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Date

April 28, 1989

STORIES OF LOVE AND DEATH

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Paul E. Puryear

May 1989

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ABSTRACT

The first eight stories herein concern the adventures of a young boy named Bones Gentry. "Once Upon A Time Never Comes Again" is about his friendship with a small boy that he sees cremated in a trailer fire. "Isadora" tells of a black girl who is the fastest runner in school but a student who needs help. "The Pale And The Ethiop" is about that first kiss and, ahem, some subsequent ones. In the story "Bones And The Gypsy" Bones fights a Gypsy girl in a violent initiation into friendship. "The Cat And The Goblin" is a brief story of a malignant ill will that derives perverse pleasure from watching a poor beast die slow. "Herr Koch" tells of a fighting rooster which one day explodes upon Bones' blind side. In "The Graveyard Shift" Bones and the Gypsy girl plan to rendezvous at a glade in the woods on the day she leaves. In "Don Quixote" Bones private regard of himself as a knight worthy of Arthur's round table is sorely tested when he discovers a lady in distress.

The last two stories will make the tender reader flinch. In "The Greatest Horror of Them All" Melissa is absolutely the most beautiful girl in the Universe, or so the man declares until one day. . . In "A Classic Sucker" a maniacal young man and his sick wife take a trip to

Florida for their health's sake where someone waits
grinning with all thirty-two teeth on show.

CHAPTER I

ONCE UPON A TIME NEVER COMES AGAIN

The radio played faintly on the table at the boy's head while he lay asleep. Words to a song began to seep into his brain, finding there some resonant echo.

His mind seived up from a dream. Even as a woman may sleep through a babel of noise and wake to her child's faintest whimper, so the boy slept through a jangle of bird calls outside his window yet was roused by a song tuned to a low whisper. Sang the dim voice thus: "Once upon a time never comes again."

Bones Gentry opened his eyes.

The words conjured the sight of the boy Matthew romping toward him with his book of Grimm's tales flung aloft and shouting, "Once upon a time! Once upon a time!" and handing up the book and clasping his free hand and beaming up at him.

And then a nightmare drifted back about Preacher Harrowell. "I hate that hell-hound!" he thought. The nightmare seemed vivid yet and he strove to recall it.

Bones was in church. The red-faced preacher had raked back his thick gray hair and smiled. His lips parted over long stoblike teeth and his redveined cheeks knotted and his nose broadened. "Yesterday I invited a lost soul to come to church," he said. "'What are you

going to preach about, Preacher?' the man wanted to know. Heh heh." The preacher roared, "Sin, Brother!"

His strident voice was a scream. He shouted out of him that it was not he that spoke but the Holy Ghost that spoke through him. He pointed his finger like a pistol and godfright forked into the sanctuary. Bursts of lightning like gunfire splintered to sizzling fingers, seeking out accursed sinners. In dread for his life Bones bolted for the door.

In the black night outside the church a storm was raging. Lightning bolts fired down, splintered into shivering jags. He then found himself translated by dream change onto a bleak windswept hill in blowing sage. The sky was shattered into glowing fissures. Frogs croaked brekket brekket wivk wivk. A halo'd moon rode out of a black cloud and lighted a horned devil almost upon him. He screamed and the devil resolved into a ranging cow's soft face. Gratefully unmenaced by death and hell at last, he reached out to rub the cow's face, a friend lost like him. But the cow transmuted and his hand appeared to him touching his mother's breast. He was standing out in the hallway and she was stooped over peering into his eyes, her plump breasts sloped forward down the latticework nightgown like budding horns. She swiped his dream tears away and tilted a big smile in his face. "Don't you know your own mother?" She caught

his head between her breasts, one bulged on his cheek, one behind his ear. She kissed his forehead then pushed him toward his room. "Go back to bed. Do you want me to leave your door open?"

"No! Turn on the radio."

He plunged back into bed, still steeped in dreams. Willa Mae dialed him a station and tuned it to a whisper. He drifted off and the Gypsy, BZ, appeared in a dream. The sun was at her back, her smile was shaded. A wind blew wisps and hairstrays forward. He thought her half-divine, standing there.

Next thing he remembered was hearing the song that woke him. It'd made him think of Matthew, about whom he was writing his class essay. "I want a three page true story," Miss Shelley had said. He guessed his paper would run to ten pages. O but that was fine with her. She was partial to the long ones.

Daylight was scarce more than a tincture of gold on the parchment shade. He rolled his head sideways to see the clock on his desk: 5:30. He got up early, as often he did, to do his homework. His father had gone to open the store by now.

He went to the window and scanned the sky for signs of rain. A few idle clabber clouds drifted on a whey-blue sky. Another hour and the sun would burn the fog

away and warm the morning chill. He sat on the milk stool at the cable spool and took up a pen and began to copy out George Klappox's corrected sheets. And here he printed in small precise letters for the next hour.

--o--

I was six years old and halfway through the first grade when I started to Cassville Consolidated School. My father had just bought our store and service station and trailer park. A month later a man named James Motts, his wife Lo Emma and his son Matthew and Beth Ann the baby parked their trailer on our lot. He was an engineer working for the Altoona Dam. She took care of the two kids.

I met the boy out playing one cold day. From the day we bought the place I've had to work every day. My main jobs are to keep the place clean and the grass cut. I'd gone out that day to pick up the mess a pack of Gypsies had left behind. I always had to clean up behind the Gypsies. They don't feel at home till they trash the place and build campfires that burn holes in the grass. I picked up papers and trash and shoveled the campfire ashes into a wheelbarrow. I hauled it all off, leftover firewood too. I did all that and then there was just an old car seat left. When I came with the wheelbarrow to haul it off I found this new kid bouncing on it.

I said, "Kid, I've got to take it."

He said, "Why don't you leave it for me?"

So I said: "O.K. What's your name?"

He said Matthew and I told him mine. We talked awhile and he asked me if I could read. I said yes. He asked me if I could read hard books. I told him that my dad taught me to read when I was four and I was pretty good for a first grader. He said he was nearly four. He jumped up and ran in the trailer and came back with a fat book called Grimm's Fairy Tales. He opened the book on my lap to a story he wanted to hear and I read it to him. We were shivering in the cold and I told him he better go inside and he shook his head as far as it would go both ways and shouted: "Read!" I finished reading the story and told him Bye and he ran inside.

Next day the kid saw the schoolbus stop and came looking for me. We sat on the car seat and I read him another fairy tale while he snuggled against my side to keep warm. Then he wanted me to go in the trailer with him and watch the 5:00 serial. I told him I never went inside people's trailers. He ran off to the trailer and called his mom to the door and she called for me to come in. Most weekdays after that I read him a story everyday and we watched a serial. I learned all those stories by heart from reading them to him. He was a fine little

towhead. He was the spit of his mama, his mama said.

His folks never let Matthew play with the Gypsy kids that came. The Gypsies were dirty wild heatherns, going abby-jabby in English and gobble-gobble in Gypsy and lying every breath they took.

Twice Matthew and I climbed the pecan tree and I read him stories up there. I would lift him up on the first limb, hand up the book and climb up myself. Then I helped him up the higher limbs and climbed up and leaned to the trunk and read him a story while I held him on the limb. He would look around and look down and grin at me like we were daredevils. The third time his mother found us up the tree and said: "Come down out of that tree you pair of brats!" So then we went back to the old car seat.

George Klappox brought me a rabbit skin and I showed it to the kid. He asked me to get him one too, so I gave him mine. I told him to put it on his pillow, feel that soft fur on his face.

My favorite serial was called "Burn 'Em Up Barnes." Burn 'Em Up was this pilot in a biplane who fought against foreign spies trying to steal top secrets. It looked like the thugs murdered him every day, but next day we found out that Burn 'Em Up always had an inch to spare and seemed to rise from the dead. Take for instance that time

a spy murderer attacked Burn 'Em Up from behind and shoved him out a thirteenth story window and the crook grinned and snatched a briefcase full of top secrets. Now that's how the story ended that day.

Next day there was Burn 'Em Up hanging by his fingertips from a ledge. He flung up a foot on the ledge and mounted it and stuck his head back in the window and saw the crook whirl at the door and rush Burn 'Em Up who ducked his head in the window and the crook flew over his head and out the window screaming and whirling his arms like a man trying to fly as he pitched down to the street and top secret papers strung out of the flying briefcase and went whirling down the air. Burn 'Em Up hung his head out and looked down at the crowd gathering round the crushed corpse. He said, "I swore I would see you fried! Now I see you scrambled! But hell will do it for me! There's where they fry rotten eggs!"

Matthew would snug up under my arm when we watched those serials. When they were over he would try to get me to read some more. He would plop his book open on my lap and run his fingers under the words I taught him to read and say, "Once upon a time." Then I would start with the next word. Every afternoon he would wait for the school bus and come running when he saw me cross the road. He would shout: "Once upon a time! Once upon a time!"

He was the world's best little friend. But that was once upon a time. And once upon a time never comes again.

--o--

Bones wrote the song title for his last sentence. Part One ended there.

Then he slapped down his pen. He stood up and got dressed. Part Two was ready for Klappox who'd said he'd arrive at the store about 7:00. Bones looked at the clock: 6:30. He went into the kitchen, ate a biscuit and two sausage links and drank a glass of milk. He went into the toilet, looked in the mirror and finger-raked a part in his brown hair and narrowed his eyes at the mirror. "You writing fool!" he cried, then he tramped out the door.

--o--

He had come out on a morn when hardly a breeze stirred but leaves were trickling fast. The highway was dappled and soon covered from trees footed roadside. Leaves spun in the wakes of cars, spun from the rear wheels in little whirlwinds and licked down from trees in a particolored blizzard, an astonishing sight. Bones picked up red leaves and held them to one eye turned to the sun. Sunlight dazzled through leafcolor and made the scarlet lurid, the color of the harlot's cheek, decried by the preacher in church, wildly beautiful the boy

imagined.

--o--

George Klappox drove Flavil's Buick under the porch roof and got out. He flung out a wave to Flavil and opened the door and stepped into the store and declaimed, "Well, is this the promised heaven right here on earth? Our streets are paved with gold."

"Hello, George," said Bones.

Klappox glared round in the dimness. "Hello young'un." He found a cigarette and lit it. About fifty, he seemed younger, a thorny beard on his face, his thick blond hair awry. Ruddy cheeked, with eyes of palest blue. His nose was thin and his expressive nostrils paled when angry. He was known to some as a drunk and a loud-mouth and a pretentious fool. He assented to such slurs and was apt to insult himself in worse terms. He'd inherited a huge tract of woodland and a manor house. He never worked and spent profligately and so he was assumed rich.

He was a poet who had published three thin books and had written a few stories that had seen the light of day in magazines. He had the air of a man in ferment, whose best days were yet to come and he seemed ever consumed by some project. His drunks and flings he anatomized for the cheer of fellow hunters who gathered on winter Saturdays. Most of the men held him in great favor. To Bones

he was a Poet and deep Thinker and the boy hung onto his words. The ribald poet had been privatdocent to the boy since he was age six. To the boy he was a man of education in so many things. Questions he dare not ask at home he saved for the poet. And Willa Mae, odd woman, always seemed happy to see him.

Willa Mae came in from the back and beamed a smile. "Good morning, George. How is the Morning Glory of Northwest Georgia? You look a bit peaked. Why, you're whey-faced, George! You want me to fix you some breakfast?" The old kitchen remained complete from the time they'd lived in the storeback.

"Would you please?" Klappox turned to the youth. "Bones, please turn that radio off. I hate white gospel music. I'm sure God stops his ears."

"You should have stayed in bed, George," said Willa Mae.

"I would never have risen at this ungodly hour but I set my clock to meet with your son. I asked myself on the bedside an hour ago: 'Who is most important to whom: me to him or him to me?' I woke up a sleeping woman talking to myself."

"What does your dear mother say when you bring low-life women home?" asked Willa Mae.

"Willa Mae." The poet flourished his cigarette.

"When I brought my mother to my house to live I said,
'Mother, a dead weight has blind eyes!'"

Willa Mae laughed then said, "George, your heart is
a tumor! Don't teach Tullus any bad habits. He's hard
to live with now."

Klappox walked beside the counter and Bones pulled
out a chair for him and he sat.

"Thank you, Bones."

Willa Mae went to the kitchen and sat a skillet on
the stove and turned the gas-eye on. She took out a
square of smoked bacon and hewed rashers of thick bacon
and draped them across the hot skillet which sizzled and
spat and then she called out: "What have you been doing,
George? I know you don't work."

"I've been trying to write a great poem."

She laughed. "What makes you think you can do it?"

"Other fools have done it!"

"How do you go about writing a poem?"

"To write a poem you reduce yourself to pure sensi-
bility. Then you rise to highest intellection. You test
the heart by the head. Some fools reverse that."

"O my! What's it about?"

"Women. I've shown three faces of Eve. A black
widow; A white witch; And a whore at heart."

"Just listen to that George!" said Si Woody, coming

in the door with Joe Dupree. "He talks like he don't like women."

"I like women. They're half human like good dogs. Smart too."

"Ha!" shouted Willa Mae. "He slanders women cause he can't find one who will have him more'n one night."

The men laughed and Klappox nodded. "See there! What'd I tell you? Smart, I reckon! Hand me your papers, Bones."

"Here they are." He lay the sheets on the counter. Klappox set the papers below his eyes and began to annotate the margins.

Willa Mae brought bacon and eggs and set it before the poet. He set to with appetite, scribbling while he ate.

"Do you tell your teacher that George helps you with your papers?" asked Willa Mae.

"Sure. I fold all my copies and hand them in together. Teachers always ask me about Klappox. I tell them he writes poetry and drinks whiskey and raises cain."

"Good man! You nailed me. I raise cain when I'm able and hell when I cain." Klappox finished his breakfast and sipped his coffee. When Willa Mae's back was turned, he slipped a silver flask from his coat and tilted in an amber gurgle. He fired a cigarette and two plumes

of smoke curled from his nostrils and fogged the page upon which he scratched in manic fast script down the margin. He puffed his cigarette and began to speak low to Bones while he scrawled upon his sheets.

"You must understand details. If you want to know a thing well you study it close. It will ooze into your eyes. It'll tell you things. It'll show its nature to you. Here!" He flung open his notebook and scrawled inside the cover. "I shall write some words of the poet Hopkins in your notebook: 'What you look hard at, looks hard at you?' Carry yourself a magnifying glass. Be a sleuth. Sherlock a thing. Look up its ass. When you know a thing well its mystery deepens. Omnia exeunt in mysterium. 'There is nothing the absolute ground of which is not a mystery.'"

"George, don't you teach my boy no atheism," called Willa Mae.

The poet raised his voice. "My point is that there is a world to anatomize beneath our fingertips. But our words, like the world, abut on the Ineffable. A soul stands abashed and awestruck before the silence of the Abyss. Poets listen there for the dark stands tremulous with the unsaid. They interrogate that silence. You listen to me, Bones. You are my Plato."

Joe Dupree had to cut his ear to Klappox's spiel.

"It sounds like a jackass talking to a duncehead to me. I've heard it said that after you send a jackass to school he's still a jackass. Y'ever been called a jackass, Klappox?"

"O truly! Fools abound. But we poets are in fact true asses. Balaam's asses. Visions of the angel of the Lord come to us and we must endure floggings by Balaamites. We report our sightings of the Angel in verse. The rabble either laugh or puke their curse upon us."

"George, who won the Cassville football game last night?" called Ralph Leatherwood from the front of the store.

He might have asked for a speech. "Ballgame? Sports!? Don't ask me about sports! I haven't got a word to say about sports. Nor does Bones here either! He doesn't give a damn about sports except how to play them. This is one boy that does not collect bubblegum cards! Piss on sports! Its past is dead facts, its future pure speculation, and the game of the moment doesn't count if you're not playing in it!"

"Did anyone else tell you that you were full of crap?" said Ralph Leatherwood.

"Many fools!" Klappox rose and stepped to the door. "I get no transports from sports. It's those games we play in dead earnest that interests me. But every man

to his own taste," Klappox pointed his finger at Joe Dupree's cold stare and grinned, "as Joe Dupree says when he kisses his cow." Klappox opened the door and looked back. "Goodbye, Bones. Thanks for the coffee and breakfast, Willa Mae. You're a Christian woman." Klappox dropped out of the door and went to pick up his car from Flavil who'd been fine-tuning it.

Bones, in fact, followed the sport pages closely, though he did not collect bubblegum cards.

Joe Dupree scrubbed his corn teeth with a frayed twig of sassafras and stooped his head to squint at the lowslung foreign car that snarled and surged down the road. "Somebody ought to step on that fool's throat," he said.

--o--

Bones got on the schoolbus that morning and watched the crowded trailer park pass by the window. His mother was a Dutch woman and cleanliness was steeped into his nature and he despised the Gypsies for their dirt. He'd face that blighted park when the Gypsies left and scoop their offal up in a coalshovel and tilt it into a wheelbarrow and not touch it once. The trailer park was a rabble horde's camp of Gypsies who shuttled on from town to town. They dropped trash at their feet like the damned who know there's no tomorrow. He hated them all. Save

one. He shut his eyes and saw the Gypsy BZ and felt a sweet suffusion.

Thus he passed that morning from a hatred of Gypsies to deepsmitten fondness for one in particular. At school he stepped off the bus and Bill Matthews came up trembling and half-crying. One eye was turning blue and a red welt stood on his cheek. Matthews was a frail tubercular boy who yet spoke as bold as if an army stood at his back. "That goddamn Burkett knocked me down three times cause I called him a lowlife sonofabitch. Can you whip him in a fist fight?"

"I've seen him fight. He's slow. He's not very good. But if he ever gets on top of you, you're dead."

--o--

In class he waited his chance. Then he saw Jimmy Burkett stretch out his legs across the aisle. He got up and went to the pencil sharpener and dropped back down Burkett's aisle and gave him a sharp kick in the calf.

Burkett whirled and hissed curses and snatched a look at the teacher who had whirled and stood staring.

"What are your stumps out here in the aisle for?" demanded Bones.

Burkett whispered, "Gentry, your ass is grass!" Burkett nodded with finality as though the fact was nigh upon them.

"You reckon?" Bones ambled back to his desk.

"What's the matter with you?" asked Miss Shelley Oliver.

"Ask Bill Matthews what's the matter with him." Bones pointed across the room at his friend with black eye, skinned cheek, swoll lip.

She looked at Bill and at Bones and turned away with a worried look.

--o--

That day in line at the cafeteria Jimmy Burkett stepped out of the line and called out to Bones at back of the line.

"Gentry, meet me down at the trees by the road at recess. Don't bring nobody. Fight your own fight if you're not a kaird."

Bones feared to fight Burkett without a crowd. He was a sneak and he might try to throw him and straddle him and pummel him or smother him even.

And there stood Ellen Jones looking right at him with those big blue eyes that made him recall that Gypsy's black moons shining.

--o--

Bones sat at a table of boys. Terry Womack cracked a fart that fluted like a flat stone launched from a slingshot. Two boys jumped up and hauled him back from

the table to stand till his cloud of taint vaped away, his whilom friends meantime cracking wise and poking fun while he studied the naked pinewood rafters, the white fluff cloud out the high window that whitepatched the sun's eye.

--o--

Bones met Burkett in the grove of hardwoods, a wood's corner that edged the playground on the south side of the school.

Underweight by fifty pounds avoirdupois he knew he was an underdog. He knew that a handicap in one way might serve as advantage in another. For he was quick and strong and Burkett slow and scant of breath. A cigarette pack made an oblong print on his pant's pocket.

Bones said: "You asked me out. Hit me first."

Burkett swung his right fist at Bones' head but he ducked and countered with a left jab to Burkett's mouth.

"You missed," he said. "But I gave you credit for a hit."

He sighted between his bobbing fists at Burkett's ham fists hoisted beside his malign brute face and commenced pounding furiously, shooting left jabs, ducking, fading back, smacking body punches. He pummeled and slugged and jostled and thudded and woke up bruises about his eyes and yet he hardly budged that bulk. He found

Burkett easy to hit and easy to elude with nimble footwork. He knew he must elude all handigrips and not come under that dead weight like grave dirt on you. Horrors! He could not stand to be smothered! That was the World's Worst Thing. In desperation Burkett, panting like a gun-dog, tried to close and wrest him down, but dread lent him fury and he sidestepped and shot a blitz of blows into his face and faded fast and Burkett stumbled after him then stumbled stopped and stood there blowing hard. Then he lifted his hands beside his suety red-blotched face and then he sank and sprawled on the leaves, his wind blown, his face cut and bruised in half a dozen places.

Bones laughed. He borrowed a crack of Klappox's. "You piece of blubber! If two cannibals found you taking a nap in the jungle, the first one would say, 'Goddamn!' And the second one would say, 'God Bless!'"

Burkett panted and glared.

Bones drifted his gaze off and began to follow the trey of long-haired girls walking straight into the wind with their hair lashing. They seemed coming straight towards him. One was Ellen Jones who'd smiled at lunch and who was pale pink so unlike that Gypsy. He'd never spoke a word to her but he'd thought about it. If she came on he'd say How'd do? She swayed like a weed in the wind. He cocked his hand on his hip and hung his eyes rapt on

her.

Burkett stole up from the ground, and balled his ham fist and cocked it and exploded the assassin fist into Bones' unsuspecting gut.

"Ouf!"

Bones jerked down in reflex. Beads of spit ran on the lower lip and dropped. He made a fishmouth and erupted a spout of vomit WHOOSH! splash upon the leaves. His tearshot eyes magnified in his sight the lacquered leaves crawled with foodstuff. He shut his eyes and cradled his gut and sank beside his spilth and lay bleating out dry heaves, red spittle adrip from his mouth-corner. The heaves abated and he lay fetaled round his pain, mouth gaped and eyes aghast, his arm's cradling his shrieking gut. He feared something was burst inside him.

Jimmy Burkett looked at him laying there helpless and bowed in agony. Burkett turned and saw the three girls point and shout and start to run toward him and he struck out on a lateral path from the scene of his treachery. The running girls raced past his back.

He heard footsteps crashing in the leaves and opened his eyes and found a raven-haired girl from another class and Elsie Maynard and Ellen Jones, all crouched about him. They held papercups of Coke arattle with ice. He knuckled tears from his eyes and told them what'd happened. They

said they'd seen it from afar.

Ellen Jones lifted his hand off his stomach and pulled up his shirt and palmed ice to his breastpit and held it there till it melted then fished out more chunks and fed them into his mouth. They spoke in hushed tones in the presence of the injured boy. He wrenched himself up to sitting. He needed no help at all to stand, but six hands hauled him up, hands cupping his elbows, seizing one hammock and hooking belt loops and tugging him upright on his feet. He smiled about. "Thank you all."

"Hurrah!" shouted the girls. Fluttersome hands brushed clinging leaves away, flicked hair out of his eyes. Ellen Jones swiped back her gold locks and gazed on him with grave concern. Her eyes were two dots of skyblue, purloined from heaven. "You'd better go to the infirmary. You're sick."

He shook his head. "I won't be any better off there."

They fed him more ice and escorted him to the classroom.

He sat sick in his seat. He dropped his head onto his desk and conjured the face of that Gypsy, BZ.

--o--

Riding the schoolbus home that day he was still thinking about BZ the Gypsy. She'd arrived two weeks ago

and come into the store and bought a Coke and looked around and her eyes had lit on him in particular. Steady and unwavering and niggerblack, her eyes watched him. She stepped to his face. "Come with me," she said. He stared at her and took a long look. She stood taller than he. Her hair lolled like black snakes on her shoulders and dresstop. Her dress was deepcut and braless in Gypsy fashion. Down the yoke he could see a pair of rising swells. She had a bold pretty face, a bent nose but comely, strong bright teeth, silver coins dangling in her ears. Her purple dress was frayed and dirty and she stood barefoot.

All this the boy imbibed in a look of cool appraisal.

He looked about to see if he was being watched, then he looked back at her. Her eyebrows lofted a query. She nodded at the door. He amazed himself by nodding back. She went outside. He waited for a minute and stole out and found her standing by the door. She caught his hand but he snatched it back.

He did not allow his hand to be held. He abhorred handholding. Handholding was for sissies and queers. He was an absolute snob about it.

A crease tucked between her eyes. He saw the glint of caveat in her gaze. She spat a pellet of froth that pocked the dust. She then lifted her fist, knuckles up,

before his face in warning, then uncurled her fuckfinger and jiggled it in his face.

He swung his back to her.

"Gage!" she shouted.

"Go to hell!"

He thrust open the door and went back inside and slammed the door upon that Gypsy and upon his own stupidity.

"I should have known better," his lips twitched muttersome. "What can you expect out of a goddamn Gypsy?"

The earth spun once and she was back. Next night he was in the back of the store opening cases and pricing the canned food and stacking the cans on the shelves when a hand fell on his shoulder. He froze. He turned his head slowly and glared at that hand with nail paint gleaming and gold and silver rings holding rubies and turquoise.

She stepped in front of him. She smiled at the sullen smugfaced boy.

A pair of talons clenched up a knot between his brows. His grinchbrows glared.

Her hair was caught in a knot at her nape. She wore a yellow blouse with laces tied in shoulder-knots over her bare collarbones.

"Call me 'shit'," she said. "Call me 'asshole'. Call me 'whore'. Here!" She seized his hand and stood

up his middle finger. "Make the sign!"

He snatched back his hand.

She smiled. "OK? We're friends now, right?"

He turned his back on her and went back to work. He despised her with cold loathing. What a stupid girl! he thought. He wasn't fooled. Every Gypsy was a con artist. He wondered that she didn't bring a shill to insult him that she might play his savior. Almost he felt a touch of pity at such stupid hoaxes.

No one was about the storeback, just the two of them. While he worked she lingered, standing in the floor beside him. Then she sat on her heels beside him and fell to stacking cans in the shelves with him, her hands down the cardboard boxes among his own. He lifted at last his cloven-browed gaze. She beamed a smile at him. He blinked. Her face showed such evident delight that it seemed scandalous. That smile should not be seen in public. Hers was the smile of a soul in bliss. She was surely a devil. Rags on her back and half a thou in jewels. He couldn't help noticing that she looked fetching. Spite of his worst intentions, his knotbrows dissolved and he cracked the merest hint of smile.

She chinked two quarters under his nose. "Want a Coke, Boy? It's on me."

"'Bones' is the name."

"I know. I found out."

"What's your name?"

"BZ."

"That's no name. Those are initials."

"BZ," she repeated and went off to the front of the store. She brought him back a Coke and they sat on the last two cases sipping.

"Come outside."

"When I put up these two cases, I will. Wait for me."

"I'll wait."

"Outside."

She looked at him. She smiled and tilted up her chin. "Outside," she said. She stood up and went out.

He stacked the last two cases in the shelves and went outside and found her sitting on the righthand bench. She stood up and took his hand. He took it back. Their eyes met, sober and intense. He lifted her hand and curled it inside his elbow. Their eyes met again. They smiled and walked on out to her trailer.

Out the door spilled an oblong light on the grass. A song in Romany, a guitar and a man's voice came from the door. He sat by the pecan tree and waited while she went inside and brought out coffee and squares of fudge. She smoked a cigarette. Her fingerrings and earrings

winked in the semidark. The moon was a scythe stuck in a tree limb.

She lowered her head sideways on his knee and rolled up her eyes at him then leaned back upright and lolled her head side to side and clapped her hands and sang along with the voice coming out the trailer door. Now what was he to make of that? he wondered.

He told her the poem Lasca. Her black eyes beheld him.

"That's a long poem!" She gave him smirking appraisal.

She walked him home and made the dark thrilling. They stopped at the edge of his yard. She lay a hand to his left cheek and kissed his right. She turned with a hand toss and he watched her lessen in the dark.

--o--

That night and every night since she'd walked him home. She leaned to his face and laughed with such a naked look of affection that she both thrilled and frightened him. That she was a Gypsy troubled his heart. She was older than he. She was illiterate. Her bare feet had never stepped inside a school.

--o--

Riding there on the schoolbus, he wondered if she would meet him at the store today.

It was one of those rare autumns when the leaves fall all in a day. The wind had risen and the leaves gnashed the wind and everywhere bare limbwork spidered the sky.

The schoolbus braked to a stop. Out the window he saw the Gypsy watching from her trailer. He stood up and stepped down the aisle and dropped to the ground and crossed the road in front of the bus. He saw the Gypsy fling up an arm and flutter her fingers at him. Then she flipped her hand over and the fingerwave now beckoned. She ran up to him and stopped and jerked her head behind her.

"Let's go!"

"I'll have to go ask my dad." He went in the store and asked Flavil if he could go with the Gyp and said besides he'd been sick today and Flavil pointed to the door and said, "Go! Tomorrow you work."

He ran back out to meet her. He'd kept his books in case the store was closed when he came back. They trod beyond the pine grove and stopped in a random spot just inside the wood's edge and sat on the leaves. Bones dropped his books and cast a look at the striate view beyond the treeboles.

She slipped a hand into a placket and brought out a little bottle, ounce or so, of Jack Daniels whiskey. "I

brought you a present."

He took the bottle in his hand and turned the label before his eyes with a discriminating air. "Popskull," he said. "'Hooch' my dad calls it." He slit the seal with thumbnail and unscrewed the lid and turned up the phial and drank half and held out the bottle. "For you," he breathed. She took it and drained the bottle and took a deep breath and looked curiously at him, panting open-mouthed. His eyes grew huge.

"Aaaarp!"

"What a belch!" said the Gypsy.

"There'll be puke in the next one!" he panted. The swallow of whiskey went off like a depth charge in his stomach. He now felt noonday's agony at his breastpit where the thug's hamfist had buried his malice.

His bruised stomach clenched like an atomizer bulb crushed inside a fist and he whirled his head aside and a slash of vomit burst on the air and struck the leaves like sudden rain. He dropped to his hands and knees and vomited and then heaved while spittle beaded on his lips and drizzled steady drops.

The Gypsy crouched beside him, dropped her hand to his back. "I'll be back. I'll bring you something for your stomach." She strode off fast, bare feet crunching on the newfallen fronds and he lay on his side and tilted

his head sideways upon that sea of leaves.

His eyes asquint with pain, he stared off in the woods. Elves eyes gleamed out of the choppy sea of gold and red. He fingered the tender viscera within. His tears made punctual taps on a blackoak leaf beneath his cheek. Before his eyes he saw spittle from his vomit sliding down dry leaves lacquered agleam like the leaves his class collected and shellac'd. He looked at a caterpillar's glyph scrawled on a black cherry leaf adrench with his spilth. "An oblong bead is a tear," he thought. "A tear looks like a drop of tallow froze on a candlestick. Or like a woman's droopy breasts. They are not ripe until they droop. They're green."

He slipped out his pocket watch and looked at it. "It's a half mile there and a half mile back: I'll time the Gyp."

He cradled his pain. He might have swallowed slivers of glass. A cloud cowled the sun and the woodshade dimmed. He distinctly saw fairies dancing aring. They vanished and littlefolk bore small torches of leafglint, to what end he couldn't guess. Dwarves came and sat with him and blew on flutes of birdbone.

A treefrog stopped peeping and he listened out. Then he heard her barefeet shushing in the leaves. He checked his watch: thirty minutes she'd been gone.

She stooped beside him, a glazed and thickrimmed crockery mug in her hand. "Sit up! This will help you."

He sat up and looked into the mug. She had fetched back coffee laced with cream. No steam rose. He saw the rainbow flash in two fat beads of grease. All his instincts told him that this dirty cup of coffee would surely kill him. But she'd brought it to him so he'd pour it down his throat and see what happened.

He sipped it down slow. Her fingers pattered at his hindbrain. He drained the cup. His angry stomach didn't knot a fist. He smiled into the empty cup. She'd walked a mile to bring him a cup of coffee. He lifted his eyes. "Thank you."

She smiled and caught his head over the ears and lowered it to her thightop. She dropped a hand on his cheek. He was tempted to turn his mouth into that palm and put a kiss there that later she might lift to her cheek.

"Good pillow," said Bones.

"Ha!" She pulled his hindhead into her groinsink. His scraped cheek lay against her belly.

They lingered thus. A druidical peace came over him. And then bliss stole into him that was cognate to that infusion of euphoria, that warm drift, that settled upon him in the hands of barbers and shoeblacks who

sought for a precious perfection while the boy reveled in swarming gooseflesh from gently radiant currents of volupcy.

Dark seeped in. Cricketsong filled the air.

He watched her face between her breasts. The black motes of her eyes bent upon him. Her hands cradled his hindhead. Her groinrift was just off his near cheek. He smiled. So near and far. Thought of the paper kept invading his bliss.

He said: "I'll read you my paper tomorrow when I've finished with it."

She said, "We're leaving in the morning."

"Well hellfire!" How stung he felt! Her words had blasted bliss. A gust to a match. He sat up. "Think you'll ever be back?"

"I don't think so. We never travel this way. Except for this one time."

He listened to the night ziggers. "Well, I'm sure sorry. I'm sorry as hell!"

He felt her lips seethe upon his cheek. She lit a cigarette and opened her cottonmouth and sucked down the ball of smoke and blew it to the treetops where the wind sang among the dead leaves.

He wondered would she miss him too, being a Gypsy to whom Goodbyes were nothing. Well, he must go now, as

though Goodbyes were nothing to him too, and write that paper. But he knew he'd not forget for a week or two the bliss to be found inside her hands, upon her lap. Nor that the Gyp had walked a mile to bring him a cup of coffee. That struck him odd. Last thing he'd expected.

He gathered his books and papers. "I've got to go home. I've got to finish writing that paper."

"I'll walk you."

They stood together and he saw her teeth shine and her face beam. He took it for a smile of Adieu. He grinned. Her hand nestled like a small bird in his elbow-crook and he started off with her.

They went from the wood's edge and through the pines across a fallow field and down the slope to the trailer park and across U.S. Highway 41 and through the sagefield. They stopped in the field and her hand dropped from his arm. She always stayed close as a keeper and indeed he sensed that custodial instinct that inhabited Gypsy girls who with dry breasts nursed their baby brothers to sleep.

"Go back with me," she said.

"I've got a paper to write." With deep misgiving and regret he declined her offer for his gut hurt and the paper was due tomorrow and waiting for its rewrite.

"I hate school!" she shouted a whisper.

"You've never been to school," he said.

She seized his hand to her cheek. "Ha!" she said. She framed a Last Smile all teeth and eyes and leaned and kissed his cheek and turned back up the trail. He stood holding his books and watched her go off in the dark. He'd wanted to turn the other cheek. Attired all in patchwork she could beam a smile that so became her rags that they might set a rage in fashion. She looked back and saw him standing there and laughed again. And then she stopped and he watched her debate coming back. "If she comes back, I'll go with her," he spoke aloud. Not loud enough. She went on with misgiving, casting back looks for a sign.

She blew in off the road a few weeks and made friends and then she stepped off into the dark for the last time to be fabled by days that peel from calendars and blow away like leaves in a gust. Till he called her back from dead days, brought her back from never never land, that Gyp who'd borne him coffee half a mile and in whose lap he'd found bliss Once Upon A Time. The hind-head would recall that firm yield of her thigh, his face recall how she traced his features carressingly with her forefinger and felt the balls of his eyes flicker through his closed lids.

Bones turned and went on to the house. He went into the kitchen. "Hello Mom." She was tending a cake of

cornbread baking. He told her about the fight and then he told her about the Gypsy. "I was out with that Gypsy, BZ. I got sick and puked my guts up and that Gypsy brought me a cup of coffee. Carried it a halfmile and never spilled a drop. Outside of the cup was dry and clean. That coffee was that close to the brim." Bones pinched a quarter-inch on the air. "If she spilled a drop she spit it back."

"Well, I guess there ain't many friends would do that. Seems like coffee would make you sicker."

"It was half cream."

"Well, how do you feel now?"

"My stomach hurts." He fingered the pit of his stomach. "Right here. I'm going to my room."

"I'll call you when supper's ready."

"No Mom! It'll make me sicker'n I am!"

"Stand still a minute!"

She came with a fingerswipe of lard and smeared it on the scraped skin of one cheekbone. "I hate for you to fight. I hate it! You come in so bruised and banged up."

"Yeah? Well, how do I look when you get mad? My eyes slapped out and my back striped. I look a lot worse when you get through with me, Mother!"

"O hush! You ask for it!"

Willa Mae stood and turned back to the stove and picked up a ladle and looked at it and set it down and shook her head and her eyes flashed lights and her hands plead to the air.

"My boy! I have worried more about you than any of the others in my life! Than all of the others in my life!"

Bones glowered and swung his back to her and went to his room.

He lay cradling his gut, folded crooked on his maplewood bed. He was morose, abashed, dejected. He whimpered with pain while his fingerballs palped the tenderness in his gut. His heart was a ripe pustle at thought of Burkett's sneakblow. Then at thought of that Gyp it was a thing blowing sighs. He might yet rise and go find her. His heart nodded Yes Yes Yes. But he was proud and in the grip of a lingering hate that only wished to make tender feelings suffer more. So he nixed the idea. Was his hate stronger than his love? He felt bereft. He savored the haunt of the girl. She was so palpably beside him that he once reached for her. Gone. He shut his eyes. And opened them. He rose up from bed in a rage and flung himself upon the cables pool and snatched the milkstool between his legs. He snatched up his pen, sorted his pages and notes and started scribbling

fast, revelling with gusto in the violence of the tale.

--o--

George Klappox had been present at the store when the trailer burned so he too was an eye-witness and had added some details of his own to the story, quoting himself by name or adding (K) after his own sentences. He had scribbled some different verbs, added a few details, and set the stolen song title to the end of Part Two as well.

Klappox wrote a squiggly scrawl. Bones would have given him a C- for penmanship. He scribbled inserts slantwise down the margin and dragged out rattails to the point of insertion. Bones couldn't read all his notes, but since the points of objection were underlined he crafted his own solutions.

The boy did not now stitch his tale with an indifferent hand. He added gory supposing about Burn 'Em Up Barnes. His pen spake the King James. He scribbled in brooding outrage. He tried to slake a bloodthirst. He was sure that Jimmy Burkett was the same ilk as Burn 'Em Up's enemies.

He wrote into the story of Burn 'Em Up that the criminals scourged the innocent. They were after secrets of the Atom Bomb. They murdered innocent folk ruthlessly in their pursuit of atomic secrets. They were like

Herod's henchmen who butchered infants by the thousands to get at Baby Jesus, the one they missed. Burn 'Em Up rendered back to hell its own. Burn 'Em Up wanted to see them all die. He regretted that they had but one life to give for many murders. He shot them between their snake eyes. He carved them like a Christmas turkey. He handed out tickets to hell. He kept gravediggers busy. He blasted at least one commie rat a day. He wanted to see every one of them die as stone dead as that featherless buzzard who flew out the window and flapped like a plucked chicken and brained himself on the street. Burn 'Em Up craved to smite them all like a hammerblow out of hell.

Having swelled the end of Part One, he began to rewrite and then to copy out each sheet of Part Two.

--o--

A dozen or fifteen kids waiting for the schoolbus were packed in my dad's grocery store on February second, 1964. The thermometer outside the door read -05°. The wind made your eyes water then froze the tears on your face.

Homer and Jethro were singing a song on the radio and my ear was stuck to the speaker for I was trying to memorize the words:

"Mamma Mia,
I love your pizza
Sprinkled o'er
With redhot peppers
And anchovies,
And mushrooms too
It makes delightful eeeatza. . ."

The next sound I heard was the door blasted open into Waldo Dupree's face which sent him sprawling and Lo Emma Motts burst in and screamed: "My trailer's on fire! My babies are inside!"

Dad's mouth dropped and he leaped for the door. A thunder of feet hammered as the crowd bolted out the door and raced round the garage and grease rack and saw the whole front of the trailer blazing already, red and blue flames licking up through the pecan tree.

Here is what happened:

Lo Emma did not want to take the stove's gastank out into the cold and fill it there as she was supposed to do. Instead she went outside and got the gas can from under the trailer and took the gas can back inside and tilted a stream into the stove's tank. But the stove was on, the jets spewing, each about a matchstick flame. Then the flames leaped the fumes and jumped to the can and Lo Emma dropped the can and sprang back. Gas spilled on the floor between her and Matthew and a sheet of flame sprang up in her face and she fell backwards out the door

and climbed to her feet watching the door fill with flame and cried, "Omigod!" and ran to the store on a twisted ankle.

--o--

By the time we got to the trailer orange flames were climbing in great sleazy licks like hearts of cedar burning. The trailer inside was paneled in shellac'd pinewood that burned like tinder.

Matthew inside called out, "Mommy," and his mother screamed, "Run to the back, Matthew!" He was in the front of the trailer. The littlest child was cribbed in back.

My dad got this terrible look on his face, like he was ready to charge hell itself. I knew then that he was going to go through that open front door pouring flames and smoke. I screamed, "Daddy don't!" and my mother screamed and we grabbed him and my dad flung us off and took a run and jumped straight through the fire and then flames gushed out the door with a Whoosh and Dad was blown through the air with his hair and clothes on fire and pitched on his back. But he jumped up and took off running to the garage. Then he came running back with the axe and knocked the back door agawp with two blows and snatched it off and jumped inside through a cloud of smoke and felt blindhanded for the crying baby. He came

out of the smoke with the year old baby girl, Beth Ann, and handed it to my mom who ran to the store with it. Dad's hair was singed off and his face was burned red and his clothes were smoking like a devil's, but the baby was fine. She was saved by one minute for the next minute flames snaked out the back door.

Flakes of crisped ash and sparks and smoke all spun up a roaring whirlwind. Half a mile up the blue sky yonder you could see the soot and ash. The flames soared blue against the blue and save for their ripples seemed gone out.

The school bus stopped and all the kids ran and got on except me. The bus window's were filled with their faces.

The water in the faucet in front of the trailer was frozen up but George Klappox said it would have been like trying to piss out hell to turn a garden hose on that inferno.

Flames went shooting up through the tree. The fire roared like a monster feeding. Neighbors came running. A crowd gathered round.

While my dad was rescuing his sister, Matthew kept crying: "Mommy! Mommy!"

Lo Emma kept screaming for Matthew to run to the back of the trailer but his voice was coming right out

of the fire. Then Matthew's screams stopped. Lo Emma called again and then listened. And then a scream blared out of her face and she dropped like the sudden dead.

George Klappox, who'd been eating breakfast my mother cooked at the store, lifted Lo Emma up to sitting and wrapped his coat around her and clasped her shoulders.

"It's over now. He feels no pain," Klappox kept saying to her. Klappox said that, right then, there was not one word in the world, not in the Bible even, nor in Shakespeare that could give her any solace.

She opened her eyes and then her mouth fell open. You could have stood an egg in it. She looked like she was screaming but just soft dying sounds came out. Her scalded eyes were big as birdeggs and her cheeks were tearglazed and the flames were jumping on her eyes and cheeks. Klappox said she looked like her brain was on fire and licking out her eyes.

Then the roof, just ashes now, pitched down and the flames jumped higher and bluer and twice taller than the trailer. A raven was keeping warm by the chimney on Joe Dupree's roof. Then it launched into flight behind the fire and melted and rippled across the blue flames.

Elder Jones stood wringing his hands. "It visits the young as well as the old! It comes to us all! It

comes to us all!"

"Knock it off you goddamn cryptkeeper!" said Ralph Leatherwood.

Spectators loitered about with gauzey breath and shook their heads and spoke queitly and scrubbed their hands and held them toward this cremation. (K)

Lo Emma's husband, James, came home from work. He put his arm round his wife and stood looking at the trailer burn. She buried her face in his neck and howled while he stood and gazed and never cried nor spoke a word. Then he went into the store and called his kinfold and told them that his kid was dead and his trailer burning.

A fire truck rumbled in when the trailer was just a jumble of ashes. They unloaded a hose and sprinkled the ashes.

The fireman stepped up and looked at the stove. There was a warning on a warped brass plate bradded to the stove lid. You could still read plain where the red letters had been.

DANGER
NEVER FILL TANK IN STOVE
ALWAYS TAKE TANK OURDOORS

The fireman pointed at the sign. "Look at that," he said. "It says the same thing twice. That's cause it's doubly dangerous to fill a stove with white gas. It'll blow up in your face."

They found Matthew facedown on the sofa. I snuck close to see him good. Matthew was charred to the bone clear through except for half his face and his belly that was melted to the sofa. His head was cooked and his skull shone white through the crispy ash. His face was a skeleton's. His eyes were empty holes. The fireman showed me the little white calcium pebbles the size of okraseed that used to be his eyeballs. His nose and mouth was burnt off. His skin was peeled like paint from the bone. His mouth stood open with his dying cry. (K) His backbone and ribs showed. They had to sift the ashes for his hands and feet.

Next day I sifted some ashes myself and found a bunch of coins with their faces melted off and a few of Matthews' hand bones they'd missed.

When I'm out around that tree I often remember Matthew. He was the world's best little friend. Sometimes I see him running at me shouting those words I taught him to read. But that was once upon a time. And once upon a time never comes again.

--o--

Bones finished copying the story and numbered the pages. He suddenly felt very sleepy. He snapped off the gooseneck lamp and found his bed in the dark and crawled onto that nightraft and let the tide take him asea. . .

The redfaced preacher grinned his cheeks into red knobs before the boy who stood solemnly as if arraigned in court and the preacher clasped up a black Bible and thrust it in the boy's face, its red silk page marker V-notched at the tip and hanging out like a crushed serpent's tongue. And then the gospeler opened his mouth to hail the sinner. . .

--o--

CHAPTER II

ISADORA

One morning on the school bus Bones saw the despised and gloating visage of Tommy Cline pushing toward him in the busaisle. A smirk spread on the brute face of the felon who'd beat him. A black girl stood in the aisle and Bones jerked her Plonk! into the seat beside him.

"Sit with me!" he said.

"I will if I want to," she said. She seemed to want to.

He took up her hand. "Be my guest."

"Black pussy," grinned down Tommy Cline. "Got ye a nigger."

"Yeah, he got one," said the black girl. "What yo got? I bet it's runnin' in de woods wid its tail tuck ovah its asshole."

Tommy Cline lifted a fuckfinger and Bones laughed and the black girl looked at him and laughed. The black girl lost her smile. She watched him. He looked out the window. When he looked back at her she was still watching him.

She spoke to him. "You always make de A in English."

He shrugged and looked out the window. He knew her name was Isadora. Never before had he spoke a word to her. He recalled what he knew of her. She had failed

one year in school then failed a second year when rheumatic fever settled in her kidneys. Now she stood six foot tall among five-footers. She was back in health and some said she could outrun anybody in school. She'd clocked faster time than any boy on the track team and none would race her and face defeat by a girl. On Field Day she'd beat all girl runners from four schools. She'd won the hundred yard dash and the four-forty and the mile. At school Bones got off the bus and went his separate way to the same class.

Bones studied the black girl in class that day. He reflected that brains or their lack were hard to sort in her. She had an odd mind that darted quick as an eye-blink. She spoke nonsense but it often had the shimmer of an insight. Bones suspected she was more wit than half-wit.

Tall and slender and rondured of breasts and bottom, she was a sooty Afric face with a purple mouth. Her hair was short as a sheared sheep's wool and kinkfuzz covered her small neat head that looked hand shapen. She turned in her seat and looked directly at him and smiled. He dropped his gaze onto his book. She was unselfconscious of any word she spoke and she'd make inane cracks and her classmates would leer at her for a fool and she would nod her head up and down at them like she alone comprehended

truth. Bones admired such brass. She could not be bothered to argue any point. She seemed never to think the same thought twice. Her flighty brain was off already pursuing some new idiocy.

Next afternoon he mounted the bussteps and heard his name called. He saw her waving from the back of the bus. She was holding an empty seat beside her. Bones slipped past the crowd in the aisle and she scooted next to the window and he pitched down beside her.

"Hello."

"Drop de 'O'."

"Why?"

"We git report cards in two weeks, an' I'm goin' to flunk English. I got two papers to write ovah. Made an F on both of 'em. Hammontree say he gif me my last grad an' let it stand. If I make A, he gif me A. If I make F he gif me F. But if I flunk English, I flunk de seventh grade. An' I'm not stayin' in dat room no mo'. I'll stay home. I'll quit school. I flunk school. Lookit you! Dem others! Y'all all little kids."

"Do you have the essays you failed?" asked Bones.

She nodded.

"Let me see them."

She took the folded themes from her notebook and handed them to him. Her themes were about her two

brothers. Each had been in a gunfight. Joel, the mild-mannered one, had shot a white man in a shootout between four white men and four black. Riff, the hot-head, had been murdered himself, sparing an inch and the lucky angle of the shot.

"These themes aren't but a page long! They should be at least three pages long. Better yet five or six."

"I'm up shit creek." She shook her head despondantly.

"Listen, when I was in the third grade I never much brought any homework home. Dad made me write two pages a day. Then George Klappox started helping me with that. Now I'm in the sixth grade and he still helps me every week. He scratches up my papers and makes me write them over if he doesn't like them."

"I know dat George Klappox. He ain't got a lick o' sense."

"My mom says he's insane. She says they have lunatics down at Milledgeville Asylum who've got more common sense. He's my best friend. There's nobody in Georgia can write like that man. Listen, I'll tell you what do! Come to the store tonight and we'll write your papers. I'll call up Klappox to meet us."

"O I'll do anythin'! I got to pass! I jus' got to! I'll not stay in dat room no mo'!"

"Calm your nerves. I'm going to help you."

"I'll kiss you if you do!"

Bones glowered at her. "No! You! Won't!"

--o--

Bones phoned Klappox and Klappox phoned a girlfriend and said he'd pick her up an hour late. An emergency had arose. Klappox came to the store and sat inside talking to Flavil. Bones sat on the doorstep waiting for Isadora. He saw her coming up the trail stepping out of the dark.

Bones stood up and called inside to Klappox: "Here she is!"

She crossed the highway and stepped into the doorway and tilted her shoulder to the jamb and stood hiploose. She smiled about.

Klappox raked his fingers back through his thick blond hair. "Come to me, my little abecedarians," he said.

"What'd he call us?" asked Isadora.

"Beats me," said Bones. "One of his jawbreakers."

Bones and Isadora sat down across the table from him. "The Pale and the Ethiop," he said. He started to scribble down the margins of her paper. A cigarette hung in his lips. He thinned his left eye against corkscrews of bluish smoke. Such seriousness of Klappox over his own child's words had always driven Bones to strive hard over his sheets before showing them to the Poet who

reminded him of the priest who dropped in, his kind smiles alluding to certainties beyond himself. Klappox sipped coffee and set it on the table. He eyed each of them and a grin lurked in his mouth corner. His eyelids tightened. His rapt blue eyes gleamed in their sockets.

"Listen to me. You should imagine that you're telling a story to your worst enemy. The story you tell him is the last thing on earth he wants to hear. You just saw his wife raped or his mother. And she loved every second of it. Gave her rapist his best whiskey and asked for more. A dirty story but get my point? You must tell it well, pile on vivid details till it kills him dead in his tracks. Every word is a hell-screach to his ears. You want to focus his attention on the details. Each new detail is another hammerblow that drives the stake into his heart. And remember, it's the details that kill."

Klappox put down his pen. "I've got to go now. Bones will scratch this up for you." Klappox rose and walked to the door.

"Thanks, Klappox," said Bones.

Klappox tilted to the jamb and spoke back over his shoulder. "Joel's story needs an introduction. Take down a few words, Bones."

"Gotcha!" Bones snapped up a pen.

The Poet looked out into the dark. "It was a

sweltering evening. The first crickets had just started zigging. Dusk was yielding to dark. The fullmoon rode high. The air was filled with warning buzz. Fireflies flashed caution lights. The glowworm in the grass, with her drop of moonlight, vamped the moon above. Eight uncommon fools trod the back road that night, half drunk and dead to all this. Four black men came upon four white men walking the other way. One of the whites had four pints of illegal whiskey in a sack. There had been six pints. The blacks bore liquor in their bellies."

"Start out Joel's story that way. Put my initial after that. Help her shape the rest of it, Bones." He lit a cigarette and looked at Isadora. "You going to pass, girl. Bones and me ain't never flunked a paper yet." He dropped from the stoop and stepped out of sight.

"Tell your lady friend thanks for waiting!" shouted Bones.

"Will do," Klappox called back out of the dark. A door slammed. His car started with a roar and he gunned off toward Cartersville.

Bones wrote out the pages then gave them to Isadora. She took the themes home and copied them out in a neat script. Next day she gave them to Bones to read at lunch time in the cafeteria. He jotted in a few marks of

punctuation and handed them back to her.

"Hammontree will say you didn't write these. Save all those work pages to show him. Go on, hand the papers to him now." Bones nodded toward Mr. Hammontree two tables over. She went up to him and held out the themes and he took them and grinned up at her.

"Riff," he said, sifting the pages. "And Joel. Dinner reading," he said. "If they're good they'll stimulate my appetite. If not, I'll lose it." He began to read while he ate.

Bones and Isadora watched him clean his tray while he flipped the pages. Then he set his chin in his palm and gazed at the two of them.

--o--

RIFF

My hot-head brother called Riff was dealing cards. The man across the table said he was dealing himself cards from the bottom of the deck and he came up with a gun and Riff dipped his hand for a .32 in an ankle holster and jumped up but his knees caught the under-table and he pitched backwards as the man stood and fired. All three men at the table ran out the door and got in a car and tore out.

The bullet struck the base of the breast-bone as Riff toppled backwards and sheared upward through the left chest boring a hole under the skin that would have gone clear through him if he'd been hit dead on. Then it struck his collar bone and stopped dead, and him sprawled on the floor thinking he was dead. He sat up and saw he wasn't dead and lit a cigarette. Then he jerked the phone off the table and

called an ambulance. Then he sat back against the wall and rubbed his shoulder. He felt the bullet under the skin and inserted a knife blade and squeezed it forth.

"I don't need no doctor," he said to the policeman. "I done operated on myself."

He stood up and put the bullet that was mashed like a fat quarter in the officer's hand and dipped his head like he was bowing deep and pitched on his head in a pool of blood. The ambulance men put him on a stretcher and hauled him out.

At the hospital they sewed up his chest and shoulder and the intern was about to sew up his forehead he'd cut in the fall when Riff said: "Let me do that. I can cut out bullets and I can stitch a wound. Give me that needle and thread." He sewed two stitches looking in the mirror held by the lawman while the intern advised. Then the intern took back the needle so he wouldn't lose his job and Riff said to the intern, "Take them two stitches off my bill."

"I swear I will," said the intern. The lawman had been laughing all the time.

Three days later Riff sat back in the same chair he was shot out of, a small blue light making a blue spot back in the window, meaning he was at home. A pretty girl in a tight dress was tossing her hair and trotting drinks to the table and Riff was back flipping round a new deck to men who tried to make a partner out of blind chance. (K)

--o--

JOEL

It was a hot evening. The first crickets had just started zigging. Dusk was yielding to dark. The night was filled with warning buzz. Fireflies were flashing yellow lights. The glowworm in the grass, with her drop of moonlight, vamped the moon above. (K)

Eight uncommon fools trod the road that night, half drunk and dead to all this. Four black men came upon four whites. One of the whites carried four pints of illegal liquor in

a sack. There had been six pints an hour before. The blacks bore liquor in their bellies. Racial insults were paid out by both parties then shouted out and then shouted back.

There were guns in the air then shots then a sudden scramble for the roadside ditches and for a minute four guns blazed across the road. A man, stone deaf, walking along there would have thought those muzzleblasts were fireflies just before gunshots riddled him with bullet-holes. Then it got still.

A white man called out: "Hey, we got one dead. How you?"

A black man called back: "We got two hit!"

The white said: "Let's hang it up."

Joel called out: "You jes' stick that gun down your pocket and step out. Show your palms."

The blacks and whites all climbed out of the ditches.

Joel said, "We shouldn't have fought, but we did it. Now we don't want to get no time."

After the shootout no insult was muttered. They all eyed each other, sullied and wild-eyed. They lit up cigarettes. A white man produced a pint bottle from a sack and passed it among the whites. He produced another bottle and offered it to the blacks. "You fellers drink?" he said.

They sent the least drunk man among them to call an ambulance. The rest all sat about getting drunker and pouring booze on the bullet holes of the wounded men.

It was my brother Joel's gun that killed the white man, the law said later, for they took a .38 slug out of his brain. He plead self-defense and the jury turned him loose.

The white men at the trial did not blame the blacks. They admitted they shot first but they said the blacks pulled guns first. The blacks admitted that was true.

The judge boomed out from the bench. "Why couldn't you pass the bottle and smokes before the gunfight?" The jury acquitted my brother and the white men shook his hand in the courtroom. So the Cartersville newspaper said that few men had come by a hard lesson dearbought.

The next afternoon, five minutes before the last bell, Mr. Hammontree gave back all theme papers with grades circled in red. Isadora, beaming her choppers, flashed two 'A+'s at Bones. He held up his 'A'.

The bell clamored in the hall and students pitched for the door.

Mr. Hammontree spoke out: "I want to see Tullus and Isadora. Doobie tell the bus driver to wait for them."

Isadora and Bones went forward and faced the teacher across his desk.

"Isadora, I gave your papers A+ because they're worth it, but I didn't put those grades by your name. Tullus, you wrote those papers."

"O, no, I didn't, Sir. She wrote them herself. I just helped her rewrite them a couple of times. Show him those work sheets, Isadora."

Hammontree shuffled the sheets, peering at them.

"My, my! Well this is strange indeed. Your poet friend has taken a hand I see. When you help a body you pull out all the stops, don't you, Bones? Ha ha ha. But it's still too much your work and too little hers. But it's good, it's good." He eyed them quizzically then laughed and slapped his thigh. "Keep it up! Help her write them all. But turn in your scratchwork. I want to see all your sheets, the same way you do with

yours and Klappox's papers, Bones."

Hammontree opened his gradebook. "Come around here, Isadora. I want you to see this." Isadora went around and looked over his shoulder and he scratched the two F's and wrote in two A+'s. Hammontree kicked back his chair and flung up his arms and cried out. "Maybe she'll learn more English from you than from me, Professor! Ha ha ha! Go on! Get out!"

Isadora followed Bones into the deserted hallway and slipped her arm inside his. He stopped and looked at her. Her white teeth gleamed along her purple lips. Her smile shimmered all over her face. Her black eyes gleamed. "You saved me! You did it, Boy!"

Bones smiled and shrugged.

Her lips tightened over her teeth. Her cheeks dimpled. The taut lips quivered against splitting. She drifted her face up close to him, plush mouth mobile and pouted and tilted close, made threat and posed imminent and he forgot to breathe waiting for her to touch down. Her lips poised tightly then suppressed laughter which trembled in her throat burst from her lips into his face and he took breath again.

"Come on," he said, "the bus will leave us."

"I don't care if it leave me," she said, "if it leave you too."

For a few moments Bones considered suggesting that they leave their armloads of books in their lockers and run home together. She was faster of course, but he was sure for the distance. Then he saw them running, in his mind's eye, paleface boy, sooty Afric maid, running in the face of some hard looks through the windshields of oncoming cars and qualms butterfly'd his stomach.

"I'll race you to the bus," he said.

She beamed at him and bowed her head and swung it back and forth. "Ain't no way I'm gonna pass you up."

--o--

CHAPTER III
THE PALE AND THE ETHIOP

The last bell rang and Bones walked round to the schoolbus and got on. He saw Isadora in a seat near the back of the bus and crowded past aislestanders and she swung over and he sat beside her.

Felicia shouted outside the window: "Isadora, I brought your books from the gym!"

He saw her eyes through the glass.

"Hi, Bones," called Felicia.

"Hello, Felicia."

Felicia carried two armloads of books. One armload was Isadora's. She called out: "You're going to have to reach out here and get them, Isadora. I can't lift them that high."

Isadora stuck her knees into the seat and leaned her head and arms out the window and caught the stack of books and lifted them.

"Get your bottom out of my face, you Hottentot!"

He'd read about Hottentots in the stack of piss-yaller National Geographics shelved in the library storage room.

Bones said, "Isadora, there's a bee on your butt!" He sprang to his feet and slapped her bottom.

"Ow'wee! Hit it again, Bone. It done stung me!"

Shrieks of hilarity greeted that girl's idiocy.

She sat her books in front of her knees and shivered and bobbed her buttocks at him.

"She's got the hots for you!" Lynn Archer said to Bones.

"Not for me!" said Bones. He stood in the aisleway and leaned back against a seat edge and crossed his arms and gazed upon the spectacle.

The bus driver started up the bus and pulled out the drive and turned onto the highway.

Claude Jenkins called out: "Hey, Isadora, put some twist in it!"

Lynn Archer started to sing, "Shake it up, Baby."

Isadora began to writhe her bottom through a medley of dances.

"Whaow!" shouted Rich Weber.

A dozen voices swelled the chorus. Students shouted full lungs breathless. The bus boomed reverberant. Lynn Archer swung up to his feet in the aisle and conducted the busload of screaming singers.

"Aaaaaiiiieeee!

Ahhhhhhhhhh!

Ahhhhhhhh!

Ahhhhhh!

Ahhhh!

Whaow!

Shake it up, Mama."

Bones laughed. The backsides of that girl! Two honeydews in a denim poke.

Isadora stopped to stone stillness then began to shiver and shimmy and shake and kept rhythm and out of a slow locomotion grew a rhythmic strut that swelled into a slow dance of bobbing and weaving. Her breasts were softballs stirring orbits in the blue T-shirt. Girls giggled; boys rolled their eyes and gasped. Eston Drefus sang out:

"Jelly roll done kill my mammy
Turn my pappy stone blind. . ."

Rich Weber sang:

"I don't care if I
Do die Do die Do die
Gwine let th' Juice fly Juice fly Juice fly."

"Black pussy!" cried Claude Jenkins.

"Shut up that crap!" said Bones. "She's a friend of mine!"

"Yeaow!" shouted Rich.

"Black ass!" cried Richard Cornelius.

Isadora whirled back her head. "Not none of yours!"

"Howz 'bout ol' Bones!" cried Lynn Archer.

"Howz 'bout mindin' your own business!" said Bones.

"You hush!" said Isadora. "He's a chile!"

"How about me?" said Lynn Archer.

"You a damn fool!"

"Stop showing your ass!" said Bones.

She reared her buttocks in his face and he jerked back his hand and smacked her a sharp crack.

"Sit down, you goddamn Hottentot."

"Whoo! Dat smart."

"Turn around then an' I'll smack your head!"

She put down her feet in the floor and sat down. She said to him: "You do and I'll smack you back." She pouted and smiled.

Bones felt his face blush and dropped his eyes into his lap. Beside his leg he could see her hand clawing at her thigh-top. He might smack her bottom in tomboy fashion and curse like a muleskinner but the threat of a real kiss half daunted him.

"Bone."

He looked at her.

"What's a Hottentot?"

"The Hottentots are a tribe of black people who live in South Africa. The women all have great huge fat asses. The king likes 'em the size of watermelons. Each buttock! He puts his fancy, his fiancée, in a cage and feeds her tapioca and when her bottom bulges just right he says: 'Sweetheart, tonight's your wedding night! But no king of the Hottentots would have you! They want fat women with jiggly asses. Your butt's hard as a hambone.'"

"I'm glad you ain't no Hottentot King."

Bones looked at her: "Who says?"

"I'll go home and get that quarter I owe you."

"No rush. Bring it tomorrow."

"I'll bring it today."

--o--

It had been an hour since she had gotten off the school bus at home and now she walked into the store looking for Bones.

"Where Bone at?"

"He's around here some place," said Flavil.

"Here's de quarter I owe him."

"I'll give it to him."

"No, I pay him. Where he at? Bone pay ten peoples way to de show. Half de room. He hit de jackpot on de slot machine."

Bones stepped into the store behind Isadora and stopped. She talked on to Flavil who looked beside her head into his eyes.

"Where did you get that money, Tullus?" asked Flavil.

Bones stood stunned. His cheeks paled.

Isadora swung round, her bluewhite teeth in her purple lips. "Bone! There he is! Ha ha na." She took up his right palm and smacked the quarter on it. "Here's yo' quarter! I might want to borrow it agin. Prob'ly

tomorrow. Ha ha ha. . ." Her merry black eyes lifted and his glare struck her. Her laughter drained from her throat and merriment faded from her face. Her lips closed the puffy creases crinkled round an O.

"Was that your own money, Tullus?" asked Flavil.

"No, Sir."

"Watch the store, Willa Mae. Come to the back room, Tullus."

Bones followed his father. Isadora followed him. He whirled and pushed her back.

"Get lost! Get away!" he hissed.

She stood back with a ghastly look. She had blundered badly.

In the back room Flavil turned: "You stole that money?"

"Yessir!" Bones burst out bawling in abjectest shame.

Flavil twisted the knife. "Stealing and lying. You never did that before."

"I stole but I didn't lie!" Bones cried. "I'm sorry, Dad. I never stole money in my life except for that. I've seen you give away money. I've seen you throw away fifty, one hundred, on people you didn't even know!"

"I gave away my own money! Even Jesse James robbed the rich. But when you rob me you rob the poor! My

cashbox is a poorbox! I'm going to whip you!" Flavil went out the back door and walked under the Hackberry Tree and bethought himself and crossed the dirt street to a Hickory tree and pared off a branch and called Bones into the back yard. Bones stepped out into the yard and Flavil seized his left arm and whipped him hard. The tough limber switch made whippy whistles and struck Whaow! Whaow! Whaow! on his back and buttocks while he cringed and shrank and danced with pain.

Willa Mae pushed open the back screen door. "I never thought you'd stoop to a common theif. You've been taking lessons from those Gypsies."

She took pleasure in seeing the wayward straightened. But then her smile vanished. "Flavil. . ." she said. "Flavil. . ."

Flavil released Bones' arm and flipped the switch away and went back inside the store.

Bones stood with his eyes squeezed shut, shivering with pain. He opened his eyes and saw the setting sun flash red whorls in his wet tears. He blinked out water-drops and saw there just under the sun a black face hanging round the front corner of the store.

Isadora stepped into the open, linked her hands behind her back and came walking back alongside the store, up to him. He stood shivering and seething and he slit-

eyed her from under the hackberry tree. He was stewing wild in his transgression. He glared at her. His tears magnified the traitor in his sight. He ran to her and cried into her face:

"What did you do that for? You goddamn black nigger bitch! I hate your fucking guts! That's the hardest I've ever been whipped in my life." He stuck his nose in her face and shouted down her throat. "Is it my blood you want? Is that what you came round here to see? Look!" He jerked up his shirt and whirled his back to her crisscrossed with stripes and welts.

"I didn't know. I'm stupid."

"Amen!" he shouted.

"What'll I do now? You won't nevah write no more paper fo' me."

He looked aside at her. "You got that fuckin' right!"

She covered her face with her hands and sobbed and lowered her hands to speak but he spoke first. "The stripes don't matter!" he cried. "It's the shame!" With a look of nausea he clawed his fingers down his blue T-shirt as if he were raking off slime and held out his upturned claws to her and made a ghastly face then heaved a dry puke: "Arrrgh! That's how you make me so sick I hate your fucking guts."

She turned away from him and put her face in her hands.

"Piss off with my compliments! Tell them I sent you."

She lifted her face from her hands and looked back at him. "Tell who?"

"The butler of hell! Whoever opens the door!" He leaned to her ear. "The goddamn devil!"

She put her face back in her hands and stumbled off.

Bones went into the back door and turned into the side room and sat on the old bed, hating the world. Anger rose in him against all those who misunderstood him so. He wanted to beat them all with a hickory stick. He hated his mother most: She called him a common thief. He hadn't seen any goddamn common thief giving away money.

Flavil stormed into the room, his face scowled with anger. "What have you done to that girl?"

Bones glared back mute and sullen: Let him see if he can beat another word out of me.

"Did you hit her?"

Bones shook his head.

"Well, she won't stop crying! She acts like she's dyin'. What did you do to her?"

Bones shrugged.

Flavil whew'd a sigh of exasperation. "What did

you say to her?"

"I told her I hated her guts more or less."

Flavil blew a breath, shook his head. "She had no idea in the world she was telling me something that would get you whipped. Her mother's dead and her father's in prison. She doesn't have anybody at home to love her like you do!"

Flavil glared cold scrutiny.

Bones stood and edged through the door past Flavil and went on through the store and stepped out the front door. He looked at Isadora.

She sat on the end of the lefthand bench facing away. Her face hung atop her knees.

She grieved desperately. He went up beside her and pulled her hands away from her face and said: "Come with me!"

At the sound of his voice she snatched back her hands and erupted in new howls. Her body shook; her head in her hands bobbed up and down in the anguish of her grief.

His first response was not to believe this display was genuine. He felt proud at the sight of her sobs choking and shuddering through her gut as though she'd received a terrible blow in the gut and every breath a gasp.

He pulled one of her hands loose and dragged her up and pulled her along to the back yard still sobbing and heaving.

Bones cast his eyes about. They lit on the men's toilet in the end of the washhouse. He hissed: "Shut up, you little pickaninny!" though she stood half a head taller. He flung open the toilet door and pulled her inside and shut the door behind her. A commode sat in a small cube of space. He turned round and squeezed himself a seat in the floor between the commode and one wall and forked open his legs. He flung forward and seized her hand and pulled her down between his legs and snatched her head on his shoulder. "Shhh! You got to hush!" he told her.

Her body jerked convulsively with her sobs. He caught her skirt tail and pinched the snot from her nose.

He said, "You didn't know I stole the money. I was the one who was stupid. Anyone in class could've walked in and told Dad about me handing out money. And it never even crossed my mind. I'm the stupid one."

She doesn't have anybody at home to love her like you do!

Bones tilted up her chin, kissed her eyes, her cheeks as his mother had once kissed him often. He hugged her head beneath his chin and rocked her then she

tilted up her face. In the sliver of light from the door crack he saw her huge black eyes. "Do dat agin."

He kissed her cheek, her nose, her eyes. He looked at her.

Her lips tremor'd into a half-pout. She tilted her face up, lifted her mouth, pursed her lips.

He was back on that quarry cliff again, the chasm below taking his breath away. He remembered that day in the hall when he'd rewrote her papers and she'd made those first two A+'s. She grinned and lost her pout. He squeezed her cheeks and she pouted again, chuckling through her nose, trying not to laugh.

He grinned at her: It was hard not to like this girl.

The whites glowed around the black eyes. He looked at her breast mounds in her yellow shirt, at her lips swole full. The pucker came natural but her lips tremor'd.

He recalled that Klappox had described a grieved widow's lips like that, tilting to place a farewell kiss on her coffined husband's blue lips, the last kiss and her straining to maintain composure and she'd bestowed that ultimate kiss as a ceremonial victory wreath for the many times they'd conquered the giant, Despair, but then she'd reared her desolate face so eloquent of grief, that confessed the Giant's triumph at last. Did her

despairing lips tremble against that dead mouth even as these purple lips quaking with glad mirth and lifted poised and expectant.

She doesn't have anybody at home to love her like you do.

Bones saw the water far below, the sun lying dead still upon it, and he saw himself run and fling head first from the cliff edge and fly into the sun.

He lowered his lips lightly to hers. A sudden light burst on his eyes and a hand seemed to ride an ice cube down his spine.

Her mouth ceased to pucker and yielded soft as a smother of rosepetals.

He lifted his face and gazed at her mouth. He touched her lipfrets.

"Do dat agin!" she breathed.

Her face gleamed with sweat. The toilet was hot as an oven. The heat seemed trivial, an adjunct to this hothouse intimacy.

On a sudden the door jumped open and daylight flooded in from the doorway and Flavil stood framed in the glare from the doorway, a sea of green hackberry leaves rippled behind him.

Bones' eyes blared up desperate as a trapped animal. He was caught flagrante delicto. He saw himself as Flavil

saw him: a guilty thing crouched in a corner hugging a black girl round the neck.

Flavil gazed dumbfounded at first then contemplated the pair for half a minute. Then he stepped back and shut the door. Bones' breast flooded with gratitude.

"He goin' to whip you agin?"

"I don't think so. Let's get out of here! Wait! Don't you dare tell anybody I kissed you! You hear me?"

"Cause I'm black?"

"Cause you're a girl! I don't kiss girls."

"You kiss boys?"

"Don't be stupid! Swear you won't tell!"

"I swear!"

"You hope lightning strikes you dead if you do!"

"I hope it."

"I hope it too!"

Bones shoved the door open and stepped out into the light. He felt the breeze hit his wet face. His T-shirt stuck damply to him. He turned to Isadora who was patting his back for attention.

"Wauk me home," she said. Blisters of sweat stood on her face like ink drops.

"I can't walk you home."

"Please. I won't ask you no mo'."

Bones watched her. He wondered about her. She

seemed a strange new girl under that poplipped pretty thing. He thought: 'I hated her. That was Mr. Hyde. Now I'm Dr. Jeckyll.' "I'll have to ask my dad. But he'd more apt to let me go if you ask him."

She nodded. "I'll ask him den."

Bones walked to the front of the store and stood by the front door. Flavil stood on the footrung of a red tractor pumping gas in the tophole of the engine. A muffled smokestack stood tall against the red sunset.

Isadora went up to him and called up: "Can Bone wauk me home?"

Flavil looked down at her, then at Bones waiting by the door. "Who walked you over here?"

"Nobody."

"Can't nobody walk you home?"

"No, Sir."

Flavil shook his head at such illogic. "Take him on," he said.

Flavil looked at Bones. "Boy, don't you come in here and deadbeat about tomorrow. There's going to be thirty boxes of stock waiting for you to put up."

Bones heard his mother inside moving toward the door with a customer and suddenly ran across the highway and down the path toward home, then turned he and waved for Isadora. She was standing by the highway, flustered

by his flight. He watched Isadora's long legs flicker beneath her then he turned and ran on ahead, past his own house and down the dirt street that led to the country back road that wound through cotton fields and woodland and pasture and where few houses stood. Turning onto the road, Bones slacked to a walk and Isadora hitched up beside him.

Bones said: "I had to get away from my mother."

"Won't she let you go home wid me?"

"I'm not going home with you! I don't want to get shot!"

A silence fell. They idled along the road.

The sun set and its light pinked the cotton clouds overhead. Fall leaves scuttered. Flecks of gold, yellow, brown, rippled in his eyes. The roadside ditch and the clay bank were dragonscaled with autumn leaves. They sifted down when breezes stirred. He looked at her: Her sidling eyes peeked at him. Her quiet lips spoke. Sweet ingratiation shone in her dimpled smile. Bones eyed her smiling lips. She seemed fearful she might utter again some unlucky word.

He noticed for the first time that she'd changed out of her jeans she'd worn on the bus into a yellow skirt and blouse which he thought much became her coal-black skin. She slicked her eyes at him and smirked. A

huge fraudulent-looking stone gemmed her finger. The band shone brighter than gold, the ruby was the size of a birdegg.

Bones said, "I'll walk you up close to your house, that's far as I'm going."

Her smile faded.

They walked another half-mile. Isadora spoke in a drawl that was sweet-toned and low: "I tol' Riff you was my best frien'."

"What he'd say?"

"He say: 'You like white meat.' I say: 'I lak dat white meat.' I say, 'I hear de meat is sweet close to de Bone.'"

"Ha!" shouted Bones.

"He say, 'You watch out; he give you a bone.' I say, 'Not Bone. He don't try dat stuff. He hep me pass my English.' He say, 'He jus' the kind o' frien' yo' need. Jes' stay away from dem high school boys.'"

Bones recalled Willa Mae's words at Sunday dinner-table. "My mother said: 'Tullus, when you grow up you can bring home a nigger or bring home a Jap or bring home a Jew, but don't you dare bring through my front door no deevorced woman.'"

"Why'd she say dat?"

"She worked a year in a knitting mill when she was

eighteen or nineteen. I don't know what they knitted, brazeers maybe. She worked with six other women and four were divorcees. If they acted the way they talked, she said, they make whores look good."

Bones said: "I didn't mean to call you a nigger. Call me nigger."

Isadora smirked: "Nigger."

"At your service, Ma'am."

She smiled. "Will you do what I say?"

Bones shrugged then he nodded: "Sure."

"Kiss me agin."

Bones stopped. Isadora stopped and looked down into his face. He looked up and down the road. He did not want to be caught by carlights in the gathering dark. "Well not here! Some maddog drunks will come along here and shoot us both. Come on, follow me!"

He crawled on all fours up the vermilion cutbank, topped the grasstuft overhang and stood and crept into the dimness of a strip of woods bordering far corn fields ready to be chopped and plowed under.

He turned to her.

She smiled down again.

He did not like looking up.

He turned and ran along the bank then saw a gnarled root kneed up beside an oak bole. He stepped his right

foot up on the treeroot and spun to face her and reached his fingertips to the treetrunk for balance and leaned forward to reach her.

"You've got to come closer! If I tilt I'll fall."

She stepped closer and still he had to tilt. He kissed her for as long as he could keep balance, then he began to waft on the bare stump knob and to tilt over her and he tried to shove her away but her hands clasped his waist and her feet stood rooted and he pitched against her and she toppled backwards and he sprang his legs apart and straddled her waist and alighted on his feet and caught her by the underarms and held her between his knees.

Isadora said: "Whew! You saved me!"

He gazed into her black eyes. He felt great-hearted. Why not? That was his nature. A savior of women. Like Mike Hammer. Saltpeter and brimstone for crook and thug. A piece of hell.

He said: "Why didn't you back up? You could have got out of the way."

"Guess I didn't want to get out of the way."

"You are a looney tune! Come on!" He lifted her by her underarms and she walked her feet back under her and stood at two inches.

What the hell? He gave a slight head-toss and she

kissed him.

"C'mon," he said.

"Hold my hand."

"Never!" he cried. "I don't do that. That's sissy business. He lifted her palm to his elbow.

Dark fell. He walked along under the full moon with her. He looked at her. She was a piece of night that had eyes. He thought to himself: I know she likes me. I'm going to sing a song down her throat and let her know what it feels like to love me. He sang Rye Whiskey and Sweeter Than The Flowers and Blues Stay Away From Me and Jolé Blon.

He crooned out the lyrics in a liquid-syllable'd soft voice. He loped and lurruph'd vowels that loosed like bubbles from his lips. He lippopped the B's and T's. Her teeth glowed in her lips while he sang. He thought that he could walk her into a ditch or a tree because she didn't stop looking at him. He finished the songs.

"Sho' do lak dat."

"Put your arm around my neck."

"Can I kiss you?"

"If you need help, God help you!"

"I'll help myself."

"Be a pig."

She crisscrossed his lips and lingered her plush mouth. He watched the white of her eyes and she shut her eyes and she was a piece of the dark.

He led her back over the bank and along the road. He quoted her poems Flavil had taught him till he saw lights of two houses ahead.

He turned to her and said: "This is far as I'm going. I'm not a coward. You and me's friends but your brothers might not like me."

"Can I kiss you goodnight?"

Bones shrugged, "What's stoppin' you?"

She leaned forward and touched him only with her lips, then she stood straight and strolled off toward her house. She looked across her shoulder.

"Goodnight," he called. He turned to walk home and then he heard her steps whispering on the road and she whirled back in front of him, her eyes white spots in the dark.

"Gimme jus' one mo'!" She shook her head. "I won't ask for no mo'."

Above her head the moon hung in a dead treelimb. A twig spidered its yellow face.

He draped his arms around her waist and crouched his hands upon her swells.

She put her arms around his neck and kissed him.

Her lips loitered sluggish. She stood back and patted his cheeks and stepped around him toward home. He snatched her arm going by and the whites of her eyes flashed back. "You want to take one home?" he said. "It's on me."

"It's on you, ha ha. I reckon it is." She threw her arms round his neck and crushed her soft lips to his own. Those words of his mother's didn't make any sense now, he thought, like kisses were eggs. But she'd understood him. She'd had a hard time in English, but her lips would win a prize for Blind and Deaf lipreaders would nod their heads off at any fool words she spoke just to feel those purple puffed lobes flex and seem to kiss their fingers. One mouth plus one mouth equals one kiss. You can't take them with you. She dropped back her head, her eyes shining and stepped back and slipped off into the dark.

That one-eyed yellow moon witnessed him walk down the road a ways then stop and look back. She stood a hundred yards back down the road. He stepped toward her and then he could see her walking too. When he reached her she stopped still and he slipped his hands around her waist and dropped them through the recurve of her back and her skirtback swelled in his palms. He lifted his face to her soft valves opening and her tongue parted

his lips and fused with his own.

She lifted her face. Blacker than the night was her smile cobbled with teeth that shone like phosphor on the air. He dropped back and turned and walked a ways and turned again and saw her standing in the road looking for a sign, a yellow skirt and blouse and not a visible soul within and he went on a ways farther then looked back again and she was gone or else he couldn't piece her out of the dark.

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CHAPTER IV
BONES AND THE GYPSY

The boy craned his neck to see out the row of windows across the aisle where a car roof and a truck's windshield flew by. He saw a torpedo-nosed travel trailer parked in front of the gas pumps and there were two dark-skinned men, one heavysset and one thin, standing talking to Flavil.

"What you lookin' at?" said Isadora.

"At by God Gypsies."

"Gypsies always stay wid you. Yo' daddy lets 'em."

"I hate their guts. They're the World's filthiest bunch of people. They all steal. Every last one. They teach their kids to steal. But school doesn't teach 'em anything. They don't go. None of them can read. They're all illiterates. Every last one. Bye."

The schoolbus stopped and the boy stood up and strode down the aisle and jumped the steps to the ground, bouncing on his knees, and swung in front of the bus and crossed the highway.

"Bone!"

He spun toward the bus that was pulling off and saw a sooty face framed in an open window, her eyeballs tilted, her face turning as the bus drove off, her lips splitting over teeth that glared whiteness in that black

face. She hung out her arm and waved.

He flung a wave at her and turned and strode past Flavil who was still conversing with the two dark-skinned men and went into the store. The woman storekeeper was talking to a customer when he entered and she swung her head at his passing. "Hello, young 'un."

He went to the meatcase and took out a roll of bologna and slotted it in the V and pushed it twice through the meatcutter and peeled the plastic rind with his teeth. He lay the bologna between two slices of light bread then stepped with it to the front window and ate while he gazed out at Flavil and the two Gypsies talking.

For five years he'd faced their filth. Twice a week he'd cleaned up the two acres behind their feasts and nasty habits that defaced the grounds. They were all blind in both eyes to trashcans. He picked up their cookout's filth, their whiskey and wine bottles whose labels he studied down to the fine print. There was moreover the slavered-over and tossed-aside bonescraps, the gnawn bones of pig and lamb, in summers sun-cooked slow, fried and flyswarmed then maggotcrawled all which he pincerred up in leather gloves. In ruthless and lurid detail he observed their depravity and reported on each new revulsion. At their last feast just a month ago he'd

rolled into the midst of an outdoor feast with spitted lamb and pig an oil drum to serve as trashcan, painted "trashcan" on it while some looked on and went off and went back next day and found a single crumple of red paper dropped in the oil drum to mock him where he stood surrounded by the litterstrewn grounds. He scorned too the coarse and vulgar toddlers who did their droppings behind a tree or car and hauled up their pants unwiped and strode on indifferent as an animal. Because he was tainted perhaps by his mother's Dutch ethic of cleanliness and a streak of the Puritan in him, he despised their uncleanness and had begged Flavil to turn the Gypsies away. But Flavil told him sharply that the Gypsies paid for their right to drop their garbage at their feet and that he paid the boy to clean up their mess and that that was the way the world worked.

He finished his sandwich and snuck a weiner from the meatcase. He went out and stood beside Flavil for a minute, gathered that the Gypsies would stay and more were on the way and then he crossed the highway to visit Miss Kitty.

He saw the cat looking over the back porch box and called for her and she pattered down the steps and sauntered toward him, slackbellied now.

Brownie, a coon dog who'd ventured from his usual

haunts, was snuffling in the sage grass. At Bones' call to the cat, he lifted his head and saw the cat come strolling athwart his path and plunged pell-mell after her.

The cat whirled with an anguished scream and sprang onto a pine tree. The dog leaped his forepaws against the tree and sprang for the cat, snarled down, her claws very slippery seizing and reseizing on the loose bark she was showering down in the dog's yelping face.

Bones pitched shrieking and hurling pine cones after the dog and the dog fled. He plucked the trembling cat off the tree and carried her back up the steps and set her in the box with the kittens. He broke the weiner into short pieces, tumbled them out of his hands and the cat gnashed them down. Miss Kitty slouched against the box and nursed her kittens. It was her second litter and they had issued beneath his eyes, two breach and three headfirst. Bones cuddled a kitten against his face and it sucked his earlobe. He laughed at the teeth's tickle and set it back.

He went back to the store and took his sack of marbles from under the counter and went out to the driveway and drew round in the dust a goodsized circle. He anted marbles in the center of the circle and knelt down then and mounted his right hand on his left hand's back

and fired his law. A breeze rattled the red-orange pecan leaves and one by one they came spinning down. He sang to himself while he played.

O break out the bottle
Bring on the crowd
Tell funny stories
Turn the jukebox up loud
Come on and sit at my table
Where the drinks are all free
Come gather round me
Cause Misery
Loves Company.

He stood up and backed away from two trucks pulling silver trailers and two more trucks and three Cadillacs and then that seemed to be all and he stepped back onto the dust of the driveway.

Tire tracks had of course obliterated his circle and left their tire tread's zigzag squiggles. He smoothed a spot raking his shoesole about and picked up a twig and drew round in the dust another circle. He shaped a ridge of dust between his hands and teed a row of marbles and went back to shooting at them picking them off with sharp cracks. He sang himself another song.

Fate has planned a place
For girls like you
Who torture guys like me
And the time for all bad things to end
Will surely come, you'll see
The world will turn its back on those
Who never could be true
And you'll find out
That fate has planned
A place for girls like you.

A Gypsy boy toddled up and squatted to watch as Bones crouched at the circle's edge and shot his taw. The boy watched the taw crack and spin and the struck marble fly from the circle and he swept a cherub's fat finger at each marble's flight and cried: "Oooh!" as at a thing of wonder.

Then he saw beyond the circle a girl's face rise up in a Cadillac's back door window and look out sleepily at him. That small face looked burdened by a mass of hair. She got out of the car and he stopped singing. A Gypsy woman called the girl over and handed her money and the girl turned and walked toward the store. She passed within ten feet of the boy and stopped and stood looking at him.

He lifted his eyes from her bare feet, small and arched, to the flowered dress lapping at her calves, up to her green silk blouse and then to her olive face staring down at him with coal black eyes. His eyes widened and his mouth opened. Her face was set immobile against the sky. Tendrils of hair stirred in the breeze. He believed in that second that she was surely the most beautiful girl in the world. An angel had kissed her in the cradle.

He stood up, waited for her to speak.

Her black hair fell on her shoulders and spilled

onto her breasts in coils and spirals. She looked two or three inches taller than he was, a couple of years older. She gazed at him mutely for a minute, then turned and walked to the store. He knew on instinct that such indifferent stares were insults and that most Gypsies were snotty and insolent. And why not, he thought, for like he'd heard, they take the world for a fool.

The small boy squatting on the ground called: "Hey, hey," and pointed at the marbles.

Bones squatted and anted marbles, looked aside at the boy. "Hey, you want to play, Kid? Here, put it on your thumb. This is your taw." He stood and crouched over the boy and caught the small hand and folded fingers over tucked thumb and said, "Go on, shoot it." The boy fumbled the taw a few inches and squealed with glee.

A woman looked their way and started shouting, "Putz! Putz!"

"Your mom's calling, Kid. Better go."

The boy ignored the shouts and held up a marble. "Shoot!"

He cupped the small hand again and placed a marble on his thumb and played with him.

The Gypsy girl came walking back with a sack of groceries and carried them into one trailer and came out again.

"Viola, bring Putz," called the woman.

The Gypsy girl walked up and jerked the boy up in her arms.

Bones stood up and put five marbles in the boy's hands and squeezed his fingers closed. "There's some marbles to play with," he said. "Sorry you have to go, old boy."

"His name is 'Putz,'" said the Gypsy.

"Putz, eh? There Putz, old man!" said Bones.

Putz squirmed and howled as the Gypsy carried him off.

Bones squatted and anted more marbles on a ridge of dirt. The Gypsy gave Putz to his mother and Bones bent to his marbles. He crouched his right hand on his left hand's back and fired the taw. The marble shot through the air and cracked sharply a marble which flew off while the taw spun in the dust. His gaze followed the struck marble dashing out of the circle and bouncing off in the grass and lifted his eyes on the Gypsy girl who sat just beyond. She sat on the grass with her knees drawn up and her calves crossed, watching him. He nestled the taw on his hooked thumb, inched back his hand and shot another marble out of the circle. Then he looked back at the Gypsy and spoke. "Do you go to school?"

"I did once," said the Gypsy.

Bones said, "The Gypsy kids who stay here never go to school. They don't know how to read or write. They are illiterates to the last man."

"I can read and write. I went to school three years in New Orleans. The teachers came and told my folks I was the smartest kid in school. I could read and write better than the Gazo."

"What's Gazos?"

"People like you. Not Gypsies."

"Well, I beg your pardon. You can't read better than me. I can read real good! I can read any book you put under my face."

"I can read better than you."

Bones looked at her and smiled smugly and looked back at his marbles.

"You're a little shit, do you know that?" said the Gypsy.

"You're a mite stupid for thinking that. I know that."

"You're stupid Gage. You're a fuckbrain." She spat on the ground.

"That's your opinion, I've got mine."

"Go to hell fuckbrain."

"I'd find better company."

"Fuck you."

"Likewise."

"You make me sick to my stomach."

He stood and flung down a finger at her feet.

"Puke or you're a liar!"

"I'll make you puke."

"You won't have to try hard."

"Shit too!"

He sat back on his heels. "What just came out your mouth!" He shook his head. "What can you expect out of a Gypsy's mouth," he asked the air about him and shook his head.

"I can read better than you, Gazo. I can whip you too."

"You can't whip me!"

She snapped her fingers. "Like that," she said.

"Like hell!" He crouched over his marbles and fired his taw.

She stood up and spat in his circle and planted her fists on her hips. "Stand up you little shit."

A couple of fights against high school roughnecks had earned him a reputation for a savage temper, as one who culled no weapons, an iron pipe or a chuck of coal that would equalize a fight with older boys and those who fought him would agree he had a stomach for the fray.

Touched by knight-errantry he'd defended a few girls, rough-handled on the playground or bounced from their place in line but he'd never fought one and followed

a chivalric code toward women and would not strike even one he hated, would defend even her.

He bent to his marbles. "I don't fight girls," he said.

"Stand up Gage! Shit thunderbolts! You're too terrible for hell!"

"You put that nicely." Bones squinted over his cocked finger and fired. "But I don't fight girls."

Then her bare foot flashed swirling dust in his face and scattering marbles. He fanned the dust out of his face and stood up and stared at her. She spat on his shoes.

He opened his mouth to speak and her fist burst on his mouth, then came an explosion in his eyes, a burst of light then blackness sprinkled with a sift of snow. Then his ear boomed and sirens went off in his head. He saw her face with her fists bobbing and throwing punches that now he knocked away with his fists or took on his forearms.

He stepped out of her reach and glared at her hesitating between his fists. I can hit her now, he thought. I can knock her teeth down her throat. The thought both tempted and appalled him.

Then she rushed him, jabbing her fists, her hair flooding her face and he caught most of her blows on

knuckles and forearms and retreated out of reach and cried out:

"Will you stop now? Will you please stop?!"

But she wouldn't stop and rushed ahead and cracked him in the temple. Angered now he dropped back a few steps then plunged and he jumped astraddle her waist, snatching back her hair in fistfulls while his heels kicked out her knees in back. With her legs kicked out she struck the ground in deadfall flat of her back beneath his weight with a solid WHUMP! WHOOF! burst her breath the same moment past his ear.

He reared over her and saw her eyes grown huge but gawking at nothing and her chest convulsing for air that wouldn't come. He thought then of pumping her legs back against her chest as boys did in football but that would bare her drawers. Nor could he pump her chest which would be unseemly nor blow down her throat. "I'm sorry!" he plead into her face, now gone gray under the fawn colored skin. He jumped up in horror and dragged her up by the underarms as if standing would help. She stood wobbling, goggle-eyed and gaping like a landed fish. Her fingers fluttered over the breastbone in the loose blouse. She hung her head with her mouth agape as if she would vomit.

He drummed her back with his open hand and stared at

her in alarm. Her shoulders shuddered then her throat creaked and she began to wheeze and aah and the laddered breastbone began to surge and fall down in the open blouse.

"You kept on," he cried. "You wouldn't stop!"

Her hanging face came up through vines of hair.

"It's not over yet," she wheezed.

"It's over for me! I'm through fighting you!"

"I'm not through!"

"How about we call it a tie?"

"Not till I've paid you back."

"Lookit you, I'm not going to fight you!"

"You got to. You got to pay."

"You can hit me in the stomach."

"Hard as I can hit?"

"Sure. I'm hard in the gut. But take off those rings first."

She gulped down air in draughts till she got her wind back then twisted four rings off her right hand. She breathed across her knuckles and grinned at him for a fool. Then she jerked his tee shirt up and stuck the shirttail down his neck then spraddled her feet and stood hiploose.

"You ready?" she said.

He stood spraddle-legged and sucked a breath and

tightened his stomach then gave her a goahead nod.

She lolled her hips and tilted back her right shoulder, swaying her arm out behind her, and with a shoulder-snap, swung her fist in and struck his bare stomach with a sound like the dead smack of a beefsteak slapped on a chopblock and he didn't budge an inch.

The smile went off her face. "One more!" she demanded.

"Go ahead." He inhaled another breath and clenched his stomach and the Gypsy shifted her stance. This time she stood sideways and she whipped back her fist and slugged him another hard smack. Neither did he move nor show sign.

"Wait! One more time!"

"No!"

She thrust a finger in his face. "Can't you count that far?"

He stared at her then shrugged and took down a breath and clenched his stomach and nodded.

She propped her middle knuckle on the thumb and swayed back and hurled the blow high in his midriff and then he blew out his bated breath and took two steps back.

The Gypsy fished the rings from a pocket and screwed them back on her fingers. "I hurt you, I know I hurt you."

"No," he said. "You didn't hurt me."

Then he saw her eyes slit and her hands ball to fists.

"Well," he said, "It did hurt some. It hurt like blue blazes when you hit me in the eye."

She blew across her knuckles.

He grinned and rubbed his stomach.

She smiled at him. Her smile transformed her from a pretty witch into a seraph, gave her a delicate Madonna's face. He liked to see her smile. "You got my eye a good one, too," he said. "And when you hit me on the ear it was just like a bomb exploded.

"Ha ha ha," laughed the Gypsy.

Some woman called, "Viola!" and the Gypsy girl shouted back and waved her away.

The boy saw the Gypsy men standing by the trucks watching them and then he turned to the sound of laughter and there beside the store stood Flavil and two other men watching. He saw that both parties must've held back, waiting for the other to break up the fight first. Flavil and the two men now went back into the store, the Gypsies laughed too and turned to their business.

The Gypsy girl whacked the dust from her skirt and strolled to the grass. She stooped on her heels and folded her arms across her knees and studied the boy

with her eyes slit against the low red sun. Her ten toes stuck out from under the skirt hanging in drapery folds from her knees. The skirt's hem was bedraggled and there was one loosely stitched patch on her right hip.

He picked up his scattered marbles and dusted them on his shirt and dropped them in his pocket. "How long are you all staying here?" he said.

"Just tonight. We hightail at dawn."

He liked the way she spoke words with relish. She had a sassy way of talking and a nose-thumbing manner.

"You're just a kid," said the Gypsy. "How old are you?"

"Eleven."

"I'm thirteen. What's your name?"

"Tullus Gentry. People call me 'Bones'."

"Where do you live, Bonehead?"

He pointed across the highway. "That house down across the field. My dad owns this place. We lived in the back of the store when we first bought it. I was in the first grade then."

He sat on the ground in an Indian-squat facing her. "What's your name?"

"Viola."

"Where did you folks come from?"

Her eyes were slit at the sun, a cool spot of rouge from a mime's cheek, asquat on the low hills. The sun reflected crimson spots on her black eyes, twinned there like second sight.

She told him that they had left a campsite outside Windsor, Canada and drove under the river to Detroit and drove on to Louisville. Two camps refused to let them stay for the night so they had parked at a highway rest-stop. An hour later the state patrol had routed them out of bed and sent them on. Next day they ran upon some other Gypsies who told them about this place and they headed here to stay the night. She said she was a Rom, and she spoke Romany, the language of Roms, which was the largest of the Gypsy tribes. Her mother was Gypsy and her father was Spanish and she was a Didikai, a half-breed. Her father had come from Spain with a troupe of Flamenco dancers. Her mother had joined the troupe and after a year they'd been married. She said that her mother's folks had raised terrible hell at first but then shut up when her father paid them a bride-price after the Gypsy fashion. A bride-price, she explained, was a large sum of money.

She said that she was a singer and a dancer. In New Orleans she'd danced Flamenco and Gypsy folk dances with her folks on stage in night spots or in joints and

sometimes they'd even opened acts of the famous. She called a couple of names but he'd never heard of them. She said that sometimes they danced in the street. The boy had seen street dancers in Atlanta trumped as care-free minstrals but they looked like beggars to him. She asked him had he ever seen a flamenco dancer before and he shook his head, and she rose and dropped on him an insolent gaze and crabbed one hand on her hip and began to strut and pound the dirt with her bare feet, dancing into Bones' circle, dust-puffs blooming underfoot and her wild hair shuddering, smacking the ground with her feetsoles, then dancing a circle round him with her feet stuttering and one hand poised lightly on her hip and the other thrown aloft.

Then she stopped and sat down facing him and began to talk again. She said that this year they'd spend the winter in New Orleans where they had an apartment in her grandmother's place or maybe go to Ocala, Florida and tend orchards for an orange grower. Wintertime in New Orleans was not the best season for dancers, he gathered.

He watched the sun set, wink out in her eyes and her eyes opened wider. A breeze stirred and pecan leaves came spinning down beyond her.

"Sing me a song," said the Gypsy. "I heard you singing when I was in the car. You sing pretty good for

a Gazo."

He shook his head. "I can't sing when somebody's listening."

"You're a funny Gazo. I'll sing to you first then you sing to me." She stood up and sang a song, it must have been in Romany, sang and danced and clapped as if to a thronged hillside. The boy gazed at her in awe, so brazen, so brash and cocksure the way she just stood right up there and shouted it all out of her and in a voice the like he'd never heard in a girl, guttural and with a rasp in it.

She finished the song, smiled at him then sat on the ground in front of him. "You sing now."

He shook his head. He inspected the thread of one sneaker for dried mud. He said, "I can't sing in front of people."

"Go on. You can sing in front of me."

A thought struck him and he raised his head. "I'll tell you a story."

"Is it a true story?"

"A ghost story."

"Tell it then." She hugged her knees and waited.

Little squares of window lights stood on the night and the air was murmurous with insects and treefrogs. He began telling a story he'd told a dozen times, spicing

it each time with a few more grisly details.

"Well, me and my family moved into a new house down in the country. We bought it dirt cheap cause there was no running water on the place. We moved in and my dad went down to get a bucket of water and you had to walk a quartermile to a spring. He came running back and said he'd met an old witch who told him, 'Bloody Bones gonna get you tonight.'"

"My mother said, 'Fiddlesticks!' So she took the pail and went to the spring and came running back with the empty bucket. 'They's a witch down there,' she told us. 'Said, Bloody Bones gone get you tonight.'"

"So I said, 'Sit down and calm your nerves.' I took the bucket and went down the trail to the spring and there she stood. She was short and fat and hunch-backed. She had a bone stuck through her hair in back. She was stirring a pot. Foggy steam stood over it."

"She said, 'Bloody Bones gone get you tonight.'"

"I'd never in my life seen such a sight. She was at least a hundred. She had moles with hair sprouts and a white beard and oozy red eyes. And a mouth like a cow's butt and saggy wrinkles and white hair on her head all scraggly and clotted like a sheep's scut."

"'What's cooking in that pot?' I said."

"She cackled and smacked her old lips, Swok! Swok!

She said, 'Come close and take a look, my child.'

"So I went close and looked down in the steam. It was scum and foam and stank all the way to heaven. Blood was boiling in that pot and red bubbles popping, glop glop glop. Toads rolled up the whites of their bellies. An eyeball rolled up and stared right at me."

"The witch cackled. She had three teeth in her head. One in the top and two in the bottom. She threw in a dead bat. She peppered the pot with dried spiders. She took up a dipper, a hollow skull with a bone handle, and lowered it in the pot and dipped out blood. She put her old rubber lips to the skull and sucked the blood with a long slurrup and smacked her lips."

"'It needs the sauce of a young boy,' she croaked. She put her bony fingers on my head. Her hand was warty as a frog's skin. 'Look into the pot,' she said. She started conjuring in her croaky voice:

'It's the Devil's Scout!
Chillysmith come out!
By the cleft foot of the Devil
Inside a witch's thigh.
By the corpse's stink
That makes the vulture sigh.
By rot and black and doom and death
And all that hell holds dear,
I conjure thee:
It's the Devil's Scout!
Chillysmith, come out!'

"A great glop of steam shot up and a skeleton stood straight up over the pot dripping blood. His bottom jaw

went clack-clack. It curdled my blood and sent creepy-crawls over my skin. Chillysmith said, 'Bloody Bones going to get you tonight.' Then lightning zapped where he stood and he disappeared, back in the pot I reckon."

"The witch said, 'The skeleton's name was Chillysmith before he turned into Bloody Bones. He lived in the house you bought. He eats people alive. I throw their entrails in my stew and the devil takes their soul. If you're still at the house at twelve o'clock tonight, Bloody Bones will get you.'"

"I was shaking so hard my teeth were rattling like Chillysmith's. I said, 'You ain't getting my chittlings, Witch!' I tore off back to the house. I told my mom and dad what I'd seen. I said, 'I'm scared, Dad, I want to leave this place.'"

"He said, 'Nobody's scaring us off. We mustn't be fraidycats.'"

"I said, 'I want to sleep with you and Mom.'"

"We all sat down to supper that night and my dad slammed his hand down on the table and said, 'Hogwash! It's all a big joke. Somebody's dressed up like a Halloween witch and pulling tricks on us. Trying to run us off so they can buy the place cheap. It's probably got oil on it. No more of this nonsense. We should all be ashamed of ourselves. We'll all sleep in our own beds

and pay no attention to these clowns trying to scare us off.'"

"Well. . ." Bones took a deep breath. He noted that the Gypsy girl had shifted round to sit beside him. Her eyes were huge and black and unwavering. He dropped his gaze, not to give way the surprise, and went on.

"We all went upstairs and said 'Goodnight,' and turned out the lights and went to bed. I lay there scared to death with my teeth chattering. The clock in the hall finally bonged twelve times. Then I heard it. It was Bloody Bones. His bony feet rattled on the first step and he croaked, 'Bloody Bones gone get you tonight.' He went up to the second step. 'Bloody Bones gone get you tonight.' Third step, 'Bloody Bones gone get you tonight.' Fourth step. Fifth step. Sixth step. Seventh. Eighth. Ninth. Tenth. He was on the porch, in the hallway. 'Bloody Bones gone get you tonight.' Then his bony feet were rattling right there in the room with me. And he said. . ."

On a sudden he sprang claw hands upon her shoulders and shook her violently while shouting in the Gypsy's face, "I Gotcha!"

She shrieked his near ear nigh stone deaf and jumped as though he'd thrown a snake in her lap. Then her shriek broke into a scream of laughter and she seized

him back by the shouldertops and shook him, laughing in his face.

"Whoo!" She shuddered with a thrill of delicious surprise and said, "You scared the hell out of me, Boy!" She beamed fine big teeth at him and hugged herself shivering. She chattered her teeth at him and laughed and said, "Ole Chillysmith gave me the chillywillies."

Bones said, "My cousins in Rome told me that story when I went to visit 'em. Wasn't but six or seven. They took me in a dark room. When they grabbed me I screamed and ran out. That night I got scared and got out of my bed and got in between my two cousins. Next day they laughed at me and called me that. Then it was just Bones."

A lull fell. He watched that flush of joy fade from her face. She twisted a little fiddlehead coil of hair round her fingerend.

"Tell you what, I'll sing you a song."

O my name it is Sam Hall, it is Sam Hall;
O my name it is Sam Hall, it is Sam Hall;
Yes, my name it is Sam Hall,
And I hate you one and all,
Yes, I hate you one and all,
Goddamn your eyes.

He sang six ribald stanzas to her then the Gypsy laughed and clapped her hands. "I love that song!"

"I know lots of songs. If you stayed here I'd teach 'em to you. I know some more stories and some

poems too."

He saw the sidelights in the store go out. He stood up and the Gypsy stood up too. He felt suddenly bereft and loathe to leave this newfound friend. "Maybe you'll come back here some time," he said.

"Think your Pa will let us stay?"

"Sure. I'll tell him to."

"Ha! Does he do what you tell him to do?"

"Sure."

"We might come back. I hope."

"Well, G'night."

She went backstepping through the dark speaking in a spooky voice. "You go to bed, Boy, you better pray. You'll hear me coming every step. You'll hear me KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK on your door. It won't be Bloody Bones!" She reached her trailer and snatched the door open and sprang up inside. Through the porthole window he saw her face peering out and her fingers waggling.

He waved back to her and crossed the highway and went down the dark trail home, feeling both happier and lonelier than he could remember. He had found and lost a rare friend in the same evening. Peepers and ziggers were piping night music in his ears but his brain was all besorced by the sound of his own name crooned in the throat of that Gypsy.

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He left home next morning with books underarm and lunchbox inhand and took the trail to the store. Neighborhood kids were lining up to board the school bus. He hated the jostle and shove and stood as usual at the back of the line. He looked up the hill where an orange dot the size of a pinhead would appear and crawl down the long grade, grow to dimesize at arm's length and thence to quartersize. . .Sudden red nails flashed across his sight and fingers covered his eyes.

"I Gotcha!"

He pried the fingers off his eyes and looked around.

The Gypsy smiled her big teeth in his face. "Hello, Bloody Bones, ha ha ha!" She laughed in his face.

"Morning," he said, a little stiffly at her so free.

She giggled and dipped down and picked up her Coke off the ground and sipped it. A red ribbon trailed in her black hair. Schoolkids craned their necks staring back at her.

She raised a jewel-encrusted hand, touched the bean-sized knot on his eyebrow. "Got a purple eye there, Boy." She tilted her head and looked at the back of his neck. She fingered the curl of hair on his nape. "You got a little drake's tail. A widdle ducky-doo!" She giggled and winked at him. She tapped him on the stomach. "Old

Iron Gut. You got iron bowels, Boy. You got tough chittlin's!" She raised her Coke and sipped, gazing aslant, not to take her eyes off him. She held the bottle out to him. "Here," she said. "Have a sip."

Bones shook his head.

She said, "You think I got germans, don't you boy?"

The row of kids were grinning and laughing behind their hands.

"Booone. Bloody Bones gwine get you tonight. Ha ha ha!" She taunted him with laughing coquetry and his face blazed. He stood tongue-tied. Gravely he watched her small bare feet with painted nails. She was mocking him. She was amusing herself at the expense of the Gazo kid. When she laughed the row of schoolkids laughed too, but indifferently. I hate her guts, he said to himself. I hate her bloody damn guts. He lifted his eyes to her face and knew it was a lie.

"Say me a poem," said the Gypsy.

"I forgot 'em all."

"That's funny, last night they were all in your head. Where'd they go to? Bet they all swelled up in that knot there. HMMMMM. Here!" She caught his head and pressed the Coke bottle against his eye. "This Coke is ice cold. It'll make the swelling go down."

"Hey, Bones." Lynn Archer stood in stringbean

tallness at the front of the line, looking back over the row of heads with his face split in a mocking grin.

"Who blacked your eye?"

Bones tocked two gravel together with the toe of his shoe, then he nodded at Viola. "She did."

"Whaaaaat!" squawked Lynn Archer. "I'll be dog if I'd tell it, if it happened to me! I'd be ashamed to show my face!"

"Whooooo!" moaned the waiting line. They shrank at the mention of such disgrace. They drew back their heads and rolled their eyes.

Viola balled her fist and breathed on her knuckles. "There's more where that came from," she said.

Lynn Archer's face shone with antic glee. He said, "She done whopped his ass all over the grass."

"Ooooooh," wailed the line of mockers, bug-eyed with horror.

He flinched at their moans and stared at the ground.

"She whopped his head and left him for dead."

The Gypsy laughed in his face. She found it all very funny.

"He done been clobbered by a little ole girl, saddest day in the whole wide world."

"Whoo! Uh-uh! O Noooooo!" The shamed cries grew louder, whoops of laughter starting to erupt.

The Gypsy laughed and danced and sashayed her hips. She laughed that deep throaty laughter that sounded so scandalous in the throat of this tan-skinned Gypsy laughing at a Gage kid while she danced her feet a sort of jig and rocked her shoulders, rocking him too, his head clasped between her hands, the right hand pressing the Coke bottle to his bruised eye in a clumsy mock of a helping hand that sharply pained the knot there beside his shut right eye while his left eye glared out at the Gypsy's laughing face bobbing just inches away, at her big teeth shining. She saw his glare and kissed the air about his face mocking him for a furious child, then she winked at him and laughed into his face. He tilted his head away and glared bug-eyed at the spectacle of his own humiliation. "She got me," he thought. She was mocking him without mercy. The black eye she'd given him was nothing beside the joke she'd made of him. He was a laughingstock. His face burned with shame. He was a public disgrace.

Bones stood stiff and mute. His face felt bee-stung. He wished the bus would come. He glowered with bowed head down at her dancing feet while she persisted, the silly Gypsy, in pressing the bottle to his eye. He was very proud and refused to stoop even to defend himself against such outrage. Worse than that he felt stung

by the Gypsy's betrayal. Last night he had thought that she was his friend. That he would probably never see her again had been like a thorn in his heart. He winced at his own stupidity and thought that there must be something wanting in his character. To think that he could be so stupid as to forget that the Gypsies treat all Gages as fools! Had his brain gone dead?

The Gypsy caught his chin and tried to lift his face. "Bones. . ."

"Bus!" went up a shout. On a sudden the straggly line buckled and straightened like a spasm passing through a snake and he got jostled backwards and the Gypsy's hands jarred loose. He looked up the long hill and saw an orange dot the size of a pea just now and immense relief flooded through him.

"Bones?" called a voice at his back so low that he could barely hear it.

He would not turn to look at her. She could go to hell.

The bus came on, crawled down the hill with agonized slowness.

"Bones!" tolled the faint voice. He felt a finger tapping his back but ignored it.

The bus pulled up and stopped and the doors slapped open and the school children filed on and rushed for

seats and Bones stepped forward.

"Bye Bones!" came a small voice.

He didn't look back. He climbed the steps and strode down the aisle and swung into an empty seat.

He heard a sudden loud knocking at the window and looked and saw Viola's eyes peeking over the glass. She took a step back and he could see her face. She was not laughing now. Her face shone with sweet yearning. One hand toyed with the hair falling on her breast, twirled a ringlet round her finger. She framed a wistful little smile and wagged her fingers at him.

He moved next to the glass and watched her. An aching discord trembled inside him.

Then the bus began to move off and he walled one eye to the window, watching her slide from view.

"Bye Bones," she called from out of sight.

Then she was there again in the window, running alongside the bus through the edge of the trailer park, her face bobbing in a billow of black hair, waving one arm overhead and shouting, "Bye, Bones!"

Lynn Archer spun up out of the front seat and shrieked in shrill soprano: "Byyyyyyyyye Bones!" He flopped a limp wrist in mock farewell and cried again: "Byyyyyyyyye Bones!"

The crowd of roisterers whooped with laughter.

Lynn Archer swept up his arms and dipped them and the crowd chanted: "Byyyyyyyyye Bones!" They shrieked like they would shred their vocal chords.

He thought that the Gypsy was shameless. She knew nothing of the agony of humiliation, the freezing and burning and turning to stone. She was a Gypsy and such shame was foreign to her. She was immune to such torments. He glared back at the pack of faces howling back at him. He thought he'd love to fight them all, one at a time, bareknuckled and no holds barred! He'd pass around the black-eyed peas, by God he would!

"Byyyyyyyyye Bones!" shrieked the demented chorus.

He felt feverish. His stomach was turning turtle. He was sure he was going to be ill. He swore he'd hate girls forever. He sunk his face deep inside his coat and mumbled the ballad of Sam Hall. It helped to steel his nerves. Let them scream! Goddamn their eyes! He sunk his head deeper inside his sheepskin collar and jerked the zipper up to his eyes.

Lynn Archer dipped his arms like a lunatic maestro conducting a symphony of Bedlamites. Like dements they thrilled to their own voices. The bus's arched roof amplified their shrieks to a deafening pitch.

The boy sank out of sight and the fur collar stood headless and the coat seemed inhabited by a tailer's

dummy stood upright there. Maestro Lynn Archer lifted his hands and dipped them and the demented chorus, a many-headed monster, strained furious red faces toward the upright headless boy and shrieked:

"BYYYYYYYYE BONES!"

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CHAPTER V

HERR KOCH

Bones sauntered out under a sky of bottomless blue, with here and there a few cottonbowl clouds pelted by the gusts. He went along in short pants swinging a tin bucket headed up the slope for the woods. He heard his name shouted, blurry on the wind, and looked around. Viola was running across the sage field, one arm waving in the air, her black hair lashing.

"Wait!"

The boys playing football behind her fell idle and started shouting. They cursed her in disgust then shifted a player to balance the sides and went back to playing.

She scuttled on her backside down the far clay bank, crossed the dirt road out of sight and reappeared, clambering over the near bank and sprinting forward, knees punching her flowered skirt, hair boiling like pitch smoke.

She loped down to a stop and swung on his arm a minute, panting. She laughed her big teeth at him and fell in beside him, prattling gayly. Her hair swirled in the gusts and stood out from her head shivering, sieving rainbow glimmers from the sunlight. They went through a pine grove and came to a barbwire fence. He stretched the wires and she balled her skirt about her

hips and ducked through and he followed. They stepped into a dim cool forest where the sun seeped through the hardwood trees and freckled the sea of dead leaves.

He cleared a spot of leaves and raked up the rich humus with a stick then scooped and packed the bucket full of black dirt which his mother would use to see flowers in clay pots. They crab-sidled back through the fence and walked through the pines to the grass slope. She had not stopped talking.

He watched her hair fly in the gusts. It lapped her face and shuddered like fast running water, then wrapped her like black vines, her eyes and teeth looking through, then lashed across the bucket and whipped his arm.

They quartered left at the slope; the gusts buzzed across her mouth making the words resonate off her lips. She sounded like she was speaking down into a fruit jar. He hardly listened to the words for listening to the wind strumming her syllables to the low notes of an oboe.

". . .We buried my brother two years ago. His name was Paco. He looked like you. He had a hole in his heart the size of a dime. When he was four he caught pneumonia, then Bam!" (she snapped her fingers before his eyes) "He was dead like that! Now Mamma's gonna have another one. If it's a boy we'll name it Alfredo.

If it's a girl we'll call it. . ."

Her mouth hung open, her eyes flicked past his face and widened. At that moment he heard whickering flaps behind him and swung round as a huge white fighting rooster, named Herr Koch, hurtled against him, jamming two-inch spurs into his bare left thigh.

The shock of pain astounded him. Bones dropped his bucket and recoiled with a scream. The fighting cock bounced after him with piston-like jabs, striking like a snake with his beak. The boy fled stumbling from the blitzing rooster, gained a few yards distance, then scotched a foot and hurled himself in reverse, plunging, with his fists swinging. This boy was known to have a temper.

A muffled thud drove into Herr Koch's craw. He expelled a squawk and flopped down in a squat, huffing as with hiccups, then stood and ruffled his feathers. The boy's hands plunged for the cock's neck. The cock, rising with a ruffle, backbeat his wings and whirled off. And the boy, in a rage, lunged on into a sprint and dashed wildly after him.

Pursuing the cock past a toolshed, Bones caught a leaning hoe and raced on. The big rooster darted and weaved on forked feet a rapid patter: tuktuktuktuktuktuk, with the boy trailing a few yards. The rooster swerved

round a trellis of grapevine and streaked by a chicken-wire fence and suddenly found he'd run out of obstructions into open ground and dashed across Joe Dupree's backyard.

With no obstructions to slow him now, Bones pumped his thin legs to their uttermost, eyes glued to the flame tail bouncing over the cock's patter striking cuneiform in clay and dung: Tuk-Tuk-Tuk. He narrowed the gap to the hoe's length and swung up the hoe in alignment with the cock and, saliva filling his mouth at the foresight of blood, launched an overhead swing with both hands.

Joe Dupree flung himself from his back door: "STOP!"

Spasming his arms against the downswing, he swerved the hoe in the ground beside the cock. The handle jammed across his chest through his underarm and his sneakers slashed to a stop on a bald spot greased with fresh droppings. He stared after Herr Koch fleeing on. And at the guillotine hoe in his hands that'd only chopped a clod. Then he faced the rant of Joe Dupree.

"You kill my cock by God you'll answer for it!" Joe shouted, shaking a clenched fist. "You drop that hoe where you're astandin' and git your ass off my place!"

He felt the pain sucking at his leg and looked down at the blood feathered on his leg. A pair of bright strings were crawling the length of his leg into his sock.

"It was your rooster attacked me first on my land!" His voice shook. He flung the hoe between himself and Joe and started off.

Viola rushed up and knelt and reddened her hand on his thigh looking at the raw holes. "O Bones! My poor baby!" She stood and took his arm. "Come on with me. I'll put some of Daddy's whiskey on it to kill the germs."

"Baby!" Joe cackled. "You hear what she called him, Mamma?"

Joe's wife, Maggie, had come out and was standing, fat and squat at his side, following them with her small black eyes.

"She called him, Baby!" crowed Joe. "Now she's goin' to coddle that leg with whiskey!"

"A shame," said Mag.

They walked on past the porch and started for the grass slope.

"She'll coddle it I reckon," said Joe. "She'll coddle his prick where her crotch pouts."

Viola whirled and with a violent head-toss spat at Joe: "Pffat!" Then she whirled her back and hooked Bones' arm and sauntered beside him down the slope, swishing her hips.

Joe flung his finger at Bones. "The boy plays with her, to the very letter, if you get my drift. She can't

keep her hands off him. Them Gypsy women are all a pack of bitches. It's in their blood. Born to it. Just look at that little gypsy bitch wag her tail!" said Joe. "Trying to shake the grass off her ass I reckon. Hee-hee."

Mag squinted up a sidelong gaze at him. "Maybe it's your eyes, Joe," she said.

"What?" Joe squawked like one of his laying hens and stared at his wife. "Now how come you to say a thing like that, Mamma?" He glared at their two backs jaunting down the hill then saw the spilled bucket. "Hey, ya'll forgot your goddamn bucket!" he bawled. He pitched toward the bucket and slammed a brogan toe into it. It leaped in the air with a tin belch and pitched clanking down the slope past them.

They went to the trailer. Bones stepped up behind Viola into the livingroom. He watched as she went to the kitchen cabinets and took down a quart of bourbon.

"What are you doing with that bottle?" said Viola's mother, Carmena, coming into the kitchen. "Give it to me!"

"It's for Bones' leg, Mamma, a rooster jobbed holes in it."

Carmena glowered at his leg. "Lord God!" she said. She took the bottle from Viola and handed down rubbing

alcohol and a wad of cotton. "Here, use this!"

"Mama, this man up the hill here said we were all a pack of bitches."

"Well, what did you say is what I'm wondering?"

"I never said a mumbling word."

"Then that was the first time."

Viola sat hard on the floor and fixed about knee bent and leg flung and tore tufts from the wad and dabbed his punctures, squinting. "His eyes were jumping out of their sockets he was so mad. I started to kick him in the shinbone."

Bones looked down the back of her blouse slacked open round her hunched shoulders. Her shoulder blades stuck out of her back like sprouting wings. Watching her he thought of a story he'd read in English class about a young boy, a Scot, his own age who fought an eagle off a dead lamb and got flogged half to death and his head hammered by the hooked beak before he finally dashed the bird's brains out and himself sank down and lay bloody and stunned senseless.

For a minute he was that young Scot. An angel-girl with small wings landed down and knelt and ministered to the wounds of the stricken boy, her hair, black as raven's wings, feathered forward and trailed down his leg. The angel girl looked up at him and smiled. "That

rooster really gouged you, Boy."

Bravely he smiled a crooked smile and spoke down to the ministering seraph: "You watch out for Joe, Viola, he's mean as a rattler."

"Shit on him," muttered the Gypsy.

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CHAPTER VI
THE CAT AND THE GOBLIN

The large sleek black beauty had appeared out of nowhere. It had shied and fled when Bones had tried to coax it with a purloined weiner, so he'd flung it at the cat and watched it creep back to gnash it down then slip off to the woods. From his back yard Joe Dupree had seen the cat come slinking round eying his chicks for quarry. The boy thought that Joe would shoot the cat for he had a hen and flock of biddy's running loose, but he saw Joe herd the cheeping chicks into a waist high pen of chickenwire. Next day when the cat came skulking Joe shot meat scraps at it with a slingshot.

The boy had been hacking away every afternoon with a slingblade at an acre of slope grown up in broomstraw. He'd go out about four to cut another swatch out of the sagebrush. Three days he'd watched Joe shorten his throw. On the second day he stuck the slingshot in a back pocket and pitched out scraps by hand. He crooned to the cat while he fed it: "Here kitty, kitty!" The fifth day the cat ventured close enough to snatch a pork rind from Joe's hand and Joe lunged, gloved bunched fingers flaring to crabclaws, and seized the cat's neck and jerked it up and pinned its legs against his underarm, and him wearing a denim coat, while it jerked and

squirmed.

Joe stood up and whooped: "Goddamn, I got you now you thieving son of a bitch!"

Bones wondered what Joe meant to do with the cat. He decided to go ask. The boy dropped his slingblade and walked up the hill to Joe and said: "That's sure a fine cat."

Joe looked at Bones. "Well goddamn. It's that selfsame son of a she-dog that tried to kill my rooster with a hoe!"

"You plan to tame that cat there?"

"Tame's ass!" Joe grinned. "I'm goin' to give this cat his just reward, that's what I'm goin' to do with him!"

"What kind of reward?"

"Why, a deservin' award. He gets his just due."

"You tame him and he'll catch rats."

"The hell you say! Not when biddy chicks are easy to get. Hell no, I got no use for a black pussy. Less'n it's that two-legged kind."

The boy pulled out and unraveled a crumpled bill. "I'll pay you this dollar for him."

"Hoo!" said Joe. "T'hell with you! You can wipe your ass on that dollar bill! Goddamn git on now! Go home! If he was yourn he'd be back eatin' my chickens

fore nightfall. No sirree, he's gettin' the reward that's due him." Joe snarled with sudden spite: "By God, ye always stickin' in your two cents worth, ain't ye? Your trouble is you don't take no dicipline nor guidance. You are rebellious against your elders and your own house. I'm faultin' your Pa for that. He's spoilt you rotten when he should of flailed the pure hell out of you. Your Ma's got more sense. She puts stripes on your ass. 'Fore long you'll go to drink and whores and hell won't have you." Joe flung out his arm. "Now go on and get yore ass off my land! Me and this cat here's takin' a walk!"

Bones turned and started down the slope. He was wildly curious to know what Joe would do to the cat and thought he'd follow him. He turned back and said, "If you let me go too, I'll give you a file I found." He whipped it out of his back pocket and held it up. "It's a good one. I sharpened my slingblade with it."

Joe eyed him shrewdly for a quarter minute. "Tell you what I'll do; I'll let you go if you think you can keep yore damn trap shut! Might do you good to see a thing get what it's got coming to it. You're goin' to get yourn soon enough. Day's acomin'. Just like this cat." He grinned and showed his long teeth and shouted, "Ha!" just like he'd seen it happen in his head.

"I won't say a word, I promise."

Holding the cat's feet clamped against his side, Joe fetched loops of rope from the shed and a brick from under the porch then he started off down the slope and across the highway and the fields and Bones went along beside him. They turned onto a dirt road and followed that to Johnson's pasture and then they crossed the hilly pasture to the pond.

The pond stood in the shade of blackoaks and persimmon trees footed round the mudbank and cast a lace fringe of shadow round the emerald green pond. There was a motheaten treeshade round the center of the pond. A pillar of light stood on that green luster and the sun reflected off the green pond. It looked like a gleam on a jewel.

Joe stood on the bank and tied one end of the rope to the brick and measured out about eight feet using his height plus two foot and adding another three feet which he fashioned into a noose and slipped over the cat's head. Joe's measurements made the boy wonder how often he'd done this thing before.

Joe took up the brick in one hand, caught the cat's neck in the other, whirled them both full circle, dipping low on the backswing and coming round on the upswing and launching them both into the air over the pond. Cat and

brick floated apart in the air then the green water splashed twice in the sun then quivered with ripples round the cat's head for the cat seemed to have slipped the noose somehow and started out swimming toward the bank with his head up. The boy's heart soared with hope. Then the visible shape of slack rope curving down the green water straightened like a plumbline and snatched the cat's head just inches underwater where his spasms swirled the water and his heaved breath boiled the surface with swarms of bubbles.

The boy's gaped eyes jerked from Joe to the cat and back to Joe.

Joe squatted on his heels and chuckled through his nose. His hands slowly mounted a cigarette to his lips and lit it without his eyes ever budging once from the bubbling roil, a faint spot of lace on the green water where the cat now convulsed and hooted bubbles from half a foot underwater. Joe puffed his cigarette and then grinned and his lips thinned like two earthworms mating.

The noon sun blared through the ring of trees and sank light down the green water and showed the black cat as clear as if he clawed against a pane of warped green glass.

Plucked underwater the cat first hooted out air and sucked his lungs half-full of water and jerked with

violent convulsions and soon he'd lost vigor and a wavering line of bubbles seeped from his open mouth, a swarm of fizz escaped his fur. His writhing grew languid and then stilled and he curled as if asleep on a rug except his mouth was drawn back in a fixed snarl. He began to sink slowly in the green water till he was just a shadow then he faded out of sight and the slack rope looped and followed him down. The green water flattened to mirror stillness and white clouds and blue sky and the lacey fringe of treeshade stood back stilly on the pond. And the yellow sun festered on the water like a spot of pus.

Squatting on his heels, Joe Dupree absorbed and self-forgotten, had watched the cat, his cigarette dangling between his knees, his face lit by a grin. A green vein pulsed in his temple. A white rope of smoke slid round his darkstained thumb, rose curling in the air and raveled before his eyes.

Bones backstepped softly to the trees and turned and walked home. He felt cold in the midriff like he'd swallowed an ice cube.

He had hunted and killed deer, bobcat, coon, smaller game and seen things killed and he'd studied the eyes of the shot and dying. He had wrung the necks of chickens and plucked apart struggling things that fluttered, buzzed, and clicked and he had fought and liked the hard

smack of fists on flesh and bled and brought blood and taken pride of bravery in doing both. But that day he walked home frightened by the glimmer of something sor-did, dark and deep still beyond his boyhood experience.

He'd never forget Joe's shadow-dappled face with the goblin grin that had his ears been pointed his face would have been the spit of a goat-leg'd creature with horns, he'd seen in a picture book leering from leaf cover at women dancing naked in a woods and whirling in their trailing gauzes.

And the black cat that had convulsed bubbles the size of doubleought buckshot and thrashed and wavered and faded like India ink down the green water of that sunshot pond had fixed himself thereafter indelibly, as by colorfast dye, upon his susceptible young eyes.

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CHAPTER VII
THE GRAVEYARD SHIFT

Bones Gentry turned a page of his reader and saw that the story ended there. His eyes swerved to the righthand page where in the margin was written in lipstick: "You little shit! When you kiss me I feel screwed blue!"

How could she know? he wondered. The Gypsy was a notorious virgin. She was mocking him, of course. She'd written his name in a red heart and kissed it. Her lipprints showed precise creases. On the righthand page there was Edgar Poe's oval photograph. His wry-mouth showed the wormgnaw of grave doubts. A red kiss was imprinted across his harried eyes.

The boy looked back and read the last page of the story. He wondered if Peyton Farquar had reached his wife's arms would he have died in bliss?

He fingered out his two dollar pocketwatch from his watchpocket and saw that it said four o'clock and slid the loud ticker back in the pouch. He stretched and yawned. He pushed back the milkstool, his seat, from the cable spool, his desk, and strode through the house and opened the door and shoved the screen and leaped the porch steps and raced up the trail through the sagebrush field.

He'd go now to fetch that Gyp those two rare fine dearbought editions of fairy tales. "Outsized tomes!" said Billy Raulston, his grandpa. "I mean the maker's art! Fine gold paper in the edges, pictures daubed by artists with real colors, they'd bring a pretty penny at an auction. Rich lady'd take 'em home just to give her bookcase class. You can take 'em home and do what you want to with 'em. They're yourn."

Bones had taken the two prized books home. He read them often in early morning hours. Some nights one book would clap shut on his pillow, and if he was waked by frightful dreams he'd snap on the lamp and lift open the booklid. The two books were his favorite possessions. For that reason he wanted to give them to the Gypsy.

He snatched a look north a look south and ran on across highway 41 and ran past his father's store and service station, the nucleus of a rural settlement in northwest Georgia, beside which stood a two-acre trailer park where Gypsy trailers stood parked among the pecan trees. Bones ran on behind the store to the washhouse, the near end of which was a garage. He stopped at the garage doors and unbarred the doors and dragged one door open just a foot and slipped inside and stepped in the dimness alongside the red Buick. Sunlight slivered between the wall slats on one side. He clasped the rear

door handle to yank it open when he heard a shriek of laughter at his back. Then he heard exhilarated voices chattering in Romany just beyond the crossboards. The top edge of a board at his hip glowed with light and he stooped and put his eye to it. The quarter-inch crack between the boards flared his gaze beyond the planks into the washroom upon a full-length view of three Gypsy girls at the far wall cavorting naked in a showerstall beneath a blast of water spray.

Ripply black snakelets lashed about their shoulders and their backs spinecurved into molten fleshdrops that quivered from their dancing in time to their breast bobbles.

"Figures don't lie," whispered Bones.

Before his eyes they lathered each other's backs and buttock cracks and shrieked laughter and chattered in Romany. Merriment became epidemic. One danced in apparent wild mockery of somebody and her breasts jogged with her jumps and the other two screamed laughter and danced back at her.

Asmile at the scene, Bones beheld these three Gypsy maids at play when he whiffed from somewhere a familiar perfume and wondered wherefrom. A hand dropped on his shoulder and he froze. Viola bent down beside him and leaned her eyes to the wallcrack.

He stood and stepped back with his face flushed. A Peeping Tom, he thought. She gathered the wild black mane back from her face while she peered and he saw a sharktooth dangle in its silver wire from her earlobe. He stood on a slant behind her and watched her quarterface mein, threefourths averted. He glimpsed the smile fade from her mouthcorner as she witnessed what he's seen.

She unbent and cast a glittery gaze at him. She tossed her head toward the door and strode out. He followed her outside and he turned and pushed the door to and dropped the bar then turned around to face her. She jammed his chest with her handheels jarring him back into the doorplanks which rumbled lumbery. He stopped dead and stood there against the wall, watching her hands.

She clasped his head between her hands and kissed him savagely, smearing her mouth. Then she snatched back her head and bared her teeth like some feral thing and 'Omigod' flashed in his brain too late for the open-handed swing exploded in his eye and smote his face sideways. Through falling stars he saw her whirl her back to him and stride away toward the trailer. He started after her. His nose suddenly filled up his lips and spilled down his chin and dripped on his shirtfront. He switched directions then and walked to the store.

He went inside the store and found some neighbors

discussing the Gypsies, a subject of controversy thereabouts. He strode through the store headbowed, his right hand catching drops from his nose, passing a fat woman's suety upperarm that was spotted with brown moles. He went to the restroom in the backroom and whirled the cold water cock and lifted handfulls to his nose and sniffed it up while he listened out for the talk up front.

"They steal kids and raise 'em as Gypsies. It's a wellknown fact," Si Woody said.

Flavil said, "Well, I've seen a thousand of 'em and I've never seen a kid not a Gyp among 'em. So where's the ones they stole?"

"That sassy Gyp, Viola, will take that boy of yourn," Joe Dupree said. "He'll run off with his kidnapper."

Bones looked out the restroom door. He saw Eddie Burton hold out his cigar and touch off the ash. "I once said that Gypsies on your doorstep air better'n felon criminals. But then I thought about it and couldn't tell the difference."

Bones could see Flavil smile and gaze out the window. Willa Mae sided with those who condemned the Gypsies.

She said, "From Canada to Key West they know about us. They know they can talk Mr. Flavil, that's what they call him, into any fool thing. They butter him up. He gives them what they ask for. Any riffraff blows in off

the road is at home here. Flavil will give his own bed to them."

"But not with you in it, Willa Mae," said Flavil.

"Flavil likes them Gypsies," said Ralph Leatherwood.

"He wishes he was one of 'em."

"More's the fool," said Joe Dupree.

"My father is no fool," spoke the boy aloud to the storefront.

Heads turned at him.

He stepped back into the restroom. Cold water came clear to his hand and he snatched a towel and dried his face. He clawed a part in his hair and walked back through the store, ignoring queries about the bloody nose, and dropped out the front door. He saw Viola sitting in a chair next to a fortune teller's sign which stood beside the highway. The sign pictured a spidered palm. He walked out and stood before her and gazed down into her lifted face.

The Gypsy rose and stood before him. She was a half-head taller than he. He was twelve, she was fifteen.

"Get away from me!" she spat. "Go ask those naked girls to be your friends!"

"All right." He shrugged. "If you want it that-away. Goodbye." He turned and walked away, his hands down his pockets. He knew that he'd be banished for a

day and then she'd recruit him back into affection.

"You watch naked girls and you won't even kiss me," she called at his back. "So you can kiss my ass!"

He went to the garage and unlatched the door and went in and took out the two large tomes from the back seat of the red Buick and went outside and latched the garage door. The huge volumes filled his reach from fingertips to armpit. He walked back toward the front of the store. He cut a long look at her and she stood looking back. Waves and coils of heavy hair were high-piled and clasped and spilling down. Her underlip never even had a sulk on it and that was very odd. Well, he was mad as hell and would not give the books to her, not after she'd struck him! Not in this life! he told himself. He looked out at the Gypsy. She stood with her hands on her hips and watched him as he went on round to the front of the store. His hand reached for the brass doorknob and twisted it and she shouted, "Bones!" and he stepped back off the stoop and saw her hand flung aloft and she stood eager on her toes.

Her face was half lost in that wild mane. Her fingercurls snatched at air. He walked out to face her. He thought this was damned odd. She'd violated her M.O.

"Pobrecity!" she said. She caught his cheeks in her fingers and kissed his nose and lips. He smelled

rich cookery on her breath. "I was looking for you when I found you in the garage watching those naked girls. I came to tell you that we're leaving tomorrow."

Aha! So there was no day left in which to sulk. "I'm very sorry that you're leaving. But look! I'm a gentleman. I don't have any defense against women. I'll ask you please not to hit me again. It makes me mad as hell!"

"And if I do?"

"Then you can have the rest of the world for company. I'm not going to stand still while you whip the shit out of me."

"Well I won't hit you again. I'll be gone when you get up. And you'll have the rest of your life without me."

He looked at the books under his arm and then he lifted them toward her. "I brought these books to you. I'd gone inside the garage to get them from the backseat of the car. Then I heard those girls in the shower."

She took the books and sat down in the chair and turned their pages. "These are very beautiful," she said. "Don't you want to keep them?"

"I want you to have them."

She beamed a smile of perception at him. She rose and stepped before him and kissed his cheek. "I know

they're very dear to you." She turned and carried the books inside the trailer and came back out.

She took a confiding pose beside him. "Now tell me, did you think those girls were pretty?"

He nodded. "Sure, everybody knows they're pretty. All three, Anglica, Suzie, Cleo. Of course they're not as pretty as you."

"But you've never seen me naked?"

Bones smiled. Her fine figure shone sweet and clear as moonlight through the pines. His hands, he thought, had seen her very well. He'd wrestled every inch of her. He'd glimmed that form squirming in the loose skin of skirt and blouse. His finger had clenched her buttock crack, her breast crushed upon his cheek, her every inch groped and fingerfelt that would give a blind man visions of Delilah.

"Now tell me this, and I know you're an honest boy: If you'd known those girls were bathing and that the crack was there would you have gone to look?"

His hand to his brow, he pondered the question. His grin began to give him away.

"You little shit." She spat at his shoes.

"Sticks and stones," he said.

"Go with me."

"Whereabout?"

"Go to New Orleans with me."

"New Orleans! Holy shit!"

"Sure. We'll case the joint. You and me!"

His eyes gaped with disbelief. "Hellfire! I'm not a Gypsy! I'd have to beg off you to eat!"

"You can have all the money I've got. I'll dance in the clubs. I'll keep you in money."

"Like a whore keeps her pimp?"

"You got it."

"Quit school? Run away from home? Damn!"

"Fuck school! Fuck home! Run away! Damn right! Fuck yes! Are you still tied to your Mama? Do you suck her breasts? Do you suck your thumb? Here, suck mine! You know where you can stick it!" She folded her arms and gazed at him. She dropped her eyes. "You can have my bed. I'll take the sofa; it's a hideaway."

"I want to go, Viola, but I can't! If I were a couple years older I'd go. Still, I'm tempted. Ask me again in two years."

"If I see you I'll ask you. I don't know if my folks will come back here."

"They've been coming back for two years."

"I know. Maybe we will come back. Go walking with me, little boy. We won't have any time tomorrow: I have to clean the trailer and tape the drawers shut."

"I'll go ask my dad."

"Goddamn!" she shouted. "Do you ask permission to shit?"

"All right." Bones studied her bare feet and nodded. "Copasetic. I'll go with you."

"Come on then. Let's go visit Stoner's barn. I'll give you a kiss or two. They may have to last you for the rest of your life!"

"The hell you preach! When I reach fifteen, I'll hitchhike to New Orleans."

She cradled her hand in his elbowcrook and they started walking up the hill. "Maybe I'll see you next May. I'll be sixteen. I'll become a stripper in the French Quarter. I'll buy me a Cadillac. I'll come looking for a boychild. I'll say, 'Where he is? Why that there is a man!' Ha ha ha! O! Kiss me boy!"

They sauntered up the slope and angled north onto a far stretch of newmown field that ran beside a cornfield for a quarter mile. A split oak fence ran between the corn and fallow fields. It was swamped in weeds and vines. Cottonwoods stood footed along the fence row. Whippy winds bore their yellow leaves slantwise past. The boy caught a leaf out of the air. It looked like a dogtooth flame crawling a matchstick. He watched how some leaves sledged down the wind and some tumbled. A

blizzard of milkweed flurried athwart their path. He told her that the chances of each wild blown seed in the Great Ova the World was, like the chances of any one sperm to drill the egg, one in a million. Thus spake Leech the teacher.

Abruptly she turned on him with pouted lips and he twisted his face away. "You're so sudden! Calm yourself down! Don't fly mad now! Listen to me. For a man kisses should be rare. That's a man's way. Mine and Mike Hammer's way. It's an unwritten law."

She ran off a ways and stopped and looked back across her shoulder. "When Murder!" She cocked her bottom left. "And Hell!" She cocked her bottom right. "And Death!" She clenched her buttocks in a crotchsnap. "Start to bore you, Boy! Then give me a call!" She whirled at him and danced flamenco on the spot.

She mocks at horrors she's never known, he thought. Mockery is the first puerile form of wit, so Klappox had quoted Santayana, a philosopher. The boy had looked up the word puerile which the dictionary called a contemptuous term that meant childish, immature and silly. How those words had distressed him for days for he hated to see the Gypsy diminished. Bones said, "You're strutting your butt in my face! It's your rude way of telling people to kiss your ass."

"You're so dim smart!" She danced a circle round him then she ran a long ways ahead and stood there clawing at her hair and shouting insults at him. She whirled away and ran on and whirled back and broke into a dance. She cried downfield at him, "This joint is jumping!" She exulted in leaps and bounced foot to foot and laughed it seemed from sheer joy. The blissmad Gypsy tauting the Gage nestling.

He was walking along the fallow field there smiling at that Gypsy's gay delerium when he saw what he knew was truly a holy wonder then occur before his eyes. A wind-rent opened in a thunderhead and the hidden sun, which seemed to have burned the hole there, rolled into the little eyefent and sank a fluted beam straight down the air upon the Gypsy where she sang and danced. From cloudrent to earth stood a pillar of light. An unbelievable sight. Her choppy hair leaped, a blue ribbon in it, while the sunwrought creature stomp-strutted and plainted some Flamenco tragedy. The great spotlight of the world shone upon her alone. And then the brass eye rolled up and the cloudrift closed like a shut lid upon God's eye that dropped a gaze upon the Gypsy's madcap verve.

"By God!" he cried. Why he and God had the same girl!

Such glory must be honored. He loped after her,

composing himself a speech. "Listen to me!" he shouted. He stood before her and raised a finger like an oracle. "Because on this day you were a child dancing in a sun-beam I shall name this day Viola Day. Today is Viola Day. V-Day. V-D for short." He grinned but added. "I'm dead serious."

"O boy!"

"You're the Queen of the day. This day is your day. I'm your subject. I'm a knight. Dragons my specialty, Ma'am. Hell in any shape."

She contemplated him with a frown. "Hmm. Boy, are you listening to yourself?" She tested his sincerity with a lingering kiss. He never flinched. She smiled her big teeth. "My subject?" she queried.

"Sure. That's what I said. You're the queen. I'm just shit on your shoes."

"You'll do anything I say?"

He cried at her. "What do you want, my head on a plate? When I say I'll do a thing, I'll do it! I don't lie like Gypsies!"

She crouched a hand on one hip. "Well, I do thank you!" she drawled. She turned her back to him and cocked her hip and dropped her gaze off her shoulder and tilted down a nod.

He shrugged and turned up his palms. "Hell, I've

been kissing your ass ever since Day One." He kissed her skirt swell and bowed.

"O baby, you do live up to your word!" She put her arms round his neck. "Stay out late with me. This is my day. Let's go back in the woods. We'll build a fire at the last campsite."

"Whatever you say, O Queen."

Bones took out his pocket knife and cut a hickory limb and trimmed it and set off into the woods twirling the spiderstick in front of him. Small birds flared before him. The sun set at their back. The air turned chill.

When they reached the campsite he turned back into the woods and gathered armloads of brush and dragged up dead limbs. He snapped a handfull of twigs and criss-crossed them into a low heap and ripped a wood match up his denim thigh and thrust it with slow care into the broken sticks. The match flared brighter then a flame leaped apart and then another. He dribbled dry leaves upon the thin blazes and they climbed toward his fingers. He fed larger twigs to the flames and then small limbs and then he dragged up two dead oak limbs and nudged them into the fire and the blaze soon rose overhead.

He sat down on a mossback log beside her. She held his hands on her lap. They looked at each other and

waited for the other to speak. Then the fire shifted and a log rolled out and he stood up to mend up the fire and she rose and tapped his shoulder. "'Scuse me. Gotta run! Be back soon. 'Bout one second flat."

She stepped off in the dark at his back. He shoved limbs into the fire. He heard water rattle on dead leaves. He stilled his hands and listened. Then her footfalls came crashing back. Crouched there by the fire, he looked around and saw her duck a low limb and lift her face into a whorl of orbweb and stare at him luridlooking all in spiderweb veiling, a tatterclad headshroud that looked like netting of a bride deathtook her now forsaking her crypt. A fat black and yellow spider scuttled up her temple and went asea in her stormy mane. She rolled her eyes after the spider and he rose and went to her and flicked the spider from her hair and swiped the web from her face. She caught his hands and they went to the log and sat down.

She slipped her hand behind her skirtwaist and stuck her hand to the elbow down a thief's pocket and brought out a halfpint of whiskey. The Gypsy untwisted the cap then Bones took it from her hands. He looked overhead at a red oak with red leaves then he looked about the ground. He found an acorn in its cap. He'd once painted an acorn into a thumbend-sized Frenchman

in beret. He shucked the cap and poised it like a goblet by its little twig stem and lifted off the fluted bottlecap and tilted the bottlemouth and brimmed the cup with one fat drop. She leaned to the tiny goblet and her lids dropped shut and smelt the whiskey as if it were cognac. Half her face toward the woods was lost in darkness, the other half glowed in the firelight. She sighed upon his hand and opened her black eyes. He saw how subtle the Gypsy could be.

She pinched up the little goblet and fed it to his puffed lips. Bones drank from the bottle then shut his eyes. The whiskey went down his throat like a puke-finger. He sucked wind. His mouth flooded with saliva and he swallowed again and again. Spit was his chaser. The sickness passed. He opened his eyes and watched her tilt a drop into the goblet and sip and smile and dark smote half her face.

He watched the Gypsy's hand rise from her lap and her fingers unslot the topmost blouse button. Another thumbtouched button tilted through the hole. She flipped the blousefront open. The folds hung by her breasttips.

The boy caught his breath. This was the first time ever she'd done that! She went braless like all Gypsy women. She caught his hand and led it beneath the blouse. His fingers bumped the swole gland then stuttered up and

over the fleshmound. The nipple tilted before his second finger and slurped its length and nuzzled his palm. His flexed fingertips clasped the breast. She opened a third button and raked the blouse wider. By God! he thought. Here were no sprouted buds of schoolgirls! Here was the Thing itself! High-nippled and fat in the underbelly, the fullbloomed breasts of a grown woman, that is what he witnessed. He touched her right, its iterate left. She clasped his hindhead forward and unweaned his lips. He seemed to recall having done this thing before in some dark past.

He thought that a man of steel would not do it save one that served a queen. He pouted his lips and stoppered them with the supple berry.

The Gypsy lit a cigarette and dropped her gaze upon him and said, "You're the spittin' image of a kid I once knew." She puffed and blew a smoke ring and Bones saw it ripple across strewn stars and galaxies. "I used to nurse Paco. He had a hole in his heart." She dropped her eyes. "He took pneumonia." She sucked the cigarette and blew off smoke overhead. The boy saw a fog swarm the Milky Way. "Lorenzo was standing in the door of the motel. He propped his arm to the doorjamb. The sun came in under his arm. I slit my eyes for the sun. It looked like a drop of blood. Then it set. I looked down

at Paco nursing. And then his mouth fell off the breast. It stayed open. I tilted the breast into his mouth. 'Little Brother,' I said. I held his mouth to the nipple. He had no interest at all. The sight of his lips open like that with no suck in them. . .Like he was dreamin' of the nipple." She dragged at the cigarette and blew off smoke. Bones saw the big dipper through a wavery smoke ring unwinding. "Lorenzo once caught a baby rabbit and brought it home to me. He'd eat out of my hand. He'd snug up to me in bed. The third day he stopped playing and just sat still. Ten minutes later he dropped dead in my hands. Paco died sudden as that."

Bones saw a shooting star pitch across the night-blue sky and spill into her brain. Firelight painted teartracks down one cheek. He saw her tightened mouth wince.

Treefrogs croaked Brekekek Brekekek Brekekek Wivk Wivk.

A bat flittered past like some antic oak leaf.

She sucked the cigarette and flipped the butt into the fire. She looked out at the dark and shuddered as if in appallment at the Cosmos' Design. She dropped her gaze on him and cradled his head in her armcrook like an infant's. She picked up the whiskey and unscrewed the cap and thumbstopped the bottlemouth and turned it up

over her breasttop and dribbled out drops that raced downslope to his nursing mouth.

He flung back his head and cried out, "Whaow! That burns!" But he returned to the whiskey-tinctured breast-tip and decided that it was the way for a man to take a drink. She tried to tilt up his chin and the nipple popped from his lips and he looked into her face. Her lips gleamed, lacquered with liquor. She dropped down her face and kissed him. "Kiss 'em tulips. Baby Tookums. You're my orphant boy. You like to tootle. You never had a tit to suck. Your momma made you suck a bottle. And it's no wonder!" She kissed his face and hissed at him. "You've got your teeth in me! Sweet Jesus, if you weren't so slow in the head I might teach you how to suck a breast! Are you the one boy in all creation who can't learn to suck a tit? My luck!"

"My front tooth is chipped," he said. He pushed up his lip and showed it to her. She felt with her finger the front sawtooth notched with a razorous edge.

He resolved that minute to have that tooth capped before she came back. He looked into her black eyes. "Viola, O Queen, I've got to go. With your permission of course. I'm going to get beat when I get home."

"But isn't my company worth it?"

He smiled and nodded. A woman good enough for God

was good enough for him.

Her teeth shone smiling. She kissed him and stood up and buttoned her blouse and dusted off her skirt with two handwipes each buttock. Bones pitched woodsdirt on the fire. He kicked out a redhot heart of oak and rolled it underfoot while his shoesole blazed then he walked in a circle flame licking up like from demigod or demon flameshod.

He buried the coconut sized meteroid in a cone of humus and they stepped back through the woods singlefile, she following. They veered from the scent of deathreek and Bones looked to the moon for compass. Their feet crashed in the claustral dark till they emerged from the woods and went abreast down the slope. They reached the washhouse and Bones stepped into the dark beneath the eave's overhang. "Every kiss will cost me another stripe, O Queen."

"Suffer! Show me your stripes tomorrow. Tell me it's not worth it. It's hello when you come, boy. It's O hell when you go."

"Listen," said Viola. "Meet me at the campfire tomorrow at twelve o'clock. I'll dance naked for you. If you swear to me that you'll stay away from cracks in walls and other girl's cracks. I'm a virgin and you mustn't touch me. Except to hug and kiss me half to

death, of course."

"Do I understand you? You are going to do a strip-tease for me?"

"You're so dim smart!" She felt his brow for fever. "It's only love! Not git! Scram! Meet me at the secret spot! Don't be late! You'll be on my shit list, Boy! Twelve o'clock! I have to slave till noon. Scram, Boy! Run! Adios!"

She whirled away and fled a step and whirled full-circled and stepped back in his face. "Ooo Bones! Hello again!" She flung a hand to her heaving breast. "I've missed you awfully! Give me a kiss. . .Ahh, saved my life! That kiss resuscitated me! You breathed down my throat! Mouth to mouth! Raised the dead, Boy! I was a goner!" She kissed him and slit his lips with her tongue and laughed a shade hysterical then cried, "God, I've got to get gone now!"

He'd known her like a method actress to get lost in roles. Paroxysms of helpless mirth shook her. Her teeth flashed on the dark like the Cheshire cat's. Her laughter grew wild and shattery. A maniac inhabited her. She seized up his face and smacked furious wet kisses about his cheeks. "God, it's been ages!" she cried. "Ages! I thought you'd died!" She dashed more kisses about his face then fled again and whirled again and stopped. "O!"

she cried. She seemed stricken. "BOOONES!" she squawled. She sobbed like the actress who'd spilled the tragedy down her blouse. She stood there squalling helpless. The scornful girl was quite shattered. Her wild-eyed squalls appalled him. He gaped at her. He'd never have guessed that such stricken sobs lived down her laughing throat. She hung her head. All hair and eyes and no face except where moonlight slivered the wiggly tresses. He lifted her face. Her cheeks drenched his fingertips. He pulled her to the ground and she sat beside him and dropped her face on his lap and wept for some minutes then hushed and raised her face. "It's only love," she said. "Sing me a song."

Softly he sang the ballad of Sam Hall while she took her face between her hands and kissed his singing mouth and imbibed as it were, the frisson of liptwitch.

He gazed about and wondered what should he do if a blinding flashlight blared on them clung together like this as it had flashed out of the dark on Rob Thomas caught dead in the act fucking his sister, Laurie. Rob was cornered naked in the room cowering like a guilty thing before the stark beam of light blinding him like the eye of God or hell and a rattling chain flashed out of the dark again and again and covered his body with blueblack welts which he'd showed to Bones at school.

"Do you still fuck her?" asked Bones. Rob glanced about with a haunted look and didn't answer.

Bones spoke out now with lucid dread: "What do you say when the World's Worst Thing comes by?"

She stuck a cigarette between her lips and queried his eyes in the matchflame she lifted. She sucked the cigarette afire and mushed a smoke ring on his face.

Bones said, "My cousin, Dawn, died of blood cancer. She was my same age. When they lowered the coffin, Vera, who's her mother, jumped up and shouted, 'O no!' Then she fainted on the ground. Dropped like the sudden dead. Said, O no! That's what you say when the World's Worst Thing comes by."

Viola pushed his nose with a forefinger. "You'll say, 'O no!' when I'm gone, Boy! Hasta principio de Mayo. Then you'll say: 'O yes! O goddamn yes!' Want to know what I say when the World's Best Thing comes by? 'O boy!' That's what I say. 'O boy!'"

Bones said, "O Queen, my mother has already called the law."

"You hush, baby!" said the Gypsy. "Babies can't talk! Your folks know that you're in no danger of being murdered."

Bones dragged up his two dollar watch and reflected the moon on its face. "It's one o'clock. If my mother

is awake I'm a dead man! I'll bet she's walking the floor right now with a clock in her hand."

"And a stick in the other hand."

"You know her!"

"Shit! Hours are one minute long when I've got you in my hands. All right, stand up." They stood and she caught his face and kissed him and sighed apparently with the bliss of it. "Meet me at high noon! Don't be late!" She kissed his nosetip. "You know the hardest words in the world to say? Byebye, Baby, Baby Byebye." She sighed and smiled one last and lifted her hand and strode off around the washhouse.

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He turned and ran home. He opened the door with trepidation and stepped into the glare. Behind his back he hushed the door shut. They should have been in bed hours ago but Flavil was sprawled on the old chesterfield and Willa Mae sat in the armchair. On the TV set asquat in the far corner Bones saw long dead Peter Lorre when he was young and thin.

Willa Mae rose to her feet with a menacing look.

Flavil said, "Well well, looky looky. Here comes the Graveyard Shift. You disappeared without a word. You come in after midnight. I intend to know your whereabouts for a few more years!"

Willa Mae strode forward and snatched a fistfull of his hair and jerked his head back and sniffed at his mouth.

"You need stripes on you that'd keep for a month! Where have you been?"

"Visitin' with Viola. She's leaving tomorrow."

"Thank God!" Willa Mae turned away. "And good riddance! Let her stay gone this time! Go ruin some other woman's sleep! Have you been back in the woods with that Gypsy?"

"Yes. We built a fire."

"What do you do?"

How he craved to cry 'Fuck!' in that woman's face! He stood pokerfaced.

"Does she put her hands on you?"

He stared at her. She'd think the Gyp the lowest whore in the state if he admitted to a fraction of the truth. His queen was her whore. Well, he'd let her beat the answer out of him, if she could.

Flavil laughed then said: "Tullus, have you been behaving yourself in a manner that's becoming to a gentleman who's in a woman's company? You follow my drift?"

"Yes, Dad, I sure have. I let a few bad words slip. But I don't cuss near as much as I used to."

Flavil said, "Then go to bed. No, wait just a

minute! How did your face get scratched? It looks like clawmarks."

"Yessir. Viola did that."

"Why?" said Willa Mae.

He stood sullen.

"That's a fair question," said Flavil.

"It's my business, Dad!"

"Did she kiss you?" asked Willa Mae.

Bones stared at her. "That's my business too."

"You answer me! I'll tell you what's your business!"

"Well, you know she kissed him, Willa Mae!" said Flavil. "She kisses him whenever she finds him. She kisses him in the store. I've seen her snatch his head and kiss him so quick he didn't hardly know it happened. She's a Gypsy."

"Well, he's just spent half the night trysting with that Gypsy in the woods. Don't that make you wonder?"

Flavil pulled a wry mouth. "Not much," he said. "Willa Mae, she's been laying hands on that boy since she first blacked his eyes. Get to your room, Tullus. Kiss your mama. And don't do this again without you ask me. We want to know where you are."

Bones kissed Willa Mae on the cheek and then kissed Flavil's cheek likewise, as was his custom. He went to his room and shut the door then tilted his head to the

door.

Willa Mae said, "I smelt her perfume on him. I think I smelt whiskey. Yesterday he spilt a drop of milk on the floor and polished a spot for ten minutes. I tell you they're too close."

"They do esteem each other so! Each seems the ideal of the other."

"He moons over her, Flavil. And him still a child. Why she's old enough to marry."

Bones crept from the door. Tomorrow was Saturday. He set his alarm for ten and turned to his bed. Blinking at the dark he recalled the drunken poet, Klappox, who one night put him in a tophat and took him to a carnival and dealt a fiver to the barker for the boy's education and led him into a tent where he'd witnessed a cooch show. Wild black women cavorted in a molting frenzy till they danced bucknaked, jiggling and bobbling and white teeth aflash. It stretched a grin on his face spite of his raising to witness them blackfolk adance. Would she dance like that or would she stand in one spot and peel her rags like Eve dropping leaves? A flamenco dance would set her tits aquiver. He shut his eyes and smiled at such sight of her in his mind's eye.

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The alarm clock jittered on the bedside table harsh

and frantic as a schoolbell and he reached out and snapped the button then tilted out his feet and sat up. He held a fist to his croupy cough. He dragged into his clothes and laced on his shoes and went into the kitchen. He broke open a biscuit and stuck a slab of ham between the halves. He spooned sugar from the bowl into his coffee cup. His hand twitched and flared white granules across the black formica. He sipped with distaste the chicory coffee that Flavil liked. Spectra flashed from oil beads floating on the coffee. He opened his hand before his eyes and his fingers shook. "Why so nervous?" he asked his trembling hand. Some emotional inflammation afflicted him. He gazed out the window half-bleared with coffeepot steam. An expanse of cloudless blue was what he saw, the Gypsy's face there. He looked at his pocket watch. It showed 11:15. He went outdoors and walked up the path through the sage and crossed the highway to the store. He reached for the doorknob but the door swung open as by witchcraft. He looked up at Isadora's white teeth cobbled in her black smile. Bones stepped inside and sidled past the girl. The big clock on the center-post showed 11:30. Isadora went beside the radio and writhed to jive music that doubtless she had dialed. She was a shapely long lank girl in wornout jeans and running shirt. She'd run in twenty meets and at every

meet she'd been the fleetest of the pack. She was famous in the county, written up in the sports pages, made page one two times.

Bones glared at the lewd nuances wiggling out of her hinny. He dropped back his head and gazed down his nose. "Don't be uncouth!" he said. He turned to Flavil. "Have you seen Viola this morning, Dad?"

"She's gone to Saint Louis, Son."

"St. Louis?"

"An urgent deal came through for Lorenzo and they left out. Willa Mae told Viola you were dead for sleep and she'd better not wake you. The Gypsy left this doll for you." He leaned down and reached under the counter and lifted out a doll of immediate beauty and distinction. He sat it on the countertop. "Said it was a Paris fashion doll. Said to tell you that you could look up its dress but up no other!"

"Ho! Ho! Ho!" Isadora rocked up and down hugging herself.

"She can't be gone!" Bones cried.

"Can too," Flavil corrected. He grinned.

Of course it was a trick! He whipped around and looked out the door half-expecting the Gypsy to arrive at his back. He looked back at Flavil who held out the doll toward him.

Bones snapped his fingers and pointed toward hell.
"Don't hand me that corpse! That dead thing!"

Isadora took the doll from Flavil and pressed it to her shoulder. She stepped beside Bones and tilted her gaze down into his face. "He don't want dis doll. He want her. Dat Gyp gone bye-bye." Isadora pointed out the window. "She wen' dat away! She dance de dust off her feet right dere in de floor. Fo' sho'!" She cocked one buttock. "She say kiss it where it don' shine!"

"Shut up!" His tone warned her.

"Well jus' come on and whop my ass, you young boy! Take some time off to whop a nigger. You might find it smarts some. Gif me luf or gif me hate." She stood quiet five seconds and sat a hand on his shoulder. "Jus' gif me a minute of yo time. Won't you do dat? Call me sometime. I'll come ova and fight wid you." She caught his hands and put them to her waist. "Who de first girl evah kiss you?"

"How often you ask me that question?" he hissed in her face.

"How of'en you gif me dat answer?"

Isadora cut black eyes at Flavil. She watched his expression. He looked on curious. Her lipcorners tucked in a hint of smile. "You didn't know dis." Bones stood hardly minding her, his distressed gaze bent upon the

air at this alleged mishap. "Yo boy lak de best first," said Isadora.

Flavil listened with deep curiosity to these little hidden intimacies seeping to light. He loved his son with unswerving fealty and he secretly condoled with him for his loss of Viola. He forethought of all the disseverings he'd meet down the years. He felt a stab of love as sharp as grief for the boy and craved to shout laughter through tears at the glory of life and its defeats.

Bones whirled his head at Flavil. "She can't be gone, Dad! She promised she'd meet me at twelve o'clock!"

"She'll meet you in heb'n," said Isadora. "Pass you goin' de udder way!" With her hand capped on his shoulders she commenced a sleazy dance with a hard pelvic snap which mimed the Sixth of the Seven Deadly Sins.

"There's other Gypsies leaving, Dad! She'd stay behind and go with them! I know she would!"

"But Son, you can't seem to digest the fact that Lorenzo is headed north. They went south."

Isadora held out the doll toward him.

He shuddered and glared at her. "Get the hell away from me with that thing!" He whirled toward Flavil.

"Dad, those trailers are all headed for New Orleans!"

Flavil gasped. Was the boy slow? "Not Lorenzo's. He got a phone call from St. Louis this morning and he's

headed there. He's going to buy a new trailer and a new car and haul them to New Orleans."

Bones stood muttersome. He glowered at them. He'd bet they were both pulling a joke. They were having fun at his expense. She'd skunked them in a deal. They were both playing out one of her tricks. Soon she would pop out of hiding full of sass and toss her butt and laugh down his throat like a hellbent whore. She'd taunt him to confess he'd missed her. What a ridiculous exercise! She'd make him believe her gone. And then she'd appear for an hour's victory over the hollow months to come. O yes! She was notorious for her tricks. He smelt a dead rat. Two jokers in a stacked deck. He'd bet two skunks had crossed his fox's trail. Yeahp!

Isadora lifted a hand onto Flavil's shoulder and grinned at him. He grinned back at her. They both grinned at Bones. See how they acted like plotters. One minute he'd swear they were liars, next minute doubt slipped in and then thundering uncertainty.

"She gone, Bone," said Isadora. She hugged the doll to one cheek. "Dis is my baby." She began to sway with it as though it were a baby doll. "Dis is our baby."

Flavil said, "She's passed Chattanooga by now. Headed toward Nashville. From there to St. Louis."

Bones sifted their talk for clues.

"You come and play wid me and de baby. We'll fight if you want to."

Flavil said, "Isadora, you a Deuse!"

Bones glared at Isadora. He glared at the gray-haired man in wirerim spectacles. His lens were shaped like two eggs stood on their small ends. Bones pondered Flavil's amused smile, Isadora's laughing face.

Then like the sun rising out of stormclouds the truth dawned. The farce was suddenly transparent. The trick was written on their faces. Any fool could see. He smiled himself for the first time. He wondered at his own stupidity. He whirled and pitched from the door and his feet leaped the stoop and he landed on toes arunning.

"Where you goin' Bone!" Isadora sprang to the door and shouted after him. "You goin' try to kotch her?"

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"She can't be gone!" he panted, running toward the rhendevous. She'd be there laughing at him for a fool! She'd be right about that too. The wind sang in his ears. He ran on through the stand of pines and thence into the deep woods. He came to a spot where a few years hence a grove of walnut had been felled and snaked out and now coarse grass grew among the walnut stumps and saplings of red maple and silver maple and wytchelm bedecked in red stars which was the tree of whores, the

poet Klappox said, who wear red stars upon left cheeks to commemorate this patron tree.

Viola suddenly appeared to him there through the trees, strolling naked as a wood-nymph, murmuring song, her head inclined pensively, black snakelets stirring round her breasts, all fawnflesh and rosybreasts and rubycheked. She raised her head and waved and strolled swaying toward him and stepped into a direct pour of sunlight and caught fire and like a flame leaping off a wick she soared up the light shaft and burst into motes and a stir of leaves spun up the wind of her going.

"Viola!"

He ran after her. He searched frantically in back of divers trees. He'd sworn he'd caught a glimpse of her escaping behind now this tree now that. Klappox had told the boy that in Greecian Lore a man who walks in a wood might see a nymph smile and chase her and the nymph then would slip off behind a tree. And after that for his lifelong the enchanted fool or nympholept kept looking behind every tree he came onto. He sought for the Unattainable. Such ancient frenzy now beset the boy peering behind every tree. Had his own rapture produced the promised sight and the vision swayed on the air? Had the real world for a few moments yielded to his Uttermost Wish? "I saw her plain as day!" he pled to the air.

But maimed belief cracked his voice.

He searched on, belief faltered to a twitch. He accepted finally that he'd seen a phantom, some mingling of fevered brain and trick of sunlight swarming gold and amber leaves which the wind, colluding with his wild heart's wish, had stirred a pulse into, and autumn leaves jiggled in a sunbeam had become the very image of his wild heart's longing.

His shoulder's slumped. A sigh seeped through his lips. He felt his spirit run out his heels. He sank to his knees like a drained ghost and hung his head.

"Alas! Alas!" he said down to the colored dead leaves. "For that's what you say when all hope has gone."

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CHAPTER III

DON QUIXOTE

I

Lorenzo Jones stood up from the rowdy crowd that sat in the back of the schoolbus and reeled down the aisle of the slowing bus to shrill laughter and cries of, "Happy Birthday, Lorenzo." He grinned back at them his left eye blacked. He faced forward and lurched staggerfooted down the aisle of the rolling bus. His hand was snatched aside and a dime pressed into it and he cut a look into an inkblack face, her smile split over her teeth, warm black eyes lifted. "It's got your birfday on it."

"I'll save it." He squeezed her hand then pocketed the dime. He stepped on and caught the eye of Tom Cline, seventeen now, with dark brute good looks who'd spent time twice at reform schools. He sat with a split lip and a green node on his left cheek. They exchanged black looks. A green glare socketed in the black eye forewarned the felon.

"Fuck you," said Tom Cline.

"Try it."

Yvette Dutton and Christina Hoffman sprang up in front of him and the bus stopped and they filed off.

He crossed Highway 41 and walked toward his father's store. He put one foot on the stoop and twisted the

brass knob and stepped into the blue air smoke-drifted where a group of people stood about still and silent as if miming the walking dead then the crowd burst into shouts and laughter and Lorenzo flung up a fending arm. They all sang, 'Happy Birthday.' Lorenzo grinned and dropped his gaze.

A coconut cake circled with pink candles sat upon the counter. Si Woody lit them all with one wood match. Lorenzo blew out the candles circling one thin breath.

Edna Rogers said, "January 21, 1973, is special in the history of the world. It's your fourteenth birthday."

Lorenzo's mother smiled a bright set of teeth that had never known a cavity. "He's shot up like a weed. He's nearly six feet."

"He's hard as a rock!" Red Massey thumped his gut like a melon.

"And he's just so smart," said Gloria Mandrel.

"I wish you'd tell my mother that. She calls me The Little Moron."

"And just look how goodlooking he is," said Edna Rogers.

"And just look at who's his best friend," said Chloe Leatherwood. She kissed his cheek and he turned the other and she kissed it too. He looked at her face, like none he'd ever seen, that was red as potter's clay

and freckled like flecks of dried blood.

"I never saw so many liars in one spot," said Lorenzo. "Not one honest soul."

"This is Sodom or Gomarrah then!" said Issac Longman.

"It's Flavil Crawford's den of thieves," said Frank Burgess in reference to the Gypsies who filed in and out of the store all day. Two Gypsy women sat sipping coffee at the party now. The Gypsies liked Lorenzo. They called him Gitano.

"Come outside with me," said Chloe.

"It's my party."

She sulked and hung her head.

"Wait a minute."

People sat about talking and eating and paid him no mind now so he glanced at Chloe and stepped out the door. Chloe followed him out.

He'd met Chloe Leatherwood exactly eight years ago on his sixth birthday. On that day Flavil had bought the grocery store and service station and two acres which he laid with sewertiles and strung outlets on poles and built a washhouse and indoor toilets and the boy went to school and worked every day. And on that first day of ownership Flavil sat in his arms a sack of groceries to carry home for Chloe Leatherwood who bore a tall sack too. She'd invited him to stay for cookies

and milk. Then he'd amazed her by reading from the Bible. He'd went to the door and she followed.

"Come back," she said.

"When?"

"Well, I sleep days."

"I'll come at night."

That was eight years back. He'd come often to see her. Her husband too became friend and fellow hunter. Then his visits fell off. Today on his fourteenth birthday she stepped out to the road's edge.

He saw she was highstrung and intense.

"I'm not well. I've had the tremulations. I don't think it's the cancers. But I'm a sick woman. Don't tell anyone."

"I won't."

"Today's your birthday. Want to make tomorrow mine?"

"I didn't think women wanted birthdays."

"I want you to come see me. You know, it's astonishing to me to realize at the age of thirty-four how immensely important visits from someone dear become to old people. I'm just old folks now. Waiting on that visit. That boy. That kiss. It lifts me back to the land of the living. I hoard those kisses like a miser his gold pieces. One coming, another going."

She laughed. "My little boy has grown up! I can't seem to get that through my head! I've wondered about it over and over. My feelings haven't grown up. Emotions are blind brute things. They never learn."

She gazed at the ground. "I'll bake a pie. I know you like peach best. I have some fine chocolates. May I expect you? You're making a beggar out of me."

"You know I'll come."

She bowed her head and clasped her hands against her skirt. "You've been remiss."

"Did I ever once not come when you asked me to?"

She dropped her gaze into her empty hands, lifted her face and gave him a sort of bankrupt smile and turned and crossed the highway to her home.

He watched her twice swole skirt and wondered if she had freckles on her hinder cheeks too. Then he went back into the store to his party.

II

The dark succubus of night fled rout of dawn and the sun burst through the fogged east woods its radiance streaming beams shooting through the trees upon this nameless settlement along Highway 41. The boy stepped onto the porch with three books in his hand and squinted his eyes at the sun.

He stepped off the porch and went up the brick walk

to the path through the weeds that led to the highway. The trail passed the back of Chloe Leatherwood's house. She'd just be coming home from work now. He plucked a stem of foxtail grass and stuck it in his teeth. He consulted his watch. He had about ten minutes to spare till the bus arrived. He wondered was she in bed already or strolling longlegged about the place in a scant half-slip lapping at her bottom.

He turned onto a trace through the sagegrass and crossed Chloe's back yard and climbed the steep high bank of steps to the small back porch. He stepped to the door and knocked. He heard a clatter inside and glimpsed what looked like a body falling. He cupped his hands round his eyes and peered in the pane. He saw Chloe lying on the floor in a slip then hammered at the door. She rose on her hands and lifted her face then collapsed. He dropped his books on the porch and ran down the steps to the flowerbed and clawed up a river-rock size of a softball and then ran up the steps and smashed a low left pane and plucked the slivers and reached his arm inside and threw the bolt and twisted the doorknob and popped the knobeye and opened the door and ran inside and knelt by the stricken woman.

"Chloe!"

She lay there all beet red and brown freckled.

Across the floor lay a longneck whiskey bottle nearly empty. He recalled that he'd found her once before sleeping on the sofa and her breath had reeked and he'd not been able to wake her.

Her face now rose up awash in angry waves. "Sick," she said, "Oow! Do-do! Potty!" She clawed a skirttail over one buttock. He cupped her underarms and helped her stand. She dropped her head on his shoulder and slumped against him. He locked his fingers under her buttocks to hold her up. Warm ooze began to squish in his hands. He lifted one hand up and looked at it claggy with excrement.

"Shit!" he said.

"La wah ba quawah," she said. She was too drunk to speak. Her numb tongue lolled and her eyes wandered in futile search. Her mouth hung slack then her legs went boneless. He lowered her to the floor and lay her on her belly. He pushed off the shoulder laces and stripped the claubered slip and pulled her panties down her legs. On her pantyfront was a little applique of asters, small wreath for a dead womb. He stood up and looked at her buttocks in wonder. He'd never seen feces extrude from a human being. Brown knots bore out the buttock cleft like gnarled roots and broke away.

He gawked at her. His nostrils flared. He

understood now what Van de Vate, the professor of Philosophy, had said to him in the store. 'A man likes the smell of his own excrement! It's not bad. But another man's!' Van de Vate's eyes rolled and his nostrils twitched and his face expressed unendurable loathing and he shuddered his head at the abomination.

Lorenzo thought that her shit stank as from deep illness or like deep taint of contagious excrement such as cholera or plague victims that must be buried. He felt the gorge rise in his throat like a pukefinger stuck down it and he reeled away and gaped about. His sick eyes saw all furniture in a new and gratuitous light, stripped of meaning, absurd and arbitrary. He fled to the toilet and hung his face down the commode over the oval eye of water, his brief face vomit-dashed. Egg, sausage and biscuit gushed on a spate of milk. He hugged the commode and considered his predicament. The house tossed asea.

From a tender age there'd been noted in his nature a certain immoderation. At three he'd fed a dime down a pup's throat and recovered it with a straight razor. Stories grew up about him. He'd try a thing to see what would happen. He was reared on knightly tales and fancied himself a knight. Courtly good manners toward girls kept in him still.

He was no quakebuttock that fled when hard times struck. He wished to be as mettlesome as the knight who was told, 'You'll never slay the dragon without steel,' yet who from broken sword hewed one of oak and went to the dragon's keep and unsheathed his wood and rode into the dragon's snorted flame and drove his stake into that hellmouth. The point sank across the throat-well and shot through the dragon's skull and rose out the hindhead grey claubered with brains. The sooty knight stood a boot on the lizard's smoking muzzle and said, 'The steel was in my spine.'

The shit was the dragon, Lorenzo understood that much. He stood up and swiped the trickles down his chin. He thumbed the steel lever and watched his puke swirl down the toilet throat. He went back and gazed down upon the deaddrunk woman.

Once he'd changed a baby's diaper and stood away beshitten. That disaster should have forewarned him. Her claubered hindcrack had resembled the squashed lumps that mortared the baby's crack but now solid excrement had turned liquid and she lay facedown with her front-side slathered in a pool of yellow excrement. He caught her underarms and tried to drag her to the bathroom. His shoesoles stood in the mire and shot from under him and he sat hard. He wondered if he might bear her aloft?

She was five foot six and a lean thing and might not weigh a hundred pounds. He scrooched down and reached under her groin and lifted. Her buttocks rose and she folded into legfall and headdrop. He jostled her groin-fold onto his shoulder and stood up shaking and clasping her thighbacks. He stepped out on the waxed hardwood. His slicksoled shoe floated away under him. He stamped out a jig with her bobbing on his shoulder and one mired shoe shot out and he snatched her waist midair down against him and she landed on him dead weight.

He lumbered up with her and went afoot with the woman aloft like ogre or bodysnatch. From her buttocks spumed an artesian well of sulphur waters that feathered like a horse's tail and spewed the corner ceiling and the drizzle ran down a tintype of the face of an old dead confederate kinsman in uniform in an oval glass frame hung over the cedar bookcase. While he trod toiletward another aimless spew struck a cherrywood love seat in rose velvet.

A black crack in the ceiling told him of one in his head and of the zigzag fissure in The House of Usher. His feet floated apart and his legs went all ricketsprung. He seized hold of a bookcase and pulled himself along by it and his shoes slished into the toilet door and her bottom blumped the door hard and it burst open and he

danced backward and jostled her and slyppe shot one shoe and thwopp he landed with her snatched from his shoulder. An aftergong reverbed throughout his stunned skull. He shut his eyes and sucked breath. His side was split. His head was busted. His neck felt cracked. And he felt stupid. He wriggled out from under her and climbed to his feet and dredged her up from the floor and set her asquat on the cuckstool and straddled her thightops and hung his arms round her neck. They slouched with heads drooped on each other's shoulders like spent orgiasts.

He lifted her head and gave her a chaste kiss and the woman convulsed and bleated gruel into his open mouth: "Uorgh!" He turned his cheek aside and she puked upside his head then into his jeans denimfold and he spat her gorge then heaved his own and augured his ear puke full with his little finger. Foodstuff speckled his groin pouch. He recognized mushrooms and ragged steak hewn bitesize, a winecolor slime.

Her bowels at that moment spasmed and he held her jerking in his arms, waves of expulsion choking through her but her bowels seemed empty at last. The boy thought it was like the dry heaves at the other end. A deep frown rucked her brow. Moans wrung out of her, yelps of pain. She never once woke. The air seemed ether.

Her hands clawed her belly. "Oh!" He pushed back her shoulders and looked down and saw the gut in her tight flat belly dimple and cramp visibly like a thumb and forefinger clamped round a cow's tit and choked toward the tip but she shat none or squirted small waters. He held her there till the moans died in her throat and her breath lapsed and heaved. He lifted her forward and reached behind her and pressed the handle, little steel wavelet, and watched the yellow water spiral and the crookneck sewer pipe vented a croupy belch shitslaked.

He lugged her legs into the tub and folded her buttocks over the tubside and turned on the shower and fixed the water spray on her. He clawed his hand down her buttock crack grouted with excrement to her thighfork and scooped out a gob. Icky sticky tacky goo. He rinsed it down the tub, morselled it between his fingers small enough to pass through the peasized holes in the brass drain. He hauled her whole into the tub and scrubbed her with soap then rinsed her and hung her back across the tubside, her face in the floor, her cheek slurred, her red hair snakelets crawling on the tiles. He patted her rosehued buttocks with the brick colored freckles. He'd wondered before if she had freckles on her butt and here swarmed a blizzard. He considered the anus deep in her cleft. Like a ding in the throat of a bell. He rotated

his fingerball thereon. A candy sucker that cinched a sewer. He paused the fingerball and then very slowly gouged his finger into the puckered eye and watched it disappear down the orbic flexure. He felt hot and claggy inner gut. He felt the socket grip the knuckle. He withdrew the finger slow, felt the socket suck. He held up his finger. It looked clean. He smelled it. No odor there. Shit drizzled from the ceiling and daubed the walls and the yellow pools beshat the floor but her bowels were sweet and clean. An imp of perversity seemed to preside over the house. He felt some deep want in himself that brought him to such circumstances, as lunacy will follow a fool.

Her vaginal rift swole between her thighbacks. A sliver of coral gleamed. He touched petals apeek. He rotated his palms on her upended rotundity. Then he stood up and lugged her into the bedroom and slumped her against the wall.

He went back and stepped into the shower and scrubbed his clothes and himself. Then he took off his clothes and wrung them out and put them on again. He went into the bedroom and touched his fingerballs to her neck and consulted his pocketwatch. Her heartrate was one hundred thirty beats a minute.

He gathered medicine and spoons. He depressed her

tongue with one spoonhandle and inserted a second spoon to the alveolar drop and tilted paregoric down her throat. He'd seen this acted out in science class. Her throat seized and swallowed. He dissolved six aspirin in the bottom of a teacup and spooned them down her throatpipe. Then he turned his hand to cleaning. For this one child of a Dutchgirl was reared upon sayings of holy writ and heard that cleanliness was next to godliness till he loved to revel in dirt. But the proverb stuck. He mopped up the ringlets, pools, smears and tracks. He scrubbed shitruns and thumbwhorls and handprints. He stood on a stepladder and sponged yellow shit from the ceiling. Some dripped in his face but he was beyond cavil. The silk lampshade daubed with yellow spots and the velvet furniture were beyond cleaning and he feared to worsen their smears and left them. He collected her panties and slip and the sogged towels and pitched them all in the tub and scrubbed each with soap and ammonia and rinsed them and hung them on the curtain bar and tubside.

It was an imperfect job but there was no shit to be seen, save lamp and loveseat, nor shitreek he could scent. He finished at two o'clock. His fingers winced at the knot on his hindhead.

He took two wool blankets from the closet and made

a pallet alongside the bed. He had a qualm then took the plastic cloth from the kitchen table and spread it on the folded blankets. He went to an antique bureau and rifled the drawers. He sifted up soft silken panties and gauze bras but chose a plain white bra and a pair of white cotton panties. He swept the panties up her legs, worked the waistband to her navel, bellied buttocks snugly.

He strung the bra up her arms, muzzled her breasts and hooked the strap latch across her backbone. He pulled her on the pallet, lay her head a foot from the wall. He took a patchwork quilt from the closet and spread it over her. He stuffed a pillow behind her head. He knelt beside her. He purloined a kiss. Her breath smelt like chemic winds.

He wandered the house. On the living room carpet lay the assassin bottle. A third full yet. He put that bottle into the china cabinet with the other bottles. He crept like sneakthief past windows and doors. He thought that if his mother knew he was not in school but here with Chloe she'd beat the door down by way of knocking.

He cracked the back door and let the cat in. He swept up the splinters from the broke door pane.

On a bookshelf dried flowers spilled from an over

turned vase. He took up the flowers and sniffed them, their sweet breath spent, exhaling now mortuary odors. He righted the vase and sank the flowers. He watched the cat furl her pink tongue in a great yawn and drop her head on her paws.

He went into the bedroom and backed to the wall over Chloe and slid down the wall and lifted her head and sat and pulled her up by the armpits and dropped her head on his belt.

She'd once thought she was pregnant. The doctor said there was something in there all right.

He pushed down her pantywaist and stroked the long scar where scapel had hewn her belly in half and unpodded a monster head with vestigial body. The facial features were all in a swirl. The eyes were aimed each a different way. The deadborn fiend looked to have an assembled head like Mary Shelley's monster. And the monster was malignant. The doctors said that was never supposed to happen. That freak of nature floated now in a beaker of formalin with a report of its history and cancer beside it. Chloe had made medical history. They'd taken womb and ovaries and stitched her up and the healed scar looked like a ladder run up a stockingleg. Each suture hole had left a ruby dot and twin rows of dots ran from crotchcleft to naval. His forefinger traced the scar

which was the length of a pencil and just as wide.

Then she'd had a cancer in her left breast. He slipped the bra cup over her breast and felt with finger-ball the seams and needleholes on the underbelly. From the first scalpel slit one cancer had been hewn. From the second cut a benign tumor had been gouged forth by a doctor's finger. The two cancers had occurred independently. She'd gone bald from chemotherapy and wore a red wig for a while. She'd never let him see her wigless but she showed him her scars.

Lorenzo harped her ribs. He patted her empty stomach, resonant as a drumhead. He stood and pushed her legs open and crouched and split two fingers between her groinleft. He looked for a little red gland. The poet, Klappox, told him it was a thumbbutton roundlet in a fleshhood. A ruby the size of a ruby in a jewel watch. He poked between the coppery lobes. A dojigger was all it was. He thought maybe it nested deeper and spread her wider but saw nothing between red petals opening. He thought maybe this was just another snipe hunt got up by men to trick boys and laugh at them for fools.

He dropped his forehead on her belly and prayed for her. He'd never known a prayer to be answered in his life but he prayed still that she be made stronghearted.

She was firm from exercise and blessed with fine

figure and her slender body was adorned with longneck breasts. He cuddled her left breast's underbelly. He thought her breast must have fallen some. They looked like softballs down sock toes. But they hung sweetly in his eyes and they had aged just to perfection and they were lovelier far than any girl's he'd ever brushed or seen or touched. Beneath the rounding whorl of his thumb-ball her nipple stood. He bent close. The tips were dimpled. With a magnifying glass he'd Sherlock'd the Gypsy's breasttips and they had bellied tips. There was no choosing between them.

Her bottom was so bethump't that plumsized bruises would soon empurple the pale red freckled skin.

A circle of light lay beneath the table lamp. He switched off the lamp. He pushed a copper wavelet off her cheek. He raked her hair. Its choppy waves sprang from his fingers. He heard a jubilant meadowlark chortle in the tree outside the window. She sighed.

He felt a sum of love unspent. He bent to her cold lips. Transport of tenderness smote him. He felt his face flush.

Ordinariness vanished into a timerift. A transcendent moment settled, seemed to stretch hourlong. He gazed upon her face. Rapture was undifferent from torment. The deaddrunk woman was a dream fulfilled. He

would have gone right then and got a gun and shot them both blood dead if he could have known for sure that dying in his arms she'd rise with him in an afterlife not hell. But two souls might get lost among a million drained ghosts. Klappox told of Shakespeare telling of lovers like two raindrops that fall in the ocean who could never then find each other.

Lorenzo sang country songs to her. He stuck her forefinger into her mouth and kissed the head of the fingersucking idiot child.

He got up and found a hairbrush and lay her head on one kneecrook and brushed her hair. He heard whummles and tilted his ear to her stomach. It spoke to his ear. Wheek. Erk. He rubbed her stomach to quell it.

He kissed her. "Wanted," he said, "Dead or alive."

Nightly privy to death, she knew the macabre jokes and gallow's humor of the operating room. At home she observed a blueblood's decorum and preserved a becoming modesty about the boy.

Formal ceremonies informed their liason. The woman knew of the need to ritualize the boy's visits. There was tea and pastry and fine silver for the servings. She required that he tell her a tale every day that he'd read or heard or lived. He tried to stitch fine tales for her hearing. He bent now to the stonedrunk woman in his arms.

"Today's story," he told her, "is titled The Courtship of Miss Etta Sue."

"Well, Agamemnon Watts told me he drove home the other night and he opened the truck door and he heard first thing this godawful squall. 'They is a goddamn lion loose hereabouts,' he said. And there came that squall again. He reached back in his truck and picked up his flashlight and throw'd it on that lone wytchelm and shone the light up that tree and said, 'Why they's a bobcat up that tree!' Then he said, 'Why there's Miss Etta Sue!' And there she sat on the tiptop twig just like a Christmas tree ornament. She was gazing down at that bobcat about two feet below her. Agamemnon said she didn't look one bit perturbed. I reckon she knew he just wanted to whiff her odor. Then that bobcat stepped down the limbs and dropped to the ground. He snarled at Agamemnon just to let him know he was leaving unsatisfied. Then he trotted back to the woods. Then Miss Etta Sue came down."

Chloe seemed an aetherblooded vamp from some planet of a far star. He kissed her cold and juiceless lips. She might've been a spectral slip out of Poe. He thought of the blue-eyed Romena rising in grave clouts, raven hair spilled down, black moon eyes, starved-looking. All Poe's occult sylphs looked starved in his mind's eye.

She stirred in his arms. He bent and kissed her. Her eyes slit and widened. She groaned with deep sorrow. She'd woke to this world that she couldn't stand the sight of. "Oh God!" she said.

Lorenzo took personal offense. "Same back to you," he said. He stood and stepped away now proud and distant.

Parchmouth beset her. She could hardly speak. Her sticky tongue clove to her mouthroof, her lips when she tried to lick them.

He stood back. She climbed the bedpost hand over hand and clung trembling on her feet. She loosed the post and stepped out wobbly like a toddler and spilled with a clatter across the hardwood. She lifted up an aggrieved look. "Wee-wee!" she said.

He caught her underarms and dragged her up onto her feet. "Stand still a minute. You're not used to high altitude. Put your arms around my neck." He hugged her waist and led her by slow steps to the bathroom and left her leaning on the sink. He stood in the hall and faintly heard her piss shrill.

She opened the door and slouched to the jamb. She was breathing hard. He stepped before her and she put a hand on his chest. "I have to learn to walk without you." He thought that her ruby cheeks burned in perpetual shame.

She leaned from the doorjamb and pitched with gauche

gait down the hall. She veered from wall to wall and staggered into the bedroom and swung her backside fore and sat. She slumped on the bedside haggard and crazy-eyed. Bones saw again the face on the police magazine Lynn Archer gave him of a woman cringing, her begging eyes lifted to a man's quarterface seen from a back angle who's holding a knife flashing a starry glint, the sadist menacing the frail slip of girl. One savored the brute's view of those uplifted eyes, her inner breasts exposed in the blouse snatched open and two buttons hung by threads and terror shone in one eye and prayer in the other and that quadrant of the brute's face showed a mouthcorner upturned that foretold he was going to fuck her first whatever else he did.

"What time is it?"

"Four thirty," said Bones. "I'll brew you some tea. I'll put on some stew. Just eat a few swallows." He went to the kitchen and set on the kettle. He emptied a can of beef stew into a pan and stood stirring it. A feather of steam hissed from the kettle snout. He took a varnished wooden tea caddy from the cupboard and spooned black tea into the pot then poured the water. He called her to the table. She came and sat. He spooned her a bowl of stew and set it before her. He pulled up a chair beside her and sat and lifted a spoon

of stew and blew it and held it to her lips. The sudden blast of airhorns such as truckers mount like silver bugles at a rakish angle on a semi's cab blew probably at a car about to enter the highway from the service station. The blast burst through the house and amplified and her tympani reverberant and skull clangor seized within that delicate eggshell head and she screamed startled and blew that spoon of stew into his face. It dripped from his nose, slathered mouth and chin.

He clawed at his face. He went to the sink and washed his face and came back and sat down.

"I'm so sorry, Lorenzo. Please forgive me."

"No. There's nothing to forgive."

He sat back the tea caddy in the cabinet. He poured a halfglass of milk and took it to her. "Milk is good for a sick stomach."

"Young man I'm a nurse and I know that milk is the last thing you pour on a sick stomach."

"You're wrong too. It cures me. Drink it."

"You're crazy, Buster."

"Fire me then. Be your own doctor."

"I don't want any doctor but you. But I'll vomit."

"Then vomit. Let's see if you do." He rammed a hand down a front pocket and slapped down a dime on the table. "A dime says you don't." He touched the glassrim

to her lips. They parted. He poured in a mouthfull and she gulped it.

"You're certainly a mean doctor."

"You're goddamn right. I want to cure or kill and not piss around. That's what Dad says. He calls me a horseddoctor."

He tipped her another sip of milk.

"You're sure a bratty boy! You're the one who taught me to curse. Still, if you offered me snake's milk, I might drink it."

"I've never seen a snake with tits."

She laughed. "When did you come in? I can't remember you coming in."

"There's lots you can't remember." He bit his tongue to chasten it and quickly added: "I figured up I'd been beat one thousand times for cursing. Dad figured I'd been beat one hundred."

"You're here at my house and it's not cinco, Senior! No es tiempo por rhendezvous. What the hell are you doing here in my house at this hour? Answer me!" She stared at him. He stared back. She didn't remember a thing. That liquor had been milk of amnesia.

She wrinkled her nose at the smell of ammonia.

"What happened here?"

"You were sick."

"I was drunk."

"You vomited. And. . ."

"And?"

"Don't worry about it."

She blinked at him, horror dawning. She curled her fists on her thighs. "You! You! You! Saw me! I did that?"

"You couldn't help yourself. I took care of you."

On her face was a stricken look. She jumped to her feet and ran to her bed and sat down. He followed her and she stared at him in sick horror. "What else awful happened? Go on! Tell the worst!"

"Nothing else." He felt a demon nudge him. "Some funny things happened. You shit on the ceiling. Shat I should say. You taught me the past tense."

She had a look of panic. His words smote her. She seized her ears with her hands. She might have been told of a death. This indignity bore upon her a deep chagrin. Her groans abashed his ears. The boy watched her brow clench with pain.

"How could you?" She shuddered. She sat poised on the edge of the bed. "How dare you break into my house you bastard!" Her hot breath blew in his face. She took ahold of the bedpost for support and whirled up wildeyed and stood in the floor and shrieked at life and at this

one particular abominable boy right here. A snarl ripped up her throat. She seized from the dresser one of two heavy white ovoid jars and scowled into the round mirror that hid half the wall and hauled back the jar and hurled it at the face she saw and the glass shattered with a crash and sudden shrieks like birdcries and the shivers and shards spilled with wild titters about the oak floor. Two peacock feathers stood in a longnecked vase beside on the dresser with their great blue eyes violently aquiver. Straightway she picked up the match of the firstthrown marble jar and swung to face the boy where he stood in the doorway. He watched her hands like gunslingers. She whipped back her arm and he flung his arm over his face and she hurled the jar and it crashed into the huge crocker glass lamp with Chinese scenery painted in fine detail. It exploded into shrapnel that showered the boy. He dropped his arms and saw small wounds seep and blood coursed swift to his fingertips and drops splatted the waxed oakwood. Other nicks about. The Christian boy surled his lip and turned his back to her and trod hard each shod foot on her threshold to knock the dust off his feet as a witness against this woman for whom hell shall be harder in the day of Judgment than for Sodom and Gomorrah.

He strode from that door as from all doors of hers

forever.

She swept out the door after him.

"Lorenzo!"

He stomped toward the backdoor, her light footfalls in pursuit. He glanced over his shoulder. Her robe furled open, her shins flashing in long stride. She snatched his shirtback and tried to forestall him.

"Don't leave me now!"

He jerked the back door open and whirled into her face and stepped backwards onto the porch while she stood stricken with her hands held shriveled like a dead bird's feet and he spread the door broad open like a coffin unlidded and slammed it in her face. Back through the pane he saw her there. She stood aghast at the doorslam upon all the days and years ahead. The boy cut his profile to her and tromped down the steps.

He heard tires crunch on gravel and stopped on the steps. A red Ford swept past the house and stopped half in the garage and a tall goodlooking man got out. He was six three or four and well-muscled, a little paunchy. He walked up to Lorenzo and leaned on the wood rail.

"Yesterday morning I was out that backroad past Lucas' place, and I saw a buck up ahead standing in the road. I stopped. And then I looked off to the left and saw another'n. There was a fog and the sun hit it and them

bucks stood in it. It was like a picture. You'd like to of seen it."

Lorenzo sat on the steps.

"How you and my wife gettin' along?"

Lorenzo told the day's happenings.

Ralph said, "Well I'm just damned. You're dripping blood."

He looked at the blood welling up from the small deep nicks. "It's okay," he said.

"She was off work last night. She was up all night. She ate dinner and drank herself drunk. She was dead silent all evenin'. I found her lookin' out the backdoor winder an' I said, 'You want me to fetch Lorenzo? Bet he'd like to visit.' She shook her head. She won't let you see her drunk. When I left for work she was asleep on the couch with a bottle in her fist. It just happens now and then. She's a model of a woman in between. She goes out of her head and I can't find her wave length. And I ain't no head doc. You're good with her."

"Not anymore."

"Bullshit. There's just me and you."

"There's just you."

"Don't leave me alone."

"She's not my friend now."

"Well. If that's the way you feel."

"She tried to brain me. I saw her face. She hated me."

"Maybe you should of give her another minute. She goes out of her mind."

"I won't argue about that." Lorenzo stepped off through the yard.

"Come by tonight."

"No."

"I never thought you'd be afraid of a woman."

He whirled back. "She hates me!" He turned and went on.

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"Wait!"

He turned and saw Chloe running across her backyard and across a fallow field of briarbrush and dead wild-flowers.

"Whoo!" She slapped her thighs and the print of her legs jumped against the skirt.

She pointed her toe and bowed and told him thank you for his courtesies. Said she'd done more cleaning. The love seat and chair were beyond cleaning and she'd sent them to the upholstery shop. Said she was sorry for what she'd done. She said she'd not aimed to hit him with a cream jar. Said she'd hit what she aimed at.

"You aimed at me. You were a bad shot."

She clasped her hands. "Have I ever lied to you in my life?"

"Yes. Right now. This minute. Ralph and me, we're hunters. We know that nobody can aim at one thing and look at another. I saw your eyes. You stared straight at me and threw that jar."

"That was anger! That was fury! It was not hate! I swear to you before God. May I burn in hell. Look at you, hating me! But, I forgive you! I love you. Haven't you seen love ten thousand times there in my eyes? Won't those times save me now? It was shame! Shame!"

Lorenzo felt her lure. She was beautiful past telling, the very image of his yearning. And if she was only pretty, then let beauty take a hind seat.

They stood in a swollen silence. Last light just shy of dark.

"I thought you were the Gypsy," he said. "She comes out of nowhere like that. Just appears out of the dark."

"Did you wish I was her?"

"No, but I thought you were. You throw very well you know. You swing like a boy. Look here!" He demonstrated a limber arm dropping back and whirling overhead. Then he showed her an ineffectual cocked elbow dashed forward. Then he nodded to her and his footclomps went tramping on.

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Lorenzo stood headbent looking out the stopping schoolbus windshield watching the rain drops curve down a slant wind splat on the window and the wipers clear the watershot glass. The doorleaves slapped open and he jumped from the bus and ran face into the rain and the cold wind smarted his face. Filaments of cobweb dragged down from black cloud. Down the trail past Chloe's house. He thought of her with regret. He'd known her over half his life. She haunted his thoughts. That last time yonder out a dark way deep in the woods where a red sun shone sparse and shadows inked before your eyes. A wedge of honking longnecked birds went whapping low overhead just risen from some pond or river to resume their trek. They never once touched though he tasted bittersweet yearning and her gaze endeared him. The red sun sank like a blood mote among the limbs. Her eyes beheld him like the evidence of loss till dark ate the last light. She took his hand and they sat and felt the cold dark seep till she put her arms around him and he put his face in her neck.

He arrived at the house and went into the kitchen and poured a glass of milk, fixed a bologna sandwich and chomped, poured draughts down his throat. He went to his bedroom. He hugged up a large cushion such as he

imagined harem concubines reposed upon and tilted it to the cherrywood headboard. He sat on the bed and dropped his back to the cushion and reached out and picked up a book from the nighttable. A raven stood on the cover. He broke open the book and held it against his updrawn thighs. He flashed the pages right to left. A loud knocking at the front door stopped his eyes upon, 'the grim phantasm.' Was it her? His heart quickened. He leaped up and strode in sockfeet to the front door and opened it. Chloe stood on the porch with her breath swirling in her face, her red cheeks beaded. She smiled and lifted a hand and sat down her black silk umbrella open like a black mushroom behind her. Rain sizzled behind her on the brick walk. He pushed open the screen door and she stepped inside. He dropped the screen closed and shut the door.

Dark wedges at the inner corners of her eyes told of lost sleep. Rain beaded like pale blue jellies on her coat. He strode back to the bedroom and turned to her coming in the door slipping the belt of her raincoat and loosing the buttons. She shrugged the coat down her arms. He took it and hung it on the bedpost. She wore a nurse's pleated uniform all white and starched. She peeled off a plastic rainscarf and snapped the ends apart and it accorded into pleats like a Japanese fan and she

rolled it into a coil and snapped a end-tab button and dropped it in her pocket. She lifted her eyes. She looked desperate.

She sighed once then found her voice. "You don't know that deepdown sickness of the soul. You used to laugh in my face and refute all cynics that call life cheat."

Waterdrops ran down her cheeks.

"I've had such horror of seeing your love turn into loathing. I couldn't stand it. It has murdered me half-way. I've cleaned corpses of their excrement that would make a saint swoon. What if you should find me disgusting? That question keeps haunting my mind."

He listened to the gutter water gurgle. He could see in his mind the slow current riffle then coil in tightening rings round the downspout and spill like lace-work down the hole and spat on the marble dashstone humped at the housecorner.

"I have a horror that this is all for nothing," she said.

"I liked you best when you were in the shit."

Her mouth dropped, her eyes gaped. Then she hung her head and shook it. "You dumbfound me!" Her gaze fell on the open book lying on the bed. She snatched it up, "Poe," she said and flung it back on the quilt. She

turned to the bookcase and crouched to study the titles. "Nothing smutty here." She plucked from the bookcase an outsized volume in gilt and Gothic lettering of Legends of Knighthood. She sat on the bed and flipped the books open on her lap, looked at the fine handdrawn and water-colored pictures. She looked up. "I should have known you better. You practice quaint virtues. I never recognized how beautiful you were. I'm a small woman. It's a great burden to live with one's own smallness."

She wrung her hands. She spoke of failure of nerve and of will gone slack. She told that she felt bereft and drained and of incertitude whether one rogue cell still prowled her blood.

Her shoulders shrank. She opened a trembling hand toward him. "Can you see the shame and disgrace I felt that you found me stark naked in my own excrement, naked there beneath your impressionable young eyes. I threw the jars 'cause of my woman's modesty! I hated myself. Do you hate me now?"

"How can you ask me that? You tried to kill me."

"You know you're my dearest friend."

"You'd murder your dearest friend?"

"You said you held me in your arms. Tell me how long."

"For a while."

"How can you hate me now?"

"How could you hate me then?"

She hung her head and looked into her hands. "I won't ask you to take me back now. I know I can't expect you to be my friend again just yet. But one day soon you'll want to forgive me. Don't put it off! Rush right then to find me! I'll be waiting for you." She sank to her knees and lifted her clasped hands against his chest and looked up into his face, her blue eyes wet in the dimness. "God please make this boy forgive me! He's my one luxury! He's my one addiction!"

"I hate you. But I love you too."

"Then my prayer's half answered!"

He thrust down a forefinger. "Sit on the floor. God's not finished with you." He went and snapped off the light.

She sank to the floor. Her shoulders shrank. She blew her nose on a rag of tissue. Her head dropped in trembling increments like the palsied. Her breathing was the deep sighing of the utterly exhausted. Out the window a fine rain grey-shrouded the landscape. She shivered in the chill room. She lifted her eyes up his breechleg.

"You petted thing," she said.

He sat in the floor and caught her waist and pulled

her back between his thighs. She dropped her head against his shoulder. "Go to sleep," he said. And then I'm going to kiss you. When you wake up don't look at me like you hate me."

She wrenched round then to kiss him. A stricken sob burst in his face. He felt her ribcage clench in his hands. Her copper-colored choppy hair looked to have met writhen winds. She wept with gladness and quieted.

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She lifted her face to her face in the mirror. She looked about like she would look in the coffin with her eyes shut. Behind each triumph lurked the spectre. Perhaps the boy would die sooner than she. In the window she saw the Red Death or the Black hove over the boy. She felt a rush of sudden power, and a drunken lust to steal his soul. She bent down to suck his breath.

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CHAPTER IX

THE GREATEST HORROR OF THEM ALL

A whole flurry of macabre images cast hateful glares down the well of his small soul. His brown hair hung in claws that had been blood sogged and had dried to brick dust which the wind sifted off in small powders. A host of dwarves all bald or shaveheaded came in company with a very tall bearded old man in a captain's hat pumping a tune on his concertina. They all looked like a family, the dwarves turning cartwheels and walking on their hands and performing stunts. The sun blazed and the pale moon looked like ice skimmed from a waterbucket. And he knew it was the dwarves apassing that brought Melissa to mind and this sequence unreeled down the backwall of his fore-brain.

The state was building a large dormitory in that section of the insane asylum for the deformed and freak-born, their bodies awry and dwarfed and mangled-looking and gnarled and crook'd and grotesque and gruesome and their unsightliness suggested deep depravity and perhaps alliance with hell. He worked for a steel company that had written the winning bid and he was to meet the state contractor about the arrival of three flatbed cars of steel that was to be truckhauled to the building site. While he talked to the contractor a half man walked by

on his hands, his torso in a bucket aimed like a mortar at the sun. Then came a freak with a ghastly misshapen head and eyes that trolled after whatever movements and flickered as if the dimmest intelligence stirred in that warpbrain. A huge bald monster lumbered by with wrinkles all over his head like a dozen worried brows. And in their midst sat this delight that had stepped out of a sunbeam, the secretary at the front desk.

He knew his eyes were emeralds and his teeth hound-white. He walked over to her desk. She was a divine specimen of young womanhood. But she was more saporous than a seraph.

"Do you have a husband or boyfriend?"

She dropped her eyes onto her hands. "No, not at the moment I don't," she said.

He was astonished at his good fortune and lifted his face to the high coffered ceiling of the lobby. God was good. "Yes, you do," he said. "I'm Simon Sulfury."

Her name was Melissa. She went to lunch with him that noon and to dinner with him that night.

Her name in Latin he told her meant Little Honey. She was that one drop of honey that was the ultimate and eternal essence so concentrated that you might lick the sweet of it ever and never diminish that drop. The things he breathed into her ear would no place make him no

woman's enemy.

Melissa said she felt a deep tenderness for the freaks she met at the asylum and pondered out loud their sad predicament. "People come and look at them. They cringe and call them monsters. But the true horror is the small cruel hearts of those that with fell curses shiver and hate their sight the livelong day. They crave love more than ordinary people. They feel how terrible it is to see their one chance at life blighted and blasted! They are killed at heart. They think that it is a pity about life. For life is a blight when your chance for love is dead. What do you wake up to then? Your heart is in a coffin. Your brain steeps in thoughts of death."

Melissa was the beauty among the beasts. Every time he picked her up he had the same thought: Now why would God make a thing could daunt a man with a dimple! "Ah," he effused over the ineffable girl! "O Baby! O Baby! Show me your dimple and I'll be your slave! For thou art the Thing Itself!"

He told her that she was God's Masterpiece, that the best words cut her short, that she was the Queen of the World, the Unutterable, the Last Word, The Sin Qua Non, A vision captured. Juno and Venus were plain ladies next to her and Helen a pock-spotted whore and she,

Melissa, was the epitome, abstract and the essence quintessentialized of Plato's Divine Form and Ultimate Ideal of sweet girlhood in which the Holy Ghost had found a home.

She paused a long time, gazing down into her empty hands, and looked humble and unworthy which he thought was the becomingest thing in this beauty that stunned yore eye to look at for it showed that she had a good heart. She had delightful and archaic graces. A smile crept onto her mouth and she cut him a glance. Her presence he said so sweetened and intensified the moments that life felt lived at the peak. Visions seized his percepts and he was quite transcended. He'd been drawn through a mist that sieved opal tints from stars that glimmered. Because that ethereal creature rode down a sunbeam into the common light of day. She brushed a gold maple leaf from her skirt.

She lifted her face and smiled with eyes of blue diamond that would beat the Kohinoor. "Well," she said, "Just keep on lying so prettily. Those are the prettiest words I've ever heard. I know it's all untrue but the words still touch me deeply because they say: 'I love you.'" She lifted her face. Rapt-eyed, her quaking mouth beautific, her lips swole for the kiss. She shut her blue eyes better to savor his golden tones. "Worse that

addict needs a fix," then "Lay your hands upon me!" He heard purpurations or a low growl in her voice that crept down his spine like fingerballs ever so lightly grazing only the faint blond down and stirring gooseflesh underhand to horripilation. "You have to kiss what you find."

She said that when she was alone thoughts of him stole over her like sunlight. When he was with her his words induced in her a dreamy rhapsodical tenderness. She said she felt that life could not be sweeter than these idyllic days asylummed in a dim room with him or out among the trees where the wind sang with just himself alone for company. And she said that she felt like a creature as divine as he claimed her and anointed by the ungent of love and slaked by vinous lips. She said that such love was beyond speaking and that life was the most glorious gift in the Universe. He had done all this for her. Her eyes were stolen specks of the azure welkin oozing great waterdrops that beaded and rolled out the lids and grazed her cheeks and made dark spots on her yellow skirt.

He came to her apartment one day unexpected and he didn't knock. The first thing he saw was her wealth of chestnut hair on the hardwood floor. And then he saw that bosom and that small waist yea and those rondured buttocks whose memory he carried inside his hands and

those fine legs and there was indeed Melissa herself. Only thing was that she was lying across an armchair limp and wrinkled. He picked up that fleshlike casing with consternation and alarm. Why it was a flesh suit of foam rubber and plastic with inner padding and contours shaped for some thin form. There were eye fents complete with lashes with adhesive undersides and nipples that would harden to the touch. Limp across his arms it hung. His eyes perused its length.

He felt suddenly awaked from a visionsary world and dropt from that stellar ether back into the commonplace world, that blight called life. The horror dawned slow, and then he shuddered in the ghastr grip of fact and gooseflesh swarmed his skin. He looked back at the lacquered seraph's face! Why it was a mechanical horror doll! Falser than a store dummy that concealed no lie inside!

He examined the groin-cleft in the underbelly in which she'd stodged him then her pubus smacked upupup and her buttocks rocked in his hands and de bed go blam dee blam. He felt inside that short blind gut. A quaggy wet bog his fingers felt. Like lubed chamois with expansible rings. He thought it was a damn close approximation to the inimitable vagina.

And he was wondering who then had divested herself of Melissa? What tongue was that had clogged his throat?

Qualms and scruples quailed his innards. He heard a noise in the bedroom. Whoever she was, she was afoot in the apartment.

Then there came up to his elbow a ghast arachnoid caught out of its lair, an unutterable revulsion! A degenerate monster, gruesome in the extreme and ghastly and pathetic. The outsized spider was a freak thing that he'd shoot dead, blow to hell if he had a gun, just as an act of mercy only he would to God so help him Jesus! For that abortion had grown up out of the trash-can it was thrown into. That it had blue eyes and spoke that, "Let's fuck," catpurr, but so much subtler than the lewd insinuation of Mae West was this! She whose stroll's allure swayed in the hips of Delilah strolling and Salome performing a hiptoss or a bellydance and exhaling a reek of rut. What aberration had possessed him to find divinity in a grisly teratoma! This basilisk with blue-eyed gaze presented itself to him as a case of miscarried loveliness. That diametric reversal or antipodes from vision to horror seemed to snap something in his mind. It seemed almost an illumination of life that suggested a law of compensation at work in this life in which etheric transports are to be found only on a wheel that turns through hell and which we're bound to and finding heaven we fear hell will be next.

The creature sat crouched in repose like a dead spider and spoke of love and of how all creatures deserved to live.

He watched it rise against the wall and close a window blind and saw how its rickety spindled frame could stretch out into a kind of supportive endoskeleton and assume a kind of willowy form and stride. But pray tell how might it star the dimples in her cheeks and crook her fingers and how lift her heels and spur his kidneys and snap her groin like her ass was spring-loaded and swallow him down the cuntsleeve and spew and gulp and regurg and raven till his cock puked jissom (or choked slime some might euphemize) and it was this hideousity who did it all aswoon inside a girl bag! He swooned himself to recall it and yet his horrified eyes bore at the ob-scenes that he'd enacted with this spider. That thing with eyes of azure and lapis lazule had jigged up and down his buzzing prick and that claggy hole in her belly had choked his prickstick and slurruph'd his opaline drops down the crotch throat and it was that creepycrawl dead spider did that to him!

He turned for the door, then the blue eyed monster crept toward him and addressed him as the man whose sweettalk had driven it half insane with yearning love. And now it pleaded. "Don't run from me!" Tentacles?

Feelers? Arms were they? Stretched toward him. "I love you so!" it said. And then the truth sat down hard on his head that she whom he'd thought was beyond all doubt the queen of the universe was in fact the greatest horror of them all. On a sudden the strained cords stood taut in his own throat and he gaped his mouth and eyes yet more aghast, for there in the thighforks of the beast hung dark pendants. Then he turned his back upon that beast that would turn a Gorgon's eyes back into its brain, and he went out the door and stood in the hall.

A woke beast nailed down stirred upright in his chains and his long teeth shone and his leaky chops dripped then the chains clattered from the neck. He thought about a butcher's knife from the kitchen. Then his eyes fell on the closet door and he remembered something he'd left there. He opened it and took out a ballbat and then he went back into the bedroom with Melissa and he watched that hideous face disintegrate beneath his blows into a red ruin.

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CHAPTER X
A CLASSIC SUCKER

Simon Sulfurey shucked his leather coat and flung it on the couch then bent he down to tie a trailing shoelace. He bowtied the lace and stood upright. At once his face felt like a bucket of crushed ice had been dashed into it. Darkness swarmed the room and he pitched toward the sofa and fell over the scroll end and rolled into the floor.

He felt the chill fade. Stars rained from the ceiling. He saw a young girl far out in an ocean of stars. He saw the spidered cracks in the plaster ceiling. Laurie squat down and hove close, her face stark and pale, her features sharp and fine.

She said: "It's true I have a hole in my heart. But you're not well either. Make an appointment with a doctor tomorrow."

"I'm not dying, Laurie? I'm worn out. I sleep poorly. I have bad dreams. I wake up and read about those pale sylphs in Poe. They make me think of you."

"That's the fourth time in two weeks you've fainted. I want you to see a doctor tomorrow."

"I don't need a doctor."

She lifted his head against her stomach. "I need you to take care of me. You can't die first."

That night he fell asleep then burst awake panting and clammy, his heart pounding. He'd seen Laurie in a Poe tale. A lily-pale bloodless seraph, she held her heart in her hand pumping and her finger stopped its leak. He looked at the clock's phosphor hands and despaired. Just ten minutes ago he'd snapped off the light.

He got out of bed and went into the bathroom. He looked in the medicine cabinet and took down an amber phial and tilted out two fat illegal tablets and swallowed them with a sip from the tap and returned to bed. He read of Madeline Usher till he felt sleepy then snapped off the light. He looked at Laurie's profile. I'd hate to part with her but how'd I keep her from ripening? he wondered. Hours of drugged sleep passed. The alarm clock razzed him up at six o'clock. He went to the bathroom and shaved. The blue flesh of his under-eyes fluttered. He sat and ate bacon and toast. He took his coat from the closet and turned for the door. Laurie waited there. "Don't forget to call the doctor for an appointment," she said.

At work Simon asked Merv Pregulman, his boss, if he would recommend a doctor. Pregulman dialed his own physician and reached Simon the phone. The receptionist offered him a one o'clock appointment vacated by a

cancellation. Simon said yes. He went without lunch and drove to the doctor's office. For two hours he was examined, tested and x-rayed. He raced like a sprinter on a treadmill, the nurse astonished. He spent an hour in consultation with the doctor. At five o'clock he drove back to work and reported to Pregulman. Then he drove home.

Laurie met him at the door. "Did you make an appointment with a doctor?"

"Goddamn, Woman!"

"Answer my question." Her tone warned him.

"Yes. I made it and kept it already today." He gave her a cynic wink. "A doctor and three nurses spent the afternoon examining me. I've had x-rays, cardiograms, stress tests, stomach probes, intestinal palpations, throat cultures, blood tests and all orifices poked at and peered into. And I've answered forty or fifty questions at least."

"What did the doctor say?" she said.

"He said a great deal. He said I was anemic. And that I was 'on the edge.' 'On the edge of what?' I asked him. 'On the brink of nervous exhaustion,' he said. 'Clearly,' he said. I asked him how it could be so goddamn clear to him when he had run two dozen tests and found me in good health. He said, 'Hold out your

hands, Mr. Sulfurey." I held them out and they quaked like palsy was in them." Simon held out his hands in exaggerated trembling. "Look at them! Would you believe? Where's my nerve gone! The doctor said, 'Do you see what I mean, Mr. Sulfurey?' He gave me a bottle of vitamins. And he gave me a pocketfull of sedatives. He prescribed pills for sleep. He spoke about antipsychotic drugs. He gave me some pills for rage control! I told him I didn't need any goddamn pills for rage control! I possessed self-control! Will power! I've taken ahold of myself! I hammered his desk with my fist. The fool asked did I wish to see a psychiatrist? 'No!' I said. 'Hell no! And no again!' I told him I wouldn't trust a shrink with my dog. They'd had at my bitch. He asked why I liked risks. Why did I yearn for the fray. I said, 'I hate to insult you but you sound just like a goddamn shrink.' 'But of course!' he said. 'I am one. Didn't you read my titles on the door? I practice medicine and psychiatry. You aren't seeing what's in front of your face.' The fool was both quack and shrink! A mind and body man!"

"He said I was manic and he was prescribing lithium, the lightest known metal. He asked me did I know that there were half mad sorts that drove themselves with no mercy till they dropped dead. 'Well, kiss my ass!' I

said. 'And what's the point of telling me this?' 'Take a vacation,' he said. 'You need a rest. Physically you're exhausted. Mentally you're on the brink. Systemically you're in perfect health.' It cost the company five hundred dollars for that doctor's visit." Simon peeled his coat and dropped it on the sofa. "Dinner smells good."

"There's baked chicken, baked potato and green salad. Come sit and eat."

He sat at the table and ate his supper then he thumbed back his plate and lit a cigarette. "Would you like to spend three weeks on a Florida seashore?"

She closed her eyes and smiled and inhaled deeply.

"I told Pregulman the doctor told me to take a vacation. I reminded him that I had last year's vacation due plus a month of sickleave. He pointed at the door. 'Take a month,' he said. 'We can get along without you.'"

--o--

Friday evening Simon left work and went home. He lugged the suitcases into the cartrunk and drove south out of Chattanooga, Tennessee. Then Laurie drove from eight till midnight when they ate supper at a truck stop. Then Simon drove and Laurie pillowed her head on his near thigh and slept. Her face glowed below him like a waxwork dummy, blue in the dashlight. At their small

private wedding the minister had spoken of cleaving and sundering and till death and with wineglow on her cheeks she'd laughed and said to the preacher: "I'll never leave him! Except in a box." She laughed alone then for they all knew she had a sick heart and that she'd said she'd live ten years but those who knew the gravity gave her half that.

The headlights bored yellow holes in the dark. Simon snapped the radio knob and swept the dial across the FM band. A sudden soprano trilling an aria. The tormented voice flew up the scales and rode a peak for thrilling seconds, a wild scream con tremolo in the height of her register and the soprano swooped to an abyss of grief and Laurie stirred and sighed. That dramatic voice made him crave strong passions. He smiled and leaned his head at a philosophical tilt. It seemed as futile to question life as it seemed impossible not to. Not to question life was out of the question. The unexamined life was not worth living. The over-examined life was a dead specimen. Logic is all tautology. Should he then go asea in ultimate matters? Whatever is ultimate is logical nonsense. What is the answer, Gertrude? What is the question, Alice?

A freight train squalled at a nearby crossing. He looked at his wrist watch. The phosphor dial read four

o'clock, night's most ghastly hour. He glanced at Laurie and recalled Poe's sylphs of lily hue.

The wind trailed hairs across her cheek. She stirred and raised her head and gazed at him, her dream-shot eyes blown round.

"Show me your tits," he said.

She made a face of revulsion. "God, you're loathsome!" She turned onto her opposite side and dropped her head on his thightop.

He was in South Georgia or Northern Florida when he saw the pines and live oaks first sweep black against the paling sky. Pine and woodsmoke scented winds of dawn.

Laurie woke again and sat up and yawned and looked about. She dug a brush from a shoulderbag and dragged it through her hair. She put back the brush and took out a tiny compact case and pressed a button and the lid sprang up its mirror. She daubed her lips and compressed them and pouted at the mirror then put back the case.

"I want some coffee," she said.

He pulled into a truck stop restaurant and they ate hotcakes and drank coffee. He ordered two pint-sized styrofoam cups of coffee to take with them and they drove on. The sun came flickering through the pines. Stilt-legged birds stood in roadside ditches. Carrion crows

stalked roadside carcasses, their black wings ashimmer like the ebon raven. The roadside dead stank the air for a breath and was gone the next. Attercops glowed in roadside bushes like trapped fog. Two skunks came trotting across the road ahead and Simon tightened his fingers on the steering wheel and steered over their heads and heard no thunks against the underframe and he looked and saw them in the rearview mirror step on across the road.

"Whew!" he said.

"Good driving!" said Laurie. She folded her legs in the seat and sipped coffee. "I have some plans, Darling. I want to fisson! I want to divide! I want to multiply!"

"You want to be a mathematician!"

"I want hahaha to have a child!"

"You want to conspire with the universal urge to fuck and foal," he said.

An angry whelk rose between her eyes. "Would you adopt a child then?"

"Hell no! And no again! Should I raise one even I'd not adopt it. They resent your patronizing them!"

"I've got a deeprooted woman's craving to breech a child and raise it. It'd be a shame not to."

"It'd be a worse shame to die in childbirth. Go to the doctor first. Ask him what he thinks."

She looked out at the uprushing scene swarming the windshield. "I asked him already when I had those last tests. We had a long consolation which might've lasted a minute."

"His words are my words."

"He said I mustn't have a baby until I have my heart fixed."

"So there you have my answer."

"I'm going to have that operation."

"The risk is high."

"My risk is high just being alive! I'm half dead sitting here." She shuddered and looked out the side window. "Caution to the wind," she muttered.

Simon looked out the windshield at the imminent road that leads yonder ahead in a corridor where he'll wait in dread for her scapel-hewn body, scant thing, rolled out on a dolly that's headed, surely, for a recovery room.

--o--

While he drove on the tangled freeways through Jacksonville the sun crept up the windshield. Laurie rolled down the window and the wind took her hair. He drove into Daytona and crossed St. John's river and drove along the beachfront motels and pulled up at an inn called the Floridian.

Simon switched off the engine. "Every town in this state has a motel called the Floridian," he said.

He signed the register M/M Sulfurey. The dayclerk handed him the key. There were two fullsize beds in the room. They showered and walked to a restaurant and ate fried eggs and small linked sausages and then stepped into a grocery store and bought a jug of white wine and went back to the room. Simon filled paper cups with crushed ice and poured the wine.

Laurie snapped off the light. The bedside sank as he sat down. He snapped the laces and shucked his shoes. They thudded softly on the shag carpet. He lay back and shut his eyes. The bed dipped and she crept up over him and her open mouth found his. Her breath might have been ether. She lay down beside him and shut her eyes.

--o--

He woke at six and shook her awake. They fetched out swimgear. He pulled on blue boxer trunks. She fetched up a string bikini. He bowknotted the halter between her shoulder blades. She strapped the bottom between her thighs and tied the strings across her hips so the wedge of rag spanned her buttocks drumtight.

He drove to the boardwalk and parked in among the straggled lines of cars strung out down the beach. They strolled along the tide's edge past bathers teeming the

surf. They found a vacant spot of sand and spread their towels then stepped down to the surf. Spent waves broke across their shinbones. They surged on into the curling breakers swoosh and rode out the waves then slogged from the ocean. He towelled her dry. His strokes savored her.

She laughed. She sighed. "Nothing to do! And I at the moment am enamored of the Universe. I feel intimations of transcendental peace."

"A world of evidence to the contrary," said Simon, "is waiting to show you what a fool you are. I'm going to walk up the beach and look for shells." He turned and strolled along through the crowd till he'd gone beyond the bathers and came upon a jumble of concrete pilings bulldozed into a breakwater. At the foot of pilings he came upon a fiddler crab at war with an army of red ants. A dead shellfish lay nearby and Simon surmised that the crab had killed the shellfish then had encountered a few red ant skirmishers who pitched battle while one ran for more troops. Reinforcements had arrived. The fiddler lashed and clacked his scissor claw and snapped off heads of ants and crushed belly and thorax, the skeleton cases crushed with sharp crackles clear to his ear. The battle was fought with spastic frenzy like the jerky scenes in old silent films. The fiddler crab

hacked ants in half while he scrabbled to flee over hacked heads and severed torsos but all ways he faced Kamikaze red ants with little Jap faces that reared before the frantic crab pinching strong jaws seeking soft flexure of joints that no shell hid.

Simon quelled the impulse to sail the crab into the surf, be its savior. But this was life, he thought. The way it is. He stood engrossed in the pitched battle. He thought he heard his name called and turned and saw Laurie down the beach. She burst into a run headlong and leaped hard upon him and knocked him asprawl. For that spree she lay wheezing asthmatically. "Haah! Haah! Haah!"

He put his ear to her breastpit. "You imbecile! Your heart's beating like a triphammer!" He stood up and pulled her to her feet. For that dash Simon knew she'd languish an hour in oxygen debt. She scorned caution in order to scorn the dread she lived with.

--o--

Next morning she rose from bed and stood bucknaked on the carpet with her legs spraddled and one handheel poised atop a cocked hip in the attitude of a pirate's bitch and swung the wine jug across her forearm and tilted a drink to her lips and a line of bubbles seethed up the green glass. She put down the jug. "Aaah!" she

said. She sat on the bed and leaned against the headboard and cocked up her knees.

He leaned over and gazed between her knees.

"Want to look at my anus, Darling?" She handed down a small compact with a mirror in the lid. "Need a speculum?"

"I'll see it feelingly."

"Come up here."

He crawled up to her mouth and kissed her.

She heaved for breath. "Don't fuck around!" she said.

"It's your funeral," he said.

She lifted her heels and spurred his kidneys. She panted scant of breath. Then wheezes burst unbidden. She began to fling her head side to side gasping. "God!" she gasped.

"No ma'am. Just one of his children."

"Ho! Baby Tookums!"

Her face was white and her breasttips blue. The nipples stirred with her heaving. Her body convulsed. Her ribs seized stark. A wraith out of Poe, thought Simon. A lilled shecorpse.

He put his ear to her breastpit. Quick hard blows thumped there.

He lifted his head. "Just imagine you being in

labor!"

She lifted her head, her eyes unsatisfied. Her lips peeled back from her famished mouth. "Kiss me," she said.

--o--

They put on swimsuits and drove to the beach and Simon parked near the old rotting pier and pierhouse. They strolled at the tide's edge, spent waves rushing over their feet and draining back, sand sucked underfoot. Thunderheads boiled out over the ocean. Simon spoke of cotton-picking in boyhood when he used to come in from the field with his jute sack running over and shake it all out on a piece of burlap about sheetsize and that stack of cottonbolls mirrored the great cumuli in the sky.

"You a country boy!" she said.

"I reckon."

The seabreeze cooled the sun's heat. They strolled to a vacant spot and spread a towel.

"I want an ice-cream." Laurie pointed to a small white trailer. "I'll bring you one."

"Not now. I want to walk down the beach."

She flung an arm aloft. "I'll come find you."

Simon strolled off down the beach. He smiled for no reason. He was feeling good. He passed two Adoni of

thewy brawn, his own frame pale and lank. A girlchild stood in his path eating a donut. Her lips were furred with brown sugar. "What say kid," said Simon. He pinched a bite of donut and went on. A voluptuous woman strolled slowly toward him. She was dark brown and deep breasted, and her thighs switched one in front of the other. She looked straight at him, her mouth smileless and rolled dark eyes in passing. "Howdy, Ma'am," said Simon.

She stopped and looked back. "Is that a question?" Simon laughed and lifted his hand without stopping. He suspected that friendship might get out of hand.

He walked on till he came to the breakwater. There among the pilings the red ants busily quarried the crab's shell. Simon studied these methodical miners. He guessed that the shell would be hollow by nightfall. The crowbill claw lay severed a foot from the shell.

After awhile he started back. Far down the beach he saw Laurie. Sea wind swirled her hair. She was holding two ice cream cones. She came up to him and held out an ice cream.

They strolled back to their towels and sat down and licked their ice creams. Simon shut his eyes. The surf boomed. He savored a deep sense of peace. A flower seemed to blossom in his cage of bone. His eyelids

snapped open.

ZR ZR ZR ZR ZR ZRAR ZR ZR ZR.

Infernal metallic clatterblasts of hellcycles behind him had on a sudden killed the surf's plosions and hushed laughter and knelled this idyl by the sea. And he thought then how frail peace was. Frail as dandelion's downy seed puff, a soft bomb blown breath bursts.

Simon turned to look and saw two riders revved their engines full throttle: Blaow! Blaow! Blaow! Their straight pipes were unmuffled. The pair of helmeted riders braked to a stop a few yards behind Simon and Laurie and stuck down bootheels in the sand. They revved their engines to thunderous clamor. People gaped about and covered their ears.

Thunder that preludes storm, wondered Simon.

"Hey y'all, we here!" one rider crowed.

"Hee hee hee," laughed the other at this wit.

The riders throttled down their engines to a bumpety idle then switched off. They coughed themselves dead. PHOK PHOK PHOK PHUK.

Simon dropped his hands from over his ears. "My ears are bleeding."

"The fanfare of Yahoos. Ignore them."

"That would be a neat trick in all this racket. It'd be as easy to ignore a kick in the head."

Simon scrunched round and glanced sidelong at the two riders. One was swinefat. The other was meanlooking and wolfish. They tilted their motorcycles onto kickstands and cocked their front wheels aslant. Their rearview mirrors were shaped like German iron crosses. Their black leather saddlebags bore Swastiks. Devils disported upon their gas tanks. They peeled their helmets and strapped them to their backrests and turned and gazed about the beach. They leered and guffawed and swaggered about. "Why it's just like a whorehouse hereabouts," said the lean with a wolfish leer at a young girl passing off him hanging his nose and trailing after her behind. "More pussy 'n' you can shake a dick at." They lit up smokes. They wore lace-up army boots and greasy levi's. Their breastbones were bare between the open black vests. Painted across the back of their vests in red letters: DAYTONA DRAGONFLYS. Beneath the words was painted a dragonfly with four filmy wings and huge red bulb eyes. Simon guessed the fat one would go three hundred. A tub of guts overhung his belt. He couldn't spy his cock with a naked eye. His back arched deep to offset his watermelon gut. The gross oaf had puny hams. His pant's seat hung slack. He had pig-pouch eyes and pitted cheeks and a fat red slack mouth.

Simon shifted his gaze. The lean biker had a face

like a felon's with a permanent scowl writ on his mouth. His bony brows beetling, brute cheekbones, lean cheeks, a hard jaw with a muscle-knot working baccy like it was cud. His chin jutted. Had a V'd wedge of black hair he fingerraked back and his hair fell and hung about his ears in black lanks. He had a beer paunch beneath his vest flaps but he was hardmuscle. His thewy arms were knotty.

Simon looked out on the breaking waves. He listened to the bikers talk behind him. Such a brutish dialect they spoke! Simon scented danger.

He heard loud cackles and looked back at the Dragonflies. They showed their tonsils with laughter. They were just gluttons for belly shakes.

Simon knew he'd seen them before in old films, riding two abreast on stripdown motorcycles called hogs with their torsos bedecked in leather vests or denim jackets hung with swastikas and iron crosses just like these he saw there. The goodfolk were inert before tyranny. A better folk resisted mob-rule.

Hitler was their hero. Satan was their angel. They gloated in their own abhorrence.

Simon found a strong thread of credible hate in such misfits. They seemed the counterfeit values by which civilization existed and they hated to lockstep

with other men and they despise the goodfine citizenry of the land and the little law-abiding dungbeetles. He admitted that outlawry cleft his own nature. But these were cannibals upon the Body Politic, not noble savages. And even wolves kept iron laws in the pack.

Melting ice cream coated Laurie's mouth. Her tongue curled out and swept round. Droplets crawled down her chin, dripped on her open thighs. Simon pulled up a towel corner and reached for her mouth.

"Here's water." She wafted a hand. "What doth hinder?"

She stretched a yellow swimcap onto her head and stuffed her hair in it. Simon followed her to the water's edge and waded out. They surged their thighs seaward and stepped into breaking waves that stormed their heads. Simon dove into the breakers till he came up behind them and sliced through sleek green swells and troughs that buoyed him up and down. He swam outbound for ten minutes by his watch then rolled over on his back. He winced at the sun, happy in the earth's womb, in the heave of great loins. He looked all about and saw only the sun-dazzled slopes meeting the sky. He thought he might as well have been in the middle of the ocean. He squinched one eye at the sun for sextant. It stood at the zenith of its circuit and told him nothing. But he could ride up a

swelltop when need be and sight land. He'd done the same off a Mexican coast where the sun sank in the Pacific Ocean and blood up to his eyes sank down that firehole.

He floated on great heaves up and down the sun-sleeked swells, not unlike a cradle rocking. Waves feathered with faint hissing across his shoulders. The surface texture of waves stretched and tore like webwork. Here was peace. Faintly wafting his hands and feet could stay him afloat for hours. A hot sundot rode the flanks of swells.

Something hard struck his right foot hanging down the water and he kicked in sudden terror, stared down the water. He strained to see a shark shape down below but found nothing there. Incertitude tormented him. The fact of that jolt was absolute. Could the smell of fear call up sharks like blood, he wondered. He lifted his shin to his eyes and saw it was scraped raw. He looked back down the water. A jellyfish floated by puffing its little parasol.

He rode up a swell but sighted no land. He thought that it might have appeared at his back since he didn't know what direction to look.

He recalled that the stacks of thunderheads had loomed over the ocean and reckoned that the shore must lie opposite. He started off, reckoning that if he'd

erred he was swimming out to sea.

A swell lifted him and he glimpsed the beach of people and parasols and sliced the sea with new strength.

After a time he surged over a roller and was swept underwater and struck bottom and lifted his head and batted his eyes at a line of lacey fleece rushing to the shore. He staggered upright and stood swaying. Laurie came splashing up breathless. "Did you think I was goin' out yonder to look for you?"

He gestured at the ocean. "Something hit my leg! I thought it was a shark. Look here!" He crooked his leg and touched the scrape.

Her brows curled with prodigal sympathy. "Poor poor! He almost got ate by a fish!" She tore away her rubber skullcap and a torrent of hair swirled round her face and flocked her shoulders. She gazed into his eyes. "Did you ever wonder what it was like to stand on the shore and look out at the ocean while you waited for somebody to come back?"

Simon looked out to sea then back at her. He touched her arm. They walked up the beach with their heads bent against the sun. Toddlers asquat were shaping up a sandcastle. A nutbrown fat woman lying on her back scooped saltwater from a tidepool and laved great breasts that lurched toward her armpits. They stepped toward

their towels.

"Lookit that cute little shitter, Wee Buns," spoke out a raucous voice.

Simon lifted his gaze. The motorcyclists grinned at him. Sudden menace chilled the air. He thought that the sharks were here on land.

"Lookit them gams, Buck."

"Lookit them tits, Wee."

"Two puddin's in a sling, Wee."

"Vroom! Vroom!" Wee snapped his wrists revving throttles in the air.

Laurie lifted a towel to Simon. "Hush your mouth!" she said.

He dried off Laurie then he dried himself. He and Laurie sat on towels facing the ocean.

The fat one called Wee Buns spoke up behind them. "Say, Buck, did I tell you 'bout the time I'ze down in Juarez and had this here little senoreater had a big flappy cousy on her? I cupped it tight like this here. Blowed it fulla air with the lips jammed tight and let'er blow! Pppprttt! Sounded just like a fart."

"Ha ha ha!"

"Hee hee hee!"

The bikers seemed to have slank closer.

Laurie patted Simon's thightop. "Promise me you

won't say a word," she whispered.

"Goodamn Wee!" said the one called Buck. "Lookit that cunt!"

"Prime hams, Buck. Some figger, huh?"

Simon heard their boots crunch the sand.

"Promise me!" hissed Laurie.

"Introduce yourself, Buck. That Sweetlips there won't mind."

"I hope he don't. If he do I'm gonna fuck him too!"

The riders convulsed with hilarity.

"Bet that'd make him smile!" said Wee Buns. "He looks cute to me. I think you ought to stick a dick in him, Buck."

"Hey Sweetlips, c'mere a minute," called Buck. "I want to axe you a question."

"Don't say a word, Simon," Lauried breathed softly. "Please!"

"Just one leetle question! Hehehehehehe!" Wee Buns vented shrill titters.

Simon watched the ruffled wavelets meet the shore. Each spent wave drained back and left new ripples in the sand. Steps crunched at his back. A shadow fell on him and blocked the sun.

Simon looked up at Buck's gloating visage. He grinned. His horseteeth wore tobacco stain. "There you

is!" he said. He hung his eyes down Laurie's fruited halter. "Howdy, Ma'am," he said. He looked back at Simon. "Sweetlips, I'm gonna borry yore woman here if you don't mind. You don't mind, do you? I axe you a question, Sweetlips. Would you be so kind?"

Simon gazed down into his open hands. Why him? It was not the lure of Laurie. The beach was full of women. Simple accidental proximity. Blind Chance, had placed him there.

"Look at him, Wee! We need to help out the boy. She done wore out his tallywhacker. Ain't that a shame, I axe you now? The calvary has come. Hah hah hah! You answer me, Boy! You make me wonder where yore manners is!"

"She done wore out his tongue, Buck."

"His tongue done been pussywhopt. I believe that's it. If I bang his head and he say 'Ouch!', we'll know he's been fuckin' us."

People sat about watching with blank faces. Some began to pick up their towels and move away.

Laurie looked up at Buck. "Go get back on your little fart machines and poot-poot out of here!"

"Don't gimme no yap, Chippy!"

"Isn't there a goddamn cop around here?" Laurie sprang to her feet and scanned the beach then sank back

on her towel.

Buck looked around too. "I don't see one," he said with solicitude. Then he stirred the hair at Simon's nape with his sticks. "Jus' look at Sweetlips. You scared Sweetlips? He thinks I'm gonna bite him, but I jus' wanna kiss him. Now, Sweetlips, let's be serious. You sit there and keep your yap shut or I'm gonna stick my dick in it."

"Stick 'im with your dick and dick 'im with your stick! Hihihihhi," cacchinated Wee Buns.

Simon stared out to sea. He listened to surf-roar that had sounded so for eons. He heard soft plosions of his own bloodbeats in his ears.

"Hush!" said Laurie. "I beg you!"

It angered him that she clearly thought him his own worst enemy when despotic thugs loomed overhead. Simon looked up and smiled. "Say, Buck. I poured salt on a speckled slug the other day. I wanted to find out what happened when the salt of the earth met the scum. That slug just left a spot of grease."

"Hush!" stormed Laurie.

"Well. You and this creep both agree I should keep my mouth shut."

"Was he callin' us scum, Buck?"

"He was, Wee. Hey, motherfuck, stand up! You done

offended me now." Buck jostled Simon's shoulder with his sticks.

Simon whirled up and faced the bikers. He wore a steely grin like ironic gunslingers.

Buck and Wee gawked at Simon then gaped at each other.

Wee's bulbous lips vented shrill titters.

Buck's thick lips stretched over his yellow teeth. "You got balls, Sweetlips, I'll say that for you."

"Now kiss 'em goodbye!" said Wee Buns. He gestured for him with one hand and whirled his nunchuka with the other.

Laurie cried, "Goddammit to hell!" She snatched up the beachbag and towels and seized Simon's arm. "Come on with me! Goddamn you, let's go!"

Simon peeled her fingers from his forearm. "Step aside," he said.

Laurie seized his arm with both hands and hissed in his ear. "I'm not letting go! You didn't come here to play fool! You came to recover your health! Have you forgotten that? Have you?"

He tried to jerk his arm free. The Dragonflys began circling like buzzards and Simon suddenly feared a blow might strike her and whipped her away and marched her off.

"Hey Buck, he's crappin' out on us!" shouted Wee Buns.

"You can't crap out, Sweetlips! You can't back out now!" Buck drove stiff arms at Simon's back and knocked him forward into an abject sprawl. Laurie stooped and groped to help him stand. He slapped her hands away and stood up and strode off.

Buck scooped up handsfull of sand and rained it over their heads. "You chickenshit! They ain't a hair on your ass, Sweetlips!"

Buck's thrown handfulls of sand rained upon an oblivious bather snoring at the sun. He sat up spluttering. "Ptooit! What is this?" The man glared up at Buck still throwing sand. He jumped up and tore off his sunglasses and thrust his face at Buck. "You stop that!" he said.

Buck jammed the man's chest with a stiffarm shove and sent him pitching on his back in an ignominious sprawl. He shouted after Simon: "If I see you again, Sweetlips, I'm gonna fuck you!"

Simon strode on. "I'd trade my right ballock for a hoe handle!" he said.

Laurie whirled at him. "When you get mad your little fuckstick gets hard! Some thugs hang out a red flag at you and you stomp and snort. You're the very crackbrain

those goons were looking for."

He stopped dead and bored wild abhorring eyes at her. "I'd rather be beat than run!"

"Perhaps you'd rather be dead? You infant! When you reached two you never got a day older!"

Simon's gaze wandered off. His brow gnarled. "Come this way." He led her by the elbow up the beach to a boney old man sitting in a folding chair. A heavy wood crutch lay beside him. "Sir," said Simon. He swept his arm toward the cyclists standing forty yards off. "You see those motorcycle riders yonder? They meant to beat me. . ."

"I know!" the old man croaked. "I saw 'em!"

"I wondered if I might borrow your crutch there. In case I had to defend myself against those sticks they've got. A crutch may not be much good. I don't know."

"Take it! It's made of ash. Got two more at home. I hate the goddamn. Things!" The old man fetched short hale breaths. Simon listened to asthmatic wheezing up and down his sick throat pipe. His breath was drawn in labor. Simon thought a death rattle might tell better health.

"Do you mind if we sit down beside you?" asked Simon.

The old man flourished down a spidery claw. "Be

my guests."

Laurie dropped her beachbag a clatter on the sand and blared her iceblue eyes at Simon. Simon smiled at her.

He smiled at the old man and extended his hand.

"I'm Simon. This is Laurie."

"Gordon Hale." The old man's spotted claw gripped like a vise. He looked at Laurie. "It wasn't you. They were looking for." He grinned, long in the tooth. "They were after. Somebody's head. To crack."

Laurie smiled icily. "I know that. Sir!"

"Don't be mad at me. I was just telling you. I could see that. From here."

"Well," said Laurie, "You've got to be a fox in this world not a bull. Simon here is a gallant southern rebel."

"Like those fools that charged. Into walls of fire."

Laurie laughed. "You know him!"

Simon spread a towel and they sat down. Simon studied the old man. Gordon Hale looked to be sixty-five or seventy. He had a craggy face. His stiff grey hair the wind blew to thorns. He was tall and thin, had a beaked nose, strong cheekbones, hollow cheeks. He might have been a study for a corpse. Savage blue eyes burned in charcoal caves. He seemed a warrior in a

wasted body. "They'll find somebody," said Gordon Hale. "Who'll fight them."

Laurie made a sunshield of her hand and gazed at the Dragonflys. "They pushed that man," she said.

Simon picked up the heavy crutch and pondered its potential. It had twice the reach of those whizzing sticks but it looked like a clumsy and unpromising foil.

A cackle and a titter duetted on the wind and Simon looked up. The outraged man who'd confronted Buck now snatched up his belongings and strode away indignantly. Laurie looked at Simon. "He has better sense than you."

"Let the good citizens law abide," said Simon. "Personally I don't take much shit."

"Ha ha ha." Gordon Hale's laugh bubbled through sepulchral phlegm.

"I don't care one damn in hell what they say to me!" said Laurie. "I don't dignify their drivel by reply."

Simon looked astonished. "They struck me! Are blows beneath you? Evil pacific bitch! Don't be pacific on the Atlantic! There's your clue!"

"Don't turn to every dog that barks! There's your clue!"

He fetched a pack of cigarettes from the beachbag and tore the red pullband and bit off the silver foil and spat it out and knocked the pack on his knuckle and

plucked out an upstuck cigarette and nooked it in his lips and he cupped a lighter to the cigarette then stared out at the ocean and the wind tore smoke off his lips.

Laurie yanked at the crutch lying across his lap. He jerked it back and glared at her. She rared up wide-eyed and cried down at him, "A fool who persists is pretty soon a dead fool!"

"A fool who persists," mused Simon. "Why that could be the definition of a genius."

Simon cut his eyes at her. The pour of direct sunlight showed her face's imperfections. Two faint scars on her near cheek, a burn on her temple, a flat expanse of poreless skin. Blue veins showed at her temple. The wind swarmed shivering threads across her face, so comely in its imperfections. He found his sunglasses in the beachbag and put them on. His brows unknotted. Black lens in steel circles cast the seascape in olive green. Down the beach a ways he saw the cyclists reconnoiter a young couple at play. The pair frolicked oblivious to the leers standing by. Simon watched a redhaired girl in a yellow one piece swimsuit with port-holes in it that bared one buttock and the ivory quadrant of a left breast. She romped with a blonde fellow, kicking a beachball. The blonde man tried to hike the ball between his legs. The girl, in impromptu play, leapfrogged

his back. She crouched her elbows on her knees and called for him to follow suit. Buck seemed mistook that she meant him for he ran and leapfrogged her back. The girl shrieked when she looked up at who passed over her.

"We just love to play this game!" said Buck. "Ha ha ha!"

"Hihihihihhi." Wee Buns might have mimicked some jungle bird.

Simon looked away. He watched the waves skim surfers shoreward. Another shriek rent the air.

Gordon Hale rasped, "He stuck his hand. In that porthole. He felt her bottom."

"I know they're trolls. But let the law stop them. I have just one fool to my name."

A scream shot up strident as a buzzsaw. Simon's mouth fumed smoke. He listened to gulls croak. He watched the waves crash, the white destruction spill. He listened to Gordon Hale's breath rasping in his throat. He cast his eyes at the lapis lazule. A wrack of cumuli was toppling westward. He felt the tic flutter in the blue flesh under his right eye.

"Selfishness and sinfulness," said Simon, "are no different. My father taught me that. He said I was my brother's keeper. Even if you brought hell down on both your heads."

"Why are you preaching a sermon at this exact moment?" demanded Laurie.

Gordon Hale rattled, "Look yonder! They hittim with those. Goddamn Jap. Sticks!"

Simon looked at the Dragonflys. They spun their nunchukas and the blonde man maneuvered like a wrestler. Buck struck his head a blow they heard. The fellow staggered backwards clawing at his head as if swarmed by bees. Buck whipped the stick at him again and he wrapped his arms about his head like a monkey does. The redheaded woman touched fingertips to appalled cheeks and shrieked.

"Observe the vaunted lifeguard," croaked Gordon Hale.

The brown lifeguard sat ill at ease on his derrick chair. He stole a glance at the Dragonflys then leaned towards the ocean and studied the surf for black fins or the flung hand of some soul yonder.

"Their tactics are the. Same as Hitler's. First invent a crisis. Then use force. To solve it. Strip a man's dignity till. He fights back. Then hammer him into. Submission."

"It would scandalize a true Christian to sit in this heathern company. My father told me that Christians had ought to die in another man's stead. Where is one? Love that won't sacrifice is not love. I saw my old man step

like a sleepwalker into a burning house, the falling timbers crashing about him and people shouting he'd not walk out. He carried out a man he'd never met who died next day from flames that burned my old man too."

Laurie said, "How dare you tell such a goddamn lie!"

"I don't lie. Me and God don't."

"They stepped on Baby Tookum's egoismus! Him piss-off!"

She stood before Simon and Gordon Hale. She clawed at her dark mane. She set her handheels on her hips and stamped her foot. "You pettifoqulize Holy Writ!" she said.

"Do you dare defend the Bible, infidel!"

"You don't believe? You pious hypocrite. You're trying to hallow revenge with the Four Gospels. Why do we wrestle in that torment called lovemaking? Do you do it out of duty? Is it just resuscitation? What about this case. It's not love for the injured party that moves you. It's a brute urge. You crave to fuck and fight. It's in your nature. But you have to drag in the Word of God! That's snakebelly low, Mister!"

"It would be," he said, "if you were right." Simon pondered the crude makeshift, untested ordinance. He looked down at the fight taking place. Nearby bathers shifted away in alarm, a small diaspora. A bare circle

was growing round the bikers and the blonde fellow.

"Well, well, well." Simon smiled like an idiot with an arc moon mouth. He snapped the rubber cushion from the crutchtoe with a pop then he stood up.

Laurie sprang in front of him. "You're not going anywhere!"

Gordon Hale said: "The one thing about. A true Christian. Is that he acts different. The tree is known by its fruit."

"That's none of your business!" she shouted.

He smiled at her. "That's my brother yonder.

"Cut the crap!" she cried. "Your heart doesn't bleed!"

He nodded his smile. "I think it do."

"Don't be a fool!"

"It's the foolishness of God."

"God is not a party to foolishness."

"I think he is." Simon tilted his head and waxed reflective. "I've been in some fixes so bad that the cheeks of my ass burnt with shame. I've often thought since on looking back over those ghastly predicaments that there was something wanting in my character. It's troubled me all my life. One thing for sure, with a nature like mine chagrins are inevitable."

"You're a classic sucker. That's the reason why."

She seized his neck and thrust her face into his. "This was to be our new beginning, remember that? Our new beginning!" She laughed sardonically in his face.

"Every day," he said, "is a new beginning. Step aside."

"Nobody will help you! There's two of them."

"Me and God will take them. That other boy will fight."

She stepped back and exploded a slap on his face.

He touched his cheek.

A scream trebled the air and he swung his head toward the Dragonflys. Mad resolve jelled in him now. He started off and she seized his arm.

"Goddamn you!" she said. "You're mean too! You're just like they are!"

He flung her away then broke into a run.

Gordon Hale's voice pursued him across the wind. "Strike the bastards! Like hammerblows out of! Hell!"

Sunbathers swung their heads at him as he loped past. Up ahead the cyclists were stalking the blonde man. Buck whacked his arm and Wee Buns cracked one shinbone and he caught up his leg and danced on one foot and Buck struck him in the head and he fell. He tried to jump back up but Buck kicked him onto his back and stood a boot on his throat. Wee straddled him and swung his

fist in the face.

Simon braced the crutch to his armpit. With a few yards to go he aimed the crutchpoint at Wee's bent back then sprinted fullspeed, his toes spitting sand. The crutch struck Wee over the right kidney, and drove Wee's head into Buck's belly and they pitched in a sprawl. Simon, flung sideways, thought his arm was torn from the socket. He sprang to his feet and slammed the crutch against Wee Buns reared head and he seized his head and crouched like a Moslem.

Buck whirled up, his upper lip crimpt over long yellow teeth. He snarled like a hackled cur: "You done done it now, Sweetlips! I done told you what you gonna get!" The villain's laughter told he meant it.

"For shame, old boy," Simon mimicked a British accent. "You should wipe your mouth after you speak. O I think we speak the same language." He lifted a finger. "The only difference is in the mode of expression. What spews from your mouth, I articulate with my anus!"

"Get up, Wee!" shouted Buck. "Sweetlips is a school-boy. We got to teach him a lesson."

"Aow!" Wee rose to his knees and clawed at his back. "'At sucker's done broke my back!"

"And I haven't even started on your head yet!" said Simon.

"We gonna make you shit what you never ate yet, Sweetlips!" shouted Buck.

"You goddamn said it!" said Wee. He stood up off his knees and set his nunchuka whirling.

Simon thought now he should have quelled his speech and whack'd Wee's head some more and maybe spelled him. Then Buck might have lost stomach for a lone fight. Simon slit his eyes evilly at the blonde fellow. Drops from his nose holes freckled the sand between his hands. But what's a little nosebleed? This fight was first his! You goddman malingerer, get up! thought Simon though he spake not. The ingrate made no move to rise and Simon alone stood pitted against the Dragonflys.

Simon backstepped away from the Dragonflys trying to pincer him. The three maneuvered. Black shadowcrabs swarmed over their feet. Simon composed a desperate strategy: Keep both bikers in sight but engage just one at a time while keeping up a defensive retreat, jiggling backwards like a dancemaster. An opposite strategy occurred: Attack first and keep them in disarray so they can't coordinate an assault. A third strategy occurred. Judiciously alternate these first two strategies. But that would be no different than scrambling helter-skelter with no strategy at all, he thought.

The cyclists passed telling looks and shifted to

pincer and Simon rushed and gored Buck's paunch gut.

"Ow!" Buck shouted.

"Look out!" shouted the fellow on his hands and knees.

Simon whirled into Wee's swing and his stick glanced the outer orbit of his right eye and sent his sunglasses soaring high overhead in a smooth arc. The lens passed a black gaze over the beach. The Invisible Man might have passed overhead in his invisible glider. Simon with dazed reflex jerked up the crutch and struck away Wee's next swing.

Bystanders screamed. Simon ducked and a stick whizzed past and tossed his hair. He fled then and they chased him and he turned and the three jockeyed again on flexed knees and spraddled feet, their heads hunched down between hitched shoulders, each man presenting the other two a shifting coordinate. Simon danced ajog between them darting his eyes at one, the other. He rushed at Wee and slammed his stick askew. The clatter of wood sounded like deer antlers in mating season. Simon veered out into the surf. Six legs slogged and churned in the spent waves and Simon felt hobbled and slowed in the surf and fled landward. The Dragonflys pursued and Simon wheeled and dodged and feinted and jabbed. The Dragonflys wheezed and cursed his speed with baffled rage. At

the clatter of hardwood spectators snatched their effects and backed out of harm's way. The fighters became enclosed in a halfcircle arena against the ocean. Three lethal looking hellions reeled about, Simon dancing, blood tracking his forehead and one eye bloodred from Wee's blow that struck off his sunglasses. Underdog rooters began cheering the crutch-wielder. Enthusiasts shouted advice like boxing fans at ringside. Some savored the seaside brawl with sadistic smiles like thumbs-downers at a Roman circus.

Simon fled the one and rushed the other. He knocked Wee's stick out of orbit and gored his guts and whirled and fled Buck while Wee squealed and clawed his belly.

"Wee, get your goddamn ass in gear!" shouted Buck.

Wee Buns' ten fingers palped his tender belly. His face looked grieved. He was basting like a pig on a spit. His bloated face was lacquered. His breathing rasped asthmatically. He'd half quit pursuit and was hanging back. A few sorties had gone badly, now he was winded and in pain.

Simon concentrated now on Buck who'd twice dealt him hard blows that raised pumpknots on his head that leaked wriggly wind clotted blood worms onto his forehead.

He slapped Buck's stick away and blitzed him jabs

which sent him pedalling backwards then falling and pivoting up on one hand and up and, clubbing away the gouge of crutch he sprinted off aways and whirled and roared at Wee Buns. "Let's go Wee! We got to nail this schoolboy! Teach him a lesson he can't remember!"

Wee trotted about wheezing near heatstroke. He was bugeyed and his jowls were liverish. When he saw the other two had run in the sea to their calves he launched into a fat man's mincing run that cued Buck's charge. Simon flared back and they had trapped him with his back to the sea. He dragged sidelong in the surf and all three thrashing in kneedeep waters while battling with sticks and crutch. Simon shifted round the slower Wee and stomped out splashes up to the sand with Buck and Wee running after. Simon ran at Wee and swung on his head and Wee with the perfect timing of good luck whocked the crutchleg away and Simon's momentum ran him slap into Wee. It felt like charging a padded wall. Wee's beefy hands grappled the stick-chain round his neck and jerked his browbone hard to his own and glared into his eyes one inch away and smiled his pebble teeth. "Hey dere, shitface!" He laughed, not unfriendly. Simon squirmed in a frenzy of terror. He saw the veins swell on Wee's forehead. Wee rolled him to the ground and straddled him and Simon slid his hand down inside his belt, his

claw hand seizing his ballocks strove to tear them from his crotch and Wee loosed his hold and Simon ripped his head from the chain half scalped and raked one ear that blazed coral. He plunged into the path of Buck's swing but glimpsed the swing and half ducked the blow that glanced off his head and he pitched away then into a dash for surety. Every escape seemed managed by the skin of his teeth.

Laurie whirled to spectators. "Somebody help him! For God's sake, help him! You want money?"

A pudgy man rounded his mouth wetly on a halfsogged cigar said, "He ain't doing bad by himself, Lady."

"Zho far," said a tall blonde man, sending off puffs of pipe smoke on the wind. "Vut iss dis fight aboot?"

Skeptical glances gawked askant at Laurie. None wanted to risk the fray. A great bulbous woman with cherubic fat boiling out of her black one-piece, strode up and touched Laurie's arm: "The police should be getting here any minute now."

Wee stood slumped as if dead in his tracks. He wheezed like a small surf. Simon gleaned fear in Buck's glare. He led Buck in a strategic retreat away from Wee. Buck followed warily, his nunchuka singing. His lunge telegraphed his swing and Simon launched the crutch

overhead in a brute slam upon Buck's head. Buck lurched and half-fell and staggered to recover and Simon gouged his ribs and he pitched down and Simon sprang overhead and jobbed the crutch hard under his chin and said, "Just budge one inch and I'll punch a hole through you. Throw those sticks behind me!"

Buck's crowfoot eyes squinched. His neck muscles tremor'd where the peg poised at his underjaw. He flipped the sticks away.

"Roll over slow," said Simon.

The multitude by the sea howled in sudden clamor and Simon ducked and whirled and Wee's arm swept across the sky and light exploded, radiance burst in his brain. Was this the peace profound he was seeking? Patches of blue and great stacks of suet stood on his eyes. He heard screams. He wondered what drama could make a woman shriek under that great potlid welkin.

Laurie squalled: "Will nobody help him?" Faces turned and gazed at her. She balled her fists on her hipswells and gazed about with wild scorn. She marked well the boasted humanity. Then she whirled and flung herself toward Simon lying on the sand.

He dropped his head sideways and saw Laurie dash forward and Buck shot out a claw and hooked her throat like a clothesline hangs a night prowler, and her legs

raced up stairs of air and she dropped, kicking at the sky high on her shoulders and hindhead.

The situation clarified in his mind and Simon struggled to stand up. A shadow blotted out the sky and fat legs waddled up and stood straddle of him. A pigface grinned down over a melon gut. Wee raised his sticks clubwise against the sky and Simon cocked back his sudden right foot between Wee's legs and curved his hands round his bootheels and shot his foot into Wee's crotch. Wee exploded a scream as one whoopt penitent and whumped on his back. Simon dove for the crutch and seized it and climbed to his feet. Buck whirled his head and scanned the crowd, a partisian monster with a hundred hard eyes bent at him. He whirled at Simon's approach and razzed his nunchuka.

Wee crawled to his feet, one paw cradling his stomped crotch. He found Simon's back directly in front of him and waddled forward on his toes. Screams erupted from the crowd and Simon whirled and Wee whacked him across the collarbone and Buck rushed up and whapped Simon across his back and he was dazed again and blundering badly between two assailants, trying to plunge from the cross-fire by fending with crutch and forearms against blows that pelted his head and whacked his back and he swung with blind staggers from their blows and stumbled to his

knees.

Wee seized in ham fists Simon's crutch by the leg and jerked hard and Simon pitched on his belly but held onto the crutch and Wee dragged him across the sand and Buck whipped back his nunchukas and whacked his head as with nightsticks. Simon recoiled and threw up his arms and scuttled to his feet and staggered away. Wee cocked the crutch and swung like potbellied Ruth and slammed Simon's hindhead so hard he dove jackknifed into the sand. A woman's vibrato scream duetted with the shriek in his head. He stood upended on his head a moment then capsized sideways.

Buck whipsawed Laurie back into the crowd then signaled for Wee to hold off Laurie's frantic forays. Buck growled low, "Keep this whore back. Sweetlips ain't whopt yet."

Spite of a bad heart or because of it, Laurie was strongwilled and won her way by dint of effort. Her hoarse breathing sounded like sobs. Her blood was poor in oxygen. Yet she steeled her body and rose on hands and knees. Across one shoulder she saw Buck step toward Simon. She stood and sprinted toward Wee and fainted right and swerved left and pitched toward Buck, who stomped Simon's chest with a boot kick. Buck lofted his sticks and blocked the sun and the sun burst back and he

pitched away.

Laurie had outflanked Wee Buns and hurled herself at full pulver onto Buck's back. He jolted away then stopped and wrenched her around and swung back his arm and thunder-slapped her head a blow that whirled her facedown on the sand.

Some in the crowd howled as if their own heads had been thunderstruck. Laurie withdrew splayed limbs beneath her. Her swole mouth leaked blood. Sand grains and hair stuck to her face. She looked back across her shoulder and saw Buck step toward Simon and she sprang up and ran and grappled her legs and arms around Buck's legs.

"Leggo you cunt!" Buck, hobbled to the spot. screamed down at her. He tried to dance his legs free but she clung tight. "Turn loose, whore!" He whacked her backbone hard and she clamped her teeth in his calf and muffled shrieks in his flesh and noosed her legs tighter and her gasps seized her ribs stark in the flesh.

Spectators aghast shouted at sight of hard brute sodden thuds struck on fair womanflesh. The crowd's outrage burst into threats that seemed meant and Buck gawked about at the worsening situation.

The fat lady shouted: "There's not a man can watch that and stand still!" She ran herself at Buck and

slapped his face smartly. He piston jabbed his handheels into her bulbous breasts and she ran backwoars and fell.

"That's some nice tits ya got, Fatso," said Buck.

A lean tubercular looking man in his fifties stepped forward and stuck out a quivering finger at Laurie and said to Buck: "You better not hit her again!" A young man of brown muscle stepped forward. A lean tall man of white sunless skin stepped out. Each glanced at the other and nodded in abrupt confederacy. They stepped toward Wee and Wee fell back. "Buck! Let's git!" he shrieked.

"Stop them sons of bitches, Wee!" blared Buck in panic. "Brain the first one that takes another step!"

Buck spoke down to Laurie. "Now you just got yourself to blame, you hussy!" He hooked the sticks crosswise under Laurie's jaw and jerked up her chin and forced back her head till her throat stretched in a long curve and her hindhead touched the backbone between her shoulder-blades and her eyes started exopthalmic as did eyes of the hanged. The debt of air made her faint and her fingers felt numb as roots and clung like desperate digits to a cliff crevice her fingers loosening and she faced the sky as blue herself as a hanged woman.

Buck screamed into her face. "You whorehouse bitch! I'm gonna break your fuckin' neck!" Her arms broke loose

and she spilled back and braced on her handheels. Buck jerked up his right leg and stomped her breastbone and her haltertop tore away stuck in the welt of his bootheel and she pitched flat on her back. Her eyes rolled wild and she convulsed for breath that didn't come. Frantic hands fluttered at her breastbone, and her nodding breasts shuddered. The bootclop left a solemark deepdyed in mulberry over her breastbone.

Laurie's halter flailed from Buck's heelcleft where shoe vamp met sole. Buck backstepped beside Wee, his nunchuka buzzing. "Come on you brave bastards! I'll show you what your brains look like?" Buck's retreat belied his boast. His rhetoric wavered. His voice sounded shattery. His bravado rang desperate. "You boys wanna wake up in a basket?" he queried.

The three confederates advanced shoulder to shoulder. Buck barked a shivery laugh. The Dragonflies sidled backwards, their bootsteps slurry in the sand, keeping just three or four yards ahead of the three men's advance. People bolted and jostled to clear a path for the Dragonflies. Seeing the way open to their cycles they burst into a run and leaped astride their machines and lurched them off kickstands and jammed keys in locks and twisted them and ratcheted up kickstarters with boot-toes and stomped hard, engines exploding.

PHOK! PHOK! PHOK! PHAOW PHAOW PHAOW POW POW
POW POW.

The Dragonflys shifted gears and wrenched throttles and surged forward, Buck in the lead, their rear wheels spitting sand swerving onto the bench drive, spewing roostertails, and gunning off in blasts of thunder. Shouts and handclaps cheered them Godspeed hellward. Simon sat up then stood on his feet. He saw the Dragonflys waver in the heat. They looked far off like two black horseflies buzzing over the sand. They turned onto the paved road and vanished. Their thunder grew distant then died.

Simon tongued his left inner cheek that had been chainraked across his clenched teeth. He thooked a clot of blood on the sand. He was sure he could feel the wind blow through his skullcracks. He searched his scalp with his fingerballs for breached seams.

He saw Laurie up ahead being stood upright on her feet by two men joined then by two women. Six arms either side of her imparted the armswarmed look of a Hindu deity. She convulsed yet for breath. A shutcock seemed closed down her throat. Her helpers clapped her back till she stumbled forward and bedraggled vines of hair jumped about her face.

A breath of air creaked down her throat. Urrrk.

The breath rasped her throat chords. She erked again. Her seized heaves Urrk'd. She started fetching breath clutched in her throat, her breasts shuddering. Twisted vines of dark hair lashed about her face and shoulders like a bucket of snakes poured over her head. Her ribs and breastbone jumped stark in the flesh. She saw Simon come reeling. Blood had pasted hair sprigs to his forehead. Dried and flaking bloodworms crawled on his brow. Her eyes flashed at him and her mouth shaped a hole. His right eye was a green marble in a bloodpool. His sight was specked with iridial motes. A bloodstained outlook stood on his eye.

She touched his face. He smiled. Threads of bloody spittle snapped between his lips. She brushed stubble of sand from his cheek. Half her face was struck crimson. Over her breastbone blazoned a footprint like a huge birthmark. Wind berried her nipples. Her pale breasts were blueveined and glowed like alabaster. Her breasttips were blue nodes. Children looked at her then snickered at each other.

She pinched his cheeks agrin. She laughed in his face a shattery laugh. "Having a fine time on your vacation, Darling?"

A woman peeled a yellow T-shirt over the head of a half-grown boy and held it open for Laurie. She stuck

her arms through, debouched her head from the neckhole.

Simon scowled in thought. He pondered this fray lest a door close leaving him the same fool he'd been before this strife with rakehells. A mongol horde of two, bristle jawed brute and a fat oaf, had crossed Sir Simon and whacked his lance and pranced about even as mimefolk wage joust with quaint wood fightsticks. What stupid ordnance! The ridiculous one, the preposterous other! Only vis a vis did they make sense. The mongols stove his eye and knocked his head then moved on like envenomed sores that heal in one spot to flame in others.

A foil for louts, that's what he'd been. He felt brutish and dwarfed. He felt no snobbery for louts low-born but he abhorred yahoos. Had there been shit they would have flung it. His head reverbed still with after-gong of skullblows. A fine thin high shriek pitched nigh out of hearing rang in his skull. He thought again that there was surely something wanting in his character. He was the victim of a faulty metaphysic. Cap and bells apt would adorn his skull. Stick a dunce cap on the ninny, let him play himself. It seemed that he'd come South just to rendezvous with these denizens of smokey road-houses, brute louts who'd thugged him half dead then slank back to their lair.

Bloodfloaters bore a drift of spectra. Parasols

along the beach looked like great butterflies just emerged from the chrysalis. Blood specks drifted across the iris. Things shone like iridescent fishscales.

Was someone speaking to him? He looked at Laurie. It must have been her. He watched the valves of her lips writhe out syllabic plosions that multiplied meaning into Orphic ambiguity.

"What in God's name is wrong with you?" she plead.

He struggled with the immensity of the question. He thooked a bloodclot on the sand.

Her rabid eyes blared. Her lashes glittered with waterdrops. Bloodbeads on his eye haloed her head. Her soul flashed forth, beautiful past believing. A claw of longing clenched his heart. He heard the siren's sing. Impossible longing seized him, Tantalean excruciations. He apprehended nympholepsy. A wind swept across his mindscape. He lurched with braindrift. Next moment he forgot her utterly. His consuming passion was routed by a velleity. Stupefaction stood on his face. His eyes rolled overhead at the woolpacks toppling westward.

The redhaired woman in the porthole swimsuit and the blonde man with the bloodied nose walked up.

"Hello," said the man.

Simon nodded, halfsane again. "How's your nose?"

"Nothing serious. I'm Charlie Wurttenburg. This

is Cody, my wife."

"Hello, Cody. Simon Sulfurey. This is Laurie, my wife."

The man gazed into Simon's eye and his mouth dropped. The green iris looked like an emerald set in bloodstone.

"Your eye is full of blood! Can you see out of it?"

"Halos surround everything. It's a blessed world."

"Let me take you to the hospital."

"I'll go soon."

Simon saw the sun pounce off a pair of black round lenses half buried in the sand beside a woman's painted toenails. He stepped over and picked up his sunglasses. A single crack split the left lens, the right lens was shattered but still delicately intact. He put on the glasses. Laurie called to him. He swung to her summons and the shattered fragments crumbled out and inkblack shards speckled the sand at his feet. The tesseract composed upon the sand a design he could not read. The blood-congested eye stared naked red and green through the empty steel frame at Laurie and he grinned a becrazed and solipsistic grin. Her look told dread of some terrible forfeit at hand.

Simon's head felt sogged and stuped. Yet ecstasy kept bursting in his brain. The landscape looked like savagely crayoned pages torn from a child's coloring book.

He sensed imminent menace in the noonday sun. Ocelli drifted on his eyes. He saw on a sudden that people were maggots grown upright and pentapod, half forms still in the larval state. The cast in his eye yielded the world degenerate.

The odious mutation, horrid sight, swept off his eyes.

A black car surmounted by a flashing domelight rolled up and stopped. A goldescutcheon stood on the door. "It took the law half an hour to get here!" said Laurie into the car window.

A policeman got out and walked up to Simon and looked at him. "I've been held up. They was a five-car wreck on the bridge. What's been going on here?"

"We had a little fight," said Simon. "Talk to my woman. My head's not right." Simon watched gulls make white slashes in the air.

Laurie told the lawman, "My husband is badly hurt and needs an ambulance. Call for one please! If there'd been a massacre here you'd arrive a day late."

The lawman shook his head. He opened the car door and sat down and lifted his microphone and spoke into it.

Simon felt a touch on his arm and turned to a tall strawhaired man clenching a pipe in his teeth. He held out a yellow towel. "You vont to vipe your vace vid

dhis dowel?"

Simon took the towel. He stared bemused at the burst of yellow radiance flooding his hands. He daubed his head and face and torso and handed back the towel splotched like a surgeon's smock. "It's not blueblood," he said.

"No ho ho blot he's red! Blue Blot ha ha ha!"

They laughed like asylum idiots discovering a patent fact.

The fight had left behind a carnival atmosphere. Strangers spoke like neighbors. A hipflask was palmed out to Simon and he threw up a fending hand and looked toward the lawman then relented with a grin. He took the flat vial and spun off the little fretted lid and swigged and spun the cap back and handed back the bottle. "Good whusk," he said. The man laughed through brown teeth.

He seemed to have made a few friends at dear cost.

A balding thin man with a cigarette stodged in his lips flourished a wine bottle and jerked his head at Simon. He clamped the bottle in his thighs and twisted the worm down the cork and clenched the bottleneck and popped the cork. "PHAOW!" It sang a sweet hollow note. The stranger thrust the bottle of red wine into Simon's hands. Simon rolled it in his palm and read the name:

Ricadonna. Ullage had imbibed the neck to the hip. A leaky cork had stopped the neck.

Simon held the bottle to the sun. A blood sun shone in the bottleneck, a purple moon in the belly. He turned up the bottle. His throat seized, seized again, seized thrice. He lowered the bottle and handed it back. "Damn fine!" he gasped. He wiped his mouth with the roof of his hand.

A middleaged woman in a black onepiece of crepey pucker cloth stepped up. She held out a paper cup of fruit drink. "I don't have any wine," she said.

Simon took the cup. She watched him drink. He watched her back. She looked gaunted by hard times. She was slender and titless yet there was about her an air of surety and allure. A faint smile haunted her lips. Her coarse gray hair was center parted and drawn back to her nape and knotted there. Her black eyes gazed from blue wells. Strange lurings stirred there.

"There's wine." He touched her slate lips.

She lifted her hands to the shoulders of the blood-eyed man. Her lips were cold, from ice he guessed.

He smiled. "You make a country boy feel good." She smiled back. Sudden affection kindled each to seek hand purchase of the other. He touched her elbow. She sat a hand on his shoulder.

"You know, I believe you'd be a goodlooking thing if you weren't so beat up."

Simon rubbed his jaw. "I might look worse. Then you'd love me only when I was all beat up."

"I never said I loved you."

"No, you didn't. Even my mother strangled on the words."

"You just read my mind, that's what you did. I got to go now."

"'Nother little sip of lipwine."

"More'n one's not decent, you a stranger. It's hello and goodbye in the same breath."

"Pity about that."

"That's the way your life is. Just a breath." She backed away through the bathers and lifted back a wave. He watched her hand falter like a crippled bird.

She smiled and her lips lifted off her grey teeth that looked false and the sun starked her scant flesh to skeletal bone and her jawteeth stood printed on her sunk cheeks. The flesh seemed palped tight to the bonework and her skull seemed to glow like phosphor in the sun.

"Simon!"

Simon turned. Laurie crook'd a finger. He ambled toward her. Her hair spilled like a jetty flood upon her shoulder. Brown threads drifted across her face. Her

blue eyes smoked. "Have you been flirting with that woman?"

"Worse than that. But forgive me, as you're a Christian."

"I'm a goddamn heathern, remember?"

"Un cigarillo?" A Cuban or Mexican touched his arm and jiggled cigarettes in the pack.

Simon took a cigarette and notched it in his lips and leaned to the lighter held cupped and leaned upright, his noseholes fuming. "Gracias."

The Cuban's teeth flashed. An iridial mote framed his face like a halo'd saint in stained glass.

He seemed a clown, a buffoon, a pratfallen man. He saw the crutch leaned aslant under a boy's arm and he stepped toward him and the boy held out the crutch and he took it and nodded.

He thought he would take back the crutch to the fierce old gasper and tell him the thing had worked like a specialized ordnance.

He started off between bystanders propelled by that monomania that afflicted his every thought and strode a dozen steps when a frightful hammerblow of pain nailed him in his tracks. A cry leaped from his throat. The crutch dropped and he seized his head in his hands.

"Simon!" Laurie ran up to him. Horror was spooored

in that minute.

His agony of skullburst relented by half. He unclasped his head and opened his eyes and perceived the stark world. He suspected that malice lurked deep in the natural order. A blood bubble swole out his left nostril. The pale red bubble popped and a faint rose mist drizzled down the air. Simon saw a child girl clad in a swimsuit of three red tulips sewn together. A pregnant woman, a fly-gall on a stem, stopped and stood looking at him. A sheet of newsprint went whapping off in a gust. Boys shooting their forefingers swerved across his path. Pow Pow Bang Bang. He watched a small girl try to skip rope in the sand. He looked at Laurie. Soft bursts of radiance rained down her face. She was bluelipt with sun-red cheeks. She watched him with huge fond eyes on which he saw his own head shaped like small grapes. Her deep-set eyes were stole of the sky.

He seized his pain come back, old blows brooding in his skull just now exploding.

"Simon!" said Laurie.

He pitched onto his shadow. He thought he saw inside his own head the agonized ganglia, the little octapods aspasm shrieking at skullcracks where the brain swole and slit veins seeped. He wondered would the blood-leak stop? All hung on that.

"Damn you!" Laurie on her knees bent over him like a slayer. She caught his head and squeezed it as if to tighten back all loose bones in their seams. Her finger-bones went white like faith healers' hands. "Talk to me, boy!"

Simon writhed and groaned. He cracked his eyes. The sun blazed like a hole to hell.

"They've split his nut," announced the Fat Lady matter-of-fact, her hands splayed on bulbous hips. Next to the Fat Lady stood the straw-haired German and the belly dancers and somber others who'd reached him a hand. Cheerfulness thereabouts was struck dumb. People standing there gazed down at him then looked at each other. Quiet voices spoke hushed.

He crabbed his fingers into the sand to stay his drift. His hands fisted and the sand sifted out. He felt the world leaking away from him. The German rolled him on his back. He batted his eyes at them. They looked like wraiths from the shadowworld. A black girl's face bent across a skein of azure. Her black eyes bore into his own. "You a fightin' Man," she said. "You goin' to be all right." Then Laurie's eyes stared down stark. Her face was a mask of elemental terror. Then she dissolved to motes. He heard her gibber then she hissed into his ear that she'd save him yet, the bastard.

He felt her hands patter his chest with palsied fingertips. Seemed like the sand sucked his bones and then he felt himself pitch down a black well that holed into deep space where he spun giddy among stars of legend brightness.

She sank her face on his chest and he clasped his cracked skull bone in a deathclaw cradle and she dropped one ear onto his chest and she must've thought his heart had stopped beneath for she then glued her cold blue lips over his mouth and gasped down his throat her scanted breath.

Somewhere out in space he laughed. If his skull hadn't been caved he'd have stuck his tongue into her mouth. She was beside herself, the silly bitch! Goddamn it was hard not to like this girl! He choked and belched her own air back down her throat and swung his head aside. "My head! My head!" he croaked. The sabletressed and wheyfaced girl of thin blood rose overhead upon that sea-shore against the blue and gazed far off and stomped her foot and cursed the far siren's whippy yip yip yip. Simon clenched his eyes shut. He just knew his swole brain burst its shell. He heard the siren whine down. Brisk hands grappled up his arms and legs and lowered him on a cot heaved then and rolled and then he felt the face mask and inhaled the sharp smell of oxygen. He heard

tires slurr over sand then whistle over pavement. A siren began to howl and grieve. The idiot caterwaul went yowling away through the universe where he swirled among the stars. He thought himself a felon ejected from a starship into immensity. He'd been set adrift among incoordinate stars by those assassin blows. He was sore afraid. He spoke a prayer. "Father in heaven, please take my hand." He hoped to find no crimson master. He dreaded that he'd be a drained ghost lost in all that dark.

He floated through swarms of stars deep sunk in eons of blue ether. The night sank deep and all suns dimmed and he hove like a hanged man in blue space and he drifted by palest starlight that shrank to pinpoints and winked out and night stood despotic in the Universe.

The pale girl leaned down her ear upon his chest. She raised her head. "Simon!" she shouted. She bent her gaze upon the abomination.

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VITA

Paul Puryear was born in Rome, Georgia on January 21, 1941. His parents moved to Cartersville, Georgia when he was six, where he attended elementary school. Later they moved to Dalton, Georgia where he was graduated from Dalton High School in 1959. Thereafter he worked at sundry jobs and traveled much, attending college intermittently. He was graduated from the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga in 1969.

After teaching school for two years he began taking Graduate School courses at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga in the Evening College, then attended the University of Tennessee at Knoxville. He received the Master of Arts degree with a major in Philosophy in March 1977. He has continued to write and teach and travel widely.

The author presently lives in Harriman, Tennessee.

He has a wife, Cheryl, who teaches school, and a son, Stefan, who is a machinist.