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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Lewis Moyse entitled “Down in Old Mexico: Five Stories”. I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

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Down in Old Mexico: Five Stories

A Thesis
Presented for the
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Degree
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Lewis Moyse
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Abstract

This is a collection of short stories unified by the themes of love or revenge, sometimes the one, sometimes the one and the other. It is preceded by a personal essay that outlines in broad strokes some of the poets, philosophers and novelists who have influenced how I write and what I write about.

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To: Reliquary Heraclitus, the root eater, who some say despised mankind;

to: Charlie Patton and Robert Johnson and Willie Dixon and the ones like them for the heartbreak of the ancient nigger poetry of doom;

to: Marquez and Proust for the sheer beauty of words;

to: Eugene O'Neill for his version of the American Story;

to: Vargas-Llosa and Faulkner for rendering chaos into a reachable form;

to: Singer and Malamud and the others who have borne enduring witness of that strand that began in the desert 5700 years ago;

to: Par Lagerkvist and Edmund Jabes for trying to say what cannot be said.

*

I. THE NAMES

About the time I turned nineteen in the winter of 1966, my Father, as much to make a statement about the statement I was making as anything else, bought me a copy of Albert Camus' *The Rebel*. I doubt I could have been any less equipped to read that book at the time than I was, and I came away from it, then, largely bereft of real ideas, but nevertheless with a list of names. It was this list of names that made me want to read and reading was the force that compelled me to write. I read names like Rimbaud, Baudelaire

and Lautremont, like Nietzsche and Stirner, like Bakunin and St. Just, like Nechaev and Tchakev, all strange and wonderful and dangerous names: radical names in a radical time.

Something volatile can be expected from exposing a mind completely devoid of critical judgment to the ideas of fanatics. It does not matter if it is a kind of aesthetic extremism, such as in *Maldoror* , where the hero couples with a shark and wrestles with a hair of God, such as in Baudelaire's unrepentant candor and his celebration of corruption and dissolution, or in the murderous politics of the radical populists such as Nechaev and the nihilism of Max Stirner. It was the fanaticism and fatality of these writers, my own inchoate feeling that they had driven Romance to an untenable pitch with the sheer audacity of their words, that made me want to know them better. And when you are young and unlearned there is no brink, no abyss and no chasm you will not contemplate and want to navigate.

These names led me to newer names, and they in turn led me to others. The names were almost exclusively from Europe and Russia, and so I did not have the time for what I was certain then were turgid American and British writers. Why read Dickens' account of the French Revolution when you can read St. Just's own words? (I still doubt Dickens ever wrote anything as powerful and malignant as "Liberty is a bitch who must be bedded on a mattress of corpses.") Why read reasonable and polite Emerson and his celebration of Democracy when you can read Bakunin, the foremost theorist of apocalyptic anarchy? And why read Byron and Keats and Shelley and witness them writhe and luxuriate in the suffocating way they recalled a Classical past when you can read Rimbaud and Verlaine suffering in their own here and now and segue to their Beat

brethren who were all about jazz and abandon, and even the energetic Fascist, Celine, and his Gatlin gun staccato prose?

In the bars at night we drank and talked about revolution until the sun rose. Seems like it now anyway. There was a saying going around then: radical problems demand radical solutions. The corollary had to be: radical minds eat radical thoughts. My nascent little fictions were, besides being bad, overtly social and/or political: fiction in service of the Revolution. One chilly night three of us stood in line for the nine o'clock showing of *Zabriski Point.* A friend walked out looking dazed. His name was Joe Shock (honestly) and he had been to Viet Nam and now he worked against the war. I asked him how the movie was. He shook his head in the way you do when you keep rejecting words because the right ones haven't come, and then he said, "It makes you mad." Two days later, Joe crossed the border into Canada, about two hundred miles off, after setting fire to the munitions stored at the National Guard Armory in Lewiston, Idaho. Nobody got killed and he did a lot of damage. It was a big explosion, like the one at the of *Zabriski Point*. His fate, like Weldon Kees said of Hart Crane's, "is a matter of conjecture."

My own praxis, though, was aesthetic and not so overtly political. From Camus and the names he had led me to and the names they had led me to, I became convinced that writing, to be true and good and right, *had* to deal with eternal and existential uncertainties, with mystery. It had since Homer and the tragedians and the Yahwist writer. Topical novels, social-problem novels, I thought then, didn't carry the same

significance. Pirandello said the difference between a problem and a mystery is that a problem can be solved. (That such a vast number of them haven't been unraveled and deciphered certainly gives credence to those writers whose rage and zeal took to a circuit that allowed them to energize their themes in fiction.) The mysteries then, those Invisibilities that were often the sphere of the metaphysicians, of conjurors, of diviners and exiles, would become, for the longest time, a fixation, and I still believe that part of the responsibility of a writer is to add, in as true and legitimate a voice as one can summon, to the long ancient dialog between a reader and an author. Ibsen said, "To write is to sit in judgment on oneself," and if this is accurate there is nothing more expiating or condemnatory than a writer's response to existential categories, to the authenticity with which he deals with axiology and ontology and that he in some manner approach his own definition of the godhead as seen in the light of his relation to it. If when we come away from our work somehow changed, some how a little better attuned to ourselves and our essential and private faiths, we have done ourselves well, and we have done especially well if we have managed to translate our clandestine language for others.

Another reason I turned from the political to the aesthetic, to make that overly facile distinction, and to metaphysical or theological themes, was that I became convinced writing is a private act. We all want the work of that privacy to be made public, to share it with others, but we first discover our unique code in silence and in isolation. I sometimes think of the writer in an image Proust presents, that of the invalid on a journey and forced to sleep in a strange bed, who is awakened by a bar of light under his door at midnight and thinks for a moment at last it is morning. As writers, it is often

midnight for us and the slab of light, like that under the invalid's door, is precious; it is fleeting, but if we capture it, again, we've done well: something has become illumined.

And, part of the privacy of the act of writing was the act and the art of reading. I cannot imagine anyone with a more undisciplined and uncritical approach to reading, to coming upon titles, than I had. But then we each have our own chain of reading, that library either on our shelves or in our memory without which we would not be the same. When Wayne Booth talks about the value of literary friendships, I do take him literally. I had a varied group of friends, from those slightly arcane and esoteric names I first read in *The Rebel* to Continental Heavyweights, names like Mann and Dostoevsky, Kafka and Beckett, Camus, Sartre and Ibsen and Strindberg. It seemed as natural for me to lose myself in Russia's White Nights and Beckett's austerity and Kafka's nightmares as it might another reader to play in a mythic fairy forest, to become immersed in the domestic doings at a Regency manor or to laugh at street level subterfuge in Victorian London.

Because words are like music: some we like to see and use just like songs we want to hear; if the ear can be attuned to, and made to be by moved by melody, then so can the heart, the soul, the spirit whatever is that part of us that is moved by words made into lines made into stories and poems. And music itself has been an enormous component of that long and varied list of influences. I was lucky: I got to grow up with the start of it (talkin' 'bout rock and roll now) as did anyone my age if they paid attention, especially on the R&B out of New Orleans. (The first song I ever recall hearing, besides the opera and the show-tunes that my Dad always had on the Hi-Fi, was Roy Byrd's {aka Professor Longhair} *original* version of "Bald Head {She Ain't Got No Hair"}.) What I write is still full of lyrics and song titles, little tips of my little

literary hat to blues lyricists who came up with the perfect phrase long before I tried to, to the people who wrote the standards with such sheer cleverness and sophistication; and music and musicians and singers are, if not the major pieces of some stories, woven within much of what I write. Simply put: there is no way to escape or minimize the manifold ways music informs what I try to do.

When I was in high school and college I played in bands. Sometimes we played good sized venues and opened for names like Johnny Rivers. I sat in with Bobby Bland on "Love Light" one time. (He did the tune in 'G.') Sometimes we just played for drinks at strip joints in New Orleans. I still remember a dancer who called herself Little Egypt (don't get me wrong, I'm not trying to be funny) and her big number was taking it off to Bobby Freeman's "The Swim". "(C'mon, ev'rybody, c'mon in/Bobby's show you how to do the swim.") The best part came later. When the tourist crowd quit coming in and the needle freak junkie dancers got blitzed, we'd go to Black clubs like the Dew Drop and listen to the *real* singers and players. My main guy was Johnny Adams. He was until the end.

Back to the books: If I found something important, something lasting and universal in the thematic concerns of some of the Europeans, I found narrative lines and techniques of equal substance, first, in that wave ("The Boom") of Latin American literature that seemed ubiquitous by the mid and late 1970's. Like a lot of other readers, I almost drowned in *One Hundred Years of Solitude.* "Magic Realism" somebody tagged it. It's not important who invented it, because you can see it in Singer and Malamud as easily as in Donoso and Carpentier. And the books of the Latin American and South

American wave are often rife with politics, with social questions brought about by dictatorship and murder and disappearance. But these matters are not only historical: they are human. I read Vargas Llosa's *Conversation in the Cathedral* and was stunned: Chaos and complexity, a story about Peruvian politics of the 1950's told by…how many narrators…? How many conversations? How many hands must a writer have to juggle time that way? Here was the adamancy of memory taken out of drawing rooms and salons and the lobbies of Opera houses and brought to the street, to a grim bar called The Cathedral in Arequippa, Peru, where men and women of varying degrees of desolation held meetings with their pasts.

For a long time, then, the BIG (modern) book appealed to me, books such as *JR* by William Gaddis, *Darconville's Cat* by Alexander Theroux and *Beyond the Bedroom Wall*, by Larry Woiwode: *American* books. Something fine was at work here. There was something sweet and savage about Gaddis' word play and satire and the way he manipulated a chorus of characters talking all at once, and talking about things American; there was something lasting in Woiwode's saga of a North Dakota family, something ethereal in the poetry of his prose and human in the delights and torments of his characters, shot through with the "American Dream." Writers like Gaddis. Theroux and Woiwode, while very different in style and tone and theme, are, when compared to those in the canon, not necessarily the Western canon but even the Modern canon-- marginal; I think, however, anyone writing seriously today would be glad to exist within that margin.

The first time I tried graduate school, in 1969 and '70, I had a general thesis topic: Swedish author and Nobel Prize winner Par Lagerkvist. I had gotten far enough to begin

research in a couple of university libraries with my trusty packets of 3x5 note cards. But events conspired and it was never written. Just as well, perhaps, but I had read his Holy Land quintet , *The Dwarf*, the poems in *Eveningland*, and his short stories. And whether I wrote about them or not they were mine now, the way words are yours after you read them. *The Dwarf* was audacious enough, Renaissance nihilism for modern man narrated by a most evil midget, ("I don't play games…but if I ever played a game with you, you would not forget it."), but it was the five books…a kind of *Pentateuch*…? that were, in the real sense of the word, awesome. If the noise of Vargas-Llosa and Faulkner and Gaddis, the way they conducted simultaneous verbal symphonies, was astounding, then so was the lean skeletal prose of Lagerkvist, so spare it made a Hemingway sentence seem Baroque, so minimal and bare, the syntax and diction of prayer, not of petition, but of despair and of hope in a hopeless world. Lagerkvist's Holy Land novels are about Barabas, about Ahasueras, about pilgrims who seek but cannot find, about men and women in the agony of faith and in the end, about the essential solitude we all have and which we cannot share. In these books we pray and we seek but God does not answer and he hides, and that may be the most this life can offer.

At the Montreal Expo in 1967, the French chose the work of four writers to represent France: Sartre, Camus, Levi-Strauss and Edmond Jabes. But who is this last man? In a sense it is enough to say Jabes is an Egyptian Jew born in Cairo (1912) who emigrated to France during the '56 Suez Crisis, and who has been awarded many European literary prizes. He died in 1991. Of Jabes Paul Auster, a fine modern novelist himself, says "I first read *The Book of Questions* twenty years ago, and my life was

permanently changed by it. I can no longer think about the possibilities of literature without thinking of Jabes." I can't either.

Jabes: cryptic oracular silence.

He is closer to a poet than a novelist and if his earlier books had a semblance of story to them, a slender thread of plot, his latest books are epigrammatic, like much those of E.M. Cioran , but he lacks Cioran's sinister humor and cynicism. His earlier books were full of (imaginary) rabbinical sayings and old wisdoms; his most recent books read like Koans (no pun intended). But his themes stay the same: The Book and the Children of the Book, God and the desert and language and faith and the lack of it and the word and the writer and the word. Jabes calls from another land.

From Jabes: *And You Shall be in the Book*

When, as a child, I wrote my name for the

First time, I knew I was beginning a book.

-Reb Stein

"Writing for the sake of writing does nothing but show contempt."

"Man is a written bond and place."

*****

We are not free. We are nailed alive to the signs of the book.
Could it be that our freedom lies in the word's vain try to cut loose from the word?

*****

If you burn a book, it opens unto absence in the flame. If you drown it, it unfolds with the wave. If you bury it, it quenches the thirst of the desert. Because all words are pure water of salvation.

*****

What am I committed to?- The necessity of the book.
The book is alone before the universe, the writer in the solitude of the book.
Flint in the desert.

*****

In the exploded word. God collides with
the hostility of the letters. Even outside the Name,
God is a prisoner of the name.

*****

The fruit of paper is bitter words.

*****

When God, *El,* wanted to reveal himself, he appeared as a point.

-*The Kabbalah*

The desert is a distance surrounded by sand. Here, with the grain lies the point.

*****

There is no true silence except in the symbol's
heart of hearts, unexplored.

*****

Winter has covered my pen with snow.
White page, of ice. So young a word, and
already sentenced.
Ah, to write only resurrected words. To deal only with words of the highest season.
Luminous.

*****

There is no point in "explaining" these things, of submitting Jabes to any kind of analytic rigor in the name of science or logic, no sense in asking what it *means.* His words are like the mysteries of Pirandello: eternal and unknowable. Paul Auster again

(in a review of *The Book of Questions: El, or the Last Book*): "the central question of the book: how to speak what cannot be spoken." It is a preoccupation through much of Jabes and should be, it would seem, for any writer. Facing Jabes a reader faces the awe of God's immensity and the awe of each letter's vastness: Fecund austerity and absence.

The nomad and the banished and exiled, Ahasueras and the Children of the Book. Dispersion/ Diaspora: themes of Lutheran Lagerkvist and Jewish Jabes. The numinous geography linking the ice of the Norwegian Sea and the sun of the Mediterranean: like a root driven through the heart of earth's spiritual axis, a membrane, a fragile chain linking us to a pre-exilian time, that time prior to prophets and the messianic demiurge: Now: a brittle coil where at one point is exile and at the other is redemption: we are in the suspension.

Something keeps us here and requires us to write. Before *the desire to tell* there is *the need to say*.

It dawned on me a few months ago that of the stories in my thesis all but one has something, often quite a lot, to do with Jews and Judaism. I didn't set out for that to happen, but because this essay is about influence and ideas it would be ridiculous of me to deny the influence of the religion I grew up in. In the ancient days when I was at religious school we read from the *KJV* (part one, of course). If there were more modern translations such as the Jewish Publication Society's *Tanakh,* so prevalent today, I sure didn't know about them. The prayer book we used at services, those parts that were English translations from the Hebrew, was old as well, written in the same cadences as

the *KJV* , and I think I must have gotten my sometimes fondness for formal language, for elaborate sentence structure from reading them, from Rabbi's insistence that certain things be memorized. My favorite books were the prophetic ones and like Jane Eyre I didn't like *Psalms* overly much.

Jabes again: "As I probed more deeply, I began to realize that Judaism is an extended lesson in reading, an endless questioning of the writer." Fortunately for me I came from a family who came from a tribe that revered books. And from religious school and from home, it was impressed on me that Jews and books were indivisible, that Jews are indeed Children of the Book. And later when I began to write and connect writing to reading I saw they, too, were inseparable.

But the influence was more than language, pace and pattern; it was thematic as well. In the Old Testament , of course, lacks some of the kindness of the New, and there is no One Act of One Agent signifies the redemption of mankind. Forgiveness is conditional but justice is not. The Old Testament is the text of exile, of destruction and dispersion, and if in reading the New Testament one believes one can become Christ-like through love, then by reading the Old Testament one learns one can become God-like through justice.

As a theme, justice, some idea of it on personal and social levels, is apparent in much of what I write "about"; if a character feels his private sense of justice has been violated he will act to repair it. Although I agree with Conrad's notion that "the creator can only explain himself in his creations," it might be appropriate here to mention some specific stories in the thesis. Justice, some call it revenge, is clearly present in "Down in Old Mexico", "Lipstick Traces", and in a very real sense, "You Know Who You Are." In

each, a character feels betrayed and is willing to breach social or institutional justice, whatever name one gives the conventions and codes we are told to live lawfully by, to retaliate against that betrayal.

That is, of course, a very old formula, and I don't know where it was better or more passionately expressed, save for the Old Testament, than by the Elizabethan tragedians, writers like Kyd, Marlowe, Middleton, Ford and Webster. They seemed to have distilled the idea of revenge down to an essential quality, to have made of it a pure motive, one which once set in motion will not rest until all its work is done.

Love is there in these stories, too, but it is not often especially happy and rarely rendered the way a romance devotee would see it. "She Takes Care of the Wounded" is not especially happy because Charlie is one of the wounded and will always be so, but there is not even the thought of revenge there: to be a dreamy kid at any age is not a betrayal. And if there is no idea of having to avenge anything in "In Cocktail Hour", it is still a tale of one man's heartache. One of my favorite songs by Dinah Washington is "Love's the Greatest Thing," but love is for most of my characters still a four-letter word, "nothin' but a business goin' on." Some of my characters have taken one too many fists to the heart. Some feel the way Robert Johnson did when he wrote: A woman's like a dresser/some man is always goin' through her drawers. Then again they feel like Roy Hawkins: My home is like a graveyard/My bed is like a tomb/And I hope my baby/Will come home soon. They might feel like Ray Charles, circa '56…that five second primeval scream he lets go with at the end of "I'm A Fool for You," the one that ices my blood to this day. (And God was all over Ray's early things; the first time Bill Broonzy heard "Hallelujah, I Love Her So," he said "That cat's sanctifyin' the blues.") They might feel

like Buddy Guy: ”When my left gets to jumpin’ and my flesh begins to crawl/ I know you got some other mule, baby, kickin’ in my stall,” or like Billy Strayhorn:

> Romance is mush
> Stifling those who strive
> I’ll live a lush life
> In some small dive
> And there I’ll be
> While I rot with the rest
> Of those whose lives are lonely too.

And if now and then they drink a little, and there is whiskey on a lot of these pages, some of my characters feel like Albert King: “I don’t care what the people thinkin’/I ain’t drunk, I’m just drinkin’.”

Love *is* everywhere, but justice trumps it.

The five stories here do, I hope, have a thematic unity; love runs through them all but it is derailed by sorrows and memory and acts of perfidy. I have tried to brace and augment these themes by binding them with extra-literary modes, with film and music, with references to a past that is, I hope, more than mere scenery, one that adds texture and tone to the pieces, a past that plays an essential role.

It is right, though, to have some spiritual ground in fiction, not an orthodoxy which is dogmatic and intolerant and exclusive, but a stance, an anthology of values and beliefs that is at its core unshakeable. It is part of the voice writers give word to. It is why writers question, knowing they cannot always have an answer. The creed doesn’t need a name but it has to be there, within, and it is as much a part of a writer’s craft as his very words. And it should be, this belief, more than a layer, more than mere texture in

fiction and not just another hook for a reader, the force that holds the work together, the place from which it emanates. There is that place within us all, inviolate, impenetrable to others and to which religious and philosophical nomenclature has given many names, where in the quiet we live our best lives.

If a Mosaic idea of justice preoccupies me, it came first, no doubt, from religious training. But religious training is theory, even if the theories have a chapter and a verse. It came from books like *The Fixer* where, though it may be a stretch, one can see in the torment of Yakov Bok an allegory for Everyman's torments. It came from books like Arthur Cohen's neglected masterpiece *In The Days of Simon Stern* , from Richard Wright, and Chernechevski's *What is to be Done?,* a book some think led to radical Russian populism, to the excesses of men like Nechaev, to Bakunin, to the assassination of Czar Alexander II, to the repressions that followed it which the Nicholas II's minister of the interior, Stolypin, pursued with real zest and who took no actions against pogroms and was assassinated by a revolutionary who was also a member of Stolypin's own secret police, to Lenin, to Stalin……it came from threats on my Dad's life from white supremacists, from seeing a girl I dated and who worked for a mixed race charity home in New Orleans called Caritas get beaten by white thugs for her good deeds, from a Green Beret in Chicago, circa '68, who was big as a giant and who hit me just once but hard enough for me to never forget, and it came most certainly from being a Jew in the South in the fifties and sixties where I learned Bernard Malamud was right: If you forget you are a Jew, a Gentile will remind you.

The rebop of pop culture, of what Robert Warshow termed "the immediate experience," has not, I hope, been lost on me. While so much of it is the noise and hype of the American Star Machine, that appliance that seeks to convince us we need to pay attention to each and every latest and greatest singer and song and show and to give them money, too, that apparatus that concocts idols that have all the eternality of a finger-snap, that has manufactured the king of all oxymorons, Reality TV, that has bequeathed fads without end, that mechanism which has exalted trash of all races colors and creeds to iconic status and then grinds its own children into other and newer shapes, the machinery that insures Fitzgerald was right: the pure products of America go crazy….the Star Machine that seeks homogeneity almost as much as it does cash, is still, for all that, not without its moments and its triumphs. Even the most precisely milled machinery can make mistakes and the Star Machine has given us memorable movies and music and graphics, sights and sounds we cannot forget. For me, most of them are black and white or made of music kept alive by the memory of those whom it may have first moved and those names are too numerous to call here.

Bob Dylan was one of the ones who slipped through the gears of the Star Machine and while I don't have motivational sayings taped to my monitor, I try always to keep in mind something he said: *If there's an original thought out there, I could use it right now*.

This has been an examination of names and their influence. I am an autodidact; I am self taught. And being so I often find myself in the same position as a lawyer on trial who chooses to defend himself: he has a fool for a client and I have one for a teacher. On the positive side, however, I have no one to blame. Not to be especially versed in the

corpus of the Western Canon is a shame, I believe, but to have known, however briefly and inexpertly, what I have of the names I do know is good fortune.

We write, it seems, what we can, what we will and what we *must.* If it is good, our work tries to decipher moral and aesthetic problems. We try to answer a question posed by Henry James (which I am lifting from William Gass's *Fiction and the Figures of Life*): The great questions as to a poet or a novelist is, How does he feel about life? What, in the last analysis, is his philosophy?

To James' question I would add: what does he believe and what does he remember?

For me it is necessary to have ideas in fiction, and it is binding to write them out with faith and ardor. No philosophy of writing, no aesthetic, however, will substitute for the fiction itself. So we create our worlds according to our talent and temperament and taste, according to whatever morality it is that is sacrosanct to us, in service to ideas and even dreams that matter, and with the conviction that our devotion matters. If this seems in some ways antiquated, it may well be because I think now and then that I have been here a long time although, like some others, I am still a stranger here myself.

All the names, and they are legion, matter to me. The sheer muscle and force and splendor and perfection of perfect words matters, and trying to find those perfect words matters and to use them to perfection would be ideal. Isaac Babel said it well: "No iron can pierce the heart with such force as a period put in just the right place."

Imagine, then, the moral and aesthetic influence we might hold if we do it right.

II. SHE TAKES CARE OF THE WOUNDED

I never wear a watch and so I didn't know what time it was but I know I finally took the perfect breath. I wet my lips and felt the reed of the tenor sax on my tongue, like a kiss for luck. My solo was several silences. I had known for a long time that I wanted my music to be stern and austere, so pure and sculpted from such lean lines that it would send frisson into even the fabric of the heart. I wanted to play like winter and silence would be the ligature.

I watched them watch me on the stage from their tables, their eyes glancing over the tops of green and amber beer bottles and crystal colored cocktail glasses and through sheets of silver smoke, wondered if they felt the little chills I tried to fashion.

For a long time I had sought to play with an exquisite economy. I had wanted to dismantle the flash of pyrotechnics, to move past the part of a poseur who re-worked the ancient scales. I wanted my own voice and did not want to be the music imitator, the one they say can counterfeit any music but his own. That was my passion and I wanted to be the poet of that passion, to play perfection with a perfect breath and have them know the music beneath the unseen rigorous math that some say is the architecture of music.

The set in the little club ended about when it always did, around two in the morning, and we began to pack up, to fold up the drum kit, unplug amps and pop the mouthpieces from our instruments. We lit smokes and had more drinks and Burnell Chase looked at me from where he put the cover on his Fender-Rhodes and said, "Charlie, I didn't know where you were headed on that last solo."

"Yeah," I said, "it was like I took the perfect breath and I had all this air in me, like it had a life of its own." I drank some Scotch.

"You were angling for the stratosphere or something. I didn't know if I'd lost you or you'd lost me," he said, Abut we managed to keep it together."

"When we were coming out of the bridge and you blocked that big chord..."

"The diminished seventh," he said, taking a swallow of beer. He had long fine brown fingers and his nails shone in the dim light.

"Right. When you did that you inspired me."

Bobby Ozment, our drummer, tapped me on shoulder. "Great solo, Charlie."

"Thanks," I told him. Then I looked past him to floor of the club and at some of the women who had stayed behind, the ones who strap their eyes on a guy maybe just because he's a musician, the ones who practice cool. Bobby and I had a little game we played called Guess the Girl. We played it every Saturday night and if I could pick out the one he'd go home with he'd buy me a fifth of MaCallan. If I blew it, I owed him a case of Sam Adams. The stakes weren't even but he had the odds.

I looked past Bobby and his long dark hair, saw a handful of women, but I fastened on a brunette wearing a green and black checked wool sweater and a pair of camel colored slacks, a thin frail who looked vaguely lost and had big dark eyes that knew how to give off heat. "That one."

"The waif?"

"The gamine."

Bobby looked from her, where she stood with the palm of one hand on a table and the other lifting a cigarette to her mouth, and then to me. He smiled the little lethal grin the ladies seemed to like so well and said, “Well damn. First you play your ass off like I never heard before and then you win the liquor lottery.”

“I had a good night.”

I felt tired and I saw the exhaustion in their eyes too, in Bobby’s and Burnell’s, in the faces of the other players and the ones who hung around for last call. I finished my drink and then I carefully put the sax in its case, saw it shine in the dull light, a sweet and beautiful curve of metal and plastic, a bell and some key pads, glossed with finger prints and the lines from the heart of my hand, put it down the way a father might a sleeping child, and then I snapped the locks of the case shut. “I’ll see you guys Monday,” I said.

A cold wind blew off the Charles River and I walked with my head lowered, my left hand cupping my cigarette. I stopped at an all night convenience store and bought a couple packs of Luckies. When I got home, to the apartment Sarah and I had on Arlington Street, I took off my jacket, let it rest on the black leather arm of the sling chair, and I sat in the room between our bedroom and the one she sometimes used as an office. I sat still for a moment in the cool gray light and I heard her breathing in gentle rhythms, quiet as brush strokes on a cymbal, and I felt my lips move, I heard myself whisper the Sh’ma not because it is the duty of a good Jew to recite the prayer twice a day, but because it had come to me of its own, and I knew because my father of blessed memory had been a

rabbi, and he had told me that bidden or nor bidden, prayer is present. He had trusted much prayer and he had a faith that it was God's own breath, that it lived in the air. He had believed that it was the fiery finger of God that had shaped each Hebrew letter and given to those letters magic and that alphabets were an enchantment.

I thought with thanks on my perfect breath because it had been a gift, and I lit a smoke from one of the new packs. Then I got up, quietly as I could, and went to the kitchen where I poured some Grappa. The way it burned felt good on my throat. I took my drink back into the little room and when I sat down again, I pictured Sarah through the smoke and thought yes, I have loved her through all these years, maybe from the moment I first saw her in a Jerusalem twilight coming out of a pharmacy of Jaffa Street, a thin young woman wearing a tan safari coat over her red tee-shirt and a pair of faded bell bottomed jeans. She had light brown hair that hung upon her shoulders and a kind and intent face. I watched her walk into a net of shadows and I would have called to her or even followed, but I had a music lesson. Still, I watched the woman walk until she disappeared.

By the time I saw her again more than a month had passed, and the man I had come to Israel to study with, the Russian emigre Aaron Schransky, who himself had studied with Stravinsky, had been killed, along with two other Israelis in a market where a car bomb exploded. Schransky's crime that late morning had been to buy four red apples and a small bag of dates.

This time when I saw her she was leaving the Old City by the Damascus Gate. I

called out to her and ran in her direction, dodging two old Arab women wearing black chadors with humps on their backs and hair on the faces, and I saw an IDF soldier give me a long and purposeful look.

"Hey," I said, "hey," when I caught up to her.

She turned around. "Me?"

I looked at her eyes, how green they were and how seriously they looked back at me.

"You."

"Yes?"

She eyed me past my sunglasses, looked at the old U-Mass tee-shirt and the torn jeans, the light gray cotton jacket I wore, and the cigarette in my left hand.

I lifted the glasses onto my forehead. "Hi."

"Two hey's and hi." She smiled but her eyes never lost their exigent edge.

"Yeah. I'm sorry. My name's Charlie Luria," and I held out my hand.

She took it. "I'm Sarah Virag."

"Hey. That's three. Want to buy me a drink?"

"Are you serious?"

"No, but I'm thirsty."

And then our hands fell apart and became separate again, and we walked together for a while and then went into the bar of the King David Hotel. Sarah told me she had come to Israel right after what came to be called the Yom Kippur War had ended, that

she'd left Medical school at Tulane to come here to work with the wounded. We sat in a quiet corner and drank the cheapest red wine we could find.

"That's a good thing," I told her. "To take care of the wounded. That's many mitzvos."

She picked up her glass and swirled the crimson wine around and for all I know she thought of the blood of others, and then she looked at me and said, "No. That's not why I do it. For good deeds."

"Then, it's even a better thing." My father of blessed memory had told me once that in addition to all the alphabets God knew all the world's numbers, that he marked and counted everything, all our deeds and each secret murmur in our hearts.

"I do it because I'm selfish."

It sounded like a riddle I did not know. "Selfish?"

"Yes. I need to." Her voice sounded so full of steel.

She said over the second bottle of wine, "And so you know about me. Why are you here?"

"I know," I said, "why I came, but not really why I've stayed." I told her about Aaron Schransky, about my months of lessons with him in his dusty apartment that was packed with reams of decrepit sheet music and novels by Platonov and Turgenev, with photographs of Trotsky and Ouspenskaya, with letters form Stravinsky and Sergei Eisenstein and hand copied manuscripts of stories by Isaac Babel. I told her how he had loved to laugh and how shrilly he whistled to make me stop playing when I made a

mistake and then how he would laugh again when I aped his whistle with my sax. He trilled notes I had never known. I told her what I knew of the way he had died.

I pried a pistachio between two fingers and said, “It’s been a few weeks now.”

“How is your music coming now?”

“I haven’t touched my instrument since he was killed. Melody seems like a sacrilege to me now. It just sits there, Sarah, in its case like the case is a coffin. I look at it and think of silence. I think maybe music comes from silence, that it’s taken from silence the way shape is sculpted from stone.”

When I lit another cigarette she asked me, “must you smoke so much?”

“Yeah, I must. And while I smoke I think I’ll destroy chronology because I see no reason time should exist side by side with life and I’ll smoke and destroy and study.”

“Music?”

“No. I may never play another note. No, not music.”

“What then?”

“I’ll try to find the footprints of Mosiach, the Anointed One, in the Jerusalem dust, and learn what has made all messiahs false and retrieve the echoes of the prophets from the ancient stones.”

The eyes of the woman never wavered. “Are you always this strange?”

“Sometimes more.”

She didn’t recoil. She was not frightened. She seemed delighted.

I had sat across other tables from other women but Sarah was the one who didn’t

flinch, and her deep green eyes did not ricochet. They seemed to catch my words and make them their own.

She told me would be leaving in a few days, going back to the States.

"How long will you stay?"

I shrugged and stabbed out a cigarette.

"Are you watching for something? Waiting for it?"

I wished at that moment all the bleached light of the moon outside had fallen on her face so I could see the attitude of her eyes. There was something wise beyond the passionate scholarship of a rabbi's son in her voice and I knew it rested in her green eyes as well.

"I must be. Yeah," and my voice trailed off like the end of a rain.

"I hope you find it."

I heard her say, after she had gone, "I hope you find it," again and again. I heard her say it when I got scars on my forehead wrestling with God at the Western Wall. I heard her say it when I wandered with a group of Lubavitchers into kibbutzim to spread the Good News and when I went to Rhodes for a few weeks with a girl from Seattle. We walked the narrow stone streets and counted cats, because Rhodes is wild with cats, and I read arcane and apocryphal texts while she sketched the vines and red flowers that tumbled over walls. At night we drank Retsina and she told me Zen is the perfection of all thought and when I told her it is the annihilation of thought she always smiled and said that is its perfection. She stayed and I returned to Jerusalem. I said Kaddish for Aaron

Schransky and I flew home.

I called Sarah's parents in Scarsdale and they gave me her phone number in New Orleans.

"I wrote a song for you," I told her when I called. That was a lie because I had not touched my saxophone since the moment I heard of Schransky's death, but I knew song was there nonetheless, felt it the way a jeweler might sense unseen light in stone.

"Will you play it for me? Now?"

I pushed that music with my breath past my throat and through the saxophone and into the miles of copper wires that marked her place and mine.

When I was finished Sarah said, "That was lovely, Charlie. It made me think of bells."

"I've thought about you every day since you left Israel."

"Yes."

I moved to New Orleans and in with Sarah. She lived in a little white house on Maple Street, and it had a narrow porch. Some nights I sat on the porch and played music to myself while she studied and worked on her residency at Charity Hospital. Other nights I played in clubs with pickup bands, sometimes for drinks, sometimes for cash. It felt good to play again and I sought my voice each time I played. Some days while Sarah was at work, I would listen to music by Schoenberg, Webern and Berg. I learned to play the vocal-lines of *Woyzeck*. And at night I learned the deep rhythms of the fusion of all the music that had found its way to decayed and dissolute and rotting New Orleans.

On her days off we toured the countryside, the dark water swamps and the luxuriant green woods; we watched rains fall harder than we had ever dreamed rain could come, saw fog so deep even music could not pierce it and we wore the humidity like a shawl.

When Sarah graduated she had offers from several places, and she took a job on the staff at University Hospital in Boston, where she specialized in pediatric medicine. She loved the work, especially the children, as if they were her own. We needed money then so I took jobs as a session player in New York. I played a lot of eight bar solos behind singers I had never heard of, making music I tried to forget the moment I let the last notes go. In Boston I met more serious players and played when I could in clubs there and in Cambridge, free from studio engineers, their stop watches and their acoustic tricks.

"I want a child, Charlie," Sarah told me one night. We walked along Mass Ave and had just left a jazz recital at Berklee. She put her arm through mine and pulled me closer.

Finally, I said, "Yes, I know you do."

We ended up that night drinking at the Black Rose and while a group in a corner sang songs about Charles Parnell And Wolfe Tone, I asked her, "Will you marry me?"

My father of blessed memory married us in his synagogue three weeks later and Sarah and I put thin gold bands on one each other's willing fingers, pledging with soft voices love and goodness and mercy to one another. My father took our hands in his and blessed us.

Sarah gained promotions and raises at University and I drove between Boston and New York as often as I had work, but when she became pregnant, I accepted fewer jobs. During the day she worked with her sick children at the hospital and in the evenings when she came home we made plans for getting a bigger apartment, for decorating the nursery, for naming the child.

"When I was a little girl," she told me, "a baby and still in a crib, Charlie, there was a mobile over the bed. Silk birds in yellow and blue and green. Silk songbirds. I can remember it from that long ago" Sarah smiled.. "They shone. I can remember them in moonlight too, how even in the darkness they were so lovely. I wonder if they still make them."

And she shone then as well and I loved the light that seemed to come from her. I had never seen anyone so happy.

Later that night we lay in bed and she said, "If we could find them your music would make them sing."

"Make what sing?"

"The silk birds."

Sarah carried the child almost to term but something happened and it was stillborn. She wept in silence and grieved in stasis until one night she pounded my chest with her fists and cried into me all the tears she had sheltered, the ones she told me were for the wounded everywhere and for the lives of children she had not saved and the life of the one we had never named.

For many nights I stood on the Charles River Bridge until the deep morning sky became hard and the brittle winter air began to sting and I played dirges in the rhythm of Sarah's fists and that must have come from the alembic of our twin sorrows. I made my monody sound like the wind of the last day that roars and bellows like wounded beasts and wanted the ones who passed by... the cold homeless with no destination, drunk college kids lost in light snow between Cambridge and Boston, the cops who showed up to tell me to take it back home, furtive lovers stealing illicit bliss...to hear the scream of the sound of stars being pulled from the sky by their roots, to see iron sparks made from music and to think on last things.

I finished my Grappa and put out the cigarette. I walked into the bedroom, trying not to awaken Sarah, but she must have sensed me the way the long married will, the way the shape of the familiar is seen in a distant crowd. Sarah turned on the lamp on the nightstand, and an orange mouth fluttered from a blue wool coaster a glass of water sat on.

"It's almost three." She smiled at me.

"I know. Sorry."

"It's all right."

"You're ok?"

"Fine." She sat up against the headboard and scraped at the sleep in her green eyes. "You know you don't have to do this, Charlie. Live like a bat."

"I know."

"And I know you really do have to, don't I?"

"We both do."

It had never been money, certainly not now that Sarah had her own practice in pediatric medicine. We had enough money for a home in Back Bay, for a place in the dunes on the Cape, for a sleek yawl to skim along the coast and for winter vacations in bright sunny places. But we had chosen to live otherwise in this apartment on Arlington that was crowded with books and all manner of music, where our walls were a gallery for black and white photographs, pictures of Chasids at prayer, of smiling children playing soccer in the shadow of tanks, of her family and mine, of my inspirations and hers, of Bud Powell wreathed in smoke playing piano in his last madness and John Coltrane, his saxophone held like a magic staff in one hand and a fierce seeking in his eyes, of poets of silence such as Eduard Jabes, and Sabra medics tending the wounded in a Sinai spread out with corpses, of those who sought to say lasting things and the ones who ministered to the torn. The surfaces of our tables and the spare spaces of our bookshelves were filled with Judaica and symbols of China.

We lived, I know, as we did because of need.

"You look so tired," Sarah told me.

"I'm fine."

I looked at her, at her brown hair that had begun to turn gray a few years ago and thought she had never tried to hide it, that it looked like Queen Anne's Lace in the fall,

soft earth tones, like Jerusalem dust, the play of fading sunlight on ancient stones, looked still again at the lambent light in the green of her eyes and it made me think of old walks we had taken along unworn paths when we were young and spring came.

I started to tell her about my perfect breath, how it had come like such a gift, and Sarah said with her resigned eyes on mine and seasoned wisdom in her voice, “you’re still trying to say what can’t be said.”

“I know.”

“Just like you did the night we met. It’s the song that runs through you, Charlie.”

“I know the song and I hear it every day but I don’t know the words.” I lit another cigarette.

“It must be a hard need.”

“No harder than yours. The way you need to take care of the wounded.”

Her eyes left mine for a moment as if they sought light elsewhere. She said, “Yes, sometimes a child dies.”

And then there seemed to come again our twin-silence, the one wherein we spoke our private languages, and the world became quiet with us.

I put my cigarette out and it sounded like the death of dry leaves.

Sarah kept the light on while I showered, and she looked at me when I came back into the room. I thought when I saw her that ours is an old love, maybe a love that lived across other lifetimes, and that what had surely begun years ago on a twilit walk in the Old City as moonlight gathered in the branches of olive trees that had themselves come from ancient seeds, as Jerusalem dogs barked and the variegated faithful made their ways to mosques and synagogues and churches, taking ancestral paths with footsteps predestined by their God, had met itself once more here and in the silent work of our eyes.

Through the crease in the curtains and the crack in the blinds I saw the night was still rich and deep like a bruise, that light the color of a crow's tongue shone from somewhere.

"Charlie. Do you know what I still see sometimes?"

"No."

"A desert that looks crimson because the rocks and sand are covered in blood and where the wounded scream. The dead are all young and the wounded are the same, except that they howl and besides the wind that's all the sound there is."

I got into the bed beside her and I pulled the plum-colored comforter over me. "And you're there in it."

"Yes."

"And you tend them."

"Yes, but not well enough."

I felt the small cool circle of her wedding band when I found her hand. Sarah sighed.

"And sometimes I see you walking because you're looking for something. My hand is on your shoulder, Charlie, because I don't want you to get lost."

Sometimes in the early mornings we played a game of riddles and mysteries and I always believed there was some secret writing at work then, that we wrote our book like good Children of the Book in the shade and shadow of faithful words, taking those words to places where they dissolved, when all that remained was silence.

"Where are we going?"

"Oh, I don't know. We're in a dim corridor or in dusty catacombs and there's not much light there."

"A labyrinth."

"Yes. And you whistle the way you often do. Because you're afraid."

"Sometimes, Sarah."

We knew by then that the world had no answers and that at its heart everything living lives laments. I felt thankful for her and the goodness of her strength and the wisdom in her heart that early morning, for her hand on my shoulder and the susurration of her breath. It sounded like perfection.

"Goodnight, sweet boy Charlie."

Sarah patted my hand.

"Sarah. Sarah? Tonight....tonight I took the perfect breath."

“Sarah?”

But she slept because she had work to do and she had told me before the world never runs out of the wounded.

III. IN COCKTAIL HOUR

Marcus Kahn did not measure cocktail hour by his watch. It was its own creature. It is true that years ago when he came here he rarely stayed more than an hour. In those early days he had a home to go to. There were parties and meetings and events with the children. Marcus sold the house after he and Laura divorced and the people who lived there went their ways as if scattered in the night by an unseen hand. Marcus had fewer parties and meetings to attend and there were certainly no longer any events with the children. His children were grown now, adults of their own, and they had made it plain they had not much need of Marcus.

At first this, the loss of his children, stung him. Although he never talked especially much about it, it was a sorrow he carried in his eyes the way some men do sleeplessness or murder. The sense of sadness never went away but over time Marcus became inured to it as though it were a tear that had begun to restore itself. They were of course not actually lost. He knew where they were, Adam in Atlanta selling stocks and bonds, Lore, his favorite, dark-haired green-eyed daughter of his heart, in San Francisco where she was a graphic designer for a firm that published catalogs for architects. When Adam had gotten his broker's license, Marcus sent him some money to manage, a show of faith and trust, and although Adam had not mismanaged the money any more than any broker might, he never paid his father's account much attention. Still, for a while, it made Marcus proud to see at the top of his statement the line that read: Account Executive: A. Kahn. Marcus largely forgot about the money at some point and didn't open the monthly statements anymore.

He flew to San Francisco several times to see Lore, on birthdays when Laura wasn't there, once at Thanksgiving when, after agreeing he could come out, Lore had accepted an invitation to the home of her boyfriend's parents, a boy whom she was serious about at the time, confusing the jolt of passion with the grip of love. Marcus thought he and Lore would eat at his hotel, beginning the day with peach belinis almost as brilliant as the ones they had had one late summer night in Venice, and then make their way through exotic pates and exquisite caviars, all this before the main event. Instead, he had ended up at the home of a stridently hip Jewish couple who attend Michael Lerner's synagogue and who could not enjoy the lunch or the overly expensive wine he brought because of their fervor for the politics of meaning and some vague something they called "radical amazement."

Feeling neither drunk nor belligerent, Marcus Kahn told them at one point: "All politics are false and the only real Messiah was Sabbatai Sevi. You'll see."

Lore was furious with him and told Marcus as they drove to the hotel, "Mother was right. You are a lunatic. You've *always* been a lunatic. And who is that…that man anyway?"

"Which?"

"The one you said was the true Messiah that everyone said was a false Messiah?"

"Sabbatai Sevi. But you're right. The true Messiah is Johnnie Walker. Besides, that handsome boy is nothing but a bedist."

"A bedist?"

"Yes, Lore. He only wants to bed you."

"I *have* been bedded before."

"I would hope so. Life's too short to spend it like a paraclete."

Lore wouldn't see Marcus for two days, but she did come to his hotel his last night in San Francisco. In spite of it all and the disruption he had caused in her life, he had given at least as much as he had taken away and sometimes in her quiet hours it hurt and frightened her to think of the morning when he would no longer be there.

Marcus rarely ran into Laura. He knew her and causes and she his. She stayed away from the golf course at the club, the synagogue he attended, joining another instead, and the homeless shelter where he did volunteer work, and he never went to openings at galleries or style shows and jewelry stores. Laura had remarried a man slightly older than Marcus, a kind quiet soft man who had made his riches in real estate and had a grown son who spent his days and nights sheltered in his room, eating junk food and drinking caffeine fortified colas, reading comic books and playing splatter games on the internet. Laura seemed happy, which suited Marcus, and she and her husband took trips to all the places she told him they needed to go. Laura was a devout believer in cosmetic surgery, the images she saw on E-TV and VH-1, and knew what she knew of the world from Conde Nast magazines. Her fear of aging had become so strong it had alchemized into a belief in eternal life. If one's will were sufficient and one stayed pretty enough and wealthy enough, one did not have to die.

Unlike Laura, Marcus never remarried. There was a woman about whom he had been serious, but then Marcus always took love sincerely because he knew it was lethal. The woman, Paulette Stone, was a widow Marcus knew from synagogue whose husband, Harry, had been killed in an airplane accident. Paulette went to see Marcus, who still practiced law then, about the estate. She was pleased not only with the way he handled

things and his sound conservative ideas about setting up trusts for her two children, about the way he steered her away from tax-shelters in favor of A-rated municpal bonds, but with the kind and caring manner he always showed. On an impulse, he asked Paulette out for drinks one afternoon, and they came here, where they drank Gin Martinis and talked about old movies like *Since You Went Away* and *Stella Dallas* and when someone in the backroom played "Blue Guitar" and Paulette began to sing along, Marcus told her she sounded like Helen Merrill.

"She sang for our *parents*, Marcus." And she blushed because she hadn't realized she'd been singing.

"No. She's a classic, Paulette. Like Dinah Washington and Ella Fitzgerald. Like Peggy Lee. Laura hated black- and- white movies and the old songs. She has no conception of what endures."

"Harry didn't like movies, not at all."

"Sometimes I wish I had been born in the 30's instead of the 40's so I could have enjoyed the 50's more. But then I would be more decrepit than I am."

"But then I would have gone to a younger partner in your firm. You'd be 'of council.' And you're not decrepit. Not even creaky." She was an attractive woman with short black hair who never complained and worked as a substitute teacher after Harry died to give herself something to do other than spend money.

"I wish" said Marcus, "I had lived in the time when men wore hats."

They had more Martinis and three weeks later, having met twice more for drinks and once for dinner and a showing of *The Woman in the Window* at a theater that revived classic films, Marcus, in cocktail hour, called from here and asked her if she would like

to come to his condo one night the next week. "I'll cook and we can watch a movie on tape."

"What can I bring, Marcus?"

"A pair of industrial strength bifocals. We might watch two."

Marcus cooked a simple supper, grilled filet mignon, new potatoes with basil and butter, sautéed snow peas, and for dessert he picked up two hazelnut tarts. Paulette drank the Martinis Marcus made for her and he drank Scotch, his cocktail of choice. She complimented him on his rooms and especially his collection of black and white autographed portraits of Hollywood stars, circa 1940-1950, on his lobby cards and posters. "What's that mean?" she asked, pointing to one in Spanish, a vivid garish and violently drawn and jaggedly lettered poster.

"*Yo Solo Me Basto*…I Walk Alone….Kirk Douglas…Burt Lancaster. Wendell Corey and the incomparable Lizabeth Scott." Of all his memorabilia this was his most prized.

That night Paulette and Marcus watched two movies on his VCR. They sat close to each other on his brunette leather sofa and when it came time to leave Paulette said, "This was a lovely and fun evening, Marcus. Thank you."

"We can do it again if you want," he said.

And they did, watched old films and listened to Ella Fitzgerald sing Cole Porter and Rodgers and Hart, and they said no one writes lyrics like that these days, and when his club allowed for ladies on the course, Marcus and Paulette became a twosome, now and then joined by another twosome and sometimes after golf they played bridge with

other couples. Marcus said one evening as he finished his Scotch and put down a Spade run that people didn't seem to play Bridge like they had in the past.

He didn't pass over cocktail hour, though, sometimes coming with Paulette or some men from the office, other times alone. One evening one of the younger partners in the firm, a tall thin man who specialized in plaintiff law, which Marcus thought was a scourge, although he liked the aggressive young man well enough, asked Marcus when he would retire.

"Soon," he said. "Soon." It was true that he had lost his passion for the law and without Laura, whose maintenance was stratospheric, and now that the Lore and Adam were on their way in their careers, he didn't need to work any more because he had saved enough money. He looked at the young man, whom he thought a conniver, although he hadn't black-balled him from the firm, and said "And when I do…"

"Yes?"

"…I'll try to see you get my office."

Marcus never did that and the young partner bought the next round of drinks and offered Marcus an expensive cigar, because that was the fad then, but Marcus declined. Marcus had largely sidestepped fads, loathing the sight of men who twirled the tips of smuggled Cuban cigars in brandy to flavor them, mistrusting the people he saw here dirking Apple Martinis or single malt Scotches without knowing the difference between a Highland or an Islay malt in the first place. He had no idea where pepper or currant flavored vodkas came from unless it was marketing. And he never understood how someone could mix ice or water with whiskey.

He felt, as time went along, his relationship with Paulette ripen. He sensed it and suffered it in his blood. One night after they had watched another film, *Roadhouse,* with Richard Widmark and Ida Lupino, and he prized Ida Lupino. He sensed, though, that Paulette did not like the movie any more than she liked any of the noir breed, preferring as she did domestic dramas and musicals. He turned to her and said, "I think we should take a trip, Paulette."

"A trip? Together?" She smiled and speared at the olive in her glass.

"Together, and somewhere wonderful."

"Where is wonderful, Marcus?"

That night, having had a half bottle of Johnnie Walker Black, everywhere seemed astonishing, and he told her "Wonderful is where you are."

Paulette Stone blushed beneath her makeup and said, "Well, I'm no Ida Lupino."

He thought for a moment that some of Ida Lupino's films were grim….ones like *The Man I Love* and *Private Hell 36*. He asked her, "Have we seen *High Sierra*? With Ida and Bogart?"

Paulette turned away a moment. Sometimes it bothered her, not enough to mention but sufficient to notice, that Marcus seemed so easily distracted, not, she thought in a way that hinted at mental problems, but in the way of someone to whom a past he never lived in has a great allure, or the way some people find the fantastic in the ordinary, something not given to her. She saw the shadow of her face dim the bright spirits in her Martini glass.

"Where, Marcus? Somewhere nearby?"

"Would you want to go to Israel?"

"Yes, but it's so dangerous. They kill Jews there."

Marcus Kahn had always thought how mocking it was that an entire people had fought for a sliver of land less broad than God's eyelash and still weren't left in peace. "I know how they do it, the Arab terrorists, how they skulk along and murder."

"How?"

"They disguise themselves as human beings."

"It's dangerous," Paulette repeated, and she wondered if terrorists weren't human beings as well. "Could I have another?"

Marcus mixed another shaker of Martinis and they walked out on the little balcony of his condo and saw the lights of the city and talked about where they might travel, finally deciding to take a Mediterranean cruise.

A few days before the trip Marcus was at a market buying smoked salmon and peaches when he ran into Laura. "I heard you're going on a trip," she said. She wore a dark green cashmere sweater and a black wool skirt and had diamond studs the size of raisins in her ear lobes.

"Have you had another round of surgery, Laura? Your eyes look like they'd be so hard to shut."

"Twice a decade, Marcus."

"The Five Year Plan didn't work too well for Stalin."

"So, is it true about the trip? You and Paulette Stone?"

"Yes, it's true and right as rain."

"Are you going to marry her? Somewhere romantic and memorable? Somewhere you could tell your grandchildren about if your own children ever let you near them."

"Am I a grandfather, Laura?"

She looked down at the floor and winced when a shopper's cart screeched along the aisle. "So, you're just going off like a…like a kid…with a widow and…"

"Now, really. How many kids take up with widows these days? No. That is, I don't think so."

"Always the lawyer. 'That is, I don't think so,'" Laura said exactly the way an indignant ex-spouse might. It wasn't that she hated Marcus. It was that she loathed the thought of his ever being happy. She had often asked herself if she couldn't be happy, why should he? After all, she was the aggrieved party, the one who had been left, the victim for crying out loud, and didn't victim-hood carry with it special and precious status these days?

Marcus' salmon was on ice and he wanted to come here for cocktail hour. Looking at Laura he remembered that it had not been one thing, one certain piece of drama, that made their diremption inevitable, nothing, as Barry Fitzgerald repeated in *The Quiet Man,* biblical, unless it was the death of Princess Diana.

Laura wept. Laura gnashed her teeth.. Laura called her girl friends: *Can you believe it?* They cried and told each other it was the worst thing.

"I hear she's an alcoholic," Laura said.

"Who?" Marcus wondered if salmon melted.

"Paulette. But then that should appeal to you."

Marcus wondered if an ex-wife had ever been slapped by a plastic bag filled with ice and sliced salmon.

She had set her alarm the morning of Princess Diana's funeral to three o'clock or some such hour, so she could see it live. Marcus wondered why she hadn't asked her girlfriends over for a post mortem slumber party. White wine, canapés and grief . "You just don't get it, Marcus," Laura had said the night before.

"No. I certainly don't."

He heard the alarm go off and grumbled something. "What time is it, for God's sake?"

"Three-thirty. I'm going in the den to watch the funeral."

"Only farmers and fisherman, murderers and thieves are up at three-thirty."

The phone rang. Laura grabbed it and he heard her say, "Thanks…I'm up."

He fell back to sleep, amazed at a sisterhood of the sorrow stricken that must remind themselves to watch the funeral of a fabulous stranger.

When he got up later that morning and had showered and dressed, on his way into the kitchen for coffee, he saw Laura on the couch in her silver chenille robe, cuddled in the fetal position, weeping, listening to the hushed commentary appropriate for the 18th Hole at the last round of the Masters'. He looked at the screen and then to her. "Still bawling over that Spencer girl…?"

"That Spencer girl?" she shrieked. "*That Spencer girl*! My god, Marcus. She was the cutest, most stylish woman in the world. And she tried to get rid of land mines and now she's dead."

"She'll always be that Spencer girl to me."

Laura cursed him and threw a small brass trivet at him. It missed and hit the edge of the mantle and then clanked to the Mexican tile floor where it made a divot. They

didn't talk for three days. He told himself he should be more considerate and understanding but each time he tried, he gave up because he could not fathom how anyone could invest such passion in the death of a stranger. She wasn't the Pope, he told himself, but stopped short of telling Laura he thought the Spencer girl was just a snotty anorexic jet-setter.

"Yes," he told Laura, shifting the sack of salmon from one hand to the other, "we're going on a trip. The rumors are true."

He noticed Laura's shopping cart was filled with low-fat yogurt, bags of pre-cut salad, cat food, and he despised cats, vermicelli, Tide and several boxes of frozen vegetables. He looked again at her, at her eyes, saw that she was still attractive and knew she would fight to the end to stay so, but that somehow, with her sequences of cosmetic surgery, she seemed to have developed something he could only call another face. It was as though her old face, her first face, had been usurped, trespassed upon by the face of another, and he shook his head at the wonders of science and the tricks we try to play on time.

Laura patted Marcus' hand. "Have fun on the trip," and she made a little smile.

Marcus smiled back. "I'll send you a postcard if I can remember which face to mail it to." He waved and she rolled her cart away, heading back to the dairy aisle, and that night in the cocktail hour of Marcus Kahn he wondered if he should marry Paulette.

He sat drinking Scotch at the table he preferred, the one which when he died he knew they would fasten a little brass plaque to, with his name and his dates and maybe even a quote of something memorable he had said, but he couldn't think of what it might be. Marcus watched the people the way he always did, the elegant and trendy young

folks just off from work, the men in their Italian suits and the women wearing Prada and Jill Sander. They told time in Patek-Phillipe and rode to work in cars that cost twice the asking price of the house he had grown up in. He saw the men his age and older who didn't seem to care that the back of their suit jackets were rumpled or whether their pants were cuffed, and if cuffed, with the right sized cuff. He saw in their eyes the look of men who knew more than they ever cared to learn about life and in the eyes of the young only the insinuation of that awareness, and he wondered what he would see in the eyes of Adam and Lore. Some one waved to him and Marcus nodded back.

He hadn't seen his children in some months, not since they had come into town for Christmas, staying with Laura and her new husband. He and Adam had played 18 holes at the club and had gotten along well enough even if Adam didn't share his father's enthusiasm for the game. And he and Lore had gone to the museum to see the Monet exhibit and then they ate a Caesar salad and had a cup of Vichyoisse at the museum café. Two nights before the children left, Marcus brought them here, where they had drinks and then went next door to the steak house where they ate lobster.

Marcus recalled admiring the ease with which Adam handled himself around his father's cronies, the poise and the politeness, and felt a little satisfaction when, a week later, one his foursome said in the locker room, "That's a good boy you've got there, Marcus. You did a good job with him."

And Marcus remembered how good and right it had felt to view rooms full of Monet with his bright and pretty grown-up daughter.

"Do you," she asked, "remember when Mom made us stand on that bridge at Giverny and she took our picture?"

"I do."

"Adam wouldn't look at the camera and…"

"…you had braces and were loathe to smile."

"You never smile."

"I remember the picture and remember the day, and how hot it was in Paris that summer."

Now, here in cocktail hour, he tried to remember the photograph: Adam in jeans and a bight yellow tee-shirt and Walk-Man earphones; Lore in cream colored shorts and a blue blouse with a Johnny-collar; himself in wrinkled khakis and deck shoes. They stood on the green Japanese bridge in the garden and Laura, oblivious as always to the fact that her need to make a memory was holding others up, stood in front of them at the foot of the little bridge wearing a bright red Lacoste *chemise* and tan sandals that were lousy for walking but in which she thought she looked so good.

He wished he had not run into her at the grocery store. He wished, when he remembered the photograph, that he had not been standing under the wisteria and his face had not been obscured in coils of shadow.

"Adam threw gum in the fish pond."

"I'll bring that up with him." He smiled at Lore.

Some men, for example, on vacation will sit by a pool and drink a drink like a Pina Coloda they would never drink at home; others might wear sandals or go Para-sailing or take a hot air balloon ride, and still others might go to a club and try to dance with younger strangers. Marcus Kahn bought a hat.

"What is that?", Paulette asked him as they drove to the airport. They were flying to Florence for three days before boarding the cruise ship at Livorno.

"A hat. It looks like the one Dana Andrews wore in *Laura*."

But Marcus looked nothing like Dana Andrews, didn't have the man's lean angular looks because he was stout and tall and somewhat overweight, not fat, really, but still a little too heavy, and his hair wasn't short and dark and groomed like Dana Andrew's but was gray and long enough so that with his new Fedora he looked something like Geronimo did in the famous photograph of the Indian Chief riding in a Cadillac.

"But, Marcus," Paulette said as she watched a traffic light wink from red to green, "why did you buy it?"

He thought a moment and then said, "Because we're going on the cruise."

It was mid-Spring and Paulette knew the weather would likely be warm. At least she hoped so given what she had packed, and hats like his always made her think of winter. "You'll be hot in that hat." She remembered her father coming home from work on days when it got dark early and there was snow on the brim of his hat and sometimes in the folds of the newspaper he carried.

Nevertheless, he wore it into the Grand Hotel and on their walking trips of Florence where they had to make their way through hosts of tourists, most of whom looked to Marcus like they were on a camping trip, and then onto the ship where the young steward from Serbia in charge of their cabin said in splintered English, "Beware for the hat. The wind, you know."

So, Marcus didn't wear the hat on deck or the balcony of the cabin where he and Paulette had coffee and bagels and salmon with cream cheese and capers in the morning, where they often had a cocktail during long and kind foreign sunsets and watched the last of the light run along the shores of un-named islands, the walls of ancient cities and the random rocks older than Homer and which Marcus told himself Odysseus had seen in twilights just like this one.

He wore it to dinner and enjoyed touching the brim when he addressed a woman. Once, midway through the cruise, after he and Paulette had eaten supper with a couple from Seattle and stood at the bar in the ship's casino, Marcus looked around and said, "You know, I think I'm the only man on this ship who wears a hat."

" Trust me, Marcus, you are."

Marcus liked to play Blackjack and Paulette never gambled; she watched a while and then went back to their stateroom where she watched TV, if the reception allowed, or read guide books and romance novels. Marcus came in one night and told her he had lost a little money. When Paulette looked up and saw him looking at himself in the mirror, adjusting his hat to various angles, she asked, "What's next? Spats?"

"Spats," he said as if to himself, then he poured a Scotch and went onto the balcony where he looked at the stars above and the roiling white wake of the ship in the dark water.

When the cruise ended, Marcus and Paulette flew to Rome and stayed at the Hotel Excelsior. One night they had dinner in a restaurant by the Spanish Steps and then strolled down onto the Via Veneto where Marcus bought Paulette a fiercely colored Ferragamo scarf. She loved it and wore it out of the store, although, as she said, it didn't

match the peach silk pant suit she wore. They stopped at a bar and over drinks Marcus said, “You know, early in the second World War the Fascists passed a law that said in part that the obituaries of the Jews couldn’t be published.”

Paulette watched a young couple in the bar whispering to one another between the flame of a dark blue candle and laughing to themselves as if telling secrets the way the young always think they have coined love and all the mystery and joy and mourning that attends it. For a moment she wished she were young again and that Harry and not Marcus were there with her. She watched the way the boy twirled strands of the girl’s hair in his fingers and how the girl traced out something sweet and secret with her fingertips on the back of his hand. She saw Marcus run the tips of his fingers along the edge of the brim of his hat as if testing for sharpness. “Then,” she said, “it’s like they never died.”

“No. It’s like they never lived.”

But she was thinking of Harry and the young lovers at the bar.

In their hotel suite that night, Marcus had a drink and watched CNN Headline News while Paulette held a book open on her lap. He muttered at the news under his breath and Paulette looked up from her book to the pale beige shears that separated them from the night and said, “I miss Harry.”

“What?”

“I miss Harry.”

“Well, I certainly don’t miss Laura.”

Then there came that chilled quiet that always comes at a wake for affection, that silence of two lovers who discover they are now mourners suddenly sitting *shiva*.

Marcus saw the vehemence in Laura's eyes when she threw the trivet at him and Paulette heard the well practiced gravity in the voice of the woman who called and said, "Mrs. Stone, there's been an airplane crash."

The lights of Rome clarified the old dust and ancient shapes of historic stone to the hours of darkness outside their window but in the room it had become hushed and darker still. Marcus looked at her propped up against the headboard and at the way her grievous eyes looked at his as though they were two strangers. They were in that wordless territory.

He sighed deeply and put on his black windbreaker. "I think I'll go for a little walk." He pocketed the room key.

Paulette didn't say anything until he had opened the door and then with her eyes turned to the night she said, "You forgot your hat."

"Yes." He picked it up and put it on and then he left the room. Marcus walked and thought and got lost in the shadows of trees in the Borghese Gardens and took a wrong turn and walked down a grim narrow alley where he saw a night-hag wearing black who limped and drug a burlap bag behind her. She pointed at him and crowed at his hat. He wandered in the darkness and Rome was a wilderness. He looked for light and walked towards it, finally coming to the Spanish Steps where groups of young people not unlike Lore and Adam used to be drank wine and smoked marijuana and sang songs, some of them draped over each other, and they said things to one another in what he thought were a hundred tongues. A sudden rush of wind appeared and made the long hair of the young girls look wild and wanton and it made loose papers fly away and slap

against legs and faces, and the wind riffled through tee-shirts and the clouds above the city seemed to tear along the dark net of the sky.

That's how Marcus almost lost his hat. The wind blew it off his head and he watched it tumble down the well worn stairs and he heard people laugh and saw them reach for it as though it would be nice to have. A young girl wearing tattered jeans and a green sweatshirt caught it. She put it on and modeled it and her friends applauded. She laughed and smiled and knew it was too big for her so she gave it to a stocky blonde haired boy who put it on. Marcus walked towards them, side stepping the people on the stairs, the ones who were drinking and the ones in lithe embraces, past singers and guitarists and sleepers and shreds of swirling paper and plastic cups spinning in the wind.

Marcus reached the boy wearing the hat. They looked at each other a moment while detritus spun all about them in the quick wind of a warm Roman night. The boy tilted the hat at an impudent angle and saw the quiet claim in Marcus' eyes.

"Is the hat yours?" the boy asked.

"It's mine."

"You are an American."

"And you are a….?"

"I am Belgian. Here," he said, leaning over and putting the hat on Marcus, then adjusting it so the way it rested mimicked the way the boy had worn it. "Now!" He made a little bow, pointing to Marcus as he did and the little group applauded.

"*Merci*," said Marcus making a bow of his own. He looked at the children in the available light and saw how pretty they seemed and for a moment he felt a powerful and sharp need to embrace them, to hold them close enough so he could smell them and feel

their sweat. Marcus looked at them and wanted to cry and he did not know precisely why. He reached in his pocket and took out a stack of 10,000 Lira notes. He put them in the Belgian boy's hand then closed the child's fingers around them.

He heard the boy exclaim in a whistle and Marcus walked away. The young people celebrated him and Marcus walked down the steps and he did not turn around but he did lift his hat in acknowledgment. Later, at the hotel, which had been easy to find from the *Piazza di Spagna* , Marcus sat at the bar and had drinks until two a.m. He wondered how he had gotten so old with such express and if Paulette had slept during his Roman cocktail hour.

She was awake and standing on the balcony. She drank Amaretto and hummed "Soft as Spring" to the lights that lit the imperial cenotaphs she stared at. The wind whipped the bottom of her blue robe and the untied sash seemed like arms wanting to cleave to something. Paulette turned when she heard Marcus come in.

He saw in the light the liquor in her glass and poured a drink for himself, joining her on the balcony where when he looked at her eyes he knew she had been crying. "Are you all right?"

Paulette turned back to the lights and all the big dead memorials that littered Rome like defeat. "I am not."

"What? I couldn't hear you…the wind…"

"I said you are a good man, Marcus, and this has been a lovely trip, but this thing between us is hopeless. It's not bad or wrong. It's simply hopeless."

He looked at her, watched her watching in the night and wondered if the revenant of Harry Stone had not come while he was out and put a curse on her or if he had spoken

to her some poetry only the dead recite. He looked at her and saw in her eyes the empty sound of the hopeless word.

Marcus was going to say something but the wind blew loud again and tore the hat off his head. He and Paulette tried to grab it but it fell the six stories to the street and disappeared into a snare of Roman shadows and they never saw where it stopped.

He ran his hand through his hair and looked at her and he laughed first. She began to laugh with him and they put their arms around one another and went inside and closed the door to the balcony. Marcus and Paulette had cocktails until four and were very hung-over on the plane ride home.

He came back here the night he arrived from Rome and took his table and his drinks. When someone played "Only Trust Your Heart" in the back he wondered what it would have been like to be Stan Getz playing behind Astrrud Gilberto. She would be wearing tan Capri pants and black flats and a white blouse with a camp-shirt collar, so attractive and sincere, singing lyrics of reminiscence and regret.

Someone asked him how the trip had been. "Wonderful," said Marcus. "We saw the sights and ate like kings. One night we went to Ephesus and had supper on the marble street in the shadow of the ruins of the Celsus library and I imagined Heraclitus as he walked to the hills and spat at the judges who drove him away and behind us a string quartet played something silky by Borodin. And then in Rome I lost my hat."

"Your hat?"

"My hat."

"That calls for a drink."

"It is cocktail hour."

And while he waited for the next round Marcus remembered how lovely Paulette had been throughout and that although the thing between them had passed before it had become a thing quite like love, they would, he knew, always be friends of a kind. He heard more music from the back and watched as people headed home. Marcus thought of Laura fast asleep by now and of Adam counting money, of Lore at ocean's edge watching endless waves with an artist's eyes. He told himself to call his children in the morning and tell them not to wait for anything but to please seize it if it comes along because life tenders no prelude.

IV. YOU KNOW WHO YOU ARE

Bad luck for me: to fall in love with such a strange angel in this age of murder. Like all lovers we danced but the dance slowed, the music paled, segued from waltz to larghetto to a dirge of throbbing minor chords fashioned by grievous hands in the key of diremption. I should have known love could not be scored---not this one---you took the music from my mouth just as I was ready to sing. You know who you are. I cannot even call your name. It defiles the alphabet. Sometimes when I do not sleep at night I walk with a hammer in my hands through the austerity you left me and I want to decimate the letters which are the lewd signs that make your name. Or fragment them with that knife whose hostile steel is my memento of you. Either way, strange angel, you are with me. And I am of the Book: I do not forget: I will not be forgotten. There will be that time when you desire to be like me and to be of the Book and you will come to the Book and see me all over it. The alphabet will burn with the letters of my name like a ribbon of flame before your eyes and when you shut them it will flare more fiercely still but I will hurry now and tell the truth because when I am done with this you will have only begun to remember and to wander wraithlike through this burial ground you call love.

I saw you first in the middle of a melancholy winter on a night marked by somber music. You sat alone like a creature from an alluring demi-monde drinking red wine in a tavern near the northwestern coast where he went once a year to be alone, to be away from my wife and children. I ordered a drink and watched you trace flowers on a napkin, a maze of little blossoms, a convoluted labyrinth of petals and stems, and I could not

deny that you were as lovely a woman as I had ever seen with your long black bohemian hair, indigo eyes and gipsy earrings from Taxco wrought like crosses and made of Spratling silver. Those eyes flashed like treasure and gleamed like spirit but all that light hid a darkness. When you brushed the hair back from your face lights jumped like the sounds of frenetic music.

I took my drink to your table and said I like Mexican silver.

There is just no way to know at the beginning.

Later, you told me you had thought: he looks so plain in his black boots and his jacket of brown leather. He smells like smoke from long-standing fires and his face is unlovely. He is a man who is absolutely unadorned. His voice is like a dim whisper and I have to concentrate and listen intently when he speaks and oh, that is so much work.

-Honesty, you said that night, that is the most important virtue.

-All right.

I thought justice was the highest good and I still have no quarrel with the truth.

-We must always be honest with one another, you told me.

Put that in the Book, you beast, and see what they do to you now.

When we made love it was rarely with the wildness of impellent termagants who know the end is near but more with the vertigo of shy wire dancers whose most poignant act was coming apart so they might touch again. We were two pointillist dust storms, a swirl of diminished colors in a darkened room, and like all lovers we lost our breath.

-When you talk of kissing me, you said, it takes my breath away.

I thought of long slow embraces with my tongue down your throat, of the music of the tune of two tongues touching, of fingertips that love so deeply their touch can

change the colors of jewels, of ineffable words of adoration soothing parched hearts and at first we believed something could grow there and we named all the names of the Beautiful in our ritual recitation of the old poetry of touch and passion but I mistook your stunning splendor for goodness and aseity and now I am left to write the Book with the stunted alphabet of reprisal, dedicated nevertheless to you, you little doomster.

Once when we sat in a house on the San Juan Islands a fog came rolling and round like a crookback's bulge and you asked me why I loved you.

- There is never a reason for what we love because love has a heart of its own.

You opened your mouth to swallow the moon and said death has a mind of its own.

You told me you had paid money to learn French so you could read the poetry of dissolution and decay the way the ruinous had written it, to know the songs and chants of grave dancers, to feel the words of dead young poets brush your cheek, and I had picked up my market Spanish free, wandering in Mexico years before in other days of vagabondage, for a time a lost boy. When you talked with what you called honesty about your other lovers I felt neither passion nor jealousy but listened quietly as you forged a necklace of broken hearts with molten words, but in truth your past is an endless vast complaint and a shapeless discontent because by then you had been married three times to men younger by ten years than yourself. You said: older men are too set in their ways for me. They don't have any passion. Any interests. Any dreams. They just come home and turn on the TV and get drunk and pass out on the couch while I have to cook and clean and take care of the animals.

- I’m not a younger man. I drink but I don’t pass out.

-It’s different with you. You’re not afraid of a women with intelligence.

-Thank you for the panegyric.

You clicked your turquoise fingernails and something like embers tumbled in the air.

- I can’t get you close enough to me, you said.

I was vexed and charmed and in love with you. It did not matter what you believed and that your passions had no imagination. I thought because you were kind to strangers and told me you often prayed your heart was sufficient to embrace the world that you would be the quiet solace I feared had gone out of this life.

The fourth time we met I told you I knew we were hell bound.

-We could drink wormwood then, die frozen in snows. Our hell is no match for your ice, you said.

That will make it into the Book and everyday I write the Book, daily devotion to your lethal beauty and the time of my sickness.

Your passion was ”The Environment.” I remember your worn lament made of borrowed words:

-I weep for mother Earth. We have cut down too many trees. The Polar ice caps are melting and the Earth will be flooded. Everything is going to die. The Greenhouse Effect is making things very hot. I think we should save the whales. Mankind is destroying the environment. We should save our environment.

-How’s that for an unassailable position?

-I want to join an environmental group but I have to be careful which one I work for. It must believe that crystals heal and the planets ordain.

-Yes…yes…of course…

-I admire Greenpeace but some of their methods are too radical.

-Big problems demand big methods.

-The end justifies the means?

-Nothing else possibly could, strange angel.

-Greenpeace killed somebody.

-They didn't *mean* to. And I smiled.

You looked at me with cold hard eyes and said, you don't care, do you?

-No, I guess I don't. Not for what you do.

-Not about all the living hearts of this world? I grieve for them. All the innocents slaughtered by man's need to rape and acquire.

-You can't save a world whose motive is suicide. And I grieve for other innocent dead, the ones murdered in the names of theory and of a grotesque terminal Christ. But your words are so pretty.

-And yours are so unlovely… Everything I do I do in his name. Christ never killed.

-No, but they still deal death in his name. It's OK…tell me something new.

-Last Christmas my husband and I went to a ski resort. I love to cross country ski…it's so peaceful and quiet. It makes me feel closer to nature and to God. I thought a few days alone together might help me and B. salvage our marriage. He was so lazy. I had to do everything. He never knew there was anything to do. One night at the resort

there was a car in the parking lot that wouldn't start. B. went out to give the guy a hand and do you know what?

-What?

-He came back two hours later. Smashed. I'm sorry but I don't like that…

-It was Christmas.

-I'm sorry but I have a problem with that.

-What was he drinking?

-Yukon Jack.

-Strange angel…maybe it would make your life easier if you were a little more…tolerant? If you were kinder to your own heart and more forgiving of the frailties of others.

Your mouth was the color of rubies ripening in fire.

-I'm sorry you said but I just don't appreciate that.

But I think you appreciated the clever cruelty of the whirlwind of words you wrote me between our times together in your straight unbending amaranthine hand, each letter in your deviant alphabet so perfectly shaped it took the eyes of my heart a moment to adjust and they never did dilate sufficiently to the hidden darkness there. Precisely what kind of hand sculpts the alphabet with such mechanical obsession as your iniquitous script? One, I think, ruled by the machine-heart, cold bloodless twentieth century steelheart that is like a war-engine: face by Botticelli…heart by Krupp…

A man has to be indescribably miserable to drink Yukon Jack.

Don't get me wrong , strange angel. I am no longer so bitter. I try to live by the words of the great Irish tenor, Elvis Costello: I used to be disgusted/but now I try to be amused.

I told you that once and said abused? Try to be abused? Sounds like he's given up.

-No. Amused.

-Well if you'd speak with passion maybe I could understand you.

Strange angel dear I have news for you: what you call passion is mere Gnosticism. And this poor world has always been filled with bleating pneumatics who memorize clichés and slogans. It is said that the citizens of Konigsberg could set their clocks by the walk always begun at the same time each day by Immanuel Kant. Kant could have set his walk by you.

But you did make love with grace and heat and in my mean hours I still recall your company. I tried to make you smile. But smiling must not be in the nomenclature of pneumatics. You were afflicted with the seriousness unto death, that illness that strickens joy. Your words are in the Book. Pathologists will study them and perform an autopsy, segment your private alphabet of nightmare and pain, examine each sorrowing letter, and they will come to know that it was never within you to love another person. They will come to the Book and exhume your narcissism, slice it with well honed instruments, take a section to the microscope, and a learned Doctor will exclaim:

Ah ha! Romance. This woman was in love with Romance.

I should have known you could not love the Romancer.

Once at night we walked along the dim coastal plain of Western Canada near the ancient rocks and in the mist that replenishes itself each evening like a shroud. I reached for your hand. We walked past rookeries of sleeping sea-birds and the desolate husks of blown-out trees whose hearts were cut out long ago and made into canoes by a tribe of primitive Indians who had to leave, who were fleeing a calamity now lost to history, all gone now, just as we are, strange angel, a chapter in the Book of the past.

-I hate to see this world killing you. You are like the princess of pain. Sometimes I think you enjoy it but life deals us enough without having to look for it.

-I don't look for it. It finds me.

-You could get out of the way. I'll help you do that.

-No. That would be false.

-No. What's false is your precious suffering. You do nothing with it. You wear it like a suppliant's hair shirt and shed it for sex ; then you get up from the bed when you think I'm sleeping and write poems where you and your torment are at the center of the universe. You poems are named "Please Torture Me Some More, My Darling," "Let's Eat Some Pain", "Come Live With Me And Be My Death," and "I Suffer More Than Dostoevsky". They were printed in *The Journal of Masochism* (Winter '88). I deeply believe you seek the feel of needles.

-Sshh…the Earth is weeping…Christ cries…

-No. It's just me. I love you.

-Uh-huh…

-I want to be with you. I 'd help you if I could.

I knew then in the seventh year: there was no help for us.

You did not respond. I have slaked your thirst for those words. You heard me say it once more and you greeted my words with cold and silence and I watched you as walked away and perchance to dream of drowning yourself in the sea like some death benighted Gemini.

When you came back to the room that night I was smoking a cigarette and drinking scotch. I smiled when I saw you because you were so stunning even in shadows. You looked at me and then beyond, past the window and at the sharp slash of moon over my shoulder.

-Why do you drink so much alcohol?

-Oh…habit…and I like the taste of 18- year- old scotch that's been aged in oak casks that held Spanish sherry.

-It's a weakness.

-Did you just make that up?

-That's why your voice sounds like it has been sliced by a razor.

-No. It's the sound of someone who must swallow smiles in front of the woman he loves.

-You don't take me seriously?

-Not as seriously as you take yourself. I'm serious.

I poured another scotch in the cool shadowy room as a grimace of detestation ran down the corners of your mouth and when I lighted yet another cigarette I saw in the flame between our eyes that your eyes glowered and hissed. Your disgust was deep and discordant. I put down the drink and the cigarette and held my hands up to you, my palms to your eyes, not a gesture of submission, certainly, but of peace and openness.

-Do not ever touch me again.

You turned to the moon and said prayers in French and I went to sleep. Later you woke me. You said, put your hands on my breasts. I need you to. You were so fierce, so febrile. Your hands were like demons and they found One-Eyed Mo, for so you had named him the time you told me you had names for all of them, and your lethal fingernails dug into him and you traced a scream in your crazed demented alphabet along the skin of the blue vein until you heard my blood sing and you gasped as you ground down on me that night and strange angel you would not let me go. I stayed awake and watched the fire ebb and I thought of many musics and melodies and I recall that when you breathed it was like the sound of something growling for death.

I rose from the bed and watched you sleep. I imagined you dead in your coffin so I turned away. When you awoke we did not speak. We had been like feral dogs.

I still even this night distant years later have greater need of silence than you, especially when your words return and my ears bleed in memoriam to your lies. You did not speak the truth, strange angel. Those were lies. I have a list of them. They are catalogued and chronicled in the Book you bitch by your faithful scrivener and in spite of them each next drink of whiskey tastes sweeter still. Now and then I raise my glass and say, “to an old sweetheart.” But I do not speak your name. The letters of your name have been abducted from the alphabet. Search and scan the Book and you will never find them. Truth police sequestered them and now they are waiting for you. They will get you and haul you off. There will come a merciful time when you are no longer heard from. They know how to silence you and put an end to your lies. It is all in the Book.

That's why I kept the Book, in the name of justice. God help you if I am ever called to testify.

You told me one kiss will never be enough.

That's what you said and it is in the Book. All of your words, your speeches. The one about Europe: I've been to Europe five times. I think it is so rich in culture and history and tradition. America is an infant in comparison. There are so many old things there. Once I lived in a loft in Venice. A friend from Belgium came to see me and he said let's go to France. You can do that in Europe. I have friends in England, too.

Often when you spoke there was no self in your voice, no actuality, only the grievance with which you greeted each new moment. You articulated perfectly as though each word were from a machine, as though each soulless syllable were from a mold. Your speeches sometimes filled me with such ennui that I imagined myself to be slow and immense, sitting smoking drinking listening to your metallic words, watching the very air corrode and turn the sour color of dying bronze until you thought to touch me.

We first met on January 17, 1977. We last spoke on January 24, 1989. On the first date, they executed Gary Gilmore, and on the second they executed Ted Bundy. Our relationship was framed in death, bracketed by it. What you called love was a great empty parenthesis marked on both sides by the deaths of murderers and we were the big loneliness within. We were there in the parenthesis, always in touch, always aware of each other and when during those years we arranged to meet all the fury we would never have unleashed on other loved ones we spent like gamblers on ourselves and I will tell you, strange angel, no one has ever shown me the boundary of annihilation as clearly as you. You are an artist of the malefic. The designs and devices of your heart will hang

like lynched niggers in a gallery in Hell. The desperate ones and the precious ones and the new age ones and the politically correct ones will see them and believe you have understood something but I know better. If you send anyone after me and they locate me I will not flinch. I will tell them you are a leper and before they leave they will come to trust me. I will tell them you must wear a bell around your neck and they will hear it.

You're picking on the wrong guy, strange angel. I will not be your fatality, you catastrophe you.

One night when we were in a tavern far from the coast you told me you had gone to Dachau. I watched through the smoke of my interminable cigarette as you drank red wine and complained that the sulfides gave you a headache and the one-eared man who ran the roadhouse kept looking through the shabby scrapbook he had put together long ago with articles and photographs of his dead son's athletic feats at the town high school which he had shown me when you had gone out to the car to feed your gray cat and you said and I quote: I went to Dachau the last time I was in Europe. To remember. I've been to Europe seven times now. I've got connections where I could get a job. I'd rather live there anyway because America is so crass and crude. It's inhuman. Because of Capitalism. It corrupts people. I'm saying I don't like it.

-What about Dachau?

-It was so depressing.

-I can imagine.

-Dachau is depressing.

Given your crippled vocabulary that was a cogent summation of the silent genocidal wind blowing over the luckless dead upon whose rest you trespassed with your

diffuse ill-defined banal dissatisfaction, disturbing their unending requiem with your cherished thoughts, walking over their weeping graves in the shadows of black chimneys that once refined life to ash and bone to dust with your Earth-shoes, your sketch pad and your natal chart, brushing shoulders with the grieving kinsmen of the restless dead there, old dreary and unrequited ghosts like old rags convulsing to the music of a murmured fugue whose tune lingers there the way old death does as you walk those dark corrosive fields of history and into the departments of murder and torture there at Dachau on the Amper, ten miles northwest of Munich, a munitions plant in a former life.

-So, what was it like, Dachau?

-You can be so stupid sometimes. I already told you. Dachau was depressing.

You know what I think, strange angel? Depression, like Closure and Kafkaesque, are over-worked words in the alphabet of the inane. They are words for people who can no longer use real words. There are no letters for them in the alphabet of the Book. Those words are like your name that way. The ciphers that designate you are the distillation of meaninglessness.

Our last night together you tried to kill me. You knew about the knife of Damascus steel I carried in my duffle bag, the knife with a handle made from the horn of an elk that fit my hand like my palm print. We stayed in a cabin high in the Cascades that time. We met at the airport in Portland and drove to the cabin where we read our love letters aloud in the cold, watching flame and breath and smoke color portraits of sex and violation. I had brought a tape player with me so I could listen to music. I was working on a project for a radio network then. You never liked music because you never

heard it due to your rampant self absorption. The next day we walked through snow-covered woods and you told me again how you weep for the Earth and that you feel the scars and wounds mankind has put on her but later you tried to assassinate me and I believe you wept the way a ventriloquist's doll speaks. We watched cold hawks watching us. You said you were afraid of birds of prey.

That night I cooked chili made of venison for myself because by then you weren't eating animal flesh. I made you tortilla soup and then we went outside and named the stars and I don't know how I could have loved you more, strange angel, as I stood beside you in the cold hushed pristine night while you trilled the Latin names of constellations with the authority of a priestess and the moon lighted your beauty the way a star screams brilliance before it dies and vanishes and you whispered it would be sweet to die because you had had enough of this life and I said oh no there's too much talk of dying and I wager there's nothing legendary in death and nothing sweet about suicide as the poets of the precious would have it.

-I know why Verlaine shot Rimbaud, you said.

-Why?

-It was how he loved him.

We went inside and you made tea. I took a drink of scotch and you scowled. When you went to sleep I wrote you a poem. It was called "My Gemini and I." You dreamt, I think, of my hand- made knife, of cutting my heart out with it and binding it to the door and starving to death in the cabin while you kept watch and babbled what you call prayer in your storm-trooper alphabet while I scratched out my words of love in the

feeble light of a hissing lantern, quietly, so as not to disrupt your dreams of death, strange angel. You know who you are. There is no need to even write your name.

In the morning we drove down the mountain to the Church of the Good Shepherd where we listened to the pastor talk about the Duty of Love. I could never imagine where the lilies on the altar came from. They looked like white trumpets. While I listened to the congregation sing "I Walk in Danger All the Way" I thought of another hymn, one called "Death Don't Have No Mercy." I held your hand all the while but it felt like the body of a dead newborn. I thought all the blood in you had been given over to God because we were sitting in his house. I had no idea you had bled yourself to be chaste when you came to murder me. When I looked at you you had the pallor of frost.

The last night I cooked fish in a little black pan. You said you believed Christ's mission to Earth was to demand that we suffer with him. I asked if you would like to be crucified like him and you said yes, only more so, and very slowly. You said in your dreams you've heard the sound of iron nails on his bones. You told me he drowned in his own blood for our sins.

-Is that what happened?

You slapped me on the face.

It began to snow. The world had never been so silent. You had never looked so lovely to me, strange angel. You wore a black skirt and a crimson cowl covered your head. You drew me a picture of a bouquet of wildflowers and said these will cover you.

I could not find my knife.

-Have you seen my knife?

-No.

-It'll turn up…

Death is foretold in our fictions with more poise than in our other lives.

The fire burned and I turned, saw you naked on your back, your lips mouthing silent syllables, and I came to you, threw the big sheepskin blanket over us and we heaved in our warmth until your left hand slid beneath the pillow where you had hidden my knife and you brought up the hand that you had fitted with death and brought it down and cracked my right shoulder blade and then buried it in me. There was no pain at first. Then I felt my blood run over me like scalding water.

-Pull it out…please…

I tried to reach for it with my left hand but you twisted it slowly and I heard bone grind. My blood ran everywhere. It was in your eyes and your face and it covered your mouth and your tongue and your teeth like a kiss.

You bathed the wound and bandaged it with torn sheets and for a gauze you used your soiled panties so your juices would always mingle in my blood.

- I don't want to live in this world with you in it. You make it dirty with your Christless words. That is what you told me.

You shuddered.

-You could kill yourself instead.

- I have no prior history of suicide.

-I wish that you did.

A nightbird shrieked in the cold.

We drove down the mountain. You asked me how are you feeling?

-Is that some kind of joke?

You asked me: is there a difference between fucking and murder?

And I told you none that you could discern.

-I hope it doesn't hurt too long, sweetheart. Do you still love me?

-Like a bullet.

When we got to the airport your plane was about to leave. You grinned and made to kiss me but I backed away from the venom in your breath and left you calling me a name. I went to a hospital where they dressed my wound properly and set my shoulder.

A nurse held up your panties. You want these?

-No.

-They really are very pretty. What should we do with them?

-Cremate 'em…

I am restored now. I do not know where you are and I don't care where you are. It is all right with me if you are dead and those around you tap out your filthy obscene name with the lurid characters of the alphabet of murder you strung together with your narcissism. It is all right with me if you mime a headless dance against the unbounded night of infinity like a shadow uncoiling in the wind. I hope you roam the cosmos looking with your blind eyes for your place in the Book and if you ever come across this and it is somewhere stamped in a Braille even you can render unto meaning, it is my fondest wish you bitch that you ardently decode the contempt loathing and abject hatred

here and come to realize as you die slower than old people fuck that there is after all something pure in this life even if it is only this written in that fierce unbending alphabet the precious ones such as yourself run from like cancer.

Once my wife asked me about the wound you gave me. I told her I had been stabbed by a drunken Indian who thought he was a messiah, a wild beast, I said, someone crazed, darling, with a disease there is no name for, but you know who you are.

V. Down In Old Mexico

A warm breeze blew in from Campeche Bay and over the heat and corruption of old Vera Cruz, where teenage whores washed their nasty underpants in lye and waterfront thieves walked like rats looking for swag along the rotting docks. That wind hummed down the spine of the old green mountains to the west and steered flocks of Aztec parakeets and crimson collared Grosbeaks off their course. It gathered again and made for the high desert where it whipped dust and heat and stinging debris into the dry savaged faces of luckless nomads and into the eyes of prisoners like me.

I was the only one there. There had been another guy, a little Indian who had one eye. We were guarded by a scrawny cheroot-smoking mestizo I nicknamed Lucifer. He had a face like a Mexican dog and he never said a word to me. One afternoon Little One Eye knocked over a pile of bricks and when Lucifer went to see what the matter was, the little Indian started throwing bricks at him. Lucifer pole axed him and then tied his hands with wet leather thongs to a fence rail. He screamed for two days and by the next night I heard things eating on him, heard flesh torn from bone and the snarls and growls of feral dogs and coyotes fighting over his insides. On the fourth day, Lucifer had me cut the hands from the rail, drag One Eye to a pile of garbage in a far corner. I tossed what was left of him onto the heap and he stayed there, like a bone king on a throne of refuse until all his flesh had been eaten and his blood had dried in the desert heat.

I sat in a bleached landscape I called West Hell. I had a little pick ax and I

chipped mortar off of old bricks. Ten hours a day. Twelve. Fourteen. I don't know. Lucifer watched and never said a word. No matter if I spoke to him in Mexican or in English, he never said anything to me and I'm a real friendly guy. When the chief of the jailhouse walked into the yard, he and Lucifer whispered things to each other, and when Lucifer's woman came by to bring him greasy beans on a blue and white speckled plate and some corn tortillas wrapped in a damp yellow towel, they talked. Sometimes Lucifer took my pick, handcuffed me and tied me to a post. He and the woman went in one of the cells, and I know he had a voice because I heard him holler when she put that thing on him. I could just see them, rolling around on a pee-stained mattress. Now and then he barked so loud the ravens cawed and scattered, taking off like screaming black rags against the stern white glare of the sky. He'd leave me out there and I sweated and the dust covered me until I thought my face was made of mud.

Lucifer had a rifle, a long reaching gun he kept trained on me from the time I woke up until he shoved me back in my cell. On those days when his beast came by and they didn't have the inclination to ball, she dropped the food off, gave him a little kiss, and took off, but he cuffed me up anyway, so he could eat his beans in peace. And there were other times he cuffed me and he and that woman kissed, and he took his bean-greasy hand and went under her little red dress scratching for her jelly and made her squeal, or he grabbed a hold of her big Mexican titties and mashed them for a little while. She shook her skanky rump at me, ground it in tight little circles. It just about drove me crazy sometimes, seeing her, her brown flesh, and sometimes I thought I could smell her

sweat. Now and then Lucifer looked at me then with a filthy smile on his face.

Some nights I dreamed of women, long legged white ones, Chinese ones with their baby feet, little brown skinned Mexican gals like the one who came to see Lucifer, and fair dusky maidens. I saw the faces of girls I had known from north Texas and even if some of them had hearts as hard as the honky tonk floors they danced on, they looked good to me in the dreams of my hot sleep.

But the next morning came like all the mornings did and I ate in my cell, my plate on my knees, the odor of the beans and the grease they floated in mixing with what was in the bucket I used for a toilet. Then Lucifer took me back out to the brick pile. He gave me my little pick and I chipped. When I got through with a pile of bricks, I picked them up and carried them across the yard to the side of a khaki- colored building, another one of those shapeless anonymous adobes that the heat and the dry winds and the sun would grind on a little everyday. I knew one day they'd be just like the dust that was everywhere. I stacked the bricks, but I never counted them. I thought if I had I might've gone crazy.

If I wanted water, I'd holler at Lucifer that I was going to take a break. There was a brown tin bucket in the yard, about six or eight feet from where Lucifer sat in his shed. I walked there, knelt over it, and cupped the water with my hands. It felt like clay in my mouth and sometimes I had to spit bugs out. If I had to take a leak, I went in the yard. The ground soaked my pee up faster than a pimp spends money. My pee splashed on the hard cracked ground and sometimes, like the ping of my pick on the bricks, that was all

the sound I heard. That, and the wind, because the wind was everywhere and it never seemed to rest. It was a hot wind made of briars and thorns.

One morning I was in the yard and I had just sat back down to work on some bricks when I heard a shot. Rock splinters stung my face. Lucifer had the rifle up to his eye, pointing a little to my left. About six feet from my leg lay a big rattlesnake. It must've been five feet long. Lucifer brought down the rifle and leaned it against a post in the shed. He grinned like maybe it was big news to kill a snake where he came from. He motioned for me to bring the snake to him. I felt the oily scales running over the calluses in the palms of my hand, saw those fangs, big as a baby's fingers, stuck out of the mouth like ivory spikes.

He gestured for me to hold it up so he could get a good look at it. He stared into the serpent's eyes and I wondered if he looked for kinship there, or for some black secret his old tribe whispered about at night. The wind gusted and the snake rattled like teeth I'd seen fall out of some joker's mouth in barroom fight. Lefty Frizzle on the jukebox and a drunk cowboy on the floor. Lucifer laughed and made a little smile.

No doubt about it, he'd saved my life.

I stood there holding the snake up for him. He kept staring at it, and I guessed by night time he and his little Mexican twist would be gnawing on snake meat and drinking the blood for tea. He might even cut the rattle off and give to her as a gift, a little *recuerdo* to wear around her neck. I had no doubt what they would do next. They would drink some hot *pulque* and he'd lift up her little red dress.

The sun kept working on the down stroke, pounding out heat and white light. The wind blew again, longer and louder and this time those rattles started to really sing. Lucifer liked the sound of it, I guess, because he laughed again and put his left hand in the air and made a twirling motion. I looked a question at him and he did it again. I caught on and grabbed the thing over its eyes and I spun that greasy snake around my head like a lash, and the rattles whirred in the wind almost like music.

That seemed to make Lucifer happy.

Until I stopped and scraped his face with it. I ground the fangs down hard, through the flesh and onto the bone. I clawed from the corner of his left eye, across his nose and into the right corner of his mouth, that soft wet flesh inside. He screamed, and I beat his head once with the butt of his rifle. I threw the snake down for him and his Mexican skank and watched for a second as he bled blood red as her little red dress.

I stood still a second, scanning the yard and the jailhouse. I hoped the chief wasn't around. I went through Lucifer's pockets. I found three bullets for the old carbine, a tiny cross and a tight little wad of greasy pesos. I left the cross. He moaned and the blood from the holes in his face seeped onto the dust like my piss.

I got my pick, walked to the wall that led to the entrance to the yard, slid along there, and went into the jailhouse. The place felt like a glowing kiln and smelled like the remains of the dead the way it always did, of urine and turds and rat carcasses. Above my head, a line of bats slept between two *vigas*, a row of folded black roses. I walked towards chief's office. Outside, there was the flutter of wings and the hiss of sudden

flight.

The jailhouse chief's office was empty. He might be home, I thought, hiding from the sun. A set of keys on a rusty brass ring lay on his desk. I snatched them. And I saw a straw hat, some poor man's version of a Panama, well worn and stained with sweat, so I nabbed that, too, in case I made it as far as the desert.

When I reached the front entrance to the jail, I stopped and looked for shadows, listened for footsteps. A raggedy cur dog yelped once and stopped near the well outside the jail and bit at something on his haunch that tormented him. He looked at me with eyes that had seen enough of this world's misery.

Across the way stood a *Cantina*. I didn't know what they had in there but I knew I wanted some. Beer. Tequila. *Pulque*. And I knew I wanted to beat up the world, but like the whiskey that would have to wait.

For all I knew, the chief was looking down his rifle sights and I made a fine target standing in the doorway wearing his hat and holding his keys, but I was afraid to move and didn't know which way to run.

A bent over woman with a withered foot, wearing a white dress and a black and white *serape*, left the dark door of the church at the end of the town closest to the desert and the mountains beyond. She looked at me and limped on. In the white stillness her prayer beads clicked. I looked hard into the doorway for a little light, for the vibrating flames of votive candles, for the fiery eyes of a broken hearted Jesus, or for echoes of brightness from the dull tin *miligritos* I guessed must decorate the altar. There was no

light and not even the shadow of the padre. The woman looked my way again and scraped her foot along the street until she disappeared into another shadowy doorway.

I didn't think I had killed Lucifer and didn't know how much damage I had brought him, but I knew I had to beat it before he came to. I didn't even know if dead snakes still stung. Giving the place one last look, and hoping that West Hell slept well in the heat of the day, I made my way towards the dust and the desert and the mountains beyond.

I crept along walls and ducked into darkened doorways with all the silence I could manage until I came to a place where the squat round adobe buildings and the lean-tos on the outskirts didn't cast their shadows on me, a place where rocks and stones and dust and dirt seemed all that lay ahead. An old man rolling a cigarette stood in his doorway. He looked at me and disappeared into the shadows behind him.

Nothing lived there on that plain. Nothing worth saving. Creatures of the dust. Snakes and iguanas and bugs with shells hard as horn. For a couple miles there was nothing to hide behind, and I knew that I was exposed and that anything that walked or crawled or circled overhead was my enemy. I had three bullets in my pocket, six in the clip, my little pickax and a bad sense of direction.

A half mile, maybe a little more, away from town I saw two *muchachos* squatting on the desert floor, burning scorpions in a fire they had built. They looked up at me. One laughed and the other looked from me to the desert and back. "Oh, no, *Senor*." He drew

a dirty finger across his throat and grinned like baby death.

"Oh, yeah, *muchacho*." I pointed to the mountains. "Tell 'em they can find me on the other side."

I kept going and by late afternoon my throat stung with thirst. I'd been in such a hurry to get out of there I'd forgotten about water and now my freedom tasted like dust.

When I came to an arroyo, I scrambled down and looked for a shadow to rest in. All around me was stillness and silence, the kind that must've been there the day before God got the great idea about Creation. I thought about water, about whether the bats would find Lucifer and lap his blood and if his whore would like two new holes to stick her tongue in, and then of water again, and how his little Mexican gash would like him with tracks down his Mexican dog face, and water. I glanced back towards West Hell and the buildings looked like tombstones.

The jailhouse keys poked my side, so I slung them away.

When the darkness came and the air cooled, I turned and could not see any light where West Hell would be. I stopped and listened, never heard anything like pursuit, only the wind. Later I smelled smoke. It came from the direction of the mountains and I walked towards it. It seemed I would never get there and I was beat and slid down the sides of a boulder surrounded by other big rocks and all the night creatures the desert had to offer. I know I slept a little while, not wanting to but having to, and I smelled the smoke and looked for it and I dozed off again.

I didn't hear it come, not until it was on me. A child. It looked at me, leaned down. It slapped my face and I reached for the little hand, saw that it was a girl. She ran off into a swatch of darkness. I got up to follow but I tripped over a rock and something scurried past my ear and onto my neck. It crawled down my chest and I pounded the damn thing but not before it bit me. I scraped the smashed body off of me, felt the sticky insides and smelled something malefic in my hands, and when I remembered the child who slapped my face I looked but I couldn't recall which way she had gone.

I slide back into the arroyo because it seemed sleep was all I had left. In the first light of morning a tin cup filled with water lay by my left hand. I drank slowly, and drank it all, telling myself not to, to save some for later, but I couldn't. Then I gazed over the edge of the ditch and looked to West Hell. I didn't see anybody coming.

That day seemed like the day before: I walked and stumbled towards the mountains and tripped over rocks and scattered the white bones of dead creatures, watched the friable dust scatter into the shriek of the infinite winds. Dark predator birds followed me and they glided in the raw light and I walked in their shadow.

A couple of times the winds gusted hard, and the last time they did they sucked the hat off my head. I made a spastic grab for it but it was flying too fast. It fell and tumbled back towards West Hell.

Near evening, I noticed little patches of green in the desert dust, small plants and some cacti, short humpbacked trees with burned out trunks that bent into the wind and then a little later I found a cave big enough to rest in. It smelled like dead things had

been left there to rot and I sensed the lingering scent of something wild, like it had rubbed its sweat and the juices that secreted from its anal sacs on the walls.

The bite on my chest throbbed and it had swollen. It was red and had a hot center, so I squeezed it with my thumbs and the pus exploded from it and trickled down my stomach where it dried into a crust.

The light of the moon crept closer to the mouth of the cave. And I smelled smoke again, and this time it smelled stronger than it had the night before. I crawled out of the hole I hid in and searched in the darkness around me. I saw the smoke in the moonlight and it came from nearer the mountains and I walked to it.

The smoke came from the other side of a ridge. In the flicker of the fire's flame shadows worked across the face of an old woman. She had bronze Indian skin and long white braided hair. A dark blanket lay draped round her sloped shoulders.

When I approached her she looked up at me, glanced at the rifle, and then she turned to the plate in her lap and ate her food with her hands. I laid the rifle down so she'd know I meant no harm. She looked up again, saw I hadn't moved, and motioned for me to come by the fire. When she saw my cup, she filled it with water from a canvas bag and then showed me three more cups just like it. I drank it all and held out the cup for more. This time she gave me a little less, and then she handed her plate to me.

I looked at her, at her filmy brown eyes that looked ravaged from heat and saw something in them like wild kindness, like she knew how easy it was to die out there and that a little water and some bad food were merciful deeds. I ate with my hands, some

white peas and chunks of stringy dark meat that tasted like sour grease. She watched me, and I looked around, saw there was another plate with food on it, saw a pot by the edge of the coals and two bedrolls laid out near the fire.

I heard rocks being crunched and then a shadow came over the fire. I turned around and it slapped my face again.

The woman said something in a voice like a screech. Indian talk.

I grabbed the child's ankle. The girl had a filthy face and oily black hair. She smiled and was very pretty and she had the demented eyes of a berserker. It had to be her, I thought, who had slapped my face the night before and then brought me water while I slept. The moon shone all over the child. I let her go and she stared at me, put her face so close to mine. She had a scar on her forehead that seemed to go all round her head.

The old woman sat still and there was no sound until the little girl laughed and the noise of it seemed to crack the silence of the night, to bounce off rocks and mountains and sky. The woman put a finger to her lips and the child fell quiet. The girl sat down next to me, rested her head on my chest and started to murmur private music. She ran her fingertips over my face like they sought something. Her breath smelled like she had a sickness.

I wanted to know what lay over the mountains and I asked the old woman if she spoke Spanish.

She shook her head.

The little girl patted me with her tiny hand and drooled on my shirt. She hummed her music and said things in a rustling voice. The child huddled close to me and licked my wound.

We fell asleep like that, and I thought about the bricks back in West Hell, of Lucifer and that if he was alive he might be tracking me, saw the eyes of his Mexican dog face glower like lamps, and now and then the child moaned, and I smelled the wildness of her through the night. Once when I woke in the night, I saw the old woman tending the fire and remembered the way my father stacked wood against the east side of the house, the click of hardwood pine on seasoned oak, of the way my mother never slept in winter until the furious glow of the flame in the stove had filled the house. She hated the cold the way I had come to hate heat.

I had not heard them when they left. They left me some water in a small blue jar and in my right hand there was a tiny pink flower that smelled like the skin of the little girl. I looked in all directions for them and saw no sign, but I felt the heat of the day begin to build and the ashes of the fire hissed away like last whispers.

By the time the sun was directly overhead, the hard dry land began to slope upwards and I could see the mountains better, the steep incline, the stunted tree line and even small clouds. I walked carefully as I could, trying not to slip, trying not to spill my water and break the blue jar. For most of that afternoon the heat was like it had been, like spikes, but when the sun reached the top of the mountains and began to fade to the other

side, it became cooler than I had felt in a long time. I climbed until dark and I felt something like a chill. As much as I wanted to reach the top of the first range of mountains, I was too tired, too weak to go on.

I looked for a cave and found none. I searched for the smoke of the old woman's fire but I came up empty again. There was still half a jar of water left, and I took a small sip, swished it around in my mouth and over the grime that stuck to my teeth.

When the sun had set, I found a hillock, and I curled up beside it and tried to stay warm and to sleep. Things howled in the night but they stayed away from me.

The next morning I started up again but the incline was so steep I had to crawl part of the way and I lost the blue jar. My hand landed on the jagged points of a rock and when I drew back the jar flew away. It tumbled down the hill, the water trickling over a mound of dirt. I watched as it rolled away, sliding along mosses and into shadows until it vanished.

I reached the top of the range before sundown and looked into the valley below. Green growth covered most of the land, deep and dense and dark green like bolls of cotton before they explode, and the air began to feel cleaner. A few saguaro cactus stood around here and there, some scraggly Joshua trees. I gave one look to what I had crossed, saw the rocks and sand from the precincts of West Hell, and I started down, thought of food and water, of fat fruit hanging on green trees and cool streams and of what might lay beyond.

By the time night was full in the sky, I reached the bottom and I stood still

to listen to the sounds of the place, the whisper of unseen shapes moving through the trees in front of me, animal calls and cries in voices that had lasted longer than memory, the shriek of night birds with blood in their throats. I thought of prairie hawks on the telephone wires that lined the county roads near our place, the cries their game made and how I had shot some for sport. I thought the way of the world stays the same.

The vines and the leaves and the trunks of the trees were slick to touch and the air had gotten juicier, still warm but now wet. I moved toward where the moon had risen and heard the way the night grew quieter, how maybe the word had gone out that an enemy had come into the valley.

I got cut up that night, walking in almost sheer darkness, in a tangle of roots and vines that grabbed my feet and slapped my face the way the obscure little girl had, only she just hit me twice. But I kept moving because I had no choice and sometime later...a minute...an hour...I got lucky again and I found a pool of water. I got my on knees and I drank from it and I washed my face, and I lay down beside it and slept until the sun rose.

The blue shirt I had on was torn and slit in a hundred places, like my chest and my back, and I left it there, began my climb up the next mountain, and it was easier now because I could use the trees for support. I climbed into the nascent cloud line and into cooler air. The land had turned from desert to valley to jungle and the air had changed from the kind of heat that can sear bone to something soft and humid.

I found mangoes growing, and even if they weren't ripe yet, I hacked into them

with my pick ax, and I sucked the juice and gnawed the pulp until my belly hurt. But I climbed anyway, into growth so thick sometimes it was hard to move through it, the way limbs thrashed at me and vines mauled my ankles.

It began to rain just after sunset and I had not yet gotten over the mountain. I had no place to hide from it so I stood with my back against a tree and under something like a cathedral of leaves and it felt cold and good and the water bathed my mouth. The rain washed the dust and dirt and the sting of vermin bites and it soothed the little hole in my chest where that thing had fed on me and it cleansed away the time I had spent in West Hell. I thought as it did how much I wished I had killed Lucifer. And I hoped when I slept again I would dream that I had dug the fangs of the snake into the sockets of his eyes and left him blind and that he would never see his nasty Mexican gash again.

By late the next day I could see the Pacific Ocean through the fog and clouds that hung around the mountain peaks. To my right, a great distance away, I could make out a town, a good sized place, white buildings radiant in the sun, and to the south I saw a small settlement on a bay, one of those little Mexican places time hadn't caught up to yet, a place without a Chamber of Commerce. I took a left.

Angling down the side of the mountain, I made good time, moving through the dense foliage underfoot, the lusciousness of staghorn ferns and ripening Bromeliads overhead, past wild acres of Jacaranda in flame. The sun looked huge as it dropped towards China and I stopped a moment, watched how its orange light beat in the blue depth of the water. To my left I saw the little town, not much more than a village, made

of old wooden buildings painted in bright pinks and vibrant blues and deep greens and reds the color of a hummingbird's throat. I looked at the wrought-iron arches that stood over the entrances to the *zocalo* and at the whitewashed church, watched as a *Fletcha Roja* picked up some passengers at a stop by the Pemex station and stared at an old semi truck painted crimson and white, the area above its windshield lined with yellow Christmas bulbs. I saw three little girls with oiled black hair and wearing starched pink dresses leave the school next to the church.

There was a marina almost directly in front of me and past that, a little up the coast, a few shacks straggled along the waterfront. I shrugged. I picked out a yellow shanty and walked towards it, naked to the waist and carrying a weapon and the madness of desert heat still in my eyes.

The smell of frying fish came from the yellow shack, and water swirled against pilings. An old man with a belly like a kettle, thick silver hair and skin the color of a well worn penny stood over a two burner gas stove. Behind him was a wharf and a boat painted a yellow so bright it made lemons look light. But it was the smell of the food that transfixed me.

I walked past two terra cotta pots that spilled over with red flowers and past a blue door, into the room next to the kitchen, still watching him as he turned a fish. He heard me then, looked up, looked me over, gave Lucifer's rifle a glance, then flipped another fish in the shallow skillet.

He pointed at the rifle, and he shook his head . "*No es necesario*."

I propped it against a wall next to a white chair.

I had never seen such eyes as his where secrets seemed to make their home.

"*Agua*?" He spoke in a soft voice.

"Yeah. *Si*. *Por favor*."

He drew a cup of water from the tap, handed it to me and watched as I drank, as some spilled down my chin onto my chest. I looked at the fish in the pan, three decent sized Red Snappers, what they call *Huachinango* down in old Mexico. He fried them whole, with the heads cut off and the insides gutted. They smelled rich with oil and lemon and garlic.

He looked at me when I handed the cup back to him, his clear dark eyes strapped onto whatever he saw in mine, mine that stung and burned and must have had some wildness in them.

"Thanks."

He pointed at the fish. "*Quiere usted comer*?"

"Oh yeah."

He spooned some rice mixed with peas onto a white plastic plate that was decorated with pictures of wildflowers, like the kind of plates I had seen in the States in dime stores with wooden floors, and then he ladled some of the oil from the pan onto the rice. He put the biggest fish on my plate, and gave me a corn tortilla from the oven.

The old man fixed his plate and we sat down at a small white table and it was all I could do to wait for him to mumble a grace in Spanish. I started eating fast as I'd ever

eaten before, and he watched me, and he ate very slowly, shaking his head, watched me sop up every drop of oil with the tortilla and clean the sweet white fish meat off each bone.

"*Con calme todo es possible*."

"With calmness all things are possible?"

"*Si*. But you are too young to know that now."

I shrugged. I wasn't about to argue with him, even if I had no idea where he was going. I asked for more water and he told me to help myself. I eyed the snapper left in the skillet, but he must've sensed my thoughts, and the old man said, "No. *Eso por Estrelita*."

I thought maybe his wife was out shopping or praying or something. "Ok. Thanks."

"*Quiere usted limpiar*?

"That'd be fine." No doubt I needed to clean up.

He took me outside on the wharf. Attached to the back wall of the house was a galvanized metal sink and an exposed bulb dangling from the overhang. A mirror stood propped against the wall. A lizard scooted behind the it. I almost didn't know the face that looked back. My skin scorched and my eyes burned out and days of dirt and dust covered me. I washed my face and neck, scrubbed at the sore on my chest, and then I tossed the pick ax I had carried with me from West Hell into the water. When I went back into the room where I had eaten, I passed out.

I woke up on a sisal pallet in another room near the wharf, heard the peaceful sound of the water coiling around the pilings, farther off, a man singing about blue doves, and I smelled a woman. It was the sweet smell of something fresh and alive, like high pines and oranges, and not like the dried-up old woman with the brittle skin I had seen on the desert or the maniac child with oily hands who slapped my face.

When I saw her she stood by a window, the light circling over her head, and she painted the figures of shimmering fishes onto a glazed red jug. Her black hair hung below her shoulders and her sorrel eyes were flecked with green.

I stood silently in the doorway, watched her for a moment, how on her lips there was something like a smile and it was the first one I had seen in a long time. She wore a short pink and blue dress and the sun shone through it and showed me some of what belonged to her. I kept staring, maybe because I didn't know what to say, or maybe because she was the prettiest woman I had ever seen.

When she finally looked up from her work she gave a start, made a tiny sound, her eyes opening a little wider, her lips together like she might whistle.

I held my hand up like a movie Indian and made what with me passes for a smile. "Hey."

Her eyes looked at me, the way I stood in the doorway wearing a pair of dirty and torn jeans slung around my hips, and then her eyes turned away. "You are feeling better."

"Yeah. Much better."

"You slept two days. My father said when you came you looked almost like a dead man. I watched you sleep and you had bad dreams. But you look better now." She put the red jug down on the kitchen table and told me, "I am Estrelita."

"I'm Bobby. Bobby Sparks."

"Do you want to eat or...?"

No, not right now, thanks. Maybe just some water." I started walking to the sink.

"No," she said. "Let me." She drew a cup of water and handed it over.

"Thank you," I said softly and to her sorrel eyes.

"Sit, sit..." Estrelita pulled a chair out for me, and I sat down. "You will let me know when you want to eat?"

"Huh? Yeah, sure." I drained the cup.

She blushed and turned away, and then I did, let my eyes leave hers and instead I watched the water of the inlet stretch out. I got up and walked the wharf attached to the house, trying to take it in.

"This little bay," she said, suddenly standing next to me, Ait goes to a channel and then out to sea." She told me her father, Flaco, was a fisherman who sometimes used his boat as a charter for Americans who wanted to get away from places like Manzanillo, Puerto Villarta and Acapulco, but that he had an old boat and so he didn't go out as far off shore as some charter services. "They come to fish with him because he knows how to find the fish. He knows the waters well."

"Where is he now?"

"Fishing...just fishing."

A little later Estrelita fixed *heuvos revueltos* and served it with a ripe alligator pear, frijoles and bread. I had never seen a woman so lovely, or one who seemed so kind. While I ate, she finished painting the red jug and she cleaned up around the place and wiped dust from the portraits of Jesus and the Virgin Mary that hung a wall. She hummed fragments of a fetching song.

I cleaned up and when I walked back into the kitchen I was alone. I had gotten some strength back, started to feel half decent again, thought of Lucifer the way I had left him and hoped rats with sleek coats and spiked teeth and ravens with furious beaks had chewed his flesh and tapped out dirges on his bones.

I sat on the wharf, staring out towards the sea, wondering where to go next, not wanting to leave, laughed to myself when I thought I wanted four things: some cigarettes, some whiskey, a beefsteak and Estrelita. I could stay here, I thought, with those things, and never want for anything else.

Later that afternoon, I walked into the little town, and I bought a white shirt, two packs of French cigarettes, a bottle of homemade Tequila and some flank steak, enough for three. Even with that I had some Lucifer money left over, about five or six bucks American. It had gotten dark by the time I reached the yellow shack, and I thought Flaco would be home, but he hadn't made it in yet. Estrelita was there, though, and she smiled when she saw me.

"You look refreshing now," she told me.

"It's the shirt." It was so hard for me to take my eyes off of her. "Where's your father?"

She looked onto the bay waters. "Sometimes he is late." Then she turned back to me and asked, "who are you?"

"My name? I told you it's..."

"No. Who?" And still she smiled.

"Just another gringo who got waylaid down in old Mexico." I told her the truth, that I came from a little place in Texas called Quannah nobody had ever heard of, and that I used to work in a garage, first in Quannah, and then I drifted down to San Antonio and then to Harlingen, where my luck turned sour. I got put in jail there for vagrancy and spent a month harvesting cantaloupes for the state of Texas, and when they released me I walked across the Rio Grande because I had always heard life and living were cheap in old Mexico. The word was they killed each other one by one and I wanted to see it for myself. I drifted down the old highway to Ciudad Victoria and to Vera Cruz where I found a little work on the docks unloading ships that came from South America. But I got in a dustup with the boss over my pay, so I headed west again, where I met up with some American poets and painters who wore beards and got a kick out of shooting pistols. They said they didn't like living in the States. They had some wild-haired women with them who danced in black tights while the men played drums and chanted strange poems, and then we'd drink wine and mescal and smoke reefer until we passed

out under the Mexican moon. They asked me how I liked it in old Mexico, and I told them it was all right. One of them said you have to like a place where revenge can be a way of life. That lasted awhile, until they left for Mexico City because they wanted to meet Diego Rivera and learn about Russia and Frieda Kahlo and learn how to suffer. That was too much for me. I kept heading west and north, because I thought I might go to California. Some people said it was a golden place and the future was there. They said it was the land of dreams where everybody had a car and zaftig blondes grew on trees, ripe and ready to pluck. Maybe later, I thought. For now, I'd take my chances in old Mexico. I wandered from Auguascalientes through Zacatecas to Fresnillo, hitching rides with Mexican farmers and sometimes having to pay up and sit on a bus with dusty Indians and their goats. A Mexican, said he was a business man, saw me walking the highway, and he stopped his big silver Buick and asked me if I needed a ride. I told him hell yeah I did. He said get in but told me I'd have to do some of the driving. That sounded fine to me and I liked the idea of high balling up the road in his air conditioned Dyna-Flo, smoking his cigarettes. A little past dark he started passing a bottle of Cuban rum around, Santa Inez, it was. I only took a couple swallows, but he hit it pretty hard. Later his hand made for my crotch. His thick business man fingers coddle my stones. I elbowed him in the mouth and some teeth flew. He had blood on his white short-sleeved shirt and his brown tie. He opened his glove box and took out a .38, told me to pull over. I stopped the car on the outskirts of a pueblo. He started to unzip his pants with his free hand, but maybe the zipper got stuck or maybe he was too lit up to get it on the first try, and when

he looked down to see what the matter was, I chopped him in the throat. The gun flew and I picked it up. I wished him luck and took off in his car. I found a station that played American music and heard Dean Martin sing "That's Amore." Around sun-up I was stopped by some Federales and the next thing I knew I was in court where the businessman told the Judge I had beaten him and stolen his car. Two days later I was chipping mortar off of bricks for Lucifer in West Hell.

She had listened to it all and for a minute Estrelita didn't say a word. When she finally spoke she said, "The man...the businessman...he was...molesting you? That is the right word?"

"Yeah, in nice company it is."

"So then he was the bad man."

"That's what I tried to tell the judge but he wasn't buying it."

"And now you are here, Bobby Sparks."

"Yeah. Just another fugitive from the law of averages." I smiled to her.

We heard Flaco call out a moment later. He was poling his boat in, and when we got it tied up he told us his motor had died on him again. Flaco looked at the boat and shrugged.

"Maybe I can fix it," I told him.

We ate first. I pan fried the beefsteak with some onions and peppers, and they thanked me for the meal. I told them it was the least I could do. Later, Flaco and I went to work on the engine, an old inboard that had fallen on evil days. He stayed on deck

shining a lantern down and I looked around the motor. I took the fuel line out, reamed it clean, then soaked the carburetor in a little kerosene to loosen the sludge from it. By a little past midnight the engine hummed again.

He thanked me and then went into another room, came back holding my rifle. "*Puse su oin de rifle la barraca,*

"Oh, Papa. You know how to speak English."

"That's all right," I said. AI know a little of your lingo."

Flaco held the rifle out to me. I took it and put it in the shed on the wharf like he'd asked me to.

I crewed for Flaco when he had a charter and I even rounded up some fares for him in the village when I could, groups of two or three Americans who either didn't want to hang around the new resorts or who couldn't afford to, but wanted to fish anyway. We usually stayed along inside waters, fishing around the coast in the coves and swamps for snook and wahoo and yellowtail, going out in the big water for billfish only on the clearest and calmest days. There were plenty times when we made a goodly haul. Flaco worked hard in a slow and steady way and he seemed happy enough. Once he told me I had saved his boat and helped his business and he thought that I been sent to him by what he called a "good power."

"I believe in Jesus," Flaco told me one evening as he oiled a brass reel.

"Yeah? That's all right."

"And I believe in the old gods, too. Jesus just stays in Heaven, but the old gods

come down to help you and to hurt you."

Estrelita stayed the same in those days, only she seemed more beautiful and more kind. She kept the little yellow house in order, did most of the cooking, and often she helped me clean the fish and filet them for the men who chartered the boat. She worked with a smile and a song, and some evenings we went into the village and walk through the *zocalo* like young people who were great with each other, or we sat on a bench and eat *pan dulce* or ice cream, watched stars through palm fronds and felt the music of the wind from the sea.

She told me her mother had died when she was a child and that she still went to church everyday to pray for the woman's soul. Estrelita pointed to a white building and said that was where she had gone to school, a convent run by Carmelite nuns.

One evening when Flaco was out fishing alone, Estrelita and I drank some tequila. We sat on the edge of the wharf and watched bitterns and herons stab bait fish, heard a *mariachi* trumpet in the town playing scales. She smelled like lemons and her hair glistened in the last light of the sun.

I said to her, "I want to make love to you." I couldn't sand it any more.

"You have such a smile, Bobby." Estrelita took my hand and squeezed it and then she let it drop. "But no." She stood up and pointed to the convent again. "Do you know inside there the sisters pray for my soul and your soul and the soul of the world. And they pray for love. And only Jesus touches them because they are his bride."

I lit a cigarette and I said, "Yeah? That's nice, Estrelita."

"And so only the man whose bride I am..." and her voice trailed away like the shadow of a bird in flight.

I didn't know what to say, what to do. I know I felt one desire leave me, its place taken by something else that found itself in the heart of her eyes like another and brighter world.

"Don't be angry."

I stood quiet a minute. "No," I finally said. AI never want to leave you,"

She put her arms around my neck and whispered, "I have always known the world is kind."

Things stayed good like that for awhile. Flaco's charter business did all right and the boat kept running well enough. He paid me enough pesos to keep myself in smokes and Tequila, and I managed to save enough once to buy a new fuel filter for the engine. Some evenings the three of us sat by the water on the wharf and watched the nights of this world. Flaco told me he believed there were thirteen layers of heaven and nine to the underworld, and that all ages end in havoc and ruin. He loved the water, he said, because the earth itself is just the back of a sea monster that floats in a pond as big as the universe. "When this world is too old it will be destroyed and then a new one will come. It has been like that for always." He shrugged. "*Vuele*! Boom. Like that. *Vuele*!"

Late one evening I asked Estrelita to marry me.

"Yes, Bobby. I will."

We celebrated together and in the morning we told Flaco. He nodded his head and looked at both of us. Then he gave me his hand and asked, "In the church, right?"

"Yes," Estrelita told him. "Of course in the church."

"Are you Catholic, Bobby?"

I'd never set foot in a Roman church. "No, sir."

"You will have to made one then. By the priests."

I didn't know what he meant, but I said, "that's all right."

I read The Catechism in Spanish and Estrelita helped me and quizzed me.

"You're doing all this for me, aren't you, Bobby?"

"Uh-huh...for you." I loved her that much. It felt good to know I could.

I met with a priest twice a week, a little wiry man named Father Domingo who liked to eat chocolate and who followed baseball on his short-wave radio, who asked me things like "Are they really Indians? The Clevelands?" But he drilled me hard on his Church and all the secret things about it, and he always asked did I believe and I always told him that I did. I could say The Doxology in my sleep. And if he had spun me around I could still walk the Stations of the Cross blindfolded. Father Domingo gave me my saint's name, Antonio, and told me how happy he was that I came so faithfully to each lesson.

That season love and the Lord seemed good.

Estrelita sewed her wedding dress and her friends gave her little gifts, a lace *mantillia* and a blue *rebozo*, and a *retablo* of St. Anthony. Flaco bought a Bible for me,

black Spanish leather stamped with a gold cross, and one night when he was drunk he laughed and asked me, “Will you keep a secret?”

“Sure,” I told him. “I will.”

He picked up the Bible and riffled the pages so they sounded like birds in flight. AI have never read this,” and he laughed again like that was the funniest thing he knew. Then he put his finger to his lips.

The days passed like that, easy and good, tasting like the sweetness of first love, and our wedding day grew closer. I helped Flaco out on the boat when he needed me. Once we had two guys from San Berdoo on for a day, and when they found out I was getting married, they tipped me large, about ten dollars American. They drank Bohemia and made dumb jokes about the old ball and chain and so on. I kept up with my Catechism and my afternoons with Father Domingo.

Estrelita worked around the little yellow house. She painted the room she and I would share a soft cream color, and she made new curtains, yellow ones with pictures of feathers in the foreground. She seemed happy, and that made me glad, and we talked about raising a family. I didn’t care if the kids were mixed breed, because I knew I would love them as much as I loved their mother. Flaco said he would like to bounce fat babies on his knee and tell them tales about Indian warrior gods.

One afternoon before one of my last lessons with Father Domingo, Flaco sat at the table repairing the guides on a rod. He couldn’t go out that day because there had been a storm the night before and the waters were roiled. The storm had knocked out

power for a while and blown over some banana trees. Estrelita cooked a ranchero sauce with *pequin* chiles for the cabrito we were going to have for supper. I told Flaco I would see him later.

"Where are you off to, Bobby?"

"My next to last lesson with the padre."

"One week from Sunday..." Estrelita said.

"You're getting to know Jesus good?" asked Flaco, squinting down the rod.

"Oh yeah. We're like that." I held up crossed fingers.

"One week from Sunday," she said again.

"I know. And no: I'm not changing my mind."

I kissed her on the neck, smelled the fiery sauce in the pan and the sweet meat of the baby goat that was smoking in a small pit outside. She turned around and we kissed. I broke the embrace and looked into the goodness of her sorrel eyes and I cannot forget them.

I left for the church, about a ten- minute walk from the little yellow house. On the way there I passed two kids I had gotten to know over the past months, a boy and his sister. They panhandled or sold Chiclets and I was always an easy touch. I gave them two *centavos* and told them the gum was on me. One of them asked if they could come to the wedding.

"I'm counting on it," I said.

I walked on to the church, where I sat in a small room in a heavy chair and waited

a few minutes for the priest. Dusty paintings of saints and the Blessed Virgin covered the tan walls and a crucifix hung over the door to his office.

When he saw me he was very excited. "Last night, Bobby, I heard a no hitter." He held up a finger. "The first one. I sat on the edge of the chair all the last two innings."

"That's great, padre. Who pitched it?"

"Sal Maglie."

"Sal the Barber."

"No, Sal the pitcher."

I smiled. "It's what they call a nickname in America."

"Nickname?" He fingered the cross that hung round his neck.

"Yeah, it's sometimes what you call somebody because of the way they act. What they remind you of."

"Hmm..." Father Domingo pondered that, and then he asked, "Do you think he is a Catholic?"

I smiled at him. "Oh, I bet he is."

He told me about the game for a little while, and then we began our lesson, and he told me knew I had worked hard and that he was very proud of me. "You must love her so much."

I never was the kind of a guy to lie to a priest. "Yes, sir. Yes, I do."

"I know you will be very happy."

Father Domingo went back to the lesson and he talked about sin, and when he

talked about religion, sometimes he didn't know the English words and sometimes I didn't know the Spanish. He told me, A*Recuerde, el primer pecado es el mas grande. Es el que todos pecados se llever dir.*

"Si, la Caida?

Si, Bobby...the Fall...the sin from which all sin is born...because...it is when...it is *dejaudo a Dios ir."*

"Letting go of God?"

"Si...letting go..."

"And he get his revenge, right, Father?"

"No. No *venganza...misericordia...*"

I tried to find the word.. But even if what he said was the right it didn't register. I asked him, "Mercy? What mercy?"

He put a square of chocolate on his tongue, offered me one. I shook my head. I could see him looking for the English words. "Because it is merciful of Him to love you in your sin and to make you clean."

It didn't add up.

And then a few minutes later, he interrupted the lesson again to say, "I almost forgot. A man came by asking for you. A friend, he said."

"What friend?" I didn't have any friends. My heart got queer on me. I was almost afraid to ask him but I had to know. "Did...did he... were there scars on his face?" I traced a finger from the corner of my left eye, across the nose, into the right hand

corner of my mouth.

He nodded, and a look like it pained him to see that face came over his own. He made the sign of the scar the way I had traced mine. "*La cicatriz*. Like that."

"Scar.

Father Domingo winced and tapped near his eye with two fingertips. "Holes."

"When?" I tasted dirty metal in my throat.

"Two times. One time yesterday, one time this morning."

"What did you tell him?"

"Nothing. I said I know you. I said you lived in Flaco Arriata's house. The yellow one by the..."

I never heard him finish. I ran from the room to the yellow house as fast I could, and I said every prayer I knew on the way.

When I got there, I saw Flaco had a pick ax in his neck. Blood trickled rom the gash and rolled down his back. Estrelita was slumped over the stove, her throat slit and the flesh of her face seethed in the scalding sauce. Her hair had caught fire and the of it reeked and filled the room and I choked on it like I had the desert dust.

Father Domingo and I buried the dead two days later on a bright balmy afternoon in the little cemetery behind the church. A steady warm wind from the bay blew through the fronds of the palms that scratched and rattled while unseen songbirds called to one another and big Mexican crows with blood on their beaks looked down in their old silent wisdom on what they had seen play out a thousand times before.

I spent that night in the room Estrelita had fixed for us and I said a prayer into the face of the Jesus on her crucifix that I would kill the man with holes in his face who murdered her and her father. In the morning I broke the rifle down and stuffed it in a canvas bag I had taken from Flaco's boat. I put Estrelita's rosary in my pocket. I walked into the town where I bought a one way ticket and waited for a bus to the precincts of West Hell.

VI. LIPSTICK TRACES

Way down yonder in the Dixieland of death there was an agony Anne who sang torch songs in a voice wrought of morning cocktails, smoke and seduction and the hiss of her lies. She liked the mist before sunrise when she gathered the drapes at her window and fell into bed with a bottle of Rye, maybe to dream of a ghost lover whose name she couldn't quite recall. She remembered the time she saw the sun and how it made her think of blades. She told me she thought her skin might be growing whiter still.

"The day is my enemy," she said once.

She finished her stint at the Blue Room in the Roosevelt and we had a couple cocktails at the Sazerac Bar there, then left, walking down Canal, slipping onto Bourbon and into the Quarter. I looked at her in the arc of the light of the last lamp and I told her, "your skin looks like backlit milk, Lorraine."

She stopped. "Do I look like an X-ray yet, Joe?" When there was too much light around for Lorraine, her eyes began to tear.

"Not yet, baby."

I turned to a wall away from the wind and lit us each a Chesterfield, handed one to Lorraine and watched as a sudden breeze made with her white hair.

We walked deeper into the Quarter, past strip joints where chunky winehead dancers took it off for squarejohns from Des Moines kinds of places, where the bartenders were magicians who turned whisky into water. A barker outside the Sho-Bar fired up a smoke and gave Lorraine the long look when we passed.

"Hey, pal," he said, grabbing my elbow. "I'm thinkin'…you want to make some money?"

"Sure. I always want to make some money."

He had slick black hair and wore a ruffled pink tux shirt, open at the neck. He coughed. "Let me put her on stage," he said, hauling a thumb towards the club. A trio, sax, drums and bass ground out groin music. "Give her a snazzy name and she'll be the only albino on the street. Call her maybe The Great White Wonder…or…how about, let me see… I got it: Ghost Girl."

Lorraine ground out her smoke with the tip of a high heel. She leaned into the guy and took his hand, put it on her thigh, guided it up and down a minute.

"Sleek," he said, "like marble. Baby, you're money."

She said, "Fine as it feels, it looks even better. Like white fire. And you know what's so damn sad?"

"What?"

"You'll never get a peek, clown. Let's go, Joe."

I smiled at the guy and shrugged. "I'm with the girl."

We walked until we ran out of commercial real estate, took a right towards the river and Decatur Street. A steady breeze filled with fog and nighttime heat blew into us. "You think people would pay to see it, Joe?"

"See what?"

"A white muff."

"Some guys'll do anything for any color muff, Lorraine. But you've got a steady gig at the Blue Room. You pack 'em in."

We headed to Jewel's, an after hours bar.

"Or maybe make a stag reel, Joe. Just one, you know?"

Her heels sounded like rim shots on the dirty sidewalks. Ahead of us, a pair of drunk faggots argued about where Tennessee Williams' apartment was. They had on tight chinos and one of them had a build like he might be from Muscle Beach, the other a bony kid who palmed his partner's ass. New Orleans is full of guys guilty of male fraud. They took a left on Chartres and we kept walking. Behind us, sirens screeched like tormented birds and I felt that chill I always get when I think about the law. I listened, heard the cop-song stop short in the dark distance behind us.

"*You* like it, don't you, Joe?"

We'd turned a shadowy corner and the river wind made with her hair again. It whipped like pale spaces in the dark, like the trails of the last light left in town.

"You know I do."

She stopped and kissed me with those thin lips she always painted with coral gloss, and then handed me a twenty. Loraine liked the way it looked, like I was buying.

Jewel's was crowded with early morning regulars and sheets of smoke hung in the place like shrouds left out to dry. The three a.m. opera was going on, coughing, weeping, scheming, laughing and lying. It was a place for broken hearts, low-rent rendezvous and damaging plans. Lorraine took a seat in a red vinyl booth. I looked around, pushed my hat up a little on my forehead. I saw some guys eyeballing her. She looked like sparks. The whiteness of the woman threw light of its own. She held up two fingers and I went to the bar and stood next to a red headed nigger who stared at himself in the mirror, drilling the glass

like he had hard work to do. I got our drinks, a double shot of Rye and a White Horse for myself.

I made my way through the folks on the floor, the little thieves and painted doxies, saw a knife-artist I knew and a couple low level Marcello ops who did collection work, and I heard another weeping woman say, "…but you said you loved me."

Lorraine held her glass between her palms, took a sip and smiled. The colored lights from the sign in the window cast variegated shadows in her hair, on her face, down her neck and along the slopes of her slim shoulders. She looked like Technicolor, like a neon angel.

She said it again, about making a stag reel. "Just me on the bed, Joe, doing myself."

"Those lights they use would hurt your eyes."

"Oh, I'd wear these," and she tapped the lens of her dark glasses.

I had never seen her eyes. We'd been going out a month and I'd never seen them.

She let it drop, got quiet and went off to some private somewhere alone in her thin gleaming whiteness, I guess, and I had this crazy thought, saw her lying on a white bed in a blue room, fingers plucking at the ermine between her legs.

"Joey! Joe Rosen."

I turned, found the voice. It was a guy I'd known for forever, Little Mickey Dickio, built like a thick jockey. Mickey always had his ear to the street and knew the beat of the underworld drums. More than once he'd been to known to be the last guy to ever see another guy alive. He sat down with us, looking sharp in a three-piece gray sharkskin suit, and his black shoes shone like two coals in Hell.

"You been out of town."

"Four years. You know Lorraine?"

The Mickster tipped his black Fedora. "Everybody knows The White Nightingale. That's what they call you, huh?"

"That's what some hack from *The Picayune* calls me." Lorraine lit up and blew smoke.

"I heard you were back. Angola, huh?" Mickey Dickio had tiny black eyes like the deuce spot on a die. He dressed dude-style and he smelled like K&B gin and needed a shave.

"Two years in a cell with a drool case up on a three hole rape beef so I learned to sleep on my back." I lit up in self defense because Jewel's looked like the place gray light came to gather. I thought about prison, knew I'd rather take a bullet than see that place again.

"You don't say much, huh?," Mickey asked Lorraine.

"Not to midgets."

Mickey let it slide. "Me and Joey go way back. From the Irish Channel. Went to the same synagogue when we were kids."

"You're still a midget."

"Shortness, sweetness, is like albinism…. you either got it or you ain't." He turned hard eyes to her. "Besides, I'm a little piece of leather, but I'm well put together." Mickey sent her a cold smile. "So, Joe. How're you getting by?"

"Got a little job. In show business."

"Get out. What show business?"

"I'm the night projectionist at the Sanger."

Little Mickey snorted. I looked at Lorraine, and she told me she wanted another double. "You want something, Mickey?"

"Yeah. I want to see you run a projector. I'm good." He sipped his drink.

The redheaded nigger was still where I left him, working the mirror over with his eyes. I saw the freckles on his face, the light eyes that seemed not to know about blinking. He jumped my eyes with his in the mirror. It felt like one cold triangle, the kind of cold that shatters steel.

When I got back to the booth, I handed Lorraine her Rye-rocks and took a little pull from my Scotch. The noise in the place had started to ramp and I knew the tune, the song and wail of the losers' choir, broke-heart old poetry, the desperation of little dreams and little dreams of desperate deeds, the nighttime blues for the weepers and the ones who make them cry. I'd been there in that dry raw chorus, knew each lethal beat and every cunning word. It was still under my skin, too.

I asked Mickey, "Who's the *schvartze* at the bar?"

"Nobody you want to know, Joe. Unless you need somebody dusted."

"Nah, for that, I'd call my pallie." He caught my look.

"What's his name?," Lorraine asked.

"Abner Zerengue."

"What's he do?"

"What every redheaded colored guy does."

I told her, "Little Mickey's playing with your leg. There's a myth, baby, that every redheaded shine is an assassin. Because they got no world to belong in."

"Like me," Lorraine said. "Just like me." I saw her look to the bar.

"He's the real news, Joe. " He lit a Keep Moving. "No myth, no joke."

Lorraine kept looking. I wondered if he looked back, if in the work of their eyes there was a triangle too. I wondered if it was a chill or if it might be sudden fire.

Little Mickey said, "I got to go. But, Joe…you ever want to make some real money again, you know, put your talents to work, let me know. Some people I know might be interested."

"I'm through, Mick. That stretch in Angola cured me."

"So, you're going to watch pictures for a buck and two bits an hour?"

I nodded towards Lorraine. "I'm doing all right."

He got up. "Things change. So, nice to meet you, Lorraine."

She turned to him, then back to where the red head stood.

When Mickey left I said, "You should give Mickey a break. He's all right."

"I wasn't very cute to him, was I?"

When we left Jewel's the hard hours past midnight were grinding us all little by little, like the wheels of machines that turn lives to dust. In one corner two men spun black guns on a table top for drinks, on the floor a woman wept for love's old lie and Abner Zerengue stood still, all pink and Negroid with eyes so bitter they might freeze time.

Lorraine had an apartment on St. Peter, a slave quarter an uptown swell had bought and re-done, a neighborhood for make believe artists, rich girls from Baton Rouge and Jackson who pretended to paint and guys with hollow eyes who carried around books about how life is a con job and wanted to write all about it. We walked up to her third floor rooms, heard something smooth by Chet Baker slide under a doorway and then two squealing

catamites having a hissy fit. Her place was cool and dark and the slate floor in the kitchen sweated.

Lorraine said she was going to change for bed, so I helped myself to a four a.m. nightcap, shot of Scotch, neat, walked into the bedroom to wait for her. I smoked and waited, looked around the room with its dark red wallpaper and the whiteness of the bed, the black lacquer Chinese screen painted with bright figures. I turned on the radio: Helen Merrill singing "A New Town is a Blue Town."

Lorraine came out in a sheer black dressing gown and her skin beat with a light of its own. I saw the outlines of her bones when she leaned over me and took the smoke from my mouth. She took a drag, handed it back and I looked at the perfect circle of her dark coral lipstick traces. I could taste it.

"Is that true, Joe, what you said about that redheaded dinge?"

"No. It's a story, from the Bible. Judas had red hair."

"Judas?"

"Yeah, the guy who ratted Jesus."

"But I know how he feels."

"You don't know what he feels." I stabbed my cigarette out.

"He's got those big lips and that nose and his hair is nappy but it's red and his skin is pink. Where can he go?"

I looked at her, how she seemed to be losing weight so she could look the way she wanted, like an x-ray, saw her whiteness beneath the gossamer of the gown, even the thick low hairs in a fuzzy triangle, saw myself in the lenses of her shades.

"It's a big world. There's somebody out there for him, a pink Negress someplace waiting for him. That's the great thing about life, baby. There's somebody for everybody." I made a little toast and finished the whisky. "He might have found her already. Maybe she walked in right after we left, sweet and pink and smelling like funeral flowers. Or, maybe he's out there looking for her in some other joint. Jewel's isn't the only ten-in-one in town."

She was quiet for a moment, aimed her dark glasses at me. She turned and opened the drawer in the nightstand. She took off her dark glasses and put on her mask. I watched her feel for her pillow and get in next to me.

"Are you drunk, Joe?"

"Not too drunk"

I pulled her next to me and felt the heat. It felt right, her body next to mine, and I knew I was falling for her, thought she was the one and all the others had just been for practice. I kissed her and wondered if her eyes were closed beneath the black mask.

"Show me your eyes, Lorraine."

"No."

"You know I love you. Show me your eyes."

I felt her hand slide down my stomach.

I opened the top of her negligee.

"What color are they?"

She grabbed me. "The same color as my nipples…"

I got up before she did the next afternoon, made a pot of CDM coffee with chicory. I lit a smoke and opened the green plantation shutters to the dusty window. The Quarter

seemed like it was just waking up. A cop on horseback rode down the street and a squarejohn tourist couple snapped shots of each other with their arms around the stuffed colored mammy outside of a praline shop like they'd just made friends with Aunt Jemima. A snatch of music come from somewhere, a few bars of bad Dixieland. A produce truck driver leaned on his horn and cursed an old woman who walked in front of him howling about salvation. The heat of the morning had ripened into an afternoon broil. Humidity swaddled the city like gray TB sheets and the smell of last night's leftovers made the thick air sour and fetid, like the place was infected.

I poured some coffee and had another Chesterfield, wondered about Lorraine and why she wouldn't let me see her eyes. And I wondered on her talk about the pale spade. I remembered his face, pink and splotched with blots of brown, ashen eyes that seemed cold enough to clot quicksilver. I thought maybe it was just the whiskey working on her, that she'd forget it when she got up.

But I didn't see her until a little after midnight. I'd gone to the Sanger to do my gig with the magic lantern, and she was still asleep when I left. I ran *While the City Sleeps*, a cartoon about Tom Cat and Jerry Rat, the newsreel and coming attractions for about eight hours. The picture was ok, but I'd seen a week's worth of it by then. It had Ida Lupino in it. I'd stand in line to see her anytime.

I watched the black and white shimmer on the screen, the faces, the shadows, and I thought how your whole life is like that, one long process of pictures. Some are nice enough all right and some are deadly. And the ones you get caught forging can land you in jail. But still they were like magic the way they appeared on a screen or a blank canvas. Ida Lupino lit a smoke and I remembered this picture of Moses and the burning bush. I asked my father

how they did that. He said God can do anything. I said, no, not God, how they painted the picture, and he told me it's bad for Jews to love pictures. It's bad, he said, for a Jew to worship anything that isn't God. It wasn't bad being a Jewish kid in New Orleans. There were some clubs you couldn't get in, not that my old man could afford to go, and there was this whole tribe of blonde girls we'd see on Canal going into the fancy stores or whose picture was in the paper because of a party or something and they wouldn't look you. It's like they knew, and if you ever forgot where you came from they had a look that was a way of reminding you.

I rewound the last reel, took it off and put it in the can, cleaned the lenses of the projectors and shut down the room. I got my hat and walked to the Roosevelt, a drink, and Lorraine.

The bartender in the Sazerac Room comped me a Scotch. I was on my way into the Blue Room when somebody called me. I turned, saw Little Mickey Dickio. I heard Lorraine's voice, high and airy, holding onto the last notes of "That Old Feeling." I hauled a thumb towards where Lorraine sang, but he said, "Hold it a second, Joe. Let's talk."

"About what?"

"A job."

"I got a job."

"I'll buy you a drink," he nodded towards the bar.

"Got one of them, too." I took a taste.

Mickey walked closer to me in that rolling way some short people have, like they can't take a step without putting their hips and arms into it. The trio behind Lorraine started playing again and she sang "I Could Write a Book." I tried to imagine what she looked like

in the single silver spot that beamed on her, how it lit up her skin and her white hair, the way it played off her lipstick like the white light of diamonds illumines the blood heart of rubies. I bet she looked immaculate, standing still and shining like the sheen on frost.

"One drink."

I looked at my glass. "OK."

We took a booth in the bar. "What job?"

Mickey took one of my cigarettes, lit up with the house matches on the table. "There's a rich fruit…lives on St. Charles… and he digs what they call modern art. You know, not real pictures like they used to paint but just a bunch of swirls and squares and dots and splotches."

"Abstracts."

"What?"

"Nothing. Go."

"This guy flies to New York. London. Paris…all over…buying this new thing. And so I heard he has a painting by this guy uh…uh…" The Mick snaked a tiny hand into his inside coat pocket, came up with a piece of paper. He unfolded it and handed it to me.

I read it. Piet Mondrian.

"You ever hear of him? Know his stuff?"

"Yeah."

I had seen Mondrian's work, lots of geometry and white space with tight lines of color. His new paintings were spare enough, very controlled, pictures as much about what's not there as what is there. Like an X-ray. And never any green. He hated green and he used to paint the leaves of the plants in his studio white.

"They say he's a hard ticket right now."

"Ok…"

"So, you see where I'm going, Joe?" He took a long pull from his gin and tonic.

"Where you going, Mickey?"

"What, you lose your mind in stir?"

"They say it's happened before."

"That broad got you twisted or something? She's quite a blouse full, Joe, but she smells like trouble."

"That's happened before, too. But never to me." My drink was almost done. "What's the promote?"

A little smile came across Mickey's little lips, kind of like the way a baby snake slips along tall grass. "I know a guy who wants this art. But he won't pay retail. The swish on St. Charles has the piece hanging in his house. So, we boost it, you pass a copy and my friend keeps the real thing, and pays us for our trouble."

I finished my drink.

"Joe. There's five large in it for you. How many movies you got to run to make that, huh? "

"Plenty, Mickey." I saw miles of celluloid unfurl across my across eyes like a ribbon, saw myself sitting in a small projection room chaining smokes as calendar pages ripped my days and nights away…just like in the movies.

He held up a little hand. "Five large will set you straight."

"Let me think about it."

"And it'll let you buy some trinkets for that wraith in the Blue Room."

I got up to go.

"Or least a couple drinks," he added.

I didn't like it that Lorraine fronted me money but on my pay it was better than sitting in a boarding house heating up beans on a hot plate. "Beat it, dust."

"Don't get sore, Joe. Think about it…all five thousand dollars of it."

We skipped Jewel's that night and had cocktails at the hotel. We walked back to Lorraine's and when we got upstairs she asked me why I was late getting to her show.

"Ran into Little Mickey," I told her, turning on the radio.

"What'd he want?" She poured the drinks and we sat down on a dark red couch. She took her heels off and leaned back, putting her feet in my lap. She started digging around there with her toes.

"He had a promote for me."

She kept one leg where it was, raised the other over the back of the couch. "Tell me about it and I'll show you more." She made a nasty little laugh and hiked her dress up a little.

So I told her and when I finished she asked, "Are you going to do it?"

"I don't want to go back to prison."

"You won't."

"Yeah?"

"Not if you don't get caught." Lorraine made that nasty laugh again and now the hem of the dress was half way up her thighs.

I took a look at what she had, then back to her dark glasses. "It's not as easy as people think. I'd need a studio. With the right light. The right paints. And I'd have to see the original and study it…to see how much paint the artist used, to know the width of his brushstrokes. I'd have to measure everything in the composition. I mean, I can't just sit down and do it at the kitchen table."

She was quiet a minute, then she said, "I think you should do it."

"For the money?"

"Yeah, money's always nice…and if you do it, Joe…if you do it…I'll show them to you like I'm showing you this …my eyes…do it, Joe…give me a kiss…there…"

Later that morning just as sleep had almost taken me, Lorraine said, "I saw him last night. He caught my early set."

"Who?"

"They wouldn't let him in so he stood by the door and listened."

"Who're you talking about?"

"The red headed, pink Negro. He looked so lonesome standing there."

"You talk to him? He say anything to you or…"

"'Night, Joe." She turned over.

Lorraine cares for the lonesome ones.

I ditched work, called in sick, and hung out on University Walk across from the Roosevelt after dark, watched as city dad types drove up in their Cadillacs and Studebakers, tipped the parking guy a few shekels and then went inside with their women. They all looked the same to me, dark suits and gray hats, and their women walked a well practiced walk in

their shining blue and green and golden satin dresses, high heels, pearls or diamonds around their throats… too much lipstick…too much rouge. I hot-boxed a smoke and waited to see if Abner Zerengue would show. A Whitney Bank clock on the corner said almost nine, time for Lorraine's first set. The juice in the air turned into a soft easy rain, the kind you can't really hear but you see against the glow of the street lights, coronas of mist and fog chasing each other through the night.

Ten minutes later he came from the Rampart Street side of Canal wearing a pork pie hat, walking like the rain didn't fall on him. He entered the hotel. I pictured him in the half light of the doorway between the Blue Room and the entrance, standing there looking at her, and I wondered if her eyes were singing to his.

When I left, I got a couple quick drinks at a place on Poydras and thought about it. Maybe it was nothing. Maybe the redheaded nigger *mamzer* just liked the sound of her voice and got a charge out of standing there listening to her, hat in hand, a little vacation from his grim solitude. Loraine had a sweet voice and she knew how to use it like a sinister angel. She could play a guy like a jukebox and make him write bad checks. People paid to hear her, I told myself. Or maybe he was casing a target. That could be. It could be anything but chances were it was just one thing.

Back outside I walked under awnings and overhangs to keep from getting too wet, made my way into the Quarter from the French Market, thinking the whole time, wondering what Lorraine might be up to. Maybe it's nothing, I told myself. But I had this picture in my head of her and that redhead together and I couldn't get rid of it.

A frail mist hung around the city as I walked through the back of the Quarter. I bought a short dog of the White Horse at a package store and drank it on the go, walking and

smoking and fretting. I didn't have eyes to go up to Angola again but the thought of five large worked on me. I'd be able to get some things for Lorraine, the kinds of things she'd like I'd be stout and she'd forget about Abner Zerengue.

I kept walking, back towards Jewel's, down Chartres, past the Napoleon House where they played longhair music on the hi-fi and beatniks sat around drinking red wine and talking that meaning-of-life re-bop. The Scotch had me feeling all right. The mist felt good, cooling, took the edge off the heat. I drained the half pint and tossed the bottle into a pile of trash that was on the curb. I heard something scram when the bottle shattered.

The moon began to sneak a look, and I saw the reflection of its dim soft light in the dirty water that ran in the gutter. Above me, apartment lights were on. People cooking, loving, fighting, the regular business of living and dying. I walked beneath the balconies and looked at the railings across the street, at the iron flowers and birds that had been twisted and tortured into a state of grace.

I got to Jewel's about eleven. I ordered a drink at the bar and had a smoke. Midway through the cigarette, Abner Zerengue walked in. He stood next to me and when he caught the bartender's eye, he nodded, and the bartender brought him a shot of brown whiskey. The spade drained the shot glass in an easy motion and took out a white handkerchief to dry his pink lips like some kind of dude. Something on the field of white caught my eye: lipstick traces the color of Lorraine's. Just a little…but enough, a coral streak that made my eyes throb. I closed them and saw him nail her in her dressing room between sets. I opened them: he was gone.

I felt like I'd been pole-axed in my nut bag. I took another drink and figured that tears it: I had to see Mickey and sign on with the counterfeit dodge. He finally showed and

we talked. He'd arrange to lift the painting from the Nance's house and the guy behind it would get me what I needed to pass a good fake.

Lorraine didn't show at Jewel's that morning and before he left the Mickster said, "I heard a little tale tonight, Joey." He played with the knot on his white silk tie.

"Yeah?"

"Some say Abner Zerengue is hanging around the Blue Room. Some say he and your torch singer left together between shows."

I saw it again, him and her in the dressing room.

Maybe he saw the wound and hate in my eyes. Little Mickey gave me a pat on the shoulders. "So you know." He got off the bar stool and waddled off and a half-hour later, I ended up at Lorraine's, letting myself in with a key.

I fixed a drink and when she showed I didn't mention it, not the copy-job, not the shine, not what I saw when I closed my eyes.

"Pour me one," she said. She had on a dress blue as the sea and in the dim lights her coral lipstick smoldered.

I fixed her a Rye and lit her cigarette. "Didn't see you tonight."

"I got sick. Some stomach thing. You miss me?"

"Feel better now?" She blew a thin steady stream of smoke.

"Great…just great." I lit up from the stump of the one I had going. I nodded towards the bedroom. "I can go all night."

More smoke tumbled past the coral lips. "Not with me, big boy. I'm beat."

"Rough night at the mike?"

"Something like that." Lorraine took the rest of her Rye in one quick swallow and said she was going to bed. I watched her move with those long white legs and those snaky hips, watched her drop her dress and turn to me looking like a woman made from light. She stared at me behind her dark glasses and touched herself. She was making me want her, but I had to play it right.

Later when she put her mask on and got in bed I saw some marks her on arm, pink discolorations on her skin, three impressions that looked like fingertips. "What happened to your arm, Lorraine? Looks like a bruise there."

"I bumped into a hat rack."

" That's too bad…looks like it had hands…"

The next morning I made coffee and ate a handful of aspirin. While Lorraine slept, I called the Sanger and told the boss I was leaving town, that I'd be by for my last check in the afternoon. He took it the way any guy would who could find another sap to run a projector in thirty minutes. I brought Lorraine a cup of coffee. Shook her, woke her.

"I won't be around for a little while."

She felt for the cup on the nightstand, found it and took a sip. For a minute I wished I had put strychnine in it.

"Light a smoke for me, will you, Joe?"

I did, put it between her lips. "I said I won't be..."

"I know. I might have a mask on but I'm not deaf."

I pictured what she looked like under the white chenille bedspread and I wondered again on the eyes. I'd save them for later, for when I showed up with a mink coat that touched the floor and maybe even a diamond.

I gave her a little kiss. "I'll be in touch."

"Sure, Joe….be in touch."

I left her blowing smoke rings she didn't see.

Little Mickey Dickio brought me the Mondrian three days later while I sat in my room listening to the radio and fretting on Lorraine. I was down to two packs of Chesterfields and a little White Horse. He unwrapped the piece. I'd seen it before in art books at the library. It was called "Composition Number 10."

"It's all set, Joe. But we need the copy in four days because the guy who owns this will be back from New York then."

I rubbed my eyes, looked at the Mondrian. "Yeah…yeah…four days. OK."

"You looked whipped."

I rinsed the taste of a stale smoke out with some cold coffee. "Maybe. So, where's my, uh, studio?"

"Get your things together and I'll take you there."

"Who's behind this?"

"You know that show on TV, *The Millionaire*? And how he likes to like keep everything hush-hush?"

"Yeah."

"This guy does too. So, forget about it."

As long as his money was good, that was all right with me.

The place was a big house on Bayou St. John near City Park, quiet and clean and almost in the sticks in those days. Mickey told me it belonged to the guy fronting the switch

and when a maid let us in I saw it was quite a set up, big rooms filled with nice things, carpets from Arabia and vases from China. A dozen goblets made of Spanish silver sat at places on a walnut dining table and ancient tapestries hung on the wall.

"Are you Mr. Rosen?"

I turned, saw a colored guy dressed in a white uniform like a waiter in the Club Car on the Panama Limited. He had close cropped hair and looked like he could handle himself.

"Sure, I'm Joe Rosen."

The guy walked to me and gave me his hand, We shook. "I'm Brock, and I'm here to make certain you have everything you need." He spoke like he'd been to school and I figured he knew the inventory. "Let me show you where you'll be working."

Mickey and I followed him, past the living room, down a hall, and then into a room at the back of the place that was glass on two sides. Overhead hung two lines of lights. It had a big table, two easels, a drafting board, the whole magilla, the kind of set up a pro could do good work in.

"Deluxe," I said, still looking around.

"May I get you anything, Mr. Rosen. Or you, Mr. Dickstein.?"

"No," said Mickey. "Got an appointment. Just take good care of Joe."

"Yeah. Show me where I can clean up and let me eat and I'll be ready."

He took me to my room. It had a double bed with clean sheets.

When he left I told the Mickster I thought this was a swell layout.

"I better get going, Joe."

"Yeah. All right. Hey, you uh…you seen Lorraine around? At Jewel's or…?"

"No. Not at Jewel's."

"Where?"

"Some say she and Abner ate at Chez Helene a couple times."

"Yeah…"

"…drinking at Dookie Chase…."

"…uh-huh…"

He made a midget shrug. "Sorry, Joe. But I told you."

"Yeah, you told me."

"*Sie haut gevain a coura in de momma's bouch*."

I thought maybe he's right. Maybe she was a whore even in her momma's stomach but I had it for her….had something for her…love and hate, that old cocktail guys and dolls love to fix…one part kiss, two parts poison…the kind of highball that keeps you up at night and makes you think life might not be so sour after all, that the bad taste in your mouth will go away when you see her. It makes you believe the whiskey sweats you go through in the middle of the night are just part of the freight… that maybe the guys who write love songs aren't such dopes after all. And you know you'll kill her if she's lying.

He left and I showered. I knew I wasn't done with Lorraine.

Brock could cook. He fed me shrimp Creole, a Roquefort salad and crème Brule. I ate with him in the kitchen and told him, "This is good. Good as Arnaud's."

"I'm glad you like it, Mr. Rosen."

After I ate, I took a drink with me and went into the studio. I unwrapped the painting and stared at it, studied it. I remembered days I had spent at the library when I was a kid, going over art books when I was supposed to be studying Hebrew. I remembered getting lost in paintings the way they say some people get lost in words. There were books about artists

that I read, and I wanted to be like them, wanted to take a blank white canvas and conjure colors that had never been seen like a wizard, a real ace, and cover it with something new and bright and beautiful. I wanted to see my name in the corner and my pictures on a wall. I knew the tint of every color the way some kids knew batting averages and I learned the names of artists like other guys knew prize fighters. Flight and romance were on those pages in pictures filled with legend and blood , worlds unlike mine, the one of the son of a small time book maker whose Yiddish was better than his English. I looked around the room and knew where I had come from was just outside: Look how far I've flown.

The next day I stretched the canvas on the frame the original had come in, and I laid on the white background, a real live-white like Mondrian used. I penciled in the black bars that crisis-crossed the piece, the ones that looked like they came from my cell door at Angola. That night Brock fed me like a king again and I had some drinks while we watched Jackie Gleason on television. In my room I went through a full pack wondering about Lorraine. I needed her back, needed her to be mine, didn't like splitting her with a *shtarker* like Abner Zerengue. It was funny about dames: maybe there wasn't one you could trust but just try living this life without one. You know she's out there somewhere like an empty canvas for you to cover and put your mark on.

The next day was tricky because the morning sky stayed dark, full of clouds like fists. The light was lousy for getting true color. "Composition Number Ten" had three colors, blue, yellow and a strange red that maybe wasn't red at all, a kind of red that looked like it had been scorched. I wondered what Mondrian saw when he came up with it. His red had depth to it, a little deep burnt orange, maybe. Or rust, like old iron. The blue was a French

blue, easy enough. And the yellow…it was bright and vibrated when I looked at it. But the red gave me fits.

I stared at that red and I thought of the things you think of what when you think of red, of blood and roses and a woman's mouth, but this wasn't that red…deeper darker and dirtier. I thought of Lorraine's lipstick traces on a cigarette, that dark coral, the way her white face was light around it. Her mouth. Mondrian's red. And I told myself I was a sap for thinking about her when I had to finish this. She'd gotten to me, hexed me with her lips and her lies and I knew she was out there flashing Abner around like a red Cadillac, so bright it screamed. I worked on the red, trying to get the right tint, and thought of her and him and I thought maybe I never would have her, thought when she used him up there'd be another one, and another one after that. That's the way it is with some slits. They have this sickness, this affliction that makes them lethal, only you don't see it at first because they mask it with lipstick and makeup and dark glasses. Sure, I had some *gelt* coming but maybe I wouldn't splash it all over her. The sun came out. My red got closer to Mondrian's. I saw it better now, just like I saw there wasn't going to be a mink coat in Lorraine's future. I'd have something else for her, and a Jew's the most patient thing in the world when it comes to getting even.

I found the right red early the next morning. I worked it in place, then finished touching up the black bars. I called Brock and said let's celebrate with a couple of drinks. He passed on the whiskey, said he never touched it, and when I held up the original and my copy he said, "Mr. Rosen. The one is faithful to the other. I can't tell them apart." I hoped the Nancy boy on St. Charles couldn't either, because the longer a copy stays undetected the better your odds of not getting nabbed. Like murder tracks, forgery trails grow cold.

"I'll call Mr. Dickstein and tell him your work is done," Brock said.

I could have stood a few more days there but Brock was all business. Little Mickey showed up within an hour and he and Brock parlayed about something. This had been easy, maybe too easy I thought, because I hadn't seen the first dime yet. But I trusted Mickey even if he had been known to kill over less, and a few minutes later Brock came to me with an envelope. I opened it: fifty iron men looked back at me.

"Sweet huh, Joey?"

"Yeah. Swank, just like this place."

I gave my hand to Brock and told him it had been swell. "See you around," I said.

"I doubt that, Mr. Rosen." He smiled like he knew more than I ever would.

We split.

The moon's a one-eyed slut all right but even her dirty light shines strong enough, and I saw in the three o'clock dark their shadows, Lorraine and Abner Zerengue, walking to her place. She stumbled like she'd been shot in the neck and had to lean on him. He kept pushing her off and she kept falling back, and I thought I don't like a woman who can't hold her liquor.

The next day I spent a little cash on a new suit, a pair of spectator shoes and a hat. It was a good hat this time, a dark gray Miller fedora with a black band and a brim with some snap to it. Then I ate a fancy meal, at Galatoires, just like I was a wheel, salad, sautéed soft shell crabs, soufflé potatoes, the works. Good and rich. Like eating a blood clot. I walked to Royal and checked myself out in the mirror at the penny arcade and then over to Lorraine's.

I smoked a few Chesterfields until I saw her lover man leave, watched as he headed towards Rampart and that neighborhood he came from.

I still had a key so I let myself in. She was up, drinking coffee in the kitchen. I stopped at the entrance and leaned against the doorway. She looked good and I had missed her, and I thought maybe I still had a chance. "Got a cup for me?"

Lorraine looked up, her dark glasses on. "Sure, Joe." She shrugged. "I got a cup for you."

I poured coffee and told I'd been her working.

"That's nice. It's good for a guy to work, Joe."

Her mouth was made up with that coral lipstick. I noticed a little bruise on her face and when I mentioned it she told she'd run into another hat rack.

"You don't have to lie to me. I know you been seeing him…the shine."

Lorraine allowed that it was a free country.

"He roughs you up a little, huh, Lorraine?"

Dirty beams of feeble light slithered through the shutter slats.

"That's his style, Joe. You're easy. He's hard."

I lit a cigarette and told her, "Yeah, but then I'm not a violent guy."

Lorraine yawned and stretched and when she did the top of her blue silk gown opened a little, a enough for me to see her breasts. She caught me looking and cupped her hands under them a couple times, then covered up.

"What about you and me, baby?"

She let her cigarette fall into her coffee cup. It hissed. "There is no you and me."

I wanted her. Bad. Wanted to take her and violate her and show her what hard was. Wanted to rip the glasses off her face and see those eyes. But I just stood there. "You like that black stuff, huh?"

"Oh yeah, Joe. It's like iron. Like a railroad spike." She smiled. "Oooooh…"

My blood seethed. I felt sudden heat all over. She made that moan again and smiled just thinking of it. "*Dershtikt zolstu veren*."

She laughed. "You know I don't understand Jew-talk."

"You should choke on it."

I had to make friends with Abner Zerengue, set it up right and leave no traces. I thought on it, and two nights later I saw him walking down Pirate's Alley, watched his broad shouldered shadow trespass beneath the glow of old street lamps. I stood in the doorway of an art supply shop. "Want to talk to you," I whispered from the darkness.

He stopped, went for the small of his back and came up with a piece the way a conjurer finds a dove in his fist. He looked at me, stepped closer with his pistol trained on my face. Abner made a little laughing sound and when he got closer I smelled reefer.

Fog from the river gathered like dirty rags around our faces and the street was quiet, like the world had just died. He rolled his lip up and bared his teeth and for a second I saw cold absence in his eyes, some vacancy where maybe his soul should have been. He put the barrel of the iron on my forehead. It felt like the kiss of a corpse.

"I want you to kill her."

I went to reach in my pocket and he ground the gun barrel into my face.

"I don't carry heat. I'm not a violent man."

I took out an envelope. "Two thousand dollars." I thumbed the top of the bills and played money music for him. "Tomorrow night. When you get back with her from the Blue Room. Let her put on her mask and she'll never see it coming."

He took the envelope, tossed the heft of it in his pink palm.

"Jew-boy like you must want her mighty dead to cough up this kinda green."

"You're a pro. You know how to do it right."

"You ain't wrong."

"And you don't love her."

"No, man. I don't love her. You heard 'bout love, huh?"

"Yeah. I heard."

"Ain't nothin' but a business goin' on."

"And she doesn't love you. She can't love anybody. She's got a disease that way. She's sick. Too sick to live."

He laughed. "Bitch is big twisted." He smelled the money. "You know I could kill you and take yo' money."

"Yeah. But I know you're a pro. You just said so. You're not cold-blooded. You're an independent business man, just like me."

"Uh-huh." He looked hard at me with iron arctic eyes. "Ok, Jew-boy."

He pocketed the money and turned to leave.

"Hey," I called out. "You ever seen her eyes?"

"Her eyes? Fuck her eyes…"

I watched him go and darkness seemed to eat him alive.

I rousted Little Mickey at his place on Napoleon. I'd been staying there since the Mondrian switch, and when I walked into his room, he had his .38 on me by the time I took the third step. "Jesus, Joe. You know better than that." He looked at the clock. "It's five in the goddamn morning."

"Yeah… I know but I couldn't sleep, Mickey. It's eating on me."

"What?"

"Lorraine."

" And I'm Miss Lonelyhearts?"

I lit a smoke and watched his little hands daub at the sleep in his little eyes. "You look bad, Joe."

"It's her. That's what I'm saying. I need her back." I sounded good, like I meant it.

He put the piece under the pillow and lay back down. "Send her flowers in the morning."

"No. I got another idea." I tossed an envelope on the bed.

"What's this?"

"Two thousand bucks."

He sat up again, looked at the envelope and then at me. He picked up the money, bounced it in his right hand, just the way Abner had, like his palm could count. "What do I to do to keep this?"

"Kill the spade."

He tossed it back to me like I'd handed him a dose of load.

"No, listen. It's easy and the setup's in."

"You don't get it. He's death on two legs."

"What? All of a sudden you're not? All of a sudden Mickey Dickstein isn't a good gunny? I remember the day you'd pull a piece on a guy if he made a short joke…listen to me, Mickey. There's this screen in her bedroom…"

"Screen?" He lit the stump of a stogie.

"Yeah, you know, this three part thing that just stands there. About five feet high. It's got hinges and if you move the panels right…."

"…a pistol barrel could fit through…'

"Yeah. They come in and you're behind it. You wait 'til she puts on this mask and…"

"Mask?"

"She wears this mask because of her eyes. He won't see you. She won't see you."

He didn't say anything for a minute, bit on his Keep Moving and looked from the money to me. I knew what he'd say. Just like I knew what pink Abner would say, and just like The Mick knew what I'd say to passing the art. Put enough money in front of a guy, you know what he'll say.

I reached in my pocket and then lobbed the key to him.

"What's that?"

"It unlocks the door to Paradise…"

That last day felt like a long day, the kind that has a weight of its own, the way I remembered Yom Kippur feeling, gray and slow and immense, with an unknown hush to it, like I knew doom was coming, waiting for darkness to make its harvest. Then, as a child, I had fasted and sat with my father wearing my *tallis* and we rocked in prayer to the rhythm of

the cantor and heard what devastation God would deliver, and heard what mercies he had in store for the just. God wrote the names of the just in the Book of Life and he sealed the Book and he blessed them. The others he *schmiessed,* smashed them to smithereens. It's always been like that, for God, for everybody. And revenge trumps love in any game in any town. When the bad bleed it's all right.

I thought about going to hear Lorraine's last set at the Blue Room, to sit at table in the back where the shadows were thickest, drink a cocktail and make a little toast while she hit one last pure note: here's to you and to Hell. But I staved that off and hung around Jewel's instead, watched the place fill up with the ones who can't walk in the light, checked the clock for reaper time. The gear is being put, I thought, too late to stop it now. And it was a sweet set up: she puts on her mask and Abner drills her in the face. He stands there grinning at his work and I wonder if blood rolls down on her coral lips. Mickey's behind the screen. He shoots and her pink lover dies on top of her. I saw it on canvas and I saw my name in the corner. And I'd creep up there to get a peek at her eyes dead or alive.

I had another drink, and I thought about how good life was going to be, how it would taste nice going down, like the whiskey. I knew I'd done a good job on the forgery and I'd get an encore. I watched the clock and an hour later I knew it was time, wished I could hear the blasts over the din in the bar, over the stale lies and burned out hopes, all the sordid poetry of ruin the damned write on cocktails napkins with their lies and their dreams…

I went outside and had a Chesterfield, saw Mickey hauling my way.

"It went all right?", I asked him, and I think I smiled.

"Yeah, Joe….it went all right." He was panting. "Yeah…except…except…"

"What?"

He put his hands on his knees and sucked up the hot dirty air.

"What, for crying out loud."

"He was going to kill *her*. It…it went like you said. They came in and she…"

"She's not dead?"

"That's what I'm saying, Joe. I nailed him. She's all right."

He said it like he thought I'd like it and when he did I felt something frigid take hold of me like ice around my heart. Mickey wheezed like air brakes and I lit another one and tried to grin and it's hard to smile when you're lighting up.

Two NOPD black and whites shrieked our way. Their sirens sounded harsh. We went into Jewel's, had drinks, and Mickey told me there was no way Lorraine had seen him. He said Abner laid her down and put his hand over her mask, whispered something and looked at the screen, said she heard the shot and started screaming, mask on, her head twisting around like a blind woman looking for smoke.

I wanted his gun. I wanted to finish what Abner Zerengue didn't got around to.

"Good job, huh, Joe?"

"Yeah, Mick. Great job."

I left Jewel's, left Mickey to his gun and his good deed and I watched some medics carry what was left of Abner Zerengue out on a gurney. When the cops left I saw the first light of morning come like a crippled dog, like the world was going to have one more chance to get it right. I heard a woman say "somebody killed her man," and as I pushed through the crowd that hung around, a fruity looking kid with peroxide blonde hair and a peach colored sweater draped over his shoulders gushed about how Lorraine was "going to be the next Judy Garland." Fat chance. The dead are out of style.

Her door was unlocked and she sat in a black dressing gown, her white hair loose and down her back. She was putting on lipstick at the little kitchen table. When she heard me she turned, aimed the eyes behind the dark glasses at me. I watched her take a drink of Rye and she said, "Got a cigarette, Joe?"

"Sure, I got a cigarette." I lit it for her, went to hand it to her but she took it with her mouth and I felt the heat of her breath on my knuckles. "I heard what happened, Lorraine. That's too bad."

"News travels fast around here."

"You know who did it?"

She took a long drag and let it out. "Maybe you did it, Joe."

I made a little laugh that wasn't a laugh. "You know me better than that."

"You had a key…"

I saw dawn through shutter slats and I wanted to open the windows and drapes and have a world full of light assault the room. I wanted to rip her glasses off and watch her eyes bleed. "I know we're through, but I'll always have a soft spot for you."

"You were always so sweet, Joe. And you had a reason."

I took a step toward her. Her neck looked like a perfect fit for my hands.

"No reason."

My hands were on her neck.

She must've had it in the pocket of her gown: I felt the metal of a gun barrel push against my stomach. When I loosened my grip a little, she pushed it in harder.

"It was like you always said, Joe. There's somebody for everybody and he could have been the one for me…but you couldn't stand it…it was eating you alive…he told me he

knew you tailed us…so you killed him. You let yourself in and hid behind the screen and you killed him. He knew you were here…he told me…"

"Told you? You got it all wrong. I was at Jewel's. People saw me."

I thought about making a move for the gun…saw her white finger curled around the smoky blue steel of the trigger…

"He whispered, 'sssh…I smell Jew'."

"You can't kill me, Lorraine…you won't shoot…"

She smiled.

I felt the gun give a little and I took half a step back.

"No. I won't kill you. Dying's easy. Prison's hard. Hand me the phone, Joe. And while we wait for the cops…"

"Yeah…?"

"I'll let you see my eyes."

Lorraine went nationwide after the trial, but that's the way it always is with blood in the water, and this time the record company sharks were there to feed. I went back to Angola: twenty-to-life. I never ratted Mickey and hoped he was living it up out there and doing more good deeds with his gun. He never killed anybody who didn't deserve to die, and they wouldn't believe me anyway.

The joker in the cell next to mine had a radio, and it picked up WLCS in Baton Rouge pretty good on clear nights. Every time they played one of Lorraine's records he'd say, "Hey, Heebie. Your girl friend's on the radio." I had to listen because it's not like I had

somewhere to go. But every night I sat on the edge of bunk and draw pictures of a woman's eyes, trying to capture what I'd seen. I had time to get it right.

VITA

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