experience of peyote, looking up into the sycamores.

Objects became alive (so it seemed). They came up out of their mute natures. The big white boulders arranged to be on intimate terms with something or other in the psyche, for example.

One thing after another. No hurry.

Goats must feel like that when they get on the wrong fodder.

Presently she observed that the leafage of the trees was composed of an immense tangle of snakes, and she was not at all afraid of this, though she had a great dislike of snakes. I don't think this has any phallic significance.

They stayed there some hours, stricken.

Then they went wandering around, and on the way back to camp after dark, got lost in the forest for a few minutes, as was proper.

Clouds were building up meanwhile, and by the time they'd had their supper, a light rain was falling. They set to work against it by stretching a little tarpaulin between a big tree and a little one, and ditching around the sheltered area underneath (he had brought an army-surplus entrenching tool). Then they went to bed, still pretty high, enjoying the sound of the rain, and feeling secure in the sleeping bags. No lovemaking.

Sometime after ten, the rain picked up and the waters began washing here and there; it happened that one of the streams came their way, inundating their ditch very suddenly, and splashing down through their little bed making the sleeping bags wet instantly.

What sort of disaster this was you can imagine who have been in such a fix.

No fun.

Dark and cold and boring. One is bored immediately, and the day, which will dry things out, is a fading memory. There is a lot of clumsy movement impossible to regulate according to the dictates

of reason—you just hurry along, trying to get the stuff together, and wondering if there's any place where you can hide.

They looked, but there was nothing to the purpose, and the air was getting noticeably colder. They were still a little high, you understand. They'd have moved into the ranger's house if they could have found a room with the window unlocked—well, not quite that far, maybe. But they'd have thought about it—that's the possibility!

Finally he had the idea that they could go into one of the privies, and this was done—the Men's. It had one of those National Parks' toilets that consist of a drum over a hole, with a toilet seat hinged to the top of it; such an arrangement always seems to smell a lot stronger than its farm counterpart which is sawed out of boards, and this one had a particularly strong smell because there had been a lot of people using it over the weekend—one imagines the strong powders doused by the caretaker upon the steaming pile in the darkness below. It's nothing to hold against her that she was distressed to be there, sitting down most of the time, up to her knees in sleeping bags that could not very well be rolled up, since they were wet, and the packs, and her lover's legs. It was crowded in there.

All they could do was wait through each second in the hope that the daylight would come before too long. Umn. There's a situation that's difficult to bear gracefully. . . . Of course, she was happy. She was really very happy.

When finally there was enough daylight to justify the attempt at the highway, they gathered things together, and went out there.

No cars for quite a while, then a sailor in a '57 Chev. stopped, and they were on their way, this time requiring three different cars before reaching the off-ramp they were seeking at a little before two-thirty in the afternoon, and by this time they had brightened to the day and the night was merely an unpleasant thing that had happened, about which it was possible to remember that the last impulses of the peyote had somewhat mitigated the unpleasantness. . . .

A friend in a Volkswagen came down the off-ramp as they were standing there, and he was willing to take them home (to the boy's apartment), where they took showers and made love, for the first time in five or six days; it was a nice love-making; she came, for the first time with anybody, and this made them both happy.

At four-thirty they went to the wedding party, and six weeks later they had parted forever, for he believed that she was interested in marrying him.

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She was heart-broken, naturally, and has survived to be more beautiful than ever, while he has graduated and gone off to Los Angeles.

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