

NINA
GALEN
THE
GRAPE
VINE A Novel



PART ONE: *Beverly Hills, 1959*

I

I was aware that my head was the pupil in the eye of the house. The shade was half drawn, like a sleepy eyelid above my head, to keep out most of the morning sun. Behind this rectangular eye-window the house mused and waited. Yesterday's heat was still trapped inside and the molecules of air hung together in the large rooms like a swarm of summer thoughts, irritating, stinging and minutely palpable.

The house watched the street through the eye of my head. I registered impressions and the house mulled them over, made decisions, acted upon them. All the winding, sunlit, tree-drenched street passed through my head as I sat quietly, awaiting the will of the house.

The eye of the house turned. A man was walking up the other side of the street. He was tall and dark and walked in long strides. I could see the muscles flicker in his cheeks. He made an acute turn at the flagstone walk, strode to the door of the house opposite, and pressed the bell. He waited, turning to look at the street, assessing it, or so it seemed, sizing it up. He frowned and opened his mouth tentatively as if to assure himself his jaw hinges would not squeak, then thrust out his chin and ran one finger between his neck and collar. The door opened and he turned with a large smile and deferential twist of his body which was almost a bow.

His jacket and trousers were pale grey, the color of the morning mist which had preceded him up the street but which was now almost entirely burned off. His clothes were suited more to the weather than the fashion of the day, being loose and unconstricting, possibly hand-me-downs, but neat. They gave the young man a Stanley-and-Livingstone sort of intensity, an air of dedication, a validity, though his face was obviously insane.

The shadow inside the doorway shook "no". He almost bowed again, still smiling, and raised his hand in a limp salute which would have tipped his hat had he been wearing one. He backed off a pace, felt for the edge of the flagstone step with one foot,

turned, straightened, and strode towards the street. His eyes were caves and the muscles of his face so tight they twisted his mouth. At the curb he paused, pondered, glanced up, and met the gaze of our house. I moved quickly to the left and our house went suddenly, and modestly, blind.

II

I had changed from the eye of our house to its ears, I sat curled in the inner chamber of my room and listened to my mother breathe the hot, dry air into her lungs with long snores. My mother's snores droned through the house like another summer noise along with the bees and the pleasure aircraft which often buzzed in erratic circles above the hills. It was, I thought, as if the bee were trapped somewhere in the rooms, scared and struggling and dangerous. Or as if the airplane were having engine trouble so that you listened breathlessly, hoping for information of the emergency about to occur.

Even Nurse Benson, who was immune to the sting of emergency, would occasionally take note of the texture of the snore and glance up from her book or check her wrist-watch or fan herself spasmodically with her bookmark. Nurse Benson never perspired and so fanning gave her very little relief.

I had never heard so many sounds, muted summer sounds which lost themselves in the immensity of the house and garden. There was the dry scrape of the gardener's rake, the low churning some rooms away of the washing machine, and the voices of the cook speaking with the maid. So many sounds waited upon us. We were rich with noises, rich with great muting rooms of air and doors and drapes and rugs. We were rich, so rich that Death had come to spend the summer holidays in our house.

III

I was the eyes and ears and nose and tongue and fingertips of our house, but I was not the sense or the will. I took over the role of physical presence each day when Daddy went to work. When he came home we worked at it together. We saw that the dinner was eaten and the beds slept in, that the hi-fi and television were turned on and off. We noted the work of the maids and gardener, appreciated the summer fruits and flowers that grew about the house, allowed the light reflecting off polished wood and silver and glass to prick our eyes and meadow on our faces,

And twice a day Daddy, but not I, went to visit his wife and my mother, who lay in the south bedroom with Death and Nurse Benson,

What can I say of Mama? Well, I could say that her poor legs, which she had once used all over the house from wall to wall, had grown so spindly-weak that they only touched the carpet by the bed when she sat balancing on the edge. And then after a while not even her toes touched, for she became completely and irrevocably horizontal, though

Death was in no hurry.

Or I could say she embarked from the bedroom rug, drew up her poor hemp legs like anchor ropes and, riding on a raft of foam rubber, sailed slowly out of consciousness. Still, Death was in no hurry. He was having his vacation. But Nurse Benson's vacation awaited her in Mexico. And so she would look at my mother and then glance significantly at her watch, hinting that it would be as well for all of us if Death would get on the job before August. Nurse Benson had her faults but she was a good reminder to us that time had not stopped and that change was possible if not imminent,

Mama, who had never been introduced to Nurse Benson and felt no obligations, took her time and fought for her life. Her mind had gone slowly, memory by memory, and now her body would have to go ounce by ounce. I was proud to see how she hung on. I wanted to help her, but there was nothing I could do.

She was my mother, but she was a child. She needed diapers and a rubber sheet. She needed to be spoon-fed and reminded to chew and swallow. And when she would recognize us (which she hadn't done for over a month) or manage our names (not for more than two), why then we were delighted and our eyes would fill with tenderness and a kind of static hope,

I suppose I became a child out of sympathy for her, although I didn't go as far as she. Like a child I sometimes wanted to be held tenderly and warmly with my eyes closed. I wanted to be kissed and spanked, loved and punished; I wanted both tranquility and violence. And before the summer was over these are exactly what I got.

IV

Before I tell you of that summer I had best tell you something of myself. I was then twenty-six years old, though in retrospect the number twenty-six means little to me. My story ends a week after it began, yet I felt after that week as if a century had fallen like a stone into the stagnant waters of my life.

My education had been ordinary, nothing more than what was considered necessary. I had a Bachelor's Degree in English Literature. After college I spent a year traveling around Europe, mingling with other tourists, riding occasionally in third-class train coaches to get an impression of the common man. Later I could laugh about that, remembering my naiveté: how I thought that a day and a night on a third-class train would open the secrets of life to me. And perhaps too I was hoping that twenty-odd hours of discomfort would purge twenty-odd years of soft cushions and disinfected linoleum from my sterile youth and open it to new truths and beauties. I wonder now if the common man came away from those encounters equally unenlightened.

When I had "done" Europe I returned to my father's house in Beverly Hills and for the next two years worked at a variety of jobs. I took the most glamorous jobs I could find, then the most difficult, then, having discovered that jobs are neither glamorous nor

difficult, but only repetitious, I retired. Between jobs I had done a bit of writing and now I turned to this full time. It was perhaps the only challenge available to me. The ordinary ones – money, popularity, mentions by the press – these were all mine without trying; But writing was something one could work at and suffer over. It could force me to learn and understand.

What did I write about in those days? Oh, everything. The Cosmos was not too large to deal with. Life I took for granted. Death was only a color: whale-white, knight-green, Poe-red. It seemed no great task to throw a rope around the whole complex order of the universe and drag it unwilling but finally yielding through my study door. Everything seemed so clear to me at that time. Order filled the universe.

And yet this world which I had discovered, or perhaps only created, this universe filled with laws, these men who were microcosms of the universal order, were part of a vision, as cold and empty as moon shadow. There was no substance to it. It did not live. Seldom did it materialize enough to reach paper. And when it did occasionally form itself into words upon a page, I could see that I was a poor writer. I did not have the patience or discipline writing demanded. My own weakness infuriated me. I had always had everything I wanted, but here was something which was not going to be handed to me and for which tears were useless.

And time was passing faster and faster. Time was passing faster than I'd ever known it to go. Suddenly I was three-and-twenty, four-and-twenty, five-and-twenty, prisoner on an express train. But there was no arriving, no getting out in a new land. I felt I was rushing towards old age with my ignorance grained into my skin like soot. I combed my hair and was five minutes further into ignorance. I'd pass an hour in idle talk and find myself an hour further along the track. If only for a moment I could stop this rush of time and get out and behold and correlate and think. I felt I had to be alone to stop and think.

And so I withdrew from the world to sit in my parents' house and struggle with words. I didn't miss the parties, the conversations, the bridge games. I no longer looked in the magazines to see what fashionable women were wearing. My life was centered wholly on my writing. I found my variety in words; and challenges I found in sentences. I was almost glad I was such a poor writer. It made me suffer and feel.

Yet even then it was empty. Life and the universe ended at the threshold of my room. I sat alone and in a vacuum, though I didn't know it. I knew nothing and I felt nothing but the ache of loneliness which I misconstrued to be the growing pains of wisdom.

And then one day my mother began to die.

V

I will now tell you something about my parents, if for no other reason than to give my fate time to work his way up one side of our street and down the other. Was he truly

my fate, that young man with eyes like caves, who walked with a long, tense stride? It is too early to tell even now. There are moments when I think he was, or is, or will be.

It may seem odd that at one moment I speak of lofty subjects such as fate and that the next I speak of junk. But junk was, unavoidably, at the root of everything. It was behind my education and my travels. It underlay the foundation of our house. Our trees and flowers sprang from junk, our servants were paid from it, my mother lived an extra year because of it. Though we called it scrap metal. At least my father and I called it scrap metal. My mother, until the day she became ill, had called it junk.

I can still remember how she would turn back her lips disdainfully when she said that word. “*Junk*,” she would say to father. “You’re a junk man. I don’t care if it’s a bent clothes hanger or a rusty battleship. Junk is junk.” It was a short word and if you hadn’t heard her say it, but only saw her lips move, you might have thought she’d said an obscene word. And in a way that would have been true. Junk was the curse of my mother’s life; scrap metal was the blessing of her dying.

My mother had been a passionate woman. Only the passionate go so slowly and ungently into death; only they who have hoarded their passion so carefully, nursed it so consistently, retain so much at the end of life. My mother had kept her passion bottled up for thirty years of married life. She had sat with it inside her like a fermenting wine until it became an acid which corroded her organs of digestion, ate at her nervous system, and burst out occasionally in great belches or bitter invectives.

But she had passion and that is a rare quality. My father loved her because of it. I think I hated her because of it. I much preferred my father who was always gentle with me.

And that is all I shall say here about my family. Except to add what I should perhaps have mentioned at the start, that my name is Susan.

VI

It was nine months from the time we first learned my mother had cancer of the brain until that morning my fate was ringing doorbells up and down the street. During that time I couldn’t settle down to write, I couldn’t take an interest in reading. I spent my time wandering around the house and garden, at night often drove my convertible for hours along Sunset Boulevard and up the coast highway towards Malibu. I learned what it meant to speak “with a lump in one’s throat” and for the first time in my life found myself “burying my face in the pillow” to stifle the sound of my sobbing. That my sorrow was thus filled with clichés did not, curiously, make it any less acute.

You are probably wondering why I was so affected by my mother’s illness after I just said that I hated her. Well, let me put it this way. We shared a secret bond, she and I. We were so alike in most ways that we knew each other’s mind without having to speak. We were almost the same person. We each hated ourselves because we were

dissatisfied with ourselves, and so we hated each other. And when she began to die I started to follow her down the path, trailing always a little behind, stopping now and then to snap a green twig off a branch, pausing, watching her proceed, then hurrying to catch up. I was never able to catch up, of course. Life would raise up roots to trip me. Chagrined, I would stumble a few steps balk. And finally she was advancing out of my sight. I became desperate. The morning on which my story starts I was desperate.

VII

I have already said that it was hot. I took a book which I knew I would not read and started outside, The heat was blasting down, the sun having already mounted the hills and climbed down into the canyons. The dry brush on the hillsides above had taken the full brunt of it. It stood there puffed and brittle. Only the terraces of ivy and geraniums craned impatiently for their morning drink.

Honk, honk, I thought back at them. Impolite, demanding chickens and geese, that's what you are, scratching life out of the crumbling watershed where more exotic plants would be too proud to grow. But pause, Susan, pause. On second thought one has to give them credit, for in their multitudinous and repetitious way they hold up the mountainside.

I crossed the lawn towards the walnut tree. A lizard waited on the *chaise longue* pad until my shadow came along and then it flicked its tail and leaped off, disappearing instantly. They say that lizards kill spiders and that spiders kill ants. So, either you have lizards and ants, or you have spiders. We had lizards and ants. There is another chain of being which includes, I believe, cats, mice and cheese. Or is it dogs, cats and mice? Well, we had none of these, perhaps because we kept our gates locked and our cheese in the refrigerator.

I turned the pad over and lay down. Another day to waste away, waiting. I thought of the young man I had seen that morning. What was there about him that had struck me as being so unusual? There had been something in his face. Had it been madness or sanity? I couldn't quite recall. But I did remember that he had been intense. He'd had the latent intensity of a hand-grenade.

A footstep startled me.

"Morning, Miss," It was the gardener.

"Morning," I replied.

He was carrying a ladder and a saw. The ladder vanished after he did, around the corner of the house. A few minutes later came the sound of sawing. *Woodsman, woodsman, what are you about?* I got up and followed him around the house to investigate.

It was the tree limb overhanging the driveway. The tree was an oak, proudly symmetrical, the most noble and venerable plant on our property. First he sawed off a few of the smaller branches. There was no protesting. The branch over the driveway

had to come off. Slowly, year by year, it had sunk lower and lower. It hadn't mattered at first because each year the car my father bought was a few inches lower than the preceding model, and he had been able to drive underneath. But in all that time my father had not grown any shorter and the other day he had failed to duck, and hit his head painfully. So to protest in favor of the limb would have been to voice a vote against Daddy.

Numbly, watching: What was the chain of being here? It was too hot to think. My father, a tree . . . a tree, my father. And somehow the feeling that I was included somewhere in this chain. Somehow. Somewhere. Only it was too hot to figure it out. Only weep for the century of nature being sawn away. We'll, dry out the branch and bum it this winter to warm the house. That may justify it. Only slaughter what you can use.

If the tree had reached skyward it would have saved itself amputation. But it grew leaning on one elbow above the driveway, though the end of the branch reached up higher than the garage. It was a thick, heavy limb and would make quite a thud. Our gardener was a small man and not young. My father had suggested calling in a tree specialist, but Ernst had said he could do it himself and save half the money.

"It's not a question of money," my father had said. "I don't want you to hurt yourself."

"How could I hurt myself?" Ernst had laughed, very convincingly.

I assumed he would saw the limb off in one piece, but as he raised the ladder I saw he intended to do it in sections. He had to slide his ladder open to its full length in order to rest it against the branch near the top. He stopped then to blow his nose. He had a slight cold and the sawdust he made irritated his sinuses.

"Do you want me to hold the ladder for you?" I asked. I didn't think he would say yes because my hand on the ladder would mean nothing if it started to slip.

"Yes please, Miss," said Ernst,

I put both hands on the ladder. As he climbed, his every movement, even his weight, was transmitted to me in terms of vibration. His very life seemed to flow down the ladder into my arms where the muscles flickered weakly and unsubstantially with the new impulse. I wouldn't be any use at all if it slipped, I thought to myself.

The little man climbed almost to the top rung, unhooked his hand-saw from his belt, and began sawing away. He sawed to the left of the ladder, though right-handed, so that when the branch broke and fell he would not fall with it. I smiled at this simple foresight, wondering if I would have been so clever. Still, it was an awkward posture, requiring him to twist sideways for leverage, and it caused the ladder to raise one leg tentatively off the ground. I gripped tighter.

"Be careful," I warned him. "I can't hold it very well." He glanced down, then began to saw more quickly, perhaps not wanting his luck to run out before he was finished.

I did wish he'd get done with it. The hot sun pulled at the top of my head, and my hand upon the ladder was no more than a limp gesture. A dizziness came upon me and

my pulse was the rhythm of the saw cutting through the tough oak limb. Ernst sneezed, the ladder jiggled, and I closed my fingers tighter.

There were no footsteps, but suddenly two unfamiliar hands had gripped the ladder above mine. The silkiness of shirt-sleeves touched my arm and sent a shudder through me. I let go and stood back.

The stranger took ladder-holding seriously. His face was twisted with the effort and under his limp shirt his muscles stood out.

Ernst was cutting at an angle now so that the branch would break and fall away from the geranium bed down below. He was working quickly and when the branch didn't fall immediately he reached out to give it a push. I saw the veins stand out on the stranger's forehead and then his arms forced the ladder around – or seemed to – for the ladder now twisted gracefully about on one leg while the gardener scrabbled frantically with the branch. For a moment he hung, his legs kicking in vain towards the garage roof. And then he sneezed.

I reached up one hand as if to a timid butterfly, said "Look out!" in a whisper, for there was no time to draw breath, and watched him plummet down and disappear into the border of geraniums. Slowly, as if to complete the act, the ladder with dreamlike deliberateness folded in half and bowed to where its owner lay.

"You did it!" I stared in horror at the stranger who stood supporting the wilted ladder.

"It twisted in my hands."

"You twisted it."

"I tried to stop it."

But there was no time. I started towards the back door so fast and with such sudden energy that my bare knees seemed almost to touch my chest. "An ambulance," I cried into the telephone.

I gave our address and started running back outside. I had trouble breathing, as if I were the one who had fallen. I ran out of the kitchen door, hardly looking because I didn't really want to see, and ran into a silk chest. Silk arms surrounded me, restrained me. I was sobbing.

"Don't look," a gentle voice said. The voice held me like silk.

"Is he hurt? Oh, God." I didn't want to hear.

"He's dead."

And then I felt my fear turn into the greatest anger,

"It's that Death," I screamed. "He just won't leave us alone any more. Tell him to get out and leave us alone." I sobbed and cried and the silken arms held me until I was calm.

VIII

The ambulance came. We stood in the house watching the gathered crowd through the window. Our driveway was full of strangers. Perhaps they were our neighbors. They stood breathlessly quiet in a long crowd with their expressions carved on their faces like figures in a stone frieze. And I had by this time become so disassociated from their emotion that I was able to gaze at them impassively like a tourist wandering through the Louvre and thinking of his airplane connections.

Until the ambulance attendants lifted the stretcher out of the geraniums. Then I looked away. The stranger was standing a few feet from me glancing about the room. He tilted up his head and examined the corners of the ceiling. Then, feeling my gaze on him, he glanced down on me from the corners of his eyes. For a moment we regarded one another mutely, then he turned to face me, smiling broadly and twisting forward.

“Charles Nicolo,” he said.

For some reason I was unable to reply. I stood there looking at him, feeling my mind struggle, crawl out of whatever dark recess it had fallen into. And when at last it was at the top and the words were forming, ready to come forth, there seemed to be a sheet of glass in the way. I opened my mouth to speak and the words pounded against the glass, pounded and threw themselves upon the glass.

The back door slammed and Nurse Benson hurried through on her way to my mother’s bedroom. “Your mother is the sick one,” I heard her say, “and he’s the one that dies.” She laughed over her shoulder as she started down the hall. “But Esther will have her day. That’s one thing about life. It comes to an end.”

The glass broke. “I hate that nurse,” I said. I threw myself down upon a chair and motioned for Charles Nicolo to sit on another. He sat down and patted his forehead with a square of white linen. “Would you like something cold to drink?” I asked him.

“A glass of water.”

I got it myself and watched him as he drank. “Then you really didn’t do it?” I asked when he had put the glass down.

“What for?” he said.

“What for? I don’t know what for. Was all you lacked a motive?”

“Perhaps that’s all any of us lack,” replied Charles Nicolo.

I looked at him curiously. Our conversation seemed to be getting off to a peculiar beginning. And yet it seemed we understood each other and made sense. “I’m tired,” I said, “I’ve done nothing all day, and yet I’m very tired.”

“All day,” he repeated, “and it’s not even noon. If you’re tired now, what will you be by evening?”

“Then you think it will come?” I asked, suddenly desperate to hear him affirm it, “Evening is an inevitability, like taxes.”

“Evening and taxes?” There was something wrong with that. It sounded funny,

but somehow we didn't seem to be joking with all this absurd conversation. His reply had been in dead earnest. Dead Ernst. Now *that* was funny. I wondered if I ought to tell him, so that he could laugh, but I felt it would take a hundred years to explain it. And maybe it wasn't funny. Now that I thought about it, it wasn't at all. But there was something else I wanted to ask him.

"Ernst had a cold," I said. "What will happen to his cold now that he's dead? Will they bury him with the live cold bacteria?"

"They might cremate him."

Somehow it was a reassuring thought. I stopped worrying about the bacteria.

We continued to sit and regard each other. His eyebrows showed he was becoming impatient with me. He was waiting for me to suggest something, but I was at a loss as to what to suggest. He had had water. Perhaps he was hungry. I offered him food, but he refused.

How strange it was. Looking at him I wanted to sing. I wanted to dance. But I sat quietly. The snoring had started up again in the bedroom down the hall. Could he detect that this was the sound Death made? Or did he think it was some fat, drunken sleeper with an obstructed nasal passage? I wanted to explain the sound to him, but it seemed so petty, to justify snoring by mentioning Death. And then of course the nurse had been through, so perhaps he had already made the connection.

"What do you do?" I asked after a little while.

That seemed to be the signal. "At the moment," he said quickly, "I'm trying to earn fifteen dollars. I need fifteen dollars by Thursday in order to pay a traffic fine."

He reached in his pocket and withdrew a slim wallet. Removing a few bills he counted them. "So far I have four dollars."

"What kind of work do you do?"

"Right now, odd jobs, gardening, cleaning up." He took a sip of water and observed, "I'm very good at that."

I nodded thoughtfully and walked to the window. The ambulance and spectators had left and the driveway seemed strangely quiet and deserted. The mutilated oak stood forlornly, supporting the ladder. "You can be our gardener."

"I'm not looking for anything permanent," Charles Nicolo said. "As soon as I make eleven more dollars I'll have enough to pay the ticket."

"What was the ticket for?"

"Speeding. That's stupid. I wasn't speeding."

He was slender, but I remembered the way his muscles had stood up under his silk shirt. "Would you care to cut off the rest of the branch?"

"Yes."

"What would you charge?"

"A dollar fifty an hour."

I knew the job would not take more than an hour or so and that my father would

give him ten dollars for it, but I decided not to mention this. It would be better to let him work by the hour for the eleven dollars. “It’s all yours,” I said. “After you cut off the branch there are some other things you can do if you wish.”

“For instance?” His grey eyes met mine and a smile played faintly like a reflection of light across his high cheekbones. What had he read in my eyes that had made him smile? Suddenly I disliked him,

“There’s a border of ivy that I can’t stand,” I told him. “You could pull it out.”

“I’ll get my work clothes out of the car,” Charles Nicolo said. “It’s parked down the street.”

I shrugged, feigning indifference to anything he might wish to do. “I’m going outside to read,” I told him. “The maid will tell you where to change. Let me know when you’ve finished with the tree and I’ll show you the ivy.”

I watched him cross the living room. He paused a moment in the doorway, smiled, and almost bowed.

“I’ll be right back, Miss,” he said.

“Susan.”

“I’ll be right back, Miss Susan.”

The door closed behind him and for one moment I felt the strongest desire to hurl something after him – a word or an ashtray. I stood swaying a moment in the middle of the room. Ernst was no more. She was going too. The snoring from down the hall roared and sputtered, caught and roared again. Clenching my eyes shut I massaged my temples with my fingertips to soothe the headache which had started up behind my eyes. You’re not *my* headache, I thought angrily, you’re *hers*. Then I ran out of the back door, walked fifty paces of dazzling sunlight to the walnut tree, and collapsed exhausted upon the *chaise longue*.

IX

Charles Nicolo sawed the limb off the oak tree neatly and precisely, cut off the leafy parts as efficiently as a housewife dealing with carrot tops, and left a neat pile of logs and kindling in the rear of the garage. Then he asked the maid for a broom and swept up the leaves and chips which he deposited in the trash barrel.

I watched him walk across the yard towards me. He had exchanged his pale suit for even looser garments. His trousers and shirt had an Arabian Nights’ fullness, and a handkerchief, knotted at its four corners and resting on his head, gave his costume an added touch of the exotic. A small rent in his trousers flashed open with each step to reveal a tanned knee. In his hand he carried a large machete.

He stood over me and blotted his face which was perspiring freely. “You said something about a border of ivy.”

“Yes. Over here.”

I got up and led him around the house. The ivy border on that side had begun to fade, either through some imbalance in the soil or from illness or old age. My father had mentioned it to Ernst months earlier, but the old gardener, fearing the immense exertion of pulling up a mature bed of ivy had attempted to coax it back to health with applications of pesticides and chemical fertilizers. It hadn't worked.

"Can you do it?" I asked Charles Nicolo.

He surveyed the ivy bed, took a tight grip on his machete, and waded in.

I wondered when I had last seen such a generosity of motion and energy. Ivy leaves cartwheeled through the air, lizards darted in all directions, and something much larger, possibly an opossum, lumbered through the stems and escaped unidentified around the corner of the house.

After five minutes the small rent in Charles Nicolo's trousers had enlarged to show most of his knee. I felt uncomfortable watching him. He was too exotic, too intense. What would the neighbors think to see a pirate wielding a cutlass in our ivy bed? He did nothing to stop the tear and soon one leg was exposed from ankle to thigh.

When he had cut away the vines he raked them to one side, leaving the stumps clear. Then he asked for a shovel and dug deep into the black earth until one root was well-exposed. Taking hold of the stump with both hands he pulled on it gradually with all his strength. A shower of perspiration rained down as the root ripped loose. He tossed it aside and reached again for the shovel.

After he had pulled out five or six roots he stopped to straighten up and stretch and loosen his back and shoulder muscles. His shirt stuck limply to his body.

"Why don't you take off your shirt?"

He paused a moment, then obediently took off the shirt and hung it neatly on the branch of a nearby tree. Without a word he bent to the next stump,

It was clear he had resented my suggestion. He probably wanted me to go away, but I took a perverse pleasure in staying. I was interested in watching his body. He was tall with a rather broad back and narrow hips. Where had he developed his physique? Surely not on the tennis courts or the ski slopes, or even at this sort of physical labor? There was something of the wild in him. Something of the satyr.

"You're very well built," I observed aloud.

He straightened up again and regarded me for a moment as if I were another root which needed pulling.

"You're quite strong."

He continued to regard me insolently and I could do nothing but attempt to brazen it out. "If you don't like working for people," I told him, "you shouldn't get speeding tickets."

"I told you I wasn't speeding." He pulled up another root with no more yank than the others, as if he had decided to control his irritation. "And I don't mind working for people," he continued evenly. "It's fair enough. If I were rich, I'd have people working

for me. I'm just not rich."

I imagined I could hear the unspoken next word. I'm not rich *yet* was what I had expected.

"Do you expect to become rich?"

He looked up at me with a surprisingly disarming grin.

"Not at one-fifty an hour."

I grinned back, taken completely off guard. So surprised was I by his pleasant expression that I nearly blurted out that he had earned ten dollars just for cutting off the branch. I barely caught myself in time.

X

When the ivy had been pulled out and discarded in the trash barrel and the torn earth raked smooth, Charles asked if he might wash in the kitchen. I offered to let him use the guests' powder room, but he refused. "I'm too dirty to go in there," he said. "The kitchen is fine."

He refused the towel I brought him. "No reason to mess up a clean towel." He scrubbed himself minutely with soap and water from his waist up, leaning over the sink to avoid splashing the floor, then patted the water from his lean body with paper towels from a roll over the sink. A few drops had fallen on the linoleum and he mopped these up with the towels. I didn't bother to protest that the maid could do this. I felt he would do it anyway.

I asked the cook to make us a platter of sandwiches and we ate lunch together under the walnut tree. They were pretty little sandwiches on yellow bread with the crusts cut off. I imagined Charles Nicolo was hungry enough to have devoured them at one bite, but he ate them slowly and daintily, wiping his lips every few bites on the little lace-bordered napkins, and, I felt, suppressing a laugh. Or was it I who was amused by the incongruities and not he? It was difficult to tell. He made me very self-conscious and I had trouble deciding just which of us was experiencing what emotion.

We washed the sandwiches down with tall glasses of iced tea, lit cigarettes, and sat back. He had no cigarettes of his own, but he smoked mine readily enough. His dependence annoyed me.

"Don't be too proud of having money," he said suddenly, as if he had read my thoughts.

I was startled. "Oh, I'm not," I said with humility.

"Nor ashamed either."

"I'm not," I said, suddenly proud. He had me confused and I wondered what I did feel. At times proud, at times ashamed, never at rest about it,

"It's all the same whether one has money or not."

"You can't take it with you," I laughed, and then was embarrassed at having used

such an obvious cliché. Besides, that wasn't what he had meant, I was sure,

"Not many people have the right attitude about money," Charles Nicolo continued. "A rich man with the right attitude would give his money away. A poor man with the right attitude would accept money when it's offered."

"You make me feel as if I'd like to give you money." I laughed nervously.

"I wouldn't accept it," said Charles Nicolo with a slight smile. "You see, I have the wrong attitude."

I sent a sharp glance in his direction. Was he making fun of me? It seemed he was being honest, or at least when someone says ill of himself it appears to be honesty, but still he made me uneasy. I took another cigarette and offered one to him. When I held the pack towards him he took hold of my hand and regarded it a moment. "You have musician's fingers," he said.

I looked steadily at him. "I have musician's toes also," I said. He smiled quickly at me and I knew then that I had evened a score.

It was strange how his mood and attitude changed every few minutes from friendliness to coldness and back. It was even odder the way I responded to each shift; one moment I liked him and the next I dreaded him. I told myself I should take a stand either for or against him, but it was hard to decide which when he changed so often. And as I said earlier, my needs at that time were at opposite extremes. I wanted love and punishment too. I wanted both warmth and rejection. Realizing this, I decided not to hide myself from Charles Nicolo. I only hoped gentleness tipped the scale in his character.

XI

That evening at supper I told my father about Ernst and Charles Nicolo and asked him if there were any other chores to be done, now that the branch had been cut off and the ivy pulled out. My father had always been an energetic man, but in the past few months he had slowed down a great deal. That evening as he sat at the table listening to the story of the gardener's death, his whole body, even his face, sagged. I told him about it as quickly as possible so as to spare him, and then moved on to Charles Nicolo, but I knew his thoughts had remained behind on the subject of death.

Daddy, I wanted to say to him, don't think about Ernst. What can we do against Death anyway? Absolutely nothing. Let's not keep knocking our heads against that barrier. Look at us. We sit around here like dead persons ourselves. Ernst is dead. He is no more. It's so simple that we'll never be able to understand it. Nobody has ever understood it. Nobody ever will.

But I said none of this. I only asked if I ought to have Charles plant something where he had pulled out the ivy.

"Yes, yes," my father replied absently. "I suppose he'll have to plant something there. Tell him to take slips from the ivy on the hill."

“More ivy?”

“Anything,” my father said. “Put in anything you want. Geraniums, if you want.”

“We have enough geraniums,” I said, “I thought perhaps ice plant. Or cactus.”

“Anything,” he told me. “Use your judgement. Do as you wish.”

I would have continued the conversation if I had thought I could distract him from dwelling on dismal matters. It tore me in half to see him so sad and bent. My own life had received a new and nervous sort of impetus and I wanted to communicate it to him, but I could see there was no way. Every evening he came home from the office and sat on the edge of my mother’s bed and held her hand and told her the happenings of the day. He knew she wasn’t aware of these visits, yet he continued to do it. If only he would stay away from her room, as I did. If only he would relinquish those waxen fingers which so long ago had ceased to return the pressure of his hand. Perhaps it would help him, though I wasn’t sure that it had helped me.

My father watched television until nine-thirty and then went to bed. I retired early myself because I wanted the night to hurry by so that morning would come more quickly.

The next morning I watched for Charles’ car from my bedroom window. The first car to stop in front of our house was a grey Ford, a late model. I had expected that he would be driving an older car, but the moment he stepped out I dashed from the house, “Come on,” I called as I started up my convertible.

We drove to the nursery and spent the next hour buying plants. There were so many varieties of plants that I found I could not make up my mind to any one. So I bought a dozen different varieties – gardenias for the sun and camellias for against the house where there was more shade, a half dozen varieties of small, flowering cacti for a border, and ferns and roses. Then I bought a stack of interesting rocks to put between the cacti and a small white picket-fence to surround the entire area.

I told Charles, “Either it will look great or it will be a horrible mess.” I had a feeling it would look confused, but colorful. I wanted color. I wanted to have bowls full of scented color in the house for Daddy and me.

The rest of the morning and half the afternoon we worked. Charles shoveled over the earth and I hoed the clods smooth; he dug holes and trenches and I lowered in the delicate clumps of roots. He stood by with the hose while I covered the plants up to their necks in earth and patted around the stems. just as carefully we planted the stones in their places and hammered the fence into the ground on three sides.

Through all this we worked silently, just saying what was necessary for the job. Perspiration rolled freely down our faces, but it seemed as if we were both seized by the idea of planting, of helping along life, of creating, so we worked with energy and will.

When the last section of fence had been set in place we stood back and surveyed what we had accomplished.

I said: “It will look better when the leaves fill out and the flowers bloom.”

He smiled and, holding his thumb over the end of the hose, sent a fine, wide spray

of water over all the plants until they shone with wet and the dark earth beneath them ran in rivulets. Then I washed the caked dirt and mud from my hands while Charles cleaned up in the kitchen, and we went to the walnut tree where lunch was waiting.

XII

Instead of tiring me, the work in the garden had given me new energy. I had an appetite for the food. I could laugh and chatter about this and that as I hadn't done for ages. But all the while Charles said nothing. He sat very straight at the round umbrella table and paid close attention to the sandwiches. He ate them daintily, bite by bite, as steadily as a machine. I broke off talking to watch him. His manner, his expression were so unusual. His mouth had the pursed and sphincteral expression of a Brentwood dowager. I was positive, watching him, that he was making fun of the silly little sandwiches. And if he were doing that then he was making fun of me also and of my way of life. But that isn't fair, I thought. He can't pass judgement on me through those sandwiches. I don't believe in bread with the crust sliced off any more than he does.

"Would you prefer to have something else to eat?" I asked him.

"This is fine," he replied. "The best sandwiches are soft, crustless, and essentially tasteless."

"The best sandwiches . . .?" But before I could determine whether he was serious or not, he interrupted.

"Have you got any beer?"

"Yes." I walked to the kitchen and brought back a can of beer and a glass.

"Beer tastes better from bottles," Charles told me, punching open the can. "You should know that."

"I don't drink beer."

"Then your father should know it."

I glared at him. You nothing, I wanted to say. You nothing, coming here into my father's house, eating his food and taking his money and now damning him for the way he buys his beer. You *nothing* have the nerve to judge him?

"Don't cry," said Charles Nicolo.

"*Cry?*" I exploded.

"Because you know I'm right."

"Right? About what? About beer? About my father?"

"About you."

Heat rushed through me. I felt strangely weak. Strangely at his mercy. "What about me?" I managed to say.

"Susan."

I wanted to cry. Why? I didn't want to think about Susan. I didn't want to hear about Susan.

“Susan doesn’t live here. She stays here, but she doesn’t live here.” His voice was so gentle. “Susan loves her father, but she is not like her father, and she knows it.” He paused, watching me intently. I looked at a leaf on the grass, seeing every vein. “Should I go?” he asked quietly.

“No.”

“Should I stay?”

“No.”

We sat a long time in silence. A pulse pounded in my throat. I had never felt so vulnerable. I wanted to tell him that he must not go, that he must never go, that he must never leave me to fall back again into the same lonely pattern of life. He had brought new life with him. Impetus. Hope.

“You ought to get away from here for a while,” he said, “Take a trip. Fill your lungs with fresh air. Stop wallowing in self-pity and despair. It would do you good.” His voice rang like far-off music in my ears.

But: “My mother is dying.”

“Then let her die if she must.”

“Let her die? But I don’t want her to die.”

“You can’t stop her. You must let her go.”

“I want to go with her,” I said. “She is so alone and the way is so hard. The way is hard and she is so weak. She’ll be angry if . . .”

“I’m going north on Friday,” he interrupted.

“North?”

“San José.”

“I could go north on Friday too, if I wanted to,” I said, more to reassure myself than to impress him.

“Of course you could.”

“One of my dearest friends lives in San Francisco. Her name is Barbara Johanssen. She is everything pure and good and uncomplicated. It would do me *good* to visit her.”

“Fine. We could drive up together. I could stop in San José and you could continue on to San Francisco.”

The idea was beginning to take hold of me. My spirits began to rise. I would see Barbara. I would touch a pine tree. Every once in a while it was necessary for me to do those two things in order to re-establish my balance, my relationship toward life. See Barbara. Touch a pine tree growing in a cool dark forest. And Charles would come with me. He would not now turn, his job done, and walk out of my life forever.

“Why are you going to San José?” I asked him “To see about a job.”

“But I thought you didn’t want steady work.”

“I have a buddy in San José,” was his only explanation. Then he added, “We’ll have to use your car. I don’t have one.”

I asked him about the car he had driven over that morning and he said it belonged to his sister. For some reason I was surprised to learn he had family. Just to hear he had a relative who owned a car gave him more respectability. He added that he lived with his parents and mentioned a part of town that was middle class and respectable.

The more I thought about it, the more appealing the idea became. The drive up the coast was very beautiful, but it was a long drive and I would have hesitated to do it now by myself, although I had done it often enough in the past. The way the pine forests came down to the palisades. . . .

“Perhaps we could camp on the beach,” he said. “I have a sleeping bag.”

“I have one too,” I said, too quickly.

He smiled. “If that’s what you want, Miss Susan,” he said.

XIII

That evening I mentioned to my father that I was thinking of taking a drive to San Francisco to visit my friend Barbara. I didn’t tell him I would be making the trip with Charles Nicolo. This wasn’t because I was ashamed to tell him, or afraid he might object, but I sensed my feelings of anticipation and adventure were so incongruous with his feelings of sorrow, that it would be poor taste to speak of it.

“That’s a fine idea,” my father said when I had told him. “It would be good for you to get out of this house for a while. I wish I could get away, but...,” and here he shrugged, indicating the direction of my mother’s room with a tilt of his chin.

“I’ll leave Barbara’s phone number,” I told him, “and so in case anything happens....”

“I’ll let you know,” he said. “But don’t worry about it. Have some fun.” He laughed kindly. “Live a little.”

I hated to leave my father alone in that house, to make him carry the entire burden of waiting even for a weekend. But there was a new energy building inside me and I felt I ought to take advantage of it while it was there. The chances were that we would be waiting a long time – weeks, even months. My mother had already lived months longer than the doctors had prophesied last October when she had first become noticeably ill and had had her operation. They had removed enough of the malignancy to take some of the pressure off her brain and for a while she had seemed to recover. Then the tumor had started to grow back. It would continue to grow until it destroyed some vital part of her brain or until her body collapsed to the point where life, having no room, would have to depart.

I called Charles and told him that I wanted to leave town early Friday morning. Since Barbara worked five days a week, that would allow her and me to spend Friday night, Saturday and Sunday together. I called Barbara, who said she had a small apartment, but that she would be delighted to have me stay with her. I asked her to make an

appointment at her beauty parlor for me for Saturday morning and added that I might arrive on Saturday morning instead of Friday afternoon, just in case Charles and I decided to camp on the beach Friday night. I had never written to Barbara about my mother's illness, partly because I didn't want to burden her with having to reply to such a letter.

Thursday afternoon I decided to pack, but found I didn't have a suitcase. I vaguely remembered lending it to some friend who was going East, but couldn't recall getting it back. It didn't matter. My mother had some luggage I could use. I remembered seeing it in her closet.

The thought of entering my mother's room made me hesitate. I walked about the house for about an hour and then saw the nurse coming down the hall.

"How is she?" I asked.

"Your mother?" said Nurse Benson as if the question surprised her. "Why, she's fine. We just had a little bite of lunch. She said to me, 'I hear my daughter's going away. Wouldn't it be a fine thing if she came in to say goodbye.' I told her I was sure Miss Susan would stop in, and she said, 'I hope so. It's been *such* a long time since I've seen her'."

I stared angrily at the nurse. I knew my mother hadn't said anything, just as she hadn't noticed my lack of visits. Nurse Benson smiled sweetly at me. Inside I could feel myself squirm. "What good would it do for me to say goodbye?" I asked her. "She wouldn't hear me. She wouldn't even know me."

"Why, but we'd be delighted to have you say goodbye. You know," she added, "it might be for the last time." Then she laughed and taunted me with her eyes.

"All right," I mumbled. "I'll stop in a moment. I have to get a suitcase anyway."

"We'll look forward to seeing you then," said Nurse Benson in her highly irritating voice as she continued down the hall towards the kitchen.

I heard the nurse in conversation with the cook and decided that if I had to enter my mother's room this would be the best time. At least the nurse would not be there with her ready-made conversations. I walked quickly to my mother's door, opened it, and went inside.

The room was both familiar and unfamiliar. The chests and curtains and mirrors were the same, but a mechanical hospital bed had been substituted for my parents' double bed and a cot had been put in the corner for the nurse. The perfume bottles, knickknacks and other personal effects belonging to my parents had been exchanged for an enormous quantity of hospital paraphernalia. The room had been converted from a soft pastel to a world of white and stainless steel. In the center of all this, profiled on the high hospital bed, lay the tiny figure of my mother.

She was sitting propped up by the mattress, only her arms and shoulders and head emerging from the white sheets. I was shocked by the thinness of her pale arms. Her chin was thrust forward and her eyes were open and staring, no, not staring, because they

were not focused, straight ahead of her. She didn't turn to look at me because she was not aware I had entered the room. Her face was set in a heavy, angry scowl. It was only because the muscles of her face were so relaxed that she scowled that way, but she looked so undeniably angry that it was impossible to believe she didn't feel anger. Her expression was one I remembered well from before her illness.

I crossed the room to the closet and began looking for the suitcase. All the while I felt those angry eyes boring into my back. I saw the suitcase high up on the top shelf. Frantically I tugged at it, knocking aside hat-boxes and shoes. I pushed and pulled and finally got it loose. I could feel from the lightness that it was empty. Grasping it tightly I started to leave the room. As I turned towards the door I saw the nurse standing there watching me.

"That's nice," the nurse said. "Now thank your mother and say goodbye."

There was nothing I could do but obey. Holding the suitcase I slowly approached the foot of the bed. My mother's scowling eyes stayed on the level of my waist. For a long moment I stood before her and then I said, so softly, "Hello, Mama."

My voice, my words, must have reached her. Her eyes raised and seemed to focus on my face. Her lips moved and she swallowed as if she were trying to say something to me. I watched in terror the sudden awakening that my words seemed to have evoked. She swallowed again, and again I thought, feared, that she would speak. It was impossible, impossible. She couldn't have heard me. She couldn't have recognized me.

"Mama," I cried, my head whirling and my emotion rising like a lump to choke me.

And then I bolted. I ran from the eyes, from the room, clutching the suitcase like a thief before she had a chance – yet what chance did she have? – to say my name. As I ran I heard the laughter of the nurse follow me down the hall.

"You see?" she screamed after me. "She did know you. She did know you."

XIV

That evening I set my alarm for four-thirty and retired early. But sleep did not come and I tossed and turned and pummeled my pillow until after one o'clock, when I finally managed to fall into a restless sleep. Three hours later the alarm clock roused me to an exhausted wakefulness. My head ached and there was a raspy swollen feeling in my throat. Dressing quickly I tiptoed into the kitchen and prepared a thermos of instant coffee and some sandwiches. Then I got together my bags and slipped quietly out of the front door.

I had to pause a moment to feel the morning. It was chilly, but the sky was endlessly clear, promising heat later on.

I placed my bags in the trunk of the car and climbed into the stiff leather front seat. The engine caught as if it were glad to be going and the exhaust pipes sent twin plumes of grey smoke into the chill morning air. I drove off quickly, not looking back at the sleeping, lonely, waiting house.

XV

There is a certain way I like to travel. I like to leave very early in the morning, travel fast with as few stops as possible, and go as directly as possible between start and destination. Usually I travel alone, and when I don't I usually regret it. Extra persons break my rhythm of traveling, which is one nervous and precise rush. I may be the worst sort of traveler or the best, according to one's point of view. But I can say for sure that as far as superlatives go, I am the most impatient sort of traveler.

And so when I arrived at Charles Nicolo's house at a few minutes past five that morning and saw no light on at any window, I was ready right then to go off to San Francisco without him. I was furious with impatience. Had he forgotten to set his alarm? Or, having heard it, had he turned it off and gone back to sleep? I waited five minutes on the deserted street and then gave my horn a light tap. A few minutes later he appeared around the side of the house and came over to my car. "I'll be ready in a minute," he whispered.

I was so angry by this time that I didn't trust myself to speak. I waited fifteen minutes more and decided I wouldn't be able to face the day unless my nerves were calmer. There was a box of tranquilizers in my vanity case on the back seat. I got one out and poured a cup of coffee from the thermos. Just then I saw him coming around the house and, thinking for some reason that the coffee would have cooled off somewhat, I hastily put the pill on my tongue and took a sip of pure fire. My mouth couldn't stand it. The coffee spilled out down my chin and onto my dress while the pill melted in all its bitterness on my tongue. He was already by the car when I hurriedly buttoned my sweater over the coffee stain and spat the melted lump of tranquillity into a handkerchief.

Charles fitted his suitcase and bed-roll into the trunk of the car with mine and we set off. I was still shaking with irritation at him for having kept me waiting, but managed to say nothing for the first minute. However, it seemed to me that I ought to let him know how I hated being kept waiting, in order to avoid repetitions. So as nicely as possible, though somewhat stiff-jawed, I said: "Perhaps in the future you could manage to be more or less on time."

He whirled in his seat, "Whose army is this?" he demanded angrily.

My heart took a nose-dive and seemed to collide with my stomach. "It's just that waiting makes me very irritable," I managed to say.

"Is this your army?" he demanded. "If it is, tell me right now so I'll know."

"It's not my army," I said, wishing now that the coffee had burnt out my tongue before I had said anything, "It's just that . . ."

"Be on time, do this, do that. Is that what this is?"

"I'm sorry," I said, "Let's forget I ever said anything. I apologize."

“Forget it? How can I forget it? You won’t let me forget it. Be on time. Do this. Do that.”

We were approaching an intersection. I started to put on the brake. “Maybe we should forget the whole thing,” I said. “Maybe we shouldn’t go up together.”

“Is that what you want? You want to back out now?”

“I don’t,” I replied. “But maybe you do.” I started to pull in to the curb.

“I want to get to San José,” he said determinedly.

“Fine,” I said, stepping on the accelerator. “But in that case let’s try to get along.”

“It’s *you* who aren’t getting along. The first thing you say to me is try to be more or less on time. Whose army is this anyway?”

I was sick at his words, and the bitter taste of the pill filled my mouth and aggravated the soreness in my throat. I suppose I should have stopped right then and called the trip off, but I didn’t. Why didn’t I? Because it was more a need than a desire. I needed to touch a pine tree. I needed to see Barbara. Behind me was darkness; ahead was light. And these were the reasons which made me step harder on the accelerator until we were north of Sunset Boulevard and careening our way over the hills towards the Ventura freeway, I needed to take this trip. And so I went.

PART TWO: *The Coast*

I

It was daylight by the time we passed my house in Coldwater Canyon and reached the top of the hill overlooking the San Fernando Valley. I had hoped to avoid the morning traffic by leaving early, but Ventura Boulevard was already congested with heavy trucks. Charles was still muttering under his breath, asking every now and then, with what even I had to admit was righteous indignation, whose army this was. But my spirits had risen somewhat in the fresh morning air and I decided it was just a matter of time before Charles returned to a more friendly frame of mind.

“Shall I go straight out on Ventura?” I asked him.

“Take Sepulveda.”

I had a feeling he was wrong about that, but obligingly turned right at the corner of Sepulveda. “We’re taking the coast route, aren’t we?” I asked him. It was before they’d built the freeway.

“Route 99 is quicker.”

I put on the brake. “Oh, not 99. I wanted to go up the coast. it’s much prettier and cooler. It’ll be like a furnace if we go inland.”

“It’s your army,” he told me.

I made a U-turn and got onto the freeway leading towards the coast. I pointed out to him that if we went the other way, Route 99, we would have to go over the highway they called the Grapevine. “I drove the Grapevine once,” I told Charles, “and I never want to drive it again.”

“It’s your car,” he said, slouching down in the seat with resignation. “Ninety-nine is a lot faster, that’s the only thing.”

“The coast is fast enough,” I told him. And then I couldn’t resist adding, “If we’d started earlier we’d have avoided all this traffic.”

That made him get angry all over again and he muttered until we were well on our way up the coast.

II

Who was this disagreeable young man with whom I'd undertaken a voyage north?

I learned later, but shall tell you now, that he was thirty-one years old and that his father was Italian and his mother of Greek descent. In fact, his entire family background was a mingling of the darker, southerly nationalities. His hair was black, his skin a baked olive. One solitary Scot, lost on the moors of his ancestry, had blown from the north two chilly lumps of ice which had lodged in his eyes and shone there a cold and penetrating grey.

Charles himself had been born an American, on American soil, just a few feet north of the Mexican border. I mention this because later it became significant, though when I first learned of his origins I gave them little thought.

Charles was a handsome man and strong enough to have led me away from my home. His strength was enough for both of us. I began to relax, sorry now that I'd not let him take the wheel at the very beginning of the trip. He should have been driving, not brooding silently next to me. And to add to the silence and tedium of the first lap of our trip, it seemed the front wheels were out of balance and the car vibrated badly over forty-five miles per hour, so I was not able to go as fast as I'd have liked.

"The wheels," Charles said after a while.

"I know."

"It won't be easy finding a garage open at this hour."

"We'll find one," I told him.

But it wasn't until we reached the city of Ventura that we found a garage which was open and equipped to balance the front wheels. They had some sort of whirling machine to do it on, but halfway through the machine broke down, and after a thirty-minute delay, while they tried to fix it, we finally had to drive on to Santa Barbara. There we found a service station which used bubbles under glass instead of a machine.

While the wheels were being balanced I changed from my coffee-stained dress into a pair of slacks and a shirt. Charles, who was wearing a Hawaiian shirt and the trousers from his light suit, went across the street to see if he could buy some buttermilk in a market which had opened its doors a few minutes early to receive a milk delivery.

When I came out of the rest room I saw Charles and a man in a grey apron working on the milk truck. There were several small doors in the side of the large refrigerator truck and their task seemed to be to locate the door containing the buttermilk. Pretty soon a woman joined them. In turn each of the three opened and closed each of the small doors. It was as intricate and rhythmical as a dance, as serious as a game of concentration. They found milk and cream and butter, but no buttermilk. After each had opened each door they re-opened them one by one, just to check. Finally the milkman came out, walked up to the truck and opened one of the doors. He gave a push, a yank, a heft, and there was a tray of buttermilk cartons.

The wheels had been balanced by this time, but Charles remained on the other side of the street. I waited impatiently. What was he doing now? What was he looking for in those crates? When he finally crossed the street towards me he was frowning, but very excited. He held out a handful of small, bluish balls.

“They gave these to me,” he exclaimed. “They were going to throw them out.”

“What are they?”

“Peaches. They were going to throw them out.”

“They seem pretty beat,” I commented. “They’re covered with bruises,”

He looked at me in astonishment. “They’re sugar-ripe,” he said, rolling his Rs slightly in his enthusiasm. “This is the way peaches should be. Sugar-ripe.” He cradled the soft little fruits in his hand, shaking his head. “Would you like one?” He held them out as if they had been jewels. I declined, but with many thanks,

“They’re sugar-ripe,” he repeated, shaking his head and climbing into the front seat.

I paid for the tire balancing and offered to drive again so that Charles could drink his buttermilk and eat the peaches. It had bothered me to see him digging in those crates of discarded peaches. It annoyed me to see him eating refuse. I knew before we started that he was practically penniless and that I would have to pay the car expenses – even that bothered me. But I was too wise by this time to say anything. And anyway, there was nothing which could be rightfully said.

So I made myself think of other things. I thought of the day. The day was expanding around and above us with an exquisite warmth and freshness. Still, we were moving along at sixty miles an hour and my nerves raced with the car and buffeting wind until I had to force myself to relax. Next to me Charles puffed on the peaches, wiped and ate them with comments of delight. The tension between us evaporated like morning moisture. The peace was preserved by our silence.

Until we came to a roadside sign indicating a turn-off to a public beach. We were driving fast and there was only time for me to suggest and Charles to agree to spend an hour on the sand. Then we were swirling off the highway on a cloverleaf underpass which brought us to a camp site on the water’s edge.

We changed into bathing suits and lay side by side on the sand. The sun seemed to bake the last cold particles of annoyance and impatience out of me. Cooling breezes ruffled up off the ocean. “I don’t care what time I get to San Francisco,” I said to Charles. “I’d be happy to stay here the rest of the day.”

“We could camp here tonight,” Charles agreed.

But strangely enough, no sooner had we spoken of remaining than neither of us had any desire to do so. I sat up and began watching the surf. Charles glanced at his wristwatch, then covered his eyes against the sun with the back of his arm,

The beach was inhabited mainly by teenagers who seemed to be arriving out of the sea on long golden boards. Their brown bodies flashed boldly towards the shore, kneel-

ing or erect, in classical poses or off-balance antics, kings and clowns. On the shore waited the young temptresses, beautifully aware that they were the prizes which brought the boys to shore.

One girl with heavy black hair and fat breasts ran down to the water, her feet slightly pigeoned in, her elbows in at her waist. She ran, laughing and awkward, and hurled a phrase in Spanish across the water. A black-haired boy with dark skin made a wild, laughing gesture and hit the water sideways. Satisfied, the girl walked back up the beach to the siren herd.

I wondered what she had said. I happened to glance at Charles. His eyes were hidden under his arm, but his mouth was grinning.

“What did she say?”

“What? Her? Oh, nothing important.”

“Well, what was it?”

“Oh, nothing,” he replied. “It wouldn’t mean anything translated.” Again he had managed to irritate me. Susan, I said to myself, you are entirely too impatient, too nervous. Relax. Pretend you don’t care. Change the subject. Say something conversational.

“How many languages do you speak?” I asked.

“English, Japanese and Chinese.”

“And Spanish.”

“Of course, Spanish.”

“Why of course?”

“If I asked you what languages you spoke you wouldn’t say English.”

“But you’re not Spanish or Mexican. It isn’t your native tongue.” I waited for Charles to explain himself, but he said nothing. He didn’t smile. His mouth looked even a trifle grim. “Did you live in Japan?” I asked him then, to change the subject.

“During the war. I was an interpreter in Korea. C.I.C. in Japan,”

“How long were you over there?”

“Two years. Before that I studied language at the Army Language School.”

The Army Language School was located at Monterey, two hundred miles or so further up the coast. “Then you probably know this coast well” I said, “from driving back and forth to Los Angeles.”

“We took 99. It was faster.”

“I imagine so,” I said lightly, determined not to let another disagreement arise between us. “But we’re not in any hurry. I mean, as long as we get there.” I was quite proud to be no longer in any hurry. I was determined to make this a leisurely, pleasant trip and not insist on schedules or haste.

“I’m going to take a run up the beach,” I said to Charles. He didn’t offer to accompany me, so I set off alone. I was careful not to put in my elbows as I ran, and made sure my toes pointed straight ahead. I hoped I looked graceful, but I seldom ran, so I

doubted that I did.

I ran about fifty yards and slowed down, winded. Walking on a little way I glanced back every now and then to see whether Charles had followed me. But he remained motionless where I had left him.

I walked on until I came to a part of the beach that was deserted. I knelt down on the sand. The day was enormous. The sky was very high and the horizon seemed very far away. All I could hear was the wind and waves. It was all so beautiful and so achingly empty. A person should be able to think great thoughts in such a place, I told myself. But I could not.

I wanted to think about my mother and her dying, for it seemed that one should be able to comprehend death here, on this beach, in front of this ocean. But I could not.

I looked from the sea to the sand at my knees. I took up a few grains in my fingers and looked at them closely. I touched them to my tongue and chewed down on them so that they grated against my teeth. And then I summoned a great deal of saliva and swallowed them.

After that I got up and walked slowly back to where Charles lay. I threw myself down next to him. He lay with his eyes covered by his arm and I thought, the sand won't carry to him the sound and vibration of my nearness. He won't know I've returned and that I'm lying next to him. Oh, the villainy of a billion separating particles of sand.

"Let's go swimming," Charles said suddenly. "It'll do your throat good."

"All right. Why not?"

On a warm and sky-blue day it's impossible to distrust the ocean. It's impossible to think of her as Melville saw her – a great insanity of whales and coral insects, a glutton after ships and souls.

We entered the water further down from where the surf boys flashed with their head-cracking boards. My first concern whenever I enter the ocean is to get far out past the waves before they can get a whack at me. I can swim and float an hour or more if I'm out far enough. Charles swam near me, just a little behind. When I felt we were safe from waves I turned on my side and rested with an easy sidestroke motion. Charles trod water. I think we both saw the boy at the same time.

He was a Mexican boy, the one whom we had seen jump from his board earlier. But now he was kneeling motionless on the board, his hands, one bleeding slightly, up like a begging dog, his face agape with terror. I don't suppose he was more than ten yards from us. And right next to him, grinning up out of the water, was the long, motionless snout of a shark. They were so still, the boy and the shark, as they stared at each other. The sea seemed to slip by them with complete unconcern.

I could feel sweat leave my body and wash away with the sea. I glanced at Charles. His face was immobile as he watched. He hardly moved in the water. Then he turned to me and in a low, calm voice said, "When the shark goes down, yell to the boy to head for the beach."

There was no time to protest, for as soon as the words were out of his mouth Charles took an enormous lungful of air and sank under the water. I didn't wait. I headed for the beach as quickly and quietly as I could. I didn't want the shark to sense me. But I kept looking back and as soon as I saw the shark roll forward into the water and out of sight I yelled as loudly as I could: "Go, run, get out of here. Now!"

Then I didn't look back. I was a pinwheel going toward the beach. I almost tore myself in half getting out of the grip of the surf. Out of the corner of my eye I saw the boy on his board slip on to shore ahead of me and scramble on all fours up the sand. I dragged myself out of the sea, sobbing and choking for breath. Brown arms pulled me the rest of the way until I was clear of the water and then they left me, and I lay heavy as stone on the sand, just managing to twist around and see them help Charles out of the water. He didn't need their help. He walked over to where the Mexican boy lay and said a few words to him in Spanish. The boy was breathing so heavily, still with the gaping expression of horror on his face, that he could scarcely comprehend that it was Charles who had saved him. But suddenly I saw his staring, wild gaze light upon Charles' face and a second later he had thrown himself at Charles' feet stammering out words which even I could understand, "*Gracias, gracias.*"

It was a long while before my shaking subsided. I lay against Charles, my face hidden in the dark warmth of his neck, his arm around me. His voice was like a low rumble of thunder beneath my ear. "It's a good thing it was just a shark," I heard him say. The words didn't make sense, but I didn't care. What in his experience could have been worse than a shark? I didn't care. How had he managed to save the boy? I didn't care. He said, "The water along the coast is getting warmer. It brings them in. It's five degrees warmer than usual. They don't know." He sounded almost sorry for the poor, disoriented sharks. I didn't care.

III

When we left the beach Charles took the wheel. I was glad to let him drive. Since the shark incident a new kind of strength seemed to emanate from him, and with it a quiet gentleness. Certainly I felt no desire to compete. I was content to sit next to him and, as he was a good driver, going neither too fast nor too slow, I was soon able to take my eyes trustfully off the road and pay attention to the scenery and to my thoughts.

Whatever had happened in the garden at home was more than made up for now. The suspicion I'd felt regarding the manner of Ernst's death was erased by the risk I'd seen Charles take in saving the life of the Mexican boy. I was ashamed now that I'd ever doubted him. The fatal twisting of the ladder had been an accident, nothing more. As for his anger towards me on the trip up, well, I had to admit to myself that I'd deserved it. I knew impatience was one of my major flaws, just as it had been one of my mother's. But from now on it would be different. From now on I would make sure to keep my

impatience in check, keep any criticisms to myself, and preserve at all costs this new feeling of friendliness which had grown up between Charles Nicolo and myself.

Now that I had witnessed Charles' strength and gentleness I was more curious about him than before. Why should such a man have to work in someone's garden to earn a few dollars to pay a traffic fine? What part did this trip to San José play in the pattern of his life? Who was he really and what were his hopes, his plans, his aspirations?

I asked him. He didn't answer immediately, but then he said, "Is it necessary to have them?"

"Of course it is," I replied, surprised. "Especially for a man. Doesn't it bother you to be thirty years old and penniless?"

"No, not at all. Does it bother you?"

"It doesn't bother me," I told him, "but if I were you it would bother me. I mean, if I were a man, and thirty, and broke."

"You're an American," Charles replied simply.

"So are you," I retorted.

"By birth."

"But . . .?"

"But not by philosophy," he continued.

"Have you no aim in life at all?"

He thought a moment, frowning, and then said, "My only aim in life is to die outside the United States."

I thought that one over for a few minutes in silence. It seemed too absurd a statement to argue, yet too firmly stated to doubt. So I didn't question it. I merely asked the obvious: "Then why don't you leave the country?"

"It takes money to do anything in this country," he replied, "even to leave it. Nothing comes free. Everything must be paid for in one way or another. Everything." He was silent a moment and then added, "I have a buddy in San José. He's a bartender. I can get a job with him."

We were driving then through low hills of golden summer grass. Tall trees stood here and there upon the landscape like graceful kimonoed figures, their leafy shoulders raised as if to shrug off a universe of doubt, admitting only birds and breezes.

"Why don't we stop and sit under a tree?" asked Charles suddenly,

I glanced at him out of the corner of my eye. In spite of my resolutions not to be in a rush, I didn't feel like stopping again so soon. "I don't know why we don't."

"We don't because we can't. It's all fenced off."

I felt relieved that we couldn't stop. "Anyway," I pointed out, "I'm going to San Francisco and you're going to San José to see about a job. If we want to get there we can't stop too often."

"We're always going somewhere. This is a land of highways – of lines leading to

dots.”

“We stopped on the beach this morning,” I pointed out.

“Not long enough to cool off the engine.”

“Could you sit under a tree for the rest of your life?” I asked

“Yes.”

“I couldn’t.”

“That’s because you were born an American, not an Oriental or a Mexican. You’ll rush through life and achieve everything except happiness. Everything you achieve will seem unreal to you and finally you’ll seem unreal even to yourself.”

I thought of my vain and pitiful attempts at writing and his words disturbed me. “But even if I agreed with you,” I said, “and I don’t say that I do, why, I still couldn’t help trying, working, attempting to achieve something, create something, be someone in my own right.”

“Of course you couldn’t,” he said. “It’s much too late.”

“I’m only twenty-six,” I said defensively.

“It was too late when you were six.”

“Six months?” I laughed.

“Six seconds,” he replied.

IV

We passed through Gaviota and turned inland, northward, through the state. Highway 101 doesn’t stay with the coast. Its alternate rides the coast between Los Angeles and Point Mugu, veering inland long enough to merge into 101 which travels then along the coast as far as Gaviota, turning there to shear off the corner of the state. If you want to stay with the coast you have to leave 101 at San Luis Obispo and take Highway 1. Driving Highway 1 is like riding a snake across a picture postcard. Unless they’ve ruined it since, it must still be one of the most beautiful scenic routes in the world.

But Charles was driving and I was not looking at the map just then, and somehow we went past San Luis Obispo without turning off toward the coast. I got the map out and studied it. There seemed to be a road leading across to the coast. “I think we just passed it,” I said. Charles waited for a chance, then obligingly swung the car about and turned on to the narrow road leading away from the highway toward the hills to the west. “I suppose the ocean must be just across those hills,” I said, tossing the map into the back seat.

The roar of the highway was behind us now. We seemed to have caught up with the sunshine. In a few minutes we were winding into the foothills between rolling acres of grapevines. Suddenly it was like an adventure. I was happy to see that even Charles appeared pleased.

We drove further and came to a place where wine was made. It seemed it would

be a pleasant luxury to stop for a while and sample a little local wine. But no one was about. We walked through a couple of deserted, whitewashed buildings until we found a man who took us to a corner of one where there was a counter and a display of wine bottles.

“This here’s just a family affair,” he told us modestly when Charles asked. “Me and my sons, we run the thing ourselves. Sell it locally.”

Charles took a sip of wine and ran it around his mouth before swallowing it. “Locally?” he exclaimed. “Locally?” His expression was incredulous and the man looked slightly worried. “This wine has the sun in it, man!”

“Hot year,” the man said, his eyes slowly looking brighter, then suddenly dimmer. “Dry. Had to bring in water.”

“Ah,” said Charles. “River water. That’s what I taste. Not rain water.”

The man’s face, a wrinkled grape of a face, became slightly more overcast. He wasn’t worried about making a sale, I knew. In fact he probably wanted to be rid of us so that he could get back to his work. But he identified pretty strongly with his grapes and it seemed he took personally everything Charles said. Charles was in no hurry. He poured himself another glass of the dark-red wine. I put my hand over my glass. It tasted good, but I didn’t think it was polite to sample too much.

Charles held a bottle at arm’s length and read the label. “I’ve never seen this wine in Los Angeles,” he said.

“Don’t git that far,” the man said. “Mostly in Paso Robles to the north and Atascadero to the south.”

“A radius of ten miles,” Charles exclaimed. “Within a diameter of twenty! Good grief, multiply that by pi and what have you *got*?”

“Pie?” the man said.

“Grape pie.”

“Don’t know about grape pie. Have to ask the missus about that. Mostly we make wine here.”

Charles looked astounded. “You never had grape pie? YOU?” He shook his head in disbelief and poured himself another glass of wine. “Have you a pencil?” he asked. The man had. “The most important thing about grape pie is peeling the grapes. I’d make a note of that.” Obliging the man scribbled something on the paper, though his heart was obviously not in it. “The main difference between making pie and wine is that for wine you just crush the juice out of the grapes, but for pie they have to go in whole. It makes for a better pie if the seeds are taken out. Grape seeds pucker the tongue.”

Charles continued to describe how to make grape pie with sugar, milk and so forth, “But,” he said, “the best grape pie is made with dry grapes.”

The man looked puzzled. “Dry grapes?”

“When dry grapes are used it is called ‘raisin pie’.”

The man laughed. “Hell,” he said. “Raisin pie. We have that damn near ever’

week.” Wadding up his paper of notes in one large dark fist, he ticked it into the waste-paper basket.

Charles wiped the perspiration off his forehead with the back of his hand and poured himself another glass of wine. His mouth flickered with suppressed smiles but his eyes had an unstable look in them. I had the feeling that he was just beginning to work on this man.

“This is great wine,” he said. “Great. And I’ve drunk them all: wines from the Médoc, the Moselle, the Rhine. Red wines, white wines, blue wines, rosé.

“Blue wine?”

“Yes, blue wine, rose wine.

“Blue wine?” The man shook his head. “I never heard of blue wine,” he said.

Charles stared at him a moment, then dropped his gaze. “I guess you were never in Tangier.”

“Can’t say,” the man said. “Might of without knowing it. Is it in California? if it’s in California I prob’ly been there. I been all over California. Never out of it.”

“Tangier is in Morocco,” Charles said. “On the north coast of Africa.”

“Oh, hell,” the man laughed. “I never was in Africa. They got blue wine there?”

“Certain years,” Charles said. “When they have thirteen full moons instead of only twelve.”

“Thirteen moons?”

“In Africa the sun is too hot for grapes,” Charles said. “They have to grow their grapes by moonlight. Moon rays are very strong. just one extra full moon a year will turn the wine blue.”

“I never heard of growing grapes with moonlight,” the man said, scratching his head. “You say the sun’s too strong?” Then he saw the flaw. “But what they grow at night with moonlight, don’t the sun kill it the next day?”

Charles banged his fist on the counter. “You’ve hit on the heart of the matter. You’ve stated the problem!” he exclaimed. “In one half minute you’ve discovered what it took the African mind seven centuries to see: What can one do about the sun ruining the crops during the day?”

“What did they do about it?”

“They haven’t done anything yet. They’re still working on it. It’s a very great problem. Even the French couldn’t come up with an answer, so the natives kicked them out.”

“I hear the Frenchies make good wine though.”

“But,” Charles reminded him, one finger raised, “Africa for the Africans. Tangier for the Tangerines.”

“Guess that’s a point,” the man agreed. His eyes were terribly blank, but he still smiled a thin mask of a smile.

For a moment I thought even Charles felt sorry for him. He apologized very po-

lately for having drunk so much wine. "It was so good I didn't realize how much I was drinking," he said. "I want to buy a bottle to make up for it." He looked around and then selected a half bottle. "I suppose even this much costs over a dollar," he said, digging in his pocket. "I hope I have that much with me."

"Eighteen," the man said. "Eighteen cents."

"That's a very fair price," Charles said. "You could make a fortune with this wine in Los Angeles. I don't know why you don't make a stab at it. You shouldn't be afraid to expand your diameter of operations. Multiply the distance from here to Los Angeles by pi, and . . ."

"My sons and me," interrupted the man hurriedly, "we only got a couple acres of vines."

And somehow, with that statement, the man won the contest, although he didn't know he'd won anything. Charles shook his hand and we went out of the door into the blinding sunlight. We climbed into the car and I took the wheel in view of how much wine Charles had already managed to drink,

Well, we were feeling jollier now. We had a little indecision at one fork, but Charles insisted we go left and that seemed to be correct according to the map. But a few minutes later we found we'd left the paved road behind and were winding into the hills on one of the worst roads I had ever driven over. All I remember of that road was a nightmare of gravel and ruts, burning hot sun and hairpin curves, mile after mile after mile. At the top of each hill we expected to see the ocean, but each time all we saw were endless hills stretching away to the horizon. By the time we realized what we had undertaken, there was no turning back. Hours later, dizzy and exhausted with heat and exertion, I stopped the car by the ocean's edge and turned the wheel over to Charles.

"I'm beginning to understand us Americans," I told him. "This country is just too large. If you leave the highways and the dots you might never be heard of again."

I was relieved to hear him chuckle.

The wine must have had a good effect on Charles. He hadn't wanted to take the coast route, Highway 101, and he had certainly not cared to drive the twisting Highway 1 which we were now on, yet he had not grumbled once and was in the best frame of mind since the start of the trip.

Before starting off again we stopped at a gas station to refuel and freshen up. When I came out of the ladies' room Charles was not in the car. I waited for about ten minutes and still he did not reappear. I supposed he was in the men's room. I felt like asking the gas station attendants if they had seen where he had gone, but they seemed to be looking at me curiously and I didn't want to make them think anything was unusual. Then I realized I would have to pay for the gas and that they would think this very peculiar indeed. So, as casually as I could, I asked them "Has he already paid?" so they would think he *might* pay if he had remembered to, though as I asked I wondered if perhaps they had not seen him going away, leaving me. They looked at me more curi-

ously than ever and shook their heads without replying. “Oh,” I said lightly. “Then I might as well pay.” I paid. I was sure they thought I was keeping Charles, and at the same time I was sure they thought no such thing. If only I knew where he was, whether he would return.

And then I saw him coming out of the men’s room and walking towards the car.

The sun was still shining and the sea on our left was blue. We passed the castle San Simeon and were soon on the picture-postcard road which follows along the palisades to Carmel. On the horizon a thick bank of fog was moving toward shore. We started to race the fog, then succumbed to the idea of having coffee on the patio of a cliff-side restaurant where we found a table which held the last rays of sunshine. It was getting chilly by this time and the coffee tasted good. Charles paid for both of us and bought me a chocolate bar on the way out. I was so pleased by this that I blushed.

“I can at least pay for this much,” he said gruffly. And then he opened the door of the car for me. I felt like singing, like hugging him. I only smiled.

V

When evening comes upon the western coast of North America, the continent seems to become alive. It breathes; the land breathes. The pine trees which I had so wanted to touch now stood on our left like bristles on the jowls of a beast. I had no desire at all to leave the warmth and immunity of the car.

We spoke of camping for the night. Charles watched for a likely place to camp, but the beaches were either hundreds of feet below the palisades, or else they were fenced off. All along the way we saw signs prohibiting camp-fires.

“Civilization,” Charles commented grimly. “No campfires, no smoking, no breathing. They just can’t rest until they’ve fenced and labeled and quarantined every last wild and beautiful part of nature. And you wonder why I want to leave this country.”

I understood so well what he meant, but nevertheless something within me, perhaps it was the They within me, replied, “But after all, this is dry country. There’s always danger from forest fires. Only last year . . .”

“They don’t know how to live,” Charles interrupted angrily. “They don’t know how to live and they try to keep the rest of us from living.”

We drove further, scanning the roadside for a gap in the fence, a possible oversight on the part of the fence maker or, hopefully, an indication of his benevolence or good will. We spoke of climbing the fence, which would not have been difficult in certain places, but our camp-fire would have been visible from the road and to stop without a fire would have been absurd. We would have had to twiddle our thumbs in the damp, cold dusk until it grew late and dark enough to sleep. Personally I didn’t care to stop. Since the morning my cold had been worsening steadily. My throat was almost swollen

shut and I could feel my lungs beginning to congest. A night on the beach might not kill me, but it wouldn't do me any good.

Charles told me of a place in Baja California where he often went camping. He would spend weeks without seeing a living soul except one old hermit who lived in a cave near the hot springs. For food he would skin-dive to spear fish which he would cook over a camp-fire every evening. There were no signs, no fences, nothing at all between man and nature. "That's the way to live," he concluded. "As far as camping tonight is concerned, we might as well forget it." He looked one last time at the sea, then turned his eyes full on the road and didn't look to the left again.

By the time we reached Carmel the fog had intercepted us. Near Monterey we parked the car off the road and pooled what food and wine we had left over. Taken from its local clime, the wine Charles had bought tasted terrible. It was like some maiden from Shangri-La who had soured going over the mountains. Charles poured it into the roadside dust. "I have some brownies," he told me. "Would you like some?" He produced a paper bag of brownies. "I made them myself."

"Do you cook?"

"When I get a chance. In our house we fight to get to the stove. Everybody wants to cook."

I took one of the brownies, but just as I was putting it to my lips I paused. Somehow I just couldn't believe that Charles had made those brownies. I glanced up and saw him watching me intently. "They look very good," I said.

"Go ahead. Eat it."

"They're fattening," I protested with a laugh.

"No they're not," he said. "Go ahead and eat it, Tell me what you think."

Tell him what I thought of the brownies? How could I tell him? How could I say that all of a sudden a chilling fear had filled me that the brownies were poisoned. It was too absurd. Too irrational.

"They're not poison," he said then with a slight smile.

"Of course they aren't," I replied. "That's not what I was thinking." Quickly I put the brownie into my mouth, chewed once or twice, and swallowed it. "Very delicious," I told him. "You're a very good cook."

Charles started the engine and we drove on. I was angry at myself for my absurd fears. I must have been watching too much television lately. I must have lost track of the line between reality and fantasy. "I'm tired," I told Charles. "I'm really very tired. I don't know how I'll make it to San Francisco."

"Why don't you spend the night in San José?"

"With you and your friends?"

"Yes."

"Won't they mind an extra guest?"

"I'll call them when we get there."

“They do know you’re coming?” I asked, suddenly wary.

“Not yet.”

“You didn’t tell them in advance? What if they aren’t home?”

“They’re home.”

“But what if they aren’t?”

“I said they’re home,” he nearly shouted.

“All right, they’re home.” I settled back with my eyes closed so as not to see the headlights which were springing up like luminous flowers in the dusk.

I was suddenly so tired, and my head ached. Even if I spent the night in San José it would be hours before I could get to bed, hours of talk and strangers and polite behavior and sore throat. If only . . . And suddenly, as if in answer to my unspoken desire, I felt Charles’ arm move around me. Gently he pulled me toward him until I rested against his side, my head on his shoulder. He held me close and took my hand in his. I returned the pressure. It takes so little to make me happy, I thought. just a little affection, a little gentleness. The pressure of two hands. The pressure . . . But suddenly I began to wonder whether it was affection or a game. We each applied pressure to each other’s hand in a light squeeze, but when I expected Charles to relax his hand, he did not. Nor did I. And so the pressure continued – not much – just enough to be annoying. I felt it might insult him were I the first to let my hand go limp and release his first offered sign of affection. But he seemed determined to squeeze my hand lightly as long as I did his. How bothersome. I wondered if he was doing it on purpose, like a joke. Or was it just my overtired mind playing another trick?

Unable to relax my hand, I waited what seemed a reasonably friendly length of time and then moved away from him, pretending to get something, lipstick or something, out of my vanity case in the back seat,

VI

It was dark by the time we reached San José. I put gas in the car while Charles called his friends, Ed and Alice Taylor, who were indeed at home. “Ed says they’ll hold dinner for us,” he told me when he returned to the car.

We drove off into the jumble of lights and patches of darkness which reduce the identities of most small western cities to a meaningless generality.

“Ed gave me directions,” Charles said, squinting through the cacophony of evening at the street signs and names. He repeated the directions but they made little sense when applied to the chaos surrounding us. I was very anxious to get there, but Charles stopped at a service station for more directions and shortly after that he had to stop again. I could hardly keep my eyes open. “We’re almost there,” he said, but even as he said it he put his foot on the brake. “No, this can’t be right.” With my eyes closed I felt him make a U-turn and drive slowly in the other direction. “It must be here some-

where.” He put his foot on the brake.

I couldn’t stand it. “One would think you’d know where your friends live,” I said irritably. “Haven’t you ever visited them before?”

He whirled in the seat, “Ed is my friend,” he roared. “My best friend. I love Ed Taylor more than any human being on earth. If you ever say anything about us again. . . .”

But the sense of the rest of his words was lost on me. I was sobbing, his words falling upon my ears like blows. “No,” I cried, holding my head as if to shield it from the violence of his anger, “No, I’m sorry. I’m sorry. Don’t.”

“What do you mean you’re sorry? Ed’s my friend. My best friend.” He was almost insane with rage.

“Don’t,” I cried. “Don’t.”

He stamped his foot on the accelerator and the car shot forward as the tires screamed on the pavement. A few minutes later we drove up to a modern apartment building somewhere in the mystery of San José streets and Charles stopped the car by the curb. A young man stepped up to greet us and I mumbled hello without raising my streaming face.

“She’s had a long day,” I heard Charles tell Ed Taylor in a perfectly calm voice, “and I’ve been a little rough on her. We could both use a bite of dinner.”

“Right this way,” a kind voice said, and I hastily blotted my eyes while they unloaded our stuff out of the back of the car and led the way upstairs.

VII

What had I expected a friend of Charles Nicolo to be like? Well, whatever I had expected, I was disappointed. Or should I say relieved. Ed Taylor’s face was as bland and unspectacular as the bronze-painted plaster-of-paris horse-head plaque hanging in the center of his living room wall. His expression possessed as much character as the cheap modern furniture which allowed him and his visitors not to have to sit on the floor. Perhaps an ideal bartender is himself a little like a piece of unspectacular furniture, being there when you need him and easily forgotten when you don’t. Ed Taylor looked out at the world through pale friendly eyes with patience and good humor. I felt he would have been no more and no less content if we hadn’t dropped in.

Alice Taylor was something else again. She was as quiet as her husband –quieter, in fact – as she said something only when a situation absolutely demanded a word from her. And yet I have never seen a person’s eyes so full of words. They burned with words. She was polite and hospitable in her actions towards me without, however, even glancing at me. Yet every now and then I caught her looking at Charles with an expression which I can only describe as nearly hysterical loathing. The look was only in her eyes; it did not affect a muscle in her face. And so I thought perhaps I was imagining

things again. I wasn't even sure if perhaps in her eyes I was seeing reflected some dark vision from the depths of my own sub-conscious.

Since our arrival Charles had altered completely. I had never seen him so gay and laughing and helpful. Before I had arranged my possessions in the spare bedroom and washed my hands and face, he had set four places on the kitchen table, had commanded the boiling of the spaghetti, and had added seasoning to the meat sauce simmering in an earthen pot on the top of the stove. Opening a bottle of Chianti wine, Charles filled two glasses, ordering Ed Taylor to sit down with him at the kitchen table. While Alice softly stole back into her kitchen to see what had been done, he and Ed toasted one another and began to reminisce.

First there was the war in Korea, starting with the little things, the barracks they lived in, the bivouac tent they shared, the sergeant they hated. "Christ, remember the time he . . . ?"

The pressure over them and the crazy stunts they managed to pull in spite of it, or because of it. "Remember the time we . . . ?"

"I thought I'd bust laughing."

And the enemy across the dry hills, across the muddy winter dales. "Remember the time they . . . ?"

"Shoot," remembered Ed Taylor, glancing from me to his wife. Shoot was all right.

"Did you see much action?" I asked, hoping to be impressed.

"We saw action once or twice," Ed Taylor told me, "but somehow we were never really in it." For a moment he looked puzzled, then he shrugged. "Guess it's just as well. My arches aren't all that good."

Charles' eyes watched Ed's, waited, received them back with relief and renewed vociferousness. He began to fight – not the war, because they hadn't fought it exactly – but the routine, the barracks, mess hall, latrines, morning. Morning: the sound of it. How they had hated that morning bugle, and how they had found a way around it.

"Remember?" demanded Charles. "Wake up," he sang softly, "wake up . . ."

"I remember." Ed Taylor laughed.

Remembering made Charles very excited. His face was almost grey with urgency. "Remember?" His upper lip was beaded with sweat. His eyes rolled closed above the wine glass as he put back his head and drank.

"What was that about the bugle?" I asked Ed Taylor. Charles' eyes popped back open.

Ed chuckled, half embarrassed. "Oh, nothing really, just one of our jokes, We . . ."

"Remember Trotting Horse?" Charles interrupted, nudging Ed on the shoulder and smiling broadly. Jumping up he grabbed a saucepan and a spoon and, beating the one with the other, he began dancing around the kitchen. "Chief Trotting Horse going off to battle in Indian file."

I grimaced, smiling sympathetically at Ed who, however, didn't seem the least bit bothered by his friend's noisy antics.

"Are you on holiday?" I asked him, sensing that if I struck up a conversation with Ed, Charles would abandon his noise-making in order to interrupt.

"For one week," spoke up Alice suddenly. I thought I saw tears of impatience in her eyes. Her week was ticking by in the presence of uninvited guests.

The noise had indeed stopped. We watched Charles thoughtfully replace the saucepan and spoon in the exact spots he'd found them. Then he swung around with a smile, his eyes fastening on Ed's, his voice taut with excitement as he continued to recall. The guys on those volunteer patrols: gigantic black men, burly whites, raised out of Harlem swamplands and southern white trash-barrels, with thighs like oak trees, shoulders like relief maps of the Ozarks, and faces stupid, fearless, stamped like one-way tickets to Hades. They took non-volunteering Charles with them. Poor Charles with all those languages locked in his brain, done out of a soft job in Japan by the impersonal machine, setting out at night across the lines with the fearless giants who caught him Gooks and Chinks so he could ask his questions, interpret their replies. Little Charles who measured only six feet one in his GI boots; just a sapling. Monstrous, however, to an Oriental mushroom.

But finally he got to Japan. Counter Intelligence Corps.

(In a high sing-song.) *So ho. You Amelican C.I.C.*

(Deep and gruff.) *No. Me Azerbaijani.*

Can't fool me. You Amelican, I can tell. You dress Amelican C.I.C. uniform. Same hat, same jacket. Same trousers. No secret.

What if I wore khaki and stripes on my sleeve?

Khaki and stripes good disguise. We not recognize you. Better still you wear black cloak, dagger. We completely fooled. Tell you all our secrets.

Charles' impersonation was very funny. I found myself shaking my head and laughing in spite of myself. I glanced at Alice. Her smile looked as if it had been cut into her face with a knife.

But where was Ed while Charles was in Japan?

"Me? I was stuck in Korea. Our outfit never got any orders. Finally we got orders to go home. We went."

"Me Azerbaijani," Charles interrupted. "Want wooman. Never eat dinner without wooman."

Ed threw back his head and laughed. "That time in Frisco."

"Me important person in Azerbaijan. Want wooman!"

Chuckling, Ed explained. "We went to a restaurant one night in Frisco. Charles was dressed like some sort of Asian big-wig – robes, turban. He wouldn't eat dinner without them supplying him with a woman. I kept whispering to everybody that he was a very important person in Azerbaijan and that if they didn't get him a woman there

would be an international incident. The restaurant people were frantic.”

“Want wooman. Now!” Charles banged the table with the flat of his hand. Ed Taylor dissolved in laughter.

Charles’ face suddenly relaxed. “We broke their backs,” he said with simple satisfaction. He glanced at Alice Taylor. “We broke their backs.”

When dinner was over I offered to help Alice with the washing up, but Charles crowded us both out of the kitchen and set to work clearing off the table and stacking the dishes. He seemed eager to do it and I was happy to let him. But Alice let herself be deposed with a grim smile. I thought she would be as happy as I was to have the dishes taken off her hands, but deprived of her nightly chore she seemed completely at a loss for something to do. She sat in the living room like a stranger in her own house, keeping her eyes steadfastly anchored on her husband’s face. At first I thought she might be reproaching him, but when their eyes met there was not a shade of reproach in hers, not even a question or the reflection of a sigh. How she must love him, I thought suddenly. How she must need him.

While Charles was doing the dishes the three of us sat in the living room and waited. We did not talk because somehow we had nothing to say to one another. After a short while I excused myself and went to bed. By this time my nose was running and my throat very sore. The Taylors had given me their spare bedroom, a small room squeezed between the living-room and kitchen which had undoubtedly been designed as a dining area and then later enclosed. Hidden by the thin walls I felt I was still in the midst of the conversation which sporadically pierced my compartment from three sides. I heard Alice excuse herself soon after I did. Charles wanted to go and have a beer with Ed. It would give him a chance to meet the bar owner and see about a job.

After a while the front door slammed shut behind them and the apartment was still. The echoes of evening receded like water swirling down a drain. I felt my tired mind and senses begin to follow, though before I fell asleep I thought I heard soft footsteps in the kitchen and the sound of dishes and silverware being gently rearranged.

VIII

I slept poorly that night because of my cold. Toward daybreak I had a nightmare which awakened me in a sweat of fright. I opened my eyes and for a moment couldn’t place where I was. That where-am-I? feeling had never happened to me before, even on my travels in Europe. And so that morning it seemed less a fright than an interesting psychological phenomenon. Even having had the nightmare – even that pleased me in some strange way. It was reassuring, first because it meant my subconscious was on the job, and secondly because it came to me at precisely the right time during my adventure, as in a book, instead of months later after the fact.

The nightmare was this: My mother and I were in the back seat of a car which was

being driven by someone whom I could later easily identify as Charles, though in the dream we didn't know who it was. We could only see the back of his head, his dark hair, his slightly pointed ears. The car was a taxi and in front was a card with the driver's name, number, and photograph, but the photograph was too blurred to make out, try as we might, and the name was illegible. The driver's number was 99, and I remember my mother looked at it and said very matter-of-factly that this year was her birthday, which I took to mean the day on which she was actually born, as she had been born in the year 1899. Meanwhile the meter was ticking away and already showed that we owed thousands of dollars. We were embarrassed to ask, but finally we asked where, after all, he was taking us and did he know when we would arrive. The driver didn't answer, "It isn't the *money*," my mother said, glancing over at the meter. At any rate, we drove a while longer and then the road curved down to the seashore. I got out of the car and started walking along the shore alone, through the clear, shallow water. Something in the water caught my eye and I glanced down, thinking it was a fish. But no, it was a bird flying through the water. No, wrong again. It was a rat. Ahead of me on the sand I saw a table. Going nearer I saw that someone, a woman, was strapped on the table by a long, flat band of cloth. The rats were all over her and her eyes were open, looking to me for help. I started to run back along the beach. The rats were running, swimming after me. I ran and ran until, exhausted and sweating, I awoke.

When the fear left me, the first thing I thought of was Poe's story "The Pit and the Pendulum". I hadn't read it for years, but the image of the person strapped to the table with the rats came right out of that, positively. And Charles was the cab driver, of course. The other images, the ocean and the car trip itself, were all clearly from the day before. Putting them together what did I have? A sign that I was anxious over my mother, which I knew anyway. And a warning regarding Charles. Luckily I could heed the warning. Today I would drive on to San Francisco and never see Charles Nicolo again.

At seven o'clock I got up and tiptoed to the bathroom to get my washing done before the others awoke. As I passed the living room I glanced in at Charles. He lay on the foam-rubber sofa, just his head protruding from his mummy-shaped sleeping bag. He lay perfectly flat and straight, his toes making a slight bump. His eyes were closed and I expect he was asleep, though his face had the same taut muscle structure as when he was awake. Actually he looked no more asleep than the mummified remains of an Egyptian pharaoh whose carved and painted features sternly wait out the centuries, while the inner man, the creature of blood and bone, has long since moldered away.

By eight-thirty everyone was up and breakfast was under way. Alice was allowed to set out the boxes of dry cereal, the bread, milk, and butter, but Charles had taken over the making of the coffee. The Taylors, it seemed, used instant coffee.

"I'll make it," Charles insisted with a gleam in his eye. "I have a theory."

Alice, who was setting the table, looked nervously across the kitchen as Charles

selected a saucepan from the cupboard. “What are you going to do?” she asked.

“The trouble with instant coffee,” Charles said as he sprinkled a generous amount of powder into the dry saucepan, “is that it is bland and flavorless. It is a weak descendant of the original Turkish type of coffee. It suffers from generations of inbreeding, from indiscriminate enculturations, from long sea voyages, undiscerning palates, and mass production.” He turned the fire on under the saucepan. “There is only one remedy and it has to be drastic. It has to be burned,”

“Burned?”

“Scorched.” He began rapidly stirring the powder which started to melt unwillingly and sizzle. He turned the fire up beneath the pan and continued to stir. An ugly smell arose and a sticky brown ball formed at the end of the spoon. He pressed the ball of coffee against the bottom of the pan and rubbed it around.

“You’ll burn the pan,” Alice cried helplessly.

“The pan is fine,” Charles replied firmly. “The pan is doing nicely. As for the coffee . . .” He was beginning to look dubious.

Alice sank onto a kitchen chair. I sent her a sympathetic smile to which she didn’t respond. I imagined she lumped me in the same category as Charles. And indeed, if it hadn’t been for Alice and her saucepan I would have viewed the coffee-making with the same curiosity and hilarity as Charles. His actions seemed hopelessly funny to me, all the more so because they were both diabolical and pathetic. He knew the exact degree to which he was upsetting Alice, yet he genuinely hoped that his theory would prove to be sound.

“Now to add the water,” Charles said, sending a stream of hot tap water into the smoking and exhausted saucepan. When Ed Taylor entered a few minutes later and sat down, Charles set a steaming cup of coffee in front of him. We all watched Ed add cream and sugar and take an unsuspecting sip. A little look of surprise crossed his face and he glanced up. We were all looking at him so strangely. He laughed nervously.

“What’s the matter with you?”

“How’s the coffee?” I asked.

“It’s a little strong.”

“How does it taste?”

“It tastes like coffee. How should it taste?”

Alice jumped up and started to fill the kettle with water. “I’ll make you some coffee,” she said.

“Why?” her husband asked. “This coffee is all right. It’s fine.”

Alice clanked the kettle in the sink, wheeled blindly about, and left the room.

Ed looked uncomfortable. “She’s been a little edgy these past few days,” he explained.

I hummed understandingly while Charles, apparently oblivious of any tension around him, sat down eagerly to a bowl of cereal and a cup of scorched coffee.

“What’ll we do today, Eddy?” Charles inquired pleasantly.

“Let’s stop in and see that fellow I told you about last night. He may have something for you.”

“Good. Good.” Charles took a large spoonful of cereal flakes and chewed them carefully. “And then what?”

“As I mentioned before, Alice and I have to visit her folks. I’d say come along, but once her family starts talking it gets to be a bore. We’ll be spending the night at the Starr Motor Court. It’s right in the heart of Frisco.”

“Oh, are you coming to San Francisco?” I asked, surprised.

“Just for the night. To see her folks. I promised.”

I glanced questioningly at Charles.

“I’m not sure yet,” Charles said quickly. “I may stay down here and go to a few places.”

“Didn’t you get a job last night?”

Charles didn’t look at me, but Ed replied, “The place where I work just hired a new bar boy the other day. They think he’ll work out.”

“That’s too bad,” I said. I considered what it meant. “Then if you don’t find anything you’ll be coming back to Los Angeles?”

“We’ll see,” Charles replied.

I wasn’t sure whether I ought to invite him to drive back with me on Monday, but I knew he had no money for a bus or train and if my cold continued to worsen I might welcome his help at the wheel. “I’ll leave you my friend’s number in San Francisco,” I told him. “Let me know your plans.”

Then I excused myself and went into the bedroom. Before Charles had finished with the breakfast dishes I was packed and ready to start off for San Francisco.

PART THREE: *San Francisco*

I

When I left Charles and the Taylors behind and set off alone to drive the forty or fifty miles to San Francisco, I felt as if a great weight had been lifted off me – as if the trip, my trip, had only just begun. In spite of my head cold I felt good. I felt free. The sky above was blue, the air cool and fresh. Even my car seemed to leap ahead with new power.

It took me nearly an hour to find my way out of San José, but San Francisco was as nicely laid out as the other city was jumbled, and I found Barbara's apartment with no difficulty at all. Barbara was out, but the key was hidden above the door where she had said she might leave it.

I was rather disappointed with Barbara's apartment. It was downstairs at the rear of the building, actually a cellar apartment. Little light came in the windows as they were blocked off by the surrounding buildings. The air inside was damp. A note propped in plain sight on the studio bed informed me that my friend was out on an errand, but would return by noon, that an appointment had been made for me at such-and-such a beauty salon for eleven o'clock, and that if I wanted to take a bath and freshen up, the blue towels over the bathtub were for me. *You can eat anything you find in the kitchen*, the note concluded, and then, scribbled under her initial: *I'm so happy you came. I can't wait to see you.*

I too was feeling happy I had come. I lit the gas stove to warm the place up a little and took a bath in the old-fashioned iron tub. Feeling refreshed, I dressed and drove to the beauty parlor she had mentioned, where, a short time later, the dust of the trip was washed from my hair and manicured from beneath my nails.

It was the first time in almost a year that I had sat under a hair-dryer. In all that time I had not cared sufficiently about my looks to subject myself to the whirling horror of those machines. But I had gone to a beauty parlor perhaps six or seven months ear-

lier, not for myself but to take my mother.

It had been a beauty parlor in Beverly Hills, very chic, very fancy, with pink walls and beveled glass and dried tree branches sprayed pink and silver. My mother had always hated the interior of that shop, but there was a hairdresser working there who knew exactly how she liked her hair done.

He was a pleasant enough young man with lovely bleached and waved hair. My mother couldn't stand looking at him any more than at the pink and silver beauty parlor, but she endured him just for the sake of having her hair as she liked it: not frizzy, not mannish at the back, not dyed-looking.

Then my mother became ill and they shaved off her hair. She told me after the operation that it was at that moment, when they shaved her head, that the truth of what was happening to her first took hold.

Much later, when the bandages were taken off, the hair had already begun to grow back. It was all grey, of course. We told her the grey was very attractive and she decided to leave it that way. But as soon as she was able she wanted to go and have it properly done, for in its natural state her hair was straight and very thin and the scars showed plainly underneath. So we waited until she was well enough and her hair was long enough, and then I took her, leaning on my arm, to the pink and silver beauty parlor in Beverly Hills.

The hairdresser, Tommy, had known about my mother's operation because I had run into him on the street one day and had told him why my mother had not been coming in to have her hair done. When we entered the shop he was combing out the hair of another client. He greeted us peremptorily and asked one of the girls to wash my mother's hair. When her hair was washed he was in the middle of a bleach job. "Betty," he said, "will you set Madame's hair for me? I don't want her to get chilled waiting for me to get done here."

My mother looked at him with puzzled eyes. She couldn't quite understand. I had never seen her eyes look so hurt and uncomprehending. She, who had always had a sharp word on her tongue, didn't know what to say. So I said for her, when she could not hear, "Why don't you do her hair?" My voice was sharp.

"I can't touch her," Tommy snapped back.

"What do you mean?" I demanded. "It's your job."

"I'm busy."

I wanted to kill him. I wanted to tear his bleached hair out by the roots for causing that look in my mother's eyes. But I could only stand there and glare at him. Then I turned away in disgust and started to walk across the shop to my mother. "Susan," he called out after me. I turned and walked back. There was pain on his face. "I can't help it," he told me. "I feel so sorry for her, but I just can't stand to touch sick people. Try to understand."

I stood there and said nothing. God knows I couldn't condemn him any more than

I could condone him. He was weak, but I was no stronger. I knew I could no more have touched that poor, confused, suffering skull than he,

II

Someone touched my arm. My eyes leapt open. “You’re done,” the hairdresser said. I fumbled for my purse and followed her across the shop.

“I’d like it up,” I told her. “Something soft.”

“A French twist, perhaps?”

“Softer.”

“I know just the thing. You’ll love this.”

I had no idea what I wanted done with my hair. I realized I didn’t even know the current fashion. Glancing around the shop I saw large, bubbly hairdos being teased with comb and brush, “Something less conspicuous,” I told the hairdresser. “I’m not eighteen any more.”

“You wait, Madame.”

So I sat back and let her do her work. I didn’t care how she fixed it as long as Barbara approved. I always dressed more carefully for her than for anyone else. In spite of her tiny salary Barbara always managed to look perfectly groomed. I seldom did any more. I dreaded that little look of disappointment which would cross her face if she saw me with my hair hanging limp or my stocking seams crooked, or worse, without gloves. I hated wearing gloves, but only when I was with Barbara did my wrists seem scrawny and naked or my nails imperfectly shaped. Today I wanted her to be proud of me. I wanted her to accept me down to the last detail. It was more important today than ever before, though I couldn’t imagine why.

I arrived back at Barbara’s apartment shortly before one o’clock. The door flew open at my knock. Laughing and self-conscious, we embraced. Then we stood apart and looked at one another. There wasn’t a trace of disappointment in her eyes. “You look great!” she exclaimed. “Your hair looks just great.” Her eyes flickered down me, taking inventory. I was secure in my white gloves and seamless hose. She nodded approval. “You look simply great,”

I returned the compliments a little awkwardly. Returning compliments is always awkward, especially when the first are so effusive. They never seem quite genuine, even when they are. But I suspected she knew she looked lovely. Her long blonde hair was twisted into a graceful coiffure and her complexion, which never needed make-up was as clear and moist as when I had first met her five years before. Barbara was two years older than I, but looked years younger.

“Well,” she said, smiling at me.

“Well.”

“Well, c’mon in and sit down.” She hesitated a moment and looked at her watch.

“No, there isn’t time. We have to hurry or we’ll be late.”

“Late for what?”

“Luncheon. I got some of the girls together. I’ve told them about you and they’re dying to meet you. We’re all having lunch on Pat’s rooftop. You’ll love it. It has a view.”

I couldn’t hide my disappointment. I had wanted to spend a few hours alone with Barbara. We never talked about deep subjects when we were together. We talked about the men we knew and the places we had dined and what we had been doing since we last saw one another. But I loved talking to Barbara because she was never vain, never showed envy, and above all, because she never tried to “use” me. Still, as much as I loved her, I was horrified at the thought of spending a precious afternoon in the company of her secretary friends. “Do you think I ought to?” I asked her. “I have a terrible cold and the rooftop will probably be very windy.”

“You’ll live,” Barbara laughed. “C’mon.”

We started off. I knew Barbara had sensed that I really didn’t want to come, but wasn’t going to let me get away with it. She was out to show me what she considered a “good time” and she expected me to play along and *have* a good time.

We followed a street that ran parallel to the bay shore. At every intersection I could look down the cross street and see the bay with its whitecaps and sail boats. I longed to be down by the water watching the boats. I wanted to sit there with Barbara and tell her about my mother. I had the feeling that if I could just tell Barbara that my mother was dying it would be all right after that. That thereafter I would be able to accept her death.

The apartment of Barbara’s friend, Pat, had a view of the bay, but one had to lean far out of the front window to see it. Leaning out of the window didn’t seem to matter to Pat. She didn’t mind paying a higher rent for the privilege of saying she had a view of the bay. It seems Barbara had told them that I lived in Beverly Hills and so I had to tell them the names of the film stars I had seen. She’d also told them that I was a writer. I put an end to that subject by telling them I’d never had anything published. After that I sat back and looked interested while they, who were indeed all secretaries, talked shop. Barbara helped Pat prepare the lunch and then we each took a tray and carried our meals up two flights of carpeted stairs to the roof.

From there the view of the bay was really magnificent. Small boats and aircraft dotted the scene, tossing bravely on the choppy water or rising and alighting like tiny gnats on the blue surface. The wind was strong and fresh and we had to hold tight to our napkins. Pat had brought up a six-pack of beer. I was the only one to refuse.

“Don’t you like beer?” Pat asked.

“No.”

She looked at me as if she thought there was something wrong with me.

“This is my third today,” Barbara said. “I had two for breakfast. But I’d better cut

down because I'm getting a beer belly."

I didn't like hearing Barbara say she drank beer with her breakfast. I knew that people in San Francisco drank a lot in general, but I didn't like to know that Barbara did also. There was something vulgar in that and I didn't want Barbara to behave in a vulgar way. She had to remain pure. She had to remain pure and uncomplicated and clean.

"How about some music?" Barbara asked after a few minutes. She reached over and switched on the portable radio. For a moment the beautiful strains of an operatic aria rose on the air and blew with the wind. Barbara turned the knob and I cried out automatically, "Oh, leave it."

"That's just opera," Barbara said. "I'll find something good."

"Don't you like classical music?" I asked her.

"No," she said. "It makes me sad." Then she frowned a moment in thought. "Of course I don't dislike *all* classical music," she qualified. "I like Sousa's marches."

I grinned. I wanted to hug her. When, oh when could we get away from here?

I finished my sandwich before the others and excused myself to walk over to the edge of the roof and look at the view. I wanted to get away from their chatter and at the same time demonstrate that I was appreciating the idea of lunch on the roof. When I saw that the rest were finished eating I faked a couple of sneezes, coughed and blew my nose until they suggested we go back inside. I helped round up the blown napkins and led the way downstairs.

I thought that now I could beg off by reason of illness and make an escape with Barbara, but it was not to be. They had planned an outing by the water and since none of them owned cars their transportation depended upon me. Crossing the afternoon off as a complete loss, I complied with their wishes with as much enthusiasm as I could simulate. I knew they had planned all this for my pleasure and I would have to try my best to show my appreciation. The five of us drove across some bridge to some wharf and there they all had more beer. I scandalized them by ordering a straight Scotch.

"Wow!" exclaimed Jeanie, with something like adoration in her eyes.

"For medicinal purposes," I said, lifting the glass to their health, then swallowing it quickly down. I needed that drink. I really did. There was a little voice beginning to clamor inside me and I hoped the alcohol would quiet it, but it only made the clamor more intense. So after finishing the Scotch I got up and, pretending to be going to the powder room, walked round a corner and on to the next pier where I was hidden by boats in dry dock. I stood by the boats, looking out over the water, and the little voice inside me screamed: *My mother is dying, my mother is dying*. I wanted to tell it to Barbara. I wanted to toss it on to the table in front of those sweet secretaries. I wanted to unstopper their internal bathtubs of pity and commiseration, to give them a glimpse of the great emptiness inside me and let them fill me with their beery sentiments. "How terrible!" they would exclaim. "Golly, how awful!"

I knew what they would say and I nevertheless wanted so desperately to hear them

say it. But it was a revolting idea all the same and so I had to keep walking away from them, afraid that if I returned they would somehow hear the voice crying inside me without my willing it. I stayed away about fifteen minutes and when I returned I saw them surrounded by young men. I decided they wouldn't miss me so I took a walk round the streets, visited a bookshop, and returned about a half hour later. They were now alone.

"Where were you?" Barbara cried when she saw me.

"I met a handsome sea captain," I said, "and went for a ride on his yacht."

"Did you really?" gasped Jeanie.

I smiled mysteriously at them out of the corner of my eye. Barbara wasn't smiling back. Her eyes searched mine, silently asking me what was wrong. I knew then that we could still communicate although we could never really understand each other. But we could communicate and that was enough. I dropped my gaze. "No," I said to Jeanie. "Not really."

"Golly," she said with a sigh of relief. "You had me scared for a moment there,"

"Scared?"

"I mean fooled."

I paid for the drinks, over their protests, and we left the pier about four o'clock. I got in wearily behind the wheel, hating the thought of more driving. But I would have to drive the girls back to their respective apartments in various quarters of the city. By this time my nose was rubbed raw and I had a bad cough. I wanted nothing more than to return to Barbara's apartment, take off my shoes and stockings and those confounded gloves, and stretch out on the bed.

"Where did you get such an awful cold?" Barbara asked as we drove along.

"Where did I get it?" I shrugged. "Where does one get a cold?" Yet even as I asked I knew the answer. A chill ran through my body. It was almost a minute before I said: "I caught it from our gardener."

"Listen to that, girls," Barbara said, twisting around to those in the back seat. "She has a gardener!"

"Had," I corrected automatically. "*Had* a gardener." I hoped they wouldn't question me, and they didn't.

Barbara's phone was ringing when, an hour later, we returned to her apartment. I was feeling particularly tired and depressed then because Barbara had just surprised me with the news that we were to go to a dinner party that evening in Sausalito at the apartment of someone named Bill Jones. "You'll love Bill," Barbara had added. "He's a riot."

Barbara answered the phone while I sat down and began to take off my stockings. There would be about an hour to rest in before the party and I wanted to get started resting. It's for you," Barbara whispered, handing me the phone. "A man!"

It was Charles. He was calling from San José to tell me Ed and Alice were driving to San Francisco to visit her parents and he wondered what I was doing that evening. I

told him I was going to a dinner party.

“Who is it?” Barbara grimaced silently.

I put my hand over the receiver. “His name is Charles Nicolo. I drove up with him.”

“What’s he like?”

I thought a moment. It would be impossible to describe Charles Nicolo in a couple of words. “He’s tall and dark and handsome,” I told her.

“Ask him to the party. I’m sure Bill won’t mind.”

“Where will he sleep tonight?” I inquired dispiritedly. “He’s broke.”

“He can sleep here,” Barbara said. “We can make him up a bed on the floor.”

I told Charles about the dinner party and he said he would be enchanted to join us. “Bring along your sleeping bag,” I added. He told me he would be over in an hour and hung up.

Barbara looked excited. “You didn’t tell me about driving up with anybody,” she said accusingly.

“Let me put it this way,” I said, groping for adjectives. “Charles is very good looking, but he’s a little different.”

“Different?”

I wasn’t quite sure how to explain Charles to Barbara. Perhaps it would be best to say nothing. The two of them were so far apart, lived in such different worlds, and used such dissimilar processes of thought, that they would probably get along famously together. And I must admit I agreed to invite Charles to join us with the same nervous curiosity a chemistry student might feel combining unlabelled liquids in a test tube.

“What do you mean, different?” Barbara pursued.

It was hopeless to try to explain. “Like your friend Bill,” I said to her. “He’s a riot.”

III

An hour later there was a knock on the door. Barbara and I flew about the room tucking the last female unmentionables out of sight and struggling into our heels. “Wait until he sees your hair!” Barbara whispered before opening the door. I patted my coiffure. Somehow it had managed to weather the San Francisco wind and still looked quite presentable.

But if Charles noticed anything different about me he didn’t mention it. He shook hands with Barbara, thanking her warmly for her kind invitation, then placed his suitcase and sleeping bag neatly in a corner behind a chair. Behind his back Barbara caught my eye and nodded approvingly. I nodded back a bit dubiously. Charles did indeed look more handsome than ever and his immaculate dark grey suit and striped tie were outrageously respectable. But I still didn’t trust him. He was, if it is possible, too respectable.

But I decided to put my doubts aside and let the evening take whatever course it would. Probably Charles would behave himself. He would sense that these were harmless souls and treat them gently. And they, they would never see beneath his sheep's clothing.

I filled my purse with tissues and we set off. Sausalito is a beautiful little bayside town across the Golden Gate Bridge from San Francisco. "Some day I'll live here," Barbara told us dreamily, "as soon as I save up enough for a sports car." She told me to pull up to the curb a moment and leapt out. A few minutes later she came back carrying a gallon bottle of red wine. "We ought to bring something," she explained.

I wished Charles would offer to pay for the wine, but he sat absolutely silent between us. Whenever Barbara would address a remark to him he would put on a tremendously exaggerated display of attention and interest in what she was saying, would ask questions as though he were vitally concerned with her conversational trivia, and nod his head enthusiastically at her replies. I wanted to clue Barbara in on what he was doing, but he was making such a fine impression on her that I decided it would be confusing if not useless. I offered to pay for the wine, but she wouldn't let me. "You paid for the drinks this afternoon," she reminded me.

"But what about your sports car?"

"I've waited this long," she said, "and I can wait a little longer."

I love you, Barbara, I told her silently. I love you.

IV

Husky, crew-cut Bill Jones opened the door and greeted us with that ease of posture and self-assurance that had been studied and learned in junior college fraternal societies. He shook hands with Charles, repeating Charles' name so as not to forget it.

"I'm sorry," said Charles. "I didn't catch your name just now."

"Jones. Bill Jones."

"Bill Jones," repeated Charles thoughtfully. "Jones."

I noted a little sadly that our host's friendly blue eyes had landed on the ice grey eyes and dark cliffs of Charles' cheekbones. No fraternity brother was this, he saw at once. The blue eyes narrowed slightly.

"Isn't this a nice apartment?" Barbara asked Charles when we were inside.

"There's a beautiful view from the patio."

"It's very nice," Charles agreed enthusiastically, glancing around. "Very beautiful. A sweet place. Darling." He turned to Bill Jones. "This is a darling apartment you have here."

"Thanks," Bill replied. "I like it." He went to the kitchen to get some paper cups for the wine. He was obviously wary of Charles and I gave him credit for seeing through the sheep's disguise so soon. But then Charles was wearing it a little loosely. Charles

opened the wine bottle and poured us each a cup. We toasted Sausalito and Barbara's future sports car. While we were drinking, two couples arrived and shortly afterwards, a third. "We're all here," Bill Jones said, counting. "I'll get dinner started."

Charles, who had taken command of the wine bottle, filled cups for the newcomers, refilled his own which he had drained on the first toast, and added a few drops to Barbara's cup and mine to replace the sips we had taken.

"Well, what do you think of Sausalito?" one of the boys asked Charles.

"Lovely," replied Charles, rapturously. "Lovely."

"Think you'd like to live here?"

"No."

The answer had been too sharp, too quick. An awkward silence followed. All the eyes in the room focused on Charles. I closed mine. The boy who had asked the question laughed nervously. "Why not?"

"I really don't know," Charles replied, shaking his head. "It's one of those things I just don't know."

I kept my eyes closed, smiling slightly. I had divorced myself from the action. As far as I was concerned, everybody in the room was on his own.

"Let's have some music," Barbara said brightly. She went to the hi-fi and put on a *South Pacific* album. Meanwhile Charles refilled his empty cup and added a few drops to everyone else's. Most of them protested that they didn't need more just yet, that they had hardly touched what they had, but he gave each of them a few drops just the same.

Barbara flashed me a quick glance from across the room. It was obvious to her and everyone that Charles was drinking much more wine than anyone else and trying to hide the fact by adding to the other cups each time he refilled his own. But what she didn't realize was that Charles was not trying to hide the fact. He was merely pretending to try to hide the fact, but he knew perfectly well we were all aware of what he was doing. It was so grotesque that it was beyond explanation, so I just returned Barbara's glance with a blank, uncomprehending stare. Then I closed my eyes again. I wasn't sure whether I was amused or infuriated by Charles' outrageous behavior. If I was angry it was because he had let Barbara pay for the wine.

"I'll go help Bill with the dinner," Charles said then. We all watched him stride across the room and into the kitchen. There was the sound of Bill Jones' protesting voice, but a moment later Charles emerged carrying a stack of plates and a handful of silverware. Crossing the room toward the table he tripped over a cushion lying on the floor and everyone gasped until he had recovered his balance and had set the dishes safely on the table. Returning to the kitchen he came out with a stack of salad plates and some paper napkins. Again he tripped over the same pillow. Again everyone gasped. I think if I had had a gun right then I would have seriously wounded him.

At this point everybody began looking curiously at me. I returned their gazes blandly. They were on their own.

Bill Jones came out of the kitchen wearing an apron with the word CHEF printed across it and a high white chef's hat. He paused in the doorway to accept the admiration of all. "Does everybody want corn on the cob?" he asked. Everybody did. "The reason I like to serve corn on the cob," he began, then finished by reaching in his pocket and taking out a corn cob pipe which he proceeded to light. Everybody was terribly amused. Charles was the most excited of all.

"Oh, let me see," he cried, jumping up and down.

Reluctantly, Bill passed over the pipe. Charles took it carefully in his hands and puffed on it tentatively. Then he leaped sideways, touching his heels together in the air. "I'm Popeye the Sailor man, toot toot." As he tooted he puffed outward on the pipe so that two little puffs of smoke arose. Unfortunately, at the same time a shower of burning tobacco shot out of the pipe bowl and Bill Jones dived to the floor to extinguish it. Charles frowned at the pipe, but decided to try again. "I'm Popeye the Sailor man," he sang again, and again he tooted and more sparks leapt out of his pipe. Bill stamped and swore aloud while the rest of us convulsed with laughter.

Bill took back his pipe and retreated into the kitchen, but Charles had only just begun. Taking another swallow of wine he proceeded to go through a quick series of antics, repeating each one with a slight variation so as to wring the last drop of laughter out of his audience. He rolled on the floor clutching his belly and demanding in a heavy European accent, "Ven do ve reach the New World?" Then he did an imitation of a Japanese rickshaw boy arguing over a fare with a diplomat from Azerbaijan. Finally, tossing down the rest of his wine, he sang himself a ta-ra-ra fanfare and announced to the company with a sweep of his arm, "Th-th-th-that's all, folks," in a brilliant imitation of Porky Pig. We were all gasping with laughter. He repeated the fanfare and "Th-th-th-that's all, folks," and we laughed even harder. Then Charles stopped suddenly, refilled his wine cup and gave us all a few drops. This action, which was noticed by all, soured everybody's spirits. Charles seemed not to notice, although I knew by this time that he was aware of everything going on around him. When he sat down next to me on the couch I saw his forehead and upper lip were sweating.

Bill Jones came out of the kitchen for a moment, determined to make one last attempt to capture back his audience, and told a joke about two Chinamen. Everybody smiled politely and Charles laughed. Bill went back into the kitchen.

I could tell by this time that Charles had managed to win the admiration of the girls in the room. When they spoke to him their bodies swayed slightly but provocatively. Their dates lapsed into sullen silence. After a few minutes there was too much tension in the air and all conversation ceased. I thought this might be a good moment to give them a glimpse of Charles' *better* side, so I mentioned very briefly how Charles had saved the Mexican boy from the shark. Everyone was instantly fascinated and wanted to hear more, but Charles waved their questions aside.

"That's nothing compared to what happened to a friend of mine," he told them.

“If you want to hear a weird story. . .” He broke off and everyone clamored to hear.

“Well,” he began, slowly remembering, “it didn’t actually happen to a *friend* of mine. He was the brother of a friend of a friend of mine.” He paused a moment to reflect. “Or was it the nephew? Wait a minute . . . no . . . it couldn’t have been the nephew because my friend’s friend didn’t have any brothers or sisters. But then, if he didn’t have any brothers, then it couldn’t have been his brother either. It must have happened to somebody altogether different. I can’t exactly remember who.”

“It doesn’t matter exactly *who* it happened to,” one of the girls prompted breathlessly. “What did happen?”

“It was very weird,” Charles continued, “and it concerned a very large shark. Or . . .” and here he remembered hard, “it could possibly have been a small whale. At least I’m practically positive it was some rather bulky sea animal. Possibly a sea-lion. Yes . . . it could have been a sea lion. although I don’t remember hearing that it had tusks.” He paused to refresh his memory with a swallow of wine. “One thing I am positive about,” he continued after a moment, “is that it happened. either in the Arctic or the Antarctic.”

“There’s quite a difference,” remarked one of the boys dryly.

“Is there?” Charles asked excitedly. “What’s the difference?”

“Well, for one thing, penguins.”

“Of course!” Charles exclaimed. “Penguins! I almost forgot. Maybe this animal was a penguin. So then we can place the story exactly. It must have happened in the Arctic.”

“*Antarctic*,” corrected the boy. “Penguins live at the South Pole.”

“I hate to differ with you,” said Charles, “but I’m almost positive that penguins live at the North Pole.”

“I should know,” said the boy. “I was there. I saw them.”

“You were at the South Pole?” Charles seemed very interested. “Then perhaps you know this young man I’m talking about.”

“I doubt it,” the boy replied. “The Antarctic is a pretty big place. And besides, you don’t even know his name.”

“Perhaps I can describe him to you.”

“Do you know what he looks like?”

Charles thought a moment. “No,” he admitted finally. “I haven’t got the slightest idea what he looks like.”

The boy laughed nervously. One of the girls spoke up. “Go on with the story,”

“I don’t know,” Charles said. “It’s a very bloody tale. I don’t know if you really want to hear it.”

“Oh, we do!” cried the girls.

“Well, where was I?” He paused a moment to remember. “Oh, yes. Well, this young man – let’s call him Ishmael – signed aboard a whaling ship in Cape Cod. I think the ship was called the *Pequod* or something like that.”

“Wait a minute.,” said one of the boys. “That’s the story of Moby Dick.”

“Why,” Charles exclaimed, “then you’ve heard of this case. You even know the name of the fish involved. That’s amazing.”

“It’s a story by Herman Melville,” the boy said. “I saw the film last week.”

Everyone looked resentfully at Charles. “Oh my gosh,” he exclaimed, striking his forehead. “Of course. You’re right. I got on to the wrong story. I meant to tell you about this actual case. It was very horrible, but very brave.” By this time they were all watching him warily, but he continued as if he noticed nothing. “Actually, there *was* a boat involved, but I don’t think it was a whale boat. No. I’m sure it wasn’t. It was smaller, more like a canoe or a kayak,

“Let’s have some more music,” someone said suddenly.

“Don’t you want to hear how the story ends?” asked Charles.

“I don’t know,” replied the boy. “It doesn’t seem to be getting anywhere.”

“But we’re just now getting to the action,” objected Charles.

“I don’t know if I really want to hear it,” said one of the girls. “If it’s so horrible like you said . . .”

“It isn’t the *least* bit horrible,” Charles contradicted her. “That was that other story which was so horrible. The one about Moby Dick. There isn’t anything horrible about this story. In fact it’s rather pleasant. It takes place in the South Seas on a lovely island. I only wish I could remember the name of the fellow involved. The story was told to me by a friend of mine who got it from his grandmother. I just wish I could remember the name of the grandmother . . . I remember hearing it from this friend. But I can’t . . . I just can’t . . . remember . . . the name of the friend who told it to me. Or where it took place. Or what exactly happened.”

Charles broke off. For a moment I think he and I both expected to hear applause. But everyone was silent. I knew what they were thinking. They were thinking that Charles had tried to make fools of them and that he hadn’t succeeded. But he *had* succeeded, because he wanted them to come to exactly the conclusion they had come to. He wanted them to think they saw through him. Because he knew they would never be able to find a motive for what he had done and they would feel confused and foolish, which was exactly what he had intended.

Finally the dinner was ready. Several large, well-done hamburgers, buns, a bowl of salad and one of corn on the cob were put on the table so that everyone could help themselves. We all filled our plates except Charles who took only one small ear of corn.

“Don’t you want a hamburger?” Bill asked, his voice cracking slightly.

“This is exactly enough,” Charles replied.

“Aren’t you hungry?”

“I’ve been drinking wine.” And then, with what appeared to be surprising honesty, “I’ve drunk much more wine than anyone else. Wine has a lot of calories. If I eat more than this I’ll have had too many calories.”

“Are you on a diet?” Bill Jones seemed to be making one last desperate attempt to figure Charles out.

“No,” Charles explained, “but I don’t believe in stuffing with calories.” He glanced around at the rest of us who were all just raising the hamburger sandwiches to our mouths. “Most people stuff themselves with calories. It isn’t good for them. They don’t need so many. It isn’t healthy.” He watched us eat. “Stuffing themselves,” he repeated thoughtfully.

Suddenly the hamburger I was eating tasted like cotton wool in my mouth. I continued to eat only to preserve my self-respect. I wondered if the other guests had experienced the same uncomfortable sensation.

Charles sat down next to me and started on the corn-cob. He held it daintily between his fingers and nibbled at it neatly and rapidly in even rows, making quick little chewing motions, even twitching his nose from time to time exactly as if he were a chipmunk nibbling on nut meats. I tried not to look at him, but he was so fascinating to watch that I couldn’t help myself. To my relief he finished the corn quickly, but then, instead of putting the cob down on his plate, he began to eat that too. I looked away, praying that no one else would notice. But...

“Look at him,” a girl cried suddenly. “He’s eating the cob!”

“The cob is the best part of the corn,” Charles informed her with the confidence of a dietetics expert, “The cob of the corn contains all the vitamins.” He continued to nibble away at the cob with apparent pleasure while everyone at the table exchanged glances and shrugs. It must have been terribly hard to eat that cob, and I had the feeling that this was the first and last time Charles would ever do such a thing, but he managed to eat most of it until there was just a little nub left. This he put down on his plate with a sigh as if he were simply stuffed and couldn’t eat another bite.

I thought by now Charles would have lost the sympathy of the female contingent, but was surprised to see that the light of admiration in their eyes had not only not diminished, but had brightened. Barbara was sitting next to me and I couldn’t see her eyes. I wondered what she was thinking and whether she hated me for knowing a person like Charles.

After dinner I went to put on lipstick in the next room. Barbara followed me in. “Your friend sure is a riot,” she said, her eyes bright with amusement.

“He’s a little different,” I agreed casually.

“Different?”

“You know,” I said.

She looked thoughtful. “Well,” she said finally, “he certainly is a lot better looking than Bill, if that’s what you mean.”

“Yes,” I said. “I guess that’s what I mean.”

Charles took charge of the dish-washing chore as I suspected he would. Bill Jones handed over his kitchen wearily and re-entered the living room where he made one more attempt at telling a joke. He told it almost apologetically and after laughing sympathetically two of the girls decided to go into the kitchen and help Charles with the dishes. Their dates, who were obviously not even going to attempt to fight, turned their attention toward Barbara and me. Their eyes were a little cold when they looked at me. Still, we kept up some semblance of a conversation, looking up every few minutes as shrieks of laughter rang in the next room. Now and then a girl, laughing and blushing, would stagger out of the kitchen, but it couldn't have been so bad because they always turned immediately and went back in. Bill Jones sat with us a few minutes, then pleaded exhaustion and went outside to sit on the patio. He wasn't missed until, a little while later, the dishes done, someone suggested we all go out and have a cup of coffee in a local coffee house.

"Bill must still be outside," Barbara said.

"I'll get him," Charles said, leaping up. He went out and I saw him bending over Bill's chair. A moment later he returned. "Bill wants to sleep," he told us. "He says we should go ahead without him."

We put on our coats while Charles went into the bedroom to make a telephone call. I heard his voice arguing and when he returned he had a bitter look on his face. I pretended not to notice. There was something I wanted to ask him, so I beckoned him into the hall. I was disgusted at the thought of going into a coffee house and paying for myself and Charles. It was simply not done in these circles that the girl pay for the fellow. Nor could I bear the thought of allowing one of the other boys to treat Charles. I wanted to know if he had any money with him.

"No," he told me.

I couldn't help being angry. "Well," I said, "I don't think you should expect these boys to pay for you after the fools you made out of them."

"I don't expect anything," Charles replied evenly.

I was too angry to say another word. I hated myself for bringing up the subject of money, and I hated Charles for behaving like a gigolo, for drinking so much wine and for destroying poor Bill Jones. But then I could not resist adding, "If you think you can make up for your mooching by clowning and doing dishes, you're mistaken."

"It's your army," he shrugged.

As a result of my words or the telephone call or both, Charles fell into a dark silent mood. When we reached the coffee house he refused to have anything to eat or drink and sat brooding at the table while the rest of us had coffee or beer.

"How about joining us in a beer?" said one of the boys graciously. "Be my guest." Charles shook his head without looking up.

“He doesn’t want anything,” I said flatly. I wasn’t sure whom I hated more – Charles or myself.

“Are you sure you won’t have anything to drink?” the boy asked again.

At that moment Charles glanced up. Suddenly he leapt to his feet and hurried over to the food counter. A Mexican busboy had just come out of the kitchen carrying a tray of glasses. Charles approached him and said something and the boy turned around and went back into the kitchen. A moment later he returned and handed something to Charles. It was a slice of bread. As he started back toward our table someone asked in amazement, “What did he do? What did he do just now?”

“He got some bread from that boy!” another exclaimed.

“He didn’t eat any dinner,” I explained angrily. “He’s just plain hungry.”

“He didn’t have to do that,” said the boy. “I offered to buy him something.”

“It was very kind of you,” I told him, “but he isn’t worth it.” I looked at Barbara. She was as startled and offended as the others. I lowered my eyes to avoid the question in hers. What was there to say?

Charles sat back down at the table. He sat sideways to the table and tore off pieces of the bread with his teeth and wolfed them down. We all watched, horrified, until the last of the bread disappeared down his throat. Then, at a loss for conversation, we quickly finished our drinks, bid each other nervous goodnights, and got back into our respective cars.

VI

Charles took the wheel. The three of us were silent as he headed the car back across the bridge toward San Francisco. But when he reached the city, Barbara spoke up. “I think you’re going the wrong way,” she said.

I almost laughed aloud, thinking what she was letting herself in for, but Charles answered her very patiently. “I have to make one stop,” he told her. “I have a very dear friend staying at a motel here. I called him earlier, but the switchboard operator said he wasn’t in. I asked her the room number and she said she couldn’t give out that information.” There was dull anger in his voice. “I’ll have to find him for myself.”

Barbara looked perplexed. “But how can you find him if you don’t know his room number?”

“They wouldn’t give it to me,” Charles answered. “Can you imagine that? They wouldn’t give me the room number of my best friend.”

“But then how . . . ?”

“She said she couldn’t give out that information.”

Barbara glanced questioningly at me. I shrugged. Then I laughed. As tired and stuffed up and congested as I felt, I laughed. I tried to hold it in but I shook with laughter, choked with laughter. Barbara looked anxiously at me, and Charles scowled at the

road ahead, but still I laughed. Until we pulled up in the court of the Starr Motel.

“Wait here,” Charles said,

We sat without speaking while Charles walked over to the motel office. The neon sign was lit up, but there was no light in the office window. Shading his eyes, Charles peered through the window, then turned and gazed up at the building. The motel building was three floors high and in the shape of an L. Railed walkways ran along the outside of the rooms. Charles turned and climbed the stairs to the second floor. We watched him stride quickly along, stopping to peer every now and then at a door number, turning, looking up, down, across at the rows of unidentifiable doors. He walked more quickly, hurrying up and down the open corridors, climbing stairs, descending again, pausing every now and then to knock on a door, wait a second or two, then move impatiently on. Finally, his shoulders bent, he climbed down and walked back to the car. “I can’t find him,” he told us. “That operator wouldn’t give out that information.”

“Why don’t you try calling him again tomorrow?” Barbara suggested gently.

“I don’t know,” Charles said. “I’ll have to call him again tomorrow.”

Just then two persons, a man and a woman, stepped out on the second floor walkway returning to their room.

“There he is!” Charles cried.

“That’s not them,” I said, but he was already sprinting across the courtyard and up the stairs. He caught up with them just as they were opening their door, spoke with them a few seconds, and we saw the couple turn and gaze around at the other doors as Charles pointed and gesticulated. Then they shrugged, shook their heads, and entered their room.

“It wasn’t him,” Charles said disconsolately when he arrived back at the car. “I suppose I’ll have to phone him again tomorrow, but I wanted to see him tonight. If that operator only had given out the information. What right did she have? Ed’s my best friend,”

As we drove slowly back to Barbara’s apartment, I thought to myself: Somewhere in that building Ed and Alice Taylor are asleep, safely asleep, undiscovered, and perhaps happy.

VII

Back at Barbara’s apartment Charles told us he wanted to take a walk and went out.

“Where do you think he’s going at this hour?” Barbara asked me as we started to undress for bed.

I suspected he was either going to return to the motel to try to find Ed or else he was going to look for a place to eat dinner. I imagined that in spite of the wine calories and bread he was by this time ravenously hungry. “I don’t know,” was all I replied.

“You’re right about him being different.”

“He’s a little different.” I smiled.

We were too tired to talk more so we undressed in silence. Barbara undressed down to her slip and then took her nightgown out of the closet and went into the bathroom. She and I had slept together many times, but I had seen her naked only once, when I had happened to walk into the bathroom when she was stepping out of the shower. She was extremely modest about showing her body, which was very round and beautifully shaped. It was abundant, but not too much so, and so completely soft and feminine as to be almost indecent.

Because she was modest, I became modest. Not because I was shy to have her see me naked, but I was afraid of offending her by what she might have regarded as immodesty on my part. So I got quickly into my nightgown while she was out of the room.

When we had washed we squeezed into her narrow bed. I lay on the side by the wall. The wall was cold and I tried not to touch it. My nose was still running and every few minutes I had to reach up for a tissue. “I’m sorry I’ve got such a terrible cold,” I told her. “I hope you don’t catch it.” More than anything it was a horrible idea that I might pass on the dead gardener’s bacteria.

“I never catch colds,” Barbara told me.

We lay side by side in the utter blackness of the room. As tired as I was I knew I would not sleep much that night. Barbara fell asleep almost immediately and I was glad of that because then my coughing and nose-wiping would not disturb her.

I lay as still and straight as I could, as close to the wall as possible, so as to give her as much room as possible. I listened to her light breathing, feeling happy just to be near her and alone. She had been asleep about two minutes when she stirred and turned in the bed. I felt her arm go around me and then her leg moved across mine. She made a little sleep-sound of contentment.

I smiled into the darkness. She had mistaken me in her sleep for some man. I hoped she would remain that way for a while, that she would not wake up and realize her mistake. How happy I was to be for this brief mistaken moment in her arms. I lay so still, so warm and content,

And then she awoke, “Oh, golly,” she exclaimed. “What am I *doing*?” Her voice was full of blushes. “Why didn’t you wake me up?”

“There was no reason to.”

But she was laughing, desperate with embarrassment. “I thought you were a man,” she said. “Please don’t *ever* tell *anybody* what I did. I’d just *die*.”

I chuckled and tried to put her at her ease. “I’ll never tell a soul,” I promised her.

“I’d die,” she said. “I’d just die.”

And then a moment later she was asleep again. I lay staring up into the darkness. One didn’t need eyelids in such black air. It would be possible to sleep with open eyes. Yet I didn’t sleep. I stayed awake the entire night, wiping my nose and trying not to

touch the cold wall. Two hours after we had got into bed the door opened and for an instant the tall form of Charles Nicolo was dimly silhouetted in the doorway. Then he entered the room and without apparent difficulty undressed in the darkness in front of my unseeing eyes, hung up his clothes, and climbed into his sleeping bag. After a while I could hear his breathing become regular. He and Barbara slept as I stared into the full, pulsing, breathing blackness and waited for the day.

VIII

Morning was a softening of the darkness around the edges of the window shades. I believe the sun could have descended from the sky and done a dance on Russian Hill and Barbara's apartment would have been no brighter. I had no idea what time it was, so I continued to lie very straight and still in the bed until the others should awaken. I felt more tired than ever. My throat was swollen and my nostrils raw and burning. I was hot and cold at the same time.

Charles was the first to awaken. He went into the bathroom to wash and change and while he was in there Barbara awoke. She awoke suddenly and sat bolt upright. "Is it morning?" Her face was puzzled, almost scared. Then her mind cleared and she relaxed. "Oh," she said. "For a moment I thought . . ." But whatever she had thought for that moment she had forgotten the next, for she lay back down beside me without another word.

"Charles is in the bathroom," I told her.

"Did he come back last night?"

"Yes."

"I didn't hear him." She lay silent a moment and then remembered. "Oh, listen," she said, "don't ever tell anybody what I did last night. I'd just die."

I was just a little bored by this time with Barbara's shame at having embraced me. I felt the more I might assure her that it meant nothing and had absolutely no perverted sexual significance, the more it would cast doubts on me. I didn't want Barbara to think I was some sort of pervert just because I hadn't wakened her immediately.

My annoyance was aggravated by another reason. Lying all night in bed beside Barbara I had felt very old, much older than she, and less feminine. There are some girls around with whom I always feel a little masculine. Barbara is one. She is so small and round and feminine that I feel tall and awkward in her presence. "Forget it," I told her, just a bit impatiently. "It was perfectly normal, You were dreaming I was a man."

"That's right," she agreed. "I was. I really was."

Just then the bathroom door opened. Charles danced into the room. We gasped. He had found a short nightgown belonging to Barbara, a sleeveless nightgown made of pink nylon which was cut in a straight flapper style with a ruffle around the bottom. On Charles it looked exactly like a Roman soldier's tunic. The effect was hilariously funny.

He danced once around the room, presented imaginary arms, then, with an imitation burlesque exit, kicked his foot back almost to his head, flashed a cheesy smile, and disappeared into the bathroom.

“My nightie,” Barbara wailed, but I was laughing too hard to say anything. “It’s not funny,” she moaned, laughing a little in spite of herself. “He’ll stretch it.”

My laughter came to a jerky halt. It *had* been funny. Terribly funny. Charles was a very funny person and I was sick and tired of having to feel embarrassed and apologetic for him. If Barbara wanted to worry about her nightgown she was free to do so, but I wasn’t going to take any more blame or responsibility for anything Charles did.

Getting out of bed I called to Charles to remain in the bathroom for a few minutes, then I slipped hurriedly into a skirt and a sweater. “What are we doing today?” I asked Barbara as we dressed.

“Anything you want,” she said. “I thought I’d leave it up to you.”

“I want to go to the park,” I told her, “and then to the bay.”

“Fine.” She paused. “What’s Charles doing today?”

“He’s calling his friends,” I told her.

Charles did call the Starr Motel a short time later and the switchboard this time put him through to the Taylors. Ed and Alice were just on their way out.

“They have to visit some more relatives,” Charles told us with his hand over the receiver. He waited. There was nothing we could do but invite him to join us for the day. “Can you drive me back to San José later?”

“Is that the only way?” I stalled uncomfortably.

“I can walk “ he said. “It’s only fifty miles or so.” He waited, looking up at the comer of the room.

I fidgeted. Finally there seemed nothing to do but agree to take him back to San José.

“It’s all right,” he said quickly into the phone the instant I had nodded. “Susan will drive me down. See you tonight.” He hung up and turned to us with a smile. “Off we go,” he said. Stepping forward he opened the door with a flourish, “After you,” he smiled. Going out, I felt very much like a convict might feel leaving his cell for a few hours of freedom in the prison courtyard.

IX

The wind was all over us as we walked to the car, pulling at us, pushing at us, lifting our skirts and laughing at us. Barbara insisted politely that I get in first and sit between her and Charles. The arrangement pleased me because sitting between them would allow me to feel more feminine, even liked. Yet once we were all seated I felt strangely uncomfortable and trapped.

The air outside was cool and fresh, but the sun beat down on top of the car until I

felt unbearably warm. But when I asked Barbara to open her window, the cool air made me sneeze and shiver. I had to ask her to close it again and almost instantly felt terribly hot. I suppose now I had a fever that day, although then it didn't occur to me,

Before we reached the park Charles pulled to the curb in front of a delicatessen. "Does anyone want beer?" he inquired.

"No thanks," we replied. We waited while he went into the store. He returned carrying a sack out of which he pulled two dark red plums which he handed to Barbara and a large orange which he gave to me. We couldn't have been more surprised or pleased.

"All right," said Barbara with mock reluctance, "I forgive you about the night-gown."

"I'm sorry about that," Charles said sincerely. "I didn't think it would annoy you. I only did it to amuse you."

"I was just being silly," Barbara replied. "I'm the one who should apologize." They smiled a long moment at each other.

"Do you know what Barbara did last night?" I asked suddenly. I don't know who was more surprised by my question, Barbara or I. Immediately I regretted saying anything, because Barbara was looking daggers at me.

"What did you do?" Charles asked her,

"*Nothing*," Barbara said.

"Tell me." He turned towards me.

I squirmed uncomfortably between them and kept my eyes averted. "It was nothing really. I mean . . ." I cast about in my mind for a reply.

"You mean?" Charles prompted unmercifully.

"She snored," I said lamely at last. "Just once. It was hardly even a snore." I could feel Barbara relax in the seat next to me. Still, I felt obliged, now that I had accused Barbara of snoring, to minimize it as much as possible. "It was more like a sniffle, really," I continued, feeling foolish. "In fact, it may not even have been Barbara. It may have been the building creaking. Or me. I could have heard myself snoring and thought it was Barbara."

I broke off and sat miserably between them.

"I thought you didn't sleep all night," Charles said, "so how could you have snored?"

"I don't know," I said. "Let's forget the whole thing."

"What do you mean, *forget the whole thing*?" Charles continued with brutal perseverance. "I asked you a simple question. After all, you're the one who brought it up."

The car seemed unbearably hot. "I take it back," I cried, twisting in my seat and hoping somehow to find a bit of coolness somewhere in the air. We were by this time driving through the park. "Couldn't we stop here and get out and walk? I'm burning up."

“It’s not hot,” Barbara said. “And besides, there’s nothing to see here. Further on we’ll come to the lake.”

“I’m roasting,” I said.

“When I open the window you say you’re freezing,” Barbara said. “What do you want me to do?”

“Nothing,” I cried miserably. “I don’t want you to do anything. Forget it.”

“If you want, I’ll open the window.”

“No, no. Forget it.” I couldn’t help squirming. “Couldn’t we get out and walk?”

“The lake isn’t far. We’ll be there in a minute.”

I started breathing in deep lungfuls of air. It was hot, dry air and seemed to have no oxygen in it. My nose wasn’t operating at all by this time and my hands, sticky from the orange, had become abominations attached to my wrists. All I wanted to do was get out in the fresh air and lie on the warm grass. But by this time we were bumper to bumper in a Sunday chain of cars. On our right were NO PARKING signs, so we couldn’t have pulled over even if Charles had wanted to. Almost writhing with discomfort I sat still for as long as I could and then, humbly, I asked, “Could you open the window just a little?”

Wordlessly Barbara opened the window. Within a few seconds I was shaking with chill. I had to ask her to close it again, which she did with stony patience. Immediately I was burning. “Couldn’t we get out and walk?” I begged.

Barbara turned to me, her eyes harder than I had ever seen them. “Wait, “ she told me. “Just wait. Stop behaving like a child.”

“She’s spoiled,” Charles said. “She’s used to having her own way all the time. She doesn’t care whom she bothers.”

“Well,” Barbara replied, “then it’s about time she learned.”

Oh God, the voice inside me screamed. I wish I were home. I wish I were home in bed.

X

I was an abomination. I didn’t know how it had happened. It had never happened to me before. But there I was, something spoiled and loathsome and, what was worse, trapped between them. I was absolutely hemmed in and dizzy with my cold so that I could not even think what to do. I felt I was suffocating. There was no oxygen in the air in the car.

And now they were ignoring me completely. Barbara was leaning slightly forward so that she could talk with Charles across my face, in front of my nose. I felt very much like a frog trapped in a well, drowning in what had earlier been its element. How could I get out? How could I restore my dignity? And what, after all, had happened to Barbara? Had she deserted me for him?

But Charles was the wonder. I listened to him talk. There was no cruelty, no irony in his voice when he talked to her. They sounded exactly like two ordinary human beings conversing together. There was nothing at all “different” about him. But if he isn’t the different one here, I asked myself, who is? Certainly not Barbara. And I’m the only other one present. Unless this is just another one of Charles’ disguises. But why? What was his motive? Where was the logic in it all?

“I have a story to tell you,” I said suddenly. Too late I realized that I had interrupted Barbara who was in the middle of a sentence about boats. “Do you mind terribly?” I asked her, as humbly as I could.

“No,” she replied icily. “Go ahead.”

“Once upon a time there was a scorpion who wanted to get across a stream. He asked the toad if he would carry him across on his back. The toad replied: ‘But if I do, you’ll sting me.’ ‘No I won’t,’ the scorpion replied. ‘If I sting you we’ll both drown.’ After thinking this over, the toad agreed. And so the scorpion hopped on his back and they headed toward the opposite shore. But when they were out in the middle of the stream, the scorpion suddenly stung the toad. As they began to sink beneath the water, the toad turned to the scorpion and cried: ‘But where is the logic?’ ‘The logic,’ the scorpion replied, ‘is in my character.’”

I stopped talking and waited. I felt sure Charles would understand the fable and I was equally sure that Barbara would not. She wasn’t one for abstractions and allegories.

“Is that the end?” Barbara inquired politely.

“That’s all.”

“Are you supposed to be the scorpion?” she asked.

It was like a blow to the stomach. “Did you understand the story?” I asked her.

“No,” she replied, “but I imagine you were trying to say something pertinent.”

“I didn’t understand it either,” Charles Nicolo told me.

I was sure he was lying but there was nothing I could say. “I thought it would be amusing,” I mumbled. “I’m sorry. Forget it.” But then I couldn’t help adding: I wasn’t the scorpion.”

“The toad, perhaps?” Charles asked. “The aquatic toad? Or was it a penguin?”

“You certainly have a good imagination,” Barbara said then, trying, I believed, to help me back. “I suppose that’s why you write.”

I took the offered straw. “I guess so,” I said, managing a small laugh.

I saw with relief that we had arrived at the lake. It was all I could do to keep from pushing Barbara out of the way in my eagerness to get out.

XI

“All right, now . . .” I started to say when we were all out of the car. But Barbara was already walking away towards the lake and Charles had taken his bottle of beer out

of the bag and was drinking it with his head back. There were several children about and I thought Charles looked very out of place drinking beer from a bottle on a Sunday morning. I started after Barbara who had already disappeared around the corner of the boat-house, but then hesitated because I didn't want to lose track of Charles. Why was Barbara rushing off like that? And why didn't Charles hurry up with his beer? I didn't like to appear associated with him while he drank it. Finally I decided to run after Barbara. I found her standing by the water.

"Let's find some grass," I said.

"Don't you think we'd better ask Charles what he wants to do?"

"Charles?" It was *my* holiday. It was *my* day in the park. What did Charles' wishes have to do with anything? This was to have been my day alone with Barbara. "Charles is drinking his beer," I told her. "He doesn't have anything special in mind. As for me, I'm rather keen on finding some grass."

"I thought you would enjoy the lake," Barbara told me. "That's why I suggested we come here in the first place."

"Oh, I *do* love the lake," I hastened to assure her. "But grass. Warm grass with trees overhead. I must admit I had that in the back of my mind when I said I'd like to come to the park." I stared at the ugly little man-made lake and tried to appreciate it. It was no use. I hated it and I hated the crowds of children running and laughing and wailing all around it.

"Well, why didn't you say something while we were in the car?" Barbara asked impatiently, as if speaking to a child that had soiled itself.

"I *said* I wanted to get out and walk," I cried.

"You said you were hot," she replied. "You wanted us to stop and get out when we weren't even near anything."

"We were near *grass*. I just wanted to get out on the grass. It was all around us ever since we entered the park."

"Didn't you just once try to stop and think what Charles and I might want? Maybe we wanted a little more than just grass. A lake, for instance." She looked at me as one might look at a toad, as if trying to decide whether it would be kinder to let it live or end its loathsomeness with a carefully aimed stone. "Charles was certainly right when he said you were spoiled."

I turned quickly and walked away so that she wouldn't see the tears that had suddenly sprung into my eyes. I clenched my teeth and cursed those tears. Damn, damn, damn! And then I thought of my mother and cursed myself even more bitterly. Oh, the horrible self-pity of it. The weakness of it. Was I no more than a sniffling child crying because nobody loves it? I thought that that had ended twenty years ago. In twenty years had I matured no more than that?

I fought the tears back down, but the fact remained that the thought of being alone that afternoon, of being excluded by Barbara and Charles, was unbearable. Intolerable.

Why couldn't I get along with them? What was the matter with me? I went blindly through the trees and threw myself down on the first stretch of grass I came to. Please let them follow me, I prayed into the warm, bristly grass. I don't want to be alone.

XII

I had what I had wanted. I had the grass. But now it meant nothing to me. I rolled over on my back and looked at the small white clouds floating across the sky, and couldn't have cared less about them. I knew that Charles and Barbara wouldn't follow me, that in a little while I would have to get up and go back to the car and wait for them. I told myself that Barbara had not seen in which direction I had gone – that they would have followed me, but could not find me. When we finally met again they would be angry at me for having rushed off without them. They would tell me that I was too sensitive and spoiled and that I didn't care what inconvenience I caused them. And of course they would be right and I wouldn't be able to deny anything. I began to think of my quiet, secluded room at home and wondered what had ever induced me to leave it. I should never have exposed myself so suddenly.

I began to be impatient with the grass. At first the grass had seemed warm, but after I lay on it a while the cold and dampness came up out of the moist earth. A sneeze brought me to a sitting position. I looked around. A few strolling couples; some fathers and sons playing softball. I moved over a few inches to where the grass was warmer and turned my face back to the sun so that it could warm my sinuses. All my surfaces were hot, but inside I felt very cold. I felt if I could just cut my head off at the neck I would feel much better. Yes, I was an abomination; but why didn't they come?

If only I could curl up on the grass and sleep. But an adult woman cannot curl up on the grass like that. Such freedom is reserved for children and animals. Still there was nothing against allowing one's mind to curl up into a warm ball. And nothing could prohibit my mind from seeking out the company of memories – warm, sad, beautiful memories. Like that day Dr. Hoffman came for his last visit and asked my mother questions. I was standing in the hall listening . . .

Standing? No, not quite. My knees were like old suitcase hinges that would not hold firm. They buckled and I slid down the wall until I was crouching on my heels. Even that wouldn't do finally; the beating of my heart rocked me off balance until I had to sit safely down on the hall carpet. I gripped my knees in my arms and rested my chin on my knees. From the darkness of the hall I could look into the brightly sunlit bedroom a few feet away.

Dr. Hoffman, our Viennese diagnostician, sat on a chair by my mother's bed. His back was towards me, but I knew his range of facial expressions well enough by now to know which one he would have selected. He would be smiling that condensed smile which overshot the entire range of kindness, humor and sympathy, and landed some-

where between lechery and triumph. Today his smile would be nearer triumph. Physically my mother was already distinctly unappealing; medically she was developing exactly as Dr. Hoffman had prophesied last October when she first became noticeably ill and had her operation. Death was succeeding where he had not. But the alliance had drained her, weakened her. She would never again reject the good doctor's propositions because he would not make her any. She would never again slap his hand away or stick him with sarcasm, or imitate his Viennese accent. And I knew what he didn't – that she would never again call him an old wiener schnitzel behind his back

And so Dr. Hoffman smiled and, standing at the foot of the bed, even Daddy smiled. Daddy was too nervous and polite to stand in front of Dr. Hoffman's grin without smiling back. I think too that my father smiled because he was a little chagrined about the condition of his bed-partner, puzzled by it, scared and defeated about it – ashamed too for having to ask Dr. Hoffman for permission to hope when he knew hope was out of the question. My father's eyes were young as he stood at the foot of the bed and he scanned the doctor's face minutely as if trying to read some sign of hope under the impenetrable smile.

My mother sat in the bed against a pile of pillows. She had become just a bit of a woman and her hair had grown back to a thin, grey wisp. She looked like an aged pixie with great round eyes. She too wore a wide smile which, like her eyes, was not clearly focused on anything, but which seemed to gather her husband and the doctor and the breezy white curtains and the air in the same warm and happy embrace.

My mother was being coy. It wasn't sarcasm; it couldn't have been. She was only just enough aware of Dr. Hoffman's presence to react with the outer vestiges of sarcasm which in this case was feigned coyness. She giggled and presented her hand to the doctor as if her fingertips were droplets on a weeping willow spray while he, always the gallant, gathered them gently in his steady hand as if they might pluck loose with too strong a pressure,

“You're looking lovely this morning, Esther,” he told her with the gallantry only a Viennese could affect.

My mother looked pleased-in-spite-of-herself, wiggling her shoulders this way and that. “The way you flatter a girl, you old wiener schnitzel, you,” she cooed.

My heart gave a thump. Wiener schnitzel! Then she hadn't forgotten. Good for you, mama, I wanted to shout. Give him hell. Round one goes to mama,

At the foot of the bed my father switched nervously from one foot to the other and laughed apologetically. His wife's sense of humor cropped up at the damnedest moments.

I sensed that the doctor's smile had hardened slightly, though his general composure was not affected. “How are you feeling today, Esther?” he inquired.

“Wonderful. just wonderful.”

The doctor had scored one small point there. He knew how ill she was and she

obviously did not. He decided to press his advantage: "You have no pain? You don't feel ill in any way?"

"Me?" she seemed amazed at the question. "Why, I never felt better,"

"That's very good," smiled the doctor, relaxing imperceptibly back in the chair. "Now, tell me, Esther," he said, "do you know who I am?"

"Who you are?" She seemed surprised, almost hurt by the simple question, "Of course I know who you are." Like a well-instructed witness for the defense she answered exactly what was asked, neither too much nor too little.

"Who am I?"

And then we could tell that her answer had in truth been only an evasion, a stall. When pinned down directly she had to ponder. Her smile disappeared briefly. Then it reappeared like a sunburst and she said, "You're the wiener schnitzel man."

I had to press my teeth hard against my knee to avoid laughing aloud. Dr. Hoffman was getting his comeuppance. I could tell from Daddy's face that he wanted to laugh too. But at the same time we both wanted to cry. And so we kept silent. I knew from Dr. Hoffman's voice that he had managed to hold on to his smile.

"Did you ever have an operation?" he asked next.

It took my mother a moment to remember, "Yesss," she said slowly at last. "I think I did have an operation once."

"What kind of operation?"

She indicated a vague line on her neck with one wax-yellow finger. "I had an operation on my wiener schnitzel. It was done by a famous wiener schnitzel specialist from the East Coast."

Laughter escaped me like an explosion. I crept to the other side of the hallway from where I could not see into the bedroom. My father had had to laugh also. I could hear him apologizing. "She's got a fixation on that word," he said. I think he would have liked to creep away too, but he was stuck in there, having to face it. I felt so sorry for him I hid my face in my hands.

I could tell then from the sound of his voice that the doctor had put away his smile and had decided on revenge. "Tell me, Esther," he said, "do you know what year this is?"

"Of course I do. What a silly question."

The doctor waited a moment and when she seemed to forget to answer he prompted: "What year is it?"

"Why, it's *this* year, of course. What year do you think it is?" She laughed incredulously, but convinced no one, not even herself.

Out in the hall I sat frozen. He would win now. He would win. He would pursue her and corner her, and life would have its final unnecessary triumph. He would take that last amazing spark of spirit and intelligence and snuff it out with the simplest question, and then, as a matador proudly turns his back on an injured and puzzled beast, he

would walk out of our house for the last time.

“Do you know what day this is? Do you know the date?”

“Of course I know the date. What do you take me for?” But she sounded scared, “What is the date?” he pursued relentlessly.

Please, Mama, I prayed. Know the date. Think hard. Search whatever is left of your poor brain and maybe in some last unmangled corner you’ll find that it’s March, the twenty-fifth of March. Please don’t say October, don’t say October, please don’t say it, Mama.

The whole house seemed to hold its breath. I leaned forward and saw my mother lift her shoulders and wave her hand vaguely, as if she were trying to shrug away her consternation and confusion. She frowned with thinking. Then suddenly her face lit up. “Why,” she exclaimed, “it’s October. The fifteenth of October.”

I felt the tears burst forth in twin streams down my cheeks. I hid my face in my arms and tried to keep from sobbing aloud for Daddy’s sake. I crouched in the shadow of the hall and cried and wondered if my father were crying also or if, because of me and Dr. Hoffman and my mother and the prying afternoon sun, he had somehow managed not to.

I felt something touch my foot. A rolling ball had come to rest next to it. A child was running across the grass towards me. I picked up the ball and attempted to throw it to him, but it went wild. He stopped a moment, panting, watched it bounce away in another direction, then set out determinedly after it. I closed my eyes.

Almost an hour passed and I had just made up my mind to go back to the car, optimistically imagining that they might be there waiting for me, when I saw them crossing the grass in my direction. They were strolling slowly, talking together, laughing now and then. They made an interesting pair, she as golden as he was dark. A few persons turned to look at them; I closed my eyes and pretended I hadn’t seen them, as if I were not looking for them, and was perfectly content without them. I knew it was just a matter of a few seconds before they would notice me sitting on the grass. I told myself that they had been looking for me, but I knew if they came across me it would be accidental.

I waited with my eyes closed, but they didn’t join me. Finally I stole a peck to see where they were. They had already passed by without noticing me. I had to call to them. They turned and saw me without registering any surprise, any slight sign of “eureka”. But they paused, said a few more sentences to one another, and then wandered over and sat down on the grass next to me.

“Hi,” said Barbara.

“Hi.” It was all I could do to say that much, I was seething so inside. She must know what I am feeling, I told myself. She must know. We must still be able to communicate.

But if Barbara thought there was anything inside my head but sunlight and grass, she did not let on by a word. Perhaps that was how she showed me she knew; she wasn’t

going to say anything which would give me a chance to let loose the torrents of resentment that were bottled up inside me.

It must be this cold, I said angrily to myself. It's either the cold or that I'm crazy. There must be something very wrong with me. With a tremendous effort at self-control I decided to make one last try to be terribly agreeable. I was ready to agree with anything they wanted to do. If they told me they would like to go right then and watch a Tarzan film or visit an exhibition of nineteenth-century American oil paintings, I would clap my hands with enthusiasm. If only they would give me one more chance.

"Charles and I thought it might be nice to have a cup of tea at the Oriental Gardens."

My heart sank. If there was anything I didn't want to do it was to go to a phony, contrived, tourist institution like the Oriental Gardens. Middle-aged women wearing hats, and noisy children. But I was so determined to be agreeable that I simply jumped.

"What a wonderful idea."

Barbara looked at me suspiciously. "It's outside,"

"Wonderful! I feel like staying out in the air."

"And it's right here in the park."

"Perfect. It couldn't be more perfect."

"But it's a little far, so we ought to go by car."

"Fine," I said, thinking of the traffic we would have to go through and the heat of the car. "I happen to have a car. It will take us anywhere at all."

"Shall we go?" Barbara asked Charles.

"Let's," he replied.

XIII

Barbara and Charles walked side by side towards the car. At first I walked next to them, then I trailed a little behind. They didn't seem to notice where I walked in relation to them. Once or twice I overtook them, walked next to them, even considered whizzing by them, but then dropped back. It seemed to make no difference at all. As I went I looked about me at the trees and the sky, pretending to myself that I was appreciating them, that I was enjoying a pleasant day in the park. But all the time I was feeling a little like a spanked child whose playthings no longer enchant or engender fun.

"Get in." Barbara stood back to allow me to enter the car first and sit next to Charles. This time I started to protest, then thought what-the-heck, and climbed in.

Barbara got in next to me. "Did you enjoy your grass?" she asked me.

"Very much, thanks. Quite tasty."

After that nobody said anything for a long time. Slowly we wound our way through the bumper-to-bumper park traffic, arriving at last in the general vicinity of the tea garden and band concert area where Charles was fortunate enough to find a parking

space after only five minutes of circling around. He switched off the ignition, but I just happened to notice that he had not locked it.

“You have to turn the key twice to lock the ignition,” I pointed out to him, “otherwise anybody can drive it off without a key.” He nodded and gave the key another turn. Barbara sighed. “But it’s *necessary*,” I said to her. All the same, her sigh made me feel I had been outrageously materialistic in bothering to worry about something like a car.

As the three of us walked along in the leisurely pedestrian stream, it began to be obvious that some new kind of devilment was brewing inside Charles. I was walking a little behind them when Charles made a quick little hop to the other side of the path to peer briefly into a baby buggy traveling in the opposite direction. As he bent to take a look I noticed he had his terribly-curious expression on his face. He hurried to overtake Barbara and fell into step beside her. She apparently hadn’t noticed anything peculiar and I was beginning to wonder if I had merely been imagining things, when all of a sudden I saw him glance quickly around, spy another baby buggy, and dart merrily off in its direction. I sighed to myself, thinking almost happily that he was going to lose Barbara this time. She wouldn’t be able to weather this storm. As far as I was concerned it didn’t matter what Charles was up to. I had witnessed so many of his peculiarities that I had come to consider them an integral part of my existence, like a head cold.

As we approached the tea-garden area Charles’ method of locomotion became freer, but at the same time more studied and refined. He trotted along on the balls of his feet, his elbows bent and his wrists limp like the front paws of some beast. Every now and then he would leave the footpath to catch hold of a branch and take a couple of swings. Then he would be off again, trotting swiftly here and there, peering into baby buggies, pausing, glancing about, then rushing off in a new direction. And all the while there was a serious expression of intense curiosity and bland innocence on his face that made him appear all the more grotesque.

The path we were following now started to become narrower and more winding, crossing with other paths into an intricate maze of hedges, trees and turns.

“I think the tea-garden is over this way,” Barbara said, She paused to look around for Charles. He was nowhere in sight. “Where did he go?”

I shrugged, but just then we caught sight of Charles bounding toward us down one of the paths. But instead of joining us he took a sudden turn, leapt up and caught a tree branch, swung through the air and narrowly missed colliding with a young woman who just then came around a turn in the path. Charles gave an animal cry and the woman screamed, then laughed in confusion as Charles bounded off.

Circling some trees he came towards us again. Not looking at me, he advanced upon Barbara, making little hopping and skipping motions with his feet and shaking his front paws at her. It was more than she could stand. With a scream she bolted and ran down the path, Charles leaping along after her like some dark satyr. Barbara fled between the trees, past startled strollers, her long yellow hair flying out behind her. They

looked like two creatures out of folklore, out of the illustrated pages of an ancient book; it was as if the chase had started centuries ago, flashed briefly through the present, and would come to an end centuries hence in some other life. The sight was so incongruous with the Sunday tourists, and at the same time so diabolically funny, that I could do nothing but stop where I was and laugh. Even when they were out of sight behind the trees I couldn't move for laughing, accepting the stares of the Sunday tourists with even more laughter and gasps. After a few seconds I saw them circling back. Screaming, Barbara fled by me. Charles, hot in pursuit, hopped along behind her with a half-smile on his lips and a devilish gleam in his eye. He bumped into a woman but didn't stop.

"What's the matter with that man?" the woman demanded angrily.

"He wants to run," I laughed. "He wants to run and jump and leap."

"He's a menace. I have a bad leg. He almost knocked me over."

Her words sobered me. Suddenly it didn't seem funny any more, but horribly grotesque. I knew I hadn't the power to stop him. I had the feeling that he was doing all this just to annoy me, that if I were not there to watch he would never have begun, that if I were to go away he would stop.

"Are you a friend of his?" the woman demanded.

"Sort of." I noticed with alarm that people were stopping to look at me and suddenly I was embarrassed by the whole situation. "Charles," I called to him. "That's enough."

He heard me but he didn't stop and Barbara didn't stop.

"Someone should call the police," a woman in the crowd said. "That man is a lunatic. He's frightening that poor girl."

"They're friends," I said to reassure her, but I wasn't entirely convinced that I was right. All I knew was that I had to get away from there. And so the next time she circled by I called out to Barbara that I would go across to the band concert grounds and wait for them there. She nodded that she had heard, but continued to run.

I walked away. I knew that as soon as I was gone Charles would stop chasing Barbara and the two would have a delightful tea together and converse as normally and naturally as any young couple out for a day in the park.

XIV

I didn't actually go into the open air concert area, but sat at a short distance from it so that I could keep an eye on the path along which Barbara and Charles would probably come. From this position I could also see the uniformed members of the band congregating on one side of the bandstand and the members of the audience selecting their seats on the wooden benches in front. The musicians appeared very straight and soldierly in their uniforms and since most of them had nothing to do before the concert except congregate, they paid a certain amount of attention to their props – some flags – hefting

them, examining them, and watching their colleagues heft and examine them. The flag of one's country has a certain magic about it, especially when it is very large. A large American flag, for instance, is invariably well sewn. It is a gaudy flag and when seen closely almost makes one giddy. Even that giddiness helps heighten the magic. One can't help loving it or at least respecting it when one sees from close up how strongly it is sewn together and at the same time how dazzling it is. Automatically one wants to lift it to one's shoulder and bear it about.

You can see with what nonsense I was filling my mind as I waited for Barbara and Charles to finish their tea and come looking for me. I was inventing this nonsense just to pass the time – endeavoring to find meaning and interest in what was essentially a dull scene.

The band began to play at one o'clock and had been playing about a half hour before I saw them strolling towards me. Their eyes were on the ground and they were deep in conversation. I couldn't help wondering what they possibly found to talk about at such length and with such seriousness. Every once in a while Barbara's hand held to Charles' arm. They weren't keeping an eye out for me at all and when they started to go past I got up and fell into step beside them.

"Oh, here you are," Barbara said. "We were looking for you."

"I was hiding." But I knew she had actually thought she was looking for me. They must have decided to go and find Susan, but had become so engrossed in their conversation that they had simply not thought of raising their eyes from the ground. Or perhaps they thought that there was where they would find me.

"We had tea," she told me. "You should have come with us, but Charles thought you wanted to be by yourself for a while."

"Yes, I did."

"That's what we figured. Or else you would have stayed."

"Right." I felt those damn tears rising at the back of my eyes and positively contorted my face in an effort to make them stay back. Barbara had let go of Charles' arm and now she waited for me to announce what I would like to do for the rest of the afternoon. She had a vacant, disassociated look in her eyes which said more plainly than words that she was tuned in to Charles and whatever I might say from now on wouldn't come in loud and clear.

I said, very humbly, "I thought perhaps we could go down to the bay and look at the boats. I sort of had that in mind when I came to San Francisco. It might be nice. To look at the sailing boats for a little while?" Barbara continued to look blankly at me. Then she glanced up at Charles. "Of course," I added quickly, "if there's anything you would rather we do,

"I'd like a beer," Charles said.

"Me too," Barbara agreed, as though it had been previously decided between them.

“I don’t drink beer,” I said, and then I was silent. It was up to them to solve this impasse. I wasn’t going to ask for any more special favors. But just then, in her miraculous way, Barbara solved it.

“Why don’t we get into the car,” she said, “and see what happens?”

And so we went to get into the car.

XV

What happened was that I took the wheel and we drove out of the park and along the bay where armadas of sailing boats rocked and blew across the water, their sails bursting with wind.

“Straight ahead,” Barbara directed, “and left at the second light.”

I accelerated and dodged round and through the slow traffic. I drove so hard that even Barbara, who did not know how to drive and who was therefore never critical, told me to slow up and drive more carefully. I felt like pressing the accelerator to the floor and holding it there. But I didn’t because I was not crazy. At least *then* I was not crazy.

The beer joint was on a shabby street in the wharves. From the few people I saw loitering on the sidewalk in front I decided it was some sort of college hangout. Charles and Barbara got out and I promised to return in an hour. Then I threw the car into gear and raced the wind back to the bay shore.

I found some space in a parking lot directly on the water’s edge, turned off the motor, and sat back. This was my hour. The view was splendid. I could see fifty boats without shifting my eyes. The wind buffeted the car as I sat there behind the glass, glaring at the boats. I shifted, arranged myself more comfortably, and glared some more at the boats. The wind shook and pulled at the car. The sun beat down. It became very hot. I opened the window and then closed it again. I sat and watched a boat angle its way into the harbor. It tacked, crossed the narrow inlet, tacked again, crossed again. The jib fluttered, caught wind, was drawn tight; the mainsail snapped over smartly, making everyone duck. It was a lot of work just to get through the inlet into the harbor and their progress was slow. I suppose they made it.

I stopped watching the boat because I began to feel peculiar, weak and shaking. I took deep breaths of unsatisfying air. I shifted in the seat and opened the window a crack and then dosed it again. What was wrong? Then it came to me. Of course. I was hungry. Except for the orange Charles had given me I’d had nothing to eat all day. How stupid of me. It seemed to me then that if I didn’t have something to eat within the next minute I would collapse.

There was bound to be a hot dog stand nearby. Getting out of the car I chose a direction and started hurrying that way. Within the first hundred yards I found nothing. I stopped a woman who was walking by. She said she didn’t think there was any food nearby, but that I shouldn’t take her word for it. I didn’t take her word for it, but after

another fifty yards I decided to. I ran back to the car. There was nothing to do but leave the boats and the bay shore and go looking for something to eat. My hands were shaking. What an idiot I was.

Making a right turn on Van Ness Avenue I started driving towards the center of town, looking from right to left for a luncheonette or a drugstore with a food counter. Spotting a drugstore, I parked my car and ran back. I could hardly wait to get my teeth into some food. But the drugstore was closed. I stood trembling on the windy sidewalk looking up the street. There was no other drugstore in sight. I ran back to the car, got in, and drove rapidly onward. The next drugstore I found had no lunch counter, but the third one did. I climbed up on the stool. "Food," I said to the boy behind the counter.

"All we've got left are those." He nodded towards three cellophane-wrapped sandwiches on the counter.

I tore open the wrapper on one which was labeled ROAST BEEF. Inside two slices of dry white bread was a thin, fatty slice of meat. I looked to see what the other sandwiches contained, but they were also marked roast beef. "Is that absolutely all you have?" I asked.

"That's it. We're just closing."

I bit into the sandwich. Hungry as I was, I knew I wouldn't be able to eat it. A person would have to be literally starving and with no other alternatives to have eaten that sandwich. Just then I spied two sugar cookies in a plastic container. I bought them and ate them. They took the edge off my hunger. Now, I thought, if I can just do something about this cold, I'll be in business. I went over to the drug counter and asked the pharmacist if he had anything for a bad cold.

"These will help," he told me, showing me a small bottle of capsules. "Take two now and one every four hours."

I bought the bottle and washed two pills down with a glass of water. If only they would help my cold I might be able to gather my wits and appear less abominable in Barbara's eyes. The cold was destroying my dignity. But perhaps now things would take a change for the better.

But I had hardly driven halfway back to the beer parlor before I sensed this was not to be. The pills filled me with a great drowsiness. I glanced at the label and read that drowsiness might occur and if so one should not drive a car. By the time I reached the beer parlor and found a parking place my mind was whirling and my limbs felt heavy as lead. I made my way unsteadily inside. Barbara and Charles were sitting at the back of the room talking quietly together. They didn't see me until I was standing over them. "Ready?" I asked.

"When we finish these."

Looking down I saw that they each had a fresh bottle in front of them. I swayed a moment, my mind reeling, and then I said as earnestly and politely as I could, "Maybe you wouldn't drink them too terribly slowly. I'm feeling really awful and would like to

get back and lie down.”

“Oh, Sue,” Barbara cried. “Can’t you just take it easy once in a while? Charles and I don’t want to rush all the time.”

“I know,” I said miserably. “I know. I just wanted to mention that I was here and to see if perhaps you were ready to leave. I don’t want you to rush, but on the other hand . . .” I couldn’t find any more words. I was so dizzy. All I wanted to do was lie down somewhere and never get up again. Unable to say anything more, I turned round and headed out of the door towards the car. I would wait for them there.

They didn’t rush. By the time they came out my body had almost turned to lead and my mind functioned only in a tiny inner cavern which the sound of their voices penetrated like a fuzzy echo.

“I don’t want to drive,” Charles was saying. “Not after two beers.”

“But I *can’t* drive,” I answered with my eyes closed. “Please.”

“Oh, Sue,” I heard Barbara say. “Really! Pull yourself together.”

“I can’t drive,” I repeated, trying to summon my senses. Underneath the haze my mind was very clear. I knew exactly the hateful impression I was making on them, what a loathsome blob I must appear. But I couldn’t open my eyes. I couldn’t move.

“I don’t feel like driving,” Charles repeated.

“You’ll have to,” I managed. “I took some pills.”

“Oh, Susan!” cried Barbara disgustedly.

I had a feeling she thought I had taken some sort of narcotic just not to have to drive, or to summon their attention or pity. “They were just cold pills.”

“Really!”

But finally, to my relief, Charles agreed to drive. Barbara got in the car on the other side. “I don’t feel like going back to my place,” she said. “Let’s do something.”

“Drop me,” I mumbled. “Drop me off.”

“Can we take the car?”

“No,” I replied.

“Great,” Barbara said. “Thanks a lot.”

The street in front of Barbara’s house ran at a very steep incline. Charles parked the car at right angles to the curb and he and Barbara climbed out. It was easy enough for me to follow Barbara out of the car, but when I attempted to shut the car door I found the pressure of gravity was working against me. I pushed up against it with all my strength and weight, but simply couldn’t get it to click shut. While I struggled, Charles and Barbara started to disappear around the corner of the apartment house. I had to call after them. “Charles. Help me. I can’t close the door.”

“Oh my *gosh!*” Barbara exclaimed.

Charles walked back and slammed the door shut with terrible ease. “You’ll do anything for attention, won’t you?”

“Go away,” I screamed. “Walk to San José. I never want to see you again.” Then

I leaned upon the hood of the car and wept. And as I wept I knew what a complete abomination I had become. Barbara, whom I loved, hated me. And I couldn't blame her. I hated myself. But what could I do? What could I do? I didn't know what had gone wrong. I didn't know how to mend it. And everything kept getting worse. Wiping my eyes I started toward the apartment. I wanted to lie down. I wanted somebody to come along and take me gently by the hand and lead me to the door, to the bed, to the oblivion of sleep.

XVI

"Well," said Barbara when we were once more back in her apartment. "What now?"

I sat on the studio bed, my head back against the pillows, wishing time would simply stop around us so that I could stay here, motionless, leaden, not having to answer any questions until the cloud left my brain.

"What do you want to do?" Barbara persisted.

"Rest."

"But you won't let us take the car." It was not a question but a statement of bristling disgust.

"No. I can't." I couldn't explain it to them. I couldn't explain to them that individually Charles and Barbara were my friends. Mine. And it was my weekend. And the thought that they would go off together in my weekend in my car was such a desperately lonely idea that I couldn't possibly agree to it.

"May I use your phone?" Charles asked Barbara,

"Certainly."

Charles picked up the receiver and dialed a number.

"May I please have the number of the Greyhound bus depot?"

"What are you doing?" I exclaimed.

"I have to go back to San José, and since you won't take me . . ."

"But do you have the money for a bus? How will you pay for it?"

"I don't know."

I had the car, I had money. I was a monster. I was forcing Charles, who had no money, into an impossible situation by breaking my promise to drive him to San José. What a monster I was. But suddenly the answer was clear. There was nothing I wanted more than to leave San Francisco and get to Los Angeles. I wanted to leave for home right that minute, but I couldn't begin to drive home in the condition I was in. The new idea sang in my brain. "I'll take you," I said to Charles. "I want to go home to Los Angeles. Just drive me as far as San José."

Immediately he hung up the receiver. "Let's get started," he said.

In a few minutes we had packed our things and were ready to leave. Charles

carried the suitcases out to the car. I was alone with Barbara. We stood scanning each other's faces, I with anguish, she with a cold, hard light in her eyes that pierced me like a sword.

"Barbara," I began, but there were no words to express my shame and torment and sorrow. "I don't know what happened to us, but . . . I'm sorry. Somehow it was my fault. I wanted to tell you something yesterday, but now . . ."

"That's all right," Barbara replied, trying to make her voice soft but not succeeding. "Only there's something . . ." She broke off.

"What?"

"It's hard to say it."

What is it?"

"I itch," she told me.

"You itch? Where?"

"Down there." She looked at me questioningly, at the same time accusingly. It was more than I could stand.

"It's not my fault if you itch down there," I cried. "*I* don't itch. There's no disease I have that could make you itch."

"But what shall I do?"

"*I* don't know," I said. "Wash yourself. Wash yourself with vinegar. *I* don't know."

I ran from the room, passing Charles who was returning to say goodbye. A few minutes later he joined me in the car and soon we were whirling up onto the freeway leading south towards San José and Los Angeles.

PART FOUR: *San José*

I

For a long time we didn't speak, Charles and I. I sat crushed and miserable on the seat next to him, as close to the door as possible. Charles was all the strength we had. He sat hunched forward at the wheel and in his eyes gleamed a dark intelligence which watched the road. The muscles in his cheeks were steel bands.

What could I say to him? What could I possibly say which wouldn't bring his wrath beating down around my ears. An apology? That couldn't possibly anger him. But humility wasn't enough. I'd have to grovel, turn myself inside out for him and let him see everything. First an apology and then I'd mention my mother. Her dying was like a two-edged sword. One side was turned toward me, cutting me in half, but the outward side was my protection.

"I'm terribly sorry," I began softly.

He made no reply.

"It was just this cold and those awful pills I took. They knocked me out."

His jaw muscles remained taut and inflexible.

"It's my mother," I finally forced out. "I've been so unhappy and mixed up about her." Utter humility. "If she were well again . . . I wouldn't be like this."

His eyes softened first, and then, when he began to speak, his mouth too. His voice was gentler even than my need for gentleness required. "You're no different from anyone else," he said. "All you need is a little love and kindness."

He reached out his arm and I almost threw myself against him. He held me so tight and close that my head could nestle in the curve of his neck. I turned my face and kissed the dark smooth skin of his neck which was already wet from my tears. I felt him kiss my hair and then he held me even closer.

"There are some persons," he said quietly, "who are always alone, no matter how many people they are with. That is their tragedy, and there is no way they can escape it. They are too deep ever to be completely filled. They are always hungry and their hunger drives them to do strange things, until they become abominations even to themselves.

But they are not really abominations. Actually they are the most worthy of all because, strangely enough, it is from these persons that the greatest beauty comes, the greatest works of art, the greatest compassion and understanding.”

I listened to him with the tears streaming from my eyes. I had never been so happy. Never. I felt I could sit by him and listen to him for the next thousand years and be happy.

“Your friend Barbara,” he continued, “is a different sort. She is simple as a child. One has to communicate with her as with a child. One has to play with her, perform for her. Words carry very little meaning for her. And she need only be with people not to be alone. She’s a good person, but she’s not very deep.”

“Then you only did those things to amuse Barbara, and for no other reason!” What a wonderful, glorious realization.

“Of course.”

“Will you see her again if you stay in San José.

“No.”

I lifted his hand to my lips and kissed it. I have never felt such a need for any man as I did then for Charles. I wanted to draw his strength into me, to become a part of him. My body burned with desire. I wanted to consume him and let him consume me. I wanted . . .

“Do you want to stop somewhere?” he asked me.

“Yes.” I could hardly speak. My desire choked me.

“Where?”

“Anywhere.”

“A motel?”

And suddenly and unexpectedly that money question was in front of us again. For me to pay for the motel would spoil things. I wanted Charles to take me away, to protect me, to lead me, unfeeling and dim, to some corner of the earth where I could give myself to him without first having to think, without having to pay or calculate or speak. I wanted to ride on his strength, not on my money,

The same idea must have crossed his mind because he then said, “Perhaps we can turn off the highway into the fields.”

We began to watch the roadside for a likely spot. Fields and trees there were, but these were so ringed and knotted up with houses, streets and stores that it was some time before we saw a likely spot. Charles turned off the highway and on to a small road. We drove along it until the traffic noises had given over to the songs of birds.

It was only a square, fallow field with a clump of trees in one corner. A small gathering of trees, but there were no others. We sat a moment longer in the car until a boy on a bicycle had ridden by. He looked back at us over his shoulder, but did not stop. I felt he could read in our eyes what we were about to do, but that it didn’t matter to him,

Getting out of the car we entered the trees. Even from the center of the wood we

could see for miles on every side. When we lay down on the cool, grassy earth we could see only each other and the sky and earth. And almost against my eye, a leaf. I helped Charles with my skirt and pants. There was a buzzing by my ear and two flies alighted on the leaf. I helped him find me with his hand. One of the flies moved towards the other and, curiously, as if they were in a different world, I saw them come together, one mounting on the other, buzzing. For a moment there was silence. I felt the burning enter me and twisted towards it. The leaf brushed against my closed eyes as I threw myself upwards in an embrace, hugging the weight of Charles with all the burning, excruciating desire trapped between us.

II

At first I couldn't comprehend what had happened. My eyes sprang open. Charles was standing over me, arranging his clothing. I lay motionless at his feet like a trampled leaf, too shocked to do anything but stare up at him. He was tilting his face up and glancing around him at the trees and sky. Then his wandering glance happened to fall on me. He smiled and twisted forward in a half bow. "Ready?"

My eyes were dry and staring. They fastened on his face, trying to read something there, trying to understand. And strangely, though my mind was filled with a numb horror, my body, still hot and unsatisfied, yearned towards him. Slowly I sat up. "Why did you do that?"

"Why did *we* do that," he corrected me with the air of a patient language instructor. "We. We did it together."

"No. You. Why did you do that? I could have trouble."

"Trouble?" At first he didn't seem to understand. "Oh, that," he said finally, with a wave of his hand. "That's nothing. If you have any bother just go to a doctor and he'll give you some hormones."

"What if I don't want to go to a doctor? What if I don't want hormones?"

"Then perhaps you'll have a nice little baby." He smiled at me as if he had rubber bands pulling between his jaws. He shook his finger at me. "Never be afraid of creating life," he instructed me. "It's the greatest of all talents."

I couldn't believe I was hearing correctly. I couldn't believe he had done what he'd done. I thought I must be mistaken. There was obviously something I didn't understand here, but once I understood it everything would be all right again.

Getting slowly to my feet I brushed off my clothing. There was such an emptiness inside me that I felt as if no emotion could ever again possess me. I looked at Charles without hate, without fear, without love or desire. There wasn't even a real fear that I might become pregnant by him. Inside me was the vague knowledge that Charles wasn't capable of procreating life. If somebody had come along just then and told me that Charles was going to live a hundred, a thousand, a million years, I wouldn't have ques-

tioned the possibility. But if he had said that Charles could procreate, propagate, add in any positive, concrete way to the sum total of human existence, I would have laughed in disbelief.

As we continued onward toward San José, Charles seemed to be in a very good mood. He told me about some of his adventures with Ed Taylor and of the humorous and highly organized practical jokes they had engineered. “We broke their backs,” he would chuckle. “We absolutely broke their backs.”

I had given up trying to anticipate or justify Charles’ moods. It was enough at the moment to know he was in a good humor. It might continue or end abruptly, but at the moment it was there and I was grateful.

The stories he recounted were, I must say, very funny. But even as I laughed I couldn’t help feeling a strong sympathy for his victims. These had not been selected for possessing such traits as hypocrisy or self-righteousness, but just because they were there, trusting and vulnerable.

One of these even turned out to be an acquaintance of mine in my former university, Charlotte Thompson. Charlotte was a desperate-to-be-married English instructor whom he wooed by telephone, pretending to be an Azerbaijani millionaire, a friend of a friend. They arranged their first meeting in the deathly-silent graduate reading room – possibly she wanted to impress this new acquaintance with the severity of her intellectual environment so that he would not think of her as someone to be taken lightly. He arrived for the meeting with Ed Taylor, both dressed in outlandish robes, Charles in dark glasses feigning blindness. With one hand on Ed’s shoulder, the other hand holding and tapping a cane, he loudly demanded to be led to his darling Charlotte. In fact I couldn’t help laughing at the confusion they must have caused and the terrified flight of the poor young woman faced with this apparition and the destruction of her hopes. At the same time the scene filled me with revulsion. Charlotte Thompson was a pleasant and harmless person and hadn’t deserved such treatment.

But such considerations didn’t seem to disturb Charles. He chose his victims as impersonally as Death did, without envy or rancor. Unless, of course, he hated *everyone*. I glanced at him out of the corner of my eye. He was looking straight ahead at the road. A faint fear brushed my soul. I wondered, suddenly, where that road would lead us.

III

The Taylors were not yet home when we arrived back at the apartment. My cold symptoms had abated somewhat since I had taken the pills, and physically I felt better, although tired. I particularly wanted to take a shower and wash myself clean. As I undressed I could hear Charles humming in the next room. I shrugged. As long as he was in a good mood things were not as bad as they could be. Except for Barbara – the loss of Barbara. Still, if she hadn’t itched in that last moment I might have felt worse

about what happened between us. Thinking back upon it, it seemed rather funny there at the end. And I had learned that she was not all sweetness and light, all purity and goodness as I had supposed. She was human just as I was. She too could be impatient and even cruel.

I wrapped myself in a towel and started through the hall on the way to the bathroom. Charles was standing by the living room window as I went by. He turned and our eyes met. He was looking at me with eyes so intense, so warm and wanting, that I stopped where I was and gazed back at him. I felt naked – absolutely naked and helpless before those eyes of his. I held the towel around me but it was as if I had no towel at all. He started to walk slowly toward me and my hands were trembling and I dropped the towel. My body was so hot. He looked at me a long moment before touching me, sliding his cool hands over my breasts and thighs. My whole body pulsed. I had to shut my eyes.

“Please,” he said,

He took me gently by the arm and led me into Ed and Alice’s bedroom. Carefully he pulled down the bed covers. And then he made love to me as a woman wants.

Almost at that very moment we heard the front door open. A voice called, “Halloo.” I made a dive for the bathroom while Charles scrambled into his clothes and threw the covers back over the bed. I must have stayed in the bathroom under the shower for a half hour or more. Until the water ran cold and I had to get out. Even then I didn’t leave the bathroom for a long while. Until Alice knocked and said she had to use the toilet.

IV

Alice showed by the creases around her mouth that she was just a little annoyed that I had occupied the bathroom for so long, but other than that I could not tell if either she or her husband suspected what Charles and I had been doing. Later Charles whispered to me that he had told them he had been taking a nap on their bed. I was even flattered by being allowed to share this secret with him. It never crossed my mind that he might have been as anxious as I for the Taylors not to know what had occurred.

I wasn’t officially invited to spend the night at the Taylors’ and I didn’t ask if I might. I just didn’t leave and soon it became generally understood that I would stay. Ed and Charles were very merry throughout dinner. I tried to begin a conversation with Alice, but she answered me in monosyllables. As far as she was concerned I hardly existed, and if I did exist at all, it was as an adjunct to Charles. Hardly for one moment did Alice take her eyes off Charles. She watched him as if she were waiting for something, expecting something to happen. But Charles never once looked at her, although he must have felt her eyes on him. If his glance happened to move in her direction his eyes would unfocus as they passed over her, exactly as if she had been a piece of furni-

ture.

“San José is a great city,” Charles was saying. “A great city. I can see living here. Out of this entire country, out of four dozen states and several gross of cities, this is probably the best place just for living.”

His words surprised me. I didn’t find San José at all attractive. “Don’t you think San Francisco is better?”

“San Francisco is for idiots,” Charles said. “Idiots and snobs. There’s something wrong with a city where women wear hats all the time. Women who wear hats are the curse of this world. They won’t allow a person to so much as sneeze for fear their hat will blow off.”

I couldn’t help watching Alice as Charles spoke. I don’t think she was listening to his words because nothing he said made the least change in her features. Her eyes and face were so hard that I thought if someone demanded of her that she speak she would have had trouble separating her jaws.

“Sausalito is a nice place,” Ed commented.

“Yes,” Charles agreed warmly. “Very nice.”

I looked for a hint of irony in his voice when he repeated the adjective, but there had been none at all.

At first it had been impossible for me to understand why a person like Charles loved a person like Ed Taylor. In their adventures together Ed Taylor had been an accomplice without being a conspirator. As for his character, he was good-natured without being sensitive, giving without being generous, interested without being keen. Towards Charles, Ed Taylor was helpful without being constructive. He accepted Charles as he was and let it go at that, without demands, without criticism. And perhaps, I decided finally, that is why Charles loved him so. Because Ed Taylor accepted him wholly and without questions. I wondered whether, if I could prove to Charles that I accepted him as he was, he would love me too. I determined to try.

We took our coffee into the living-room and sat lazily around on the sofas. Only Alice hunched stiffly in one corner with her knees very close together, hugging herself as if she were cold. I suspected she wanted to go into the kitchen and do the dishes, but was afraid that if she made a motion to do so Charles would dash ahead of her and do them instead. Or perhaps she remained with us so that she could keep an eye on Charles. Indeed, her eyes seemed compulsively riveted on his face. I wondered if she looked upon him as some dark monster who had followed her husband out of the war and who would linger in the shadow of his existence until some day, by some method, he could be destroyed. Perhaps in her silent corner she was plotting a way to accomplish just that.

Our full stomachs and the settling dusk had made time seem to lose its dimension. As if engulfed in a warm mist, Charles became nostalgic and began to reminisce aloud about the town of Nogales where he’d been born.

“There were always a lot of children around,” he remembered. “Everybody had

brothers and sisters and there were always plenty of cousins. Most of the cousins had brothers and sisters and they in turn had cousins. So there were a lot of us, and most of us seemed to be about the same age and the same size, although some of us were taller. Some of us were very poor, but then some of us had enough money so that we didn't have to sell buckets of coal in the streets. Instead, we had to go to school." Charles' voice rose a little with excitement, "The ones who had to sell coal wanted to go to school. They wanted to learn and become useful citizens. But the ones that had to go to school wanted to sell coal. Before going to school they would rub coal dust on their faces. They wanted to be poor and dirty like the rest of their friends, but their mothers wouldn't let them. But those of us who had to sell coal, their mothers rubbed coal on their faces themselves, to make them look even poorer and dirtier. They would take their bucket into the street and go up to a gringo and offer the coal for sale, and usually the gringo would give them ten cents or a nickel just on principle, without taking any coal at all. Christ, the money that some of us could make and still have the same bucket of coal at the end of the day!"

I was a little confused as to which group Charles had belonged to – the coal-sellers or the school-goers. I wanted to ask him, but oddly enough I thought he might resent the question. Instead I remarked, "I've only been across the border once – to see a bullfight in Tijuana."

At the word "bullfight" Charles' face grew dim and then lighted up. "We worshipped bullfighters," he exclaimed. "We were all going to be bullfighters when we grew up. There was a pasture outside the town by the railroad track with a young bull in it. Some of us would get hold of red pieces of cloth and sticks and then they'd climb the fence and cape him. He had very long horns for such a young animal and was considered very dangerous."

"How old were you then?"

"We were all ten or eleven., Most of us were small for our ages and the bull was a yearling and very large. But there was one of us in particular who was very good, very brave. He had once seen a real bullfight and so he knew what to do. He was very beautiful and graceful with the cape. All he needed was the proper costume. I found an old army uniform in a chest in our attic. It had gold braid on it. I cut it up and made a bullfighter's costume out of it." Charles suddenly fell silent.

"Did you give it to him?" I prompted.

Charles didn't reply. He seemed to be glancing around the room as if he had forgotten all about the conversation, the bulls, everything.

"Did you ever try caping the bull?" I asked then.

"Once," he snapped.

"How did you do?"

For one brief instant his eyes focused again on the past. "My friend did me a favor," he replied enigmatically. "I have recently repaid it in full."

Suddenly Charles leaped to his feet. Alice Taylor, who had become almost hypnotized by watching him, the way one might get when looking too long into the eyes of a swaying cobra, started violently.

“Don’t move,” Charles sang out as he went towards the kitchen. “Sit right where you are. I’ll do the dishes. I’d be delighted to.”

V

I couldn’t help wondering whether Ed Taylor was actually unaware of his wife’s – what can I call it? – mortal terror of Charles Nicolo. I never heard her speak a word against their guest or so much as hint that she wished him gone, and I had the feeling that even when they were alone together she held her silence. But couldn’t he tell by looking at her, by her eyes, by her very silence, that she was enduring agony?

By remaining quiet she appeared to be a model wife, uncomplaining, long-suffering. She did not make scenes. But oddly enough I found myself disliking Alice Taylor. Her suffering was too great, her silence too brave. It was like lightning without thunder. It kept one breathless in suspense, waiting and wondering. But to be more truthful I must admit that I disliked her partly because she lumped me in the same category as Charles, thereby casting me in the role of tormentor and making me the object of her hate. I resented her hatred. After all, I was only an innocent bystander. Or so I then thought.

Charles appeared in the kitchen doorway, one of Alice’s aprons tied around his waist, up to his elbows in soapsuds. “Tomorrow I’ll find a job,” he told us gaily, “and then I’ll drive down to Los Angeles, get my gear, and bring it up here Thursday or Friday. How’s that?”

Ed smiled and nodded. “Great.”

Charles turned back into the kitchen and we could hear him singing. It was a Mexican song and he sang it very well.

About this time I noticed that a change had come over Alice Taylor. She didn’t seem to have moved at all, but her shoulders, which had been stiffly hunched and rounded, appeared to have relaxed. Her eyes had softened and seemed to be focused on some faraway image, and a faint smile had come to her lips. I wondered at first whether the song Charles was singing had struck some nostalgic chord in her memory, but soon realized that she wasn’t listening to the song at all. She seemed to have arrived at some decision within herself from which she had drawn new strength and comfort. About ten o’clock she excused herself very graciously and went to bed.

Charles re-entered the living-room rolling down his shirt sleeves. “What’ll we do tonight, Eddy? How about going for a beer?”

“Fine,” said Ed.

“And tomorrow?”

“I have to take the car around to the garage first thing. She’s been acting up lately. Thought I’d have her checked.”

“And then?”

“And then . . .”

At this point I excused myself and went to bed. Lying in the darkness I could hear Charles and Ed Taylor talking and laughing together. I couldn’t make out what they were saying, though I tried to hear. It seemed to me that if I could just overhear what they spoke about between themselves it would give me some clue to their relationship. But I heard nothing and a short time later they went out.

I must have slept then because the next thing I knew I heard someone moving about the room. I sensed it was very late. “Charles?”

“Yes.”

“What are you doing?”

“I’m sleeping in here.”

As my eyes became accustomed to the darkness I could see he was unrolling his sleeping bag on the floor next to my bed. He undressed and hung his clothes in the closet. A feeling of peace filled me. I was glad he was there. When he had lain down I reached out my hand and in the darkness touched his arm. He found my hand and held it against his cheek. We lay for a long time without speaking, until our hands became hot as if an electric current were flowing through our arms. Then, ever so gently, I pulled upon his hand. So lightly did I pull that it was hardly a pressure at all, only an uncommitting gesture, almost an invitation, but not quite. But Charles felt it. He drew himself out of his sleeping bag. For a moment he seemed to hesitate, to consider, his head bent forward on his chest. Then he got up quickly. During that moment of hesitation, however, my mind flashed back to a moment days ago in the bright sun of our garden when I suggested he take off his shirt. He had done so, but he had done so almost servilely, as if doing me a favor.

And so in that instant, in the time it takes for a thought to flash through one’s mind or a man to climb into one’s bed, all feelings of passion had left me and had been replaced by fear.

Charles squeezed into the bed next to me and proceeded to make love to me very mechanically. I pretended to respond. Finally he inquired if I was satisfied and I said I was and he got back into his sleeping bag. I didn’t want him to leave my bed. I wanted to tell him it had not been the sex I had desired, but only his nearness. I wanted him to sleep next to me with his arms around me all night. But I was afraid if I asked him to do this, he would have done it too as a favor, with no warmth or love.

VI

The next morning, light coming through the thin curtains awakened me early. I glanced over at Charles. He was asleep, then his eyes opened and he glanced at his wristwatch. Waking seemed to be no transition for him. One moment he was asleep and the next moment awake, and instantly his mind was clear and functioning as if he had only closed his eyes for an instant. He had had to look at his watch, I believed, only to make sure that time had indeed passed.

I continued to lie in bed, but he went into the bathroom to take a shower. When he returned he dressed himself in the same pale suit he had worn the morning we had first met. He was always meticulous the way he dressed. None of his clothes ever showed dirt or wear and he himself was always immaculately clean. When he put on his silk shirt I remembered the first touch of that silk when I had stood holding the ladder, and a slight shudder ran through me just as it had then.

After Charles had finished dressing he hung the Hawaiian shirt he had worn the day before on a clothes hanger. He arranged the shirt very carefully on the hanger, holding it at arm's length once or twice to eye it critically, then carefully restraightening the collar. Then he took his dark suit out of the closet, took the trousers of these and refolded them over the hanger very carefully, although they had already been carefully hung up in the first place. He fooled with the jacket a few minutes, straightening and restraightening it before hanging the suit back in the closet. Then he took out his Hawaiian shirt again and checked that it was hanging properly and without creases. When he had finished checking over his clothes which were hanging in the closet, he glanced around the room and caught sight of the ironing board in the corner where he had draped his underclothes and where I had thrown down my skirt and blouse the night before. Carefully he folded his underclothes, arranging them side by side in a row. Then he picked up my skirt and blouse and folded them neatly. A sweater which I had tossed on my suitcase he picked up, folded, and placed on the ironing board. When he had finished folding my clothes he refolded his own and then refolded mine. While he worked he hummed a little song.

I couldn't stand it any longer. "What on earth are you doing?" I asked him.

He glanced at me with surprise. "Folding clothes," he said, going to the closet and taking out his suit. He shook the suit and then straightened it on the hanger and put it back in the closet.

"But why so much?" I asked.

"Why," he said, "that's what poor people do. Poor people have nothing to do all day but fold clothes. What do you think they do?"

I realized I didn't know what poor people did all day. Perhaps they did fold clothes if they couldn't afford outside amusements. Certainly the less clothes a person had, the more careful he would have to be with them. I was rich and therefore I could

afford to be careless with my possessions. Suddenly I was ashamed that Charles had seen the careless way I had thrown down my clothes.

But when he started to fold his underclothes again I felt he had already gone far enough to prove his point. "Are the Taylors up yet?" I asked, in order to get his mind off folding.

"Not yet," he replied. "I'll have to awaken him."

"But if you awaken Ed, you'll awaken Alice too. Let them sleep a little longer."

"He has to get up," Charles said and left the room. I heard him walk down the hall and softly open the bedroom door. He paused a moment – I supposed he was looking at them – and then he sang, ever so softly, "Wake up, wake up, the wicked old witch is dead." I heard the bedsprings creak and then he sang again, "Wake up, wake up, the wicked old witch is dead."

A moment later he returned, smiling and satisfied. "He's up."

I was disgusted by the liberty he had taken, "What was that you were singing?" I demanded.

"When Ed and I were in the army we hated the bugle. So we used to wake each other up singing that."

"But you must have awakened Alice too." As far as I was concerned it was practically indecent to awaken a sleeping couple. Even to open their door and look inside was outrageous. I said that to Charles,

He shrugged as if I were trying to communicate to him in a foreign tongue. "I don't know," he said, shaking his head. "I don't know."

Ed Taylor, red-faced from sleeping, paused in our doorway on his way to the bathroom. He smiled a sleepy good morning. Charles danced like an excited puppy and flew to the kitchen to start the coffee. From the voices in the next room I could tell that Alice had reached the kitchen before him. Gently but firmly she was insisting upon making the coffee herself.

I dressed hurriedly and went into the kitchen. Charles was sitting hunched at the kitchen table watching Alice. It was the first time I had seen him focus his eyes on her. Now he watched her like a hawk – as if life itself depended on the sharpness of his eyes.

Ed came in a few minutes later, washed and shaven. "They told me to bring the car in before nine," he said. "You all go ahead and have your breakfast. I'll eat when I get back. It's just around the corner."

Alice followed her husband to the door and kissed him lightly on the mouth. Charles looked at the toes of his shoes until she returned.

After Ed had gone out none of us spoke. We waited for the water to boil. I remember lighting a cigarette which I rarely did before breakfast. The water finally boiled and Alice carefully poured it into three cups, stirring them so that the powder would dissolve. But when Charles arose to help her carry the cups over to the table, she almost threw herself in front of him. Recovering herself she said lightly, "This is the wife's job."

You're a guest. just sit down and let me do everything."

Charles laughed and sat back down. When Alice set his coffee in front of him the cup rattled in the saucer and he laughed again, suddenly looking up into her eyes when her face was no more than a few inches from his. For an instant Alice froze as if she had turned to stone, and in that moment a look passed between them such as I have never seen exchanged between two human beings. It was a look of ultimate understanding, a glance by the living into death, and by death with even fiercer hatred into life. How could I have seen that? How could I have known? And the realization: that death hates life more than life hates death – how did that come to me then?

The look lasted only for an instant, however, and then Charles laughed again and, stretching his legs out under the table, leaned back in his chair. Alice went back to the sink and stood with her hands among the dishes without moving. Her shoulders were bent and her face, before she turned it away from us altogether, was an indecipherable blur of emotions,

"Alice, my dear," Charles said gaily, "this coffee looks wonderful. But I think there's a speck in the cup." Alice but did not turn. "No," Charles continued, "it's nothing. Nothing at all. I thought at first it was a dead moth, a tiny winged soul drowned in caffeine, but it was only a reflection." He turned to me. "Sugar? Cream?"

"Please," I muttered softly. I took what I needed and passed them back. Charles took four lumps of sugar and a lot of cream.

"It goes down more easily when it's sweet and creamy. Turkish coffee, on the other hand, forces its way down the throat. You don't have to worry about Turkish coffee getting into the stomach."

Alice sighed. "I don't worry," she said. I saw that she had raised her head and was gazing out the window. The morning light reflecting from the southern sky touched her face gently, and in profile she looked almost beautiful.

Charles noticed it too. "You are beautiful this morning, Alice," he told her. "Very beautiful."

"Am I?" she replied softly. "I don't think so."

"Like a Madonna," Charles continued. "If only you had a child at your breast. What a sight that would be. Great artists from all over the world – Italy, Spain, Martha's Vineyard – they would all fight to have you for a model – you and your child."

"I have no child."

"Not yet, of course, but who knows what might happen some day? Look at what happened to the Blessed Virgin. An immaculate conception took place. That could happen to you too, especially on a day when you look so beautiful."

Alice laughed softly without turning her face from the light.

"It might have happened to Mary on a day just like this," Charles continued, his voice becoming more excited. "She might have been standing just so with her face touched by a soft southern light, waiting for Joseph to return from the blacksmith's

where he had taken one of the mules for a shoe repair. Perhaps she heard a chord of heavenly music and then felt it happen to her. When Joseph came home she said to him, ‘The funniest thing happened to me as I was standing in front of the kitchen sink today’.”

Alice whirled around, her face suddenly ugly as it had been beautiful, red and distorted with hate, and wet with tears. At first there were no words, only a roaring sound torn from her throat like the cry of a beast in its final hour. A roar and then the words broke loose in a screaming, incoherent torrent. “Mother of God. In our bed. Our. You had to do it to her in our bed. Didn’t you, monster, monster? I wasn’t enough. Her. You had to do it to her too.” She was crying so hard the words broke from her in fitful screams. “But not for me it wasn’t – it wasn’t for me, or her. Not even for her. It was for him. It was for Ed. You were doing it to Ed, not me, not her.”

Turning, she scabbled for something in the sink and when she turned she had a knife in her hand. She took one step toward Charles, stabbing into the air spasmodically, frantically, as if into a human heart. Her lips were drawn back over her teeth and her mouth chattered like a hungry beast, as if she would rather tear out Charles’ throat with her own teeth than use the knife.

“You want *him*,” she cried. “Not me. You want him for yourself alone, so you’re doing this to me. You want him alone. Mother of God forgive me!”

She lunged across the kitchen. Charles winced, reached up quickly, and with one deft twist of his arm caught her wrist and wrenched it. The knife dropped free and clattered over to my feet.

But throwing herself violently backwards, the distraught woman tore loose from Charles. Her teeth chattering and her eyes wild, she ran first to one side of the kitchen, then the other, like a moth caught in a box, bumping herself first against the stove and then the sink. Somehow she managed to blunder through the kitchen door. Then she saw the front door and ran to it, wrenching it open. She must have seen her husband coming towards her up the street, because twice she called out his name, “Ed, Ed,” and then threw herself forward. It was not in the direction of the stairs, I saw at once, but the street.

A moment later the screams began. Charles had run outside after her, but he was too late. She was dying. She had thrown herself from the balcony and had fallen upon the balustrade beneath and from there to the sidewalk. The iron balustrade had broken her fall so that she did not die immediately, but it had also broken her back.

I learned all that later. Then, I couldn’t move from my chair. The screams spurted from below like a fountain of agony, drowning my first impulse to run and help her. Automatically I reached for the telephone and put a call through to the police. Then I forced my unwilling body to get up. Perhaps I could be of some use. I walked to the front door. Down below on the sidewalk I could see Ed kneeling beside his wife. She was still crying and he was trying to help her, but he didn’t know what to do except

Speak her name over and over again. At the foot of the stairs I saw Charles standing looking on, like a statue carved in an attitude of intense curiosity.

Then my knees went weak under me and the sky spun once around and the screaming stopped. The air was swept clear of the sound of pain and suddenly seemed empty. I could hear nothing, not even the sound of this man weeping over the broken body of his wife, or the curious whispers of the crowd that had begun to collect, or the traffic noises of a city in the morning, or the wail of the ambulance which a few minutes later forced its way down the street, much too late.

VII

I awoke a few moments later to see Charles kneeling over me. "Wake up," he was whispering frantically. "Come on. Wake up." He was shaking me. I didn't want to wake up. I didn't want to move or think. I lay still, but he had seen my eyes open and now he started to pull me up. "Come on. Get up," he whispered urgently.

My mind started to clear. "Where's Ed?" I asked him.

"With Alice. We have to hurry. There isn't much time."

"But Alice is dead?" For a moment I thought I might have been dreaming the whole thing. My mind was still so misty.

"Yes. She's dead."

"And Ed is with her? Dead too?"

"He went with her body. He's not dead." Charles took hold of my hands and started dragging me forward. I could do nothing but struggle to my feet and let him lead me,

"Where are we going?"

"I have to find a job."

"Now?"

"Yes. Now."

"But Ed," I objected. "What about Ed?"

"He wants to be alone for a while. It was a shock, of course. Quite a shock. He didn't know what he was saying. He didn't mean it. So now I have to find a job and move up here and take care of Ed. He'll need me more than ever." Charles had remembered to bring my purse and now he rummaged through it until he found the car key. "You drive," he commanded.

"I can't." It was no lie. The dashboard seemed aswarm with dials, meaningless circles and points. I put my hand on the steering wheel and knew I could never find the strength to make it turn. "I can't."

"You have to. I have to think."

He pressed the key into my hand and I stabbed weakly for the ignition but could not find it. Charles took my hand and directed the key into place turning it so that the

motor started. I sat for a moment with my arms like lead pipes in my lap. In front of me, through the window, the sunlight was a blinding glare in which objects – houses, automobiles and trees – winked on and off, reappearing and dissolving softly, rhythmically. “Hold me,” I begged him. “Hold me for one minute. Just one minute.”

He put his arms around me and clutched me tightly to him. For one beautiful, terrifying moment we clung together and I drew out of that moment a quantity of warmth and energy so great, that even when he abruptly released me and ordered me to drive I was able to put the car into gear and start it moving forward down the street.

Somewhere deep in my brain my mind functioned like a bruised and idiotically repeating phonograph record. It spoke fragments of some thought and I was only afraid that somehow the needle would be jarred and the thought completed. I didn’t want to think. I wanted to cling to this moment of non-thought, of non-judgement. It was almost like being a baby again. Almost.

Charles sat forward on the seat, his elbows on his knees, watching the street. Occasionally he would fire a direction at me. “Right. Now left.” Automatically I turned the wheel and went through the motions of driving. “Park,” Charles ordered suddenly, and I pulled over to the curb and stopped. Before I had turned off the motor Charles had leapt out of the door. “Come on.”

I followed him up the street. He went into a doorway and I stood on the sidewalk until he returned. “They aren’t open yet,” he told me.

He looked up and down the street. There was another bar across the street on the corner. He sprinted in that direction and I followed more slowly. By the time I had reached the corner Charles had already found the door locked and was looking up and down the street for another bar.

“It’s too early,” I said to him. “All the bars are closed at this hour.”

He whirled on me. “I have to find a job,” he shouted. “It is absolutely necessary. It will be much easier if you’ll keep your opinions to yourself.”

“But I want to go home. I want to leave for Los Angeles. Can’t it be some other kind of job?”

The idea seemed to make sense to him. He began craning his neck to look up and down the street and caught sight of a used car lot. An instant later he was striding rapidly towards it. He ran his fingers through his hair and straightened his collar as he went through the office door.

I followed slowly after him. The sidewalk was warm under my feet. The sun felt good. There was a thin, tired-looking man walking slowly up and down in front of the used car lot. The man was carrying a sign that said UNFAIR.

“Why are you striking?” I asked him.

He looked at me curiously. “I’m not striking,” he said, as if I had insulted him somehow.

“Then why are you carrying that sign?”

“I’m paid to carry the sign.”

“Oh.” I walked away from him and sat down on a low wall which ran along the sidewalk in front of the used cars. I wondered why other people had paid him to carry their sign. If I had a sign like that which said UNFAIR in large, beautiful red letters I would want to carry it myself, proudly, like a child with a balloon on a string. I wondered if I ought to warn Charles that the place was being picketed. I didn’t really think he would care. Even I didn’t. Did anybody care after all? Certainly not this unshaven, tired-looking man carrying the sign. Perhaps somewhere somebody cared, but we didn’t.

I watched the man walk up and down. He walked very slowly, carrying his sign with no pride, with no anger or emotion. And I sat watching him.

I know you, old man, I thought to myself. You and I are the ivy plants waiting for the rain.

VIII

When Charles came hurrying back a short time later I didn’t have to ask to know he had not found a job. He was more nervous and short-tempered than before. He seemed to have no more ideas on where to seek a job and I had no suggestions. Then suddenly his nervous energy turned into listlessness. We began to wander through the streets, looking into shop windows. There were many army surplus stores masquerading as pawnshops. Or perhaps they were pawnshops masquerading as army surplus stores. It was hard to tell; everything in the windows looked new. There were dozens of guitars and racks of jack-knives. I wondered vaguely if perhaps they had been pawned by soldiers.

While we were standing in front of one window, wondering, a man who had been loitering by the curb with some cronies approached Charles and said something in Spanish. I heard the word *dinero* and guessed the man was begging. Charles replied in Spanish, shrugging and turning his trouser pockets inside out to prove that he was also penniless. But the man obviously didn’t believe him. He laughed sarcastically and spat. “*Gringo,*” he said, turning his back on us and walking back to his friends.

His attitude grated on Charles who took a step in his direction, but I put my hand on his arm, “Let’s have some coffee, I suggested. He nodded.

We had coffee and smoked a few cigarettes. “I don’t think you’ll find anything,” I said to him. “Besides, I want to get to Los Angeles.”

“Later.”

“Later will be too late. It’s a long drive and I don’t like driving at night.”

“Later.”

We finished the coffee and went outside. Charles looked around once more at the shabby street full of shops and bars. I could tell his heart wasn’t in the search any longer. We stood silently on the sidewalk. The unresolved happenings of the morning

hung like an oppressive cloud over our heads. I knew that none of these problems were my problems. If I wanted to, I could get into my car and drive, away from the whole thing. But if I wanted to take Charles with me – and I did – then I would have to stay with him and see the situation through to its end,

“Why don’t we go back?” I suggested finally. He nodded and we found the car and drove back.

IX

When we returned to the apartment Ed Taylor was not yet home. There was nothing to do but sit down and wait. It was not a pleasant feeling being in that apartment. It was as if time had somehow stopped within those walls, and at the same time it was as if a thousand years had gone by since the last time we had been there. Our untouched cups of coffee still stood on the kitchen table. Charles emptied the cold coffee into the sink and rinsed the cups. I remembered the way Alice had looked that morning. She must have been insane, I told myself. Only insane persons take their own lives. And with all that screaming, and the knife with which she went at Charles – yes, she must have been insane.

I stretched out on the living-room couch, still feeling weak and a little dizzy. Charles sat on the edge of the couch next to me and smoked a cigarette. After a while he moved so that my head could rest on his lap. Absentmindedly he stroked my forehead and hair. I lay absolutely still so as not to interrupt, even by a movement, this gentle caress. Each stroke of his hand was like new life to me, and my flesh responded to his nearness like an ocean tide to the moon.

The room where we sat was still dim because the Venetian blinds had not been drawn up. Only one window had been thrown open to the brilliant noon and in front of this window the soft yellow curtains swelled and flapped with the breeze. It reminded me of my mother’s bedroom, and for a moment, if I closed my eyes with the image of the blowing curtains sliding across my retinas, I could picture that I really was at home and at rest and in that strange, peaceful half-existence which one could only find in sleep, or perhaps in death, or when Charles Nicolo soothed one’s forehead with his long, gentle fingers.

A car door slammed on the street outside and I felt Charles stiffen. His fingers paused on my hair and for that instant my life seemed to stand still, as if even the beat of my heart was dependent on the motion and rhythm of his fingers. There was the sound of a footstep on the stairs below. Only one footstep. As if the person mounting the stairs had taken one step up and then paused, perhaps because he had looked up the stairs and had not found the strength to continue. Or because a dizziness had swept through him, or a fear, or a sorrow so intense that he had paused after that first step to bend forward, clenching shut his eyes, attempting to recover himself, attempting to pull himself to-

gether for what would come next, trying not to cry.

I heard all that in the silence following that footstep, but I knew the sound of that silence well from the times in the past year when my father had stopped for a brief moment before ascending the front steps of our house, in order to pull the pieces of himself together.

Motionless we waited there, Charles Nicolo and I. The moment lengthened until I began to think perhaps we had been wrong and it was not Ed Taylor at all. But then we heard the next footfall, and after a shorter interval the next, until slowly, so slowly, a man came up the steps.

Charles was standing at the door as it opened, standing by as Ed Taylor came in. But I thought as the door opened: No one is entering this room. That is surely some shadow, some ghost. Could a man enter a room so dry and sad that the room seemed emptier for his presence? But then Charles snapped the door quickly shut as if to trap this ephemeral spirit and suddenly I could see that indeed a thin, dry shell of a man named Ed Taylor was standing there with us.

Charles remained behind him for an instant after closing the door. No one spoke, but Charles' face changed as if a succession of shadows and dim brightnesses was moving across it. His jaw muscles worked as if his mouth were tasting and rejecting a series of words. Finally he said, brokenly, forcing a smile, "Eddy, old man. It's me, Charlie."

"Hi, Charlie boy," Ed said without looking round. He came over to the couch and sat down on it at the far end from me.

"How does it go, Eddy?" Charles came over and knelt in front of Ed, looking up into his face like a child,

"It goes."

"I'm coming to take care of you, Eddy. You won't be alone."

"I'm there now," replied Ed, smiling, but not at Charles.

"Not for long. I'm staying here to take care of you."

Ed glanced briefly at Charles and then away again. "No. Charlie boy," he said gently. "I meant what I said before."

"No you didn't. You didn't know what you were saying then. It was the grief. And now you can't possibly remember clearly. You said that to me when you were out of your head with grief. It didn't make any sense at all."

Ed shook his head and ran his hand across his face so close that his limp features were distorted. He wasn't going to argue. He had no strength for it. "No," he exhaled with weary finality.

"But I *can't* leave," Charles cried. "I have no place to go. I have no money to get anywhere." He waited hopefully.

"I can take you to Los Angeles," I said. "I'm leaving in a few minutes."

Charles whirled toward me with a look so fierce that I trembled.

"Go with her," Ed said. "Go with her."

“Eddy . . .”

“Go with her.”

With bent head Charles crouched in front of Ed. Then a look of decision crossed his face. Getting up quickly he strode across the room and into the bedroom where he began taking his clothes from the closet. I followed him and began packing my own clothes into my suitcase. When we were both finished Charles took our bags and started toward the front door. I followed with the odds and ends.

At the door Charles paused and looked down at Ed who was still sitting in the same place, his head in his hands. “I’ll be back by Friday,” Charles told him. “I’ve got a job now so I can stay.”

I stared at Charles. It was the first lie I had ever heard him tell.

“Is that all right, Ed?” he asked. “I’ll be coming back here to stay and take care of you. You won’t be alone any more.”

Ed didn’t answer. He didn’t raise his face. He didn’t move a muscle of his body. We stood there almost a full minute, waiting for his answer. Finally I saw his head move, ever so slightly. I would have sworn he had shaken his head, no. But, to my surprise, Charles brightened as if he had seen him nod affirmation. He stood up straighter and took a firmer grip on the suitcase. “*Adios,*” he said. “*Hasta la vista.*” Then he went out of the door and started down the stairs.

I stood a moment, wondering what I might say and knowing that whatever I said would not make the least bit of difference. “Goodbye,” I managed finally. “I’m sorry.”

But if Ed had heard my mumbled commiseration he showed no sign. After hesitating a moment I went through the front door and closed it softly behind me.

By the time I reached the sidewalk Charles had set our baggage down behind the car and was pacing up and down impatiently. I glanced at the sun and then at my watch. It was almost one o’clock. Anxious to get to Los Angeles, I was happy to see that Charles too was eager to be on his way.

“Let me have the keys,” he snapped. I gave him the keys and he stowed the suitcases in the trunk compartment and locked it.

“Do you want me to drive?” I asked.

“I’ll drive.” A moment later we were going rapidly down the street. I kept my eyes open for a sign indicating the route south to Los Angeles, but when I finally spotted one Charles paid it no heed.

“Where are we going?” I asked him.

“I have to stop off somewhere for a moment.”

It wasn’t until we were downtown again that Charles pulled over to the curb. Leaping out of the car he ran into a building. I waited almost ten minutes before he came out again. In the rear view mirror I could see him hurrying towards the car, but just as I expected him to get in he hurried on by and went into another building further down the street. His dark hair hung wildly over his forehead and he pushed it back

determinedly before disappearing out of sight.

This time I waited almost twenty minutes before he reappeared. He came out onto the sidewalk, but instead of coming towards the car he stood uncertainly a moment, turning, pausing, looking first up the street and then down it.

I got out of the car and ran up to him. "What are you doing?"

"You'll just have to be patient," he said, looking over my head. Just then he seemed to see what he was looking for and started swiftly up the street. I ran after him.

"What are you doing?" I demanded. "Just tell me."

"What do you think?"

"I don't know. Are you still looking for a job?"

"Yes," he shouted.

He hurried on, but I slowed to a walk. I stood on the sidewalk looking after him, and then I called: "But are you coming south? Are you coming with me?"

"Wait," he shouted back over his shoulder.

He disappeared into another building and I returned to the car. I looked at my watch. It was already nearly a quarter to two.

For the next two hours I waited in the car, smoking cigarettes. Every once in a while I would catch sight of Charles moving back and forth, up and down the street. Every time Charles went into a building I would not breathe easily until he reappeared. I had the strongest fear that he would go into one of those buildings and not come out again. Every time I saw his face and could tell he had not found a job I would sigh with relief.

When he had covered the first block of buildings he crossed the street and began on the next. I thought I would move the car forward, but realized he had locked the ignition and had taken the key with him. My first reaction was one of relief, even joy. It meant he would return. But on second thought, I wondered if he might not have done it as a precaution. As a precaution? Against what? Could he possibly have imagined I would leave without him? Of course not. I was imagining things again. Why would I possibly want to leave without him?

It was four o'clock when I saw Charles heading up the street towards the car. This time it was real. He was returning. He had given up. His face was haggard and there was no fire left in his eyes. I offered to drive and he handed over the keys without a word. Soon we were on our way south. The sun was still high, the day was hot. It was out of the question to take Highway 1 through Carmel, but perhaps, if we made good time, we would be at the ocean before it was too dark to see it. I felt grateful that we were at last on our way.

PART FIVE: *The Grapevine*

I

I was both grateful and happy; I was returning home and Charles was coming with me. He was coming with me because I was a new and different person, a person self-molded to his specifications of what a person must be: patient, understanding and un-critical. I had replaced Ed for him and he had replaced Barbara for me. We shared a bond, Charles and I. We had been through a lot together in these few days and we understood one another. Out of the entire weekend of poor, perishing fools, out of all the destruction and confusion, misunderstandings and tears, only we had remained intact, entering and leaving together.

All this I had understood that morning as I lay in his lap feeling his gentle, soothing hand on my forehead.

As we started off, Charles was understandably downhearted and tense. Out of the corner of my eye I could see he was scowling. I said nothing, waiting for his mood to change. That much I had already learned and I congratulated myself for my forbearance. Sure enough, after a while Charles relaxed back in his seat and seemed to be taking some interest in the scenery which was not, however, very interesting along that part of the highway.

“How many hours do you suppose it is between here and Los Angeles?” he asked after a while.

I calculated. “Nine or ten I suppose, if we don’t rush. I want to get home, but I’m in no desperate hurry.”

He got out the road map and studied it, then he looked ahead at the road. We were coming into a small town called Gilroy. “How’s the gas.?” he asked.

“We have a quarter tank.”

“I think we ought to buy some here,” he said. “Gas prices vary along the coast. It’s a lot cheaper up here.”

I didn’t want to protest that a few cents a gallon more or less didn’t mean anything to me. If it meant something to Charles then I would be happy to stop and fill the tank. I

drove into the first service station we came to and directed the attendant to fill the tank and check the water and oil.

"I'll drive for a while," Charles said when we were ready to go. "You must be tired."

I wasn't particularly tired, but I was flattered that he was concerned. I gave him the keys and moved over on the seat, but not very far over, wanting to be close in case he felt like putting his arm around me.

I paid for the gas and Charles started the engine and swung the car on to the highway. But to my surprise, instead of continuing on in the direction we had been traveling, he made a U-turn and then turned eastward along a narrower road. "Where are we going?" I asked quickly.

"We're taking Highway 99."

"But 99 is miles inland."

"It's still the fastest way. It'll save us a good hour."

I was surprised. "Are you in such a rush to get home?"

"Of course. Aren't you?"

"No, not especially," I said. "If you're doing this for me, then perhaps it would be better to take the coast route."

"I'm not doing it for you," Charles said. "I'm doing it because I want to get to Los Angeles, and the sooner the better."

"But why?"

"Don't you know?"

"No." I was really puzzled. "Wouldn't you rather take a little more time and enjoy the ride?"

"How can I enjoy the ride," Charles asked me then, "when I hate you so much?"

His words roared in my brain. "Hate me?" I blurted, "Do you really hate me?"

"Of course," he replied. "I thought you knew that. You're such a perceptive person, generally speaking, always analyzing everything, hypersensitive, observant. One would imagine with all that machinery working you'd come up with a fact or two."

"But then," I stammered, "why did you go north with me? Why are you coming home with me?"

"I had to get to San José. Now I have to get home. It's very uncomplicated really,"

"But yesterday, when you . . . when we . . ." I broke off, unable to phrase the question. I knew he knew what I meant.

"My gosh," he exclaimed, "look how much gas you've had to buy! How do you think I feel about that? I'm a man, after all. You may not think I'm a man. Sometimes I think you consider me a creature of some sort who has no feelings and no rights. But I feel terrible that you have to pay for the gas all the time. I have to make up for it in some way. I know it seems like a form of male prostitution, but you wanted to have it, you can't deny you were hot for me, and it was the least I could do after all the money you've

spent.”

“You did it for me? As a favor?” I wasn’t sure whether he meant it generously. It was either some strange form of generosity or an unbelievably horrible act of cynicism.

“Good grief,” he cried, “there you go again, trying to find *good* in everything. Your faith in people is really astounding. Right now you’re trying to believe that I had intercourse with you out of genuine feelings of compassion for your pocketbook. You can’t seem to realize that I had to keep you happy for a purpose, the purpose being that I had to get to San José and back. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” I managed to say.

“I don’t think you really do understand. That is, you may understand right this minute, but as soon as you give yourself time to think you’ll come up with some sort of explanation that suits you better. You’ll manage to find some flattery in what I’ve said. You’ll twist it all around and come up with something beautiful. Or else you’ll take it as some sort of joke.”

“Isn’t it a joke?” I asked him. “Aren’t you just making fun?”

“You see?” he cried. “You see? You didn’t even have to think it all over. Your rationalizations come automatically, like gum out of a machine. I bet you’ve already forgotten that I said I hated you.”

“Do you really hate me?”

“There! You see? You see?”

I was going to ask him why. I wanted to know the reason. But I couldn’t speak. I realized I had moved across the seat away from him, almost in a slow, instinctive recoil, and now I sat motionless and dazed. Why did he hate me? What had I done? Hadn’t I tried to become what he wanted? I had changed so much of myself for him, both values and attitudes.

But I did not ask because I could not speak. I knew he was expecting me to ask, waiting for the question, and I wanted to oblige him by asking, but I simply could not. Perhaps I could not speak because to ask would mean that I believed, really believed that he hated me. But I could not believe it. I could not. But why couldn’t I believe? And there was that question coming around and hitting me again. Why? It was like being caught in a threshing machine, being knocked down by the same question every time I tried to rise. Why? Why?

“Be honest,” Charles said. “Admit that you knew it from the very first moment.”

Yes, I had known it from that very first moment when I had first seen him walking up our street. I had known it from the moment I saw the muscles flicker in his face, and in his eyes an insanity; from when our gaze first met, he on the street and I in the eye of my house. I had known even then that he hated me,

“And then later,” he prompted. “Later you knew it for sure, didn’t you?”

I had known from the first touch of his silken shirtsleeves when I had stood holding the ladder for Ernst that Ernst would die if I should relinquish my grip to Charles

Nicolo. And when I had asked Charles if he had killed Ernst and he had replied: “What for?” I could have told him right then what his motive was. But I had wanted to believe.

“And later you wanted to look at my body so you asked me to take off my shirt. I showed you then how I felt, though it was subtle. I hesitated, thinking: If I do not take off my shirt I will offend her now, and I cannot afford to offend her yet. But if I take it off now, later she will understand why I did it and it will offend her a thousand times more bitterly. It was subtle, but you are sensitive. You understood, but you still wouldn’t allow yourself to believe.”

I knew it then. Of course I did. I knew all along, but I couldn’t believe because there was no logic in it. There seemed to be more logic in the faith I had that I didn’t want to lose – the faith I had always had in logic, in answers, in reasonable thought and action.

“I must admit I did throw you off at one point,” Charles continued. “The time we were planting the flowers. As usual you took the whole thing symbolically and pretended to yourself that we were creating life to make up for the death of the gardener. Symbolism is a handy thing for persons like you. It’s so arbitrary. The color green can symbolize springtime and rebirth or it can just as easily mean rot, decay and death. As far as I was concerned, that day I was just trying to earn the rest of the money to pay the traffic fine.”

He was trying to force me to ask why. He wanted the question. He expected it. But I could not ask because I could not speak. Yet dazed as I was, I found amusement in that. It was like the one last strength I had left. I wanted to laugh because I was making him wait.

“I never lied to you,” Charles said, his voice rising with excitement. “I only point that out to you because I know you consider honesty a virtue. I never lied to you, but *somebody* lied. *Somebody* wasn’t speaking the truth.”

It was true that he had never lied to me. But I had lied to myself from the very first moment, I to whom truth was, as he said, a virtue. I had lied over and over again, and now I was here having to listen to the truth and feeling afraid – not of Charles, because he had never lied to me – but of myself who was the real liar. I was afraid of myself because we were driving along this absurd easterly road between two highways and I was wanting to laugh because I wouldn’t, couldn’t ask him why, and therefore I held a power over Charles that was no power. I was afraid that I might laugh when there was nothing funny to laugh about, and yet I felt like laughing, knowing if I laughed the sounds would come out wild and hysterical and meaningless, like the laughter of a person in a madhouse who laughs all day over nothing funny. Nothing funny at all.

II

He drove swiftly into the ripe yellow and brown landscape along the easy curving road. The sun at our backs seemed to grow hotter and I had the curious sensation that it had changed its course to follow after us.

My mind was a hideous jumble of truths and lies, facts and fantasies so intermixed that I thought it would take me a lifetime to sort them all out. I wondered if it were even possible. But, whether it was or not, I knew I would try. I knew I would be drawn to this confusion of glittering irrationalities with the same magnetic curiosity and awe which drew me as a child to examine my grandmother's great wicker basket of assorted buttons which she used on the dresses she would make for me. The basket was a kaleidoscope of buttons, sweet with the odor of long, black, wrinkled vanilla beans. Carefully I would paw through the buttons, trying to find the most beautiful for my dress. But the most beautiful buttons never had a mate. Only the plain ones matched, and I would sit pondering the sorrowful mystery of those beautiful unmatched buttons while my grandmother would dredge out the little plain ones and sew them down the front of my dress, where suddenly they would look very pretty. I remember that her thumb was always bent. As much as I tried I could not unbend that thumb. I would . . .

"Have you rationalized everything yet?" Charles asked suddenly. "Have you decided that I love you?"

He drew me back but still I did not answer; I did not ask. I reached into my mind and sifted out one beautiful thought. The flowers. Those innocent symbols. Had they managed to survive? Had we planted them properly after all? And had someone remembered to water them? Suddenly I was desperate to see those plants, to see if they had taken root and started to grow. It seemed to me as if my own fate was somehow interwoven with the fate of those poor roses and camellias and cacti, and that my own survival depended upon theirs. Perhaps they were already dying in this same blistering sun which was beating down upon my own head. Perhaps...

"Have you straightened out the ranks of your army of symbols?" he asked. "Have you marched them onto the battlefield, and have they defeated truth again and set you up as queen over a land of fantasy?"

Perhaps they were already dead, and somewhere on some highway in this endless state I too would die. What for? Why? I glanced over at Charles. Behind his dark glasses his eyes burned straight ahead, his tight lips twisted slightly in what might have been a smile. Why? What for? Through what logic? And I could almost hear him answer: "The logic is in my character."

III

We drove and drove. The road went on and on. Where, after all, were we? Taking out the road map I scanned it. Here we were, on a thin red line stretching between two yellow lines. Highway 152. The red line seemed very long. I doubted that we would save any time by coming this way. We would not reach the Grapevine until after dark.

There were few cars on this stretch of road. The way wound inland over low rolling hills and then straightened out through flat farmlands. It felt strange to be traveling eastwards when my whole body ached towards the south. It seemed as if time had stopped for this interval, as if we were getting nowhere.

“Barbara Johanssen,” Charles said. “Now there is a lovely girl. Filled to the skin with compassion; the kind a symbol-maker can hardly resist. As I recall, you originally associated her with purity. Purity and life. You wanted to touch her, I believe. Or was it a tree that you wanted to touch? It’s all the same really. One symbol is just as meaningless as another. It’s no wonder she ended up by hating you.”

His words stung like whips. It was all true, of course. Every word Charles spoke was true. The shame in me mingled with another feeling – what was it? Yes, I would be honest; it was jealousy. Barbara’s name on his lips. Jealousy.

“We had wonderful talks, Barbara and I. We spoke a lot about you, so you don’t have to feel jealous. I’m sure it pleases you that Barbara and I spoke a great deal about you. Because you were so lonely, practically nonexistent in your own mind. But we were keeping you alive in our conversation. You were not forgotten. You were always there with us, and that is why we didn’t need to be with you. Doesn’t that make you feel better?”

He had been close to her. He had probed into that golden head. What had he found there? What had she said? I was aching to know, but I could not speak, I could not ask.

“You’re probably dying to know what she said,” Charles continued. “Well, of course she knows how you feel about her. She knows you consider her one step above a moron, perhaps even that you find her quaint at times.”

No. No. It isn’t true. She doesn’t understand.

“She understands perfectly well that you don’t love her for herself as a person, but as some sort of symbol, a symbol of something you lack within yourself. As for Barbara, she finds you rather self-centered and spoiled. I think the word she used was selfish. She said she had a lovely weekend planned for you with all sorts of nice things to do, but you couldn’t wait to get away. All you were thinking about was yourself all the time. She said you were so busy thinking about yourself that you hardly spoke to her friends and then, to top it off, you tried to buy them off by paying for their drinks.”

Oh God, it was true. True. Every word of it. But how did Barbara know? How

did she guess?

“Barbara is a lot more aware than you give her credit for. She just doesn’t make a fuss about things all the time the way you do. She has no compulsion to show off her awareness every two minutes. She doesn’t get jealous over every little thing because she doesn’t take everything personally. But there is one thing I’m curious about,” Charles continued. “There was something she did. Something you were about to tell me that morning in the car when instead you said she had been snoring. What had she really done?”

The words forced their way out of the silence of my throat. “She put her arms around me in her sleep. She held me in her arms!”

“You see?” Charles cried. “You go right ahead and blurt out her secrets. She asked you not to tell anybody as if her life depended on it, and now I hardly have to ask to find out.”

“But it was nothing. Nothing!”

“Only a secret which she asked you to keep.”

“Because she didn’t understand that it was nothing, that it meant nothing.”

“How can you say that? Of course she understood. She told me all about it that morning over our beer when you were passing out with self-pity in the car. She said she wanted to tell me because she knew that you would tell me in spite of the fact that she had asked you to keep it a secret. She just wanted to make sure I got the story right – that you wouldn’t embellish it by saying that she kissed you too, or by saying that she wasn’t really asleep, but only pretending to be asleep so that she could put her arms around you.”

“Barbara thought that?” I gasped. No. Impossible. He must be lying. But Charles never lies. Not to me.

“Did you wake her up when you felt her arms around you?”

“No, but . . .”

“In other words, you let her do what she wanted, as if she were a man.”

“I didn’t want that,” I cried. “I didn’t want her to do anything. I only . . .”

“Perhaps *you* were the one who felt masculine. Perhaps I have the roles reversed. I’m only repeating what Barbara . . .”

“Sometimes I do feel a little masculine when . . .”

“You see?”

“. . . but only so far as it’s normal . . .”

“. . . for a man to feel. A normal man.”

“Why?” I screamed. “Why are you doing this to me? Why do you hate me?”

He seemed to relax at the question as if he had been waiting a long time for it. He smiled and his voice was very calm. “Because,” he said, “you are a gringo.”

IV

Heat burst through my pores, turning me suddenly cold. I stared at him. A gringo? A gringo? What was a gringo? The word made no sense at first. It was so unexpected. But I had heard it recently. Of course. It was the word the Mexicans called the Americans, the Yankees.

“But,” I blurted, “you’re a gringo too. You aren’t Mexican.”

Charles said nothing. His eyes were riveted to the road and his face looked grey with anger. I was right and he knew I was right and he had no answer.

“If you hate gringos,” I continued excitedly, hardly able to form the words as they tumbled from my mouth, “then you must hate yourself, because you’re a gringo too.”

“I haven’t the slightest idea what you’re babbling about,” Charles said.

He was right. I had started to babble. That was the word for it. But I was right too. That much I knew. Charles hated himself. He was an American but he identified completely with the Mexicans. What hate he must contain, I thought. They probably never accepted him, those little beggar children with their buckets of coal. He was the gringo who went to school. The idea was suddenly funny. The beggars had not accepted him. If the beggars would not, then who would? How low on the rungs of society would he have to go to find acceptance? As low, perhaps, as I?

The answer was so clear. He’d torn himself in half with his hate. He’d split his personality down the middle. He’d driven himself insane. Without a doubt he was insane. But you knew it all along, I accused myself. You knew it from the first moment when he stood there in the street and raised his eyes to look into yours. Then why did you come with him, when you already knew?

The answer ran through me like a shudder: The logic is in my character. I must be as mad as he.

V

We continued to drive inland, east into the state. I sat dully and my mind worked round and round like a beast tied to a water wheel, in ceaseless repetition. In that half hour or so of silence I relived in my mind every moment Charles and I had shared from the first time I’d seen him. I recalled every detail of our acquaintanceship, every word we had exchanged as though they had been etched with merciless candor on a reel of film. It was the same story, only now it was seen for the second time and with the correct motives supplied – the motives of hate and insanity.

The death of our gardener had been no accident. Why had he done it? For eleven dollars. Case closed. The death of Alice Taylor had also been willfully engineered. Why? Love triangle; jealousy. Case closed. But were there no plusses here? Yes, Charles had saved the life of the Mexican boy. Why had he done that? Settling a debt?

He had said later something about repaying a debt when I asked him if he had ever tried to cape the bull. Perhaps his Mexican friend had saved him from the bull and so he had saved the life of a Mexican boy in return. It made sense, yet it didn't make sense. None of it made sense except on some level of unreality, in terms of a highly literal pattern of cause and effect.

So far my reasoning seemed intact. I told myself that I had established that Charles was insane and that he was most probably a murderer. It followed that my own life was in danger. He needed my car, but he didn't need me. He didn't even require a reasonable motive to kill me. But the thing that puzzled me was this: Why wasn't I afraid of him? Why wasn't I plotting to escape? I was letting him carry me along like a dumb object, a suitcase, wherever he might want to take me.

My lack of fear of Charles made me fear myself, made me fear my own lack of fear. It meant something within me was not quite right, was not functioning according to reason. It meant that I had something of madness inside. And that thought was frightening beyond all thoughts of death.

I *must* be afraid of him, I told myself. I must at least attempt to feel afraid. I must take some interest in making an escape. I could signal to another car in passing. I could write HELP in lipstick on the outside of my door without letting him notice. I could leap from the car the next time he slowed down. There were any number of ways for me to save myself. But the truth was that I could not become interested in any one of them. I would not try to escape and I think he knew it. Perhaps he'd been right when he said I could not believe seriously in unreason.

"I may have been wrong," Charles said suddenly. "You were probably right when you said the other way was shorter. This road seems endless."

"It's hard to tell," I replied, surprising myself with the naturalness of my voice. "Maps are often deceptive. This way might still turn out to be quicker, if not shorter." And then I added as an afterthought, "Are you feeling tired?"

"I'm a little tired," Charles admitted.

"I'd be happy to drive."

"Thanks. I'd appreciate a rest." He waited until a car behind us had passed and then pulled to the side of the road. Getting out he walked round the car while I slid over in the seat. A moment later we were on our way again.

I wanted to laugh. I wanted to sing with happiness. He trusted me! A trust so strong was tantamount to respect. He respected me because he knew I understood him. A respect so great was tantamount to love. A love so great was equal to the strongest hate. He could only hate me with such intensity if he loved me. Love and hate at the highest level were one. He could only hate me so much if he respected me, and he could only show this respect by trust,

The road was flat and arrow-straight. My joy had given me new energy. New life coursed through me until my skin felt tight to bursting. It needed some release, an out-

let, or I would burst. Wanting to fly I pressed my foot down hard on the gas pedal. The car shot forward, seventy, then eighty miles an hour.

Charles, who was sitting next to me with his head back and eyes closed, suddenly lurched sideways and looked hard at the speedometer. “You’re going too fast,” he shouted. “Do you want to get a ticket? You’ll get a ticket if you go this fast.”

Immediately I took my foot off the gas and applied the brake. The car slowed to fifty. We seemed to be crawling. “Is this all right?” I asked.

“We’ll never get to Los Angeles at this rate,” he answered angrily.

I pressed the accelerator and we gained some speed. “How fast do you want me to go?” I could feel my body tightening as if I expected a physical blow.

“Drive at the speed limit. Always drive at the speed limit.”

“What *is* the speed limit?” I couldn’t remember. I couldn’t think.

“You should know. You’ve lived in California all your life. Don’t you ever try to learn these things, or do you always do what you like, regardless of what the law says?”

“I know, but I can’t remember.” I tried to think. My foot was tapping with nervousness on the accelerator. “I think it’s sixty.”

“Then go at sixty,” he said. “You see, it’s very simple really. If you drive at the lawful speed then you don’t get traffic tickets and you get where you’re going without any trouble and bother.”

It seemed perfectly logical. Why had I driven so fast? Sixty was a good speed, the perfect, safe, legal speed, and therefore the logical speed. I forced my body to relax. Every few seconds I glanced at the speedometer to make sure I kept at sixty,

“Look out!”

I stamped my foot on the brake and strained my eyes forward. Ahead of us a truck had stopped, waiting to make a left turn off the road on to a dirt lane in the fields. He was still hundreds of feet ahead of us, but I hadn’t realized he had stopped and I was bearing down on him at sixty miles an hour. The fact that I had not noticed he was stopping frightened me.

“You’ve got to watch where you’re going,” Charles shouted. “Do you want to get us killed?”

“No,” I said, fighting to keep my nerves under control.

“That’s the first rule of driving,” Charles explained angrily. “If a car ahead of you wants to turn left you have to slow down and let him. You can’t go banging into him.”

“*I know* that,” I said. “I just didn’t realize he had stopped. How could I know anybody would want to turn off this road? Why would anyone want to turn off it? We’re in the middle of nowhere.”

“Just because you have no business in these parts doesn’t mean that other people don’t. If a farmer came to Beverly Hills you wouldn’t want him to go charging down the streets without looking just because he had no business there.” He paused a moment and then demanded, “Would you?”

I didn't reply because the answer was so obvious.

"Would you?" he demanded again.

"But . . ."

"*Would* you!"

"No," I finally said. "But the thing is . . ."

"Who's right?" Charles asked then. "Who's right?"

"The question was . . ."

"Who's right!" he shouted.

"All right. You're right," I snapped back, "but the question . . ."

He took a deep breath. "Who's wrong?"

I stared at him,

"*Who's wrong?*"

I was afraid if I laughed I would not be able to stop and if I cried I would not be able to stop. "*I'm wrong,*" I shouted finally, to put an end to it.

What was he doing to me? What was he doing? My brain whirled and repeated like a cracked record. Watch out! Not too fast! Not too slow! I must do everything right, absolutely right. I must relax and do everything right. For by now my body was absolutely rigid with fear while my foot chattered helplessly against the accelerator. I must keep an eye out for turning cars. I looked ahead. The nearest car was a half mile away. I watched it carefully, lest it should stop to turn.

Charles lurched sideways in front of me. I glanced at the speedometer. It read over seventy. "That's too fast," he screamed.

I drew my foot back as if it had been burned. My stomach seemed to turn itself over and for a moment I thought I would vomit. The speedometer needle returned to sixty. Charles never took his eyes off the needle, as if he were staring it down. My foot was shaking so hard I could hardly keep the needle on the sixty mark.

"I thought you knew how to drive," Charles said, "On the way up you did fine. I don't know why you're cracking up now."

"I don't know either," I said, and I didn't. What *was* wrong with me? Why couldn't I drive properly? I kept my eye on the needle. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Charles look up suddenly. I followed his gaze. Ahead of us the car had slowed down to turn off the road.

"Do you see that?" Charles asked tensely.

"Yes."

"Then you know what to do."

"I have to slow down," I replied, as if repeating a school lesson. For some reason the task seemed tremendous. I felt like a small child suffering over the terrible chore of solving a problem in simple addition. It should have been automatic, but I had to think. I thought wrong. With utter concentration I applied my foot to the accelerator instead of to the brake. The car shot ahead.

“Slow down!” Charles yelled.

I jammed my foot on the brake. The other car was only a few yards ahead of us and turning right. I swerved the car to the left to pass around him. Charles threw himself in front of me to look past and see if it was all clear to pass. I had seen it was clear. That he should check was useless and insulting, but I said nothing. When we had passed the car, Charles slouched back in the seat and reached into my purse for a cigarette.

“Sixty,” he said.

What was wrong? What was wrong with me? Why couldn't I drive a perfectly straight road without doing everything wrong? Why didn't I notice when cars ahead slowed down? I stared at the road. It was so straight into the horizon. The lines of perspective were so clear. Then suddenly I saw what was wrong. There were only two dimensions there. The third dimension, depth, was not registering. I was hurtling into a photograph. I had to stop. I had to stop. “Why don't you drive?” I cried.

“You're doing just fine,” Charles replied pleasantly. “Just take it easy and watch where you're going so we don't both get killed,”

“You want to live? You want so much to live?”

“I don't want to die,” Charles said. “Not here. Not with you.”

I stepped again on the gas and the picture came flying towards us. That is what a fly must see when the swatter descends. But when it seemed we were surely about to smash, nothing happened. Nothing whatever. We were still going, still moving down the straight line between two planes; a moving point on a line on a map on the seat of a car in a vast, rectangular universe.

VI

We arrived finally at the junction of Highways 152 and 99. I asked for, and received, permission to stop and turn the wheel over to Charles. As soon as I had released the wheel and moved over in the seat, my limbs seemed to go limp. When Charles put the car in gear and accelerated, it surprised me that there existed in the world enough energy to propel a car forward. Until I remembered that Charles had energy. He had all the energy.

We drove for a while in silence and then Charles said gently, “I know what some of your problem is. Your mother is dying. Sometimes when a person's mother is dying it puts him or her under a great psychological strain. The mind is liable to play tricks, the imagination becomes overtaxed.”

It didn't surprise me to hear Charles speak like this. It didn't surprise me because I no longer expected or anticipated anything. I was only dumbly grateful that he was not now angry. But at the same time I was afraid to agree or disagree with him, so I said nothing. What he had said, as usual, was true.

“Why don't you close your eyes and try to get a little sleep?”

I was afraid to say anything, so I grunted, nodded, lay back my head and closed my eyes. I knew I wouldn't sleep, but I could rest. Rest and think and remember. I didn't want to ponder the present any more. Charles understood more about that than I did. I didn't have any more answers or interpretations – just an occasional reflex or an automatic response. It was like the way my mother must have felt before she stopped feeling things altogether.

“Can't you sleep?” Charles asked after a while.

“It's too hot,” I said.

It was very hot. It must have been after six p.m. but the sun was still high and the temperature this far from the coast above ninety degrees. Hot, dry air blasted in on us through the open windows. I opened the air vent at my feet and pushed open the wind wing to break the suffocating rush of air coming through the window.

“What are you doing?” Charles demanded.

I told him.

“That's not how they work,” he said angrily. “You can't open just one wind wing. Either you open both of them or neither. That's how they work.”

I didn't want to argue. I was too tired and hot. I closed the wind wing.

“No,” Charles shouted. “If you want it open just tell me and I'll open mine too. We have to work together in this thing. You're not alone in this car, you know. You aren't the only person present.”

“What do you want me to do?” He confused me so. I could feel my muscles beginning to tighten again.

“If you want turbulent air inside the car, then we'll both close our windows and open our wind wings. Is that what you want?”

“I don't know. Perhaps that's what I want. I'm just so hot.”

“All right. Then simply say: ‘I'd like turbulent air inside the car’, and then we'll both together close our windows and open the wind wings. Is that clear?”

“Yes,” I said, but it wasn't clear. I didn't know what he wanted me to do and he made no move to open his wind wing. Did he actually want me to ask? Finally I said, “I'd like turbulent air, please.”

“Certainly,” Charles said. “Then together.” Together we rolled up our windows and opened our wind wings. Sure enough, the front of the car was filled with turbulent air. I began to relax.

We rode a few miles in silence, testing the motion of the air. I began to wish I had not asked for turbulent air. It was too buffeting. I wanted to open my window a little too, but I didn't dare. We drove on a few more miles and I began thinking of other things and before I knew it I had rolled down my window.

Charles whirled in his seat. “What are you doing? When you open your window you have to tell me so that I can open mine at the same time. They have to be exactly the same or it doesn't work.”

I was too stunned and confused to say or do anything. Charles rolled down his window. He rolled it down exactly as far as I had rolled mine, glancing over several times to compare them, raising his window slightly or lowering it until there could not have been more than a fiftieth of an inch difference between them.

We drove a few more silent miles. Finally I gathered up my courage and said, “I think the air is a little too turbulent. Can we shut our wind wings a little?”

“Certainly,” Charles said, very obligingly. “When we do it together like this, then everything is fine,” He was careful to shut his wind wing exactly as far as I shut mine.

How easy that was, I told myself, shaking with relief. I must remember to ask him the next time. I must remember. But even as I lectured myself, and swore to remember, I knew the next time I would forget.

VII

The most one can say for Highway 99, which slices down the center of California, is that it is straight and fast. It is a main artery for trucks carrying produce from the valleys of central California to the more densely populated areas in the north and south. But while most of the State is filled with landscapes of rugged beauty and magnificence, Highway 99 runs through an area which is surprising for its drab monotony, and, in the summer, for its heat.

As we drove along I wondered at the endurance of the machine we were in, which allowed it to continue to move through that sea of heat. It seemed the tires would expand and explode beneath us. There was a time when such thoughts would make me plan in my mind what I would do in case a tire blew out; how I would shield my face and upper body with my arms; how I would force my body in that split second to relax in order to absorb the impact of the crash. But this time I made no such plans. Somehow it didn't seem to matter. If I were to live, I would live; if I were to die . . .”

“What did your mother say to your taking a trip at this time?” Charles asked.

“She didn't know,” I replied. “She's in a stupor.” I remembered how my mother's eyes had seemed to focus on me that day before I left. I didn't tell him.

“Are you sure she doesn't know? How can you be sure? A stupor isn't a coma, after all.”

“I'm sure.” But there was no assurance in my voice.

“There must have been a time when she was aware of things – a time when she knew she was going to die.”

“Yes.”

“I doubt it,” Charles said, unexpectedly. “People never know they're going to die. That is, they know it, but they don't believe it. It's the people who aren't going to die right away that always think they are. I suppose she asked for reassurances.”

“Yes.”

“She would ask if she were dying just to hear it said that she wasn’t?”

“Yes.”

“And then you would tell her that she was going to recover and everything was going to be all right.” He shook his head and laughed. “That lie. That old gag practiced on everyone who is dying.”

“She would ask me if she were dying and I would say no.” She would say, sitting there puzzled on the edge of the bed and unable to find the energy to do the day’s marketing or even to get dressed: What’s wrong with me? I must be dying. And I would reply, as convincingly as I was able: Of course not. I wish you wouldn’t talk that way. It’s silly. Oh, no, she would say. I’m dying. I know I’m dying. But at the same time there would be a question in her eyes. She would wait hopefully to be contradicted. And so I would say: Of course you aren’t dying. Don’t talk that way. You had a successful operation and it’s only a matter of time before you’re completely recovered. And then I would clinch the lie by asking: You don’t feel ill, do you? And of course she would say no, because she felt no pain with the tumor, and the question would go out of her eyes for a few minutes and she would be at peace,

“Nobody can ever believe it,” Charles said. “It never ceases to amaze me. And the more obvious it becomes, the less they believe.”

“I’ll believe it when the time comes,” I said.

“When the time comes,” Charles repeated. And then he laughed.

I didn’t understand why Charles had laughed and I didn’t ponder it. I was too tired to think about the reasons for sarcasm, to interpret ironical sallies. His mind had too many undercurrents; one could drown in them if one weren’t careful.

“Do you love your mother?” he asked then.

I hesitated. A week ago I would have found a thousand different answers for that question, a thousand nuances and qualifications. Now I searched the corners of my mind and came up with only one. “Yes. I love her very much.”

“I doubt it,” Charles said. “I think you hate her. You have to hate a person to leave her when she’s dying.”

“She’s not alone. My father’s with her. And the nurse.” The nurse!

“You must hate your father too, to run away at a time like this, when he needs you the most.”

“No, I love them, I love them!” When we learned she was ill we found, all of us, that we loved each other. But it was too late, almost too late; the operation might take her from us. Suddenly there were a thousand beautiful things which we had never said to one another, a thousand tendernesses to profess. But no time. There was no time and no opportunity. Doctors took over what time remained and we stood helplessly by, my father and mother and I, with a thousand hopeless yearnings, like tardy passengers watching their ship depart, thinking it could all have been different if we had only started earlier.

But the operation brought her back to us and for a while it seemed she would recover and there would be time to say everything. We were being granted a second chance. Now there was time to show our love. Now there was a chance to correct a thousand misunderstandings.

It didn't happen. When the threat was gone it drew our love away like an ebbing tide. We started up our old arguments, beginning again exactly where we had left off. Personality conflicts separated us again. This second chance, for which we had wept, suddenly was proving worthless. And when I saw time running out again the second and fatal time, I watched it go with inexpressible sorrow, thinking that if a third, a fourth, or a thousandth chance were offered us it would bring no different results. Her dying would be no less lonely; our ability to communicate our feelings to one another would be no less impossible.

"You don't know anything about love," Charles said. "Love exists *between* persons, not inside them. Love is an exchange. Lust is something else. Lust is the poor man's substitute. Lust is margarine. Lust is frozen broccoli, ready-made biscuits and reproductions of Monet. I think you know what I mean. I mean, you know what lust is already. Don't you?"

"Please, Charles, don't say these things. Don't say these things."

"You're not capable of love," he continued excitedly. "All you're capable of is lust. What kind of daughter makes love in the grass with a perfect stranger when her mother is dying that very minute? What kind of daughter . . .?"

"Other people . . ."

"What?"

"Other people have . . ."

"Other people have done it too? Of course. Particularly French writers. One reads it in their books all the time, you were going to say. The young man who makes love in the ocean the day his mother dies; another who goes to a whore-house when the wife he thinks he loves dies. A good writer can even make it seem beautiful and proper. Pretty soon the man who doesn't want to go whoring on the death of his wife thinks there must be something perverted in him and wonders if he really did love his wife because all he wants to do is cry or kill himself."

"I saw two flies . . ."

"Two symbols."

". . . in the grass."

"And you couldn't help comparing, could you? Oh, my God." He struck his forehead with his palm, "Two flies and you couldn't let them alone, you couldn't allow them just to remain flies. I saw them too and I said to myself, 'There are two flies. Tell me,' he said suddenly, 'does your father know his daughter is a slut?'"

"No!" I cried.

"He doesn't know?"

“No, I’m not a slut. The question wasn’t . . .”

“I’m sorry. I’ll rephrase it. Does your father know his daughter is a slut?”

“I’m not a slut, I’m not a slut. I want to get out.” I banged my fist against the door. “Stop and let me out!”

“There’s no stopping now,” Charles Nicolo said. “Not yet. Perhaps later,”

There were so many fields, so many fields of warm, quiet earth and grass. There was so much world there outside the car, but I was caught in steel and glass and hurtling through it.

“You think you’re all alone in the world, don’t you? You’re the daughter of a rich man so you can afford to sit alone and think about yourself. You don’t even know other persons exist. You sit alone and people your universe with symbols which you can make into anything you want. You can make the world just as it pleases you. You can ask one symbol to have sexual relations with you at your pleasure. You can buy your sex and think you aren’t buying it. You can label it l-o-v-e in your mind. You can rationalize it all by thinking he loves you in return. But you’re no different from any common slut except that you aren’t as honest. You knew I hated you the whole time, didn’t you? You knew it, didn’t you?”

“No! I believed you loved me.”

“Liar.”

“I believed it.”

“Liar, liar, liar.”

“Let me out!” I cried. I clutched the door handle.

Charles laughed. He knew I would not try opening the door at this speed. The falsity of my motion seemed to prove the truth of his words, though they didn’t need proving. They were true enough and we both knew it. Only now I could no longer protest, no longer pretend. He had ripped open another door of my dishonesty. He was a miracle of truth, and we both knew I would not try to get away. I would stay. I would stay with him as long as he allowed me to.

VIII

There were two me’s and I could see both of them very clearly. No, I could not really see them clearly, but I could clearly see that there were two of me. There was the me who had decided to take on all the attributes of a rock, a stone, sitting silently and imperturbably on the front seat. Not as hard as stone, perhaps, but as unthinking; not exactly immobile, but passive, needing to be levered. Every once in a while something would strike the stone as funny – the key, for instance – and then she would laugh. But when she laughed, then the other person who was also me would react to the laugh. The stone would seep out a cold, clammy sweat. It was fear – fear of the laugh – fear of the stone – fear of the joy felt in being a stone.

The key had been, naturally, in the ignition. But when Charles turned off the road into a gas station to buy us a couple of cokes he turned the key twice, locking the ignition, and took the key with him until he returned. I kept looking at the empty keyhole as if I couldn't understand why he had done it. At the same time there was inside me the knowledge why, the answer; so you see, I really did know although I continued to stare at the lock as if I didn't. The fact of the matter was, I realized Charles didn't really and completely trust me after all. He thought I might try to get away with the car while he was in buying the cokes. It was very nice of him to have bought me a coke, at any rate, and I held out a dime which he waved away.

We drank the cokes as we drove along, but all the time that key incident kept bothering me. For one thing I wanted to find a way of proving to him that I was staying with him voluntarily, that I quite completely accepted his greater strength, and that he didn't need to resort to anything as crass and mortifying as physical imprisonment. Unless he trusted me it meant that he did not trust himself, and if he didn't trust himself, then how could I trust him?

Then I remembered there were two keys. One was on the key chain and the other was in my change purse. I laughed aloud when I remembered this. It struck me as so funny, the irony of it. But then I had to think hard. I wanted Charles to know that I had another key, but I did not want him to know that I had noticed the way he had locked the ignition and kept the key. It would have embarrassed him and perhaps angered him. He was being subtle and I would have to be more subtle. It was a case, in other words, of engineering an obvious subtlety. That too amused me. I laughed and the other part of me broke out in a sweat of fear at the laugh.

The plan seemed to leap whole into my mind. On the key-chain was a tiny knife in the shape of a key, a souvenir from my trip to Europe years ago. I had once showed the knife to Charles, so he knew it was there. Very casually I took an emery board out of my purse and began to file my nails. I held my hands well forward so that Charles could see what I was doing. I even noticed him turn his head slightly to look. When I had very carefully filed every nail I dropped the emery board back in my purse, said "Pardon me," and very quickly but casually reached across and withdrew the key from the ignition without turning off the motor, and immediately began cleaning under my nails with the little knife. I took my time doing it and then, apparently absentmindedly, dropped the key chain into my purse. Charles said nothing. Keyless he drove on. Then, as if suddenly remembering, I took the second key out of my coin purse and put it in the ignition. He could see it was not the same key because it had no chain. Still he said nothing. I thought I would explode with stifled laughter.

IX

But after a while my own amusement made me afraid. Nothing here was funny. I was laughing for no reason. Was this insanity? The thought that it might be insanity made me break out in a stone-grey sweat. And then it made me laugh again. Because while for one part of me insanity was a horror, for the other it was a warm nest.

Constantly in those next miles I examined my nest to see if it was safe and firm, or treacherous. I patted round the inside like some child building a nest of clay, pressing the middle out between thumbs and forefingers, while at the side were round rolled blobs of clay, the eggs, waiting to go in when the nest should be finished. Those little clay eggs, were like balls of snot carefully rolled and put to one side for subsequent counting or contemplation.

What madness am I thinking? I thought suddenly. And then I laughed aloud and said: "What have balls of snot got to do with me now?" I didn't realize I had spoken until the words were out. Charles glanced at me, but remained silent. He had not understood. I laughed again. I still had private thoughts after all. He could not read them all. More loudly I repeated: "What have balls of snot got to do with anything?" And I chuckled to think that out of my whole childhood this image had come to me now. And so I laughed again and became afraid again.

"I'm curious," Charles Nicolo said suddenly. "I'm curious to know just how you evaluate me symbolically. Just what do you think I represent?"

"You?" His words caught me by surprise. I wasn't prepared to answer. I didn't know the answer just then. I had known it before, but it had changed somehow in the past few hours. And I didn't want to tell him because I was afraid he would reject the first symbol and confirm the second. "I don't consider you a symbol," I lied.

"Why did you come with me?"

"I wanted to escape what was happening to my mother. You offered me a chance to escape."

"You weren't trying to escape anything. You must know that by now."

"I *was* trying to escape," I said. "I really was." His words were making me very nervous. I didn't want him to keep talking.

"That was just your conscious reasoning. There was a deeper one."

"*That* was the deep one. Superficially I just wanted to take a trip to see Barbara." Why didn't he stop talking?

"Death."

What did you say?"

"Death."

My nervousness exploded into fury, "Shut up!" I screamed at him. "Just keep quiet and stop talking this nonsense. You're not Death. I know that now. I know that. Not *my* death. You don't have to tell me."

I wanted to seize him, to take that dark, mad face of his between my hands and tear his lips with my teeth. I wanted to see if he bled poison, if to bite those lips or be bitten by those teeth meant rabid insanity and convulsive death. I wanted to bite those lips and drain him until there was nothing left beneath his skin but white and brittle bones. For Charles had strength. He had strength though it were madness. He had the strength to act as he felt in face of all that was called normal, in face of all that was proper and codified, in face of all hypocrisy. He had the courage of his insanity and the truth which opposes the falsity which sane men masquerade as reason.

"I see you're disappointed," he laughed. "You messed up your Barbara-Life symbol and now you've goofed this one as well. You're having to face the fact that you're something less than a heroine out of classic Greek tragedy. You may even live for ever, as unsatisfying as that may seem." He paused. "By the way, have you accepted the fact that you're a slut?"

"I accept it," I replied very humbly. Perhaps I could appease this man I loved.

"I thought so!" he cried, pounding the steering wheel triumphantly. "That's the American in you. You love to accept guilt. You just love it. You're all so self-effacing and egocentric you just can't think that somebody else might be to blame for something. If it's good, then you did it. If it's horrible, then you did it. If anything is done at all, then you did it. You have to be responsible for every comedy and every tragedy. That's vanity. That's the very height of the American institution of egocentricity: *accepting the blame!*"

"Then I'm *not* a slut?" I cried with gratitude and relief. "You mean I'm not really a slut?"

"What do you think?" he laughed.

"I don't think. I don't think. Tell me."

"What do you think I think?"

Breathlessly, joyfully, hardly daring to hope: "That I'm *not?*"

He laughed. "Whatever gave you that idea?" he said.

"Of course you're a slut. Don't you even know that much by now?"

X

We stopped for coffee. Charles turned the key and the engine, which had hummed us through so much, and over such long straight roads, seemed to turn over like an insect with its belly to the sun, and die. I pulled myself out of the front seat, feeling like I weighed a thousand pounds, and followed Charles into the café as if there had been a leash between us. We looked around for a place to sit. All the tables were unoccupied and we considered every one and finally sat down at the counter, side by side, on high stools. I slouched, supporting my head, which weighed a hundred pounds, on my wrists. When the time came I asked for coffee and Charles ordered tea. The woman behind the

counter brought me my coffee right away. "The water ain't boiled yet for tea," she said to Charles. "You gotta wait."

"The water ain't boiled yet for tea," I repeated, my words ending in a scream of laughter. I laughed until the tears rolled down my cheeks. I had the feeling my laughter annoyed Charles, even embarrassed him in front of the waitress, and so I tried to keep it up. But as soon as I began to force it, it stopped. I took a sip of coffee and burned my mouth. I wanted to cry, I felt so miserable. The waitress glanced at me and I knew my face was grey and wore a reverse expression. That is, it was not expressionless, but if there had been a thermometer of facial expressions, mine would have registered a minus.

Some persons entered the café and I turned my eyes and then my head. First entered a man of the largest proportions I had ever seen. The woman who followed him might have been his twin. They were pig people. The skin all over their fat bodies was red and bloated. Their eyes were beady pig-eyes and their noses flat snouts almost buried in the thick flesh of their faces. Their lips were thick and they spoke together in thick gutturals which I could not understand, almost like two pigs speaking.

At first I did not notice that a third person had entered with them, but as they moved around the counter toward the tables I saw her. I didn't know how old she might have been. She could have been a child or an old woman, a daughter or a mother. A shapeless, colorless cotton dress covered her body. It really was shapeless and colorless, as though she had been given only one dress her whole life and her body had remained small so that it would always fit her. Her figure was that of a child of nine or ten years, but her face might have been any age. It might have been sixty years old. Her head was thin and very long and her chin jutted down almost the length of her neck. She was so drained and thin and spiritless, so grey and starved, that one might think all the life had been sucked out of her by the two pig people to make them fat. And she was so sad, so sad and futile and barren, her expression so reverse, that I wondered how she still lived.

She followed the pig people to a table and they sat down. I had turned around on my stool to look at them. I was conscious that I was staring, but I could not look away. Slowly the pale eyes of the child-woman rose until they looked into mine. For one long moment we looked across the room at each other and neither Charles nor the pig people saw us looking, as if it happened out of time, in the eternity which exists between the ending of one minute and the beginning of the next. And then she dropped her gaze and I turned back to my coffee.

I finished my coffee before Charles had been served his tea. Excusing myself, I went out the door and around the building to the ladies' room. Before leaving there I splashed cold water on my face. Altogether I was not gone for more than two minutes and so I was surprised on reentering the lunch-room to find that Charles was no longer there. He could not have finished his tea so quickly. I bought an ice cream cone and started out to the car to wait for him. When I turned the corner and saw the car, my blood froze. Charles was sitting inside waiting for me. The truth hit me. He had

thought I meant to go around the restaurant and escape in the car. He knew, of course, I had a second key. Very slowly, licking my ice cream cone, I walked over to the car and got in.

XI

Evening overtook us. I glanced at my watch. It was late, but the summer days were always long and it seemed too dark for that time of day. Then I remembered I was wearing dark glasses. I took them off and the air was brighter. Charles was squinting through his dark glasses. I thought I ought to remind him he was wearing glasses so I said: "It might be easier to see without glasses now."

He raised his glasses briefly, then lowered them again. After a second he raised them, as if comparing whether it was better with or without. Finally he decided to leave them on. I wondered at this, then realized perhaps they were prescription lenses. Perhaps he was nearsighted. I made no comment, but after a while he asked, "Do you wear glasses?"

"No."

"Not even for reading?"

"No," I said. It wasn't true: I did sometimes wear reading glasses. "Never," I added.

He said nothing, but it struck me that a man like Charles would resent having to wear glasses and it would probably annoy him to know that I didn't need them. Suddenly I was amused. I said very casually, but very plainly, "I never wear glasses because I have exceptionally keen vision. In fact, all my senses are particularly sharp, much sharper than most people's." I knew my words irritated him. I just knew it. I smiled to myself.

We stopped for supper in the town of Grapevine just at nightfall, leaving the car in a gas station to be fuelled while we ate. I told the attendant to be sure to check the water. The one other time I had driven over the Grapevine the radiator had boiled over on the ascent and I wanted to be sure this didn't happen again.

The food was terrible. I had ordered a hamburger but could not eat it when it came. Charles ate his corned beef hash methodically, bite by bite. We sat opposite each other, not speaking, not looking at one another, and yet aware of each other with all our senses. It seemed to me that every person in the café was watching us and that the waitresses were talking about us behind the counter. It didn't matter. There was only one person in the world who mattered to me. Charles Nicolo. My breath, my blood, my every sense reacted to him. If he moved, my muscles knotted; if he looked around, my eyes saw all he saw without turning. When he ate, I felt satisfied.

Charles paid for my dinner as well as his. Why he paid I did not know. I didn't want to know. We went outside.

I didn't want to drive, but I offered to because he was having so much difficulty

seeing with his dark glasses. It wasn't until we had started off that I remembered Charles had driven other times at night without his glasses. So then they *weren't* prescription lenses. Or were they? I didn't know. Had he purposely feigned nearsightedness in order to make me drive now, now that we had to go over the Grapevine? But he *knew* I didn't want to drive it,

My mind was too confused. I couldn't think clearly and I didn't want to try. I didn't want to know the answers. I didn't want to worry about what was to come. It was hard enough living through each successive minute without pondering what might or might not happen in the dimming future.

XII

The Grapevine is a well-paved, four-lane, fifty-mile strip of highway running from the town of Grapevine in the north, across the hills of the Angeles and Los Padres National Forests, to the San Fernando Valley in the south. Traffic from either direction is separated by a divider in order to minimize the chance of cars colliding head-on across the center line. The highway is modern and well built, but it is as full of curves as the vine after which it is named. The curves are never sharp, so one does not have to slow down for them, but they are continuous.

On the first half of the Grapevine one winds almost constantly up a long, steady grade. After passing the top ridge it is all downhill. The danger then is not from overheating, but from brake failure. To lessen the danger, escape ramps are provided for trucks which have gone out of control to leave the highway at certain points and travel uphill until able to stop. But it is not uncommon for a heavy truck to go careening down the highway, unchecked, faster and faster, scattering cars off the road before it to fiery destruction, finally itself ending in fire in some dry, barren valley.

It was quite dark by the time we had left the diner. We couldn't see the hills ahead of us, but I knew they were there – brown, rolling hills rising close upon one another like a bunch of grapes on a plate.

The approach to the hills is a long, straight, tree-lined road. Charles had said little for the past hour and I had begun to relax, though I kept my eyes on the speedometer to make sure I was going the proper speed. I had a feeling that the speed limit dropped at night to fifty miles an hour, but I didn't want to bring this up. Sixty did not seem unreasonable or dangerous on this strip of road.

I was driving along when suddenly a car turned so suddenly onto the road ahead of me that I had to brake to avoid colliding with him. Actually we had been in no real danger of colliding, but it angered me that he had shot out so suddenly. Pressing the accelerator to the floor, I overtook him in a couple of seconds and swung sharply into the lane ahead of him to indicate my feelings. The sudden movement of the car seemed to jolt Charles out of his reverie.

“What did you do?” he demanded. “What did you do just then?”

“He cut me off,” I explained. “I just wanted to let him know it.”

For a moment Charles was so furious he couldn’t find words. “Do you realize you aren’t alone in this car?” he shouted. “Do you know you nearly knocked me off the seat?”

He was right, of course. I hadn’t thought. I had just done it automatically. “I’m sorry,” I said. I felt my body begin to shake. I felt suddenly very cold. Reaching up I pushed the wind wing shut.

“Do you know what you’re doing?” Charles screamed, “Do you realize what you just did?”

I trembled and glanced about nervously. What had I done?

“You shut the wind wing,” he shouted. “You shut it without telling me.”

“Oh, my God,” I moaned. “I’m sorry. I was so cold.” Frantically I attempted to push open the little window, but the catch had closed and my shaking fingers could not open it,

“If you’re cold, just say so. I’ll be happy to close mine if you’re cold. You just have to tell me.”

“I’m cold,” I wailed. “Shut your window.”

“The window or the wind wing? Make up your mind. If I shut my window you have to shut yours and open your wind wing again. If. . . .”

“I meant *wind wing*. Wind wing!”

“Certainly,” said Charles in a normal tone of voice. “All you have to do is ask. You aren’t alone here, you know. We have to work at these things together. Would you like your sweater?”

“Yes, please.” I was trembling all over. Charles reached into the back seat and got my sweater. He helped me put it on without my having to slow down.

The straight road ended and we started the ascent. The traffic on the highway was light, but the few cars were travelling very fast. I moved to the right lane to let them pass, rounded a curve in the road at sixty miles an hour, and came up behind a truck travelling at ten. Jammed on the brakes, I switched back into the center lane. “That’s why I hate this road,” I told Charles. “There are so many slow trucks. And they pass one another with no warning. A truck going ten miles an hour will suddenly cut into the center lane to pass one going five.”

“You have to *watch* for that,” Charles said. “You have to be very careful here.”

“But I don’t want to go sixty,” I told him. “That’s too fast.”

“Then go whatever speed you want. Choose a speed and then stick to it.”

I slowed the car to fifty. It seemed a good speed for this road, but cars going seventy and eighty forced me to stay in the right lane. I was in constant fear of rounding another curve and running into the back of a truck. The trucks were enormous affairs, each hauling one or two huge trailers. Once I came up behind two such trucks travelling

close together and I blinked my lights to let the one behind know I was going to pass so that he wouldn't attempt to pass at the same time.

"Very good," Charles said. "Now, when you get past them, blink your lights to say thanks."

I blinked my lights. I was so cold and stiff at the wheel that I did what he told me automatically.

"Do you know the rules about blinking lights?" Charles asked.

"I think so."

"I mean for trucks. There's a special system of lights for trucks. It's a matter of politeness as well as safety."

I was trembling, but I nodded. Up ahead was another truck. "What shall I do?" I asked.

"First you blink your lights on and off to let him know you want to pass and to ask if it's all clear from the other direction." I blinked my lights. "Good. Now he'll blink his runner lights to tell you when it's all clear." Sure enough, the signal came. I passed and just as I was about to head back into the right lane I saw the lights blink again. "That's to tell you you're clear of him," Charles said. "He is really very polite."

That wasn't so hard, I thought to myself, warmed by the unknown truck driver's good manners. But just as I was beginning to relax, Charles whirled. "Thank him!" he screamed. "When he helps you like that you have to thank him."

"How? How?"

"Blink your lights!"

I blinked my lights. In the mirror I could see the truck signal that I was welcome.

"You see?" said Charles, relaxing back. "That's all there is to it. It's a simple courtesy. Now there's another truck. Let's see if you can do it properly this time."

There was a great rectangle of darkness up ahead with small lights showing low on it like a sleeping house. For one moment I fought the urge to drive full blast, hurling myself through the invisible front door through which my soul, if not my body, could pass.

"Lights," Charles hissed.

I blinked my lights, but the truck did not signal all clear. I passed anyway because I knew it was all clear. All traffic in the other direction was on the other side of the divider. "Shall I thank him anyway?" I asked.

"No. If he wasn't courteous enough to signal all clear you don't have to thank him." He looked back angrily at the truck as if it had offered him a personal offence. "It's a hay truck," he observed, disdainfully. "You won't find a diesel with manners like that. But I suppose you aren't aware of these things. You've never had to hitchhike on trucks. I suppose you don't even know there's a class system among trucks."

"I didn't know. No, I didn't know it."

"There is." He looked ahead. "See how you can do with this next truck."

“But it’s not necessary, is it?” I asked nervously. “I mean, these signals are just used between trucks. And you know, there are two lanes so I don’t really have to signal for passing. I mean, I can just pass.” As I spoke I overtook the truck and began to pass it without signaling.

“What kind of manners do you have?” Charles screamed. “Signal to that truck!” He threw himself sideways. “Look at your speedometer. For goodness sake look at your speedometer!”

I glanced down and saw I was doing sixty-five. Immediately I applied the brake. “Signal!”

With my other foot I pressed the blinker button, but in my confusion I pressed it only once. A truck coming from the opposite direction blinked his lights to remind me to lower mine, but I didn’t understand. Then the truck I was passing flashed its running lights. I was too confused to know what to do.

“What’s the matter with you?” Charles shouted. “What are you doing? Thank him. *Thank him!*”

Desperately confused, I blinked my lights down and up and a truck from the other direction blinked his lights at me. I still didn’t know my brights were on, and after signaling me to lower them the other driver angrily turned his beams on full in my eyes so that I was half blinded. Behind me a car signaled that he wanted to pass. “Somebody wants to pass,” I cried.

“Then let him. Let him pass. You don’t own the road.”

I swung back into the right lane and the car sped by. I felt I was going at a hundred miles an hour and glanced down at the speedometer. Fifty-five. It was then I saw my brights were on. I lowered them,

“Here comes another truck,” Charles said. “Try to do it right this time,”

I thought I was going to be ill. I thought I was going to vomit from nervousness, from terror. We were going too fast. The car was a heavy, unwieldy monster rushing precariously over the winding road. I passed the truck without attempting to blink my lights. Charles bounced up and down on the seat. “What are you doing?” he shouted in my ear. “What kind of manners have you got? You’ve got the manners of a slut.”

My body was rigid. I tried to speak and my lips trembled, my jaw chattered so that I could hardly speak. “I’m sorry.”

“Here’s another truck. Signal him.”

“I’ll try,” I blinked my lights. He didn’t blink an all-clear. We passed.

“Thank him anyway,” Charles told me. “Show him that some people at least have manners.”

I signaled thanks.

“Very good,” Charles said. “Another ten or fifteen trucks and it will be automatic for you.”

Automatic? Yes, it must be automatic. How could it be otherwise? Automatic is

the word for when the senses go and instinct takes command. Automatic, when you're trained to the highest degree of response, when you respond without thinking, like a dog or a madman. Or *does* he respond, a madman, mad woman? Does she blink lights in a given pattern on seeing a ten-ton truck dance up the highway ahead of her? And other trucks, rising from the south, rolling towards her, undulating north in a fantastic rhythm of lights and motion and sound. Trucks came at her over the ridges and up from the valleys, and other trucks, called her on, marking the way with lights. A string of running lights on, then off; a thanks, a welcome, headlights bright and dim, then passing by and under, just a glimmer in the mirror, gone, gone.

She wondered if madness were a passing of lights, a blinking and fading of beams, a string of reds like eyes in the night, illumined. And this brother, crouching beside her on the seat, shouting greetings through the impulse of her lights into the dark dance:

You spread your legs like a slut, bright and dim. Your movements in the grass like undulating highways acrawl with animals of the night, their red eyes glaring. Your breasts like hills under the hard starlight, barren and dry under the moon as the moon herself filled with caked earth and desire, tasting of sour wine and cigarettes. A barren, hard American girl in her own land shoveling the blame into her mouth like some ponderous earthmover eating hillsides. To kill you would be like stabbing into and ripping open a gunny sack of wet sea-sand. There is enough blame in you to dam a flood of logic.

What shall I do? she cried.

Signal. Tell him you want to pass.

How?

With your lights.

Ah, yes. My lights. Not my legs.

Hurrah, he cried. You're coming. You're coming along nicely.

Coming where? Where am I coming?

With me. You're coming with me.

. . . to . . . ?

A place I know where you can sit alone in the middle of thirty thousand eternities, where black winds from outer space hiss across the ice. All alone, quite alone, you can sit with a looking glass and study your skin for clogged pores and sing songs with no music to them.

Where . . . ?

In my world. In my life.

In your madness. Her eyes were staring straight ahead. *I thought you were Death,* she cried. *I thought you were Death or I never would have come. I don't want to be mad. I want to die.*

First thirty thousand eternities of madness and then death. First you must know humility, you must learn to bless. You must bless the little crawly things, the purposeless

serpents retching over the earth, the clogged and weedy lantern-eyed fishes nuzzling through the mud of seas, the scrawny balded blood-beaked eaglets. You must wash the feet of the insane, bless the reeking brains of the mad where tumors root and spread like flowers. And when all is finished, you can die.

Insanity!

She slammed on the brakes and turned the wheel sharply right to jolt him into anger. The car halted and she whirled toward him who turned in fury at her.

Now, she cried. She threw back her head and felt his hands clutch at her throat.

At that moment, something hurtled toward her head and she thought it was Death rushing at her until it went by. Over Charles' shoulder she saw a face; the door behind him had opened. Someone was climbing past him into the back seat. They stopped and turned and stared.

"Thanks a lot," he said. "I'm going to San Diego. Where're you folks heading?"

With open mouths they stared at the tall young man with the round face and he looked back at them. Nothing breathed – all was stunned silence – until understanding seized them and wrenched them back. The boy laughed. He understood.

She laughed too. *Diabolus ex machina!* Devil from the machine. No *deus* could save me, only a devil. She laughed and stepped on the gas. The car shot forward down the hill. Charles said nothing. He was sitting sideways with his arm on the back of the seat, looking at the stranger with quiet curiosity and interest.

"We're going to Los Angeles," I cried gaily.

XIII

Like driving my way out of a nightmare it was – like breaking the pull of the sea-sand, accelerating up to sixty, sixty-five, seventy thousand miles per second because he wasn't watching, wasn't jealous over the speedometer. He was sitting turned, watching the intruder, and in the mirror, like a round moon over my shoulder, shone the round, boyish, knowing face. His eyes shone not on me but on Charles. He wore a sailor suit, looking more like a large child taking his boat to a pond than a staunch defender returning to his base from leave up north.

They love each other, I thought gaily, and would have clapped my hands but the wheel bridged them apart. We careered round a curve in the road. Charles didn't notice. He didn't notice. I pulled on the wheel as if I could nose the front of my craft upward.

We flashed by trucks and my foot tapped recklessly against the blinker: on-off-on-off, I didn't care what Morse I sent. They flashed back at me. What were they saying? I didn't know. Perhaps they flashed warnings. Perhaps they were laughing with me. Thank you and you're welcome. Perhaps they too, in their ponderous elephantine way, wanted to fly through the night or tie their brake pedals back over their shoulders and

take the descent like blind juggernauts, crushing cars, slicing the sides off hills, making the road a straight and single ribbon from top to bottom.

I drove faster, blasting cars out of my path with the horn. Owning the road, I owned the night. "Where are you from?" I cried.

"Peoria."

I could have split with laughter. Peoria indeed. "And what do you like to do?"

"I like to fire guns."

"At what?"

"I like to fire guns into the sea." His face shone like a moon on Charles.

"And do you like to kill people?" I asked gaily.

"I don't know."

"You haven't tried?"

"No. I haven't tried."

"Do you love men?"

"Yes."

"Then we are sisters. I love men too. Tell me, do you hate women?"

"Yes." The sailor reached out and placed his hand like a question, like an appeal, on Charles' arm. Charles didn't move. He looked at the hand on his arm, but didn't move.

I rolled down my window and filled the car with draught. I pushed open the wind wing and filled the car with turbulent, bubbling air. Charles laid his cheek on the hand which rested on his arm.

"Shall we go to San Diego, Charles?" I asked, holding back my laughter.

"Charles, tell me, shall we go to San Diego?"

"No!"

"Good," I said. "I think I want to go to Los Angeles. I think I want to go home."

"We will go to San Diego," the sailor said, as if the moon had spoken.

"No," Charles answered,

I laughed and pressed harder with my foot. We're bats out of hell. Bats from the steaming caves of equatorial lands. We fly abroad when the world sleeps. We see in the dark with our ears. We have red running eyes blinded with sleep. We have cotton in our antennae ears. We will blunder past Los Angeles and land in the ocean.

"San Diego," said the sailorboy.

"You will come to Los Angeles," replied Charles rubbing his cheek against the hand.

At last we came out of the hills, whooping out of the hills into the flat valley floor where the force of the presence of the yet unseen city slowed the car as if gravity, to save us, had reversed itself. We came to signs and traffic lights. Soon we were swimming slowly through familiar places. The stars above us dissolved in the smoky haze of the sleeping, smoldering city. Only another half hour. Only a few minutes more.

I drove through San Fernando and reached Ventura Boulevard. I drove Laurel Canyon over the hills. I saw other cars with people sitting in them driving through their city, returning to their homes after an evening out. I knew every person in every car and what they were about and at the same time I was invisible, non-existent, a ghost wanting to embrace each and every one, yet unable to. How humble I felt with my invisible, ineffectual, overwhelming love.

“There,” Charles said.

I turned the car into the driveway of his house. It was after midnight. The houses all along the street were dark. “Everybody out,” I said,

Charles got his suitcase and sleeping bag out of the trunk compartment. The sailor waited on the sidewalk, one hand on his duffel bag. He ran his other hand slowly through his hair. He watched Charles, whose movements were slow and tired,

Charles gave me back the key. “Thank you very much for the ride,” he said to me.

“Thank you,” I said, “for helping me make the trip. I couldn’t have done it alone.”

“Goodbye,” he said.

“Goodbye.”

I backed the car out of the driveway and started slowly up the street. A great weariness had suddenly come over me and my arms and legs felt like lead. In the mirror I could see Charles and the sailor still standing on the sidewalk in front of the house. They were pulling and pushing each other, slowly, without energy, in different directions, like underwater figures in a dance. The car stopped and my hand raised itself. You poor man, I thought. You poor man. And then the car moved on. It was the last I ever saw of Charles Nicolo.

XIV

My house too was dark. I drove through the moonlight into the garage. I was too tired to take my suitcase out of the car. I started walking towards the house and automatically bent to pass under the oak limb. But it wasn’t there. I stood very straight and walked past the tree and nothing happened.

Entering the sleeping house I walked down the hall to my mother’s bedroom. Very quietly I opened the door so as not to awaken the nurse. My mother sat in the white bed with some of the moonlight on her. Her eyes were closed and her face peaceful in sleep. She breathed very quietly.

I took one waxen hand in mine. Her arm seemed to weigh nothing. I looked at her hand. She still wore her wedding ring, but they had put a rubber guard in front of it.

“I’ll take you a little way, Mama,” I said softly, “but then I’ll have to go back.”

Holding her hand I sat down on the floor beside the bed. I closed my eyes and for a while we walked on together, she and I, without saying anything to each other because there was no need for words. We walked slowly, looking about us and understanding

what we both saw without having to explain. When the time came for us to part, I opened my eyes and it was just beginning to be light outside. I got up quietly so as not to awaken the nurse. "Goodbye, Mama," I said.

In the darkness of the hall I could see a soft pink light coming through the kitchen doorway. I went inside and to the window above the sink. The sun was just starting its climb up the other side of the horizon. Over the hills a few clouds caught the first pink rays and sent them down. From the window I could see the dark area of earth where Charles and I had planted the flowers. I went out the back door into the garden and knelt down by the plants. In the early light I could see on every plant the light green new leaves. The earth beneath them was moist. Somebody had remembered. Perhaps by now we had a new gardener.

Very gently I touched the new leaves and the dark, moist earth. Then I went inside.