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OEDIPUS IN RED

AND OTHER STORIES

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ABSTRACT

OEDIPUS IN RED

AND OTHER STORIES

By

Timothy Ernest Kelley

Although each of these stories is intended to be an individual experience, independent of the rest, the collection is bound together by a few common themes: the erosion of human relationships; loneliness in a world full of others; and the struggle to discover a truer standard by which to live. The stories all turn on moments of recognition or understanding, sometimes conscious and sometimes not. A good deal of the important action takes place within the characters, but the stories should be read as if those characters were close friends, rather than subjects of a psychological study.

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OEDIPUS IN RED

At noon on Saturday Alex Nash motored the little fishing boat up to the dock below the cabin. The sun had become too bright for fishing the rockbeds in the shallows of the bay. He secured the ropes to the pilings and ascended the flight of split log steps to the cabin, leaning his pole against the railing when he reached the top. His wife, dressed in Bermuda shorts and the old flannel shirt she used as a robe, sat at the desk under the front window, hunched over the typewriter.

"Jesus, Miriam," he said, coming through the door, "do you have to do that?"

"I'm just trying to get caught up."

"You're always caught up."

"Staying up half of Sunday night to get a lecture ready for Monday morning is not caught up."

"I mean you're always caught-up. We're only here for the weekend. Can't you put that stuff away for long enough to enjoy it?"

"I was enjoying the quiet."

He took a beer from the refrigerator. "The whole reason for coming here is to get away from work."

"That's your reason. I don't know why I come here."

"Well, nobody forces you."

"I didn't mean it that way. I just meant I don't come here to get away from work." She shut off the typewriter and stacked the loose pages into a pile on the desktop. "You were out fishing, anyway. What was I supposed to be doing?"

"I don't know," said Alex. He was staring out at the bay through the window above the sink. A flock of gulls circled above the end of a dock down the beach.

"Don't pout," said Miriam. She rose from the desk. The sleeve of the flannel shirt brushed his back as she passed to the refrigerator. "You want a sandwich?"

"I was thinking about driving up to the point for a swim." He watched the near collision of two gulls as they tried to land in the same spot on the water.

"I'll go with you." She made two sandwiches and they sat at the kitchen table to eat. The weekend trip had been his idea. They hadn't spent much time together since she had begun teaching, and they had already argued once the night before, when he saw her loading the typewriter into the car.

"How was the fishing?"

"I didn't try very hard."

Miriam smiled. It was an old story. He would go out for hours at a time, and almost never come back with anything. He had explained to her years ago that the fish know whether

you are really trying or not, and that he rarely tried as hard as he should.

When they had finished their lunch he followed her to the bedroom and stood leaning against the door, watching as she undressed and pulled on her swimsuit.

It was a ten minute drive to the public beach at the end of the peninsula. Alex Nash thought about the changes that had taken place in the bay area since he was a child, the changes that had taken place even since they had bought the cabin fifteen years ago. The cherry orchards still rolled over the hills of the peninsula, but what had once been open shoreline was now an undulating row of tight little lots with modern looking summer homes; the area had taken on the atmosphere of a summer suburb. He wondered if his son, now in his second year of college, had enjoyed this place the way he had as a boy.

Miriam gazed out over the orchards at the east arm of the bay. She was thinking about Greek tragedy, the subject of the coming week's lectures, and considering Sophocles as the topic of the doctoral dissertation she would have to begin work on soon. She had left the University of Michigan in her second year, two months pregnant, to marry Alex. He was working as a highway department draftsman, and taking night classes to become an engineer. She didn't return to college until their son, Jason, entered high school, but now had a Master's degree, and was teaching at a junior college while she

prepared to begin her Ph.D.

"The beach shouldn't be too crowded," said Alex. "the water will still be a bit chilly."

"The water will be near freezing." For Miriam the bay was almost unbearable until near August, though the two of them had always been among the few who began swimming in June. She tolerated the temperature; Alex seemed to overcome it, to actually enjoy it.

When they arrived there were a few people on towels scattered along the beach, but none in the water except for a paunchy, dark haired man about their age and a boy of fourteen or fifteen, who had waded in, shivering, to push a small cabin cruiser off its submerged trailer. Two teenaged girls whispered and giggled on the front deck of the boat as Alex stripped off his shirt and shoes and bounded across the sand, a blue snorkel dangling from his neck. He smiled and waved at them; said hello to the man in the water. Miriam sat down on the beach blanket and watched as he approached the shoreline.

He turned, knee-deep in the bay, to look back at her.

"You coming in?"

"How's the water?"

"Couldn't be better. Bath water."

"I bet. You go ahead. I might come in in a while."

"Suit yourself." At the top the water was really not bad, but as he waded deeper he could feel the temperature dropping. At waist-deep he shoved the snorkel into his mouth,

stretched his arms out over his head, and plunged forward through the jade colored surface of the bay. He swam out and down, the cold reaching a new intensity with each foot he descended. When he came up again he was in about eight feet of water. His upper body was no longer uncomfortable, but his feet, kicking slowly below, were numb. He waved at his wife.

"Perfect," he shouted, his voice quavering from the cold. "Couldn't be better."

She laughed. He waved again, then ducked his head back beneath the surface and swam, breathing through the snorkel, toward the old shipping dock at the other end of the beach. Moving slowly between the wood pilings of the dock he spotted a couple of large fish that he guessed to be trout, though he couldn't get close enough to be sure. When he came up for a rest he heard the planks of the dilapidated boardwalk creaking over his head, and looked up through a gap in the boards to see a young woman making her way out to the end of the dock. With the afternoon sun overhead her hair looked almost as yellow as her suit. He started to shout when he realized she was going to jump, not sure if she was aware of the rocks in the water, much closer to the surface than they had been years ago when the dock was used by ships, but she dove out high and long, entering the water just beyond the dark blue line of the drop-off. She swam back in under the dock and came up next to him. The top of her swimsuit seemed to wave like a yellow banner beneath the rippled surface. Her skin was oiled and tan, but there was a trace of blue around her lips.

"Still pretty cold," she said. "I thought I heard some one yell as I was diving."

"I thought you were going to hit the rocks," said Alex. "Nice dive."

"Thanks. This isn't the best place for snorkeling. Not much to see."

"I'm just getting a little exercise."

"You don't look like you need it."

A spindly young man in flowered trunks and a sport shirt walked out onto the dock above them and lay down, hanging his head over the side to look at them.

"Are you all right down there?"

"You're going to fall in," said the girl. "I'm fine, just freezing."

"Well, come out and get a towel."

"I'm on my way."

The young man watched them for another minute, and then stood up and returned to the beach.

"There's an old shipwreck on the other side of the point," said the girl, "about halfway between here and the lighthouse. I snorkeled to it a couple of years ago. The water's come up a little since then, but I think you could still reach it without tanks."

"Really?" Alex remembered hearing as a child about a tugboat that had gone down outside the harbor. His father had once pointed out the area to him when they were fishing.

"Hey," called the young man on the beach, "are you coming

in or not?"

"Lighten up," said the girl. "I'm coming, already." She let her legs float to the surface and backstroked slowly around Alex and out from under the dock, her breasts pointing like marker buoys at the sky, water slipping away from her oiled legs as she frog-kicked herself into motion.

"See ya 'round."

Miriam watched the arc of the girl's dive, the slight disturbance she created on the surface as she pierced the water. She watched her swim back in, and smiled when she came up next to Alex. He had a way of attracting people, not just women, though perhaps especially women. Wherever he went he could not be alone for long. She lay back on the blanket and closed her eyes before the girl swam away. Within a few minutes the heat of the June sun sedated her to near sleep, and she found herself again thinking of Attic tragedy, wondering how much difference it would have made if the original actors had worn bright colors instead of the white she had always imagined: Oedipus in red, Jocasta in royal blue.

She opened her eyes again when Alex sat down next to her on the blanket. A large crayfish dangled from between his thumb and forefinger over her face. One drop of water hit her on the chin before she could roll out from under it.

"Look what I found."

"Great," she said, brushing sand from her arm. "What are

you going to do with it?"

"They're supposed to be good to smoke." He held the tail in front of his lips. "Which end do you light?"

"Put it back in the water."

"I found him in an old shoe at the bottom. He pinched my toe when I stuck my foot in it."

"Why did you stick your foot in it?"

"Because it was a shoe."

"Put it back in the water."

He walked down to the water and set the crayfish on the wet sand of the shoreline. When he returned to the blanket Miriam stood up.

"Bathwater, huh?"

"Almost too warm." He sat down, stretching his arms and shoulders.

She waded into the bay until the water reached her chest, and then tipped forward and swam out across the surface. She ducked under once, and descended until she reached a level of cold that created a sharp pain above her eyebrows. Resurfacing quickly, she caught a breath of air and tread water until the pain subsided. Then, floating on her back and paddling her feet slowly, she returned to shore.

That evening they had dinner at the Bower's Harbor Inn. Alex had made reservations before they came up. He had taken Miriam there for the first time a few months after Jason was born. The luxury of dinner at the inn was more than they

could realistically afford in those early years, but he had been so excited she could not make herself raise any objections. They had eaten there at least once every year since, usually on special occasions. It was no longer an extravagance. After twenty years as a state engineer Alex was being paid very well, and she could survive now, if she had to, on what she was making alone. But even now, as she watched him sit down across the table from her, she thought she detected a trace of the determined smile he had worn that first night, and remembered a strange moment at which she had felt suddenly closer to him. Their first year had not been an easy one, and she knew how hard he had tried to make everything nice for her, to make her feel that everything would always be nice. But there was a moment at which she saw the apprehension behind his smile. It was like watching him walk into the bay, pretending the cold didn't bother him, and catching that one twinge in his expression that gave away the charade, and a barrier seemed to suddenly break down between them. She had experienced such a feeling only a few times in the two decades they had been together, and although it was a sad kind of feeling she remembered those moments as the only times in her life that she knew she was not alone. It had felt as if, for an instant, they were thinking as one, both recognizing the ultimate strangeness behind all of their worries and hopes. Their satisfactions, their happiness, they enjoyed privately, but they had truly shared those few rare moments.

When they returned to the cabin Alex started a fire. He had to open a window to the cool breeze from the bay to keep the room from getting too hot. They sat on the rug in front of the fireplace, leaning against an old sofa they had bought shortly after they were married. It had been re-upholstered once, recovered a second time, and finally moved to the cabin when they were able to buy a new one. Its upkeep no longer a necessity, it had begun again to show the erosion of the years.

"I miss Jason."

Alex was opening a bottle of wine they had left behind the previous fall. He set it on the floor and slid closer to her, slipping an arm around her shoulder.

"He'll be home in a couple weeks."

"No, I mean I miss him up here. I haven't gotten used to being here without him again."

"It is awful quiet." Alex squeezed her arm, smiling. "He'll still come up in the summer."

He reached for the wine bottle and poured two glasses. He, too, missed the times they had enjoyed with their son at the cabin, but at the moment he missed even more the times he and Miriam had spent there before Jason began making the trips, the times of touring the local wineries, of staying up all night and making love on the floor in front of the fireplace.

They sat for a long time in silence, drinking the wine

and watching the fire. When the bottle was half empty Alex pushed it aside and leaned over to kiss his wife, running a hand up the side of her ribs, and then cupping it over a breast.

"Not here," she said. "Let's get in bed."

Early in the morning Alex loaded the spare tank of gas into the boat and backed it away from the dock. Instead of trolling the rockbeds he headed north, along the line of the drop-off. It took twenty minutes to get to the lighthouse at the end of the peninsula. From there he cruised slowly, watching the shoreline as he wound around the series of indistinct inlets along the west edge of the harbor point. After a few minutes he saw the old wooden lifeboat, now half buried in the sand on the shore. Putting along the edge of the dark water he couldn't spot any sign of the sunken tug. He anchored the boat and put on his snorkel, mask and fins. At the edge of the drop-off he could stand on his toes and keep his head out of the water. He swam along the edge, diving as deep as he could safely go down the slope, and coming back up to stand on the sand shelf of the shallow, where he could rest without having to tread water. On his fourth dive he saw a dark area on the bottom, about twenty feet out from the drop-off, but didn't have enough air to reach it. After a long rest he went down again. When he reached the bottom his skin ached from the cold. He came close enough to make out the black shape of the tug before he

was forced to go straight up for air, without time to make it back to the shallow. Treading water, he caught his breath, and then made a couple of attempts at going straight down, but could not get any closer. Finally exhausted, he swam slowly back to the boat, thinking that he could bring scuba gear out later in the summer. A young couple in a speedboat passed in the deep water. The woman wore a yellow bathing suit, and he had to watch them for a moment to be sure she was not the girl he had seen beneath the dock.

Just a few minutes after he had started back the engine sputtered twice and then quit. His efforts to reach the sunken tugboat had left him tired, and the six gallons of gas in the spare tank seemed heavier as he lifted it over the seat than it had when he loaded it into the boat. As he began to prime the line from the new tank it popped away from the motor, squirting gas over his hand and forearm. He had not snapped the connection tight.

"God damn it," he shouted across the bay. He was sweating as he secured the line, as much from frustration as from the heat of the mid-day sun, and after priming it again he dove back into the cold water to rinse the gasoline and perspiration from himself before starting the motor.

Miriam had spent the first few hours of the morning finishing her preparations for the week's lectures, and sorting through notes for her dissertation. Just before noon the telephone rang. She was delighted to hear her son's voice

when she picked it up.

"Just thought I'd see how you guys were doing."

"Oh, Jason," she said, "we miss you so much."

"Yeah, sure. You've probably been renting my room."

"I mean it," she said, a little annoyed at suddenly realizing how much he sounded like his father on the phone.

"I know, Mom. I miss you, too. Listen, I know I should have told you this before, but I've been seeing this girl for a while now, and we're thinking about getting an apartment for the summer." He paused for a moment, and then added: "She's really something. I want to bring her home to meet you when I come."

"That's wonderful," said Miriam, after a pause of her own. "This is pretty serious?"

"I don't know. Well, yeah, I guess it is."

"That's great, honey. I can't wait to meet her."

"Good. We'll see you in a couple weeks. So, how are you guys doing?"

"We're fine."

She walked down to the dock when she heard the boat.

"You've been out a long time. Why are you all wet?"

"I did some snorkeling." He tossed the ropes to her and she tied the boat to the pilings. He ran a chain through one of the oarlocks and padlocked it to the dock.

"We're all packed. I thought we could stop in Traverse City for lunch on the way back."

"What's the hurry?"

"I thought we could get home early enough to relax a little. What's the matter?"

"Nothing." He locked the motor to the boat, disconnected the gas tank and hoisted it to the dock.

"Jason called. He's bringing a girl home."

"Hmm," said Alex. He stepped out of the boat, oars and fishing pole wedged under one arm, lifted the tank with his free hand, and walked past her to the stairs.

"They want to get an apartment."

He stopped at the foot of the stairs and turned to look at her. After a moment he smiled, and then turned again and started up the steps. Miriam wondered if she would ever feel this close to him again.

A HAIRCUT

The Tonsorial Palace had a large window at the front, but as the glass was tinted a barely translucent coffee brown the inside of the shop received the benefit of almost no natural light. Marsha was surprised, walking in out of the sunshine, to discover a rather scant employment of artificial light as well. A small brass desk lamp stood next to an antique cash register on the oak counter just inside the door, illuminating a little oval section of the countertop around an appointment book. Just beyond the end of the counter a small group of stairs led down to the main level, where a row of overhead bulbs, unadorned, provided what hardly seemed sufficient light for the three barber chairs, and merely cast a faint yellow glow across the rest of the room. Against a corner opposite the work area a pink ceramic lamp lit the end table on which it stood, and just enough of an old but well preserved sofa to allow one person the use of the magazines strewn across the tabletop.

Marsha had to close her eyes for a few seconds to help them adjust to the sudden lack of light before descending the

stairs. Although the decor of the place was not really palatial by any means, it did, perhaps because of the strangely low lighting, have an agreeable sort of timelessness about it. The heavy oak railings that ran up the sides of the staircase and separated the two levels of the shop, finished only by age and clear varnish to match the counter and back bar, though more charming than regal, did possess a certain stateliness. A smattering of antiques around the waiting area, including a small steel safe and a six foot wooden barber pole, added to the sense of rustic refinement. It was the kind of atmosphere, she thought, that Roger had been striving unsuccessfully for in his den, that relaxed and removed atmosphere of a private library. She wondered for a moment if it was just the lighting, but decided it was not. There was a rigidity and a lack of imagination in Roger's thinking that rendered him incapable of the relaxed creativity behind that kind of mood. It was a mood that didn't suit him, anyway. She was sure the den would produce more narcissistic musing than creative activity.

She had chosen the Tonsorial Palace not because it had been recommended, not even because their Yellow Pages ad seemed any more professional than the rest, but because she liked the name. The only qualification she cared about was that it had not been recommended to her by any of Roger's friends. She would have her hair done for their party, but she would not have it done at a shop they patronized. Although she loved Roger, or at least thought she did, as she

had begun to wonder about the feelings she had developed for him over the past few months, she preferred to avoid any unnecessary contact with the circle of friends to which he had introduced her.

She had been planning to have her hair cut for some time, but Roger had insulted her so deeply a few days earlier that she almost decided not to have it done before the party. When she kissed him good-bye as he was leaving her apartment one morning his hands slipped from her shoulders to run through her hair and he stepped back to look at her.

"We have a party to go to at the Morrison's Friday night," he announced. She had known about the party for two weeks, and wondered what made him think she would forget. It was several minutes after he had left that she realized he had been examining her, that the reminder had been a hint that she should make herself look acceptable. At the last party they went to two of the women had suggested that she see their hairdressers.

She didn't think he intended to insult her. In fact, she doubted that he even realized he had, but that only made it worse in her mind. She considered not having it cut at all, she considered not going to the party, but in the end she decided to do both, and never mentioned to Roger how badly he had hurt her. She did not wish to jeopardize the relationship she had with him over a petty matter. Three months ago he had thrown a sheet over a lonely and boring period of her life, offering her new experiences--a skiing trip, a weekend in New

York, dinner at real restaurants--but most importantly he offered a steady companionship she had not known since moving away from her parents three years ago. For this she would overlook the insult, and would even have her hair done for the party she would just as soon not attend.

Two of the three chairs were empty. Behind the first a tall dark haired woman stooped to slide something into a cupboard below the back bar, exposing the black garter belts that supported her fishnet stockings. At the third chair, the only one in use, a redheaded woman waved a blow drier over the head of a mature looking high school girl, swinging a plastic brush through her hair with the flamboyant motions of an amateur concert conductor.

"So," said the redhead, "who my choo be?"

"I'm Marsha."

"Aha," said the redhead. You want her." She pointed to the tall woman, who was now standing straight and turning away from the back bar. "Dat's Di."

Marsha remembered the name Diane from talking to her on the phone. "I might be a little early," she said, glancing at two people sitting on the sofa in the waiting area, a girl who looked no more than a couple of years older than the one in the barber chair, and a man in perhaps his late twenties. The girl sat at the end near the lamp, a magazine opened across her lap. She had thick straw colored hair that stood straight at the top, trimmed into a sort of dome shape. The man, in the shadowy area at the other end of the sofa, wore

a lavender T-shirt, tight blue jeans, and a pair of black zipper boots with pointed toes, quite noticeable because of the way he crossed his legs at the knees, letting one foot bob in the air in front of him to the beat of the fast, Neo-Beatles style rock and roll that flowed from the speakers hanging near the ceiling above their heads. His hair also stood straight at the top, but very short, almost like a crew cut. In the back it tapered into a tail that faded from the dark brown on top to a bleached white tip where it met the collar of his T-shirt.

"No," said Diane. "You're right on time. She's waiting for Cheryl," she nodded at the girl on the sofa, "and Reggie over there just seems to like hanging out around here for some reason."

"The reason is," said Cheryl, pulling the apron off the high school girl, "that Reggie don't have to work when he hangs out here."

"You can just hop right up," said Diane, tapping the back of the chair to get Marsha's attention.

As Cheryl escorted the high school girl to the cash register, the man on the sofa began to talk about her as if she had already left.

"Now she's all set for the school dance," he said, "for a little kiss and tell. And she'll be the envy of all her little girlfriends."

"That's enough, Reggie," said Diane.

The girl had not looked back at him, and didn't slow down

to hear the last of what he was saying. Marsha looked in the mirror to see the impish grin, the grin that was half sneer, on the man's face. The reflection of his eyes met hers for a second in the mirror, and she suddenly felt that the sneer was directed at her as well.

"So," said Diane, "what do we want to do with it?"

"I don't know...," began Marsha.

"Another of those. They just never know what they want, do they?"

Marsha tried to ignore the voice from the sofa. "I guess something a little different. Maybe something like that." She pointed hastily to a photograph taped to the top of the mirror. She had just noticed it. "But maybe just a little shorter on top."

"Okay," said Diane. "I can do that."

"I can do that," mimicked Cheryl, coming back down the stairs. She whistled like a traffic cop at the girl on the sofa and thumbed her into the low chair that sat in the corner of the work area in front of the sink.

Reggie slid to the other end of the sofa. Again he caught Marsha looking at him in the mirror, and flashed her a sarcastic smile before beginning to riffle through the magazines on the table. In the glow of the ceramic lamp he looked even stranger than she had thought him at first. There was a venomous incongruity about his presence.

Roger was openly critical of homosexuals. She was more tolerant, at least in theory. She had never spent any length

of time in the presence of anyone she knew to be gay, but she knew that life could be very lonely, and believed everyone should be granted the right to whatever kind of companionship he chose. "Being gay has become so chic," she had once heard Roger say, "that they act as if they have the run of things." At the time she had thought that only in Roger's sect of society could anything be considered chic. For most of the world, the part of the world in which she had always lived, things became fashionable, popular, or stylish, but chic was a concept she felt was reserved for the class of people to whom Roger had introduced her. In the world she knew the closest one could come to being chic was a kind of fashionable brazenness. This seemed to be a part of what the man on the sofa was trying to accomplish, and although she had to admit that she found his superior attitude rather offensive, she did not find it any more offensive than those of most of the people in Roger's clique. If only, she thought, people would realize that attitudes--superior, inferior, good, bad or horrid--were all very common, they might be more careful in adopting them.

It wasn't the man's assumed superiority, however, that bothered her the most. She felt threatened by him, and was sure that he wanted her to feel threatened. In the brightness of the street she might have given him a second glance, just out of curiosity, the way one might glance a second time at a brightly colored billboard. Here in this strange shop she had to endure his prolonged presence, a presence which seemed

somehow more justified here than her own.

"What kind of shampoo do you wash this with?" asked Diane, who had wetted her hair with a spray bottle, and was now running both a comb and the fingers of one hand through it.

Marsha could not help but feel a bit insulted by the word "this." It was her hair, and the question made it sound as if she had walked in with a dead cocker spaniel on her head.

"Pretty much whatever's on sale," she said.

"It looks like it," said Diane.

Reggie laughed at the other side of the room, and Marsha fought the urge to look at him again.

"You should try the stuff we have here," said Diane. "The first bottle is kind of expensive, but we refill them pretty cheap, and it's a lot better for your hair than anything you can get in a store." Marsha had the feeling the woman knew she had insulted her, and was trying to tone it down a bit.

It was at least a direct and honest insult, and seemed to be offered more as a suggestion than a declaration of disapproval. The insults she suffered from Roger, and from his friends, bothered her much more. They were never open, rarely even directly stated, trite and poorly hidden implications of disapproval.

The first party he had taken her to had been at the Morrison's. He had introduced her to all his friends by name only, and when asked about her said simply that she was "with

only, and when asked about her said simply that she was "with one of his company's clients," leaving her to explain that she was a secretary at an architectural firm for which he did consulting work. Until meeting him and his friends she had always been very proud of her job, and of her ability to support herself, but they made her feel as if it would be better to not work at all than to have such a menial position.

Elaine Morrison did not work, and though they did have two children her primary activities seemed to revolve around making herself glamorous and throwing parties. They were real cocktail parties, a type that Marsha had never experienced before, the conversation light and witty, and never personal unless the person being spoken about had left the room. She had returned from refilling her drink to catch Elaine and a circle of women talking more about her than they had to her when she had been with them.

"How did he come up with her?" she heard one of them ask.

"I don't know," said Elaine, smiling. "She really doesn't seem like the type he'd go for." She hushed the rest of the group when she noticed that Marsha had returned to the room.

Marsha wandered uncomfortably through the room until she found Roger. He was engaged in a conversation having something to with business with Allen Morrison and two other associates. She stood next to him for a few minutes, sipping her drink and trying to hide her discomfort, until one of the men asked her opinion about something that had just been said.

She had not really been paying attention, as she understood little of what they were talking about, anyway.

"I just type the stuff up," she said. "I don't know anything about it."

The man laughed kindly, condescendingly, but her remark brought a pained expression to Roger's face. By the time they left the party she felt as if she had to work very hard to be worthy of him, and he didn't do or say anything to make her feel differently.

He was usually different when they were alone, more understanding and much less preoccupied with their differences, except in those instances, like the one earlier in the week, in which he thought about her in contrast to his circle of friends.

She thought there was too much hair coming off the top from the very start, but didn't say anything. Since she could rarely explain to a barber or stylist exactly what she wanted, she generally tried to refrain from back seat driving. The redhead had turned on another small light above the sink, and was pulling wet locks of straw colored hair through holes in a plastic cap to prepare them for streaking.

"I'm bored," announced the man on the sofa. "Shall we have a reading of 'Forum?'"

"I don't think we're that bored," said Diane. Reggie looked a bit disappointed, but began reading aloud, anyway.

Marsha had never looked inside the cover of a Penthouse magazine, and although she knew something about the subject

matter, she was shocked by the graphic nature of the letter he had selected. She wondered if it could be an actual account.

"I tink dat's about enough," said the redhead when he came to the end of the first entry.

"Okay," he said, with a hint of feigned dejection, "but I really think these things are great reading." He smiled again at Marsha in the mirror, and went on with his reading in silence.

Marsha thought about sex with Roger. That was good, quiet, and although he didn't seem to make any overt efforts to contribute to her satisfaction, he generally delayed his own for long enough for her to achieve it without any conscious assistance from him. He had at least shown no signs of unhappiness with her in bed.

The bobbing of the pointed boot, reflected in the mirror, brought her partially out of her train of thought, and she found herself wondering for a moment what it would be like for two men. The pair that came to mind were Roger and the man on the sofa, but she blocked the thought completely. The image was too repulsive, too absurd to consider.

She was sure now that she was losing too much hair from both the top and sides. She double checked the photograph on the mirror. Perhaps she should have asked to have it longer, rather than shorter on the top, but the hair in the picture looked much longer than what she thought she was going to end up with. She glanced in the mirror at the girl in the low

chair. The dye going into her yellow hair was a deep purple. Marsha wondered if this was perhaps not the right place for her to have come at all. She was grateful when Diane tapped the back of her head and said, "Look down."

Looking down, she saw a series of pictures taped across the front of the back bar that she had not noticed before. Mostly clipped from magazines, but with a few snapshots thrown in, they displayed some of the strangest hairstyles she had ever seen. School letters and colors were cut and dyed into a few of them. One, from a magazine, featured a man in a crew cut with raised edges and little pockets cut into it to make it resemble a pool table. The center of the flat top was dyed green, and a miniature cue stick and two little balls lay across it. The caption beneath the picture read "Pool Crazy." The word "pool," thought Marsha, seemed quite unnecessary.

When she was told she could look up again her hair was dry enough on top to get a reasonable estimation of the length. Her only positive thought was that there were no pool balls or purple streaks. The top had no bangs, and not even enough length to part. The sides were virtually nonexistent. It reminded her of something she had seen on MTV, though she couldn't remember who wore it. She didn't think it was a woman. She wanted to complain, but was so upset she was afraid she would burst into tears if she opened her mouth. It was too late now, anyway.

Diane wetted it again with the spray bottle, and began drying it with a brush and blow drier. When she was finished

it stood straight and smooth on top, and the back, she saw in a hand mirror held up behind her, was in a tail like that of the man on the sofa, but a few inches longer. Nothing, she realized, was considered wild anymore, but her taste had not changed as much as the overall taste of the time, and to her this was far too much. She could almost hear Elaine and the others talking about it at the upcoming party. It was a disaster. Still, she could not summon the voice to register any outright complaint.

"Well," she said, meekly, "it's different."

"You don't like it?"

"Oh, honey," said a voice from the sofa before Marsha could respond, "it's you. It really is."

"If you don't like it..." began Diane.

Marsha didn't hear her. She stood up out of the chair and turned to face the man on the sofa. "Thank you," she said. "Your opinion means so much to me."

Diane, the redhead, and the purple stripe all stared at her for a moment, and then at Reggie.

"I mean it," he said, ignoring Marsha's angry, sarcastic tone. "I think it'll be all the rage. You'll be a real trend setter. All your friends..."

"You don't know anything about me or my friends," said Marsha, unwilling to give up the last word. "You don't know anything that gives you the right to judge me or anyone else. Being different is not the same as being better."

"Ooh," said Reggie, in mock fear, but with a very real

sense of surprise.

"Fifteen dollars?" Marsha asked Diane, who was struggling to get the apron untied from the back of her neck.

"Yes," said Diane. "But if you're not happy with it..."

"No," said Marsha, "I'm not happy with it. It's not at all what I had in mind, but I guess I should have explained myself better."

"I think it looks very nice," said the redhead. "You have a pretty face, and that style shows it off a lot more than what you had before."

Marsha would not allow herself to be flattered out of her anger. She found correct change in her purse, so that she wouldn't have to stop at the cash register, handed it to Diane, and walked out without saying anything more, and without turning to look again at the sofa.

She squinted walking back into the sunlight. After a moment she thought about Roger. He would be appalled at the haircut. It wasn't the kind of look that would fit in at the Morrison's party. She wondered what she should tell him. The hell with the Morrisons, she decided, after a moment. The hell with Roger. She would tell him she loved it. She would tell him it was exactly what she had wanted. The image of Roger and the man in the Tonsorial Palace sneaked back into her mind. This time she laughed, imagining the look on Roger's face if he could see it.

THE PORTRAIT

The driveway of the Gentillozzi estate was a semi-circle of white concrete, bordered on both sides, except for a gap of about forty yards where it came closest to the front doors of the house, by rows of manicured hedges. Peter Ryan hesitated before driving in, afraid his car would leave a blemish of oil, and was relieved to find a turn-off that led around a rose garden to a large white garage behind and to the right of the house. He parked next to the garage, out of the way of the three overhead doors. An elderly man in light colored coveralls straightened up in the garden and waved, a small spade in his hand, as he saw Peter beginning his walk to the front of the estate. Peter returned the wave, and noticed that the man kept watching him, rather than returning to his work. When he neared the rose garden the man stepped out onto the drive.

"You must be the painter."

"I'm an artist," said Peter. "I have an appointment with Mr. Gentillozzi."

"I know. Mrs. G. told me about it. He wants you to

paint her picture. Very excited about it." He continued to stare at Peter even after he stopped talking.

"The roses are beautiful," said Peter, looking past him into the garden.

The man laughed. "Not responsible for that. Just keep 'em healthy and they do the rest. The rest of the place gets high technology, but the roses are Mrs. G.'s, and all she wants is for me to trim 'em a little and keep the weeds out."

"High technology?"

"Notice that smell?"

"Peter sniffed the air, and did notice a slightly starchy smell. "Fertilizer?"

"Dye." The old man smiled. "See how much greener the lawn looks than any of the others around here?" He waved with his spade to direct Peter's attention. "Green dye. Mixes with water and the grass drinks it up right through the roots. Fed it in two weeks ago. Smell still hasn't gone away."

"I'll be darned." Peter looked toward the house. "I'd better get up there. I don't have the job yet."

"Nice talking to you," said the gardener.

Peter thought about green dye, examining the lawn and hedges, as he walked up the drive to the house. After ringing the chime he stepped back to look at two junipers that flanked the sides of the front porch, their branches and twigs pruned bare to the tips, where the growth was trimmed into perfect, bright green orbs.

After a moment the doors were opened by a dark complected

man in his middle forties, wearing a dark grey suit and a white shirt, open at the collar.

"Mr. Ryan?"

"Yes," said Peter, "I..."

"I am Victor Gentillozzi," said the man in the doorway. He stepped to one side. "Please come in."

He glanced at a grandfather clock in the entryway as Peter stepped into the house. "You're right on time. I thought artists were always late."

"I hope I don't seem unprofessional," said Peter.

"On the contrary. I appreciate punctuality. There are some things we must discuss, so if you will join me for a few minutes in my study..." He turned to lead the way.

The study was a large room, about half again as long as wide. The side walls were hidden by well filled bookcases. At the far end stood an oak library desk, the items on its top in perfect array, above which hung a Monet watercolor.

Victor Gentillozzi seated himself in a leather chair behind the desk, and motioned Peter into the one across from him.

"Obviously," he said, "I can afford to be rather selective. I had no intention at first of settling for local talent for this piece, but I have spoken to people in several galleries, and have been told that you are a very capable young man."

"Really?"

"The money is not a real concern. What I want is the

very best." He took a carved bone pipe from a matching stand on the desk and packed it with tobacco. "My wife is not an unattractive woman." He lit the pipe and puffed at it, settling back into the chair. "She has some very nice features. She is not, however,... How shall I say it? She is not a beauty queen. I would like for you to paint her in such a manner that her better features are maximized, and the less attractive ones diminished."

"Mr. Gentillozzi," said Peter, "an artist always strives to capture the beauty in his subject, but I can only paint what I see."

"This painting will hang at the first landing of the stairs in the front hall of my home. It will be not only the first impression guests will get of my wife, but also of my estate and the life I have built for myself here. It must, of course, be a portrait of her. It must seem, to her and to everyone who sees it, to be a perfect likeness, but it must display an ideal beauty that will require all your talent and your most scrupulous attention."

Peter hesitated for a moment, trying to balance his financial need against an uncomfortable feeling he was beginning to develop about this painting. "My rate for a portrait of this type is two thousand dollars."

"That is fine," said Victor Gentillozzi, "but please, don't look so concerned. I am sure I have made it sound like much more of a task than it will actually be. My wife, as I've said, is not an unattractive woman." He rose from the

chair, clicking the bone pipe neatly back into its joint in the stand. "I assume you are ready to start immediately?"

"I would like to do some sketches today."

"Fine." He showed Peter to the drawing room in which he wanted the portrait done, and then back to the front hall, stopping to point out the important wall at the first landing of the stairs.

On the way to his car Peter was flagged into the rose garden by the gardener's spade. With him was a woman with light brown hair, dressed in loose blue jeans and an oversized green sweatshirt. When Peter reached them she introduced herself as Ellen Gentillozzi. The apprehensions he had developed during his conversation with her husband evaporated. She was a beautiful woman.

"How did it go? asked the gardener.

"Just fine," said Peter, still looking at Ellen Gentillozzi. "Are you ready to sit for some sketches?"

"It'll take me a few minutes. I thought my husband would keep you longer. He thinks I'm preparing myself right now." She excused herself and returned to the house.

The gardener watched her for a moment, and then returned to digging weeds out of the rows of rose bushes with the little spade. Peter retrieved his materials and equipment from the car. Victor Gentillozzi, on his way to the garage, met him as he approached the main drive.

"I understand you met my wife. What do you think?"

"About your wife?"

"About the portrait. Don't you get some kind of initial feeling about the subject?"

"I think it will go well," said Peter. "She's a lovely woman."

"Well, at any rate, I am sure you'll please me. Why don't you go ahead and get set up. She shouldn't be long." He looked out at the old man squatting in the garden. "Isn't there some kind of chemical for that?"

"Mrs. Gentillozzi didn't want any chemicals," said the gardener.

"It seems like a waste of time."

"Doesn't take that much," said the gardener.

The drawing room, elegantly decorated in Victorian style, was unoccupied when Peter returned to the house. He set up his lights, laid out a large sketchbook on his easel, focusing on a burgundy colored love seat beneath a window at the side of the room, and had begun sharpening his pencils when Ellen Gentillozzi entered. She was now wearing a dark blue gown of satin and lace, and more make-up than Peter thought necessary.

"What do you think of this?" she asked, spreading her arms and turning to display the dress. "It was Victor's choice."

"If you like it," said Peter, "I think you should wear it." She was standing at the center of the room and did not move. "I thought we would start with you on the love seat, right at the center of the window. Just make yourself

comfortable."

As he began the drawing he was not noticing the same beauty that had reassured him when he met her in the garden. Her face seemed fuller than he remembered. Although she was not of a Madison Avenue build, she was not at all plump, not even at all overweight, yet her cheekline was not as distinct as he had first thought. Her eyes, too were different. They were the same blue-grey color, but they no longer seemed to possess the energy he had found so attractive before. After the first sketch he adjusted the lights. After the second he moved her to an armchair that stood against a wall adjacent to the love seat. As he worked he spoke quietly to her, trying to relax her into beauty, telling her of the kind of paintings he had done, of the kind he would like to do. She told him that she had been Mrs. Victor Gentillozzi for just under two years. Her laugh seemed a little nervous when she added that he had probably saved her "from becoming an old maid."

"I wouldn't think you would have been in any jeopardy of that," said Peter, thinking more of the woman he had met outside than the one he was struggling now to depict in a manner that would satisfy her husband's demands.

As he began his fourth sketch he asked her about the rose garden. "The gardener tells me you take an active interest."

She smiled. "I'll never get used to having all these rooms, but I think I have gotten used to having a rose garden."

"It is beautiful."

When he finished the fourth sketch he announced that they were through for the day. Ellen Gentillozzi watched him as he examined the day's work.

"How did we do?" she asked, a little nervous, as if she was hoping she had gained his approval.

"We did fine," said Peter. "I think we can start the real work tomorrow."

In his apartment that evening he examined the sketches again over two tumblers of bourbon. They were all, in his judgment, accurate likenesses, but he decided finally that the last one he had done was the most generous portrayal of his subject. Before going to bed he secured a piece of canvas to a stretcher frame and transferred the sketch, making some barely perceptible adjustments in the lines of the face.

The following morning Victor Gentillozzi admitted him to the house, and escorted him to the drawing room before going to see how his wife was "coming along." Peter began setting out the materials he would need for the day. After a few minutes he heard Victor Gentillozzi come down the stairs and leave the house.

When Ellen Gentillozzi appeared in the drawing room, apologizing for making him wait, Peter director her to the armchair. He looked at the sketch on the canvas before him, comparing it to the subject across the room. She seemed even lees attractive than she had in the sitting of the previous

day, and the changes he had made in the sketch were more evident than he had thought, although the likeness was still acceptable. As he began to apply the first colors to the canvas he thought about the conversation in her husband's den, and about subtle touches that would accent features he could no longer discern in the woman's face. Her nervousness of the first session seemed to have dissipated, but it had been replaced by a mood no more conducive to his task. She seemed sullen and withdrawn, and spoke only in direct response to his questions.

By the end of the afternoon he had applied a great deal of paint, but accomplished very little. It seemed as if every stroke required another stroke to correct. Ellen Gentillozzi's eyes displayed more distrust than curiosity as she watched him staring at the canvas, and he wondered for a moment if she was aware of the disappointment he was feeling, of the difficulty of the task her husband had assigned him. He covered the canvas carefully with a cloth before leaving the house.

For the next two days he worked in the same manner, painting what he saw, and then adding and subtracting as he thought best, redefining proportions. Her mood seemed to grow more morose each day. Each day he found it more difficult to recognize any beauty in his subject. The painting was becoming more a work of imagination than a portrait, and he was not longer sure that he was producing any kind of likeness

of the woman. How can you do this to me? he wanted to asked her. How could you seem so beautiful at first, and then turn into this? He could feel the money slipping from his grasp.

At noon on Friday, the fifth day of his work on the portrait, he stopped. He could no longer use the woman in the chair as a reference. She bore no resemblance to the face in the painting. For the past two hours he had worked at improving the likeness, but what he had created was neither an accurate portrayal nor an image of the ideal beauty he had tried to create for Victor Gentillozzi.

"Are you finished?" she asked, as he began packing up his materials.

"There is still some detail work, background, minor things. I'm going to take it with me."

"Will there be another sitting?"

"Possibly," said Peter. "I'll be back Monday."

He did not intend to do any more work on the portrait, and was not sure that he intended to return on Monday. There didn't seem to be anything more he could do. His imagination was unable to provide the beauty he could no longer find in his subject. He took the canvas with him because he didn't want Ellen or her husband to see it.

As he was sliding it into the back seat of his car the gardener came out of the garage.

"Finished?"

"For the week," said Peter.

"Good," said the gardener. "Give Mrs. G. a chance to get

out and enjoy her garden." He walked onto the lawn next to the drive, looking down at the grass. "See that?"

"Green dye?"

"Green dead," said the gardener. "Put that stuff on almost three weeks ago. Grass hasn't grown an inch since. I usually have to mow it every week." He gazed around the grounds and then took a deep breath. "Smell hasn't gone away, either.

Peter sniffed the air. If anything, it seemed to have grown stronger. "I'll be darned." He said good-bye to the old man, climbed into his car, and drove out of the estate.

Sipping bourbon, brooding, he sat in his apartment for over an hour, staring miserably at the disaster the week's work had produced. He could never take it back to Victor Gentillozzi, and didn't deserve to be paid for it. It was an impossible undertaking. He felt as if Ellen had cheated him, as if she had been intentionally unattractive make his job impossible.

When he finally arose he removed the painting from the easel and set out his sketch book. After examining the four sketches of Ellen Gentillozzi, he settled again on the last, transferred it, unaltered, to a new canvas, and began work. Sleeping only a few hours a night, he worked throughout the weekend, filling in the sketch from memory, the memory of the Ellen Gentillozzi with whom he had spent the past week in the drawing room, as he could no longer summon any memory of the

woman he thought he had met in the garden. By early Monday morning the new painting was finished, true to his sketch and to his memory, an excellent likeness, but not the portrait Victor Gentillozzi wanted to hang in his stairway. Still, Peter was pleased. It was an accurate and artistic representation of the woman who had presented herself to him for the work.

He arrived at the estate at about nine-thirty. Driving up to the garage, he saw Ellen Gentillozzi, wearing the blue gown she had worn for all the sittings, the gardener at her side, walking through the rose garden. He took the painting and an easel from the back of his car and set them up at the edge of the garden. The gardener turned at the other end and hurried back to meet him. Peter heard the front door of the house close, and looked up to see Victor Gentillozzi coming down the drive.

"Very impressive." The gardener crowded Peter's side to get a closer look at the painting.

Ellen Gentillozzi was moving slowly toward them down the center path of the garden when her husband reached them.

"What are you doing out here?" asked Victor. "Is it finished?"

"It's finished." Peter was staring at Ellen Gentillozzi. It was her, the woman he had met here a week ago. She was radiant, and he suddenly doubted that his work had captured her well enough to meet her husband's approval.

"Pretty good." The gardener smiled, walking back out to meet her in the garden.

"My god," said Victor Gentillozzi, staring at the portrait, "it's beautiful.

Peter looked. The face in the portrait was not the one he remembered painting, but the face of the woman in the garden, the woman he had met the first time he came to the estate. He looked up at her again to see that the gardener, still smiling, had taken her hand, and that she seemed even more beautiful than she had a moment before. Looking back at the painting, he found it still a perfect likeness.

Victor Gentillozzi looked from the painting to his wife, his expression puzzled. "It's remarkable."

SEVINSKI'S SECOND MOVEMENT

On the kitchen table of his little two bedroom home lay three items that would make this day more interesting and more important than any previous day in the life of Leonard Sevinski. In a large manilla envelope addressed to the editor of the Toxicology Journal waited a seventeen page report entitled "The Effects of Selenium on Methylmercury Neurotoxicity in Laboratory Rats." It was an item that Leonard believed to be of great importance, though even he realized it would not be terribly interesting to anyone other than a scientist, except in its overall conclusion. Its conclusion was that selenium reduced the neurotoxic effects of methylmercury in rats: that is, it neutralized the mercury, saving the rats from metallic deposits that would otherwise have destroyed their nervous systems. Even Leonard did not give a damn about saving rats from mercury poisoning. It had, in fact, been necessary to wipe out a huge number of them by that very method during the course of the research. If selenium worked in the same manner, however, in fish and in

human beings, it might one day neutralize an environmental disaster in the Great Lakes. The paper was the result of a year of laboratory research with a team of graduate students. Leonard, in his senior year, had been the only undergraduate, yet he had found himself carrying the bulk of the load. It had now been a year since the research had been finished. He had virtually written the whole report, had received several rejections, made several revisions, and was now sure, with a few final changes, it was going to be published.

On top of the report, in a smaller envelope, was a letter Leonard had written to his ex-wife in the middle of the previous night, a sort of love letter, an interesting item, to be sure, but one that seemed important only to Leonard, and would come to seem less so even to him. Three days earlier, a little over a year after she had left him to run off with an ex-high school football star, a kid with a gorilla's body and a less developed brain, she had come back to him looking for a reconciliation. Her leaving might have been the ultimate insult of his life, an insult from which he thought he had never fully recovered. Nonetheless, he had found himself, for a reason he didn't understand, happy to see her again. He had been cordial to her. They went out for dinner and then came back to his house to talk and drink. But in the end, just as he had told himself a trillion times he would, he coolly, almost coldly, turned down her request and showed her to the door when it was time for bed. He had to admit, though, that turning her away had not been as easy as he would

have liked, and after three restless nights he had broken down. Waking startled from a dream in which she had made a guest appearance as heroine, a dream that was beyond his conscious understanding, but that had left him with a pleasant feeling of resurrection, he had rushed to his desk and scribbled off the letter, a passionate bleating of forgiveness and apology. In the dream a soldier stood outside a foxhole, looking down at another soldier lying at the bottom. Beneath the helmet of the one in the hole was a bare dried out skull, but as the other reached down to pull it out the corpse came to life and the skull was transformed into a living face. It was his face. He looked up from the foxhole at his rescuer and saw his wife.

"Kathy," he called. But it was no longer her. The soldier was now a man with a familiar face that he did not recognize.

"I have brought you back," said the man, "because she wanted me to." He pointed, and Leonard again saw Kathy.

"Does this mean...?"

"It means nothing," said the man. "It means she wanted me to bring you back. I brought you back. That's all."

Then he was gone. Then she was gone. Then Leonard was awake and writing the letter. He realized suddenly that she had brought him back to life. In the year since she had left him he had neglected old relationships and established no new ones. Losing her had made him afraid of life, afraid of closeness, of dependency, and of himself. Even as he

awkwardly, determinedly, asked her to leave, he had felt more alive and more important than he had since she left him. When he was finished with the writing he put the letter in the envelope and sealed it, as if to protect it from reconsideration, and returned to bed.

Next to the two envelopes on the table was a paperback copy of Ulysses, an item unarguably of both interest and importance. Leonard had read a lot when he was a teenager, but when he entered college he devoted himself to science and statistics. Only after Kathy left him did he begin reading literature again, diminishing the presence of her absence by focusing his time and attention on novels he had always meant to read. Although he found Joyce rather confusing, and although it seemed like it was taking him forever to wade through the single day in which the narrative of Ulysses takes place, he was fascinated by the book, and had been carrying it with him even to work, where he would pore over a sentence or passage he had found confusing, interesting or amusing whenever he had a break. For the past two days, however, his mind had been busy with thoughts about Kathy, and though the book was always at hand he had opened it only a couple of times, and found himself unable to concentrate on reading.

At noon, early in the day for Leonard, and for most afternoon shift workers, Ulysses and the two envelopes were waiting on the kitchen table to be carried out of the house. Leonard was in the bathroom conducting a rather unsatisfying movement of his bowels. He had only recently been switched

to the afternoon shift, and the change in eating and sleeping habits, coupled with stress over the publication of the report and Kathy's return, had had an unpleasant effect on his digestive sync. Now adagio, now prestissimo, he rarely knew what to expect. Today he had looked forward to a grand crescendo with a flatulent chordal finale, but found that after a brief, discordant intro he was at a loss to strike up a note.

His posterior, however, true to its purpose and slow to admit defeat, maintained its ground for close to ten minutes, while his upper quarters were locked into a cycle of thoughts concerning the upcoming reunion. Kathy had once made him feel so good, so wanted, so normal. He had lived since early adolescence with a secret fear that he was not normal, that he was somehow falling short of what he was supposed to be. The way he thought, the way he talked and acted, seemed to him so different from the way others thought and talked and acted that he was afraid he would be found out, exposed as an abnormal, a misfit, or even a lunatic if he let anyone get too close. When he began seeing Kathy her approval of him had been so immediate and unconditional it carried him through their awkward beginning and allayed his fear of exposure. She had made it seem okay to be Leonard Sevinski. But in the second and final year of their marriage it began to seem less okay. She grew bored with him, and he began to feel that he had been right about himself, that there was something different about him, something wrong with him. When she left

he was convinced it was due to his failure not only as a husband but as a man. His fear and insecurity engulfed him again and he felt suddenly that he had been alone all along.

But now she was back. Now she was admitting that it was she that had been wrong, that he was worthy and desirable. It had taken him three nights to realize it, but for the first time in over a year he felt that he, not his mind or abilities, but he, was worth something again. He had ushered her out of the house three nights ago because he was afraid, but he now realized that he had nothing to be afraid of, that her return proved that he didn't need to hide. The memory of the pain and humiliation with which she had left him a year ago crept into his mind a couple of times as he sat there, rekindling the anger and resentment that had colored all his thoughts about her until last night, but each time the dream reinserted itself and the relief and happiness with which he awoke from it melted the bad memories and overshadowed his reservations. She had once made him feel more alive than he had ever felt without her, and she had now done it again. He couldn't help but feel that he would be a fool to let her go.

Coming out of the bathroom he saw the articles on the table and remembered that his paper was going in for publication. He smiled for a moment, and then frowned at an intruder. Could Kathy have come back knowing that he was about to be published, that he might soon be able to make a living as a biochemist rather than as an unskilled warehouse laborer? He put the thought quickly out of his mind. She

couldn't possibly be aware of the status of the report, and even if she were she would have to know that the publication was not going to make him wealthy. He would probably take a pay cut to get a job in laboratory research. The change would bring him a satisfaction he had awaited for years, but would certainly not make him the object of a fortune hunt. He glanced out the window at the Michigan February as he pulled his coat on, then, slipping the envelopes into the pages of the book, cradled them all under his arm and left the house.

A few minutes before one o'clock Ulysses, the two envelopes sandwiched between pages 372 and 373, (365 and 366 by the pagination of the original American edition, to which so many scholarly notes refer), landed on the end of the bar at the Mariner Tavern. Leonard had become somewhat of a regular there lately, stopping in before work a few times a week.

"Hello, love," said a silver haired woman so old he imagined he could see dust on her face, caked thick in the crevices around her eyes and at the corners of her ancient smile. "What'll it be? Heineken?"

"Make it a Pauli, Alberta," said Leonard.

"Dark?"

"Right."

"Glass?"

"Please."

When she returned with the beer and glass she glanced at

the stack of paper in front of him. "Toxicology Journal," she said. "What are you sending them?"

Leonard looked down at the bar and saw the address on the large envelope protruding from the book. "It's a study on the effect of selenium on mercury poisoning."

"Oh, really?" she said. She had the tone of a grandmother trying to sound interested in a child's project, but Leonard was not annoyed. He liked the old woman, and didn't care much for discussing the details of the project with people outside of the field, anyway.

He ordered an olive burger, more out of a sense of duty to his stomach than hunger. As Alberta went into the kitchen to place his order a waitress came in from the back room of the bar. She was about Leonard's height, and probably a couple of years younger, with almost blonde hair, chopped short at the sides with the currently stylish tail at the back. Leonard had said hello to her several times, without ever actually meeting her, though he knew her name was Jodi. She smiled and waved to him from the other end of the bar.

"Hiya," said Leonard.

When Alberta returned Jodi got two bottles of Miller and a dollar's worth of quarters and returned to the back room.

"She's a nice girl," said Alberta.

"She seems nice," said Leonard.

He wondered how Kathy would react to his change of heart. There was always the chance, he thought, that it was too late, but that possibility seemed rather remote. Even as he was

walking her to the door three nights earlier, even as they were saying their cool, dispassionate good-byes, she had maintained her air of knowing self-confidence.

And he too, at least as he saw it now, had had the feeling that he just wasn't going to get away with it, that he could not have missed her so much, that she could not have hurt him so badly, if he didn't love her, if he didn't need her. He could no longer understand how he had been able to let her get out of the house the other night. She was radiant, at least in his eyes, and she was in top form. A small girl, she had virtually no breasts, but Leonard had never been big on breasts, anyway. Sharp as his mind was, he had never been terribly imaginative, and could never think of anything to do with them. It was her face, though, that really moved him, a beautiful smile--perfect teeth and small, friendly lips--and blue eyes that were actually closer to grey. Intriguing eyes.

But by far the most remarkable feature of the woman was her tongue. It was an instrument of many delightful talents, to be sure, but the one which had attracted Leonard first was its gift of oratory. She had never taken well to education, and was not at all smart in the bookish sense in which he was smart, but she had always shown a brilliance in analyzing everyday situations and a love of irony that made her openness somewhat unsettling to a good many people. But Leonard had never been put off by her wit. Even when it was aimed at him he usually enjoyed it, though nothing was sacred to her.

"You don't have any girlfriends?" she had asked him three nights before, in a tone that indicated she thought she already knew the answer.

"No," he said. "No friends at all, really."

"So, what do you do?" she asked. "Jack-off?"

"I've been celibate," said Leonard.

"Hah!" she said. "I know that's a lie. You were always such a sexual fucker."

He laughed, partly at her terminology and partly at himself. She was, of course, right. He had, in fact, been celibate for a few months after she left. He was, after all, genuinely hurt and genuinely afraid of being hurt again. He then tried masturbation for a while, but between lingering adolescent feelings of guilt and an inability to find himself terribly interesting, he had lost interest in the manual method rather quickly. During the past summer he had rented three hookers, his only sexual activity in an otherwise warm and pleasant season. But here, too, guilt bothered him, as did fear--fear of being found out as much as fear of disease. Finally, with his ego a bit inflated by the last of the prostitutes he'd seen, a pretty young woman who had really earned her money by telling him how good, how "really good," he was over and over again, and by kissing him everywhere and thanking him at the end, he decided to get himself back into circulation. So he began trolling the bars, starting out low, looking for women with minor imperfections--slight weight problems, bad teeth, bowed legs, what have you--women who

would be grateful. But once again he was pursued by his conscience after these encounters. He was pursued also by some of the women, which bothered him more than the guilt. The women toward whom he was really attracted, the ones he would have been proud to know and to be seen with, he was afraid of. They were the ones who could hurt him. Inevitably, he became frustrated again, retired from the pick-up clubs, and had once again been celibate for the past few months.

Over the course of his year alone his major sources of enjoyment, his major sources of relief, had been his research and his reading. The selenium project had been in progress when Kathy was still with him, but after she left he began to devote almost all his free time to it. As the study wound toward its conclusions, and could no longer occupy all his time, he began reading, and fell asleep late most nights with a book in bed beside him.

All of his activities through that year, he now realized, had been distractions, safe distractions from thinking about Kathy. When he told her, "It could never work again," he knew that he meant his pride would not allow him to admit that it probably would work again. And as they stood at the door, although he tried his damnedest to muster a no-hard-feelings smile, they both knew that it was probably the second most difficult moment in his life.

There is still room for love, he thought to himself as he waited for his burger. She has shown you that there is

still room for love in your life. It was the meaning of the dream. The dead lover in him, the admitter of need, the risk taker, had been revitalized by the reappearance of this woman, this girl. She was, in fact, still only a girl. Although Leonard often felt like he was a million years old, like he had grown right out of all the joys of youth, they were both still very young. And today he was beginning to feel, for the first time in a painfully long time, that it was good to be young.

Halfway through his olive burger Leonard was joined at the bar by a tall man, at least five or six inches taller than he was, and perhaps as many years his senior. Although the entire bar was open, the man chose the stool right next to his. Leonard tried not to look at him, keeping his face in his burger. He disliked talking to strangers, especially in bars, and hated the kind of conversation he was sure was about to be initiated. He had never understood why so many people were unable to drink quietly alone, why they couldn't leave him alone and mind their own damned business.

Alberta, who was at the other end of the bar, sneaking spoonfuls of chili from a bowl she had stashed under the counter, came over, dabbing a napkin at her wrinkled lips, to take the stranger's order.

"Seven and Seven," he said. "I just started a voluntary lay-off today. I'm celebrating."

Leonard knew without looking up that this was directed at him. "Congratulations," he said. He was not overly

impressed with a man who volunteered to hit the unemployment line when twenty percent of the state was already out of work. He kept eating, and the man didn't say anything more for a little while.

When Jodi came back into the room the stranger watched her wait at the end of the bar for two more Millers and a Tom Collins. "She don't look too bad," he said, thrusting an elbow into Leonard's side as she passed again to the back room. Leonard didn't reply, though he had finished eating.

"You ever go out to Indian Lake in the summer?" asked the stranger.

"Not since I was a kid," said Leonard, wondering what in hell brought that up in the middle of February.

"Boy, you oughta," said the other. "I worked on a dredging crew out there for a couple of years, and I've been spending afternoons out there ever since. You wouldn't believe all the tuna that packs into that beach every day."

Leonard tried not to smile. "I work afternoons."

"What time?"

"Three-thirty," said Leonard.

"Hell," said the stranger, "that's perfect. Get out there around noon. A lot of them are married anyway. You know, just looking for a little afternoon action. They have to be home before hubby gets out of work... I tell ya, since my wife, my ex-wife, that is," he smiled, "left me I've been noticing that there's a lot of snapper around this town just itching for a little strange."

"Well," said Leonard, "I guess it's the least we could do."

"That's right," laughed his new friend, pounding a fist on the bar. "Hey, you're just about dry there. Let me get you one."

Leonard checked the clock and reluctantly agreed. He, of course, now wanted something more than a hunk of tuna, something that wanted more than a little strange, something that offered more than an illicit afternoon orgasm. Yet there was something reassuring in the thought of a beach covered with pungent, starving bikinis, although it was not an easy vision to conjure in the middle of a Michigan winter. There was also something a bit disconcerting in the thought that a large number of those bikinis were being carried to the beach by a boredom with young marriages, by the hunger for something different, something more exciting than a husband.

He finished the second beer quickly, and began to rise. "I have to catch a bus," he said.

"Where you going?" asked his companion.

"Downtown," said Leonard. "Larch Street."

"Well hell," said the stranger, "I've got to go that way. Have one more with me and I'll give you a lift." When Leonard hesitated, he added, "Beats the hell out of waiting for a bus."

Leonard didn't like to have more than two beers before work. His job at the warehouse was fairly mindless, and didn't require much attention, but he knew that three beers

was enough to make him tired before the end of his shift. The buses, however, were terribly inconsistent, and when he thought about the weather outside the offer began to sound better.

"What the hell," he said.

The stranger ordered two more drinks, and then excused himself to go downstairs to the john.

Seeing him gone when she came back into the room, Jodi walked around the bar and sat down at the stool next to Leonard.

"Do you know that guy?" she asked.

"No," said Leonard. "Why, do you?"

"No," she said. "I think he's weird."

Leonard laughed. "Weird?"

"Creepy," said Jodi. "I didn't like the way he was looking at me."

Leonard mused. The man was probably a drunk, and certainly a bit strange, but he hadn't thought of him as weird or creepy. "I hope he isn't too weird," he said, "because he's giving me a ride into town." She gave him a disapproving look. "Hey," he said, "it's cold out. I have to get to work."

She made no further comment on the subject, but didn't get up either. "My name's Jodi," she said after a moment.

"I know," said Leonard. "I heard Alberta say it the other day."

"And yours is Leonard." Smiling, in answer to the

question on his face, she added, "I asked Alberta."

She held out her hand and Leonard took it, shook it, and held it for a second. "Pleased ta meetcha," he said.

Jodi smiled. "How far into Ulysses are you?"

"About halfway," said Leonard. It seems like it's taking forever."

"It's worth it," said Jodi. "Joyce once said that reading that book was a lifetime's work."

Leonard had been surprised at her interest in his reading, but he was nearly shocked by her familiarity with Joyce. "That sounds borderline egomaniacal. He was only thirty-two when it was copyrighted. It took him longer to get it published than it did to write it, and the rest of us are supposed to spend our entire lives reading it?"

"It sounds like that," said Jodi. "But I don't think he was separating himself from the rest of us. He saw a synthesis in the book that he didn't put there, that he didn't even fully understand. Ulysses is different from his earlier stuff. He was beginning to think of himself as a gifted observer and recorder of life, rather than as an interpreter. I think he was right. It is a life's work--probably more."

Smiling, astounded, Leonard stared at her.

"I'm working on a Masters degree in English literature," said Jodi, in answer to his unasked question. "Oop, there's my cue."

Leonard saw the stranger coming around the corner from the stairway. Jodi laid a hand on his shoulder to push

herself up from the stool.

"See ya later."

"You got a little something goin' there?" asked the stranger, pulling up to the bar.

"Just talking," said Leonard.

"Uh huh," said the other, grinning.

At the other end of the bar Alberta, setting her spoon back into the hidden chili bowl, fell into a violent coughing fit. The cough was harsh, and sounded painful and forced. It went on for ten or fifteen seconds, and Leonard started to fear that she was choking. He was about to get up, wondering whether her old ribs were too brittle to survive a Heimlich, when the spell began to subside. Between two loud final coughs she emitted a rattling fart, and the stranger laughed aloud. Leonard wasn't sure whether the whole coughing fit was faked to cover the fart, or the fart was a case of equal and opposite reaction, but either way he felt sorry for the old woman, and irritated at the man next to him for heightening her embarrassment.

He finished his beer in a silence that even the stranger did not interrupt, paid his tab, and laid a dollar on the bar for her. The stranger downed the remainder of his drink and rose.

"See ya next time, Alberta," said Leonard, pulling on his coat.

"Okay, hun," said the old woman, meekly smiling. "you take care."

"You betcha." He waited for the other man to start for the door, and then set another dollar on the bar without looking back at Alberta.

At fifteen minutes to three Ulysses, the envelopes still nestled in its pages, settled on the dash of a 1977 Chevy van. The front bumper of the van was missing, as was about half of the grill, and the right headlight was held on by two strands of wire and what appeared to be a shoelace. The driver, as he explained to Leonard, had a D.U.I.L. ticket to clear up.

"Do you drink whiskey?" he asked.

"Occasionally," said Leonard. He was beginning to wish he had caught the bus when he had the chance, but it was too late. The next one would get him to work at least twenty minutes late.

The stranger, whose name Leonard still didn't know, crawled into the back of the van, where he had a small stove and refrigerator, a narrow bed, and one hell of a mess on the floor.

"I really have to get to work," said Leonard.

"Plenty of time," said the stranger. "This will just take a minute." He shuffled around in the rubble, swearing, for a couple of minutes, and then re-emerged in the driving compartment with a half empty pint bottle of whiskey, two styrofoam cups, and a half-liter of Seven-Up. I always rinse out my coffee cups," he said, "just in case I have company. Not that you're the kind of company I have in mind, if you know what I mean." He measured the whiskey carefully into the

cups and handed one to Leonard.

Leonard poured a few ounces of bubbleless Seven-Up into his drink, noticing that the man hadn't rinsed the cups particularly well. A few ashes and a small hair swam in the swirling liquid, probably the least toxic of the mixture's contents, he mused, though the hair bothered him a little.

As he drove, the stranger told Leonard the story of the accident and the ticket. Another car had pulled in front of him on an icy highway, and he hadn't been able to get around it. It wasn't his fault. But while they waited for the cops, who took almost an hour to get there, he was sitting in the back of the van drinking whiskey and Seven-Up and getting sloshed. The other driver got ticketed for an unsafe lane change, and he was cited for driving under the influence of liquor. He intended to fight it, though, on the grounds that he hadn't been drinking before the accident. It was legal to drink in the back of a van in Michigan, he explained, as long as it was registered as a motor home. He didn't say how he had planned to get the van off the side of the highway.

Leonard sipped slowly and carefully at the drink as they travelled, keeping a close eye on the hair. When they came to a stop sign and the driver was watching the traffic, he stuffed a finger in and pulled it up the side of the cup.

"As soon as I get that taken care of," said the other, "I want to go down to Texas."

"Yeah?" said Leonard, wiping his finger on the side of his jeans.

"Yeah," said the stranger. "I've got friends in Houston, but I don't think I could stay there. There's too much work, and I'd end up losing my unemployment."

Leonard laughed.

"Really," said the other. "But I think I've got it worked out. I'll rent a little shack down in Corpus, or maybe just a room, and have 'em send my checks there. Then I can just drive down from Houston twice a month to pick 'em up."

"Sounds like a lot of work to stay unemployed," said Leonard.

The stranger laughed. "It'll be worth it."

At the corner of Michigan and Larch the tires scraped against the curb as the van came to a stop.

"Sure you don't want me to take you all the way up?"

"This is fine," said Leonard, anxious to escape. "I have a few minutes to kill, anyway." He swilled what he could of the drink, and dumped a half inch of the liquid and most of the ashes out the door. Thanking the driver, he jumped to the sidewalk.

At three-fifteen, Ulysses, still snuggling the two envelopes, pulled away from the corner of Larch and Michigan on the dashboard of the 1977 Chevy motor home. Leonard stood at the corner for a few seconds, made a strange, sour face, shaking off a gastronomical tremor ignited by that last drink of the whiskey, and then walked half a block up Larch Street before realizing he was missing something.

"Fuck!" he shouted. "Shit!" He jumped in the air in order to be able to stomp both feet at the same time. When he got back to the corner he saw the van, two blocks down Michigan Avenue, stopped in the left turn lane at a red light. He started running, and after a half block began waving his arms, trying to whistle, and yelling, "hey!" He ran past the adult bookstores, which advertised "Peep Shows" for fifty cents, past the Velvet Fingers Massage Parlor and Escort Service, past the downtown Rescue Mission, which advertised Christ, who died for our sins, past the Pussycat Theater, past three gay bars, one Mexican restaurant, and two high school girls who had certainly picked a questionable part of town in which to spend the afternoon, one of whom pointed, and both of whom laughed as he ran by. He had almost reached the van, despite nearly being run over on Cedar Street, when the light changed and it pulled around the corner. He chased it south for two blocks more, falling farther and farther behind, until he saw it swerve onto the entrance of the highway.

"Shit!" he shouted, flipping his middle finger up at the back of the van as it faded out of sight. "Fuck!"

The whiskey and the running had not treated him well. He was not in very good physical shape, and found himself terribly out of breath and a little dizzy. Still worse, he was furious with himself for being so stupid. He should never have gotten into the van. At a corner drug store he stopped and used the phone to call in sick to work, though he was already getting his wind back and feeling a little better.

His boss was surprised, but not unfriendly. Leonard had not missed a day in the two years he had worked at the warehouse. There are firsts for everything, he thought as he hung up the phone.

The walk home was not bad, although it was several miles. He pulled his hood on, and without anything to carry now, was able to keep both hands in his pockets. As his breath and heartbeat returned to their normal walking rhythm he hit his stride and actually began to enjoy the walk, and the thought of not having to go to work. He became also a bit less severe with himself, and began to wonder why he had become so panicked and enraged. The selenium report was, of course, one of several copies, and he still had the original at home. Ulysses was a sad loss, to be sure, but it was the paperback edition, and the financial beating was therefore not too severe. And the letter...

Yes, the letter. He realized suddenly that the letter was the only thing that couldn't be replaced. Even now he could remember only small parts of it. "It was my pride," he had written, "that didn't want you back." And he had gone on to diminish pride and to rant poetically in the name of love. But now, walking through the February grey, with his hood pulled up so that he could see only forward, like a horse in blinders, he found that his pride was back again, and that it wasn't willing in the middle of the day to be so easily diminished.

"Goddamnit!" he shouted to himself, not angry, but

relieved, suddenly relieved and slightly amused. "God fucking damn it!" He had won a reprieve. Losing the letter might have been the best thing that could have happened to him today. It gave him a chance to rethink his position. He had not even thought about Kathy since... since he had talked to Jodi at the Mariner.

For the rest of the walk Leonard reconstructed the previous night's dream in his mind.

"Does this mean...?" he began to ask.

"It means nothing," said the man in the dream. And this time Leonard agreed. Yes, she had awakened him from a deadly sleep, but it was a sleep that she had put him into in the first place, and it suddenly seemed to him that the re-awakening was all her return had to offer him. He did not need her back. He laughed aloud at this realization, so loud, in fact, that he startled himself. Then he laughed again at being startled.

When he finally arrived home his legs were tired, but he felt good, better than he had felt in a long time. He went into the second bedroom, the one he used as a study, and removed the original of "The Effects of Selenium on Methylmercury Neurotoxicity in Laboratory Rats" from the center drawer of his desk. The desk was a huge maple affair that he had purchased at a rummage sale just after his wife left him. It had been painted yellow when he found it, and he had stripped it, replaced a broken leg, and refinished it in linseed oil and wax. He was very proud of having found and

resurrected such a beautiful piece.

He laid the report on the kitchen table, so that he wouldn't forget to have another copy made in the morning. Looking at it lying there he felt the absence of Ulysses. He would buy another copy tomorrow. Or perhaps he could borrow one from Jodi.

Finding himself loosened up a bit by the food, the drinking and the exercise, he went into the bathroom and assumed a familiar pose atop his faithful American Standard. He was now much less indisposed than earlier in the day. In fact, he orchestrated a movement of virtuoso perfection, not missing a note, and was so pleased he could have given himself a standing ovation. His newfound regularity was not one sided, either; he found his mind freed from its previous confusion and returning to its old and ordinary shitcan occupations. He read about palmitic acid, triethanolamine, pentane and sorbitol on the back of his shaving cream can; about SD Alcohol 40, propylene glycol, menthol, benzoic acid, and FD&C Yellow#5 and Blue #1 on his after shave; about TEA Lauryl Sulfate, Lauramide DEA, Hydroxypropyl Methylcellulose, and possible traces of Linoleamide DEA and sodium dihydroxy-ethylglycinate on his bottle of organic shampoo.

PAWN TO QUEEN FOUR

The only light on in the front part of the Wells house was the one in the first bedroom, Craig's room. I jumped onto the porch, careful not to step on the lawn, and knocked lightly on the window of that room. Craig's old man would be sitting in the living room, listening to a ball game or the jazz station on the radio, staring out of the dark at the street and the lawn on which he spent so much of his time. I didn't need to see him to know he was there. He was always there, and is probably there now. But if I had rung the bell and listened to the long series of chimes he would only have been irritated, and would not have budged from the couch to let me in. Stepping on the lawn would have brought him to the door.

A minute or so after I knocked at the window I heard Craig's chair slide away from the desk. Although I knew he stayed very busy I always suspected that he kept me waiting on the porch intentionally, to make me feel unimportant, or at least uncomfortable, and to gain a psychological advantage

in the chess games. When he finally got around to letting me in I heard two voices: first that of Craig's sister, apparently engaged in an argument with their mother in the kitchen; then that of Dave Bing, one of the radio commentators for the Pistons' games. The radio was not loud enough to drown out the discussion taking place in the kitchen, but Mr. Wells, a still dark shadow on the couch, did not appear to hear anything but the sounds of the game.

"What's the score?" I asked, a little surprised at the volume of my voice in the hallway.

The old man snorted in the darkness without moving. "A million to one," he grumbled after a moment.

Craig clicked his tongue off the roof of his mouth the way he often did to indicate his disgust or impatience. "You want to play chess or talk about basketball?" It always seemed to bother him when I stopped to talk to his father, maybe just because it kept him waiting and destroyed the superior position he'd established by leaving me on the porch. I'm sure I never thought of that at the time. I just enjoyed talking to Mr. Wells, despite all his efforts to make himself unlikable, and perhaps partly because of them.

There was a story that had floated around the neighborhood about the old man being drafted by the Brooklyn Dodgers as a pitcher. He played, according to the story, a year of double-A, and supposedly would have gone up to the majors if he hadn't been drafted into the army for World War II. By the time he got out there was a new crop of strong

young arms, and no place for him to play. It was the kind of story I could believe, and it seemed to explain, at least to some extent, the old man's ill-temper.

As we walked into the room and Craig pushed the door closed, I noticed the aroma of the pot, and the half burned joint in the ashtray next to the chessboard. Smoking pot was a regular part of our evening chess games. It was usually Craig's pot, and I remember him accusing me once of putting up with the games in order to get high, an accusation that was probably not entirely unfounded. The trouncing I took in most of the matches was far from enjoyable, but Craig's pot was always good.

He was three years older than I, a freshmen in college at the time, while I was a high school sophomore. We had gotten to know each other a couple of years earlier, during our simultaneous and equally unsuccessful attempts at hanging around with my older brother and a group of his friends. Craig never fit in because his interest in school kept him too busy to learn anything about being cool, about the art of hanging around. I was too young, and too willing to open my mouth and express my immaturity, to gain the respect of the older guys. In our own ways, Craig and I were both dinks, and we both slipped quickly and uncomfortably out of the gang.

I managed to salvage one redeeming accomplishment in the failure: I proved myself the best competition in the neighborhood for Craig's chess skills. This was not any great claim. My brother and most of his friends had each played him

at least once, but none of them knew much more than how the pieces moved. I wasn't a lot of competition--I was lucky to win one of ten--but I understood enough about strategy to at least make him work to beat me. Our rivalry was fierce, but for the most part friendly. Craig made the most of his superiority. He was a poor winner and an even poorer loser. He gloated mercilessly at every victory, and pouted and complained so at each rare defeat that I was always disappointed to feel as much sympathy as satisfaction when I won. He had convinced me that something had to be terribly out of order for me to beat him.

The board was set up for play, the only thing in the room that reflected any sense of organization. Around the carpeted floor and across the bed were scattered a number of thick textbooks, mostly math and statistics.

"Must be hell to get a vacuum through here," I said, moving to my side of the desk.

"Very funny," said Craig. "I haven't had time to play housekeeper this week."

As I sat down I gave the globe at the end of the desk a spin, and then stopped it, closing my eyes, with a finger.

"Madagascar," I announced, without opening my eyes, feeling the relief with my hand.

"Good," said Craig. "Just like your chess game. Make a blind move and then try to guess where it got you." He sat down and lifted a pawn from each side of the board, shook them between his hands, and held out two closed fists. I pointed

to the one on the right. Craig opened his hand to display a black pawn.

"Maybe you should try closing your eyes," he said. "You want white? I hate to start you off with even more of a disadvantage."

He always made this offer when I drew black, probably just for the sake of being insulting. "I'll play black," I said. "That's what I wanted to pick."

After replacing the pawns he took the joint from the ashtray and handed it to me. We each went through five moves without hesitation as we smoked. Craig almost always opened the same way, pawn to queen four, the unconventional favorite of Bobby Fischer. I had tried a few different gambits against the opening, but didn't understand them well enough to avoid disaster, so I had settled into mimicking his first few moves, developing some power, and countering the quick attack on the center of the board. The knights came out, the queen's bishop came out, and pawn to king three opened a lane for the king's bishop.

At that point the pat moves were all used up, and we both began taking more time, trying to visualize an attack, to find the right spot for a trap or an all out offensive. Craig was an expert at setting middle-game traps, and although I rarely fell for the same one twice, I always felt outclassed in this part of the game, even when I seemed to be holding my own. Craig's plans included five or six moves at a time, and what looked to me like a simple trade often turned out to be an

elaborate scheme to win a major piece or gain control of a side of the board. That was all it took for him to win a game. When the board thinned out, Craig's superiority made even a slight advantage almost invincible.

When it became apparent that the real battle was about to begin I thought and looked for long periods of time between moves. I could hear the sounds of the basketball game, and the argument in the kitchen rising intermittently above it. Craig's sister seemed to be a real problem for their mother. At fourteen she was like an untrainable pet. A big girl, almost Amazonian in appearance, she towered over the others in her class, and probably had even more trouble fitting in than her brother did. But she didn't have Craig's academic advantage to compensate for her social problems. Instead of burying herself in books she roared like a lioness, and fought verbally and physically with anyone who opposed her, outside of and within her family. In the kitchen her arguments rose at points to a hateful, shrieking tone that I couldn't remember ever being angry enough to reach, and fell at other points to a pleading whimper that seemed beyond any desperation I'd ever felt.

I wondered if Craig's failure to become an accepted part of my brother's group was not due more to the strangeness of his family than to any undesirable trait in Craig himself. We all had strange families. The neighborhood was an urban stew of religious neurotics, alcoholic fathers, mothers with prescription drug addictions, sisters who were becoming dope-

whores. But there was something different about the Wells family. Maybe it was just that none of us ever felt that we really knew them. It was okay when somebody found your dad's whiskey stashed in the garage, as long as you laughed along with them. It was even all right to get pissed off, the way I did when one of the guys told me that the reason my mother couldn't seem to keep her car on the road was that she was always on downers, because everybody understood. But when you just dummied up the way Craig did when somebody made a joke about his father murdering someone for walking on his lawn, nobody could understand. He never gave us any indication of what his family was like for him, which made it hard to sympathize with him, or to joke with him about them.

I heard Craig clicking his tongue against the roof of his mouth, and realized suddenly that I had been staring at the board for a long time without even thinking about my next move. I tried to ignore his impatience and focus my attention, but my imagination wasn't working. I couldn't see the changes that were likely to occur in the next stage of the game. The noise from the kitchen rose and fell in expanding waves. I was in trouble. Falling into guessing my way from move to move always resulted in swift disaster. I stalled for a few more minutes, ignoring the drumming of Craig's fingers on the desk, and finally, more out of aggravation than calculation, moved pawn to queen's bishop four. It opened a lane for my queen, and added a new complication to the center of the board. If nothing else, it would at least force him

into a new variation of whatever scheme he was working on.

"That's it?" said Craig, throwing his hands up in disbelief. "All that time, and that's what you came up with?"

"I thought it would look good there," I replied, a little irritated.

"Well," said Craig, "I guess it could have some interesting ramifications." The way he studied the board made me think I may have made a pretty good move. I reviewed the last few moves and the positions of all the pieces, and finally found it. My pawn move was going to force a conflict at the center of the board, and I appeared to be at an advantage if I could make it happen quickly. I could win a knight or a bishop, or at the worst a pawn and control of the center. I had stumbled into a powerful position. I glanced up at Craig to see that he had been watching me.

"So, you finally see it."

I smiled. "Pretty brilliant, huh?"

"Yeah," said Craig. "You're a blithering genius. Sometimes I almost forget you don't know what the hell you're doing."

"Thank you."

He continued to stare at the board for a long time, calculating, I was sure, all the possible combinations of moves the coming conflict would initiate. I tried for a few minutes to do the same, but my attention wandered. I drummed my fingers, cleared my throat, and even clicked my tongue against the roof of my mouth, but Craig didn't seem to notice.

He didn't seem to be distracted by the noise outside the room, either. His sister's shouting was beginning to rise to a new shrill level, as if building to an explosion. His mother's voice was lower, but firm and sharp. She spoke in short sentences, and although I couldn't make out her words, they sounded threatening. An occasional radio comment from Dave Bing still sneaked in from time to time. It had to be nearing the end of the basketball game; he sounded depressed and exasperated.

When Craig finally made his move he took power away from the center of the board, weakening rather than strengthening his defense of the contested square. This, I assumed, was intended to cut his losses and prepare for a counter-attack. He was giving me the battle, and I knew him well enough to know that meant he had something else going. Surveying the board, I noticed a rumbling of white power on the king side, but nothing that seemed like an immediate threat.

I initiated my attack, and he made the obligatory counter-moves, slowly and deliberately, though I knew he had already played them out in his mind. I could not believe he hadn't seen the conclusion I thought inevitable in the combination. I would finish my exchange with my knight, leaving myself in position to leapfrog right down his throat, forking his king and his queen's rook. It was a simple but classic example of the deceptive strength of the knight. Craig had destroyed me with it a number of times before, and it seemed impossible that he didn't see it coming.

I took one last glance at the board. The shouting in the kitchen was beginning to sound almost maniacal. I made the last move of my combination, setting my knight up in the center, convinced I was about to take control of the game.

"It's not fucking fair!" screamed the girl in the kitchen.

The scream was followed by a slap, and then a rumbling of movement, falling and scrambling, that stopped with a sudden thump in the hallway. A door opened and closed. Craig's sister began to scream again, but a loud crack sent her voice trailing off into a whimper.

"Get up!" shrieked the mother.

Without looking up from the board, Craig moved a knight in on my king side, taking a pawn, and forking my queen and rook.

In the hallway, it sounded as if the girl had just gotten to her feet when another crack dropped her back, crying, to the floor. I stared down at the chessboard, trying not to think about what was going on. I had not seen Craig's attack coming, and only now realized that he had beaten me to the punch, and that I was going to lose again. The cracking sound began to come at regular, pulsing intervals outside the room. With each blow the mother shouted a single, unintelligible syllable. It sounded like some kind of insane chant.

"Sometimes," said Craig, finally looking up at me across the board, "I don't think she handles things just right."

I looked down at the board.

"Thought you had me, didn't you?"

His sister had gotten to her feet again, and taken a couple of steps down the hall. There was another crack just outside Craig's room, and the door suddenly burst open. She came tumbling in, slamming into the desk and sending chess pieces flying across the room.

"Jesus Christ!" yelled Craig, jumping from his chair.

"Get up and get out here!" shouted their mother.

"Is this really necessary?" said Craig. "I do have company here right now."

"You stay out of this." His mother glared at him, and then at me for an instant, her eyes hateful, the belt dangling from a trembling hand. "I ought to use this on you, too," she said, turning back to Craig, "for smoking that damn shit in here every night."

The sister glanced at me as she pulled herself up from the floor. There was a red welt across one side of her face. She, too, seemed to hate me for being there. Slightly hunched over, hands shielding her head, she moved quickly past her mother at the doorway and hurried down the hall to her room. The mother stood there for a moment, staring after her down the hall, as if trying to decide whether to follow, and with one final accusatory glance at me, turned the other way and returned to the kitchen. Craig pushed the door closed and we began silently gathering up the pieces on the floor.

When we had them all assembled on the desk I began setting up my side of the board for the next time we played.

"What are you doing?" asked Craig. "The game wasn't over."

"I think it is now."

"I can reconstruct it," he said.

"That's all right," I said. "I know you were going to win."

"But you don't know how. That knight fork was just the beginning. You were going to lose your queen in two more moves."

It seemed as if the beating I had just witnessed had not mattered to him, as if it was just an interruption of the logic and predictability of the game. Outside the room the house was now still except for the music of the jazz station on the radio. The basketball game was also over. I took a cigarette from my jacket pocket. I only smoked a couple a day, and sometimes none at all, but I liked to have a pack with me.

"You want to go for a walk?" asked Craig after a minute. "Smoke another joint before you go home?" This had become a kind of post-game tradition, but I didn't feel much like it this time.

"Sure," I said. "I guess so." I lit the cigarette and began smoking it while he rolled a joint. When he finished we both watched the board for a minute.

"That was a good game," said Craig. "You had me scared for a little while there." I put the cigarette out and we got up together to leave the house. The old man was still on the

couch in the dark living room, motionless, staring out into the night.

The autumn night outside was chilly, but not uncomfortable. The sky was clear, but the lights of the subdivision made the stars seem dim. We walked to the park at the end of the block and sat down to smoke the joint. For a while we didn't talk. The scene that had taken place during the game had left me without much to say. I had been spanked pretty good from time to time as a child, but never violently, never like that. The beating I had just witnessed was beyond my comprehension.

"That's a hell of an opening," said Craig.

"What?"

"Pawn to queen four. It changes the whole complexion of the game."

I walked with him back to his house. Stopping on the sidewalk in front, I glanced at the living room window, knowing the silent shadow of the old man would still be staring out, waiting to chase a neighbor with a dog away from the lawn.

TREES AND CHILDREN

"Hey!" yelled Arthur Jennings, looking out the kitchen window at the boys climbing in his cherry trees. He scrambled past his startled wife and out the side door. "Get the hell out of there!"

The boys jumped down, and one of them ran out the alley and disappeared behind the garage. The other came straight at him, smiling contemptuously, veering away as he passed him to head out the drive. Arthur took one stride and landed a foot in the back of the boy's pants, lifting him into the air.

"Grin at that, you little son of a bitch!"

"Arthur!" shouted his wife, looking out the door.

The boy, barely breaking stride, landed on the driveway and continued running, putting a hand over the seat of his pants as he turned out of sight. Arthur stared after him for a moment, and then turned toward the house.

"You didn't have to be so rough," said Aileen. "You might have hurt him."

"I hope I did." She didn't understand. For the past three years, since their family had moved in down the street,

he had been trying to fight off the attacks of the Trevor boys on his prized trees. He spent so much time keeping them perfectly pruned, and they climbed in them, breaking off twigs and even small branches. They had carved their initials in one of the trunks, along with a few obscenities. One summer, just as the cherries were ripening, they had stripped them both bare, scattering the fruit all over the yard. It infuriated him that booting one of them in the ass was the only retaliation he had been able to manage.

"They're just kids," said Aileen.

"That's the same thing Ed Zimmer keeps telling me," said Arthur. Ed Zimmer was their next door neighbor. "'Kids do that kind of thing,' he says. If I had any of my own I'd understand."

Aileen turned away from him and walked out of the kitchen. A year before they were married she had had an abortion. They had both agreed that it seemed to be the only thing to do at the time. They were not ready to be parents. But a complication in the surgery had made it impossible for her to bear another child.

Arthur returned to the kitchen table, where he had left his Friday evening paper and a cup of coffee. He didn't mean to hurt Aileen, but he was tired of being reminded that he didn't have any children. When he married her he said, and believed, that it didn't matter, and he still wasn't sure that raising children was an experience he was sorry to be missing. But there was something about being responsible for their

inability to have them if they wanted to that did matter to him. In agreeing to the abortion he felt that he had somehow committed a terrible crime against Aileen, and he thought now that he had married her as much because of that inability as despite it. If there had been a crime, he realized, they had committed it together, and living alone with her in this community in which every household but theirs seemed to be producing children reminded him every day of their complicity.

They had moved into the lake community six years ago, during the second year of their marriage. It was supposed to be a refuge from the working day that never seemed to end when they lived in the city, but the city and their jobs, he had come to believe, were not the only things from which they, or at least he, wanted to escape.

A year after they moved into the house, without Aileen's approval, and to her dismay, he had paid three hundred dollars to have the pair of trees, already pretty well developed, transplanted into the back yard. He spent hours with them every week, almost every night for the first summer, pruning, fertilizing, experimenting with organic methods of disease and insect control. The trees became his refuge, not only from the city and the working day, but from the rest of the neighborhood, and even from Aileen. In his relationship with those trees he had accomplished an understanding, an awareness of terms and conditions that he had never been able to achieve in a relationship with another person. He had them planted there, he nurtured them, he scrambled through journals and

manuals to diagnose their afflictions, but he quickly came to realize that all his work, though it kept them tidier and somewhat healthier than they would have been without it didn't matter to the trees. They had a plan of their own, and all he could really do was watch it develop and try to help them succeed. He couldn't browbeat them. He couldn't kick them in the ass and make them see things his way. But that was all right; he had come to understand that about trees, and to enjoy just watching their progress, helping them along, and trying to guess at what directions they might take.

Aileen had once accused him of buying them just so that he would have another excuse to spend time away from her, and he knew, in a sense, that she was right. He hadn't bought them for that purpose, but he did probably spend more time working with them than he did talking to her, and he often felt less alone observing the serene strength of the trees than he did in the house with his wife. It was not, he thought, that they had drifted apart through the years, but that he, and probably she, too, had come to recognize the differences that had existed between them all along. Their joint responsibility for the accidental result of the abortion was the bond that had carried them into the marriage, and that experience had been so strange and confusing that they had not been able to look beyond it to see that there was little else holding them together.

Saturday morning, glancing again out the kitchen window

as he poured his morning coffee, Arthur saw first a glimmering of red light in the trees. As his eyes adjusted to the bright morning light his jaw dropped in shock, and his cup tumbled into the sink.

"Jesus Christ!" he shouted, scrambling toward the door in much the same manner he had the previous evening.

They had painted them red. The trunks, the limbs, the leaves and twigs, and even the buds, which would have begun to open in the next couple of days, had all been painted a glowing, fiery red. They had done a thorough job. Only the highest areas had escaped the spray.

"Oil base," called Ed Zimmer, walking over to the fence that separated their yards. "I took a look at them earlier. I was going to come get you, but I figured you'd see them soon enough. Don't know how in hell you're going to get it off."

Arthur felt sick to his stomach. The paint was so thick in places that the weight made small branches droop. The buds were sealed tight, and would surely never open.

"They're going to pay for this," he said quietly.

"You know who did it?"

"We both know who did it."

"You both suspect," said Aileen, coming around the side of the house.

"You know as well as I do," said Arthur.

"We didn't see them do it," said his wife.

Arthur turned away from her and stared off over the tops of the trees into the high clouds of the morning sky. "They

are going to pay."

Ed Zimmer began to talk about the difficulty of removing the paint without doing further damage to the trees. He suggested a couple of possibilities, but Arthur wasn't listening. There had to be a way to get them. They had gone too far this time.

"I think you should just forget about those kids," said Aileen. "If you leave them alone this will probably be the end of it."

Arthur continued to stare, pretending not to hear her, until an idea suddenly came to him. "I guess you're right," he said, after a moment. "I should try to forget about it."

He didn't try to forget, but through the afternoon and evening, his plan already formulated, he managed to put it in the back of his mind, and to convince her that the trees, growing ever redder in his imagination, were not bothering him any more. When she had fallen asleep, shortly after midnight, he slipped quietly out of bed and dressed. The night was unusually warm for April, but the moon and stars were veiled by a layer of high clouds, leaving only the pale yellow glow of the streetlights and a few scattered windows in the neighborhood to intrude on his darkness. He inhaled the fertile smell of the damp soil and budding plants as he pushed the screen door quietly closed behind him.

At the garage he stopped to get an old hand drill from his tool chest. He selected a three quarter inch bit,

tightened it into the chuck, and crept out the back door and into the alley. The crunching of the gravel beneath his feet as he moved slowly through the alley sounded like bones cracking in the otherwise silent night air. The flat bottom of the boat was leaning horizontally against the back of the Trevors' garage, hidden from sight of the house. The dilapidated old Chevy with which Allen Trevor, the boys' father seemed to tinker incessantly while he was drinking his afternoon beer sat lifeless on flat tires next to the garage, its headlights staring blankly at him, the toothless smile of its grill seeming to know what he was up to.

The wooden hull of the boat had dried out badly from lack of attention, and the drill cut through it easily. He made the first hole under the seat at the center, at what he thought would be the least conspicuous spot, and then moved to the stern. Laying on his side in the grass to reach under the rear seat he cut a second hole, listening happily to the splintering of the brittle wood over the hum of crickets and treefrogs. When he felt the bit break through the bottom of the hull he slipped it out and crept back to the alley, smiling at the effortlessness with which he had accomplished his mission.

As he approached his yard he stopped before the black silhouette of the cherry trees. They looked the way they had looked two nights earlier, the destruction for which he had just taken his revenge invisible in the darkness, but the leaves, encrusted and hardened by the paint, rattled in the

breeze as if it were autumn. It was not enough, he thought. The boat was something, but it was not enough for what they had done.

In the morning, however, he again felt quite pleased about his revenge. He smiled through breakfast, pretending to be reading the Sunday paper while his wife eyed him suspiciously across the table. She had probably heard him come back to bed, but he couldn't tell her where he had been. She wouldn't understand, and she wouldn't approve. When they had finished eating he returned to the bedroom to dress.

"Are you going to church with me?" asked Aileen.

"I'm going fishing." He had not gone to church with her in a long time.

"It wouldn't hurt you."

"It won't hurt me to go fishing. Maybe I'll catch the evening mass."

He didn't really feel any more like fishing than he did going to church, but he was sure the Trevors would be taking their boat out this morning, and thought watching the culmination of his scheme might make him feel even better.

Carrying his rod and tackle box, he walked the block and a half to the lake. There were a few boats out, all on the other side of the lake. Several men were fishing off the public dock, and a few children were casting lines off the shore near the swimming beach. Arthur walked out to the end of the dock, sat down, dangling his legs over the side, and

cast a weighted rubber night crawler into the water. He continued casting it out and reeling it slowly back in for about half an hour before the Trevors' car pulled up at the boat launch, the little fishing boat tied to the roof.

Allen Trevor got out of the car to help the boys untie it and lift it off, and then jumped back in and drove away, leaving them to drag it through the grass and sand to the lake. Arthur was a little disappointed. He had hoped to see him in the boat with them when they discovered the leaks. After all, his own shiftlessness was probably the primary cause of his kids' delinquency.

The boys rowed the boat, one on each oar, much faster than he would have guessed they could, and he was surprised at how far they were getting without noticing the holes. He had thought the leaks would be big enough that they would see the water coming in right off shore, but they had crossed the dark line above the drop off before they stopped. The younger boy moved to the bow and began letting the anchor down. The older one, moving sternward, suddenly began to shout.

"Jesus! Pull that up!"

"What?" said his brother, still letting the anchor out.

"Water! There's a bunch of water back here."

"Bail it out," said the younger one.

"It's coming in fast. Just pull up the goddamned anchor!"

"How could it be coming in that fast?"

The older boy jumped up furiously, setting the boat

rocking, and scrambled toward the bow. "It just is, goddamn it!" he screamed, grabbing at the rope. "Gimme that!"

Arthur smiled on the dock, sure that they still had plenty of time to get back to shore, or at least into shallow water. He was thoroughly enjoying the panic. But suddenly the delight with which he had been watching turned to horror. As they wrestled for the rope the boat tipped, stood up vertically on its port side for a long instant, the boys suspended above the water, still hanging onto the taut anchor line, and then capsized with a belly smacker thump. One of them went down very fast, as if still clinging to the anchor. Arthur and the others on the dock and shore watched, none more stunned than him. After a moment the younger one came up next to the boat.

"Help!" he shouted. "He's gonna drown!"

Arthur pulled off his shoes and dove in. The boat was not too far out from the end of the dock, and he reached it, swimming underwater, surfacing just twice for air. He pushed the smaller boy over to the side of the overturned boat and told him to hang on, trying to ignore his wailing.

The anchor line was still taut, the top snagged on an oarlock. He followed it down about fifteen feet and found the other boy, hanging in the water, one arm looped in the rope, the other flailing wildly at it. Arthur pulled up the anchor below him for slack and pulled the arm free. The boy continued to swing frantically, catching him once across the bridge of the nose before he could grab him. He had been down

there a long time, and Arthur could feel the kid gulping in water as he took him up.

When they reached the surface the smaller boy was still clinging to the boat, still sobbing.

"Is he dead?"

"Can you swim?" shouted Arthur.

"Some," whimpered the boy.

"Where the hell is your vest?"

The boy did not answer. Arthur pushed his brother up against the boat. His skin was a frightening grey-green, his lips purple, and he did not appear to be breathing. Holding him against the boat with one arm he slammed his other forearm against his chest. He struck him a second time and was showered by the spew of vomit and lake water.

"I have to get him in," he said to the other. "You stay here. Do you understand? Don't try to move. Just stay here and hold on."

The boy nodded. Arthur pulled the older one up against his shoulder and began sidestroking toward the shore. The kid felt heavier now, and it seemed to take forever to get him in to where he could stand up and carry him. A small crowd was gathering at the shore. At the boat launch an elderly couple had just slid their speedboat into the water.

"Are you all right?" called the woman.

"There's another one out there," said Arthur, motioning with his head.

The man waved and started his motor. "I've got him," he

shouted over the roar.

Arthur dropped the boy to the sand and stared at him in shock. He was unconscious, and still didn't appear to be breathing. For the first time it occurred to Arthur that if the child died he would be a murderer. He fell to his knees in the sand and pumped hard on the boy's chest with the heels of his hands, initiating another spray of green water. He continued pumping until the water stopped coming, but the boy was still not breathing. He lowered his head, taking a breath, sealed his mouth against the cold purple lips, and blew. When he was sure he must have inflated the lungs he began to pump again on the boy's chest.

"Breath, damn it!" he shouted.

He returned to the mouth to mouth, and when the boy suddenly vomited again he was unable to escape the eruption. Spitting out water and bile, Arthur turned him over and slapped his back to clear his lungs. The boy began to cough and the crowd of spectators, which had grown considerably, sighed, and then broke into a cheer. The boy gasped for air. Arthur turned him over again, laid him on his back, and collapsed into the sand beside him, thanking God that he had come back.

The ambulance arrived as the couple with the younger one pulled up to the shore, and took them both away, the big one on a gurney, the little one, who appeared to be all right, sitting next to him in the back. Arthur rested for a few minutes on the beach, trying to ignore the congratulations of

the people still milling around him, and then rose and walked slowly home. He was halfway there before he realized that he had left his fishing gear and his shoes on the dock. He didn't bother to go back for them.

Aileen was still at church. After a hot shower he brushed his teeth twice and gargled with mouthwash, but couldn't completely erase the taste of the boy's vomit any more than he could forget the grey-green skin of his face or the firm rubbery feel of his purple lips--like two fat rubber night crawlers that had just been pulled out of the cold water. But the taste was not terribly unpleasant once it had been subdued a bit. It reminded him, in fact, of something he had tasted before, though he wasn't sure what it was. And the vision of the deathly face no longer terrified him the way it had when he looked at it on the beach. He had saved him. He had actually killed him, but he had brought him back. He was still shaken by the horror, but he was beginning to feel an exhilaration and a strange sense of satisfaction with the outcome.

"Well, here's the local hero," said Ed Zimmer, coming through the front door with Aileen as Arthur came down the stairs.

"Are you all right?" asked Aileen.

"I'm fine," said Arthur.

"They said you saved that boy's life, that they thought he was already dead when you brought him up."

"I guess he might have been, technically. He's okay?"

"He's going to be," said Ed Zimmer.

"Allen Trevor stopped as we were coming out of church," said Aileen. "He was on his way back from the hospital. He was in tears, Arthur. He's coming over later to thank you." She embraced him as he reached the bottom of the stairs. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"I told you," he said, wrapping his arms around her shoulders. "I'm fine." He wished he could tell her the whole story. He wished he could explain just how fine he felt and make her feel that way, too.

"Hey," said Ed Zimmer. "I talked to my friend at the paint store yesterday afternoon. He has a stripper he says is safe, completely biodegradable. Says it should work on the trees."

"What's that?" said Arthur. "Oh." He had forgotten about the trees.

Ed, still in the doorway, looked at him for a moment, and Arthur knew they had retrieved the boat and discovered the holes, but it didn't matter. No one else would know, and even if they did it still wouldn't matter. This had been enough.

THE TROLL

Jenny Rae had just drifted into that first stage of sleep, the stage in which her last waking thoughts slipped into a subconscious dressing room and emerged as a procession of images, when the shouting began. Laying still in her bed, her eyes now open again, she watched the spectors of her imagination evaporate back into ideas and emotions. Colors became words and shapes became dimensions before the shouting rose again. A vision of her ex-husband, silent and expressionless, became an empty memory of the failure of their marriage, and the face of her daughter, her mouth poised in its interminable "Why, Mommy?" was transformed into a conscious fear that she would never have the answers a child's questions deserve.

Bob Alman, the next door neighbor, had come home drunk again. She knew this without listening closely to the words. It had happened a number of times before, and she also knew that the argument would not end quickly. She pulled back the blanket and took her robe from the post of the headboard.

Looking out the bedroom window she could see shadows

moving in the house next door, but couldn't tell what was going on. She peaked into her daughter's bedroom before descending the stairs, saw that she was sleeping soundly, and wondered what kind of apparitions wandered through her dreams. Two steps above the landing at the bottom of the stairs she stopped to peer through the window that faced across the front drive. The sides of the houses were like mirror images of one another, and she could see over the bannister of the Alman's stairway into their living room. Bob Alman was standing in the middle of the room. He was still yelling, but the little window had been painted shut years ago, and she couldn't make out what he was saying through the glass.

He was a short man, but very big in the shoulders, the hair on his head and face thick and wild, almost never combed. Melissa, her daughter, had begun to refer to him as the Troll. Jenny laughed at the nickname, and told her not to be afraid of him, but agreed that the man's stature and appearance created a figure more likely to be found under a bridge in a children's story than in the house next door. She could see from the redness in his cheeks that he was indeed drunk. They could have been red from anger, but when she had seen him drunk before, angry or not, they were always glowing so red she half expected his beard to burst into flame.

She finished descending the stairs and hurried to open the dining room window. Though she couldn't see the Troll from there, she could see his wife, a little Mexican woman, standing in the archway between their living room and dining

room, her back facing the window.

"I don't want you going to your god damned mother's house every day," shouted the Troll.

His wife made a reply that Jenny couldn't make out, even though she was much closer to the window than he was. She tended to speak in a hiss when he began to yell, aggressive and accusatory without being loud.

"Where I am don't make a goddamned bit of difference," said Bob Alman. "You don't have to be going over there every damn day."

Jenny returned to the living room and turned a lamp on next to the couch. What a stupid thing, she thought, to be arguing about in the middle of the night. She and Frank, her ex-husband, had hardly ever argued. Their differences had never seemed important enough to be worth fighting about. She wondered now if they shouldn't have fought more. Over their last couple of years together Frank had grown gradually quieter with her, until they rarely talked much about anything at all, and then one day he had just come home from work and announced that he was leaving. That was eleven months ago.

She returned to the living room and turned the television on, setting the volume low enough that she could still hear most of what was going on across the driveway, thinking it best that she pay some attention. She didn't really fear for the safety of the woman. As many times as she had listened to these arguments she had never heard any indications of real violence. He would throw things, and occassionally break

something, and sometimes his wife would join in, hurling and smashing a few items herself, but she didn't know of anyone ever actually being hurt. She wondered, in fact, if they didn't both somehow enjoy the bouts--little sessions of home therapy, or at least a break-up of their day to day monotony. They always seemed to subside just before they reached a truly dangerous level. He would storm out of the house, or she would stomp off to bed, and things would be forgotten, or at least ignored, until the next session.

Still, she didn't think it merely nosey to listen. The arguments did get loud, and often viscious, and there was always the chance that one day they wouldn't knock off at quitting time. When he was drunk the Troll's explosiveness seemed much more predictable than his judgment.

After a few minutes the argument subsided for a while, and Jenny tried to sink into a late movie, but it was an old film, featuring nobody she recognized, and didn't help to alleviate the tension she always felt during the neighbor's fights, or the loneliness that dominated the house when she was awake late at night. Most of the time she didn't miss Frank any more, but at night she did. She hated being awake and alone at this time. For the first few months after he left she'd had afternoon cocktails once a week with a couple of girlfriends, but she had stopped because even though she never had more than two drinks it made her tired in the evening, and she always fell asleep too early and found herself awake and alone at two or three in the morning, her

imagination still spinning, as if it had refused to be pulled completely from its dreams. It was the one time of day that she had never found a cure for. Even Frank's silent presence would have offered some comfort.

Though she continued to stare at the television she listened more to the dialogue coming through the window from next door than to that of the movie. For a moment she wondered if she didn't enjoy the catharsis of the fights as much as the neighbors. She did not enjoy being awakened, but once she was up it was easier to listen to their arguments than to concentrate on reading or even watching television. Her imagination, too active to allow her conscious mind to focus within fixed parameters, could play with the sounds that floated across the drive, reconstructing, adding and subtracting, until it tired itself out.

She wondered what it would have been like to have a serious fight with Frank. Maybe there were things that could have been worked out. Maybe they just needed to fight once in a while. She tried to imagine him in the kind of fit the Troll was in right now, but it was a hard image to conjure. Frank's face, contagiously stoical, she had seen reddened by embarrassment, but never by anger.

When the argument next door began to grow louder again she turned down the television to listen. It was Mrs. Alman's voice, louder than she ever remembered hearing it, but still sounding more like a venomous hiss than a shout. Unable to understand what she was saying, Jenny got up and moved again

to the dining room window. The Troll and his wife were in their dining room, directly across from her, glaring at each other across a rectangular table with a red checked cloth. Jenny slipped back to the corner of the window to avoid being spotted.

"I'll go anywhere with anybody I want," shouted the Troll.

"Yeah," hissed his wife. "You sure in hell will."

"Anyfuckingbody!" screamed the Troll.

"God," said his wife, "you make me..."

"Anymotherfuckingbody I god damned please!"

"You make my skin crawl."

"You got that? Anybody I want, any fucking time I want!"

Jenny caught herself leaning across the window and sank back again behind the curtain. She wondered if they were talking about a mistress, and what kind of woman could be a mistress for the Troll. Frank, unless he had been extremely discreet, had never had an affair while they were married. At times she almost wished he had, thinking it would be better if he had left because he found someone who made him happier, rather than because she made him unhappy.

"Yeah," said Mrs. Alman, "I got it, and you ain't the only one."

The Troll walked around the table, kicking a chair out of the way, and grabbed her by the front of her blouse. "What the fuck do you mean by that?" He was still yelling, though he held her just inches from his face.

The woman's voice became barely audible. "Nothing," she said, trying to squirm away.

Jenny was suddenly overwhelmed by a panic. She had never witnessed this kind of physical contact in their disputes, and it felt as if Bob Alman, in pulling his wife closer to him, had pulled her also closer to the conflict.

"What the hell do you mean nothing?" he shouted, tightening his grip. "What did you mean by that?" He pulled her still closer, until their noses almost touched, and then pushed her backwards into the table. The table slid a couple of feet and a chair toppled over, but the woman caught her balance and didn't go to the floor. Jenny stumbled backing away from the window, and then ducked out of sight when the Troll looked in her direction. She was as terrified as if she were the one standing over there, trembling against the wall, instead of his wife.

The Troll stepped toward her, and reached out to grab her as she began to move away, but she managed to slip out of his grasp and scramble past him into the kitchen. Jenny managed to reach the phone, shaking, somehow strangely surprised that the thick little hand of Bob Alman had not pulled her away. He stalked into the kitchen and the shouting continued, though it was now muffled beyond intelligibility, as she dialed 911 and the switchboard operator connected her quickly with a police sergeant.

"And what is your address?" he asked when she had explained the situation.

She gave him the address of the house next door. "Please hurry," she added, hoping she hadn't already waited too long. She hung up before he could ask again for any information about her.

When she returned to the window she could hear them yelling at each other in the kitchen, but the voices, distorted by the distance and the dining room wall, were incomprehensible even from there. The kitchen had no wall on the driveway side of the house, the only room on the first floor in which she couldn't see them. She went into the living room and sat down across from the television without looking at the movie, nervous, and still as frightened as if she were the one in danger. If it had been her, she would have been running to the kitchen for a knife, and she wondered if that was what Mrs. Alman had done, if she was just holding him off right now. After a moment, too anxious to sit still, she went back upstairs to check on her daughter again. Melissa still appeared to be sleeping. From her room Jenny noticed that she couldn't hear anything from next door.

She stopped halfway down the stairs, suddenly realizing that the fight had stopped. The house next door was silent. She peered through the little window in the stairwell and saw Bob Alman sitting in a chair in the living room, his fiery cheeks buried in his hands. His wife stood across the room, staring at him, tears running over her own reddened cheeks.

It was over. They had taken it right to the limit this time, but they had stopped, and no one seemed to be hurt. For

a moment she felt a dizzying relief that drained her the way she imagined it drained the couple next door. She wished she had seen and heard what happened in the kitchen. Then she remembered that she had called the police. It would be all right. They would come and see that it was over and everything would be all right.

The neighborhood was heavily patrolled, and the police car arrived within a few minutes. She watched as the two officers climbed out, slipping their nightsticks into their belts, and approached the front door. Bob Alman jumped from the chair when they knocked, and her panic returned when she saw the rage that had subsided a few moments earlier flaring to a new peak. He threw open the door, screaming incoherently, and an altercation began immediately between him and the two policemen. Jenny stared, horrified, as they dragged him, still yelling, from the house. They had to wrestle him together to the front lawn before they could get his hands cuffed behind his back. Mrs. Alman stood at the center of the living room, watching through the open door. She looked more frightened than she had even at the height of the argument.

The Troll allowed himself to be led to the back door of the squad car, but then stopped and refused to get in. The younger of the two policemen put his hands on Bob Alman's shoulders and tried to force him down into the car, but the Troll's bulk and strength were more than he could move. He drew his nightstick and swung it hard into his prisoner's

thigh, bringing a scream from the woman in the house. The Troll roared over his shoulder, but still didn't budge. The officer struck him again in the thigh, harder, and then began working his way up, swing by swing, each blow bringing another shriek from Mrs. Alman, until he had struck him several times in the side. Jenny felt sick. The beating had succeeded only in further enraging Bob Alman. He didn't move until the older officer drew his stick and jabbed him once in the stomach. This blow doubled him over, and together they shoved him down through the door, banging his head against the roof of the car, before he could straighten up.

The older officer returned to the house to speak with Mrs. Alman after they had closed the door on her husband. She hissed at him for a moment, and then burst into tears. The man put a hand on her shoulder and began to say something, but she pulled away from him. He stood there for another moment, just looking at her, and then turned, pulling the door closed behind him, and returned to the car.

The sudden quiet in the neighborhood after they had driven away was eerie. Across the driveway Mrs. Alman sank, sobbing, into the chair her husband had been in before. Jenny continued to stare out the window at the street for a few minutes after they were gone, and then moved back to her living room, turned off the television and dropped into the couch.

It was her fault. She had no business listening or watching, no business butting in. The danger had seemed so

real to her. She was sure he was going to hurt her, maybe kill her, if she didn't do something. But they had stopped, and they would have been okay if she hadn't called the police. It was their fight, and they knew when to stop it. She, who was not a part of it, had taken it too far because she didn't know the limit.

She heard a squeak on the stairs and looked up to see her daughter, dragging a blanket with one hand, and rubbing an eye with the other.

"Melissa," she said, trying to hide the fear that seemed to have increased rather than diminished since the incident had ended. "What are you doing up?"

"I juswokeupisall," said the sleepy child.

"Well, come on," said Jenny, picking her up. "You can sit up with me until you just fall back to sleepisall."

"Mommy," said the girl, "is Daddy all right?"

Jenny held her up to look at her face. "Why do you ask that?"

"I thought I heard Daddy. Did somebody hurt him?"

"No, honey," she said, pulling her against her shoulder so that she wouldn't see her crying. "it wasn't Daddy."

GREAT BUILDINGS AND HIGH PLACES

In the dank restroom of an Amoco station at the junction of Interstate 96 and Michigan Highway 40, fifty miles from Lansing, Jerry Butler changed from lightweight jeans and a T-shirt into his funeral suit, a dark grey wool blend. He had worn it also for more cheerful events, as it was the only suit he owned, but thought of it as his funeral suit because that was the purpose for which he had purchased it some six years ago. When he had completed the change he stepped up to the urinal. He had not had a drink in three days, since hearing the news of his fathers death, and wondered why now, just over an hour before the funeral, he was suddenly conscious of his sobriety, imagining the poisons being purged from his body as his urine streamed out over the lower lip of the porcelain mouth.

Tinkertoys, he remembered, checking himself in the mirror. He had awakened in his car at a rest stop two hours earlier, several hours later than he had intended. Just before he awoke he was in the midst of a strange dream that had deserted him in the sudden intrusion of the morning light.

Now he remembered. He was in a huge corridor, walking through a vast Tinkertoy structure. The little colored rods and unpainted wooden hubs connected to form a catacomb of archways and domed rooms. When he neared the end he saw his father for an instant, smiling, but not at him. The only trace of the dream that had remained with him when he opened his eyes was a strange feeling of confusion, a feeling that did not abate even now that he recalled the images that had stirred it.

Squinting, shading his eyes against the sun, he stepped out the door and into the parking lot. A semi-tractor pulling two trailers of new cars rumbled over a bad seam in the interstate overpass, creating a swell in the pulsing hum of the other traffic. Though it wasn't even eleven o'clock, it was already almost ninety degrees, and he could see the heat radiating from the passing cars. A horn honked in the gas station lot, and a blonde haired woman in a dilapidated red van glared at him through her open window. He had left his car blocking the gas pumps.

"Sorry," he called, waving over his shoulder as he climbed into the car. Although he still had plenty of time to get to the chapel at the funeral home for the service, oversleeping at the rest stop had set him far enough behind schedule that he would have to cancel a stop at his mother's house on the way, a development that didn't greatly disappoint him. She had a way of using somber occasions, however irrelevant, as evidence of the instability of his life. He knew that in her mind his father's death would be an omen, a

sign that he had better get his life in order. Meeting her in a crowd at the funeral home would be easier.

He had not yet mourned the loss of his father, had not thought much of it at all. As he drew closer to Lansing the death began to seem more real, though his first feeling was not of the loss of a loved one, but of a missed opportunity. He didn't remember his father ever being proud of him, at least not since he was a very small child, and had always been sure that one day he would do something to really impress the old man, to make him want to stand up and shout, "Hey, that's my boy!" It had never happened. His father had died without ever coming to understand or respect him. He died knowing a son that he didn't like.

Already uncomfortable in the suit, Jerry stripped the jacket off, steering the car down the interstate with his knees. He remembered the driving lessons with his father when he was a teenager. "Both hands on the wheel--two o:clock and ten o:clock." If he came to a complete stop his father would shout, "The sign says stop, not park." But anything less and he would scream, "You in California boy? In Michigan that's not even good enough for a yield sign." Though he had no trouble passing the tests and getting his license, he had never found that perfect median that would win his father's approval, and had never been comfortable driving with him.

About twenty miles outside of Lansing, cursing aloud to himself, he wobbled the car to the side of the highway on a flat tire. Fifteen minutes later, sweating like a wrestler,

hands and shirt filthy, he lowered the weight of the car onto the spare and listened to the air whistling out of the cracked valve stem as it flattened slowly to the ground.

"Damn it !" he shouted. "It had to fucking happen!" He hurled the lug wrench to the ground and stomped his foot in frustration as it bounced up to take a ding out of the fender of the car. The jack and the first tire still laying on the grass embankment, he slammed the trunk closed, took his jacket from the car, stepped up to the road and held out his thumb.

"Monday morning traffic was not heavy, but he counted two dozen cars passing him before he saw the red van. As she swerved in he jumped off the shoulder of the road, not sure if she was trying to pick him up or hit him.

"Well, are you going to get in?" she called through the window.

The door groaned like a walrus as he pulled it open.

"Gotta lift and pull to get it closed," she said as he climbed in.

"Are you going into Lansing?"

"Yeah, but there's a gas station closer than that."

"I don't have time right now. I just need a ride into town."

"You're Jerry Butler, aren't you?" She swung the van back out onto the highway, letting him search his memory for a moment. "You went to school with my older brother, Wes McDonald. I'm Tina."

He remembered a skinny girl who vaguely resembled this

woman, who had watched him beat up her brother once when they were in junior high school. He wondered if she remembered that, and if he should tell her that his father had beaten him just as badly when he got home.

"So, where do you need to go?"

He gave her the name of the funeral home, and offered to pay for gas if she would drop him off. An afterthought, he apologized for his inconsiderate parking at the gas station. She agreed to drop him off, ignoring the apology.

"Family?"

"My father."

"I'm sorry." She focused her attention on the road, and graciously maintained the distance of a respectful stranger.

He was still sweating. Sitting above the engine of the old van was not helping to cool him off. He knew they weren't going to make it on time. One of his uncles would stand in for him as pall bearer. The family would whisper. His mother would claim to be heartbroken by his lack of respect, and in her memory the death of her husband would forever be associated with the irresponsibility of her son.

A few white clouds floated across the otherwise blue summer sky. The van rattled like an old washing machine down the highway at almost eighty miles per hour. Jerry Butler stared out the window at the black pumps over a small field of oil wells, and found himself thinking again of Tinkertoys. He remembered a time when he was very small, not yet in school. He had spent the better part of an afternoon building

a Tinkertoy castle to present to his father, the architect, when he got home from work. But when he was finished, and there was not a rod or hub left in the can, he decided it was not good enough. He disassembled the whole thing, but had barely begun rebuilding it when his father walked in.

Just before they reached Lansing, Tina McDonald sent him to the back of the van to wash his hands with a dirty towel and water from a plastic milk jug. He scrubbed a little at the sleeves of his shirt, succeeding only in making them look dirty and wet. When he returned to the front he pulled his jacket on. No one would see the shirt, anyway.

The city looked different than when he had last seen it. At the center it was still much the same, but the strip malls and office buildings that radiated out along the main roads, many of which his father's firm had designed, now reached and engulfed the little outlying towns.

When they reached the funeral home the parking lot was empty. A clock on the front of the building said ten minutes to one. Jerry sank back in the seat and shook his head. He knew he was going to be late, but didn't think he would miss the whole service.

"What cemetery?" asked Tina.

"What?"

"What cemetery? You can try to catch the service there."

"Meadowlawn," said Jerry. "I guess it's worth a try."

She swung the van back out of the drive and began winding through the maze of one way streets in the downtown area. He

had given up hope, but her willingness to try encouraged him a little, and after a few blocks he began exhorting her to hurry. She coasted through stop signs and ignored speed limits. As they approached the cemetery gates he saw the police car behind them, lights flashing.

"Don't pull in." It was too late. Tina was already turning the van into the driveway. "Jesus," he said. "This is all I need. What the hell did you pull in here for?"

"This is where you wanted to go."

"It isn't where I wanted to get pulled over by a cop."

"Shit," said Tina, checking the rearview mirror. "Well, you were the one who wanted to hurry."

The crowd was just beginning to disperse at the grave site. The door of the van groaned as he opened it to jump out. His father couldn't have directed more attention to him if he had sat up in the casket, pointed to him, and shouted, "Hey, that's my boy!"

The cop stopped him next to the van, and he presented his driver's license, explaining quickly that the woman had picked him up after he had car trouble, that she was simply dropping him off at his father's funeral, for which he was late, and that they did not know each other.

Most of the people were already in cars when he caught his mother and sister approaching the limousine.

"Mom."

"What in the hell is the matter with you?" She spoke in a harsh, hissing whisper.

"I'm sorry I'm late. I..."

"Late? You weren't here. It's over."

"I'm sorry. I had some trouble."

"And you have the nerve to show up now in that piece of junk, with whoever that is, and the police chasing you."

"He wasn't chasing us, and it was the only ride I could get. It wasn't my fault."

"Of course not." She burst into tears. "It never is." Clutching her rosary to her chest she ducked into the back of the limousine.

Jerry looked a this sister. She stared back at him for a moment, more worried than angry.

"Alice, there was nothing I could do. I had two flat tires."

She sighed, and then smiled and stepped closer to hug him. "Seven hundred miles, and you didn't check your tires before you left."

"They looked all right."

"Well," said Alice, "I'm glad you're here. Give her some time to calm down, and then come over and talk to her. And don't tell her it wasn't your fault. I'll be staying with her for a couple of weeks."

He walked slowly toward his father's grave to get away from the line of cars beginning to crawl through the gate. His mother would never forgive him, but she would calm down, and things would be the same as they always had.

A few minutes after the last of the cars in the

procession had left he heard the van start up and pull through the gate. Staring at the casket at the bottom of the hole he tried to remember what his father had looked like the last time he had seen him, but could only summon a general image of him, stern, strong willed, his heavy eyebrows habitually lowered in disapproval. He was sorry he had missed the service, not because the service was important to him, but because he didn't want people to think he didn't care. He didn't want his final actions in the history of his father to be seen as gestures of disrespect. If he hadn't respected him it wouldn't have bothered him so much that he was never able to please him.

When he turned away from the grave the police car was still in the drive. He walked past it and out the gate, pretending not to notice the man watching him through the windshield. For the next two hours he walked alone through the city. He smiled self-consciously to himself as he set out. This, he supposed, was the walk during which he was supposed to work things out, but he couldn't think of anything to work out. He didn't feel much like thinking at all, and had decided to walk only because he didn't know what else to do.

He stopped on a sidewalk downtown, in front of a building his father had designed years ago. A forty-two story business center, it was not a skyscraper by big city standards, but it was an impressive building nonetheless, and the only high rise his father had ever done. He remembered going to the top with

him in a construction elevator before it was finished. He had been very young at the time, and standing up there looking over the city had made him feel very small. His father had accused him of being afraid of heights when he asked to go back down, but it wasn't the height that scared him: it was the terrible sense of unimportance he had felt looking down from it. "Acrophobia," his father had laughed. He wondered now if there was a word for the fear of insignificance, or if all the other phobias--fear of heights, crowds, open spaces, closed spaces, darkness, flying, bodies of water--were actually just symptoms of the fear of insignificance. He wondered if great buildings and high places made everyone feel as unimportant as they did him.

He thought again of the Tinkertoys in the dream, and remembered the smile on his father's face. Was he smiling at some other child, the child who had built the structure, hidden somewhere in the darkness beyond the corridor? Or had he built it himself. Perhaps he was smiling because he knew it was better to design great buildings than to stand in awe beneath them, because he knew high places could be made the slaves of geometry. Perhaps they had never made him feel small.

When he tired of walking he checked into a new motel on the east side. It wasn't until the clerk asked for his license plate number that he remembered he'd left his car on the highway. From his room he called his insurance company, and arranged to have it towed to a service station he could

see from the window. His feet and legs tired from the walk, he laid down on the bed and soon fell asleep.

At eight-thirty, just as the sun was beginning to set, he awoke in the same confused state in which he always awoke from afternoon naps, trying to make sense of time and place and the sleepy feeling of morning. When he had recovered his memory of the day he looked out the window and saw his car in the parking lot of the gas station. He saw also the battered red van in the motel lot.

After retrieving his car and belongings he showered and shaved and went down to the restaurant for dinner. Before he had finished eating Tina McDonald walked in, pretending not to notice him, and took a seat at the bar. He finished his meal, paid the check, and joined her, apologizing as he sat down for deserting her when they were pulled over.

"I got a thirty dollar speeding ticket," she said. "Are you sorry enough to pay it?"

He took forty dollars from his wallet and laid it on the bar in front of her. "I am sorry. It was nice of you to try to help me."

She slid a ten dollar bill back to him. "You don't have to buy me off. Just pay the ticket."

"And buy you a drink?"

"Fair enough. I guess our entrance didn't go over too big, huh?"

"Not too big at all," said Jerry. "It'll blow over." He ordered two drinks and stayed with her, talking through the

evening. During their second round he mentioned the childhood fight with her brother, and told her how bad he had always felt about it.

Tina laughed. "My brother was an asshole."

Jerry smiled. "I guess I probably was, too."

"Oh, you were," she said. "Wes still is. He spends half his life screwing people over, and wastes the other half apologizing. How about you."

Jerry thought for a moment. "Yeah, I guess I still am, too."

"Hey," said Tina. "I was just kidding. Don't get all serious about it."

Jerry felt suddenly very alone. Tina McDonald had no idea what it was like to be Jerry Butler. No one had any idea how he felt when he stood at the foot of a great building. The catacomb of Tinkertoys existed only for him, and only he understood what had to be understood to expect anything of Jerry Butler. These were not thoughts that depressed him, but observations that intrigued him, and brought him a strange pleasure.

When she turned on the barstool her knees brushed against his. He hadn't noticed that she had finished her drink.

"That's about enough for me," she said. "You sticking around?"

He watched her expression change as he thought, knowing he had already missed the opening. "For a few minutes."

"You all right?"

"I'm fine."

After she left he finished his drink and returned to his room. It was ten-thirty. Outside the window the lights of the streets and buildings created a yellow glow in the still night air. He stretched out on the bed without undressing, though he wasn't ready to sleep. After a few minutes he sat up to the phone and dialed his mother's number.

"Alice? I'm glad you answered. Is Mom still up?"

"She went to bed an hour ago. She's still pretty steamed, but she's getting better. You'd better come over tomorrow."

"I will."

"Are you okay?"

He told her the whole story of the day, including the Tinkertoy dream and the visit to their father's tower.

Alice laughed. "Jerry, you are so weird. Only you could have a day like that."

"I know."

"You know Dad always loved you?"

"I suppose so."

"I love you, too."

"I know, Alice. Thanks."

He hung up the phone and dropped back into the bed. As he closed his eyes the Tinkertoy structure of the dream appeared again before him, but this time his father was not there, and he stood alone at the end of the corridor. In the absence of his father the network of rods and hubs no longer

seemed important, a cobweb without a spider. He would miss him the way a mountain climber would miss a great peak if it suddenly crumbled before he had gathered the nerve to attempt it. He felt cheated, but he felt also a strange sense of relief, a relief he didn't yet understand, and wasn't sure he was comfortable with.