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ABSTRACT

SIX STORIES

By

John Sherman

This is a collection of short stories in which the characters look for love, meaning and alleviation of pain.

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JACKSON LOOKS FOR LOVE

Jackson wondered what the really pious men could be thinking about when they looked at Dee. What were their options? Her presence didn't exactly promote spiritual thoughts. No one could possibly be a happy celibate or a happy husband if he were to catch her eye or any other part of her body with his glance.

And what could the swami be thinking? His eyes, too, were slow to leave her face.

The holy man was assisted out of his Mercedes and placed on a golden litter--a stretcher spray-painted gold, actually. He bounced a little as he was carried along the path, not so much because he was being jostled, but because of his own hyperactivity; the happy little man wouldn't keep still. But when Dee placed a flower in his lap and touched his feet, the bouncing ceased for a moment. Even the swami was stunned by her beauty.

As the procession made its way into the house, Jackson stood on the lawn and felt like a walking eyesore. He was uncomfortable because of the grinning religious devotees all around him; he also felt unsettled by the wealth in clear view--as if he should be wearing livery in order to belong in such a neighborhood.

He caught Dee's eye as she clamored to be near the holy man, and he stared at her for the thousandth time in the month that he had known her. Leaving the scene and starting to drink somewhere might make him feel better, he thought. Maybe if he went to Del Santo's Bar he could find a social worker or someone who would listen to him tell it out loud. Maybe then he could rid himself of this traumatizing vision, these snapshot images in his head of Dee either smiling and drinking at the bar, white robed and meditating, or naked against his skin. These images weren't the greatest source of pain; what really troubled him was the daily increasing likelihood that this dark and lithe one would never really give him her love.

They spent so many hours together at work! There were a few times when they sat down and almost managed a normal conversation, one which wasn't marred by long silences or Jackson's inability to articulate an idea. And as a result of these sessions and an occasional contact of eyes as she rounded the corners of the bar with beers held aloft, he had fallen into a fitful, dangerous state. The feeling was inexorable: this woman, this girl-woman, raven beauty must be his. He couldn't bear to see her round many more corners without his taking some kind of action. It wasn't just lust, he told himself. He wanted her body most immediately, of course, but he also wanted her with him at all times, too.

Just proximity to Dee was enough to bring about a peaceful state, and any of the regular customers at the bar would readily agree. Their behavior was a testimonial in and of itself: even when some of them were smashed and loudmouthed or smashed and belligerent, they would become models of gentility when Dee entered the scene cooing her disapproval.

Jackson moved toward the house as the swami was being carried up the stairs. Dee had invited him to this gathering, and he wasn't about to give up a legitimate reason to be near her. So he entered too and found a piece of mat still unoccupied in the back of the room where the swami would lecture. He watched one hundred sets of flashing teeth and listened to all of the joyful sighs as they swept across the room. And he wondered: what was it about these people? Was this real joy or just some manifestation of group psychosis? And the swami--where did the lights in his eyes come from? Was it just some kind of glaze (does curry do that?) or did it originate in some physical place deeper in his head, a center in some zone that had either atrophied or never existed at all in Jackson's own brain.

Dee came over and took his hand, and he momentarily lost all awareness other than the sense of her touch.

> ...and before we begin our meditations, I want to tell you again that you are very special people. In the Bhagavad Gita Krishna said that among thousands and thousands of men, perhaps one strives for perfection; and

> out of these few among the multitudes, perhaps one knows me in truth. Well I wonder how it has happened that we have gathered so many in one room who are working toward being that one knowledgeable person...

Jackson almost laughed out loud. At least the swami hadn't included him in his gaze as he said these words. This would have been too ridiculous in view of the motives which had brought him to this meeting. He pondered Krishna's words as they had been recounted to him: one of thousands of thousands? he thought. Maybe the swami was delivering the wrong message. Maybe the word coming down from heaven had to do with one man in thousands but this title wasn't intended to be in reference to the knowledge of Krishna; maybe it had to do with knowledge of Dee. Biblical knowledge. Jackson, after all, had been one of the multitudes who had striven for this knowledge, and now that he had tasted it, couldn't he hope to be chosen winner of this contest? Were the signs now right for him to take a bride? Such was the direction of his fantasy as the swami droned on about the real nature of knowledge and fulfillment.

The holy man talked about the rich and poor, the pious and the amoral. He mentioned the radio preachers who had claimed to have chatted with God, one saying that he had seen the Great Being's forehead while peering out of a window on the ninth floor of an insurance company's administrative

headquarters. The man said that God had addressed him by name. Another religious leader claimed to have had a fireside chat with the Lord, and he said that God was really irritated by all of the pleasure-seeking going on in America. Swami's audience showed particular delight with these little tales, and the swami thought they were funny too. But he was not without words of chastisement for these men, these "good friends" of God; and he didn't care for their lifestyles, either.

> This type of man who says that he has God's ear or God's voice close to him; he is often rewarded. People send him money, and they wait in line to provide services for him. But all of these men are clinging to the pleasures of this earth and this flesh, and they only waste their time. They are possessed of lust and time will only weaken them.

What's wrong with pleasure, Jackson wondered. The thought crossed his mind that the swami didn't appear to be practicing self-denial. To Jackson, he even looked like he could use a brief fast! And why did he bother talking about these other people? Jackson was certain that everybody in the room--in the audience, at least--was full of lust. And most of them had the additional burden of lusting after and envying all of the good things which the rich man already enjoys and continues to lust after.

He wondered if he could ever truly believe in this man. And could he truly believe in yoga. Was it a godsend

and could the swami be considered so, when they both only took you so high but no higher. This man brought the answers with him: love, fulfillment, redemption from pain; and yet Jackson couldn't believe in changes so profound. If this holy man were to bring love to all mankind--mutually exchanged love--there would be dramatic changes made on this earth, certainly. But what would you have to inject the people with in order to satisfy them. Just simple love wouldn't cut it, he thought. It wouldn't take care of the outward effects, the aspects of self that get caught in the mirror. Even if everyone was disposed toward goodwill, wouldn't we still mourn the loss of our youth or covet the youth or beauty of others? Jackson was certain that he would be mourning and coveting when he got old.

> ...and through meditation we can find the knowledge and the Way. Do not think about power or wealth or sexual contact. We must believe that our spirits are strong, that Yoga is strong. Believe that all else in this life is fleeting--even desire.

Jackson almost missed this last remark entirely. It didn't exactly resonate for him, as all sound became subordinate to his steadfast focus on Dee.

Dee liked to talk about the exploits of one swami or another. By doing yoga she said that they could all remain healthy until they just decided to pass on! And one yogi with a twelve syllable name could run uphill into the noonday

sun without losing his breath and without squinting or sweating. Another one had a reputation for sweating, but the odor was of such an exquisite sweetness that it was his smell that attracted devotees, not his teachings!

And Dee had told him of Ram Dass' master who ingested 500 milligrams of LSD and did not show any outward signs. Jackson wondered how well this swami in the room with him would handle those 500 milligrams. Wouldn't he at least want a cigaret when that kind of dose hit his blood?

So Jackson's interest would thereafter include yogis and mountains and jasmine smell and LSD and awakening--and breasts. Was this life one big practical joke being played exclusively on him? This absolute goddess could hardly shut up about spiritual peace and enlightment, and yet her appearance could only send a male's mind spinning with base thoughts--thoughts of selfish earthly gratification.

Jackson didn't think he had a clue as to how to begin to please her, and that, of course, was his biggest problem. He was so keyed up to please that he couldn't find his sense of humor and couldn't maintain his sense of cool, either. He saw his struggle and his lame responses to her as if they were being judged in competition. How could he possibly offer her more than what must have been contained in a thousand other men's and boys' entreaties or bribes, most of these communicated while fawning and almost drooling. At least a few of that thousand must have been charming, handsome, or

fast. Some of them must have had money. All of them had to have been doing something more impressive than cooking and doing dishes. They could come into the bar, sit in her section, and think of cute things to say to her when she returned with their steaks and martinis. Jackson could stand in the back room and do the same thing as he was preparing the steaks and the cole slaw; but he couldn't quite see her taking up permanently with this greasy one behind the counter when she could have her choice of any of a thousand handsome and affluent young hopefuls, their bodies molded into three-piece suits. This sweet young thing--this lovely face and lovely ass as well: an exquisite piece of ideal woman youth, and he could almost be certain that she wasn't interested in his plans. She wasn't thinking of him as she flirted with other men at the bar; that he knew. She also couldn't be thinking of him when she went home without him, alone or otherwise.

Jackson was in absolute agony with desire. She had allowed him to take her home just once, and the events of that one night had him cruelly bothered. He desired a repetition of those events and because he had waited so long, he began to consider whether she had given her body to him in order to remove a flaw from her life (a mote from her eye?), this over-eager prep cook having been so often like an additional appendage of late. Could she have attempted to rid herself of him in such a sweet manner, she doing him a favor,

in fact? Could it have been one night's worth of remembrance, a spiritual keepsake intended for just another one of her cloying, working-stiff friends? Whether she would turn out to be a true love or simply an altruistic acquaintance in his past, Jackson didn't know.

Several days after the swami's delivery, he was preoccupied more than ever with the lack of signals from Dee. She was still lovely and warm and light around him, but she would not encourage him to believe that they would be lovers again. So after closing time one night, he finally managed to confront her with a weakly uttered "What're you doing tonight?"

"Ohhh. First I'm gonna have one beer, and then I'm gonna meditate about what it's like to be off my feet," she said.

"Well, when are you planning on coming home with me," Jackson said. "If you were doing me a favor the other night, then do it again. I need you."

"I did myself a favor," she said, as if she could never be less than agreeable. And she further responded by getting her coat and keeping pace with him through the all but lifeless streets of 2 A.M. A few minutes' trudge put them in the relative comfort of Jackson's converted garage apartment, and there they began what in his hopes was to be a nightly ritual: wine and proximity for warmth; and very soon thereafter they took to bed and each others arms.

Although Jackson could think of nothing more intensely physical than sexual contact--other than pain, maybe--he found himself, in the act of loving Dee, more close to leaving his body than ever before. As in a love scene made in Hollywood or within the ideal consummation as it is envisioned by a betrothed virgin, he became released from self, the pleasure and emotional investment so great as to put him in a zone far behond that which he had ever reached through drugs or meditation. He would think it odd later that at this time, within the embrace of the woman of Everyman's dreams, he was truly no longer there--just not with her at all.

Dee left for the ashram around noon the next day. She had to meditate and otherwise prepare herself for that night's ten hours of rounds at the bar. Jackson laid in bed all afternoon, as he was intent upon neglecting all forms of responsibility. This was his day off, and he was content to lay around and contemplate what life could be like with the woman who had just left his bed.

Dee called on her break time that evening, said she had something important to say in a tone for Jackson reminiscent of a high school girl's apologetic declaration that she would no longer be allowed to go steady any more. "I've got to tell you," she said, "I'm taking the bus to New York tomorrow. I've been called there by the swami. He's asked me to join him."

"I understand," Jackson said, for lack of anything more sincere or eloquent in mind. And in fact he did understand. The swami and New York City and doing a line of work other than waiting on college kids and young professionals was much more appealing and certainly more rewarding than staying in this podunk town in order to accept his adoration. He also didn't know the extent to which he had made this adoration known to her. He had grasped at every opportunity to be near her but to have really expressed his feelings would have been foolish, he thought, especially with a woman he hardly knew. Besides, Dee had already laid waste to expression of affection. She used the word love more often than the swami, had already expressed love for every employee of the bar, and had even murmured I love you as she hurried to get through what might have been their last communication. Who knew what these words really meant to her! Jackson guessed that she perceived of the use of the word love in the same way in which she would generally dispense it--in its generic sense, or "swami love" you might say. Love for a man or woman didn't necessarily connote anything more significant than love for a kitten or even a tree or a rock. So Jackson accepted this I love you in silence, returned the phone to its resting position, and sat, not bothering to replace the natural light in the room as it faded with evening into night. Three hours later, after the blackened room had given him enough of an indication of what his life was to be

like without her, he called her back to say that he would be joining her shortly.

Jackson arrived in New York, life savings in his pocket, and started looking for a place to live. He knew that he would not find housing at the ashram--he wasn't one of the chosen ones--but he thought that he would try to find a dive somewhere nearby so as to stay as close to Dee as possible. As it turned out, the only affordable dives were in Brooklyn. Even the ashram's seedy neighborhood on the lower east side seemed exclusive when the rents were measured against a pocketful of tens and twenties.

So within a few days Jackson found his hovel in Brooklyn and also established himself as a voluntary member of the swami's kitchen crew. Having acquired access to food and shelter in such short and relatively painless order, Jackson thought the move at least a partial success. His only problem was Dee.

In his first two days in New York, contact with the woman had been limited to a glad-to-see-you-again hug and a few affectionate glances across long rooms. She was part of the swami's entourage--one of his personal secretaries, in fact; and Jackson hadn't yet found her when she wasn't in the attendance of her master.

After three days in New York, Jackson came to the conclusion that he was lonely and that this feeling wasn't in

keeping with his plans. He finished a third evening's set of dishes and afterward spent an hour on the stoop, watching the dusk weaken and the traffic lights gain prominence in the sky along 1st Avenue.

He wondered how he could be living in an enclave of loving people without feeling any love. He also wondered how he could have been so taken by this woman when she had so many times acted not like a lover but like a friendly waitress. "What's your horoscope," she had said. "Oh, you look so much like a Leo," she had said. "I'll get you another beer and sure, I'll continue to drink with you after closing time," she said. And this is how you respond, he thought. She takes you home to check out the prospects for a good time, and you repay her by chasing her along nine hundred miles of interstate!

The man was fast becoming convinced that he had been a fool. Had the swami come out to console him, even he might not have been able to change his mind. Jackson had found a companion of beauty and kindness and absolutely transcendent sexual conduct, and he thought--he actually presumed--that he might remain with her, that life could actually gain a luster instead of losing one. But now he felt as if he had somehow been made God's fool, or His special object of contempt. I'm God's little dog or God's little hankie, he thought.

He knew that he couldn't work this one through with drugs or meditation. He also knew that he stood to gain

nothing by continuing to be passive. So he went into the private quarters of the ashram and found her door. He was shaking, and his knock and his voice were weak; but when Dee answered to his name in a joyful tone, he thought all of his fears had been ridiculous. He entered and embraced her, and as she accepted his embrace, she smiled and thought of the next day's schedule of events.

THREE VIEWS OF ZION

Jess thought of his father as a man without a soul. He was certain that since 1912, four years before he himself had been born, the old man had somehow been operating automatically--like a modern factory machine. It was during the winter of 1912 that his father had his first premonition of imminent death. According to this vision he was supposed to die some time in April of that year, the exact date having been long-since forgotten by everyone.

But some time in early April, a few days before the appointed time, he quit eating and sleeping in order to ready himself for the moment. And when the day came, he was ready as far as family and friends were concerned; people said that on that day and the one following, he sat immobile and perfectly upright in one of the kitchen chairs. With eyes and jaw wide open and with drool occasionally seeping, he stayed rigid for those two days. One of Jess's step-brothers insisted that the old man never truly awakened from this kitchen trance; that the complete lack of facial expression was brought about by those two days, and that his personality ("if such a wisp of mind function could be defined thus") had glazed over and hardened then. It was a step-brother who said that when

his father arose from the chair, saying nothing and showing no signs of recognition of anyone, he had left his soul behind.

So everyone in the family grew accustomed to living with this empty thing. He didn't bother anyone and, oddly enough, he was still able to conduct his business affairs with skill. In fact, during the next ten years that he remained in Poland, his investments brought him considerable wealth.

Jess's father took a second wife a short time after his personality left him. The first one had gone quietly of fever, and within a couple of months he had agreed to accept the dowry of another young girl. This second wife was Jess's mother, and he often wondered at the fact that the marriage had been consummated at all. Notwithstanding his father's retention of business acumen, Jess couldn't fathom how such a lifeless being could father a child.

Jess's memories of Poland were of tranquil and uneventful days except for when he thought of 1928, his last year there. His mother he remembered as a loving soul, and he didn't recall feeling threatened by the occasional presence of her husband, the graying old man of the frozen expression. All of this changed when he was twelve years old, though. His mother died in childbirth in that year and his father had somehow had the dreams of his own death reawakened. Not more

than a week after his wife's passing, Jess's father again became certain of his impending demise.

This second revelation of doom had an impact on his father so strong as to force him to behave entirely out of character. His face showed real expression like no one had seen in over fifteen years, and he regained an outward decisiveness that everyone had forgotten he possessed. To all who would listen, he announced that he was putting his oldest sons in charge of his properties and selling his other investments outright so as to be able to retire to Palestine with his youngest son. What the old man wanted in the Holy Land was a choice site for his grave; a place overlooking the Western Wall. So, before the supposed day of reckoning had come, father and son arrived in Jerusalem and found a dingy set of rooms and an ideal burial site.

On his father's pre-determined date of death, and during the two days following, Jess sat alone in the apartment and watched as his father remained slumped in a chair, shivering and moaning the whole time. At the end of the third day, he again became the walking nonentity that Jess had hitherto known. Once again, he shuffled from place to place, seemingly without purpose and in an automatic fashion. He wouldn't occupy his grave for another decade hence--not until the spring of 1938. But his demeanor would betray the fact that he had made arrangements long in advance.

Jess remained bitter even after the old man was dead and buried and the bulk of his fortune had been passed on to him. The ten years that they had spent in Jerusalem during which, according to his father, the angel of death had been cheated, he too had been cheated. For him Jerusalem was comprised entirely of dirty Arabs and doddering Jewish men like his father. Jess felt as if every Jew in the city excepting himself was waiting there to die, and he was almost correct on that account. Virtually the entire community was made up of pensioners or beggars who had journeyed there only for the privilege of being buried near the holiest spot on earth. They all had it in their heads that proximity to the holy city would bring them special favors in death. Very few of them had brought their families, and in his ten years there, Jess had grown up with no friends to speak of. His time had been spent in drudgery: cooking and cleaning and attending the yeshivah as his father insisted that he do.

Jess was most bitter about the opportunities which he had missed these past ten years in Poland. There he would have had the friends and enjoyment that he yearned for. There also, he would have been treated to innumerable introductions to pretty girls of good breeding. He had been cheated out of all of this; he had been cheated out of Poland altogether.

The only meaningful experience that Jess had had with a girl was with Sarah, and his father had not approved in the least. In fact, Jess wondered if the old man had any feeling

left at all for women and girls. There had been no introduction to them until he had nearly turned twenty-one, and those were the result of the matchmakers' cajoling for so long a time. His father finally did agree to accept just three invitations. Father and son dressed in their best black and attended the obligatory teas. Afterward, Jess saw actual jubilation in his father's eyes when he declared that he had found fault with each girl in turn.

Sarah was a different case. The old man didn't get a chance to screen her entrance into his son's life. She was standing in the middle of the street, peering up at his apartment window, when Jess noticed her. He could see well enough from that vantage point to realize that she was pretty, and he ran down the steps to see what she needed.

Sarah was looking for the address of a printer when Jess approached. She asked in Hebrew if he knew the man, and when he told her in Yiddish that he lived next door, she frowned and quickly made her way toward the neighbor's stairway. A couple of days later the printer was not at home when she came around again, and she went to Jess's door requesting that he deliver some materials to the man as soon as possible. He received two similar requests on Sunday and Monday of the following week, and when she came to him a third time in as many days, he declared that, as her unpaid courier, he should at least be given some small amount of information regarding that which was to be delivered. She smiled at him then, and

accepted his offer of tea, at which time his father showed his disgust with a short gutteral sound and a hasty exit from the room. For Sarah the old man's behavior was a bit disconcerting, particularly since she could find nothing in her appearance that would warrant such a negative response. She had worn her long sleeves for the city and a scarf to cover her hair, and she had not done anything to annoy the man unless a young woman's smile was for him a source of irritation. She considered that the old man might see her as intent upon enticing his son, and if this were the case, then there was nothing one could do to please the fellow.

Over tea, Sarah told Jess about her membership in a Zionist youth corps which had been formed in Galicia. She told about the passage by train from Krakow to Sofia and from Sofia to Constantinople. From there they had taken the Cairo Express as far as Jerusalem. She said that the corps' greatest hope was to be a self-sufficient community within a year, but for now they were dependent on outside sources. Her deliveries to the printer, she said, were proofs of news bulletins intended for consumption by the Zionist groups and their benefactors who still remained in Europe. These proofs might better have been called propaganda sheets, and this she admitted. She showed Jess some photographs of herself, a comely friend, and a few of the most strong and handsome men of the settlement to which she belonged, all of them looking

as if life couldn't offer better rewards. Sarah then had him read the caption that corresponded with one of the photos. It read:

> David S. and Sarah M., original members of the Aliyah Zionist Youth Corps of Galicia, and Rachel G., Uri C., and Josef S., founding members of the Warsaw Zionist Federation, are shown as they inspect the ripening crop of cotton. They are still living in tents at their tiny enclave seven kilometers from Jerusalem, and work often entails many long hours of tilling the parched soil in the desert sun. But you won't find anybody complaining in these ranks!

Sarah didn't know how to complain, unless a frown can be classified as a complaint. She did frown at Jess whenever they exchanged greetings--that is, whenever he refused to take her lead and speak Hebrew with her. Over this first cup of tea together, Jess did enough complaining for two people--about the weather, the country, the size and appearance of his father's rooms, and even about the quality of the tea. But Sarah would agree with none of it. She didn't have a discontented thought in her mind, and this was in November when there isn't a corner in all of Palestine which isn't gray and damp and cold. She was like so many of her Zionist brethren who could look upon the future with nothing less than hope. This land was the fertile inheritance of a nation for her, and as Jess regarded her shining eyes, he thought cynically of these "new pioneers" as they called themselves; these people who spit in the sand and expect flowers to grow.

Sarah allowed Jess to chatter on, mostly about himself. He hadn't had a guest in the apartment in as long as he could remember, and it felt like an extraordinary holiday to have her there. It had been weeks since he had spoken to a girl! He told her about his hometown, his mother, his two step-brothers in Poland. He wanted her to know that he too had left everything behind and that, because he had lived in Palestine for so long, he could undoubtedly be of service to her organization. He did have a few legitimate selling points, after all. He had lived next door to the printer for ten years, had done some bookkeeping for him, and had developed a good rapport with him. He was also able to speak a fair amount of English, and that could certainly ease matters when dealing with the authorities.

Sarah accepted all of this information with some amusement, and within a couple of weeks she actually started bringing some business his way. He became a liaison between the settlement and the printer, and he also began to accompany the settlement members whenever they had dealings with the British. He began to feel useful for the first time in his life, and he even felt a tinge of remorse for ever having spoken ill of Palestine. This land did not seem so desolate when one found oneself in the company of friends.

The settlement members rarely paid cash in order to get things done unless, of course, they were dealing with Britons or Arabs. But Jess would receive fresh eggs and milk

on occasion, and he also considered the time spent with Sarah as a form of payment; she was warmth and companionship as he had never known.

Sarah was quick to make sure that her relationship with Jess would not remain a simple friendship. She was naturally effusive and when an appointment or transaction had gone particularly well, or at the least indication of good fortune in any regard, she would grab his hand and squeeze it or even press her body against his. This sometimes became difficult for Jess to bear, he being a twenty-two-year old with no outlet for his desires. Yet he didn't want any of it to end; he wanted to continue to feel her touch. There were rare times when, after a long day, he would grow weary of her dreams and unflagging optimism. But he enjoyed the great majority of the time they had together, and the more imtimate they became the less willing he was to spend the hours without her.

There was a winter journey together which was especially delightful. Jess and Sarah and four or five of her comrades took a wagon ride to Haifa in order to pick up a shipment of new harrows which a philanthropist had contributed. Upon arrival at customs, Jess was able to speak with a decent Englishman who cheerfully expedited their procurement.

The next day, on the way back to the settlement, Sarah and Jess were separated from the rest of the people in the

wagon by the array of newly-acquired packing crates. Jess didn't know who initiated the type of behavior that ensued, and Sarah didn't know or care; both knew, however, that she had been the one to stick her tongue in his mouth and not vice-versa. For what must have been a couple of hours they kissed in this way, the donkeys all the while pulling their burden up the gradually inclining road from the sea.

In the months immediately following this journey, Sarah and Jess became affectionate at every opportunity. And Sarah no longer kept their affair a private matter. She would kiss him spontaneously in front of any or all of her comrades and even while walking down the street or standing in the market place. What Jess would later consider odd was that she never spoke of the future as it related to the two of them. For the settlement, for Jerusalem, for a Jewish homeland, there were great possibilities and spectacular plans in the works; but never was there anything said about their part in it all. At every one of their encounters, Jess began to wonder if she was saving this sort of talk--if in fact she was waiting for a proposal of marriage. And yet she never indicated that that was a concern for her.

By spring Sarah was coming into the city several times a week, and Jess would spend each day with her as she ran her errands. He began staying overnight at the settlement at this time, as he would find any excuse to escort her home

in the evening. On these occasions, he ate in the communal dining hall and shared a tent with one of the single men of the group. After he had done this a few times, there was a particular night when Sarah didn't act pleased about letting him retire to his tent. They had been strolling along the endrows of the cotton and wheat fields, and when he suggested that they begin the walk back to their tents, she frowned and then clung to him in response. Jess realized then why marriage was of no real importance for Sarah. She had touched him in such a way that he no longer had the resolve to return to his tent. They lay in the spring field then and knew each other sexually, she doing so with obvious pleasure and no apparent shame.

Jess was completely bewildered by this first experience. He felt sullied, somehow--as if he had been with a prostitute. She had been the dominant one, leading his hands and body as she saw fit. And the whole time she had smiled and moaned and writhed; he was certain that if he hadn't been in such a complete state of confusion, he would have been terrified!

When it was over they lay in the new grass not talking for some time. They were both dazed but as they rested together Sarah continued stroking his back to the extent that he was certain that she wanted him again. When he realized this, he got up, put his clothes on, and waited for her to do the same. For him this night's show of affection had already been too much.

Sarah clung to him once again that night. She wanted to know if anything had gone wrong, at which time Jess assured her that nothing had. But in the days and nights which followed he could not help but show irritation with the things she said and did. He was making his disappointment obvious. Until their night of passion in the field, he had looked upon her as his prospective wife; but he could no longer think this way with any degree of certainty or comfort. She knew that his coldness was directed toward her but she chose not to question him about it in the hope that it would fade away.

Within a couple of days something happened which served to alter Jess's mood for the better. Of an afternoon in the second week in April, he returned home from an outing to find his father seated eyes open and motionless in one of the kitchen chairs. This in itself was not an uncommon event, but after a few minutes, when Jess had not heard even a mumble or a wheeze, he faced his father at close range and looked into his pale, genuinely dead eyes. After succumbing to a moment of shock, Jess walked away from the body with mixed feelings of amusement, fear, and relief. It was uncanny. The old fool had planned for half a lifetime to die sitting in a kitchen chair in April, and he had died in just that way. The man had gotten everything he had ever wanted--right down to the last detail, he thought. His dreams had been real; they just hadn't been accurate with regard to the year.

At the funeral the next day, Jess was accompanied by Sarah, the rabbi, and a cadre of old men from the neighborhood who Jess suspected of being regular funeral-goers rather than actual friends of the deceased. When it was all over and the procession had returned from the gravesite, his grand mood became ebullient. With the exception of shivah and the prayers to be said, he had been released entirely from years of filial responsibility.

The seven days of mourning passed serenely, and afterwards Jess again acted happy to be at Sarah's side. His father's death had so changed his frame of mind that he could no longer be displeased about anything that had come before. Their relationship returned to an affectionate norm and they took every opportunity to kiss or embrace.

Their lives wouldn't remain long in this mutual state of peace and lightheartedness, however, as Jess once again became negatively affected by Sarah's actions. He was sitting in the dining room of the settlement when he noticed something that he had never seen a woman do. He saw Sarah getting coffee for the two of them, and while standing in line, she pinched the behind of one of her comrades--a big, stocky red-faced fellow who laughed all the time. He laughed then, too, and she kissed this oaf , he returning her brief kiss. This wasn't the first time that Jess had been a witness to some form of public display at the settlement. He had seen Sarah with more than one male friend, caressing or

clasping hands in a happy moment. This he had taken as a show of simple affection among friends. But this latest platonic touch--this pinch and light kiss of the red-faced boy--had done something to implant in Jess's mind a feeling that he had not recognized previously; he felt intense distrust.

There were rumors afoot across the entire length of Palestine concerning the Zionists and their free-thinking ways. Some of the old Jews in the city said that these people shared more than material goods; that they took socialist ideology to a hazardous and perverse extreme. Jess now sensed some truth in what he had previously dismissed as spiteful expressions of jealousy. He finally had discovered what had bothered him on that night in the fields. It wasn't that she had been the decisive and controlling one; it had been the clarity with which she had shown him that she knew what she was doing! This innocent pinch had revealed something that he had known all along but had refused to accept.

Jess and Sarah took a stroll that night, again passing by the new cotton and wheat fields. But rather than walking arm in arm as they had so often done before, they kept a distance due to Jess's obvious desire to do so. When they reached a point where the settlement lights no longer retained a brightness for them, Sarah wanted to know what was troubling him. At first she got an unintelligible response. "Nothin'"

she thought he had said. But when she again asked him to share his troubles, she became involved in the conflict that she had sensed would come.

"You came to me a used woman," he said.

"A used woman?" she said.

"You didn't save youself for me, do you deny it?"

"No, I do not. I have not saved myself for you or anyone. In fact, I have not saved myself many times over!"

That was the last thing he heard her say. He turned away and walked up the main road never to set foot in the settlement again. He had saved himself, he thought. From life with a loose woman. From a lifetime spent in this desert wasteland. He had saved himself, all right. He would return to Poland with his father's money now. He would return to civilization.

A CASE OF MIXED SIGNALS

March in these hills is a thing of beauty and sometimes a bitch, too. There are times when you can smell the presence of the Lord through the trees: the rhododendron and laurels are budding, just-melted snow flows everywhere down from the mountains, and the pines become scented anew. But then there are the cold, rainy days on end when winter returns and makes it hard to believe that the Lord is with us at all, or that anything fresh and young has ever lived.

It was quite a few years ago, on a cold and rainy day in March, when I took Randall to the Knoxville airport. I was driving past there anyhow because I was checking out the prospects for a job in the city. Randall came along because he needed an early flight to Nashville, and at the Tri-cities airport he would have waited until some time in the afternoon before getting a prop-plane headed for Newport, Sevierville, Knoxville, Centerville, Murfreesboro, and every little town and holler with a landing strip in all of middle and east Tennessee.

Randall's father was dying in Nashville, and his mother had sent money so he could get there as fast as he could. The night before we set out for Knoxville, right before he passed out, Randall began moaning about the money. He was

upset about his father too, of course, but he had been expecting that for a long time. Having to take money from his mother, though, and especially given the circumstances, was enough to make a veteran alcoholic yearn to get liquored with renewed fury.

"Thirty-five years old, and my mama's got to send me the money." The words came out in slurs and half-moans. "Jesus why, Jesus why, why, why?"

It had been raining all day, it was going to rain all night, and Randall's mournful cries and the dull light from one lamp weren't about to bring any cheer to the room.

"What do you mean 'Jesus why,'" I finally said after hearing it four or five times in a row. Each repetition had been quieter than the last, though, and by the time I got around to asking, he was snoring into the arm of his chair.

Well, I suppose that Randall was more upset about his father dying than he was about the money or anything else. But he had all kinds of problems that spring, of which alcohol was not the least, and he wasn't taking any of it well. That next morning, I had to shake him for close to half an hour before I could get him out of bed and into the car. I remember being really annoyed because there was a steady drizzle coming down, the roads would be slick, and we were going to have to make better-than-average time in order for him to catch his flight. Meanwhile, I was having to hold him up to get him out to the car.

"Dammit, Randall, you got to be able to walk on your own," I said.

He grunted and fell into the front seat as if he were a drowning man who had just touched shore. Then he didn't move until thirty miles outside of Knoxville, so for the better part of the trip, all I had for company were the windshield wipers, the "See Rock City" signs, and what little scenery I could make out through an hour of fog soup and gray.

There are some beautiful little valleys along Route 137, and some of the ridgetops afford fine views on clear days. But then there are quite a few valleys that are ugly as sin even on the clearest of days: most everyone drives through praying for divine intervention in order to guarantee that their eight cylinders and all that downshifting, accelerating, double-clutching,and what-all will carry then away from the devastation.

It's the red clay and coal slag that gets to you. And there are all kinds of ignorant white folks, too, hanging around the main streets with their malnutrition bloat, whiskered jowls, and bad teeth. God only knows how they manage to stay alive. There are hollers, especially along the way from Brooksville to Newport, where the coal and timber companies once set up their land-movers and their armies of gray faces. They moved on years ago, but the places they left behind still haven't gotten over their little sojourns. You can tell they had done something with a vengeance;

whole countries shipped off to Nashville or Atlanta or Chattanooga to make electricity or two-by-fours. And what's left--the bare sides of the hills and the shacks and worn-out families--looks as though it had been jerked around by the years. My father says that in this part of the country, the way it used to be was that you would see the topsoil wearing away to red clay only on a rare occasion. Now you can drive through one valley after another, and the roadsides and all the farmers' fields are red with clay. Even the tobacco crop looks sickly.

It has been so many years since that gray spring morning. I think it was March of '70, but somehow it seems like a lifetime since then--as if I ought to have grandchildren sitting at my feet. It must be because Randall isn't around anymore, and it seems like so much time has passed. So much time.

Well it must have been March of 1970 because the new highway hadn't been built yet, and because I remember that, as we got close to the airport that morning, we were talking about the upcoming elections in Knoxville; and '70 was the first year that Taylor Blanchard ran for mayor.

"You be sure and look up ole Taylor," Randall said through his hangover. "Just as soon as you get to Knoxville. You tell him that I'm a good friend of yours, and he'll give you a job just like that." He made a feeble effort to snap

his fingers without crushing his cigaret, and failed on both counts. "You know, we were roommates one year in college," he said as if he were giving me some new information. "Fifteen years ago, and even then he was talking about being something special; said he'd be senator of Tennessee some day, and damned if I don't believe him now."

Randall would have been disappointed. Blanchard never did get too far in his bid for the senate. His divorce turned out to be way too messy for that, and to a lot of people he just didn't seem bright enough for the job. Back in that first election, though, he was still married to his first wife, and not that many people cared about how smart he was; he won the mayor's race easily that year.

In the 1970 primaries, Blanchard had been one of the first candidates to start talking law and order. Everybody from Richard Nixon on down had given it lip service now and then, but "ole Taylor" was speaking from personal experience and he really milked the issue for all it was worth. Before going into politics he had been a tough cop on the Narco Squad in Knoxville, and on Friday and Saturday nights he was always the one in streetclothes leading the men in blue into houses around the university where pot parties were going on. He took some criticism during the election campaign--from "mealy-mouthed liberals," as he put it--because sometimes he didn't bother to get a warrant, and also he had a habit of using bullhorns, firing shotguns into the air, and lobbing tear gas

on occasion just to rout a few college kids out of their apartments and into the hands of the law. Somehow, too, he always managed to get himself interviewed on the eleven o'clock news after every bust.

In those few months before the '70 election, Blanchard was actually taking more heat than the occasional criticism. And you might say that he did everything he could to meet fire with fire. A little dynamite in the middle of the night had torn up his campaign chief's Lincoln, so in an equally anonymous manner, the Taylor Blanchard for Mayor Committee sent out its own forays: cars full of drunken rednecks who set off their own explosives at the opponent's headquarters the next night. They shot off their automatic weapons all over town, too.

Blanchard and his crew did something else that was dirty, too. A friend of his owned a local T.V. station, and he had one of his cameramen following the other candidate as he worked the Porter Street area of town for votes. Then this friend had one of his reporters doing interviews with people who were supposed to have been on the street at the time; men mostly; a couple of them with earrings and most with beards that wouldn't scrape a newborn baby's ass. The T.V. audience got a shot of the candidate, a shot of these pansies endorsing the candidate , and a second shot of the candidate--who was scrawny and had a high-pitched voice in the best of times. Taylor probably figured that people would be sitting in front of their sets all over town muttering, "That fucking queer!" And they probably were!

"Well, what am I gonna do for Taylor?" I asked as Randall began to slump into the car seat. The lights of Knoxville International were just coming into view, and the rain had picked up some. "Get a haircut and a shave, first thing," he said. "And buy yourself a new shirt. After that, all you gotta do is go in there and look serious. I know Taylor, and I have to believe that he's serious about this election. So you just let him know how serious you are about seeing him get elected. You don't need any reasons, just look him in the eye."

"All right, I'll do it," I lied.

"Sure you'll do it, and you'll get a steady job, too," he said.

Randall didn't care for steady work for himself--at least not as long as I had known him. Like Taylor Blanchard, Randall had a friend at a T.V. station--the manager of CBS, Johnson City. He had it worked out so that he could come in two or three days a week to edit some film or cover a car wreck or a high school football game. The only problem was that he had to drink beer on the job in order to keep his hands steady behind the camera, and while his friend the manager never said anything about it, he was finding less and less work for Randall to do as that spring wore on. Later that summer, when Randall moved on, he was only working one day a week.

"When Taylor hires you, maybe you'll get to meet his wife; I bet she's something," he said. I looked his way and he leered.

Randall's "show of affection" was for Miss Dogwood Festival of Knoxville, 1967. Mrs. Taylor Blanchard was a dark-haired, dark-eyed, cap-toothed, big-breasted beauty who was no doubt able to muster quite a few votes from that part of the electorate that wanted the opportunity to see more of her front on the six o'clock news or the society page. Her talk-show voice wasn't bad either.

"She does look like a nice piece, though, doesn't she?" Randall said wistfully, as if he wanted to savor her image a while longer in his mind.

When Blanchard became mayor of Knoxville that first time, it turned out to be an anti-climax, not so much because of the ease with which he got elected, but more so due to the prominent place on the news that the sheriff's race had taken. The dirt and the bombs and the bullets that had been slung in the mayoral race weren't nearly as rough and tough and full of conviction as the events surrounding Little Jim O'Connor's battle with Big Ted Tucker. Big Ted had a strong lead in the polls, probably because he was big and tall and he showed up at all the banquets and speaking engagements with his prim little Christian wife at his side along with five of the most wholesome kids you'd ever want to see. He'd get up on the podium and deliver a helluva

speech about innocent victims of crime, the need for more frequent use of the electric chair, the sanctity of motherhood and the law, the will of Jesus, and all of those crowd-pleasing issues; and he'd talk about his opponent in a preachy sort of tone, too. Most everybody liked Big Ted.

Little Jim O'Connor was white and Christian, too, but he was facing extortion charges due to a couple of big accounting errors left over from his post as city clerk. That information didn't sit well with some of the taxpayers, and neither did the publicity about the fact that when he came into the office of city clerk, he and his first wife had lived in a modest little frame house; and when he left office, he had a different wife and a palace over in a subdivision where the people are so rich, they don't need to pay any taxes.

Little Jim didn't like that kind of publicity, even though he was a Republican. And in particular, he didn't like listening to Ted Tucker slinging it his way. So two days before the election, he released a sworn affadavit to the press from one Fanny Mae Jefferson, attesting to the fact that Big Ted Tucker, while a cop on the beat some years previous, had "arrested" her, and instead of charging her with a crime and hauling her in for questioning, he raped and sodomized her in the back seat of his squad car. Now this information alone would certainly have put a sizeable crimp in Big Ted's chances, but the other half of it really sealed his fate; Miss Jefferson was toothless, black, and three

hundred pounds of prostitute. Needless to say, Little Jim the Extortionist won by an overwhelming amount of votes. I remember Randall saying of politicians that their methods are about as civilized as taking a shit in the woods, and I reckon that that wasn't too far from the truth.

As he stepped out of the car at the departure gate, Randall put on what looked like a half-felt, half-feigned display of pain; he smiled just a crack and then grimaced a second later; it was hard to tell which one was forced. Given the amount of alcohol he had consumed the night before and the situation with his father, I had to believe that this show of pain wasn't wildly exaggerated. As he got his gear together, I could see that his drinking was beginning to have a lasting effect on the man. It was getting to the point where he wasn't recovering from the night before; each day brought agony followed by a partial afternoon recovery over a whiskey or a few beers. On that March morning in particular, his eyes were bloodshot, his nose was shot through with broken blood vessels, and his skin was a uniform gray, like dirty snow. He looked like a man about to die.

Before heading into the terminal, he hoisted his duffle bag onto his shoulder--gently, in order to avoid any unnecessary jolt to his aching head. He stood motionless at the curb for an instant, letting the rain drip from his hat onto the front of his shirt. Then, as a sign of farewell, he held his hand out, made a fist, and pointed his thumb toward

the sky. I wished him luck in the same way as he turned and disappeared into the terminal.

A week later I was sitting on the porch of the rooming house where I was living in Johnson City. I had no job and no prospects anywhere. I was just passing the time in a rocker, staring off into space, when a pale pink Plymouth turned into the driveway. It was a 1957 in really good shape--almost as if it had never seen dirt. Randall got out and walked up the path looking like he was about to accept an award at a chamber of commerce banquet. He swaggered like he had never seen dirt either, and an extra-long cigaret dan= gled unlit from his lips.

"From now on, I'm gonna look better than your mama on her way to church," he said. "Her name is Angel and I reckon you can call her that too." He escorted me to the car and ran his hand along one of the fins of the closest rear fender. "There ain't a woman in Johnson City that's built like this," he said. "There's nothing on God's green earth that can stand up next to this kind of beauty, and I'm gonna cherish her, I swear." At this point he took off his hat and placed it over his heart. He winked. "Get in," he said. "We need some beers."

We drove up the street to Charly's Party Store where Randall still had credit. The Plymouth really did have springs like an angel, and she sounded good, too.

We got our beers and returned to the car. I asked what had happened in Nashville.

"He's dead," he said.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Don't be," he said. "He's got to be in a better place now."

He took me for a spin around town then, and it soon became obvious that he felt no need to contain his new-found joy of ownership.

"This car is from Nashville, this ain't no Johnson City car. This ain't no redneck preacher's car, this ain't no car that's been owned by somebody who lets kids puke in the back seat. This car is from Nashville, and people from around there don't allow preachers or children in their cars. Why, this is the kind of car the stars used to drive--they still might, too. She's probably been to the Grand Ole Opry dozens of times, and maybe had a star in her a couple of times. Come to think of it, this just might be the make and model that ole Hank Williams perished in!"

He had won her gambling, he said. One night in Nashville, he dropped his mother off at home after visiting hours at the hospital and drove around town checking out the old neighborhood, thinking about his father the whole time. He prayed, but there was hardly any room for hope; the man's vital signs were fading fast, and he was rarely conscious at all by that time. So Randall ended up in a bar. "Some sucker said he needed a fourth for a card game, and within an hour

I was walking out with this set of keys. I guess some of that praying must have done some good somehow. Maybe the good Lord just got his signals mixed up." He patted the dashboard affectionately. "Yessir," he said, "Ask and ye shall receive--and that's just the way it goes, too. You may not get exactly what you asked for, but you're bound to get something."

"Shit, Randall," I said. "If you put it that way, then she wasn't a great deal. And besides, what about all of those folks praying the world over. What do they get for their prayers? All the people in the hills around here diseased and losing their teeth; they send their children to school in flour sacks. You know about those people, don't you?" I said.

"Man!" he said. "We got the Angel, we got a case of beer, and there ain't a cloud in the sky; but sure, I'll talk serious. Those people got their salvation, man. They pray every day, and every day they know they won't be going to hell. They know they haven't arrived there yet, too, which is more than I can say for you. And they got all that from praying, which is a pretty good deal, ain't it?"

Well I had to admit that a good part of what he said was true. All those people in the hills are busy praying every day, and I suppose they receive Jesus every day if that's the way they look at it.

"Too bad praying for alcohol doesn't do any good," I said.

"No shit," Randall said.

Randall drank quantities of alcohol that would do any sailor proud. That summer he had the Angel, it got to the point where he was hardly bothering with food at all. He would chase whiskey coffee with beers by noon, and would joke about the beers being all the protein he could stand.

He said that it was drinking Cap'n Choco-Malteds as a kid that had gotten him hooked. "You ask A.C. Murray," he said one afternoon as if A.C. had been the topic of conversation when in fact we had been sitting on his porch for some twenty minutes, neither one of us saying anything at all. "You go and ask A.C. about what Cap'n Choco-Malteds did to him--how he preferred them to his mother's tit after a while. And now me and him can't leave off from sucking on these," he said, lifting his beer to show it to me. "Twelve-thirty in the afternoon, and you'd think that I would be ready for a burger and coke or a glass of milk like everybody else. Those goddam choco-malteds!"

For Randall the benefits of praying weren't enough to offset the effects of choco-malteds and a few of the other snares of this world. Just in that one spring season, as his father suffered and died, he began to stay drunk both night and day, and the Angel gave out on him. Although she may have been the least of his troubles, the Angel became a disappointment, nonetheless.

No amount of grease and tinkering would ever make her sing and rumble again. After little more than a month in Johnson City, she threw a rod and a few other things, and her days of roadworthiness were at an end. She sat there on the street out in front of the house, and Randall watched her from the porch as he drank. Sometimes he tipped a beer in her direction in way of tribute. Sometimes he said "Glory be to God, that is a pretty sight," or "Here's to you, cherry!," but he was pretty drunk when he expressed those sentiments. She had been a lame blessing, after all. She was a beauty and a bitch, too.

That summer the kudzu rolled in from over the North Carolina border. It did a fast creep across town, first on the telephone poles and wires, and then from tree to tree and house to house. It came up on Randall's porch, and rather than chopping the life out of it, he guided the vine onto every pillar and chair. He even had ideas for covering the Angel with the stuff and making a planter out of her; he was training it across the lawn in her direction when she was taken away suddenly--towed when no one was home. Randall called the city, and they demanded a hundred dollars before they would give her back. So the Angel had left for good.

Now I suppose that after this big, long dramatic story, everybody must figure that Randall is dead--that he killed

himself in a car wreck on some lonesome stretch of highway, or that he ended up dead in a ditch somewhere; or maybe people figure that his body gave out in some hospital room, tubes running in and out of him from every direction. Well, it's possible that he met any one of those ends, but then again, he may be sitting on a front porch somewhere right now. He just disappeared from town that August, and there is no telling where he might be holed up. Maybe he has reformed and is living a good Christian life somewhere. Nashville, maybe. That's the word that got around when everybody realized he was gone. He went to Nashville to help out a cousin, somebody said. I have to wonder, though. He didn't care too much for the big city, or for most of the members of his family. And he used to say that he would rather be here in Johnson City than anywhere else on God's green earth, so maybe he is dead. He probably is, in fact, because his luck never was very good. Even when he succeeded in something, because of praying, sweet-talking, begging, or whatever, he never did get what he really asked for. So maybe he prayed for the strength to quit drinking, and wound up dead. Maybe the Lord really does get his signals mixed up.

A SPRING DAY IN MEMPHIS, 1970

Nothing was happening on the river. No wind, and there wasn't a boat or a barge in sight. The trucks roared along the interstate highway bridge on their way to Raleigh, L.A., or Tucumcari. Sheri pulled onto the shoulder of the road and turned off the ignition. She lit a cigaret and jumped out of the car in the same motion, the cigaret dangling from her mouth. She stood alongside the car and looked out over the water. Hands stuck deep in her pockets, elbows making sharp arrows for north and south, she exuded the fact that this place, this particular side of the road, was a special one for her--that it should be that way for anyone who was at all sensitive. Her eyes and the determined way her lips were set attested to a sense of the freedom offered here: no mama, no older sister around--no authorities to cast a wary eye.

For a moment she stopped gazing at the river. She turned to her lover, still with a distant focus in her eyes.

"It's purty, ain't it?" she said.

"Yeah, it's pretty. It's big enough, that's for sure," he said.

"It's better than big, man. It's the fucking Mississippi." She drew deeply on her cigaret for emphasis.

Lee lit a cigaret and took a long pull on it just to put himself in good stead: to show that he was hip enough to appreciate that this was not only the big river through town but the great big fucking Mississippi. He walked over to Sheri's side, put his arm tightly around her waist, and they kicked the stones before them as they moved toward the water. At the end of a bluff the river passed slowly twenty feet or more below them. The water had never been more calm; an occasional ripple marred the glass here and there, each a distant glint in an otherwise flawless vision.

They had traveled halfway across the country to get to Memphis. Flat land and a string of factory towns had given way to the Appalachians. They in turn had receded into flat land and factory towns once more, only on this side the land had a gentle roll, and the people spoke with a sharp drawl--like Sheri.

Lee was a stranger to Memphis, and for him the whole town was the stuff of an old sepia-tone photograph: brown pavement, brown brick, brown mud, and brown air alongside a huge, nearly stagnant strip of brown ditchwater. Even the skin of the black people appeared to be a peculiar shade of Memphis brown.

Sheri reached for her lover's hand. She caught his eyes with a look intended to be sincere, loving, meaningful. She didn't want anything to change.

He had driven a thousand miles with her to enter a long-dingy house and a dark front room where the locale and the passage of time lent a certain coating to everything in the place. The rugs, furniture, drapes, and even the windows were lined with this dusty, peculiar-to-Memphis hue.

Sheri's mother had smoked 100,000 Lucky Strikes right down to little nubs, all of them in this same chair in this same front room. Her skin was gray, but when the light hit her just right, she too was imbued with the Memphis tinge.

Sheri had said that Mama never did wear her age well. By this year of our Lord 1970, her face had been worn beyond the aid of cosmetics. She seemed almost threadbare to Lee, and the frayed hair and tattered housecoat seemed to demonstrate a certitude that there wasn't going to be another man: that 1955 wasn't coming back anytime soon, nor would that special one return to care whether there was any finery left in her life or her appearance. The room and the ruined belongings within looked as if they would remain unchanged, collecting dust amid the sighs and cigaret smoke of this fading woman.

Sheri lit another cigaret.

"It was a brand new car," she said. "White with a white interior. Had it maybe two weeks. A drunk ran a red light. Five o'clock in the afternoon as he's coming home from work, he gets creamed by a drunk. Broad daylight and the son-of-a-bitch is blind drunk. Didn't even know what he'd

done. Mama never did get out of the car at the cemetery. She couldn't bear to see him laid in the ground."

Mama chain smoked in that chair. She came home from work every day at five-thirty, took off her beige rayon uniform, and replaced it with one of two flowery-pattern housecoats. After a day with the cash register and flourescent lights, she's always tired; her feet hurt like hell. "I've been standing at that same damn counter for fifteen years," she lamented hoarsely to no one in particular. "Y'all ought to find somethin' better to do with your lives," she said vaguely in the direction of her youngest daughter. "I put in a lot of time at that department store. Six days a week and no pension just so I'd be able to scrape by with the mortgage payments and food on the table."

The old Mustang lurched as the worn gears engaged through the twilit and neon streets of downtown Memphis. They crossed the river on the DeSoto bridge. From between the flashing steel girders, Memphis looked like an outpost on the lost prairie wilderness. The city had an honest-to-goodness skyline with modern churches and office buildings, unlike the state of Arkansas which loomed before them a wasteland on the west bank, verdant though it was. The highlights of the Arkansas horizon were a shipping firm, a few weathered shacks, and some outcroppings of limestone and red clay which stood out from the pines and brush. And a Texaco station shone in the center of the rubble.

On the outskirts of West Memphis, Arkansas, they pulled up in front of a little frame house. It was in need of paint but neat just the same, as it had a lawn enclosed by a picket fence and each window was trimmed in white ruffled curtains. Sheri's brother-in-law was the first to greet them, and he was as friendly a country boy as anyone would care to meet. He smiled broadly as he opened the screen door. When he grabbed ahold of Sheri and shook Lee's hand, he really meant it! "Well ain't this a special occasion," he said.

As they entered the house the sister delivered the old southern hospitality from clear across the room. "Well come right in," she said. "So nice to see you all!" The two women hugged and kissed, and then hugged again. It would have been apparent to anyone but a blind man that these two were sisters. Sheri looked younger, that was all; younger by three years and a family with needs.

The two little girls were hypnotized by the T.V. set and didn't bother to check out the new arrivals. Sheri's sister prodded them until, showing mild annoyance at the interruption, they said hello and returned in haste to their program.

Lee got a lingering handshake and a look that was penetrating yet accepting from the older sister. After a few minutes at the kitchen table, though, he began to sense a veiled coldness underneath--a reticence, at any rate. He

was a yankee, after all, and he had been "having his way" with her baby sister. The air seemed shot through with something more oppressive than Arkansas spring heat. "Don't forsake us," was the transmission from behind her eyes. "She's been sleeping with you for six months now, and you're all she can talk about."

Brother-in-law was entirely content with the beer and company. He was excited to have somebody there from out of town to talk sports with--and he had at least half a case of cold beers in the Frigidaire. The Cleveland Indians never did look good; the Reds and Pirates would surely be contenders again this year ("Whereabouts y'all say you're from in Ohio?").

Sheri had different plans. A few minutes after a polite beer and talk of getting together again real soon, they were back in Tennessee again, at a dark little bar alongside the river.

Sheri was looking for charm--in Memphis and in herself. She wanted to be open and to know Lee's thoughts.

"It's a nice day, ain't it? Y'all can find a cheap apartment somewhere, or we can find a house and live together. Mama'll get used to the idea; she'll have to. This is a really nice place, Memphis is. And plenty of work down here. Shouldn't be hard to find at all. Plenty of work. Y'all just gotta give it a chance. I love you."

Lee wasn't talking.

A HOSTESS'S LAMENT

Nobody even knew who she was until a couple of days later. Found out it was a friend of a friend of Charlie Gordon. We hardly knew Charlie let alone his friend's friend. I spoke to her a minute in total--maybe handed her a beer or something. Some way of showing gratitude she had, dying in my bathtub. If it had been a heart attack or some other natural cause, I would have forgiven her. The university would have forgiven Randall too. The trustees and administrators couldn't have blamed him even if people were talking about the professor's loose ways--a single woman dying naked in his house and he not even knowing her last name. If she had died of natural causes, the reporters and rumor-mongers wouldn't have had the creativity to call her "the junkie mistress"--the coroner was the one to plant that seed, giving out the junkie part of it and the information as to where her body was found.

I truly am a forgiving soul, and I could have forgiven Charlie except that the son-of-a-bitch never did apologize--never did show one little jot of remorse. He brought her over here and then left without her. Christ, what a burden she was, too. He said that he looked for her for a good long while before giving up. He figured she had

wandered out the door or gone home with someone else. If only she had.

I'm too nice a woman and Randall is too nice a man. All it takes is one time: some misfit will latch on; somebody who wants to take advantage of you or some weakling--the parasitic kind who creates devastation all around and doesn't even realize it. This woman might as well have brought the plague into the house considering the harm she did around here. And all we did was agree to let her sleep on the couch for the night. We were doing a little cleaning up after a party; it must have been two o'clock and we were taking care of the ash trays and empty beer cans. We thought the house was empty, and this stranger wanders out of the back room in a long cotton dress that could have doubled as a nightie. She looked as if she were about to jump into her own bed, and of course we obliged her with the next best thing; the mattress she had been so attracted to earlier in the night. We even gave her a pillow.

The next day was Saturday, and I guess that I was lucky. If it had been a weekday Randall would have been away at school all day, and I would have returned from classes and discovered her by myself. As it turned out, Randall and I got up and went shopping for a couple of hours. When we returned, he got the first look. He came into the living room frightened and sickly pale. He didn't want me to go upstairs, but I had to see for myself.

Before this happened we were either throwing parties or going to them all the time. These were really good times, too. We weren't just killing brain cells and dredging up lousy memories like we're doing now. Back then, Randall was making good bucks, he was content with the progess of his work, and everyone at the university was happy with him. He was making such good money that I could take courses and work toward finishing my degree without having to think about money concerns at all. We had the Austin Healy then, too; the one Randall had when I first met him. We had a great time just driving around town.

It seemed as if Randall was always wearing his gray worsted wool suit and thin red tie whenever he taught and when he drove that car. He thought he looked like God's gift in that suit. He wore it till it was frayed at the cuffs. I don't know where he got the idea that that's the proper attire for an English professor. Maybe one of his mentors at Vanderbilt wore one like it, or maybe he saw a photograph of T. S. Eliot in something similar. Regardless of his reasons, he did look outstanding in that suit--especially when he was behind the wheel of the Healy with his granny sunglasses on; the kind John Lennon used to wear. Randall sure as hell didn't look like a Tennessean in that outfit. In fact, he didn't look like he had ever seen Tennessee, let alone been born and raised here.

Before we were married we would go out in the car after dinner. We found roads we had never been on, and we would

just drive. About once a week, we headed out route forty-five past Greenville to the Johnston's house; Randall knows Merle Johnston from when they were college freshmen together. There were always a bunch of musicians out there, and Randall would bring his guitar and play late into the night. Sometimes I would do some clogging when there was a full band and they were really cooking. We still go out there, but one or two visits every few months is all we can afford now. Besides, when we're there now, Randall sometimes doesn't even bother to pick up his guitar.

Things have got to change soon. We can live on food stamps and what I make just so long as the car is running and nothing breaks down in the house. But who wants to live like this?

We haven't even begun to recover from that day. Randall took it well for the first couple of months. He had a resolve in him. He wasn't going to let it ruin us, and he was checking out every kind of employment lead for fifty miles around. He thought the worst would blow over--that folks' memories are short, and even if they do remember, they're usually willing to forgive. He figured he would be able to walk into a decent job at a small college or at one of those new corporate headquarters that have sprung up since they put in the interstate. He really had no idea.

When we found her we were both calm somehow. It was probably shock more than presence-of-mind which allowed us to

handle the matter with any dignity whatsoever. We were both numb. It's not every day that you find someone rigid in your bathtub, her dead eyes wide-open in horror. She knew that something had gone wrong, and she sure as hell didn't nod out peacefully.

I remember we called the rescue squad--we knew she was dead, but who else do you call when you've got a body upstairs? We were sitting on the couch waiting for them to arrive. We both knew what this whole little episode was going to do to Randall's career, and yet he started joking about what we might have done; that we could have disposed of the body through less-than-proper channels. Down the Elizabethton Highway and into the Nolachuckee River was the route that came to his mind. In retrospect, that doesn't sound like a bad idea. No one would have suspected us when the body was found; Randall might be an associate professor by now. He would still have the Austin Healy, and somebody would be being paid good money to work on his car. I can't stand to watch him working under the hood of that ratty old Ford. It's just not right.

We'll probably go north before long. I shudder to think of it, but the prospects aren't getting any better here. Randall talks about sending his resume to places in New York, Pennsylvania, and Michigan. Pretty soon he'll do it. He has virtually run out of places to look for work around here, and he must be getting tired of the kinds of interviews he has

had. If people don't recognize his name or face at the outset, they catch on soon enough. The interviewer has only to be curious about why he resigned his tenure track position at the university. Professors are supposed to take sabbaticals,and most normal people will have another job lined up before they quit work. Randall says that when he tells the interviewers that he resigned due to personal matters at home, they invariably clear their throats, shuffle their papers, and find some fast way of ending the interview, smiling all the while.

We're going to wind up leaving the area. We're going to go six or seven or eight hundred miles from our friends and kin. I can't help but think back constantly to the time before it happened. It has only been a few months, and yet so much has changed. If we could only cut one day out of our past. If we could only pick it out like so much dust from a child's eye.

TOP OF THE PECKING ORDER

Jackson wondered why life's pleasurable moments were so often accompanied by periods of torment and abuse. For him it wasn't enough to dismiss the pattern as a necessary balance; there had to be more to it than that. He knew from his experience of the past few years that life could be easy, and that it didn't have to be chopped up into segments of good and bad. A beautiful wife, two stunning children, a successful business of his own, and a year of college completed with honors: all of these things had come his way without being interrupted by misfortunes or ill will.

And yet he couldn't rid himself entirely of the bad times--the mean years, he called them. So many people hadn't left him alone to find the happiness that had been within easy reach all along.

Jackson's first twenty-one years had contained a succession of ordeals, and now, as a full-grown man of twenty-five, he was still plagued by fears that the peace he had found could be easily taken away. He was convinced that one stroke of bad luck or someone's evil whim could reduce him overnight to the hapless boy he had once been. If for some reason the business failed--or God forbid he should be disabled somehow--he would be back in a position where he

could be pushed around, chastised, and otherwise treated like a small child. And there might be nothing he could do to protect his family from the effects of his fall. He felt like a clairvoyant Job before God and Satan started playing games: he awaited the onset of the calamities.

Negative thoughts ran through Jackson's mind with good reason on this particular day. He had come too close to losing it all in life; he had almost finished himself off with one foolish gesture. During the afternoon rounds through his chicken coops--a lengthy undertaking as his holdings now included four long coops housing five hundred chickens each--he was passing through coop number four when a gate to the outside unlatched itself and flew open in the wind. Since there were no chickens nearby, Jackson, with a full bladder, decided to take the opportunity in hand, sending a trail of piss out of the open doorway. This impulse proved regrettable when the wind turned on him, and the angle iron and chicken wire of the gate and a faint remembrance of piss came hurtling back toward the coop, forcing him to take a preventative measure--to thrust his bare hand into the oncoming fray of jagged iron and gnarled wire, in sacrifice of one appendage to save another. He then pulled his hand away from the instrument of its scrambling to find each finger a casualty in some way: a scrape, a nick, a small laceration; and the entire index finger returned macerated, like the remnants of a corpse after a grizzly has been at it. Jackson stood there immobile for a few seconds

with the one unblemished member still hanging in the now gentle breeze and the other bloodied one held out straight before him. He stood there just so until a few hens brushing past his legs had revived him with their frenzied attempts to taste the small red puddle that was forming at his feet. He kicked at them, put himself back in his pants, and shut the gate securely. Then, wrapping a bandana around the torn hand, he walked back through the laying rooms in the direction of his truck.

At the clinic, after the stitches were put in, Jackson was a little reluctant to pull down his pants for the tetanus shot. The nurse noticed the hesitation and soothed him with an estimation of how many men's bare buns she had seen, this year being in the dead-winter of her career; "forty-four years in the same office, and there must've been ten thousand backsides that've passed this way." Jackson lifted an eyebrow in appreciation of that figure and then bared his own.

Because he would be returning home long after dinner time, he had called his wife Amelia to say that he was running late with errands and would be eating at McDonald's. So when he finally gothome the sun was down, the kids were asleep, and the wife was stretched out on the couch, semi-conscious before the TV with a beer or two in her bloodstream. She revived as he sat down in a nearby chair with a beer of his own in his good hand.

"The kids were hell today; we're raising animals, you know that?" she said.

Then she caught sight of the finger bandage and many mercurachrome-smeared abrasions, contusions, and lacerations of the same hand.

"One small sacrifice for the greater good," Jackson said, and proceeded to tell her that he had done it for their marriage and that the "greater good" had snapped back from the point of danger, as if it had had a sixth sense, a sense of its very own vulnerability. They laughed for a time and then fell silent, Amelia becoming lulled by her fatigue and the drone of the TV, and he by the languid feeling brought on by Demarol and the aftermath of having come so close to reckoning with an unspeakable fate.

Jackson sipped his beer and pondered while his wife dozed. He thought about chickens straining their necks in an effort to taste blood. They behaved in such an appalling manner. Other crudely social animals--ants, bees, wolves, pigs, termites, humans--all have vile traits of their own; but humans and chickens always seemed head and shoulders above the rest of the crowd for Jackson, in terms of what they might do to their own kind without provocation. Other species don't go around tearing each other's throats out or throwing each other out of the nest or off the front porch with anything near the same ferocity displayed by humans and chickens.

Jackson was studying animal husbandry at the state university in order to prepare himself for vet school, and the texts used during this past year had left a strong impression. A reading in an animal behavior course which especially intrigued him was devoted to bovine brain function: does a bull think, and if so, what about? If a bull is observed loping around in a desert area, he will avoid sharp objects even though he has been raised in confinement and never felt the sting of a thorn. And he will not only take care to watch where he treads: his is also equipped to lift his testicles up to six centimeters in the event that they need to be elevated out of some thorny or otherwise undesiralbe zone. Now, since this is well documented, veritable common knowledge to any student of animal husbandry, why should any intelligent, inquiring human mind stop there? Shouldn't we all consider the possibility that, since a bull is able to spy a bramble or cactus about to merge into its scrotal space, and subsequently raise its balls to avoid contact, never having felt the sting of the aforementioned hazards, then he must also be capable of making judgements about things and beings more lofty than a mere desert bush. The bovine--the lummox of the mammalian order--is able to contemplate pain, rather than simply reacting to it; and he chooses to stay clear of it. He uses thought processes to a limited extent then, and one can expostulate that he is sometimes able to control his actions.

And what of the lowly chicken? Jackson believed that it too could choose its own mode of behavior at times, except for that seedy underbelly of their populations which could be used in cockfights without any prodding or conditioning; the ones who would be considered psychopaths if they were human. Other than that hard core of unregenerate trash, there is a society of run-of-the-mill chickens who sometimes choose to get in on the kill and at other times lie back on the sidelines with feathers unruffled. What Jackson found astounding was that these normal, every-day chickens not only made a habit of pecking each other into submission; they went a few steps further and gouged until the object of their derision was transformed into bloody lunchmeat. They turn the coop into a killing floor for no reason other than that someone strayed into the wrong room or cocked his or her head the wrong way. And at the least sign of vulnerability, they drew their little peckers and went to work, not for the preservation of the species, mind you; this isn't any manifestation of Darwinian survival of the fittest--not even an aberrant one. This was daily perpetration of ritual torture followed by less-than-summary execution. The whole community couldn't wait to get their beaks into action. First they opened a wound on the victim and then tore into it en masse until the bird fell and its eyes could be deftly removed.

So Jackson thought he had seen enough evidence to conclude that man isn't an anomaly in an otherwise perfect scheme

of things. In his mind, chickens and men were equally unattractive and curious beasts, in control of and responsible for their own actions. He even went so far as to ponder the scenario wherein technology had advanced to the extent that we could communicate with a few chickens of mutant intelligence. Jackson dreamed up the possibility that such interviews might garner responses not unlike those of the commandant at Auschwitz:

> Yes, I did hear their shrill screams, but they were mere beasts. No one in his right mind could possibly think of them as chickens!

As Jackson raised his beer to his lips and his bandaged finger blurred out of focus against the side of his nose, he expressed wordless gratitude at the ceiling. He knew from Animal Husbandry 101 that a rooster plummets to the bottom of the pecking order after being made a capon. He shuddered to think that he could have been there--with humans as the peckers above.

Jackson got another beer, sat down again, and sucked away a third of its contents. As he put it down on the table, he lost all awareness of self. He was back in childhood in that instant, the boy-Jackson inhabiting this world once again. He and his eight-year-old companions reared their freckled and toothy little heads in Jackson's vision.

> Why don't you go home, Jackson, and don't come back until you can hit the ball. We're gonna lose because of you!

Jackson had been a small baby and was still small at eight years old--noticeably so to everyone. Grownups were still friendly; they didn't seem to make any distinctions between him and the other boys his age. But his friends! The meaner ones on the block threw him to the ground or cursed him for any reason at all--or for nothing. "Why don't you get lost; we don't want you here," they said. And the lesser ones, the hangers-on, would pitch in with a chorus--a cacophony of verbal spit.

In junior high school they weren't any kinder and were especially obnoxious around pretty girls: "Jackson, you little shrimp; Jackson, you weak little creep; Jackson, why don't you go home and play with mama and your toys!" Any number of punk kids--future cops or marines or insurance salesmen--through the halls or across the gymnasium would let fly, "Jackson, is that girlie voice of yours ever gonna change? Jackson, are you ever gonna be able to throw a baseball?"

In high school the taunts became more sophisticated: "You wouldn't know what to do with a girl, would you Jackson? You never touched one there, did you? You probably never even kissed one!"

When the testosterone finally began surging and the pubic hair decided to take root, the damage was already done. He had resolved that life is one flinch after another--that stimulae either tear at the flesh or sear away the brain

tissue so that the proper response could only be to find a corner somewhere in which to stay shy of high-school age boys.

With the secondary sexual characteristics, Jackson finally acquired height and some timbre in his voice. But something of the time before pubic hair remained; a sharp anguish that if physical might resemble the pain of a scalpel left in the bowels. He would never trust anyone fully again, and would scoff forevermore at anyone's intimation that life if a gift. A gift of dead flowers? Of sodden ashes? Of day upon day of inchoate grief for oneself and everyone living--especially oneself. He wanted to tell the sickly sweet, ever-smiling effervescent types to try buck teeth, ninety-five pounds, and hairless balls on for size some time. With those kinds of attributes at sixteen, life is hardly worth cracking a smile about. Life is a disease.

Jackson's ascendance into the body of an adult brought a short respite from difficult times. He could do what his friends did: he could walk down the halls of the school and no one would bother him; he could show up for a baseball game and not be the last one chosen to play; he could ask girls out on dates; and sometimes they would accept; and, as his friends had so charmingly noted some years before, he could go to "first, second or third base" with them, second base being nipple-touching, Jackson recalled.

But the time for simple pleasures were soon cut short. Almost before Jackson could catch his adult breath, he was ushered out of high school and seized by bullies of the highest order; his draft board had searched him out and would do their best to destroy him in the two years of their custody.

For Jackson, the army was a strange concept. Full-grown bullies were given rank so they could be vested with the flag and all the mom and apple pie and ceremonial crap that goes along with it while they go about the task of terrorizing eighteen-year-old kids; as if the meanest boys on blocks all over the country somehow woke up one morning as adults with decorated breasts and official duties in public service. And each one is given protection from the law when he chooses to commit assault, torture, or murder. All Jackson really knew was that a few fat and balding generals and colonels sent the order down through a series of rigid, in-need-of-enema types--valets and eager-beaver junior officers and eagle scouts; in fact, the whole chain of command saw to it that he would be assaulted, tortured, and brought to death's door during six months of basic training before some other big boy, secure in the Pentagon or in some hollowed-out mountain somewhere, saw fit to send him willy-nilly to Vietnam. Thrown in with a bunch of other scared kids, he was shipped out with a few choice words to the effect that he and his new

friends should take care not to doanything foolish like killing each other out on patrol. They said the villages and jungle would supply enough legitimate targets, and everyone would get a chance to contribute to the kill ratio in some small way.

As it turned out, Jackson's "small way" was the firing of his M-16 into interminable foliage, or into villages full of "sympathizers" after the artillery and bombers had already shattered every square inch for twenty square miles. The jungles and villages really did yield bodies after such "missions," and although Jackson didn't feel responsible when he rolled a body over still twitching, or witnessed a child's corpse still smoldering as he "mopped up" an area, he would invariably be given the credit. A captain's "nice work men," and a cold draught always awaited him back at base camp.

He walked through Nam with hardly a scratch. He took orders and fired his gun without thinking after a while. And in the back of his mind he hoped that he could leave without being affected at all, until a bullet tore through someone's helmet beside him on the path, the man not moving for a second, knowing the bullet was in his head, before screaming that he'd be all right, he'd be all right. He said as much before the blood poured down over his face, and he fell with his eyes still opened, still expressing the certainty that he would be all right.

Jackson was nearly able to leave the rest of Vietnam behind. He seldom thought or dreamed of the children or the screaming women. But this face--this blind, dead stupefaction--would never leave his psychic vision. The man's astonishment, after all he must have seen and experienced, seemed ridiculous on the surface. And yet Jackson knew that it is human nature and animal behavior in general to resist the force of death right until the end--right up until the moment when the victors are hovering above you, choking off your last supply of air even as they loosen your collar and examine your eyes.

Jackson sat back on his couch and swallowed the last of the beer. He saw the medics sealing the dead comrade into a plastic bag before they took him away on a stretcher. He thought about his chicken coops, Amelia and the kids, and his relatively good fortune. He was alive and able to fend for himself; he was physically fit and able to provide for his family. He promised himself that he would stay self-employed and at the top of his own heap. Instead of allowing blind circumstance and men other than himself to control his fate, he decided to better his odds by cutting the other men out of the picture as best he could. In that way, there would be no bosses and no commanding officers shouting orders; and there would be no one peering hawk-eyed at his racked body. He would see to it, to the best of his ability, that his body would give out of its own accord rather than someones else's.