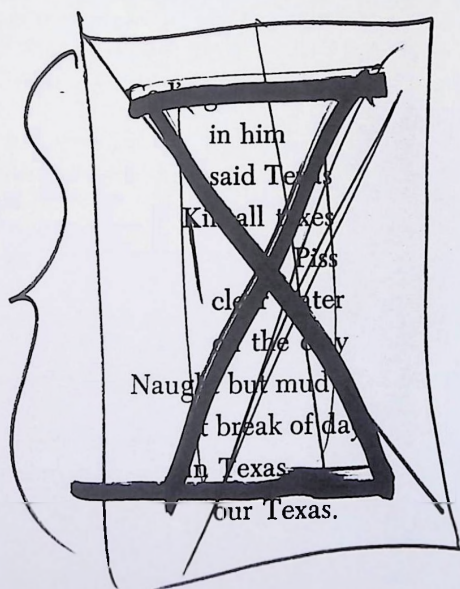
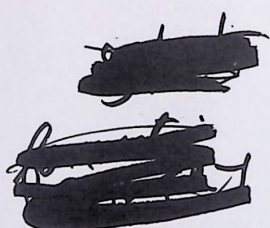


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which had lost the clue that a democracy could become equable only if it became great, that finally the world would continue to exist only by an act of courage and a search for style. Democracy flowers with style; without it, there is a rot of wet weeds. Which is why we love the memory so of F.D.R. and J.F.K. For they offered high style to the poor. And that is worth more than a housing project. That is the war against poverty.

Still, Lyndon Johnson must be given a vote. Because *My Hope for America* contains one good sentence, one more than Barry Goldwater could claim. This sentence reads: "... the wall between rich and poor is a wall of glass through which all can see." It inspires a corollary which is almost as good—the space between hypocrisy and honest manner may not forever insulate the powerful from the poor.



Why Are We in Vietnam?

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assistant who did the work on possible side effects of thalidomide before there were side effects and declared the drug harmless. Of course research assistants are like Hollywood producers. The more failures, the more jobs. But on to Vietnam.

Two pieces follow about this most scientific war. The first was a speech written for Vietnam Day, May 25, 1968, in Berkeley, California, and printed later in The Realist (with a preface note to explain that four or five paragraphs in the speech had been taken, in slightly altered form, from the book review of My Hope for America, and from the piece on the Republican Convention of 1964). The second article on Vietnam is a reply to a symposium in Partisan Review and is furnished with the editor's statement from which it departed.

Both pieces say the same thing, yet emphases are different, tone is very different, and the second goes further than the first. Its last sentence is not uncertain to damage a general.

A SPEECH AT BERKELEY ON VIETNAM DAY

Years ago in Austin, Texas, not far from the L.B.J. Ranch, even less far from the radio station owned by Lady Bird Johnson, at a time when our President was still Vice-President, I read a few lines I had written about Lyndon Johnson to an audience at the University of Texas:

Johnson had compromised too many contradictions, and now the contradictions were in his face: when he smiled, the corners of his mouth squeezed gloom; when he was pious, his eyes twinkled irony; when he spoke in a righteous tone, he looked corrupt; when he jested, the ham in his jowls looked to quiver. He was not convincing.

That Texas audience laughed as if I were William Faulkner talking about the Snopes family.

Years later, getting ready to write about Johnson again, I endeavored to come closer:

The private personality of L.B.J., as reported by the authority of the best gossip, is different from his public presence. In private, one is told,

he is not too unlike Broderick Crawford in *All the King's Men*, roaring, smarting, bellowing, stabbing fingers on advisers' chests, hugging his daughters, enjoying his food, belching, burping, mean and unforgiving, vindictive, generous, ebullient, vain, suddenly depressed, then roguish, then overbearing, suddenly modest again only to bellow and fart once more.

I was trying to convince myself to vote for him. I had already decided Goldwater had all the homely assurance of a filthy sock. My vote nonetheless was heavy with gloom, stricken with a sense of bad consequence. There was much about Johnson which appealed not at all, and some of the evidence was intimate.

He had written a book. *My Hope for America*, he called it. Now, a book written by a high official must not be judged by average standards, or even

good writer and Bobby Kennedy, at last reading, wrote a dead stick's prose. But even at its worst, the prose style of Jack Kennedy (and his ghost writers) is to the prose style of L.B.J. (and his ghost writers) as de Tocqueville is to John Rand. Reviewing Johnson's book for the *Herald Tribune*, I said:

Is it even not impossible that My Hope for America is the worst book ever written by any political leader anywhere . . . a boundless sea of overweening piety . . . an abominable, loathsome book . . . a prose which stirs half-heard cries of death by suffocation.

went on to say that Johnson was not a writer but a communications engineer.

The essence of totalitarian prose is that it does not define, it does not deliver. It obstructs from above. It is profoundly contemptuous of the mind who will receive the message. So it does its best to dull the consciousness with sentences which are nothing but bricked-in-power structures.

but
It was obvious *My Hope for America* was part of the expanding horror of American life. It would be used to brain-wash high-school kids. Like all horror, it stayed in the memory. For it offered a surrealistic clue to Lyndon Johnson's real secret vision of a Great Society: jobs for all, everybody with an interesting job, the farmers taken care of—their subsidy checks written by computers—every industrial worker with his own psychoanalyst, every student who was able to pass the aptitude tests able to stay in school forever, Medicare, antibiotics in every glass of drinking water, tranquilizers added to the television dinners, birth-control pills in the booze.

Sketch { The President was willing to go even further. One could conceive of him making a speech: "Let us reason together. Freedom is indivisible. Marijuana might be just such a freedom. But there are those who argue with justice that marijuana is passed from mouth to mouth. That is, by common consent, unsanitary. Therefore I propose Congress draw up a law requiring marijuana to be marketed solely in suppositories."

There would be a recreation program for all American children—mass calisthenics in air-conditioned stadiums with a glassed-over dome. The majors would have eighty-two baseball teams in each league and the additional teams would take their names from the new housing complexes built around shopping centers—the teams would be called Bypass 60, Ramp 6, Belt 1, Lower Alternate Freeway 4, the Coral Gate Arms.

The colleges would look like factories, the housing projects would keep looking like prisons, the corporation office buildings would be indistinguishable from the colleges, and not even an airline hostess would know where the airport ended and the motel bedroom began.

~~The sexual revolution would push on. Ladies' magazines would wonder whether the orgy had become a vital solution to suburban life. If there would be statisticians to point out that the modern orgy grouping showed an average of eight people and one erection, still State Department intellectuals could point out on their orientation tours through the universities of America that the Sexual Revolution was just begun, and ways would be found to increase vitality.~~

Camp would have moved on to the Happy Hunting Ground of old art movement. A new art movement would be in. It would be called Shit. Its test would be: is this object, happening, work, event or production more resonant than it was yesterday? Movies about the Strategic Air Command with Jimmy Stewart, Hubert Humphrey speeches, old Lawrence Welk records, news photographs of Mayor Wagner, Senate testimony by Robert McNamara, interviews with J. Edgar Hoover—these would be the artifacts of the new art movement—Camp was out and Shit was in.

Well, the President contemplating this perspective could not be altogether happy. "The Great Society is a dud," was his lament. "I don't even have an issue with which to slow down the Nigras and their Rights."

The President believed very much in image. He believed the history which made the headlines each day was more real to the people than the events themselves. It was not the Negro movement that possessed the real importance, it was the Movement's ability to get space in the papers. That ability was equaled only by the President's ability to attach himself to the image of civil rights. But his ability to control the image, even put it down when necessary, was hampered by one fact. In the Great Society there was no movement, program, plan or ideal which was even remotely

as dramatic as the Civil-Rights movement. So the Civil-Rights movement was going to crowd everything else out of the newspapers. There was going to be no way to control the Negro Movement, and no way to convince the Negro Movement that their victory was due to his particular attentions. You can never convince a movement of your power unless you can send them back after you have called them forth. So the President needed another issue. Then it came to the President.

Hot damn. Vietnam.

Vietnam, that little old country which had been under his nose all these years. Things were getting too quiet in Vietnam. If there was one thing hotter than Harlem in the summer, it was air raids on rice paddies and napalm on red gooks. Now he had a game. When the war got too good, and everybody was giving too much space to that, he could always tell the Nigras it was good time to be marching on the White House; when they got a little too serious he could bring back Vietnam. He could even make all those Barry Goldwater rednecks and state troopers happy—that was a happy nation, when everybody had something going for them. The Nigras had their Civil Rights and the rednecks could be killing gooks. Yes, thought the President, his friends and associates were correct in their estimate of him as a genius. Hot damn. Vietnam. The President felt like the only stud in a whorehouse on a houseboat.

Ladies and gentlemen, you will notice that up to this point, I have offered little in the way of closely reasoned quiet argument. ~~I did observe for myself that in the discussions about Vietnam which took place last Saturday in Washington, and were seen by many of us on television, there was an abundance of rational arguments advanced for our escalation in Vietnam and an equal abundance of equally rational arguments against our involvement there.~~

~~Well, so far you have received no rational arguments from me today and~~ you are not likely to receive ~~many~~ more as we go on. I believe our present situation in Vietnam is so irrational that any attempt to deal with it logically is illogical in the way surrealism is illogical, and rational political discussion of Adolf Hitler's motives was illogical and then obscene. Bombing a country at the same time you are offering it aid is as morally repulsive as beating up a kid in an alley and stopping to ask for a kiss. Reading the papers these days is a nightmare of unrequited love. If one's country lives like a woman in some part of the unconscious dream life of each of us, if beneath all our criticisms and detestations of America's vulgarity, misuse of power, and sheer pompous stupidity there has been still some optimistic love affair with the secret potentialities of this nation, some buried unvoiced faith that the nature of America was finally good, and not evil, well,

that faith has taken a pistol whipping in the last months. The romance seems not even tragic or doomed, but dirty and misplaced.

Still, let me assume there is some point in trying to be reasonable about Vietnam even if it is only to discover that there is no logic in the situation. But let me at least make one straightforward attempt to understand what transpires there. I will, however, insist that the logic we employ runs close to the vein of theological argument, for we must try to speak rationally about a mystery.

Since any interpretation which seeks to justify our role in Vietnam on legal grounds is criminal—~~since~~ we have no legal justification to be in the country; we are in fact there (as many of you doubtless know already) in violation of the Treaty of the Geneva Conference of 1954 which we were pledged not to obstruct—the only positive argument for our presence is that while we are illegally in Vietnam we are there at least to fight communism.

Well, that is a large question. It is part of a large mystery. We may leave the largest parts of it for last. What may properly concern us first are the arguments and complexes of argument which revolve around the domino theory. Vietnam, says this much discussed theory, is a domino, supporting all the other dominoes of Southeast Asia. This is, of course, argument with the aid of metaphor, argument by image. But metaphors have curious mechanics. There is much dispute about their properties. Edgar Snow, for example, would argue that the dominoes of Southeast Asia are already falling. Insofar as they are dominoes, Indonesia has fallen, and Cambodia. Both nations recognize the Viet Cong as the legitimate government of South Vietnam. Burma gives guarantees to China not to give bases to any U.S. forces. India and Pakistan oppose a U.S. invasion of North Vietnam. Japan makes known its desire not to fight, de Gaulle excludes French aid, no NATO power promises support for a wider war.

The suspicion must begin that we are not protecting a position of connected bastions so much as we are trying to conceal the fact that the bastions are just about gone—they are not dominoes, but sand castles, and a tide of nationalism is on the way in. It is curious foreign policy to use metaphors in defense of a war; when the metaphors are critically imprecise, it is a swindle.

It is worse than that. The escalation in February began immediately after the Viet Cong attacked our air base near Pleiku, and killed seven American soldiers. In retaliation for this attack, or using the attack as our pretext for an offensive we had already planned, the Air Force proceeded—for the first time—to bomb areas over the Seventeenth Parallel in North Vietnam. It is, if we are to use metaphors, it is as if you and I have

a small street fight on a city block. You catch me by surprise, you win, and I choose to come back with my gang and stick a plastic bomb on your house. Your maid loses a hand in the explosion; your friend, paying a visit, is blown to bits. I send flowers to the funeral, and a card offering my services as a fire-insurance adjuster. Is it possible the ideology of the Communists is being opposed by the spirit of the Cosa Nostra?

Let me list another difficulty to fighting communism in Vietnam. It is that the communism of the Viet Cong is attached to the local nationalism. With the exception of a few dedicated career soldiers, however, the average American in Vietnam is not much interested in the future of Asia. The freedom-loving spirit of our experts in Saigon has about as much real comprehension of the life of the Asian peasant as the President of the Hilton Hotels Incorporated is on talking terms with his dishwashers at the Hilton Istanbul.

For those of us here, for close to 200,000,000 Americans, Vietnam is faceless. How many Americans have ever visited that country? Who can say which language is spoken there, or what industries might exist, or even what the country looks like? We do not care. We are not interested in the Vietnamese. If we were to fight a war with the inhabitants of the planet of Mars there would be more emotional participation by the people of America than there is even now for our share of the war in Vietnam. Until recently, until February of this year, South Vietnam could have fallen and most of us would not have known nor cared particularly if the territory acquired by the Viet Cong were as big as Brooklyn or as big as the state of Texas. Never in our history has so portentous a war been accelerated in a place which means so little to Americans. Therefore we must admit that we confront a mystery. Which is: why are we already thus involved in a combat which is potentially huge, yet empty of emotional meaning?

The only answer which makes sense is that we are in this war to drive matters to a military climax, we are escalating the war in Vietnam, we are bombing North Vietnam, as the first steps in a sequence which is aimed to destroy the nuclear plant of China. But, if escalation carries up to the summits and abysses of such a moment, then the odds are large that an atomic war will also be upon us. Civilization as we know it would be gone. It is possible all life as we know it would be gone. So we are back to the mystery. Only now it is worse. It asks us to explain why all life would be destroyed for a war in a country we do not care about.

The ill of civilization is that it is removed from nature—disproportions thrive everywhere. The war in Vietnam is just such a monstrous disproportion. We are present at a mystery. All monstrous disproportion con-

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ceals a mystery or an insanity. If a man suffering from a fever decides to cure it by walking through fire, we must say he has either a secret motive or is insane.

Perhaps President Johnson has a secret motive.

I do not speak of the desire to bomb the atomic works of China as his secret motive. That desire is, for one thing, public—William Buckley was writing in *National Review* about his desire for such an act a month before the first big February air raids on North Vietnam were begun. Indeed, a large part of the Pentagon has been obsessed with similar desires since 1946. For twenty years Congressmen have been standing up in Congress to read speeches written by War Department officials which exhort America to destroy the Soviet Union by atom bomb before the Soviet Union becomes too strong. That desire has never ceased. *We are a conservative property-loving nation obsessed with the passion to destroy other nations' property.*

So one would not speak of the impulse to bomb the nuclear industry of China as a secret motive. That is a public motive. It is merely not overpublicized. Not yet. If President Johnson has a secret motive, it would have to be then of another sort. Most strong motives are finally psychological—money or power is required to satisfy some imbalance in ourselves.

So President Johnson's motive in escalating the war in Vietnam may be psychic in its nature. This assumes of course that the prime mover in the new war in Vietnam is precisely the President, it assumes that Vietnam is not the unhappy expression of vast inevitable historic forces too large for any man; no, to the contrary this premise supposes flat-out that there was a choice in Vietnam, and one man, balanced at the fulcrum of power between the Pentagon on one side and his liberal support on the other, decided to accelerate the war.

So it is a thesis which would say that the mystery of Vietnam revolves around the mystery of Lyndon Johnson's personality.

To ferret one's way into the recesses of that mysterious and explosive personality is an activity which would give pause to many. It gives pause to me. He is after all a very intelligent man. He is doubtless more intelligent than you or me. He is certainly most intelligent about getting his way. He is also a complex man, and his sides are many. The only side of him which is evident to all is that he is famished for popularity.

At the Democratic Convention in Atlantic City in 1964, not one picture of the President was hung behind the speaker's rostrum, but two. They were each forty feet high. So said his public relations. These photographs, however, looked like they were eighty feet high, high as an eight-story

motel. They dominated every moment of the Convention. They spoke of an ego which had the voracity of a beast.

At that convention, there were other clues to the mystery of the President's personality. It was apparent he had vast affection for the powers of television, an affection so huge it shrank from any pretext that he might have equally large affection for his delegates. They were left marooned for the most part behind two huge television towers.

Perhaps a fifth of the delegates were seated in front of those towers. The rest were installed behind. From nearly every position behind the television towers, it was not possible to have a direct view of the speaker on the rostrum. One had to watch him on television. Delegates began to fight for a seat which gave them a good view rather than a poor view of the television set.

The Republican Convention in San Francisco which nominated Barry Goldwater had been not quite so orderly as a rodeo. The Democratic Convention was cancerous—the electronic machines were more crucial than the men.

It was evident that the Establishment was in the service of a most subtle and modern tyrant, an Emperor, to whom all Mafias, legit and illegit, all syndicates, unions, guilds, corporations and institutions . . . could bend their knee. The Establishment had a new leader, a mighty Caesar had arisen, Lyndon Johnson was his name, all hail, Caesar.

Caesar gave promise to unify the land. But at what a cost. For if the ideology were liberal, the methodology was total—to this political church would come Adlai Stevenson and Frank Sinatra, the President of U.S. Steel and the President of the Steel Worker's Union, the C.I.O. and the C.I.A., Martin Luther King and the Pentagon.

Even before the election, a question was there. If we all worked to beat Barry, and got behind Lyndon and pushed, radicals and moderate Republicans, Negroes and Southern liberals, college professors and Cosa Nostra, café society and Beatniks-for-Johnson, were we all then going down a liberal superhighway into the deepest swamp of them all?

For Johnson was intelligent enough to run a total land, he had vast competence, no vision, and the heart to hold huge power, he had the vanity of a modern dictator. Under Johnson we could move from the threat of total war to war itself with nothing to prevent it; the anti-Goldwater forces which might keep the country too divided to go to war would now be contained within Johnson.

That was a final description of the Democratic Convention, and still it missed the point. Because the final unhappy point was that Barry Goldwater had established Johnson's power with such total perfection that the

man elected had come closer to total control of America than any President before him. What could increase the fear is that Johnson might not be a whole man so much as he was alienated, a modern man, a member in a most curious sense of a minority group.

Lyndon Baines Johnson a member of a minority group? It is an extraordinary forcing of category. It is obvious some other notion is intended than a description of a Negro, a Jew, a Mexican, a Nisei, or a Puerto Rican. Will it make sense if we say Lyndon Johnson is alienated? Alienated from what, you may ask.

But one must speak first of alienation, that intellectual category which would take you through many a turn of the mind in its attempt to explain that particular corrosive sensation so many of us feel in the chest and the gut so much of the time, that sense of the body growing empty within, of the psyche pierced by a wound whose dimensions keep opening, that unendurable conviction that one is hollow, displaced, without a single identity at one's center. I quote Eric Josephson:

It [alienation] has been used to refer to an extraordinary variety of psychosocial disorders, including loss of self, anxiety states, anomie, despair, depersonalization, rootlessness, apathy, social disorganization, loneliness, atomization, powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation, pessimism and the loss of belief or values. Among the groups . . . described as alienated . . . are women, industrial workers, white-collar workers, migrant workers, artists, suicides, mentally disturbed, addicts, the aged, the young generation as a whole, juvenile delinquents in particular, voters, nonvoters, consumers, audiences of mass media, sex deviates, victims of prejudice and discrimination, the prejudiced, bureaucrats, political radicals, the physically handicapped, immigrants, exiles, vagabonds and recluses.

What a huge and comprehensive list. Is anything to be gained by adding to it the name of Lyndon Johnson? You may still ask—what is he alienated from? The Asian peasant? The dishwasher at the Istanbul Hilton? Of course not. You cannot be alienated unless you wish to participate. Lyndon Johnson does not wish to share a bowl of rice with an Asian peasant.

How then is he alienated, and from what? And I say to you in no disrespect and much uneasiness that it is possible he is alienated from his own clear sanity, that his mind has become a consortium of monstrous proportions, of pictures of himself in duplicate forty feet high, eighty feet high. Lyndon Johnson is not alienated from power, he is the most powerful man in the United States, but he is alienated from judgment, he is close to an imbalance which at worst could tip the world from orbit.

The legitimate fear we can feel is vast. Because there was a time when

Lyndon Johnson could have gotten out of Vietnam very quietly—the image had been prepared for our departure—we heard of nothing but the corruption of the South Vietnam government and the professional cowardice of the South Vietnamese generals. We read how a Viet Cong army of 40,000 soldiers was whipping a government army of 400,000. We were told in our own newspapers how the Viet Cong armed themselves with American weapons brought to them by deserters or captured in battle with government troops; we knew it was an empty war for our side, Lyndon Johnson made no attempt to hide that from us. He may even have encouraged the press in this direction for a time. Abruptly, he dropped escalation into our daily life.

There is fear we must feel. It was not the action of a rational man, but a man driven by need, a gambler who fears that once he stops, once he pulls out of the game, his heart will rupture from tension. You see, Lyndon Johnson is a member of a minority group and so he must have action. But now let me explain. A member of a minority group is—if we are to speak existentially—not a man who is a member of a category, a Negro or a Jew, but rather a man who feels his existence in a particular way. It is in the very form or context of his existence to live with two opposed notions of himself.

What characterizes a member of a minority group is that he is forced to see himself as both exceptional and insignificant, marvelous and awful, good and evil. So far as he listens to the world outside he is in danger of going insane. The only way he may relieve the unendurable tension which surrounds any sense of his own identity is to define his nature by his own acts; discover his courage or cowardice by actions which engage his courage; discover his judgment by judging; his loyalty by being tested; his originality by creating. A Negro or a Texan, a President or a housewife, is by this definition a member of a minority group if he contains two opposed notions of himself at the same time. What characterizes the sensation of being a member of a minority group is that one's emotions are forever locked in the chains of ambivalence—the expression of an emotion forever releasing its opposite—the ego in perpetual transit from the tower to the dungeon and back again. By this definition nearly everyone in America is a member of a minority group, alienated from the self by a double sense of identity and so at the mercy of a self which demands action and more action to define the most rudimentary borders of identity. It is a demand which will either kill a brave man or force him to grow, but when a coward is put in need of such action he tears the wings off flies.

The great fear that lies upon America is not that Lyndon Johnson is privately close to insanity so much as that he is the expression of the

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near insanity of most of us, and his need for action is America's need for action; not brave action, but action; any kind of action; any move to get the motors going. A future death of the spirit lies close and heavy upon American life, a cancerous emptiness at the center which calls for a circus.

The country is in disease. It has been in disease for a long time. There has been nothing in our growth which was organic. We never solved our depression, we merely went to war back in 1941, and going to war never won it, not in our own minds, not as men, no, we won it but as sources of supply; we still do not know that we are equal to the Russians. We won a war but we did not really win it, not in the secret of our sleep.

So we have not really had a prosperity, we have had fever. We have grown rich because of one fact with two opposite interpretations: There has been a cold war. It has been a cold war which came because Communism was indeed a real threat to our freedom, or a cold war which came because capitalism could not survive without an economy geared to war; or is it both—who can know? Who can really know?

The center of our motive is an enigma—is this country extraordinary or accursed? And when we think of Communism, we have to wonder if we are accursed. For we have not even found our Communist threat. We have had a secret police organization and an invisible government large enough by now to occupy the moon, we have hunted Communists from the top of the Time-Life Building to the bottom of the Collier mine, we have not found that many, not that many, and we have looked like Keystone Cops.

We have even had a Negro Revolution in which we did not believe. We have had it, yes we have had it, because (in the true penury of our motive) we could not afford to lose votes in Africa and India, South America and Japan, Vietnam, the Phillippines, name any impoverished place: we have been running in a world election against the collective image of the Russ, and so we have had to give the black man his civil rights or Africa was so much nearer to Marx. But there has not been much like love in the civil rights. We have never been too authentic. No.

We have had a hero. He was a young good-looking man with a beautiful wife, and he won the biggest poker game we ever played, the only real one—we lived for a week ready to die in a nuclear war. Whether we liked it or not. But he won. It was our one true victory in all these years, our moment; so the young man began to inspire a subtle kind of love. His strength proved stronger than we knew. Suddenly he was dead, and we were in grief.

But then came a trial which was worse. For the assassin, or the man who had been arrested but was not the assassin—we will never know, not really—was killed before our sight. In the middle of the funeral came an

explosion on the porch. Now, we were going mad. It took more to make a nation go mad than any separate man, but we had taken miles too much. Certainties had shattered.

Our country was fearful, half-mad, inauthentic—it needed a war or it needed a purge. Bile was stirring in the pits of the national conscience and little to oppose it but a lard of guilt cold as the most mediocre of our needs. We took formal public steps toward a great society, that great society of computers and pills, of job aptitudes and bad architecture, of psychoanalysis, superhighways, astronauts, vaccinations, and a Peace Corps, that great society where nothing but frozen corn would be sold in the smallest towns of Iowa, where censorship would disappear but every image would be manipulated from birth to death.

Something in the buried animal of modern life grew bestial at the thought of this Great Society—the most advanced technological nation of the civilized world was the one now closest to blood, to shedding the blood and burning the flesh of Asian peasants it had never seen. The Pentagon had been kept on a leash for close to twenty years. Presidents so mediocre in their talents as Truman and Eisenhower had kept the military from dominating the nation.

But Johnson did not.

Out of the pusilanimities or the madnesses of his secret sleep he came to a decision to listen to the advice of his military machine, that congeries of Joint Forces, War Department and C.I.A. which had among other noteworthy achievements planned the Bay of Pigs. It was now planning its escalation in Vietnam. And Johnson was in accord. The body of a consummate politician took recognition as it slept that the nation was in disease and its only cure—out where the drums were beating and the fires would not cease—was to introduce us to the first anxieties of a war whose end might be limitless. Miserable nation cursed with a computer for its commander-in-chief, a computer with an ego so vain it could not bear the memory of his predecessor and the power he had had for a week when the world was on the edge of nuclear war.

Yet, there still remains the largest question of them all. It is the question of fighting Communism. Look, you may say, is it not possible that with all our diseases admitted, we are still less malignant than the Communists, we are the defense of civilization and they, not us, are the barbarians who would destroy it? If that is true, then—as some of you may argue—the logic must be faced, the Chinese must be stopped, we must bomb their bomb. And I would argue in return that neither capitalism nor Communism is the defense of civilization but that they are rather each—in their own way—malignancies upon the spirit of honest adventure and open inquiry which developed across the centuries from primitive man

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to the Renaissance, and that therefore there is no man alive who can say at this point which system will perpetrate the greater harm upon mankind.

But this I do know: existence alters the nature of essence. An unjust war, an unnatural war, an obscene war brutalizes what is best in a nation and encourages every horror to rise from its sewer.

The Communists could capture every nation on earth but our own and we would still be safe if our intention were clean. Yes. For in the vertiginous terrors of nuclear warfare rests one rock ledge of safety—in future no great power can ever be destroyed without destroying every other power which would attack it. As a corollary no philosophy of government can occupy nine-tenths of the globe without being altered to its roots. The health of Communism, its secret necessity, is an enemy external to itself; war is indeed the health of the totalitarian state, and peace is its disease. Communism would split and rupture and war upon itself if ever it occupied most of the world, for then it would have to solve the problems of most of the world and those problems are not soluble in the rigidity of a system. Like all top-heavy structures the greatest danger to Communism lies in its growth. Prosperity is its poison, for without a sense of crisis, Communism cannot discipline its future generations. Attack from capitalism is Communism's transfusion of blood. So our war against Communism, most particularly our war against Communism in Asia, is the death of our future.

I am going to quote Senator Wayne Morse:

We shall win one military victory after another; we shall destroy cities, industrial installations, and nuclear installations; we shall kill by the millions. . . . That course of action will lay a foundation of hatred on the part of the colored races of the world against the American people. In due time, those installations will be rebuilt . . . on the foundation of intense hatred by Asians for the people of the United States. That hatred will even be inherited by generations of American boys and girls fifty, seventy-five, one hundred, yes, two hundred years from now.

I say: end the cold war. Pull back our boundaries to what we can defend and to what wishes to be defended. Let Communism come to those countries it will come to. Let us not use up our substance trying to hold onto nations which are poor, underdeveloped, and bound to us only by the depths of their hatred for us. We cannot equal the effort the Communists make in such places. We are not dedicated in that direction. We were not born to do that. We have had our frontier already. We cannot be excited to our core, our historic core, by the efforts of new underdeveloped nations to expand their frontiers.

Let the Communists flounder in the countries they acquire. The more countries they hold, the less supportable will become the contradictions of their ideology, the more bitter will grow the divisions in their internal interest, and the more enormous their desire to avoid a war which could only destroy the economies they will have developed at such vast labor and such vast waste. Let it be their waste, not ours. Our mission may be not to raise the level of minimum subsistence in the world so much as it may be to show the first features and promise of that incalculable renaissance men may someday enter.

I have one set of remarks more to make. They concern practical suggestions. I have been visionary in my demands. For it is visionary in 1965 to ask of America that it return to isolationism. No, this country wishes to have an empire. The grimmest truth may be that half of America at least must be not unwilling to have a war in Vietnam. Otherwise Lyndon Johnson could not have made his move, since Lyndon Johnson never in his life has dreamed of moving against a majority.

Let us then insist on this—it is equally visionary, but it is at least visionary in a military way and we are talking to militarists—let us say that if we are going to have a war with the Viet Cong, let it be a war of foot soldier against foot soldier. If we wish to take a strange country away from strangers, let us at least be strong enough and brave enough to defeat them on the ground. Our Marines, some would say, are the best soldiers in the world. The counter-argument is that native guerrillas can defeat any force of a major power man to man.

Let us, then, fight on fair grounds. Let us say to Lyndon Johnson, to Monstrous McNamara, and to the generals on the scene—fight like men, go in man to man against the Viet Cong. But first, call off the Air Force. They prove nothing except that America is coterminous with the Mafia. Let us win man to man or lose man to man, but let us cease pulverizing people whose faces we have never seen.

But of course we will not cease. Nor will we ever fight man to man against poor peasants. Their vision of existence might be more ferocious and more determined than our own. No, we would rather go on as the most advanced monsters of civilization pulverizing instinct with our detonations, our State Department experts in their little bow ties, and our bombs.

Only, listen, Lyndon Johnson, you have gone too far this time. You are a bully with an Air Force, and since you will not call off your Air Force, there are young people who will persecute you back. It is a little thing, but it will hound you into nightmares and endless corridors of nights without sleep, it will hound you. For listen—this is only one of the thousand things they will do. They will print up little pictures of you,

Lyndon Johnson, the size of post cards, the size of stamps, and some will glue these pictures to walls and posters and telephone booths and billboards—I do not advise it, I would tell these students not to do it to you, but they will. They will find places to put these pictures. They will want to paste your picture, Lyndon Johnson, on a post card, and send it to you. Some will send it to your advisers. Some will send these pictures to men and women at other schools. These pictures will be sent everywhere. These pictures will be pasted up everywhere, upside down.

Silently, without a word, the photograph of you, Lyndon Johnson, will start appearing everywhere, upside down. Your head will speak out—even to the peasant in Asia—it will say that not all Americans are unaware of your monstrous vanity, overweening piety, and doubtful motive. It will tell them that we trust our President so little, and think so little of him, that we see his picture everywhere upside down.

You, Lyndon Johnson, will see those pictures up everywhere upside down, four inches high and forty feet high; you, Lyndon Baines Johnson, will be coming up for air everywhere upside down. Everywhere, upside down. Everywhere. Everywhere.

And those little pictures will tell the world what we think of you and your war in Vietnam. Everywhere, upside down. Everywhere, everywhere.

1965 ✓

A HAPPY SOLUTION TO VIETNAM:

From a Partisan Review Symposium

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Statement by the EDITORS of *Partisan Review*

We do not think that the present or past policies of the United States in Vietnam are good ones, and we lament the increasing and often self-defeating military involvements which those policies require. We have not heard of any alternative policy, however, which would actually lead to a negotiated peace in Vietnam or promote the interests of the people of Southeast Asia. This is not to say that the critics of American actions in Vietnam are therefore required to propose a specific policy. But it is not unfair to ask that their criticism be based on more than the apolitical assumption that power politics, the Cold War, and Communists are merely American inventions. Most of the criticism of Administration policy at the teach-ins and in the various petitions we have been asked to sign has simply taken for granted that everything would be fine if only the Yanks would go home. It is not clear whether these critics think Asia will not go Communist if American troops are withdrawn or whether they don't care. Nor is it clear whether they really care what happens to the people of Southeast Asia so long as America gets out.

That free societies can exist should be the goal of any international policy. Our policies in Vietnam do not promote that end, even though it is claimed that they are justified because the United States is preventing a Communist take-over. Nor do the policies of North Vietnam, Communist China or the Viet Cong, however they are explained. As for our policies in the Dominican Republic, they cannot be justified even on the ground that the United States is preventing a Communist coup. They are a disastrous violation of any democratic principle, a violation likely to alienate the people of South America, especially the youth, or even drive them into an alliance with precisely those Communist forces our government claims to be combating.

The fiasco in the Dominican Republic illustrates, we think, what is basically wrong with our policies. So long as we are not able to understand the political and economic problems of rapidly changing countries, and to support democratic revolutionary groups, we are bound to find ourselves in a false dilemma, always having to decide at the last minute whether to intervene, as though that were the only solution. Military action can be a substitute for political foresight only if we propose to police the whole world, and to imagine that we can do that is to lack even hindsight.

Obviously, the time has come for some new thinking. And some of it, has to be about what's happening in different parts of the world, regardless of what the United States does or fails to do.

ELEANOR CLARK
MARTIN DUBERMAN
IRVING HOWE
ALFRED KAZIN

BERNARD MALAMUD
STEVEN MARCUS

WILLIAM PHILIPS
NORMAN PODHORETZ
RICHARD POIRIER
RICHARD SCHLATTER

Canals
and
Christians

PPB

~~For~~
~~Canals~~
~~Life~~
~~Go~~
~~PPB~~

PSB

~~you can say with greater certainty that the President is not insomniac in his vanities; and that the nation is not insane with Christ, Pop art, Riberglass, mandarin, and the Hilton Hotel architect.~~

The editors ask for a counterpolicy. I offer it. It is to get out of Asia. A Communist bureaucrat is not likely to do any more harm or destroy any more spirit than a wheeler-dealer, a platoon sergeant, or a corporation executive overseas. We have our malignancies, Communism has theirs. Whether capitalism or Communism will finally prove more monstrous is out of my capacity, or yours, to guess, but it is perhaps evident to both of us that Communism cannot grow without exploding its own form. If Marx's vision conceivably left room for some minds to remain fertile, Stalin fixed a process of petrifying thought until post-Marxian thought is now an ideology which cannot change remotely so fast as reality and so must be insulated from reality by war. War is the health of Communist ideology, whereas peace and the abrupt *strifeless* acquisition of backward countries is a nightmare to ideology. For backward lands which are not used up by war have wealths of primitive lore with which to mine the foundations of ideology.

Consider: a quiet end to the war in Vietnam by the agency of a quiet victory of the Viet Cong might have given the world one more backward Red nation with still one more tenacious home-grown stubborn little Communist party at odds with China and in intrigue with Russia, thereby dividing world Communism somewhat further. Now, grace of escalation, we have the likelihood that any future alignment between Russia and China will be a little more on China's terms; and for China vis-à-vis North Vietnam (which countries formerly shared the distaste of England and Ireland for one another) we have accelerated a collaboration.

Of course all those Washington Pistols, all those keepers of the chalice, will talk about India falling if we "get out." And there will be tears in Joe Alsop's eyes. Of course. And I, of course, don't know. Maybe if Vietnam falls, so, too, falls India. So to what? Do we really want India? Do we desire it? Do we desire deeply to die of indigestion? Might it not be simpler if the Communists die of the same disease? But, in fact, might they not hesitate? For, the more Communism grows at a vertiginous rate, the more it must suffer from vertigo. It is like America. So, Communism might even come to recognize that Communism in possession of three-quarters of the world cannot have any world. The world is now balanced on too much. So Communism might even retreat before the terror of ideology being lost in the jungles and grasslands. What if Communism is not an unstoppable force—but is rather (since we can only approach comprehension of these matters by metaphor) a giant with a specific neurosis that it will awake one morning on the compulsion to eat its

Stout
90 to end
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own limbs. I say: throw Asia open to Communism. The meal will not be taken. If it is, we will even live to see the Communists destroy themselves. It is certain we cannot destroy them. We, like them, can only eat upon ourselves—this is after all a century for perverts and Reds.

But, believe me not. Take the alternative: might against might. Our troops against theirs—no, of course we are not serious. Even Barry Goldwater knows that we can't defeat the Communists militarily, not even with atom bombs. How could we occupy what was left? The cost of rebuilding it. The boredom for America's young couples—obliged to live out their early married years in rebuilt cities in Siberia and Mongolia. All the ration stamps. All the ghosts of 900,000,000 atomized corpses. No, we don't really want to defeat Communism militarily. But we do want to stand up man to man, stick to stick. If we cannot stop Communism by the force of our armies, we could of course pitch in to help create a world society of military and bureaucratic behemoths who will nibble at one another forever in small dribbled-out land wars while totalitarian tissues fill up with the waters of political edema, yes, just as our good prophet and saint, George Orwell, was dying to remind us.

Look to the other side. To absolute isolation. If all the world were Communist but America, America would be militarily in no poor position. We could still fight the rest of the world if we chose to. That is the paradoxical nature of nuclear war. But it is doubtful if Communism would then have the impetus to fight anything. Can anyone—even Dwight—conceive of Communism remaining unruptured in its cast-concrete heart on a diet of English lords, French intellectuals, Italian lovers, African drums, Zen, Yoga, pot, the New Wave, Pop art, camp—the prospect invites occupation. "Come on in, honey, this hustler's got enough diseases to keep you dripping all your days."

That, of course, is not programmatic, I would assure you. The world will never go to the Communists because they will never get through Asia, Africa and South America. They will bog down in the cultural swamps of our imperial wastes; their minds will rupture in the new pressures on their cast-iron formulations. For Communism contends with an impossibility: one cannot bring a modern economy to a backward country in a hurry, bulldozing through a wealth of primitive lore, without manufacturing a horde of mass men. And mass man is equal to the plague. Nihilistic, he is addicted to modern communications. Shakespeare, comic books, motors, electronics, jazz, plastic, fucking, frozen food, are all equal grit to his Dispose-all. He consumes whatever culture is before him and is the secret enemy of any government which presumes to rule him. His secret allegiance is always to the enemy. So let the Communists rather than the Americans do the manufacturing of mass men in back-

ward lands, in order that the secret allegiance of those new mass men be exactly to us.

For there is one way in which the West is superior to the Communists, and without that superiority, mass man cannot live. Mass man is an insatiable man, a malignancy of directionless greed at the mercy of his secret addiction—which is art. No population ever on earth has loved art so much as mass man, for that is the only hope of his deliverance: that he may encounter some great art before he is dead. Only great art can penetrate into the tomb of the modern soul and bring a moment of cease to the backed-up murders of the modern heart. Here, on this violent spit, friends, is the place we are ahead in the Cold War. For our artists are better, our writers are better, our jazz musicians are better, our painters go further, our vision is more fierce, it explores more. It is relentless we almost dare to think. It may even prevail if we do not burn too many women and children fighting for Christ. Oh, Christ, what assholes be Americans.

Yet it may be too easy to end on this fine proud and strenuous moral note. For the sweet bloody truth is not so neat. If the Lord of the Snopes went to war in Vietnam because finally he didn't have the moral courage to try to solve an impossible mix of Camp, redneck, civil rights, street violence, playboy pornography and all the glut which bugs our works, if Lyndon Johnson finally decided in his fine brain that only a war was going to get America off the pot (we were that mercilessly screwed to the john by fifty years of smelling our national armpit every time the truth rose up to kiss us) well, what he didn't realize was that the war in Vietnam was not going to serve as cloaca for our worst emotions but instead was going to up the ante and give us more Camp, more redneck, more violence in the streets, more teen-age junkies, more polite society gone ape, more of everything else Lyndon was trying to ship overseas.

Still, with it all, confess it, Mailer, the country is now in good humor. A wild good humor—it has been the wildest summer in years from Watts to Easthampton; it has been wild. The truth is, maybe we need a war. It may be the last of the tonics. From Lydia Pinkham to Vietnam in sixty years, or bust. We're the greatest country ever lived for speeding up the time. So, let's do it right. Let's cease all serious war, kids. Let's leave Asia to the Asians. Let us, instead, have wars which are like happenings. Let us have them every summer. Let us buy a tract of land in the Amazon, two hundred million acres will do, and throw in Marines and Seabees and Air Force, Scuba divers for the river bottom, motorcyclists for the mud-races, carrier pilots landing on bounce-all decks in typhoons, invite them all, the Chinks and the Aussies, the Frogs and the

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Gooks and the Wogs, the Wops and the Russkies, the Yugos, the Israelis, the Hindoos, the Pakistanis. We'll have war games with real bullets and real flame throwers, real hot-wire correspondents on the spot, TV with phone-in audience participation, amateur war movie film contests for the soldiers, discotheques, Playboy Clubs, pictures of the corpses for pay TV, you know what I mean—let's get the hair on the toast for breakfast. So a write-in campaign (all of us) to King Corporation Exec Mr. Pres; let us tell him to get the boys back home by Christmas, back from Vietnam and up the Amazon for summer. Yours—readers—till the next happening.

Unless Vietnam is the happening. Could that be? Could that really be? Little old Vietnam just a happening? Cause if it is, Daddy Warbucks, couldn't we have the happening just with the Marines and skip all that indiscriminate roast tit and naked lunch, all those bombed-out civilian ovaries, Mr. J., Mr. L.B.J., Boss Man of Show Biz—I salute you in your White House Oval; I mean America will shoot all over the shithouse wall if this jazz goes on, Jim.

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elected Congressman Stephen Richards Bojack, Democrat from New York.

Now, I could go into more detail about the precise sequence of steps which left me a young Congressman in 1946 at the age of twenty-six—the moves were not automatic after all, but that would merely describe the adventures of the part which I as a young actor was playing. There are any number of movie stars who capture the love of women they have never seen; the poor husbands of those women are in competition with a man they cannot meet. But I think of those particular few movie stars who are not only profiles for a great lover, but homosexual and private in their life. They must live with insanity on every breath. And something which could correspond to this was true for me. Where many another young athlete or hero might have had a vast and continuing recreation with sex, I was lost in a private kaleidoscope of death. I could not forget the fourth soldier. His eyes had come to see what was waiting on the other side, and they told me then that death was a creation more dangerous than life. I could have had a career in politics if only I had been able to think that death was zero, death was everyone's emptiness. But I knew it was not. I remained an actor. My personality was built upon a void. Thus I quit my place in politics almost as quickly as I gained it, for by '48 I chose to bolt the Democratic Party and run for office on the Progressive ticket. Henry Wallace, Glen Taylor, and me. I had reasons for the choice, some honorable, some spurious, but one motive now seems clear—

(Start) → I wanted to depart from politics before I was separated from myself forever by the distance between my public appearance which had become vital on television, indeed nearly robust, and my secret frightened romance with the phases of the moon. About the month you decide not to make a speech because it is the week of the full lunar face you also know if still you are sane that politics is not for you and you are not for politics.

Now, that was a long time ago. Since then I had, as I say,

gone up, and I had certainly gone down, and I had gone up and down. I was now at a university in New York, a professor of existential psychology with the not inconsiderable thesis that magic, dread, and the perception of death were the roots of motivation; I was a personality on television and an author of sorts: I had had one popular book published, *The Psychology of the Hangman*, a psychological study of the styles of execution in different states and nations—death by guillotine, firing squad, by rope, by electric chair, by gas pellets—an interesting book. I had also—as I indicated—become the husband of an heiress, and I had been most unsuccessful at that. In fact I had come to the end of a very long street. Call it an avenue. For I had come to decide I was finally a failure.

I had had a bad year this last year, and for a while it got very bad; I may as well admit that for the first time in my life I had come to understand there was suicide in me. (Murder I had known was there for a long time.) It was the worst of discoveries, this suicide. Murder, after all, has exhilaration within it. I do not mean it is a state to entertain; the tension which develops in your body makes you sicken over a period, and I had my fill of walking about with a chest full of hatred and a brain jammed to burst, but there is something manly about containing your rage, it is so difficult, it is like carrying a two-hundred-pound safe up a cast-iron hill. The exhilaration comes I suppose from possessing such strength. Besides, murder offers the promise of vast relief. It is never unsexual.

But there is little which is sexual about suicide. It is a lonely landscape with the pale light of a dream and something is calling to you, a voice on the wind. Certain nights I would go leaden with dread because I could hear the chamber music tuning up, tuning up and near to pitch. (Yes, murder sounds like a symphony in your head, and suicide is a pure quartet.) I was approaching my forty-fourth year, but for the first time I knew why some of my friends,

and so many of the women I had thought I understood, could not bear to be alone at night.

I had spent the last year parting company with my wife. We had been married most intimately and often most unhappily for eight years, and for the last five I had been trying to evacuate my expeditionary army, that force of hopes, all-out need, plain virile desire and commitment which I had spent on her. It was a losing war, and I wanted to withdraw, count my dead, and look for love in another land, but she was a great bitch, Deborah, a lioness of the species: unconditional surrender was her only raw meat. A Great Bitch has losses to calculate after all if the gent gets away. For ideally a Great Bitch delivers extermination to any bucko brave enough to take carnal knowledge of her. She somehow *fails in her role* (as psychoanalysts, those frustrated stage directors, might say) if the lover escapes without being maimed to the nines or nailed to the mast. And Deborah had gotten her hooks into me, eight years ago she had clinched the hooks and they had given birth to other hooks. Living with her I was murderous; attempting to separate, suicide came into me. Some psychic bombardment of the will to live had begun, a new particle of love's mysterious atom had been discovered—the itch to jump. I had been on a balcony ten stories high talking to my host, the cocktail party was done, and we stood looking down on Sutton Place, not talking about Deborah—what else was there not to talk about this last long year?—and I was wondering, as indeed often I did, whether this old buddy, comfortably drunk with me, a pleasant-looking stud of forty-six, with a waist kept trim by squash at the New York A.C. and a rogue's look in the eye kept alive by corners he cut making his little brokerage prosper (not to speak of the women he met for lunch—he had a flair, this buddy), well, wondering whether his concern was so true for me as the timbre of his voice, now sincere, now so place-your-bets sincere, or if he'd been banging my blessed Deborah five times a year, five times each of the last eight years,

forty glorious bangers upon the unconscious horror of my back (something so hot they could hardly contain themselves, and kept it down to five each twelve-month out of delicacy, out of a neatness which recognized that if ever they let themselves go, it would all go crash and boom) well, as I say, I stood there, not knowing if Old Buddy was in the Carnal Delights, or a true sword and friend, or even both—there was a wife or two after all with whom I had done the five times eight years bit, and sweet was the prize—no offering like a wife so determined to claw her man that months of hatred are converted to Instant Sweet for the passing stud in the hay, and I felt all the stirrings of real compassion talking to *her* husband next time out. So all was possible—either this guy before me now suffered conceivably a true concern for an old friend and his difficult wife, or was part of the difficulty, or indeed yes was both, both, precisely like me so many times, and before the straight-out complexity of this, the simple incalculable difficulty of ever knowing what is true with an interesting woman, I was lost. I tell you in shame that for those eight years I could point with certainty to only five bona-fide confessed infidelities by Deborah; she had indeed announced each of them to me, each an accent, a transition, a concrete step in the descent of our marriage, a curtain to each act in a five-act play: but beyond this, in the great unknown, were anywhere from two hundred to precisely no infidelities, for Deborah was an artist in that great dialectic of uncertainty where lies lead to truth, and truth begets the shimmering of lies—"Are you *mad?*" she would ask when I would disclose my suspicions of a particular gentleman or lad, "Why, he's a boy," or "Don't you know he's *repulsive* to me," which she always said in her best London voice, five years of Catholic schooling in England contributing much to the patrician parts of her American tongue. Yes, before the uncertainty of this, feeling like a scientist of love whose instruments of detection were either wholly inaccurate or unverifiably acute, I stood up in the middle of my conversation with old friend rogue,

and simply heaved my cakes, all the gin-and-tonics, anchovy paste, pigs-in-blankets, shrimp cum cocktail sauce, and last six belts of bourbon zip over his balcony and down in a burning cascade of glob and glottle, a thundering herd of love's poisoned hoofs.

"Oh, my God," said the friend, out-rogued for once.

"Stow it," I grunted.

"My God," he repeated, "it's dropped on the second floor."

We had both expected as a matter of course—the seizure was so pure—that my paint would land on the doorman's ears. Instead, some tenant would soon complain. The sheer mechanics of it had me next to laughter—how did one send an awning to the cleaners?

"I suppose I've got to tell them," said the friend.

"Let the rain wash away what the moonlight fails to bless," said I, in a tone I had come to abhor, a sort of boozed Connecticut gentry in the voice, putting together poetic phrases which were unpoetic, part of the product of living with Deborah's near-English lilts and lecturing too many classes over too many unfulfilled hours. "In fact, old buddy, leave me. If you can bear it."

So I stood on the balcony by myself and stared at the moon which was full and very low. I had a moment then. For the moon spoke back to me. By which I do not mean that I heard voices, or Luna and I indulged in the whimsy of a dialogue, no, truly it was worse than that. Something in the deep of that full moon, some tender and not so innocent radiance traveled fast as the thought of lightning across our night sky, out from the depths of the dead in those caverns of the moon, out and a leap through space and into me. And suddenly I understood the moon. Believe it if you will. The only true journey of knowledge is from the depth of one being to the heart of another and I was nothing but open raw depths at that instant alone on the balcony, looking down on Sutton Place, the spirits of the food and drink I had ingested wrenched out of my belly and upper gut, leaving me in raw

Being, there were clefts and rents which cut like geological faults right through all the lead and concrete and kapok and leather of my ego, that mutilated piece of insulation, I could feel my Being, ridiculous enough, what! I could feel lights shifting inside myself, drifting like vapors over the broken rocks of my ego while a forest of small nerves jumped up, foul in their odor, smelling for all the world like the rotten, carious shudder of a decayed tooth. Half-drunk, half-sick, half on the balcony, half off, for I had put my leg over the balustrade as if I were able better to breathe with one toe pointing at the moon, I looked into my Being, all that lovely light and rotting nerve, and proceeded to listen. Which is to say, I looked out deep into that shimmer of past death and new madness, that platinum lady with her silver light, and she was in my ear, I could hear her music: "Come to me," she was saying, "Come now. Now!" and I could feel my other foot go over the balustrade, and I was standing on the wrong side of the railing, only my fingers (since my thumbs were up and pointing like horns at the moon), only my eight fingers to hold me from the plunge. But it was worse than that. Because I knew I would fly. My body would drop like a sack, down with it, bag of clothes, bones, and all, but I would rise, the part of me which spoke and thought and had its glimpses of the landscape of my Being, would soar, would rise, would leap the miles of darkness to that moon. Like a lion would I join the legions of the past and share their power. "Come now," said the moon, "now. is your moment. What joy in the flight." And I actually let one hand go. It was my left. Instinct was telling me to die.

Which instinct and where? The right hand tightened in its grip, and I whipped half-around to the balcony, almost banging into the rail with my breast, my back now to the street and the sky. Only if I turned my head could I see the Lady.

"Drop," she said one more time, but the moment had gone. Now if I dropped, all of me passed down. There would be no trip.

"You can't die yet," said the formal part of my brain, "you haven't done your work."

"Yes," said the moon, "you haven't done your work, but you've lived your life, and you are dead with it."

"Let me be not all dead," I cried to myself, and slipped back over the rail, and dropped into a chair. I was sick. I assure you I was sick in a way I had never been sick before. Deep in a fever, or bumping through the rapids of a bad nausea, one's soul could always speak to one, "Look what this illness is doing to us, you coward," that voice might say and one would shake or twist in the fever, but that at least was a nightmare. This illness now, huddling in the deck chair, was an extinction. I could feel what was good in me going away, going away perhaps forever, rising after all to the moon, my courage, my wit, ambition and hope. Nothing but sickness and dung remained in the sack of my torso. And the moon looked back, baleful in her radiance now. Will you understand me if I say that at that moment I felt the other illness come to me, that I knew then if it took twenty years or forty for my death, that if I died from a revolt of the cells, a growth against the design of my organs, that this was the moment it all began, this was the hour when the cells took their leap? Never have I known such a sickening—the retaliation of the moon was complete. What an utter suffocation of my faculties, as if I had disappointed a lady and now must eat the cold tapeworm of her displeasure. Nothing noble seemed to remain of me.

Well, I got up from that deck chair and back to the living room which felt like an indoor pool. So steamy was the air on my stomach, just so ultra-violet seemed the light. I must have been in some far-gone state because there was an aureole about each electric light, each bulb stood out like a personage, and I remember thinking: of course, this is how they appeared to Van Gogh at the end.

"You don't look too well," said the host.

"Well, buddy, I feel worse than I look. Give me a drop of blood, will you?"

The bourbon tasted like linseed oil and lit a low smoke in the liverish caverns of my belly. I could feel some effulgence of the moon glowing through the windows and dread came back like a hoot from a bully on the street outside.

"It's a great night for the race," I said.

"What race?" said my host. It was obvious he wished me to be gone.

"The human race. Ho. Ho. Ho," I said.

"Stevel"

"I'm on my way."

My hand offered him the glass as if it were the gift of a shiny apple, and then I strolled, closing my host's door so carefully it failed to shut. I turned around to jam it once again and felt a force on me as palpable as a magnetic field. "Get out of here," said a voice in my brain. The elevator took too long. I rang, and rang again, but there was not a sound from the cable or the cage. I broke into a galloping sweat. "If you're not out of here in thirty seconds," said the same voice, "your new disease takes another step. Metastases are made of moments like this, lover-man." So I bolted down the stairs. It was ten flights taken in two banks each, twenty banks of concrete steps, cement-block walls painted guacamole-green, blood-iron railing made of pipe, and I flew down pursued by panic, because I had lost my sense of being alive and here on earth, it was more as if I had died and did not altogether know it, this might be the way it was for the first hour of death if you chose to die in bed—you could blunder through some endless repetition believing your life was still here.

The door to the lobby was locked. Of course. I tired of beating on it with my hands—I was half certain I was really gone—and shifted to one foot, took off a shoe, began to whang away. The doorman opened in a pet. "What's going on?" he asked. "I go up

in the elevator and you ain't there." He was Italian, some stout dull lump of rejection from the Mafia—they had assigned him to this job about the time they decided he was hopeless for waiting on tables in a hopeless bar. "Ain't you got any consideration?" he asked.

"Up your ass, friend." I put on my shoe and walked past him. As I was going to the street he muttered behind me, "Up yours too."

Walking fast I was two blocks away before I saw I had forgotten my overcoat. It was a night in late March, it was cold, it was much colder now than it had been on the balcony, and I shivered from the realization, the wind reaching in to the forest of nerves on my gut. I could feel those nerves wriggling now like a hive of worms; they were flinching as the wind rode by. A familiar misery was on me. I was separate from Deborah as much as a week or two at a time, but there would come a moment, there would always come a moment, after everything else had gone, when it was impossible not to call her. At moments like that I would feel as if I had committed hari-kari and was walking about with my chest separated from my groin. It was a moment which was physically insupportable, it was the remains of my love for her, love draining from the wound, leaving behind its sense of desolation as if all the love I possessed were being lost and some doom whose dimensions I could hardly glimpse was getting ready on the consequence. I hated her more than not by now, my life with her had been a series of successes cancelled by quick failures, and I knew so far as I could still keep any confidence that she had done her best to birth each loss, she was an artist at sucking the marrow from a broken bone, she worked each side of the street with a skill shared only in common by the best of streetwalkers and the most professional of heiresses. Once, for an instance, at a party, a friend of hers, a man I was never able to like, a man who never liked me, had proceeded to beat on me so well for "celebrity" on

television that he was carried away. He invited me to box. Well, we were both drunk. But when it came to boxing I was a good *torero de salón*. I was not bad with four drinks and furniture to circle about. So we sparred to the grim amusement and wild consternation of the ladies, the sober evaluation of the gents. I was feeling mean. I roughed him up a hitch or two in the clinches, I slapped him at will with my jab, holding my hand open but swinging the slaps in, he was such an ass, and after it went on for a minute, he was beginning in compensation to throw his punches as hard (and wild) as he could, whereas I was deepening into concentration. Which is the first reward of the ring. I was sliding my moves off the look in his eye and the shift of his fists, I had settled into the calm of a pregnant typhoon, the kill was sweet and up in me, I could feel it twenty moves away, he was going to finish with three slugs to the belly and his arms apart, that is what it would take, his eye was sweaty and I was going keen. Just then his wife broke in. "Stop!" she cried, "absolutely stop!" and came between us.

He was a bad type. "Why'd you stop it?" he asked. "It was getting to be fun."

"Fun!" she said, "you were going to get killed."

Well, the point to the story is that when I turned around to wink at Deborah—she had heard me talk much about boxing but had never seen me fight—I discovered she had quit the room.

"Of course I left," she said later, "it was a sight, bullying that poor man."

"Poor? He's bigger than I am."

"And ten years older."

That took the taste away. Next time some passing friend invited me to spar at a party—not until a year later I believe, not *all* the parties ended in a bout—I refused. He filed the needle to a point. I still refused. When we got home, she told me I was afraid.

It was worth little to refer to the first episode. "This man, at least," she said, "was younger than you."

"I could have taken him."

"I don't believe it. Your mouth was weak, and you were perspiring."

When I looked into myself I was not certain any longer that there had been no fear. So it took on prominence for me. I did not know any longer.

One could multiply that little puncture by a thousand; Deborah was an artist with the needle, and never pinked you twice on the same spot. (Unless it had turned to ulcer.) So I hated her, yes indeed I did, but my hatred was a cage which wired my love, and I did not know if I had the force to find my way free. Marriage to her was the armature of my ego; remove the armature and I might topple like clay. When I was altogether depressed by myself it seemed as if she were the only achievement to which I could point—I finally had been the man whom Deborah Caughlin Mangaravidi Kelly had lived with in marriage, and since she'd been notorious in her day, picking and choosing among a gallery of beaux: politicians of the first rank, racing drivers, tycoons, and her fair share of the more certified playboys of the Western world, she had been my entry to the big league. I had loved her with the fury of my ego, that way I loved her still, but I loved her the way a drum majorette loved the power of the band for the swell it gave to each little strut. If I was a war hero, an ex-Congressman, a professor of popular but somewhat notorious reputation, and a star of sorts on a television show which I cannot here even bear to explain, if I also had a major work on existential psychology, a herculean endeavor of six to twenty volumes which would (ideally) turn Freud on his head (but remained still in my own head) I had also the secret ambition to return to politics. I had the idea of running some day for Senator, an operation which would not be possible without the vast connections of Deborah's clan. Of course there

had never been a cent from *them*—we lived on the money I made even if Deborah had the accumulated tastes and habits of the money Barney Oswald Kelly had made. She claimed he had cut her off when she married me—which is possible—but I always thought she lied. It was more probable she did not trust me enough to show the buried loot. Heiresses have a scale: they surrender their heart a quarter-century before they open the purse. I did not care about the money itself, I half hated it, in fact I might have despised the money if it had not become the manifest of how unconsummated and unmasculine was the core of my force. It was like being married to a woman who would not relinquish her first lover.

At any rate, such were my parts. Without Deborah they did not add to any more than another name for the bars and gossip columns of New York. With her beside me, I had leverage, however, I was one of the more active figures of the city—no one could be certain finally that nothing large would ever come from me. But for myself the evidence made no good case: probably I did not have the strength to stand alone.

The difficulty is that I have given an undue portrait of Deborah, and so reduce myself. She had, at her best, a winner's force, and when she loved me (which may be averaged out somewhere between every other day to one day in three) her strength seemed then to pass to mine and I was live with wit, I had vitality, I could depend on stamina, I possessed my style. It was just that the gift was only up for loan. The instant she stopped loving me—which could be for a fault so severe as failing to open the door with a touch of *éclat*, thereby reminding her of all the swords, humors, and arbiters who had opened doors for her on better nights—why then my psyche was whisked from the stage and stuffed in a pit. A devil's contract, and during all of this last year, not living with her and yet never separated, for though a week might go by or two weeks in which I hardly thought of her at

all, I would nonetheless be dropped suddenly into an hour where all of my substance fell out of me and I had to see her. I had a physical need to see her as direct as an addict's panic waiting for his drug—if too many more minutes must be endured, who knows what intolerable damage can be done?

It was like this now. Walking the street just this cold night in March, the horrors were beginning. On these occasions when I had to see her, my instinct gave the warning that if I waited another half hour, even another ten minutes, I might lose her forever. It made no sense, I was almost always wrong in my anticipation of her mood, I was too rattled these months ever to divine what her mood might be, and yet I knew that the way I would probably lose her in the end was by waiting too long on some exceptional night when she might be hoping I would call. For once a certain moment was passed, once Deborah ever said to herself, "I am rid of him, I am rid of him now finally and forever," then it would all be gone. She was nothing if not final, she took forever to form her mind, but come the moment and she would not look back.

So I went into an outdoor booth, and shivering in the trapped cold air, I phoned her apartment. She was home—there were agonies on those nights I phoned and she was out—but she was home this night, and she was cordial. Which was a very bad sign.

"*Darling,*" she said, "where have you been? You must rush over." She was a handsome woman, Deborah, she was big. With high heels she stood at least an inch over me. She had a huge mass of black hair and striking green eyes sufficiently arrogant and upon occasion sufficiently amused to belong to a queen. She had a large Irish nose and a wide mouth which took many shapes, but her complexion was her claim to beauty, for the skin was cream-white and her cheeks were colored with a fine rose, centuries of Irish might had produced that complexion. It was her voice however which

seduced one first. Her face was large and all-but-honest; her voice was a masterwork of treachery. Clear as a bell, yet slithery with innuendo, it leaped like a deer, slipped like a snake. She could not utter a sentence for giving a tinkle of value to some innocent word. It may have been the voice of a woman you would not trust for an instant, but I did not know if I could forget it.

"I'll be right over," I said.

"Run. You must run."

When we separated, she was the one who had moved out. Our marriage had been a war, a good eighteenth-century war, fought by many rules, most of them broken if the prize to be gained was bright enough, but we had developed the cheerful respect of one enemy general for another. So I had been able to admire the strategic splendor of leaving me in our apartment. It *stifled* her, she explained to me, it was a source of much misery. If we were to separate, there was small logic for her to remain behind in an apartment she did not like, no, it was better for her to leave me there, I was fond of the apartment after all. I was not, I had never been, but I had pretended to be fond. Therefore I inherited her misery. Now the apartment, the empty stadium of our marriage stifled *me*, but I had not the pluck, the time, nor the clean desperation to move. I used it as a place to drop my dirty shirts. Meanwhile she hopped from one fine suite to another; there was always a friend leaving for Europe, and no one was ready to remind Deborah she was very behind on the rent. (What cowards were her friends!) When they would get the bill finally, it would be a knockout, \$2700 for three months rent—I would hold it, no question of paying. Part of the attrition on my military reserves had been the expenses. Deborah got four hundred dollars a week—it was senseless to give her less; she would merely run up her bills, and I had been scuffling and humping, taking three hundred dollars for a spot appearance on a television show, and seven hundred fifty for a spiced-up lecture on

some Ladies Auxiliary in Long Island—"The Existential Approach to Sex." Yes, debt was grinding me bad, I was something like \$16,000 in the hole already and probably worse—I did not care to count.

The apartment she had now was a small duplex suspended some hundred or more feet above the East River Drive, and every vertical surface within was covered with flock, which must have gone for twenty-five dollars a yard; a hot-house of flat velvet flowers, royal, sinister, cultivated in their twinings, breathed at one from all four walls, upstairs and down. It had the specific density of a jungle conceived by Rousseau, and Deborah liked it the best of her purloined pads. "I feel warm in here," she would say, "nice and warm."

The maid let me in. "Madame is upstairs in the bedroom," she said with a smile. She was a young German maid who must have had an interesting life in the ruins of Berlin from the age of five, for nothing missed her attention. She had taken lately to smiling at me with a droll mocking compassionate and very wound-up spite which promised portfolios of detail if I were ever rich enough to turn her tongue just once. I was sometimes tempted to start, to grab her in the hall and take her spiced mouth, lay my tongue on hers and rustle up with a stroke those overtones of malicious music she could sing. What Madame did with me she knew too well because I might still spend a night with Deborah from time to time, but what Madame did with others . . . that would have to be bought.

I ascended the stairway, a padded perfumed aisle up a wall of flowers. Deborah was in bed. Her body was not only large but lazy and she hopped into bed whenever she did not know what else to do.

"My God," she said, "you look awful." Her mouth turned fond in the corners. She never disliked me so much as when I came to her looking my best. "You really are a contemptible-looking creature this evening."

Did she know about the balcony? Sometimes I was convinced I was mad, because it seemed not at all exceptional to me that Deborah had been in touch with the moon and now had the word. She had powers, my Deborah, she was psychic to the worst degree, and she had the power to lay a curse. Once after a fight with her, I had been given traffic tickets three times in fifteen minutes, once for going down a one-way street, once for jumping a red light, and once because the policeman in the last car did not like my eye and decided I was drunk. That had all been in the form of a warning from Deborah, I was certain of that. I could see her waiting alone in bed, waving her long fingers languidly to spark the obedient diabolisms and traffic officers at her command.

"It was a bad party," I said.

"How is Philippe?"

"Looking well."

"He's a *very* attractive man. Don't you think so?" said Deborah.

"Everyone we know is attractive," I said to annoy her.

"Except you, pet. You look as if you've used up your liver, for keeps this time."

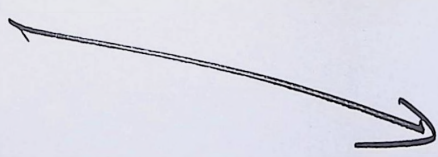
"I'm not very happy," I said.

"Well, come *here* and live. There's no reason why you *can't* move back with me."

Her invitation was open. She wanted me to dispose of my apartment, sell our furniture, move in with her. After a month she would move out again, leaving me with the velvet flock.

"If you'd come this afternoon," she went on, "you could have seen Deirdre. Now she's off to school. You are a swine not to have seen her." Deirdre was her daughter, my step-daughter. Deborah's first husband had been a French count. He had died of a lingering illness after a year of marriage, and Deirdre, so far as I knew, had been the child of that marriage, a delicate haunted girl with

eyes
you if



she looked too long, and so chose not to look. I adored her, I had realized for years that being step-father to Deirdre was the most agreeable part of our marriage; for that reason I tried to see her as little as possible now.

"Is she pleased at going back to school this trip?"

"She would have been more pleased if you had come by." Deborah's complexion was mottling with red. When she became angry a red flush, raw as a rash, spotted her neck. "You pretended to love that child for so long, and now you give her no attention."

"It's too painful," I said.

"God, you're a whimperer," said Deborah. "Sometimes I lie here and wonder how you ever became a hero. You're such a bloody whimperer. I suppose the Germans were whimpering even worse than you. It must have been quite a sight. You whimpering and they whimpering, and you going pop pop pop with your little gun."

Never had she gone quite so far before. "How do you tell that story these days?" Deborah went on.

"I don't tell it."

"Except when you're too drunk to remember."

"I'm never too drunk to remember."

"I can't get over the way you look," Deborah exclaimed. "I wish you really look like some poor peddler from the Lower East side."

"I'm descended from peddlers."

"Don't I know it, honey-one," said Deborah. "All those poor sentimentalistic grabby little people."

"Well, they never hurt anyone particularly." This was a reference to her father.

"No, they didn't, and they didn't have the guts to do anything else either. Except to make your father brainy enough to make your mother and then make you." She said this with such a stir of fury that I moved uneasily. Deborah was violent. I had a bad scar on my ear. People thought it came from the ring, but the truth was less

presentable—Deborah had once bitten it half-through in a fight.

"Go easy," I said.

"You're fragile tonight, aren't you?" She nodded, her face almost gentle, almost attentive, as if she were listening to the echo of an event. "I know something happened to you."

"I don't want to talk about it." Which was in effect a counter-attack. Deborah could not bear not to know.

"I thought you were dead," said Deborah. "Isn't that funny. I was certain you were dead."

"Were you sorry?"

"Oh, I felt a great woe." She smiled. "I thought you were dead and you'd left a will that you wished to be cremated. I was going to keep your ashes in an urn. There—right by the window table. Each morning I was going to take a handful of your dust and drop it on the East River Drive. In time, who knows, you might have been strewn all over New York."

"I would have done my best to haunt you."

"Can't, pet. Not when you're cremated. That atomizes the soul. Didn't you know?" Her green eyes had a particularly bad light. "Come here, darling, and give a kiss."

"I'd rather not."

"Tell me why not."

"Because I threw up a while ago and my breath is foul."

"Bad smells never bother me."

You "Well, they bother me. And you've been drinking rum. It smells Godawful." It was true. When she drank too much, a stench of sweet rot lifted from her. "The Irish were never meant to go near rum," I said, "it brings out the odor of their fat."

"Do you talk this way to all your little girls?"

She did not know what I did with the days and weeks I spent away from her. This was forever agitating her rage. Once, seven years ago, she uncovered an affair I had been keeping in a corner. I had been with a rather ordinary young lady who (for compensation,

tion, no doubt) had been a burning wizard in bed. Otherwise, the girl was undeniably plain. Somehow, Deborah learned about her. The subsequent details are vicious, private detectives, so forth, but the indigestible issue was that Deborah had gone with the private detective to a restaurant where the girl always had lunch and studied her through a meal, all through a long meal the poor girl ate by herself. What a scene followed!

"I don't think I've been quite so marooned in all my beloved life," Deborah had said. "I mean, *figure-toi*, pet, I had to keep up a conversation with the detective, a horrible man, and he was laughing at me. All that money spent on fees, and for what, a poor wet little mouse. She was even afraid of the waitresses, and this was a tea-room. What a big boy you must be to take up with a sparrow."

The real part of her fury was that no intrigue had ensued; if the affair had been with one of her friends, or with some other woman of parts, then Deborah could have gone to war and fought one of her grand campaigns, hook and eye, tooth and talon, a series of parties with exquisite confrontations; but I had merely been piddling and that was the unforgivable sin. Since that time Deborah spoke only of my little girls.

"What do you say to them, pet?" asked Deborah now, "do you ^{say,} Please stop drinking so much because you smell like a piece ^{of fat,} or do you say, 'Oh God, darling, I love your stink?'"

The mottling had spread in ugly smears and patches upon her shoulders, and what I could see of her breast. They formed a detestation so palpable that my body began to race as a foreign element, a poison altogether suffocating, were beginning to seep through me. Did you ever feel the malignity which comes from a swamp? It is real, I could swear it, and some whisper of ominous calm, that heavy air one breathes in the hours before a hurricane, now came to rest between us. I was afraid of her. I was not incapable of murdering me. There are killers one is

ready to welcome, I suppose. They offer a clean death and free passage to one's soul. The moon had spoken to me as just such an assassin. But Deborah promised bad burial. One would go down in one's death, and muck would wash over the last of one's wind. She did not wish to tear the body, she was out to spoil the light, and in an epidemic of fear, as if her face—that wide mouth, full-fleshed nose, and pointed green eyes, pointed as arrows—would be my first view of eternity, as if she were ministering angel (ministering devil) I knelt beside her and tried to take her hand. It was soft now as a jellyfish, and almost as repugnant—the touch shot my palm with a thousand needles which stung into my arm exactly as if I had been swimming at night and lashed onto a Portuguese man o' war.

"Your hand feels nice," she said in a sudden turn of mood.

There was a period when we held hands often. She had become pregnant after three years of marriage, a ticklish pregnancy to conserve, for there had been something malformed about her uterus—she was never explicit—and her ducts had suffered from a chronic inflammation since Deirdre had been born. But we had succeeded, we wanted a child, there was genius between us we believed, and we held hands for the first six months. Then we crashed. After a black night of drink and a quarrel beyond dimension, she lost the baby, it came brokenly to birth, in terror, I always thought, of the womb which was shaping it, came out and went back in again to death, tearing by this miscarriage the hope of any other child for Deborah. What it left behind was a heart-land of revenge. Now, cohabiting with Deborah was like sitting to dinner in an empty castle with no more for host than a butler and his curse. Yes, I knelt in fear, and my skin lived on thin wire, this side of a profound shudder. All the while she stroked my hand.

But compassion, the trapped bird of compassion, struggled in from my chest and flew to my throat. "Deborah, I love you,"

said. I did not know at that instant if I meant it truly, or was some monster of deception, hiding myself from myself. And having said it, knew the mistake. For all feeling departed from her hand, even that tingling so evil to my flesh, and left instead a cool empty touch. I could have been holding a tiny casket in my palm.

"Do you love me, pet?" she asked.

"Yes."

"It must be awful. Because you know I don't love you any more at all."

She said it so quietly, with such a nice finality, that I thought again of the moon and the promise of extinction which had descended on me. I had opened a void—I was now without center. Can you understand? I did not belong to myself any longer. Deborah had occupied my center.

"Yes, you're looking awful again," said Deborah. "You began to look all right for a little while, but now you look awful again."

"You don't love me."

"Oh, not in the least."

"Do you know what it's like to look at someone you love and see no love come back?"

"It must be awful," said Deborah.

"It's unendurable," I said. Yes, the center was gone. In another minute I would begin to grovel.

"It is unendurable," she said.

"You do know?"

"Yes, I do."

"You have felt it?"

"There was a man I loved very much," she said, "and he didn't love me."

"You never told me that before."

"No, I didn't."

Before we married, she told me everything. She confessed every last lover—it had been her heritage from the convent: she

had done more than tell me, she had gone to detail—we would giggle in the dark while she tapped my shoulder with one cultivated and very learned finger, giving me a sense of the roll and snap and lurch and grace (or lack of it) in each of her lovers, she had even given me a sense of what was good in the best of them, and I had loved her for it, painful as the news had sometimes been, for I had known at least what I was up against, and how many husbands could ever say that? It was the warrant of our love; whatever our marriage had been, that was our covenant, that had been her way of saying I was more valuable than the others.

And now she was inside me, fused at my center, ready to blow the rails.

"You don't mean it," I said.

"I do. There was one man I never told you about. I never told anyone about him. Although once, somebody guessed."

"Who was the man?"

"He was a bullfighter. Marvelous ripe man."

"You're lying."

"Have it your way."

"It wasn't a bullfighter."

"No, it wasn't. It was someone far better than a bullfighter, far greater." Her face had turned plump with malice, and the mottling had begun to fade. "As a matter of fact, it was the finest and most extraordinary man I ever knew. Delicious. Just a marvelous wild feast of things. I tried to make him jealous once and to kill him."

"Who could it be?" I asked.

a "Don't bother to hop on one foot and then the other like a three-year-old who's got to go to the Lou. I'm not going to tell you. She took a sip of her rum, and jiggled the tumbler not indelicately as if the tender circles of the liquor might transmit a message to some distant force, or—better—receive one. "It's going to be a long time not having you here once in a while."

"You want a divorce," I said.

"I think so."

"Like that."

"Not like *that*, darling. *After* all that." She yawned prettily and looked for the moment like a fifteen-year-old Irish maid. "When you didn't come by today to say goodbye to Deirdre . . ."

"I didn't know she was leaving."

"Of course you didn't know. How could you know? You haven't called in two weeks. You've been nuzzling and nipping with your little girls." She did not know that at the moment I had no girl.

"They're not so little any more." A fire had begun to spread in me. It was burning now in my stomach and my lungs were dry as old leaves, my heart had a herded pressure which gave promise to explode. "Give us a bit of the rum," I said.

She handed over the bottle. "Well, they may not be so little any more, but I doubt that, pet. Besides I don't care. Because I made a vow this afternoon. I said to myself that I would never . . ." and then she did not speak the rest of the sentence, but she was talking about something she had done with me and never with anyone else. "No," said Deborah, "I thought: There's no need for that any more. Never again. Not with Steve."

I had taught it to her, but she had developed a pronounced royal taste of her own for that little act. Likely it had become the best of her pleasures.

"Not ever again?" I asked.

"Never. The thought—at least in relation to you, dear sweet—to let me brush my gums with peroxide."

"Well, goodbye to all that. You don't do it so famously if the truth be told."

"Not so famously as your little girls?"

"Not nearly as well as five I could name."

The rattling came back to her neck and shoulders. A powerful gust of rot and musk and something much more violent came from

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her. It was like the scent of the carnivore in a zoo. This last odor was fearful—it had the breath of burning rubber.

"Isn't that odd?" asked Deborah. "I haven't heard a word of complaint from any new beau."

From the day of our separation she had admitted to no lover. Not until this moment. A sharp sad pain, almost pleasurable, thrust into me. It was replaced immediately by a fine horror.

"How many do you have?" I asked.

"At the moment, pet, just three."

"And you . . ." But I couldn't ask it.

"Yes, darling. Every last little thing. I can't tell you how shocked they were when I began. One of them said: 'Where did you ever learn to root about like that? Didn't know such things went on outside a Mexican whorehouse.'"

"Shut your fucking mouth," I said.

"Lately I've had the most famous practice."

I struck her open-handed across the face. I had meant—some last calm intention of my mind had meant—to make it no more than a slap, but my body was speaking faster than my brain, and the blow caught her on the side of the ear and knocked her half out of bed. She was up like a bull and like a bull she charged. Her head struck me in the stomach (setting off a flash in that forest of nerves) and then she drove one powerful knee at my groin (she fought like a prep-school bully) and missing that, she reached with both hands, tried to find my groin and mangle me.

That blew it out. I struck her a blow on the back of the neck, a dead cold chop which dropped her to a knee, and then hooked an arm about her head and put a pressure on her throat. She was strong, I had always known she was strong, but now her strength was huge. For a moment I did not know if I could hold her down. She had almost the strength to force herself up to her feet and lift me in the air, which in that position is exceptional strength.

for a wrestler. For ten or twenty seconds she strained in balance, and then her strength began to pass, it passed over to me, and I felt my arm tightening about her neck. My eyes were closed. I had the mental image I was pushing with my shoulder against an enormous door which would give inch by inch to the effort.

One of her hands fluttered up to my shoulder and tapped it gently. Like a gladiator admitting defeat. I released the pressure on her throat, and the door I had been opening began to close. But I had had a view of what was on the other side of the door, and heaven was there, some quiver of jeweled cities shining in the glow of a tropical dusk, and I thrust against the door once more and hardly felt her hand leave my shoulder, I was driving now with force against that door: spasms began to open in me, and my mind cried out then, "Hold back! you're going too far, hold back!" I could feel a series of orders whip like tracers of light from my head to my arm, I was ready to obey, I was trying to stop, but pulse packed behind pulse in a pressure up to thunderhead; some black-billed lust, some desire to go ahead not unlike the instant one comes in a woman against her cry that she is without protection came bursting with rage from out of me and my mind exploded in fireworks of rockets, stars, and hurtling embers, the arm about her neck leaped against the whisper I could still feel murmuring in her throat, and *crack* I choked her harder, and *crack* I choked her again, and *crack* I gave her payment—never halt now—and *crack* the door flew open and the wire tore in her throat, and I was through the door, hatred passing from me in wave after wave, illness as well, rot and pestilence, nausea, a bleak string of salts. I was floating. I was as far into myself as I had ever been and universes wheeled in a dream. To my closed eyes Deborah's face seemed to float off from her body and stare at me in darkness. She gave one so evil look which said: "There are dimensions to evil which reach beyond the light," and then she smiled like a milkmaid and

floated away and was gone. And in the midst of that Oriental splendor of landscape, I felt the lost touch of her finger on my shoulder, radiating some faint but ineradicable pulse of detestation into the new grace. I opened my eyes. I was weary with a most honorable fatigue, and my flesh seemed new. I had not felt so nice since I was twelve. It seemed inconceivable at this instant that anything in life could fail to please. But there was Deborah, dead beside me on the flowered carpet of the floor, and there was no question of that. She was dead, indeed she was dead.

2

A Runner from the Gaming Room

ON THAT NIGHT sixteen years ago when I made love to Deborah in the back seat of my car, she looked up when we were done, smiling with a misty somewhat bewildered look, and said, "You're not Catholic, are you?"

"No."

I was hoping perhaps you were Polish Catholic. Rojack, you know.

"Or half Jewish."

"What is the other half?"

"Protestant. Nothing really."

"Nothing really," she said. "Come, take me home." And she was depressed.

It took eight years for me to find out why, seven years of living my own life, and a first year of being married to her. It took all of

that first year for me to understand that Deborah had prejudices which were as complex and attractive as passions. Her detestation of Jewish Protestants and Gentile Jews was complete. "They know nothing about grace," she finally explained to me.

Like any other exceptional Catholic, Deborah was steeped in her idea of grace. Grace was a robber bridegroom, grace was the specter in our marriage bed. When things went badly, she would say sorrowfully, even remotely, "I used to be filled with grace, and now I'm not." When she had been pregnant, grace had come to her again. "I don't think God is so annoyed at me any more," she said. And indeed a tenderness rose from her at moments like that, a warm full-bodied balm to my nerves but for the purity of it. Deborah's grace always offered its intimation of the grave. I would be content she loved me, and yet at such moments my mind drifted out to the empty peak of a mountaintop or prepared to drop down the sheer gray face of a ten-foot wave in a storm at sea. That was love with Deborah and it was separate from making love to Deborah; no doubt she classified the two as Grace and Lust. When she felt love, she was formidable; making love she left you with no uncertain memory of having passed through a carnal transaction with a caged animal. It was not just her odor, that smell (with the white gloves off) of the wild boar full of rut, that hot odor from a gallery of the zoo, no, there was something other, her perfume perhaps, a hint of sanctity, something as calculating and full of guile as high finance, that was it—she smelled like a bank, Christ she would have been too much for any man, there was something so sly at the center of her, some snake, I used literally to conceive of a snake guarding the cave which opened to the treasure, the riches, the filthy-lucreed wealth of all the world, and rare was the instant I could pay my dues without feeling a high pinch of pain as if fangs had sunk into me. The afterbreath, lying on her body floated on a current of low heavy fire, a sullen poisonous fire, an oil on flame which went out of her and took me in. Invariably

a groan came out of me like the clanking of chains, my mouth on hers, not sobbing but groping for air. I always felt as if I had torn free some promise of my soul and paid it over in ransom.

"You're wonderful," she would say then.

Yes, I had come to believe in grace and the lack of it, in the long finger of God and the swish of the Devil, I had come to give my scientific apprehension to the reality of witches. Deborah believed in demons. It was Celtic blood, she had once been ready to explain, the Celts were in tune with the spirits, made love with them, hunted with the spirits. And in fact she was an exceptional hunter. She had gone on safari with her first husband and killed a wounded lion charging ten feet from her throat, she dropped an Alaskan bear with two shots to the heart (30/06 Winchester), I suspect she finally lost her nerve. She hinted once that she had broken from an animal and the guide had been forced to take it. But that I didn't know—she was not definite. I offered to go hunting with her, to Kodiak, to the Congo, I did not care where: in the first two years of our marriage I would have been willing to go to war with any expert, guide, or champion—she took pains to separate me from that romantic heart. "But darling, I could never go hunting with you," she said. "Pamphli"—the almost unpronounceable nickname of her first husband—"was a superb hunter. It was the best thing we had together. You don't think I want to spoil that memory by smashing about with you? That would do none of us any good. No, I'll never hunt big ones again. Not unless I should fall in love with somebody who's divine as a hunter." Like most of her friends, she had an aristocratic indifference to the development of talent. One enjoyed what was in flower, one devoured it if it were good for one, but one left the planting to others.

Finally she took me on a hunt—for moles and woodchucks. I was shown the distance of my place from her beloved Pamphli, but even on this hunt, a casual walk through the Vermont woods near a house we were renting for a season, I saw how good she was.

She did not see a forest like others. No, out of the cool and the damp, the rent of forest odor aromatic and soft with rot, Deborah drew a mood—she knew the spirit which created attention in the grove, she told me once she could sense that spirit watching her, and when it was replaced by something else, also watching, well, *there* was an animal. And so there was. Some small thing would leap from concealment and Deborah would pot him with her .22. She could flush more small animals than any hunter I ever saw. Often as not she fired from the hip, as nicely as pointing a finger. And many of the creatures she allowed to escape. "You take him," she would say, and sometimes I would miss. Which elicited a laugh of gentle contempt altogether sinister. "Buy a shotgun, darling," she would whisper. We hunted only a few times but by the end I knew I would never go hunting again. Not with her. Because Deborah went for the most beautiful and the most ugly of the animals she flushed. She knocked down squirrels with exquisite faces, tender as a doe in their dying swoon, and she blasted the hindquarters off groundhogs whose grimace at death was as carved in stone as a gargoyle's horn. No patch of forest was quite the same once she had hunted there. "You see," she told me once at night, late, when the booze had left her in the rarest of moods, not violent, not vicious, not amorous, but simply reflective, an air circling in on itself, "I know that I am more good and more evil than anyone alive, but which was I born with, and what came into me?"

"You shift allegiance from day to day."

"No. I just pretend to." She smiled. "I'm evil if truth be told. But I despise it, truly I do. It's just that evil has power."

Which was a way of saying goodness was imprisoned by evil. After nine years of marriage to her I did not have a clue myself. I had learned to speak in a world which believed in the *New York Times*: Experts Divided on Fluoridation, Diplomat Attacks Council Text, Self-Rule Near for Bantu Province, Chancellor Outlines Purpose of Talks, New Drive for Health Care for Aged. I had

Council
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lost

my faith in all of that by now: now I swam in the well of Deborah's intuitions; they were nearer to my memory of the four Germans than anything encountered before or since. But what I did not know was which of us imprisoned the other, and how? It was horror this edge of madness to lie beside Deborah in a marriage bed and wonder who was responsible for the cloud of foul intent which lifted on the mingling of our breath. Yes, I had come to believe in spirits and demons, in devils, warlocks, omens, wizards and fiends, in incubi and succubi; more than once had I sat up in a strange woman's bed feeling claws on my chest, a familiar bad odor above the liquor on my tongue and Deborah's green eyes staring at me in the dark, an oppression close to strangling on my throat. She was evil, I would decide, and then think next that goodness could come on a visit to evil only in the disguise of evil: yes, evil would know that goodness had come only by the power of its force. I might be the one who was therefore evil, and Deborah was trapped with me. Or was I blind? For now I remembered that I was where I was and no place else and she was dead. It was odd. I had to remind my mind of that. It seemed as if she were not so much dead as no longer quite living.

Well, I came to myself then, and recognized I had been lying in a half sleep, resting beside Deborah's body for a minute or two, or could it be ten or more? I still felt good. I felt very good but I had an intimation I must not think of Deborah now, certainly not now, and so I got up from the floor and went to the bathroom and washed my hands. Have you ever taken peyote?—the bathroom tile was quivering with a violet light, and at the edge of my vision was a rainbow curving out to the horizon of the tile. I had only to close my eyes and a fall of velvet rain red as the drapery in a carmine box ran back into my retina. My hands were tingling in the water. I had a collection then of Deborah's fingers on my shoulder and I stripped my shirt and washed my upper arm. As I put down the soap, its weight in my palm was alive; the soap made a low sticky sound as it settled back to the dish. I was ready to spend an hour

contemplating that sound. But the towel was in my hand, and my hands could have been picking up the crisp powder of autumn leaves as they crumbled in my fingers. So it went with the shirt. Something was demonstrating to me that I had never understood the nature of a shirt. Each of its odors (those particular separate molecules) was scattered through the linen like a school of dead fish on the beach, their decay, the intimate whiff of their decay a thread of connection leading back to the hidden heart of the sea. Yes, I returned this shirt to my body with the devotion of a cardinal fixing his hat—then I fixed my tie. A simple black knit tie, but I might have been snugging a ship to the wharf; the tie felt huge, a run of one-inch Manila long enough to please the requirements of a difficult knot—my fingers ran in and out of the interstices of this Windsor double-hitch like mice through the rigging. Speak of a state of grace—I had never known such calm. Have you ever heard a silence in a room at night or a great silence alone in the middle of a wood? Listen: for beneath the silence is a world where each separate silence takes up its pitch. I stood in that bathroom, water off and listened to the silence of the tile. Somewhere deep in the stories of this apartment building a fan turned on, a refrigerator clicked: they had started like beasts out of some quickened response to the silence which came from me. I looked into the mirror, searching once again into the riddle of my face; I had never seen a face more handsome. It was the truth. It was exactly the sort of truth one discovers by turning a corner and colliding with a stranger. My hair was alive and my eyes had the blue of a mirror held between the ocean and the sky—they were eyes to equal at last the eyes of the German who stood before me with a bayonet—one moment of fright flew like a comet across the harbor of my calm, and I looked deeper into the eyes in the mirror as if they were keyholes to a gate which gave on a palace, and asked myself, "Am I now good? Am I evil forever?"—it seemed a simple indispensable question to ask—but the lights went down suddenly in the bathroom, then flickered

up. Someone had tipped a salute. And now the eyes in the mirror were merry and a touch blank. I could not believe I was studying them.

I quit the bathroom then, and returned to look at Deborah. But she was lying on her stomach, her face to the rug. I did not want to turn her over just yet. The calm I contained seemed delicate. It was enough to stand near her body and look about the room. We had made little mess. The bedspread and the blankets had slipped to the floor, and one of the pillows was sprawling at her foot. An armchair had been pushed to the side; it had pulled a fold in the carpet. That was all. The rum was still standing in its bottles and its glasses, no lamps were overturned, no pictures were off the hook, nothing broken, no debris. A quiet scene—an empty field with a Civil War cannon: it has fired some minutes ago and a last curl of smoke issues like a snake from its barrel, is beheaded in the breeze. Quiet as that. I walked to the window and looked down ten flights to the East River Drive where traffic was going by at a good full clip. Should I jump? But the question had no force: there was a decision to be made inside the room. I could pick up the phone and call the police. Or I could wait. (I was taking a pleasure in each step which gave hint of the grace a ballerina might know in her feet.) Yes, I could go to prison, spend ten or twenty years, and if I were good enough I could try to write that huge work which had all but atrophied in my brain over the years of booze and Deborah's games. That was the honorable course and yet I felt no more than a wistful muted impulse to show such honor; no, there was something other working at the base of my brain, a scheme, some desire—I was feeling good, as if my life had just begun. "Wait," said my head very directly to me.

But I was uneasy. When I closed my eyes I saw again the luminous full moon—would I never be free of her? I almost picked up the phone.

The voice in my brain said, "Look first at Deborah's face."

I knelt to turn her over. Her body made some rustling sound of

protest, a muted whimper. She was bad in death. A beast stared back at me. Her teeth showed, the point of light in her eye was violent, and her mouth was open. It looked like a cave. I could hear some wind which reached down to the cellars of a sunless earth. A little line of spit came from the corner of her mouth, and at an angle from her nose one green seed had floated its small distance on an abortive rill of blood. I did not feel a thing. Which is not to say that nothing was happening to me. Like ghosts, emotions were passing invisibly through the aisles of my body. I knew I would mourn her on some distant day, and I would fear her. I had a certainty this instant that Deborah had been divided by death—by whatever fraction, what was good in her had been willed to me (how else account for the fine breath of this calm) and every last part which detested me was collected now in the face she showed for her death—if something endured beyond her dying, something not in me, it was vengeance. That delicate anxiety which pulses up to flutter in the nose was on me now. For Deborah would be there to meet me in the hour of my death.

The verdict now came clear. I was not going to call the police, not now, not yet—some other solution was finding its way up through myself, a messenger from that magician who solved all riddles was on his way, ascending those endless stairs from the buried gaming rooms of the unconscious to the tower of the brain. He was on his way and I was doomed if I thought to do my work in jail. For her curse would be on me.

I had an intimation then of Deborah's presence. Did one ¹⁸⁸ after death like a feather, rising slowly? I went to open the window as though to hope some breeze might seduce her forth, and dropped my hand. For I had the sense I had been touched on the shoulder there at the precise point where her fingers begged me to let go her throat. Something touched me and now pushed me without touch toward the door. Once again I could have been in a magnetic field where some force without sensation other than its own

presence was coaxing me firmly to step away from Deborah, cross the room, and out the door. And I went with this force; it had a promise like the smell of bar whiskey when rich young girls are in a bar. There was a good sound somewhere in my head, and expectation came to life in me, two full breasts came to rest their balm upon my eyes, then dropped in soft taps of curve and fall about my throat, rubbed a turn on my chest, tickled a hair at the belly and came to fold like two does at my root. One kiss of flesh, one whiff of sweet was loose, sending life to the charnel house of my balls. Something fierce for pleasure was loose. And I was out that door and strolling down the stairs, still traveling in the field of force which drifted me clean out of Deborah's room. As I stood at the lower landing of this duplex, I could breathe a tropical bouquet from the woven velvet flowers on the wall, I was near a swamp where butterflies and tropical birds went fanning up—and over the spoil of animals who looked for flesh—and floated on the air which rose from vegetation growing in the damp and drowning in the wet. At the door which opened to the elevator I stopped, turned around completely, and following that force which held me now as closely as an embrace I could not bear to quit, I crossed the hall, opened the door to the room where the maid must sleep, and pushed right in.

The lamp by her bed was on. The windows were closed, the air was close, an oven of burgeonings was that room—and, nice shock, there was Ruta, Fräulein Ruta from Berlin, lying on top of the covers with her pajama pants down, a copy of a magazine in one hand (a flash of nude photographs in color) and her other hand fingering, all five fingers fingering like a team of maggots at her open heat. She was off in that bower of the libido where she was queen, and those five fingers were five separate lords and ladies hard at work on her.

We did not say a word. Her face, caught in this pose, was on the edge of dividing into two women: that queen for certain of her

fevers, and a little girl trapped in a dirty act. I winked like the friendliest peasant neighbor—I recall how natural was this wink—and then I stripped my coat and started to take off my clothes. I removed them with care enough to fold them neat. And the atmosphere in the room which had quivered for an instant on my entrance like a whip of air from a bellows, now flared slowly up and higher. The maid set down the magazine and turned her free hand palm up toward me, her fingers long and thin with a hint of the fine curve in a double curved bow. I remember seeing that the curve of her fingers, her lips, and her long thin calves were a part of that sly bright fever she gave off, and in a new whiff of boldness as if to be bold was her *métier*, boldness had brought me to her, she lifted the other hand (those lords and ladies) and moved it across to me for a kiss to her fingers. Which I did, getting one full draft of a heated sex which was full of the flower, full of earth, and with suspicion of one sly mouse slipping through the garden, a bit of fish in its teeth. My bare foot came up from the carpet and I put my five toes where her hand had been, drawing up on the instant out of her a wet spicy wisdom of all the arts and crafts of getting along in the world. She made the high nasal sound of a cat disturbed in its play—I had stolen something from her, and she was about to draw back, but there was a look in my face—I was ready to kill her easy as not, there was an agreeable balance in the thought that I was ready to kill anyone at this moment—and my look cracked the glitter in her eye. She shook her head and gave the prize to my five toes which moved in the wet with all the deliverance of snakes who have crossed a desert. Something took me on then—the wisdom in my fingertips was sure; I could feel where her flesh was alive and where the skin was dead, my fingers played at the edge, making little forays, nipping her to life. I felt for the first time in my life like a healthy alley cat, and I stroked at her with a delicate hatred lacquered clean up to a small flame by the anticipation of my body. It must have been five minutes before I chose to give

her a kiss, but I took her mouth at last, pinched the corner in my teeth, and our faces came together with the turn of a glove catching a ball. She had a virtuoso's mouth, thin and alive, stingy and lightly fevered, a woodwind which tickled promise into me, yes those lips spoke of where they had traveled and where they could go now, something hot and mean and greedy to take the low road rose from her lean belly and tricky breasts which now popped out from under my thumb before I caught them, and at each corner of her mouth was a plump little mound, a tidbit for the teeth. Yes, she was sweet oil to the throat. She was breathing the pictures of her brain into mine, all the rosy tan and tinted gold of those pinup pictures in the magazine, and her thin lips now fluttered on my mouth, her warmth was rosy, her mouth offered to go down. I lay back like a king lion and let her romp. She had a gift. I was off on the nicest dream of Berlin nightclubs with their telephones and queer shows, of bal musettes and twisterias, she was giving a short lecture with her tongue on the habits of the Germans, the French, the English (one sorry bite indeed), the Italians, the Spanish, she must have had an Arab or two. All the tars and scents were blending into the one full smell which always makes you begin. I was ready to take the roller coaster, but I didn't want it to end, not this one, not yet, her greed was riding through me, I wanted more and more, and so I slipped free of her mouth and put her on her back.

But then, as abruptly as an arrest, a thin high constipated smell (a smell which spoke of rocks and grease and the sewer-damp of wet stones in poor European alleys) came needling its way out of her. She was hungry, like a lean rat she was hungry, and it could have spoiled my pleasure except that there was something intoxicating in the sheer narrow pitch of the smell, so strong, so stubborn, so private, it was a smell which could be mellowed only by the gift of fur and gems, she was money this girl, she cost money, she would make money, something as corrupt as a banquet plate of caviar laid

on hundred-dollar bills would be required to enrich that odor all the way up to the smell of foie gras in Deborah's world and Deborah's friends. I had a desire suddenly to skip the sea and mine the earth, a pure prong of desire to bugger, there was canny hard-packed evil in that butt, that I knew. But she resisted, she spoke for the first time, "Not there! *Verboten!*"

I had, however, gotten an inch of the *verboden*. A virulent intricate hatred, a detailed specification of the hardest world of the poor, the knowledge of a city rat, came out from her into me and deadened the head of my heat. I could go for a while now. And go I did. That other presence (which, I could remind you, leads to the creation) was lying open for me, and I barreled in on a stroke, expecting glory and the hot beat of jungle wings, but she was slack, her box spoke of cold gasses from the womb and a storehouse of disappointments. I quit her there and went back to where I had begun, the fierce pinched struggle to gain an inch and then a crucial quarter of an inch more, my hand was in her red dyed hair, pulling at a swatch with a twisting upward motion, and I could feel the pain in her scalp strain like a crowbar the length of her body and push up the trap, and I was in, that quarter-inch more was gained, the rest was easy. What a subtle smell came from her then, something back of the ambition, the narrow stubbornness, the monomaniacal determination to get along in the world, no, that was replaced by something tender as the flesh but not at all clean, something sneaky, full of fear, but young, a child in soiled pants, "You're a Nazi," I said to her out of I knew not what.

"Ja." She shook her head. "No, no," she went on. "Ja, don't stop, ja."

There was a high private pleasure in plugging a Nazi, there was something clean despite all—I felt as if I were gliding in the clear air above Luther's jakes and she was loose and free, very loose and very free, as if this were finally her natural act: a host of the Devil's best gifts were coming to me, mendacity, guile, a fine-edged cupidity for the stroke which steals, the wit to trick

authority. I felt like a thief, a great thief. And like a thief returning to church, I see-sawed up from that bank of pleasures up to her deserted warehouse, that empty tomb. But it was more ready now. Those flaccid walls had come together—back of my closed eyes I could see one poor flower growing in a gallery—what love she still possessed might have been in a flower. Like a thief I was out of church again and dropping down for more of that pirate's gold.

So that was how I finally made love to her, a minute for one, a minute for the other, a raid on the Devil and a trip back to the Lord, I was like a hound who has broken free of the pack and is going to get that fox himself, I was drunk with my choice, she was becoming mine as no woman ever had, she wanted no more than to be a part of my will, her face, that mobile, mocking, know-the-cost-of-every-bargain Berlin face, was loose and independent of her now, swimming through expressions, a greedy mate with the taste of power in her eyes and her mouth, that woman's look that the world is theirs, and then I was traveling up again that crucial few centimeters of distance from the end to the beginning, I was again in the place where the child is made, and a little look of woe was on her face, a puckered fearful little nine-year-old afraid of her punishment, wishing to be good.

"I have nothing in me," she said. "Do we go ahead?"

"Who knows," I said, "keep quiet."

And I could feel her beginning to come. The doubt in me had tipped her off, the adjuration to be quiet had thrown the bolt. She was a minute away, but she was on her way, and just as if one of her wily fingers had thrown some switch in me, I was gone like a bat and shaking hands with the Devil once more. Rare greed shone in her eyes, pleasure in her mouth, she was happy. I was ready to chase, I was gorged to throw the first spill, high on a choice, like some cat caught on two wires I was leaping back and forth, in separate runs for separate strokes, bringing

spoils and secrets up to the Lord from the red mills, bearing messages of defeat back from that sad womb, and then I chose—ah, but there was time to change—I chose her cunt. It was no graveyard now, no warehouse, no, more like a chapel now, a modest decent place, but its walls were snug, its odor was green, there was a sweetness in the chapel, a muted reverential sweetness in those walls of stone. "That is what prison will be like for you," said a last effort on my inner tongue. "Stay here!" came a command from inside of me; except that I could feel the Devil's meal beneath, its fires were lifting through the floor, and I waited for the warmth to reach inside, to come up from the cellar below, to bring booze and heat up and licking tongues, I was up above a choice which would take me on one wind or another, and I had to give myself, I could not hold back, there was an explosion, furious, treacherous and hot as the gates of an icy slalom with the speed at my heels overtaking my nose, I had one of those splittings of a second where the senses fly out and there in that instant the itch reached into me and drew me out and I jammed up her ass and came as if I'd been flung across the room. She let out a cry of rage. Her coming must have taken a ferocious twist. And with my eyes closed, I felt low sullen waters wash about a dead tree on a midnight pond. I had come to the Devil a fraction too late, and nothing had been there to receive me. But I had a vision immediately after of a huge city in the desert, in some desert, was it a place on the moon? For the colors had the unreal pastel of a plastic and the main street was flaming with light at five A.M. A million light bulbs lit the scene.

It had been when all was said a bitch of a brawl. She lay for a minute half in sleep, half in stupor, and her tongue licked idly at my ear. Like a mother cat she was teaching a new kitten how to listen. "Mr. Rojack," she said at last with her gutty fleshy Berlin speech, "I do not know why you have trouble with your wife. You are absolutely a genius, Mr. Rojack."

"A doctor is no better than his patient," said I.

There was a wicked look of amusement in her face. "But you are a *vache*," she said. "You must not pull my hair. Not even for that."

"*Der Teufel* asked me to visit."

"*Der Teufel*!" She laughed. "What can a rich man like you know about *der Teufel*?"

"Doesn't *der Teufel* like the rich?"

"No," she said, "God protects the rich."

"But at the end I could not have paid my respects to God."

"Oh, you are dreadful," she said, and pinched me a good mean German pinch where my belly was soft. Then she started uneasily.

"Do you think your wife heard?" she asked.

"I doubt it."

"Are the walls so good?" She sat up now, her tricky breasts lolling nicely. "No, I feel not so easy now," she said, "your wife could come in on us."

"She would never do something like that. It's not her style."

"I think you know a woman better than that," said Ruta. She pinched again. "You know, at the end, you stole something from me."

"Half."

"Half."

We liked each other. That was fine. But again I could feel a stillness from the room above. Ruta was nervous.

"When you walked in on me," she said, "you looked pretty."

"So did you, I fear."

"No, I never do something like that. At least," she added with a malicious grin, "not unless I lock the door."

"And tonight you didn't."

"No, I was asleep. After I let you in, I went to sleep. I was thinking how unhappy you looked. When you came to visit." She put her head to one side as if to inquire whether I had been already

with my wife in the bed above her, and then didn't ask. "Of course," she said, "you and Mrs. Rojack had a reconciliation."

"Of sorts."

"What a bad man you are. That's what woke me up—making your reconciliation with Mrs. Rojack. I was awake, and I was so excited—I can't explain it." Her bold pointed spiteful nose made everything she said seem merry.

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-three."

She was probably twenty-eight. "You're a charming twenty-three," I said.

"And you are still a *vache*."

Her fingers were beginning to play with me.

"Let's sleep another minute," I said.

"Yes." She started to light a cigarette, then stopped. "Your wife thinks you've gone home."

"Probably."

"I hope the walls are good."

"Let's try to sleep," I said. I wanted the light out. I had a rendezvous in the dark. Something was waiting for me. But the moment I turned the switch, it was very bad. The darkness came over like air on a wound when the dressing is removed. My senses were much too alert. Everything which had passed from her body to mine was now alive inside, as if a horde of tourists, pokey and inquisitive, were wandering through my body. I had one of those anxieties which make it an act of balance to breathe: too little air compresses the sensation of being throttled, but too much—one deep breath—and there is the fear of a fall. There was something in the room besides Ruta and myself, something which gathered force. It was approaching now, but there were no eyes, no claws, just a sense of oppression waiting. I felt vile. "Do you have a drink?" I asked of Ruta.

"No." She gave a laugh and whispered, "When I drink I go out to look for men who will beat me."

"Crazy," I said, and got up.

She could hear me putting on my clothes in the dark. The oppression had lifted on the moment I was free of her bed and my fingers were quick. They seemed to float onto each piece of clothing as I needed it.

"When will you be back?"

"Before morning."

"And you will tell your wife you took a walk and came back and woke me up to let you in?"

"No, I will tell her I left the door unlocked."

"Don't give all the good things to your wife. Save a present for me."

"Maybe I will bring back a diamond."

"I love you a little bit."

And I was thinking of that empty womb, of that graveyard which gambled a flower and lost.

"I like you, Ruta."

"Come back, and you will see how much you are going to like me."

I had a thought then of what had been left in her. It was perishing in the kitchens of the Devil. Was its curse on me?

"*Der Teufel* is so happy," she said, and a perfect spitefulness of attention came to a focus in her eye. Small cheer that she could read my mind.

Was that the cloud of oppression which had come to me in the dark? That the seed was expiring in the wrong field?

"Next time," said Ruta, "you must take care of little Ruta."

"Next time will be an event," I said. I wanted to blow her a kiss but there was nothing in me to send her way. So I closed the door, and went back up the stairs, up the aisle of that padded

jungle, and entered Deborah's bedroom again with the expectation that somehow she would be gone. *There* was the body. It struck my sight like a shelf of rock on which a ship is about to smash. What was I going to do with her? I felt a mean rage in my feet. It was as if in killing her, the act had been too gentle, I had not plumbed the hatred where the real injustice was stored. She had spit on the future, my Deborah, she had spoiled my chance, and now her body was here. I had an impulse to go up to her and kick her ribs, grind my heel on her nose, drive the point of my shoe into her temple and kill her again, kill her good this time, kill her right. I stood there shuddering from the power of this desire, and comprehended that this was the first of the gifts I'd plucked from the alley, oh Jesus, and I sat down in a chair as if to master the new desires Ruta had sent my way.

My breath was bad again. What in hell was I to do with Deborah? I had no solution. If the messenger was on his way, he gave no hint of being near. A first rat's panic began to gnaw. "Keep cool, you swine," said a contemptuous voice in me, all but an echo from Deborah.

Let me tell you the worst. I had a little fantasy at this moment. It was beyond measure. I had a desire to take Deborah to the bathroom, put her in the tub. Then Ruta and I would sit down to eat. The two of us would sup on Deborah's flesh, we would eat for days: the deepest poisons in us would be released from our cells. I would digest my wife's curse before it could form. And this idea was thrilling to me. I felt like a doctor on the edge of a thunderous new medicine. The details fell into place: what we did not choose to devour we could grind away in the electric Disposall beneath the sink, all the impure organs and little bones. For the long bones, for the femur and the tibia, the fibula, the radius and the ulna, the humerus, I had another plan. I would bind them in a package and hurl them out the window, out across the East River Drive and into the water. No, four lanes of traffic and a pedestrian walk to clear,

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too long a throw, I would have instead to go out in the street and take a taxicab and then another and then another until I ended at last in the marshes of Canarsie or the stench flats near City Island; there I could fling them in a swamp. With luck those long horsewoman's bones might disappear forever, or would I know for sure? Would I have instead to fill a box with plaster of Paris and imbed the bones, and her teeth as well? But no, the teeth must be disposed of separately, and not in any sewer or trash can, no, they must be buried securely, but where? Not Central Park, not by half, one tooth found, and I was dead: as in a movie I could see the police talking to Deborah's dentist—and bones in plaster of Paris dropped at sea, that was not good either, for how was I to rent a boat in March without drawing attention? *Heiress Is Missing!* the tabloids would scream on the following day and people would remember my face, my heavy package, no, this wasn't going to work: worst of all was Ruta in it with me, for she could yet cause trouble. Now the fantasy approached the vanishing point: I saw myself alone beside the tub with Ruta's body in cadaver—there was a tonic humor at the thought which made me smile. No, this was done, this idea was done, and I lay back weakly in my chair as if a spasm of illness which should have discharged itself from my mouth had lifted instead to my brain. What gifts this girl had given me, what German spice!

Then it came simple as that, the simplest solution of all. The messenger had slipped into the tower. And I smiled in terror, for it was also the boldest choice. Was I brave enough? Something in me lingered back—I had a panicked minute of argument in which I tried to find some other way. Perhaps I could take Deborah to the elevator (my poor wife is drunk) or sneak her down the stairs, no, altogether impossible, and then I sighed: if I missed on this one, it was the electric chair for sure, I had a wistful sadness now I had not tried to cast a baby into Ruta—she might be the last woman for me—and then I stood up from my seat, went to look at Deborah,

knelled beside her again, and put my hand under her hips. Her bowels had voided. Suddenly I felt like a child. I was ready to weep. There was a stingy fish-like scent in the air, not unreminiscent of Ruta. They were mistress and maid and put their musk in opposite pockets. I hesitated, and then since there was nothing to do but go on, I went to the bathroom, took some paper, and cleaned Deborah. It was a discipline to be thorough. Then I disposed of the waste, listening to the hound's sigh of the closet water, and came back to look out the open window. No. Not yet. First I turned off the brightest lights. Then in a panic of strength, like the desperation to get out of a burning room, I lifted her up, at what a cost I lifted her up, for her body was almost too heavy (or I was that empty with fright) and balanced her feet on the ledge, it was harder than I thought, and with a fever that no one see me at the open window now, not this instant, no, I took a breath and thrust her out and fell back myself to the carpet as if she had shoved me back, and lying there, I counted to two, to three, how fast I do not know, feeling the weight of her flight like a thrill in my chest, and heard a sound come up from the pavement all ten stories below, a flat, surprisingly loud and hollow thump as car brakes screamed and metal went colliding into metal with that howl of a shape which is suddenly collapsed, and I stood up then and leaned out the window and looked and there was Deborah's body half beneath the front of a car and a pile-up of three or four behind and traffic screaming to a stall on back, all the way half a mile back, and I howled then in a simulation of woe, but the woe was real—for the first time I knew she was gone—and it was an animal howl.

One scalding wash of sorrow, and I felt clean. I went to the telephone, dialed O, asked, "What is the number of the police?" The operator said, "Just a minute, I'll get it for you," and I waited for eight long rings while my nerve teetered like a clown on a tight-rope, and a cacophony of voices rose all ten stories up from the ground. I heard my voice giving my name and Deborah's address to

the mouthpiece, and that voice of mine then said, "Get over here right away, will you. I can hardly talk, there's been a frightful accident." I hung up, went to the door, and shouted down the stairs, "Ruta, get dressed, get dressed quick. Mrs. Rojack has killed herself."

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A Messenger from the Maniac

BUT now it wasn't possible to wait in Deborah's room until the police arrived. An anxiety went off in me like the quiver of electricity when there is a short in the line. My body could have been on a subway, it felt as if it *were* the subway, bleak, grinding at high speed; I was jangled with adrenalin.

I went out the door, down the steps, and came up against Ruta in the hall. She was standing there half-dressed, a black skirt, no stockings yet, no shoes, a white blouse not buttoned. Her breasts were bare, no brassiere yet either, and her dyed red hair now uncombed, still mangled by my fingers, stood up like a bush. Dyed, marcelled, lacquered and then worked over by me, her hair gave off the look of a girl just taken in a police raid. But even at this instant, something relaxed in me. For there was a tough slatternly tenderness in her face, and her prize—those bright little breasts—

kept peeking at me through the open shirt. There was an instant between us, an echo of some other night (some other life) when we might have met in the corridor of an Italian whorehouse on an evening when the doors were closed, the party was private, and the girls were moving from bed to bed in one sweet stew.

"I was dreaming," she said, "and you called down the stairs." Suddenly she closed the shirt over her breasts.

"No," and to my surprise, I gave a pure sob. It was an extraordinary sound. "Deborah killed herself. She jumped through the window."

Ruta let out a cry, a thin dirty little cry. Something nasty was being surrendered. Two tears flashed down her cheek. "She was an ingenious woman," Ruta said, and began to weep. There was pain now in the sound, and such a truth in the grief that I knew she was crying not for Deborah, not even quite for herself, but rather for the unmitigatable fact that women who have discovered the power of sex are never far from suicide. And in that sudden burst of mourning, her face took on beauty. A nourishment came off Ruta's limbs. I was in some far-gone state: no longer a person, a character, a man of habits, rather a ghost, a cloud of loose emotions which scattered on the wind. I felt as if much of me had gathered like a woman to mourn everything I had killed in my lover, that violent brutish tyrant who lived in Deborah. And I groped toward Ruta like a woman seeking another female. We came together, hugged each other. But her breast came out of the open shirt, and slipped into my hand, and that breast was looking for no woman's touch, no, it made its quick pert way toward what was hard and certain in my hand. It was as if I had never felt a breast before (that gift of flesh) for Ruta was still weeping, the sobs were coming now with the fierce rhythm of a child, but her breast was independent of her. That little tit in my hand was nosing like a puppy for its reward, impertinent with its promise of the sly life it could give to me, and so keen to pull in a life for itself that I was taken

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with a hopeless lust. Hopeless, because I should have been down on the street already, and yet there was no help for it, thirty seconds was all I wanted and thirty seconds I took, one high sniff of the alley coming from her as I took her still weeping right there in the hall, her back against those velvet flowers while I fired one hot fierce streak of fierce bright murder, fierce as the demon in the eyes of a bright golden child.

Something in her leaped to catch that child, I felt some avarice shake its way through; she was beginning as I was done, pinching and squeezing at the back of my neck: she came in ten seconds behind. "Oh," she said, "you are trying to woo me." By which time I was cold as ice, and kissed her mockingly on the nose.

"Now, listen," I said, "take a shower."

"Why?" She shook her head, pretending a half-bewilderment. But those forty seconds had drawn us to focus with each other. I felt as fine and evil as a razor and just as content with myself. There was something further in her I'd needed, some bitter perfect salt, narrow and mean as the eye of a personnel director.

"Because, my pet, the police will be here in five minutes."

"You called them?"

"Of course."

"My God."

"They'll be here in five minutes, and I've got to pretend to be overcome. Which of course I am." And I smiled.

She looked at me in wonder. Was I mad, asked her eyes, or deserving of respect.

"But what," she said like a German, "do you have to explain to them?"

"That I didn't kill Deborah."

"Who says you did?" She was trying to keep up with me, but this last had been a racing turn.

"I didn't like Deborah very much. She detested me. You know that."

"You were not very happy with each other."

"Not very."

"A woman doesn't commit suicide for a man she detests."

"Listen, pet, I have something awful to tell you. She had a sniff of you on me. And then she jumped. Like that. Before my eyes."

"Mr. Rojack, you are hard as nails."

"Hard as nails." I pinched her shoulder a little. "Are you?"

"Yes."

"Let's get out of this together. Then we have fun."

"I'm scared," she said.

"When the police talk to you, tell them the truth. Except for one obvious detail. Obviously, there was nothing between us."

"Nothing between us."

"You let me in tonight. A couple of hours ago. You don't know the time exactly, a couple of hours ago. Then you went to sleep. You heard nothing until I woke you up."

"Yes."

"Don't trust the police. If they say I said we were having an affair, deny it."

"Mr. Rojack, you never laid a hand on me."

"Right." I took her chin between my thumb and forefinger, holding it as if precious. "Now, the second line of defense. If they bring me down to see you, or bring you up to see me, and you hear me say we went to bed tonight, then agree. But only if you hear me say it."

"Will you tell them?"

"Not unless there's evidence. In that case I'll tell the police I wanted to protect our mutual reputation. It'll still be all right."

"Shouldn't we admit it from the start?"

"More natural to conceal the fact." I smiled. "Now, wash yourself. Quickly. If there's time, get dressed. And look—"

"Yes."

"Make yourself plain. Comb out your hair for God's sake."

With that, I quit the apartment. The elevator would take too long, but I rang anyway, five piercing rings to manifest impatience and then took the stairs. For the second time that night I was on my way down ten flights of stairs, but this time on the run. When I reached the lobby, it was empty, the doorman was doubtless ascending, a bit of good luck or bad luck (I could not keep up with the possibilities any longer) and then I was on the street and running a few steps to the Drive. There was one instant when the open air reached my nose and gave me a perfect fleeting sense of adventure on the wind, of some adventure long gone—a memory: I was eighteen, playing House Football for Harvard; it was a kickoff and the ball was coming to me, I had it, and was running. Off the river came a light breeze with the hint of turf to it. There was a fence lining the East River Drive, but it had no barbed wire on top, I was able to climb up and get over without ripping my pants, and come down the other side. There was now a jump of eight feet further down to a strip of curb, but I dropped—I hated jumping—but I dropped, jarred my ankle, hurt something minor in my groin, some little muscle, and made my way along the southbound traffic whose drivers were crawling by at five miles an hour in the unobstructed lane. Deborah was a hundred feet down the road. I had a glimpse of four or five cars collided into one another, and a gathering of forty or fifty people. A magnesium flare had been lit and it gave off the white intent glare which surrounds workmen doing serious work at night. Two police cars flanked the scene, their red lights revolving like beacons. In the distance, I could hear the siren of an ambulance, and in the center was that numb mute circle of silence which surrounds a coffin in the center of a room. I could hear a woman weeping hysterically in one of the automobiles which had collided. There were the short, rapt, irritable tones of three big men talking to one another, a professional conversation, two police and a detective, I realized, and farther on an elderly man with dirty gray hair, a large nose, an unhealthy skin, and a pair

of pink-tinted glasses, was sitting in his car, the door open, holding his temple, and groaning in a whining gurgling sound which betrayed the shoddy state of his internal plumbing.

But I had broken through the crowd and was about to kneel at Deborah's body. An arm in a blue serge sleeve held me back.

"Officer, that's my wife."

The arm went down suddenly. "You better not look, mister."

There was nothing agreeable to see. She must first have struck the pavement, and the nearest car had been almost at a halt before it hit her. Perhaps it pushed the body a few feet. Now her limbs had the used-up look of rope washed limp in the sea, and her head was wedged beneath a tire. There was a man taking photographs, his strobe light going off each time with a mean crackling hiss, and as I knelt, he stepped back and turned to someone else, a doctor with a satchel in his hand, and said, "She's yours."

"All right, move the car back," the doctor said. Two policemen near me pushed on the automobile and retired the front wheels a foot before the car bumped gently into the car behind it. I knelt ahead of the medical examiner and looked at her face. It was filthy with the scrape of asphalt and tire marks. Just half of her was recognizable, for the side of her face which caught the tire was swollen. She looked like a fat young girl. But the back of her head, like a fruit gone rotten and lying in its juices, was the center of a pond of coagulated blood near to a foot in diameter. I stayed between the police photographer who was getting ready to take more pictures and the medical examiner who was opening his satchel, and still on my knees, touched my face to hers, being careful to catch some of the blood on my hands, and even (as I nuzzled her hair with my nose) a streak or two more on my cheeks. "Oh, baby," I said aloud. It might have been good to weep, but nothing of that sort was even near. No, shock and stupor would be the best I could muster. "Deborah," I said, and like an echo from the worst of one's past came a clear sense of doing this before, of making love to some

woman who was not attractive to me, of something unpleasant in her scent or dead in her skin, and me saying "Oh, darling, oh, baby," in that rape of one's private existence which manners demand. So, now, the "Oh, darling" came out full of timbre, full of loss. "Oh, Christ, Christ," I repeated dully.

"Are you the husband?" a voice asked in my ear. Without turning around, I had an idea of the man who spoke. He was a detective, and he must be at least six feet tall, big through the shoulder and with the beginning of a gut. It was an Irish voice oiled with a sense of its authority, and in control of a thousand irritations. "Yes," I said, and looked up to meet a man who did not correspond to his voice. He was about five-eight in height, almost slim, with a hard, clean face and the sort of cold blue eyes which live for a contest. So it was like the small shock of meeting somebody after talking on the telephone.

"Your name?"

I told him.

"Mr. Rojack, there's a series of directly unpleasant details to get through."

"All right." I said dumbly, more than careful not to meet his eye.

"My name is Roberts. We have to take your wife to Four Hundred East Twenty-ninth, and we may have to call you down there to identify her again, but for the minute now—if you'd just wait for us."

I was debating whether to say, "My God, right in front of my eyes, she jumped like that!" but that was one duck which would never lift from the lake. I had an uneasy sense of Roberts which was not unlike the uneasy sense I used to have of Deborah.

I wandered down the line of banged-up cars, and discovered that the unpleasant elderly man with the pink-tinted glasses was still moaning. There was a young couple with him, a tall dark good-looking Italian who might have been the man's nephew—he showed a family resemblance. He had a sulky face, a perfect pompadour c

black straight hair, and was wearing a dark suit, a white silk shirt, a silver-white silk tie. He was a type I never liked on sight, and I liked him less because of the blonde girl he had with him. I caught no more than a glimpse of her, but she had one of those perfect American faces, a small-town girl's face with the sort of perfect clean features which find their way onto every advertisement and every billboard in the land. Yet there was something better about this girl, she had the subtle touch of a most expensive show girl, there was a silvery cunning in her features. And a quiet remote little air. Her nose was a classic. It turned up with just the tough tilt of a speedboat planing through the water.

She must have felt me staring at her, for she turned around—she had been ministering with a certain boredom to the weak gutty sounds of the man in the pink-tinted glasses—and her eyes which were an astonishing green-golden-yellow in color (the eyes of an ocelot) now looked at me with an open small-town concern. "You poor man, your face is covered with blood," she said. It was a warm, strong, confident, almost masculine voice, a trace of a Southern accent to it, and she took out her handkerchief and dabbed at my cheek.

"It must have been awful," she said. A subtle hard-headed ever-so-guarded maternity lay under the pressure with which she scrubbed the handkerchief at my face.

"Hey, Cherry," said her friend, "go up front, and talk to those cops, and see if we can get Uncle out of here." Studiously, he was avoiding me.

"Let it be, Tony," she said. "Don't look to draw attention."

And the uncle groaned again, as if to begrudge me *my* attention.

"Thank you," I said to her, "you're very kind."

"I know you," she said, looking carefully at my face. "You're on television."

"Yes."

"You have a good program."

"Thank you."

"Mr. Rojack." The detective was calling me.

"What is your name?" I asked her.

"Don't even think about it, Mr. Rojack," she said with a smile, and turned back to Tony.

And now I realized the detective had seen me chatting with nothing less than a blonde.

"Let's go upstairs and talk," he said.

We stepped into a squad car, the siren was opened, and we drove up the Drive to an exit, and then turned back to the apartment. We didn't say a word on the way. That was just as well. Sitting next to me Roberts gave off the physical communion one usually receives from a woman. He had an awareness of me; it was as if some instinct in him reached into me and I was all too aware of him.

By the time we arrived, there were two more squad cars in the street. Our silence continued as we rode up in the elevator, and when we got to the apartment, a few more detectives and a few more police were standing about. There was a joyless odor in the air now somewhat reminiscent of liquid soap. Two of the police were talking to Ruta. She had not combed out her hair. Instead she had done her best to restore it, and she looked too attractive. The skirt and blouse had been changed for a pink-orange silk wrapper.

But she made up for it by her greeting. "Mr. Rojack, you poor poor man," she said. "Can I make you some coffee?"

I nodded. I wanted a drink as well. Perhaps she would have the sense to put something in the cup.

"All right," said Roberts, "I'd like to go to the room where this happened." He gave a nod to one of the other detectives, a big Irishman with white hair, and the two of them followed me. The second detective was very friendly. He gave a wink of commiseration as we sat down.

"All right, to begin with," said Roberts, "how long have you and your wife been living here?"

"She's been here for six or eight weeks."

"But you haven't?"

"No, we've been separated for a year."

"How many years were you married?"

"Almost nine."

"And since you separated, you've been seeing her often?"

"Perhaps once or twice a week. Tonight was the first time I'd been over in two weeks."

"Now, on the phone you said this was an accident."

"Yes, I think I said it was a frightful accident. I think those were my words."

"An accident in fact?"

"No, Detective. I may as well tell you that it was suicide."

"Why did you say it was an accident?"

"I had some dim hope of protecting my wife's reputation."

"I'm glad you didn't try to go ahead with that story."

"It wasn't until I hung up that I realized I had in effect told the next thing to a lie. I think that took me out of my shock a little. When I called down to the maid, I decided to tell her the truth."

"All right then." He nodded. "It was a suicide. Your wife *jumped* through the window." He was doing his best to make the word inoffensive. "Now, let me get it clear. Your wife got up from bed. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"Went to the window and opened it?"

"No, I'd opened it a few minutes before. She'd been complaining about the heat and asked me to open the window as wide as I could." I shivered now, for the window was still open, and the room was cold.

"Forgive me for prying," said Roberts, "but suicides are nasty

unless they're cleared up quickly. I have some difficult questions to ask you."

"Ask what you wish. I don't think any of this has hit me yet."

"Well, then, if you don't mind, had you been intimate with your wife this evening?"

"No."

"Though there had been some drinking?"

"Quite a bit."

"Was she drunk?"

"She must have had a lot of liquor in her system. However, she wasn't drunk. Deborah could hold her liquor very well."

"But you had a quarrel, perhaps?"

"Not exactly."

"Please explain."

"She was fearfully depressed. She said some ugly things."

"You didn't get angry?"

"I was used to it."

"Would you care to say what she said?"

"What does a wife ever accuse a husband of? She tells him one way or another that he's not man enough for her."

"Some wives," said Roberts, "complain that their husband is running around too much."

"I had my private life. Deborah had hers. People who come from Deborah's background don't feel at ease until their marriage has congealed into a marriage of convenience."

"This sounds sort of peaceful," said Roberts.

"Obviously, it wasn't. Deborah suffered from profound depressions. But she kept them to herself. She was a proud woman. I doubt if even her closest friends were aware of the extent of these depressions. When she felt bad, she would go to bed and stay in bed for a day or two at a time. She would keep to herself. I haven't seen a great deal of her this last year, but you can certainly check with the maid."

"We got a couple of men talking to her right now," said the older detective with a wide happy smile, as if his only desire in the world was to assist me.

"How about the coffee?" I asked.

"Coming up," said Roberts. He went to the door, called down, and came back. "What did she have to be depressed about?" he asked easily.

"She was religious. A very religious Catholic. And I'm not Catholic. I think she felt that to be married to me kept her in mortal sin."

"So as a very religious Catholic," said Roberts, "she decided to save her immortal soul by committing suicide?"

There was just the hint of a pause between us. "Deborah had an unusual mind," I said. "She talked often of suicide to me, particularly when she was in one of her depressions. Particularly in the last few years. She had a miscarriage, you see, and couldn't have any more children." But I had done myself a damage. Not with them; rather with some connection I had to an instinct within me. That instinct sickened suddenly with disgust; the miscarriage, after all, had been my loss as well.

There was of course nothing to do but go on. "I don't think it was the miscarriage so much. Deborah had a sense of something bad inside herself. She felt haunted by demons. Does that mean anything to you?"

"No," said Roberts, "I don't know how to put demons on a police report."

The older detective winked at me again with great joviality.

"Roberts, you don't strike me as the type to commit suicide," I said.

"It's true. I'm not the type."

"Well, then, don't you think a little charity might be in order when you try to understand a suicidal mind?"

"You're not on television, Mr. Rojack," Roberts said.

"Look, I know where I am. I'm doing my best to try to explain something to you. Would you be happier if I were under sedation?"

"I might be more convinced," said Roberts.

"Does that remark indicate suspicion?"

"I didn't hear you."

"Does that remark indicate suspicion?"

"Now, wait a minute, Mr. Rojack, let's get squared away. There must be newspapermen downstairs already. There'll be a mob at the morgue and another mob at the precinct. It can't come as any surprise to you that this will hit the newspapers tomorrow. It may be front page. You can be hurt if there's a hint of irregularity in what is written tomorrow: you can be ruined forever if the coroner's report has any qualifications in it. My duty as a police officer is to find out the facts and communicate them to the proper places."

"Including the press?"

"I work with them every day of the year. I work with you just tonight and maybe tomorrow, and let's hope not any more than that. I want to clear this up. I want to be able to go down and say to those reporters, 'I think she jumped—go easy on that poor bastard in there.' You read me? I don't want to have to say, 'This character's a creep—he may have given her a shove.'"

"All right," I said, "fair enough."

"If you wish," he said, "you can answer no questions and just ask for a lawyer."

"I've no desire to ask for a lawyer."

"Oh, you can have one," said Roberts.

"I don't want one. I don't see why I need one."

"Then let's keep talking."

"If you want," I said, "to understand Deborah's suicide—so far as I understand it—you'll have to go along with my comprehension of it."

"You were speaking of demons," Roberts said.

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education?"

"Yes. Deborah believed they possessed her. She saw herself as evil."

"She was afraid of Hell?"

"Yes."

"We come back to this. A devout Catholic believes she's going to Hell, so she decides to save herself by committing suicide."

"Absolutely," I said.

"Absolutely," said Roberts. "You wouldn't mind repeating this to a priest, would you now?"

"It would be as hard to explain to him as it is to you."

"Better take your chances with me."

"It's not easy to go on," I said. "Could I have that coffee now?"

The big elderly detective got up and left the room. While he was gone, Roberts was silent. Sometimes he would look at me, and sometimes he would look at a photograph of Deborah which stood in a silver frame on the bureau. I lit a cigarette and offered him the pack. "I never smoke," he said.

The other detective was back with the coffee. "You don't mind if I took a sip of it," he said. "The maid put some Irish in." Then he gave his large smile. A sort of fat sweet corruption emanated from him. I gagged on the first swallow of the coffee. "Oh, God, she's dead," I said.

"That's right," said Roberts, "she jumped out the window."

I put out the cigarette and blew my nose, discovering to my misery that a sour stem of vomit had worked its way high up my throat into the base of my nose and had now been flushed through my nostril onto the handkerchief. My nose burned. I took another swallow of coffee and the Irish whiskey sent out a first creamy spill of warmth.

"I don't know if I can explain it to you," I said. "Deborah believed there was special mercy for suicides. She thought it was a

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frightful thing to do, but that God might forgive you if your soul was in danger of being extinguished."

"Extinguished," Roberts repeated.

"Yes, not lost, but extinguished. Deborah believed that if you went to Hell, you could still resist the Devil there. You see she thought there's something worse than Hell."

"And that is?"

"When the soul dies before the body. If the soul is extinguished in life, nothing passes on into Eternity when you die."

"What does the Church have to say about this?"

"Deborah thought this didn't apply for an ordinary Catholic. But she saw herself as a fallen Catholic. She believed her soul was dying. I think that's why she wanted to commit suicide."

"That's the only explanation you can offer?"

Now I waited for a minute. "I don't know if there's any basis to this, but Deborah believed she was riddled with cancer."

"What do you think?"

"It may have been true."

"Did she go to doctors?"

"Not to my knowledge. She distrusted doctors."

"She didn't take pills," Roberts asked, "just liquor?"

"No pills."

"How about marijuana?"

"Hated it. She'd walk out of a room if she thought somebody was smoking it. She said once that marijuana was the Devil's grace."

"You ever take it?"

"No." I coughed. "Oh, once or twice I might have taken a social puff, but I hardly remember."

"All right," he said, "let's get into this cancer. Why do you believe she had it?"

"She talked about it all the time. She felt that as your soul died, cancer began. She would always say it was a death which was not like other deaths."

The fat detective farted. Abrupt as that. "What is *your* name?" I asked.

"O'Brien." He shifted in his seat, half at his ease, and lit a cigar. The smoke blended easily into the odor of the other fumes. Roberts looked disgusted. I had the feeling I was beginning to convince him for the first time. "My father died of cancer," he said.

"I'm sorry to hear that. I can only say I wasn't very happy to listen to Deborah's theories because my mother passed away from leukemia."

He nodded. "Look, Rojack, I might as well tell you. There'll be an autopsy on your wife. It may or may not show what you're talking about."

"It may show nothing. Deborah could have been in a pre-cancerous stage."

"Sure. But it might be better all around if the cancer shows. Cause there is a correlation between cancer and suicide. I'll grant you that." Then he looked at his watch. "Some practical questions. Did your wife have a lot of money?"

"I don't know. We never talked about her money."

"Her old man's pretty rich if she's the woman I'm thinking of."

"He may have disowned her when we married. I often said to friends that she was ready to give up her share of two hundred million dollars when she married me, but she wasn't ready to cook my breakfast."

"So far as you know, you're not in her will?"

"If she has any money, I don't believe she would have left it to me. It would go to her daughter."

"Well, that's simple enough to find out."

"Yes."

"All right, Mr. Rojack, let's get into tonight. You came to visit her after two weeks. Why?"

"I missed her suddenly. That still happens after you're separated."

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"What time did you get here?"

"Several hours ago. Maybe nine o'clock."

"She let you in?"

"The maid did."

"Did you ever give the maid a bang?" asked O'Brien.

"Never."

"Ever want to?"

"The idea might have crossed my mind."

"Why didn't you?" O'Brien went on.

"It would have been disagreeable if Deborah found out."

"That makes sense," said O'Brien.

"All right," said Roberts, "you came into this room, and then what?"

"We talked for hours. We drank and we talked."

"Less than half the bottle is gone. That's not much for two heavy drinkers over three hours."

"Deborah had her share. I only took nips."

"What did you talk about?"

"Everything. We discussed the possibility of getting together again. We agreed it was impossible. Then she cried, which is very rare for Deborah. She told me that she had spent an hour standing by the open window before I came, and that she had been tempted to jump. She felt as if God were asking her. She said she felt a woe afterward as if she'd refused Him. And then she said, 'I didn't have cancer before. But in that hour I stood by the window, it began in me. I didn't jump and so my cells jumped. I know that.' Those were her words. Then she fell asleep for a while."

"What did you do?"

"I just sat in this chair by her bed. I felt pretty low, I can tell you. Then she woke up. She asked me to open the window. When she started to talk, she told me . . . do I really have to go into this?"

"Better if you would."

"She told me my mother had had cancer and I had had it too,

and that I gave it to her. She said all the years we were lying in bed as husband and wife I was giving it to her."

"What did you say?"

"Something equally ugly."

"Please go into it," said Roberts.

"I said that was just as well, because she was a parasite and I had work to do. I even said: if her soul were dying, it deserved to, it was vicious."

"What did she do then?"

"She got out of bed and went over to the window, and said, 'If you don't retract that, I'll jump.' I was confident she didn't mean it. Her very use of a word like 'retract.' I simply told her, 'Well, then jump. Rid the world of your poison.' I thought I was doing the right thing, that I might be breaking into her madness, into that tyrannical will which had wrecked our marriage. I thought I might win something decisive with her. Instead, she took a step on the ledge, and out she went. And I felt as if something blew back from her as she fell and brushed against my face." I began to shudder; the picture I had given was real to me. "Then I don't know what happened. I think I was half ready to follow her. Obviously I didn't. Instead I called the police, and called down to the maid, and then I must have passed out for a moment because I came to lying on the floor, and thought, 'You're guilty of her death.' So go slow for a while, will you, Roberts. This has not been easy."

"Yeah," said Roberts. "I think I believe you."

"Excuse me," said O'Brien. He got up just a bit heavily and went out.

"There's a few formalities," said Roberts. "If you can take it, I'd like you to come down to Four Hundred East Twenty-ninth for the identification, and then we'll go over to the precinct and check out a few forms."

"I hope I don't have to tell this story too many times."

"Just once more to a police stenographer. You can skip all the

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details. No hell, heaven, cancer, nothing like that. None of the dialogue. Just that you saw her go."

O'Brien came back with another detective who was introduced as Lieutenant Leznicki. He was Polish. He was about Roberts' height, even thinner than Roberts, and looked to have an angry ulcer, for he moved with short irritable gestures. His eyes were a dull yellow-gray in color, and about the tint of a stale clam. His hair was an iron-gray and his skin was gray. He must have been fifty years old. Just as we were introduced, he sniffed the air with a boxer's quick snort. Then he smiled irritably.

"Why'd you kill her, Rojack?" he asked.

"What's up?" said Roberts.

"Her hyoid bone is broken." Leznicki looked at me. "Why didn't you say you strangled her before you threw her out?"

"I didn't."

"The doctor's evidence shows you strangled her."

"I don't believe it. My wife fell ten stories and then was struck by a car."

Roberts sat back. I looked to him as if he were the first ally and last best friend I had in the world, and he leaned forward and said, "Mr. Rojack, we handle a lot of suicides in a year. They take pills, they cut their wrists, they stick a pistol in their mouth. Sometimes they jump. But in all the years I've been on the Force, I never heard of a woman jumping from an open window while her husband was watching."

"Never," said O'Brien.

"You better get yourself a lawyer, buddy," said Leznicki.

"I don't need one."

"Come on," said Roberts, "let's go over to the precinct."

As they stood up, I was aware of a mood which came from them. It was the smell of hunters sitting in an overheated hut at dawn waiting for the sun to come out, drunk from drinking through the night. I was game to them at this moment. As I stood up, I

felt a weakness go through me. No adrenalin followed. I had been taking more punishment than I thought and had the same sense of surprise a fighter knows in the middle of a fight when his legs go mellow and there is nothing left in his arms.

When they took me through the hall, Ruta was nowhere in sight. I could hear voices however in her room.

"The specialists get here yet?" asked Leznicki of the policeman on guard at the door.

"That's them in there," said the cop.

"Tell them I said to give one hundred percent to this job, and one hundred percent to the job upstairs."

Then he rang for the elevator.

"Why don't we take him through the back door," said Roberts.

"No," said Leznicki, "let him meet The Press."

They were downstairs on the street, about eight or ten of them, and they did an odd dance about us, their flashbulbs going off, their questions flying, their faces overcheerful and greedy. They could have been a pack of twelve-year-old beggars in some Italian town, hysterical, almost wild, delighted with the money they might be thrown, and in a whinny of fear they would get nothing. I made no attempt to cover my face—at the moment there seemed no harm worse than to have to look at myself tomorrow in a tabloid with my head humped behind a hat.

"Hey, Leznicki, he do it?" one cried.

Another darted up to me, his face full of welcome, as if to give surety he was the one man on the street I could trust. "Would you care to make a statement, Mr. Rojack?" he asked with concern.

"No, nothing," I said.

Roberts was guiding me into the back seat.

"Hey, Roberts," another cried, "what's the word?"

"Suicide or what?" asked another.

"Routine," said Roberts, "routine."

There was a low undertone of bickering, not unlike the sound

an audience gives off when it is announced the understudy will play the part tonight. "Let's get going," said Roberts.

But he sat in front beside the driver, while I was plumped into the back cushions between Leznicki and O'Brien. We were driving now in an unmarked battered sedan, a detective's car, and as we took off from the curb, more flash bulbs went off through the window at me, and I could hear them scrambling for their cars.

"Why'd you do it?" asked Leznicki in my ear.

I didn't answer. I did my best to stare back, as if I were in fact a husband who had watched his wife go out a window and he was no more than some animal barking at me, but my silence must have been livid, because an odor of violence came off him, a kind of clammy odor of rut, and O'Brien, on my other side, who had shown a pronounced smell already, oversweet and very stale, was throwing a new odor, something like the funk a bully emits when he heads for a face-to-face meeting. Their hands twitched in their laps. They wanted to have a go at me. I had a feeling I wouldn't last thirty seconds between them.

"Did you use a stocking to strangle her?" asked Leznicki.

"He used his arm," said O'Brien in a big hollow gloomy voice.

It had started to rain. A light fall, almost a mist, settled in a delicate wash of light over the streets. I could feel my heart beating now like a canary held in my hand. It throbbed with a tender almost exhilarated fatigue; I could have been no more than a drum with a bird's heart trapped inside, and the reverberations seemed to sound outside my body, as if everyone in the car could hear me. There were cars following behind, the photographers and the reporters no doubt, and their headlights gave an odd comfort. Like a bird indeed in a cage in a darkened room, the passing flare of light from outside gave some memory of the forest, and I felt myself soaring out on the beating of my heart as if a climax of fear had begun which might race me through swells of excitement until everything burst, the heart burst, and I flew out to meet my death.

The men in the car looked red to me, then green, then red again. I wondered if I were close to fainting. It was suffocating to sit between those men—it was like being a fox in a bog while hounds crooned on either bank. I knew at last the sweet panic of an animal who is being tracked, for if danger were close, if danger came in on the breeze, and one's nostrils had an awareness of the air as close as that first touch of a tongue on your flesh, there was still such a tenderness for the hope one could stay alive. Something came out of the city like the whispering of a forest, and on the March night's message through the open window I had at that instant the first smell of spring, that quiet instant, so like the first moment of love one feels in a woman who has until then given no love.

"Going to marry the maid after you grab your wife's dough?" asked Leznicki.

"You strangled her." O'Brien said in his hollow voice. "Why'd you strangle her?"

"Roberts," I asked, "can you call off these hoodlums?"

There was one instant in which they both came so close to hitting me that I felt a wave of frustration fly out from Leznicki's hand and move across my face with the small impact of a flashlight in the eye. They sat there, their hands on their thighs, shaking, Leznicki with the muscular beat of a piston and O'Brien quivering like a sea-jelly disturbed in its ooze.

"You say that again," said Leznicki, "and I'll give you a pistol-whipping. You've been put on warning now."

"Don't threaten me, friend."

"Let it go," said Roberts to all of us. "Knock it off."

I sat back, feeling the damage I had done. Now the adrenalin was going through their body like a mob in a riot.

We went the rest of the way in silence. Their bodies were so heated with anger that my skin felt the kind of burn one knows from staying too long beside an ultraviolet-ray lamp.

We were at the morgue for only a few minutes. There was a walk down a corridor with an attendant unlocking the doors for us, and then the room with sheets over two cadavers lying on stainless-steel tables and a bank of refrigerated bins where the bodies were kept. The light had a color like the underbelly of a whale, that denuded white of fluorescent tubes, and there was now new silence, a dead silence, some stretch of the void with no sense of events beneath, just a silence of the waste. My nostrils hurt from the antiseptic and deodorant and the other smell (that vile pale scent of embalming fluid and fecal waters) insinuated its way through the stricken air. I did not want to look at Deborah this time. I took no more than a glimpse when the sheet was laid back, and caught for that act a clear view of one green eye staring open, hard as marble, dead as the dead eye of a fish, and her poor face swollen, her beauty gone obese.

"Can we get out of here?" I asked.

The attendant put the sheet back with a professional turn of his wrists, casual but slow, not without ceremony. He had the cheerful formal gloom of a men's room attendant. "The doctor'll be here in five minutes. You going to wait?" he asked.

"Tell him to call us at the precinct," said Leznicki.

In a corner, on a desk, at the end of this long room, I could see a very small television set about the size of a table radio. It was turned down low and had gone out of synchronization, for the picture was flaring bright, then dark, then flaring up again, and I had the insane clarity to recognize that it was speaking to the neon tubes and they were answering back. I was close to nausea. When we quit the corridors and left the hospital, I turned to one side and tried to throw up but produced no more than a taste of some bile and the intimate lightning of a photographer taking a picture.

On the way to the precinct, we were silent again. Whatever Deborah would deserve, that morgue was not the place for her. I

had a reverie of my own death then, and my soul (some time in the future) was trying to lift and loose itself of the body which had died. It was a long process, as if a membrane trapped in mud were seeking to catch a breeze which would trip it free. In that morgue (for that was where I pictured my own death) the delicate filaments of my soul were also expiring in a paralysis of deodorant while hope withered in the dialogue between the neon tube and the television set. I felt guilty for the first time. It was a crime to have pushed Deborah into the morgue.

There were more photographers and reporters at the entrance to the precinct, and again they were all shouting and talking out at once. "Did he do it?" I heard one yell. "You holding him?" cried another. "What's the pitch, Roberts, what's the pitch?" They came in behind us and then were left as we passed through the Desk Sergeant's room where a cop was sitting high up on that square raised desk which had always reminded me of a tribunal (but it was only in movies I had ever seen this desk before) and then we passed into a larger room, a very large room, perhaps sixty feet by forty feet, the walls painted a dark institutional green up to the height of one's eyes and then a dirty worn-down institutional tan all the way up to the dirty-white tin plates of the ceiling, those eighteen-inch-square cheap tin plates, each decorated with some nineteenth-century manufacturer's impression of a fleur-de-lis. I saw nothing but desks, twenty desks perhaps, and beyond, two small rooms. Roberts stopped by the door between the Desk Sergeant's room and this large room, and made a short speech to the reporters. "We're not holding Mr. Rojack for anything. He's just accommodating us by coming here to answer questions." Then he shut the door.

Roberts led me to a desk. We sat down. He took out a folder and wrote in it for a few minutes. Then he looked up. We were alone again. Leznicki and O'Brien had disappeared somewhere. "You're aware," said Roberts, "that I did you a favor out there."

"Yes," I said.

"Well, it was against my better judgment. I don't like the feel of this one. Neither does Leznicki or O'Brien. I'm going to tell you: Leznicki is an animal when it comes to this sort of stuff. He's convinced you killed her. He thinks you broke her hyoid bone with a silk stocking wrapped around her neck. He's hoping you did it a couple of hours before you pushed her out."

"Why?"

"Because, friend, if she was gone for a couple of hours, it could show up in the autopsy."

"If it does, you have a case."

"Oh, we have the beginnings of a case. I have a nose for one thing. I know you were making out with that German maid." His hard blue eyes looked into me. I held the stare until my eyes began to water. Then he looked away. "Rojack, you're lucky nobody got hurt too much in that five-car crack-up. If they had, and we could stick your wife's fall on you, the papers would handle you as Bluebeard, Jr. I mean think if a kid had been killed."

Indeed, I had never considered this until now. It had not been part of my intent after all to telescope five cars on the East River Drive.

"So, look," he went on, "you're not in the worst of spots. But you are at the point where you have to make a decision. If you confess this—forgive your feelings—but if you have any infidelities on your wife's part to bring in as evidence, a smart lawyer could get you off with twenty years. Which as a practical matter is usually about twelve years and can be as little as eight. We'll cooperate to the extent that we'll say your confession was given us of your own free will. I'll have to mark down the time of it which will mean you didn't confess for the first few hours, but I'll say you were in shock up to then. I won't mention the kind of bullshit you've given us. And I'll stand up for you in court. Whereas if you wait till all the evidence accumulates, and then confess, you'll get life.

Then, even at best, you won't be out for twenty years. And if you fight it all the way, and we get a lock on the case, you could face the chair, buddy. They'll shave your head and give your soul a charge of voltage. So sit on this, and think. Think of that electric chair. I'm getting some coffee."

"It's way after midnight," I said. "Aren't you supposed to be home by now?"

"I'll bring you a cup."

But I was sorry he was gone. It had been easier somehow when he had been there. Now there was nothing to do but think of what he had said. I was trying to calculate how much time had gone by from that moment I recognized Deborah was dead until she struck the ground on the East River Drive. It could not be less than half an hour. It could be as much as an hour, conceivably an hour and a half. I had had a knowledge of anatomy once, but now I had no idea how long the cells might remain intact, nor how soon they might begin to decompose. While I was sitting here, it was likely they were doing an autopsy on Deborah. A leaden anxiety settled in my stomach; just that sort of bottomless pit I used to feel when I had been away from Deborah for a week or two and was suddenly powerless not to call her. It was difficult to sit still and wait for Roberts to come back, much as if that merciless lack of charity which I had come to depend on in Deborah (as a keel to ballast the empty dread of my stomach) was now provided by the detective. I knew they were probably watching me, and that I should not move too much; I was aware that once I began to walk about, my anxiety would show in every step I took, and yet I did not know if I could expend much more of my will in remaining motionless: I had been firing guns for hours—the armory was near to empty.

Still I forced myself to study the room. There were detectives talking to people at four or five of the desks. An old woman in a shabby coat was busy weeping at the nearest table, and a very

bored detective kept tapping his pencil and waiting for her to cease. Further down a big Negro with a badly beaten face was shaking his head in the negative to every question asked him. In the far corner behind a half partition I thought I could hear Ruta's voice.

And then across the room I saw a head with long blonde hair. It was Cherry. She was with Uncle and Tony, and her friends were arguing with Lieutenant Leznicki and two detectives I had not seen before. I had been in this room for a quarter of an hour, and had been looking at nothing but the expression in Roberts' face. Now I was suddenly aware that there was as much sound as one might find in the dark night ward of a hospital, there was all but a chorus of protests and imprecations, and the leathery pistol-shot insistence of the policemen's voices, I could almost have allowed myself to slip into the anteroom of a dream where we were all swimming about in a sea of mud, calling to each other under the crack of rifles and a dark moon. Voices picked up from one another, the old woman wept louder as our Uncle across the room began to talk in his whining stammering voice, and then Ruta, still out of sight behind the partition, picked up something shrill in tone from the old woman's weeping and the Negro with the smashed-in face was talking faster, nodding his head in rhythm to some beat he had extracted from the sounds. I wondered if I were in fever, for I had the impression now that I was letting go of some grip on my memory of the past, that now I was giving up my loyalty to every good moment I had had with Deborah and surrendering the hard compacted anger of every hour when she had spoiled my need, I felt as if I were even saying goodbye to that night on the hill in Italy with my four Germans under the moon, yes, I felt just as some creature locked by fear to the border between earth and water (its grip the accumulated experience of a thousand generations) might feel on that second when its claw took hold, its body climbed up from the sea, and its impulse took a leap over the edge of mutation so that now and at last it was something new, something

better or worse, but never again what it had been on the other side of the instant. I felt as if I had crossed a chasm of time and was some new breed of man. What a fever I must have been in.

A face was looking at me.

"Why'd you kill her?" asked Leznicki.

"I didn't."

But Leznicki seemed happier now. His narrow face was relaxed and the stale clam color of his eyes had a hint of life. "Hey, buddy," he said with an open grin, "you're giving us a hard time."

"All I want is a cup of coffee."

"You think you're kidding. Listen," and he turned a wooden chair around, sitting with its back against his chest, and leaned his face toward me so that I caught the iron fatigue of his breath and his bad teeth, he doing this with no embarrassment the way a race track tout will feed you the good news about the horse with the bad news which rides on the smell of his breath, "listen, do you remember Henry Steels?"

"I think I do."

"Sure you do. We cracked the case right in this precinct, right at that desk over there," and he pointed to a desk which looked to me exactly like all the others. "That poor guy, Steels. Twenty-three years in Dannemora, and when they let him out, he shacks up with a fat broad in Queens. Six weeks later he kills her with a poker. You remember now? By the time we pick him up two weeks later, he's knocked off three queers and two more fat ladies. But we don't know. We just got him for the first job. A patrolman sees him in a hallway in a tenement on Third Avenue, rolls him over, recognizes him, brings him here, and we're just giving him a little cursory questioning to wake him up prior to turning him over to Queens, when he says, 'Give me a pack of Camels, and a pint of sherry, and I'll tell you all about it.' We give him the sherry and he knocks us on our ass. He produces six murders. Fills in half the Unsolveds we had in New York for that two-week

period. Phenomenal. I'll never get over it. Just an old con, neat in his habits." Leznicki sucked on a tooth. "So, if you want to talk, I'll give you a bottle of champagne. Maybe you'll give us six murders, too."

We laughed together. I had come to the conclusion a long time ago that all women were killers, but now I was deciding that all men were out of their mind. I liked Leznicki enormously—it was part of the fever.

"Why didn't you tell us," he went on, "that you had a Distinguished Service Cross?"

"I was afraid you'd take it away."

"Believe me, Rojack, I never would have given you that kind of hosing if I'd known. I thought you were just another playboy."

"No hard feelings," I said.

"Good." He looked around the room. "You're on television, right." I nodded. "Well," he went on, "you ought to get us on a program some night. Assuming the department would approve, I could tell a story or two. Crime has got a logic. You understand me?"

"No."

He coughed with the long phlegmy hacking sound of a gambler who has lost every part of his body but the wire in his brain which tells him when to bet. "A police station, so help me, is a piece of the action. We're like Las Vegas. I know when we're going to have a hot night." He coughed again. "Sometimes I think there's a buried maniac who runs the mind of this city. And he sets up the coincidences. Your wife goes out of a window, for instance. Because of cancer, you say, and five cars smack up on the East River Drive because of her. Who's in one of the cars but little Uncle Ganooch, Eddie Ganucci, you've heard of him."

"In the Mob, isn't he?"

"He's a prince. One of the biggest in the country. And he falls into our lap. We've had a Grand Jury subpoena on him for two

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years, but he's out in Las Vegas, in Miami, only once or twice a year does he sneak into town. And tonight we got him. Know why? Cause he's superstitious. His nephew told him to take a walk, get lost in the crowd. No. He's not leaving the car. There's a dead woman on the road, and she'll curse him if he walks away. He must have had twenty guys killed in his time, he must be worth a hundred million bucks, but he's afraid of a dead dame's curse. It's bad for his cancer, he tells his nephew. Now just look at the connection you could make. Your wife you say had cancer, Uncle Ganooch is swimming in it. There it is." Leznicki laughed as if in apology for the too-rapid workings of his mind. "See why I leaned on you so hard? You can appreciate that the minute I got word Ganucci was our baby tonight, I didn't want to waste time with you."

"What about the girl? Who's she?" I asked.

"A broad. The nephew's got an after-hours spot, and she sings there. A very sick broad. She makes it with spades." He named a Negro singer whose records I had listened to for years. "Yeah, Shago Martin, that's who she makes it with," said Leznicki. "When a dame dyes her straw, she's looking for a big black boogie."

"Beautiful girl," I said. Her hair hardly seemed dyed to me. Perhaps it was tinted a bit.

"I'm getting to like you more and more, Mr. Rojack. I just wish you hadn't killed your wife."

"Well," I said, "here we go again."

"No, look," he said, "do you think I like to exercise my function on a man who's won a Distinguished Service Cross? I just wish I didn't know you did it."

"What if I tried to tell you I didn't."

"If they brought the Good Lord Himself to this room . . ." He stopped. "Nobody ever tells the truth here. It's impossible. Even the molecules in the air are full of lies."

We were silent. The Negro with the beat-up face was the only

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one talking in the room. "Now, what do I want with that liquor store," he said, "that liquor store is boss, I mean that store is territory, man. I don't go near territory."

"The arresting officer," said the detective next to him, "had to subdue you right in that store. You cracked the owner in the face, you emptied the register, and then the patrolman caught you from behind."

"Shee-it. You got me mixed up with some other black man. No cop can tell one nigger from another. You got me mixed up with some other nigger you been beating up on."

"Let's go in the back room."

"I want some coffee."

"You'll get some coffee when you sign."

"Let me think." And they both were silent.

Leznicki put a hand on my arm. "It's beginning to go bad for you," he said. "That German girl is cracking."

"What has she to confess? That I tried to kiss her once in the hall?"

"Rojack, we got her worried. Right now she's thinking about herself. She don't know if you killed your wife, but she admits you could have, that she admitted after we had a matron strip her down. A medical examiner took a smear. That German girl has been in the sack tonight. We can take you out and give you an examination too, and see if you've been working on her tonight. Do you want that?"

"I don't think you have the right."

"There's male body hair in her bed. We can check to see if it's yours or not. That is, if you're willing to cooperate. All we have to do is pull a few out with a tweezer. Do you want that?"

"No."

"Then admit you gave the maid a bang this evening."

"I don't see what the maid had to do with this," I said. "An affair with the maid wouldn't give me cause to murder my wife."

"Forget these petty details," said Leznicki. "I want to propose something. Get one of the best lawyers in town, and you can be on the street in six months." At this moment he looked more like an old thief than a Lieutenant of Detectives. Twenty-five years of muggers and dips, safe men and junkies and bookies and cons had passed before him, and each must have charmed some fine little cell. "Rojack, I know a man, an ex-Marine, whose wife told him she went down on all his friends. He beat in her head with a hammer. They kept him under observation until his trial. His lawyer got him off. Temporary Insanity. He's on the street. And he's in better shape today than you are with your suicide story. Because even if you get out of this, which you won't, nobody will believe you didn't push your wife."

"Why don't you be my lawyer?" I said.

"Think!" said Leznicki. "I'm going over to visit Little Uncle."

I watched him cross the room. The old man stood up to meet him, and they shook hands. Then they put their heads together. One of them must have told a quick joke for they both started to laugh. I saw Cherry look over at me, and on an impulse I waved. She waved back merrily. We could have been Freshmen at a state university catching glimpses of one another at different registration desks.

A policeman came out with a pot of coffee and poured me a cup. Then the Negro shouted to him, "I want a cup, too."

"Keep your voice down," said the cop. But the detective who was sitting with the Negro gave a signal to come over. "This boogie is dead drunk," said the detective, "give him a cup."

"I don't want any coffee now," said the Negro.

"Sure you do."

"No, I don't. It gives me butterflies."

"Take some coffee. Sober up."

"I don't want coffee. I want some tea."

The detective groaned. "Come in the back room," he said.

"I want to stay here."

"Come in the back room and take some coffee."

"I don't need none."

The detective whispered in his ear.

"All right," said the Negro, "I'll go in the back room."

The woman who had been weeping must have signed some paper for she was gone. There was no one near me now. And I was watching a film of a courtroom. The defense counsel with a dedicated emollient in his voice: "Then, Mr. Rojack, what did your wife say?" "Well, sir, she spoke of her lovers and she said they had made a favorable comparison of her actions in the sexual act with the sexual actions of a plumber—as it is called—in a Mexican brothel." "And would you, Mr. Rojack, tell the court what a 'plumber' is?" "Well, sir, a 'plumber' is the lowest prostitute in a house of prostitution and will commit those acts which other prostitutes for reasons of relative delicacy refuse to perform." "I see, Mr. Rojack. What did you do then?" "I don't know. I don't remember. I had warned my wife of my terrible temper. I have been suffering blackouts ever since the War. I had a blackout then."

A faint nausea, kin to the depression with which one could wake up every morning for years, drifted through my lungs. If one pleaded Temporary Insanity, Leznicki and I would be brothers, we would be present in spirit at each other's funeral, we would march in lock-step through Eternity. Yet, I was tempted. For that emptiness in my chest, that sense of void in my stomach were back again. I did not have any certainty at all that I could go on. No, they would question me and they would question me; they would tell truths and they would tell lies; they would be friendly, they would be unfriendly; and all the while I would keep breathing the air of this room with its cigarettes and cigars, its coffee which tasted of dirty urns, its distant hint of lavatories and laundries, of junk yards and morgues, I would see dark green walls and dirty-white ceilings, I would listen to subterranean mutterings, I would

open my eyes and close them under the blistering light of the electric bulbs, I would live in a subway, I would live for ten or twenty years in a subway, I would lie in a cell at night with nothing to do but walk a stone square floor. I would die through endless stupors and expired plans.

Or I would spend a year of appeals, spend a last year of my life in an iron cage and walk one morning into a room where ready for nothing, where nothing done, failed, miserable, frightened of what migrations were ready for me, I would go out smashing, jolting, screaming inside, out into the long vertigo of a death which fell down endless stone walls.

It was then I came very close. I think I would have called Leznicki over and asked him for the name of a lawyer, and stuck my tongue out in some burlesque of him and me and our new contract, and rolled my eyes, and said, "You see, Leznicki, I'm raving mad." I think I really would have done it then, but I did not feel the strength to call across the room, I had a horror of appearing feeble before that young blonde girl, and so I sat back and waited for Leznicki to return, experiencing for still one more time tonight what it was like to know the exhaustion and the apathy of those who are very old and very ill. I had never understood before why certain old people, sniffing displeasure in the breath of everyone who stared at them, still held with ferocity to the mediocre tasteless continuation of their days, their compact made with some lesser devil of medicine—"Keep me away from God a little longer." But I understood it now. Because there was a vast cowardice in me which was ready to make any peace at all, ready to pillage in public the memory of that wife I had had for near to nine years, ready to mock the future of my brain by preparing to cry out that I too was insane and my best ideas were poor, warped, distorted, and injurious to others. No, I wanted out, I wanted to get away from this trap I had created for myself, I would have given up if my cowardice had the simple strength to throw my voice across the room. But it didn't, it

could only rivet the cheeks of my buttocks to the chair and order me to wait, as if some power had cast a paralysis upon me.

Then the Negro started up in the other room. I could not see him but now I could certainly hear him. "I don't want the coffee," he cried out, "I want some Seagram's Seven. That's what you told me I could have, and that's what I want."

"Drink your coffee, Goddamn you," shouted the detective, and through the open door was a glimpse of him walking that big Negro back and forth, and there was a patrolman on the other arm, a hard-faced dull young cop with straight black hair and eyes you see in tabloids on the face of young killers who never miss a Mass until the morning after the night they go berserk, and they were both walking the Negro, they were out of sight now, there was the liquid splattering sound of coffee falling in a large splash and the thump of the mug on the floor, and then there was another splattering sound, the sound of a fist on a face, and the dull thump of a knee in the back, and the Negro groaned, but almost agreeably, as if the beating were his predictable sanity. "Now give me the Seagram's Seven," he cried out, "and I'll sign that paper."

"Drink coffee," shouted the detective. "You can't even see right now."

"Shee-it on that coffee," muttered the Negro, and then came the sound of new beating on him, and all three, all with a stumbling grappling hold on each other went out of view, came into view again, went out again, and more sounds of splattering.

"Goddamn you," cried the detective, "you Goddamn stubborn boogie."

And a new detective had taken the seat beside me, a younger man, thirty-five perhaps, with an anonymous face and a somewhat gloomy mouth. "Mr. Rojack," he said, "I just want to tell you that I enjoy your television program very much, and I'm sorry we have to meet under these circumstances."

"Unnh," grunted the Negro, "unnh, unnh, unnh," as the punches went into him, "that's the way, daddy, unnh, unnh, keep moving, you're improving all the time."

"Now, why don't you drink some coffee," shouted the detective who was beating him.

I have to confess that at this instant I put my head down and whispered to myself, "Oh, God, give me a sign," crying it into the depths of myself as if I possessed all the priorities of a saint, and looked up with conviction and desperation sufficient to command a rainbow, but there was nothing which caught my eye in the room but the long blonde hair of Cherry standing across the floor. She, too, was looking at the room where the beating went on, and there was a clean girl's look on her face as if she had been watching a horse who had broken his leg and was now simply miserable before the proportions of things. I stood up then and started out with some idea of going to the back room, but the dread lifted even as I stood up and once again I felt a force in my body steering away from that back room, and a voice inside me said, "Go to the girl."

So instead I walked across the big room and approached Leznicki and Ganooch and Tony and Cherry and Roberts and O'Brien and even a few others, detectives and lawyers, and stopped near Cherry. I had a good look at her now and she was older than I had expected, she was not eighteen or twenty-one as I had thought on the street but twenty-seven perhaps or twenty-eight, and there were pale green circles of chronic exhaustion beneath her eyes. But I still thought her very nice. She had an elusive silvery air as if once there had been a huge disappointment and now a delicate gaiety had formed to cover the pain. She looked a little like a child who has been anointed by the wing of a magical bird. And she also looked wretched just now.

"Tony, can't you do something about that beating?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Stay out of it, huh?"

90 *Norman Mailer*

Roberts spoke to her. "The boy they got in there tried to beat an old man to death tonight."

"Yes," she said, "but that's not why *they're* beating on him."

"What do *you* want?" said Roberts, looking at me.

"Roberts, I think she's right. I think you ought to call off that detective."

"Planning to talk about it on your program?" asked Leznicki.

"May I invite you when I do?"

"It's better to stop these things," said Uncle Ganooch. "There's too much friction in the world today."

"Hey, Red," Leznicki shouted to the back room, "he's drunk. Stick him in a cell for the night."

"He tried to bite me," Red yelled back.

"Stick him in a cell."

"Now," said Uncle Ganooch, "can we finish our business? I'm a very sick man."

"It's simple," smiled Leznicki, "we just need some assurance you'll show up to honor your subpoena."

"We're going over the old ground," said Ganooch's lawyer, "I will stand manifest for him."

"And what the hell does that mean?" asked Leznicki.

"Let's go back," said Roberts, looking at me. "I want to talk to you."

I nodded. And then moved next to the girl. Her friend Tony was standing on her other side and he gave me a look which had power to quiver in my skin. It was a look which said, "Don't talk to this girl or somebody will break your arm."

But I was thinking that I might as well take that girl for a sign—she was the only one in sight. So I said to her, and my voice was easy, "I'd like to come and hear you sing."

"Well, I'd like you to," she said.

"Where is your place?"

"Down in the Village. Just a little place. Just opened up." She

looked at Tony, and hesitated, and then gave me the address in a clear voice. Out of the side of my eye I could see the Negro being led out of the big room.

"Let's go, Rojack," said Roberts. "We have something new to talk about."

It must have been three in the morning, but he still looked neat. Once we sat down, he smiled. "There's no use in asking you for a confession, is there?"

"No."

"All right, then. We're going to let you go."

"You are?"

"Yes."

"Is it all over?"

"Oh, no. No. It's not over for you till the coroner brings in a report of suicide."

"When is that?"

He shrugged. "A day, a week. Don't leave town till the coroner is heard from."

"I'm still under suspicion?"

"Oh, come on. We know you did it."

"But you can't hold me?"

"Yeah, we could hold you as a material witness. And we could work on you for seventy-two hours, and you would crack. But you're in luck, you're in great luck. We have to stick with Ganucci this week. We don't have time for you."

"You also have no evidence."

"The girl talked. We know you've been with her."

"Means nothing."

"We have some other evidence, but I don't want to get into it now. We'll see you in a day or two. Stay away from your wife's apartment. And stay away from the maid. You wouldn't want to tamper with a potential witness."

"No, I wouldn't."

92 *Norman Mailer*

"By the way, no hard feelings."

"Oh, none."

"I mean it. You hold up all right. You're not bad."

"Thank you."

"This may interest you. We got the autopsy report. There's evidence your wife did have cancer. They're going to make some slides to verify it, but it does look good for you."

"I see."

"That's why we're letting you go."

"I see."

"Don't relax too much. The autopsy also showed that your wife's large intestine was in an interesting state."

"What do you mean by that?"

"You'll get your chance to worry later this week." He stood up. "Good night, pal." Then he stopped. "Oh, yes. Forgot to ask you to sign the autopsy papers. Would you sign them now?"

"Your autopsy was illegal?"

"I'd say it was irregular."

"I don't know if I want to sign the papers."

"Suit yourself, pal. If you don't, we can put you in a cell until the coroner brings back his report."

"Beautiful," I said.

"Not that good," said Roberts. "Just a goof. Here, sign here."

Which I did.

"Well," said Roberts, "I'm going home. Can I drop you off?"

"I'll walk," I said.

I did walk. I walked for miles through the long drizzle of the early morning, and close to dawn I found myself in the Village outside the after-hours club where Cherry was singing. I had lived through a night, I had come into a morning. It was morning outside on the street; I could think of the sun coming up. But it would rise into a wintry smog, a wet wan morning gray with mist.

The entrance to the joint was a battered metal door which opened at my knock. "I'm a friend of Tony's," I said to the man in the hall. He shrugged, and let me by. I walked down a corridor and went through another door. The room had once been the rear of a large basement loft but now it was decorated like a bar in Miami, an after-hours box of leatherette, flame-orange stuffing for the booths, the stools, the face of the bar, some dark burnished midnight of black carpet and purple wine ceiling. There was a man playing the piano, and Cherry was singing. She saw me come in and she smiled on the breath she took and made a little sign to indicate that yes she would have a drink with me as soon as her set was done. Well, if Deborah's dying had given me a new life, I must be all of eight hours old by now.

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In Provincetown, a friend brought a gift. She brought a big round metal GULF sign seven feet in diameter which another friend had discovered in the town dump and rescued. The hair of fashion came alert: we might make a coffee table. While we drank, we could look at the shading in the orange and blue letters. Poets in the room could contemplate the value of—GULF—even as a novice in Yoga will fix on the resonance of OM. Musicians could explore the tick of the cocktail glass against the metal. Intellectuals could . . .

What a deal intellectuals could do. There would be those to claim Pop art is the line where culture meets mass civilization, and so Pop art is the vehicle for bringing taste to the masses; others to argue the debauch of Capitalism has come to the point where it crosses the doorstep and inhabits the place where you set your drink. And those to say fun; fun is the salvation of society.

It would go on: some might decide that putting a huge gasoline company's totem into one's private space helped to mock civilization and its hired man, the corporation; others would be certain the final victory of the corporation was near when we felt affection for the device by which a corporation advertised itself.

At last, nothing was done with the sign. I did not want to go through dialogue and the same dialogue about why it was there and whether it was good it was there, or bad it was there, and in truth I did not want the work of disposing of it when the fashion had passed. So I left the sign to rust on the beach, a mile from its burial ground on the dump.

2 Cannibals and Christians

List the symptoms. We live in a time which has created the art of the absurd. It is our art. It contains happenings, Pop art, camp, a theater of the absurd, a homosexual genius who spent thirty years as a thief; black humor is its wit; the dances are livid and solitary—they are also orgiastic: orgy or masturbation?—the first question posed by the art of the absurd. So the second: is the art rational or absurd? Do we have the art because the absurd is the patina of waste, and we are waiting in the pot for the big roar of waters when the world goes down the pipe? Or are we face to face with a desperate but most rational effort from the deepest resources of the unconscious of us all to rescue civilization from the pit and plague of its bedding, that gutted swinish foul old bedding on which two centuries of imperialism, high finance, moral hypocrisy and horror have lain. The skulls of black men and the bowels of the yellow race are in that bed, the death of the Bride of the Sabbath is in that bed with the ashes of the concentration camp and the ashes of the Kabbala, moonshots fly like flares across black dreams, and the Beatles—demons or saints?—give shape to a haircut which looks from the rear like nothing so much as an atomic cloud. Apocalypse or debauch is upon us. And we are close to dead. There are faces and bodies like gorged maggots on the dance floor, on the highway, in the city, in the stadium; they are a host of chemical machines who swallow the product of chemical factories, aspirin, preservatives, stimulant, relaxant, and breathe out their chemical wastes into a polluted air. The sense of a long last night over civilization is back again; it has perhaps not been here so intensely in thirty years, not since the Nazis were prospering, but it is coming back.

Well, it has been the continuing obsession of this writer that the world is entering a time of plague. And the continuing metaphor for the obsession—a most disagreeable metaphor—has been cancer. The argument is old by now: its first assumption is that cancer is a disease different from other diseases, an ultimate disease against which all other diseases are in design to protect us.

The difficulty—for one can always convince the literary world to accept a metaphor if one remains loyal to it—is that my obsession is not merely an obsession, I fear, but insight into the nature of things, perhaps the deepest insight I have, and this said with no innocence of the knowledge that the plague can have its home within, and these condemnations come to no more than the grapplings of a man with a curse on his flesh, or even the probability that society partakes of the plague and its critic partakes, and

each wars against the other, the man and the society each grappling with his own piece of the plague, as if, indeed, we are each of us born not only with our life but with our death, with our variety of death, good death and bad, and it is the act of each separate man to look to free himself from that part of his existence which was born with the plague. Some succeed, some fail, and some of us succeed nobly for we clear our own plague and help to clear the plague upon the world, and others succeed, others—are we those?—you don't know—who clear their plague by visiting it upon friends, passing their disease into the flesh and mind of near bodies, and into the circuits of the world. And they poison the wells and get away free, some of them—they get away free if there is a devil and he has power, and that is something else we do not know. But the plague remains, that mysterious force which erects huge, ugly, and aesthetically emaciated buildings as the world ostensibly grows richer, and proliferates new diseases as medicine presumably grows wiser, nonspecific diseases, families of viruses, with new names and no particular location. And products deteriorate in workmanship as corporations improve their advertising, wars shift from carnage and patriotism to carnage and surrealism, sex shifts from whiskey to drugs. And all the food is poisoned. And the waters of the sea we are told. And there is always the sound of some electric motor in the ear.

In a modern world which produces mediocrities at an accelerating rate, and keeps them alive by surgical gymnastics which go beyond anyone's patience but the victim, the doctor, and the people who expect soon to be on the operating tables themselves; in a civilization where compassion is of political use and is stratified in welfare programs which do not build a better society but shore up a worse; in a world whose ultimate logic is war, because in a world of war all overproduction and overpopulation is possible since peoples and commodities may be destroyed wholesale—in a breath, a world of such hypercivilization is a world not of adventurers, entrepreneurs, settlers, social arbiters, proletarians, agriculturists, and other ego-centric types of a dynamic society, but is instead a world of whirlpools and formlessness where two huge types begin to reemerge, types there at the beginning of it all: Cannibals and Christians.

We are martyrs all these days. All that Right Wing which believes there is too much on earth and too much of it is second-rate, all of that Right Wing which runs from staunch Republicanism to the extreme Right Wing, and then half around the world through the ghosts of the Nazis, all of that persecuted Right Wing which sees itself as martyr, knows that it knows how

4 Cannibals and Christians

to save the world: one can save the world by killing off what is second-rate. So they are the Cannibals—they believe that survival and health of the species comes from consuming one's own, not one's near-own, but one's own species. So the pure cannibal has only one taboo on food—he will not eat the meat of his own family. Other men he will of course consume. Their virtues he will conserve in his own flesh, their vices he will excrete, but to kill and to eliminate is his sense of human continuation.

Then come our Christians. They are the commercial. The commercial is the invention of a profoundly Christian nation—it proceeds to sell something in which it does not altogether believe, and it interrupts the mood. We are all of us Christians: Jews, liberals, Bolsheviks, anarchists, Socialists, Communists, Keynesians, Democrats, Civil Righters, beatniks, ministers, moderate Republicans, pacifists, Teach-inners, doctors, scientists, professors, Latin Americans, new African nations, Common Marketers, even Mao Tse-tung. Doubtless. From Lyndon Johnson to Mao Tse-tung, we are all Christians. We believe man is good if given a chance, we believe man is open to discussion, we believe science is the salvation of ill, we believe death is the end of discussion; ergo we believe nothing is so worthwhile as human life. We think no one should go hungry. So forth. What characterizes Christians is that most of them are not Christian and have no interest left in Christ. What characterizes the Cannibals is that most of them are born Christian, think of Jesus as Love, and get an erection from the thought of whippings, blood, burning crosses, burning bodies, and screams in mass graves. Whereas their counterpart, the Christians—the ones who are not Christian but whom we choose to call Christian—are utterly opposed to the destruction of human life and succeed within themselves in starting all the wars of our own time, since every war since the Second World War has been initiated by liberals or Communists; these Christians also succeed by their faith in science to poison the nourishment we eat and the waters of the sea, to alter the genetics of our beasts, and to break the food chains of nature.

Yet every year the girls are more beautiful, the athletes are better. So the dilemma remains. Is the curse on the world or on oneself? Does the world get better, no matter how, getting better and worse as part of the same process, or does the world get better in spite of the fact it is getting worse, and we are approaching the time when an apocalypse will pass through the night? We live after all in a time which interrupts the mood of everything alive.

So, I would submit that I see

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~~... is a book of writings on these themes. I will not~~
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myself sometimes as ~~...~~ a physician half blind, not so far from drunk, his nerve to be recommended not at every occasion, nor his hand to hold at each last bed, but a noble physician nonetheless, noble at least in his ideal, for he is certain that there is a strange disease before him, an unknown illness, a phenomenon which partakes of mystery, nausea, and horror; if the nausea gives him pause and the horror fear, still the mystery summons, he is a physician, he must try to explore the mystery.

~~... he does, and~~
~~... on to speak of the medicines and the treatment, of surgeon,~~
~~... lab analyst—no, the metaphor has come to the end of its way.~~
~~These writings are then attempts in a dozen different forms to deal with~~
~~mysteries which offer the presumption that there is an answer to be found~~
~~or a clue. So I proceed, even as a writer when everything goes well, and per-~~
~~haps a few matters are covered and more I know are left to chase.~~

There are times when I think it is a meaningless endeavor—that the only way to hunt these intimations is in the pages of a novel, that that the only way this sort of mystery can ever be detected. Such a time is on me again, so it is possible this collection will be the last for a period. I wish to go back to that long novel, announced six years ago, and change in the mind by all of seven years, may be here again, and if that is so, will have yet to submit to the prescription laid down by the great physician Dr. James Joyce—"silence, exile, and cunning," he said. Well, one hopes not; the patient is too gregarious for the prescription. What follows, at any rate, are some explorations of the theme stated here, some talk of Cannibals and Christians, some writings on politics, on literary matters, on philosophy, on all.

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II · OUR ARGUMENT ADVERTISED

ONCE MORE

JOURNALISM?

PERFECTIFICATIONS?

ELIMINATIONS?

Soon we enter the fourth part. We will be back in the arena again. The smell of the Twentieth Century—that hint of the odor of burning blood just beyond the horizon—will come into the air again. Perhaps it is provided in these excerpts about architecture (which are taken from pieces in Architectural Forum and The New York Times Magazine), for the Argument in Part Four seeks to hunt for the sign of the plague in the diseases of form, and nowhere is this disease so prominent as in the assault of modern architecture upon the horizon and the sky.

ARCHITECTURAL EXCERPTS:

a) A Piece for The New York Times

In Lyndon Johnson's book, *My Hope for America*, the fifth chapter is titled "Toward the Great Society." It contains this paragraph:

. . . fifty years from now, . . . there will be four hundred million Americans, four-fifths of them in urban areas. In the remainder of this century, . . . we will have to build homes, highways, and facilities equal to all those built since this country was first settled. In the next forty years we must rebuild the entire urban United States.

It is a staggering sentence. The city we inhabit at this moment is already close to a total reconstruction of the world our parents knew in their childhood. If there is no nuclear war, if we shift from cold war to some kind of peace, and there is a worldwide rise in the standard of living, then indeed we will build a huge new country. It is possible that not one in a thousand of the buildings put up by 1899 will still be standing in the year 2000.

But what will America look like? How will its architecture appear? Will it be the architecture of a Great Society, or continue to be the architecture of an empty promiscuous panorama where no one can distinguish between hospitals and housing projects, factories and colleges, concert halls, civic centers, and airport terminals? The mind recoils from the thought of an America rebuilt completely in the shape of those blank skyscrapers forty stories high, their walls dead as an empty television screen, their form as interesting as a box of cleansing tissue propped on end. They are buildings which reveal nothing so much as the deterioration in real value of the dollar bill. They are denuded of ornament (which costs money) their windows are not subtly recessed into the wall but are laid flush with the surface like a patch of collodion on the skin, there is no instant where a roof with a tower, a gable, a spire, a mansard, a ridge or even a mooring mast for a dirigible intrudes itself into the sky, reminding us that every previous culture of man attempted to engage the heavens.

No, our modern buildings go flat, flat at the top, flat as eternal monotony, flat as the last penny in a dollar. There is so much corruption in the building codes, overinflation in the value of land, featherbedding built into union rules, so much graft, so much waste, so much public relations, and so much emptiness inflated upon so much emptiness that no one tries to do more with the roof than leave it flat.

As one travels through the arbitrary new neighborhoods of the present, those high squat dormitories which imprison the rich as well as the poor, one is not surprised that the violence is greater than it used to be in the old slum, up are the statistics for juvenile delinquency and for dope addiction. To live in the old slum jungle left many half crippled, and others part savage, but it was at least an environment which asked for wit. In the prison vistas of urban renewal, the violence travels from without to within, there is no wit—one travels down a long empty corridor to reach one's door, long as the corridors in the public schools, long as the corridors in the hospitals at the end of the road; the landscape of modern man takes on a sense of endless empty communications.

Sterile as an operating table is the future vista of suburban spread, invigorating as a whiff of deodorant is the sight of new office buildings. Small elation sits upon us as we contemplate the future, for the picturesque will be uprooted with the ugly, our populations will double, and in a city like New York, the brownstone will be replaced by a cube sixteen stories high with a huge park for parking cars and a little grass. The city will go up a little and it will go out, it will spread. We will live with glass walls in a cold climate. The entire world will come to look like

Queens Boulevard. We will have been uprooted so many times that future man will come to bear the same relation to the past that a hydroponic plant bears to soil.

Yet some part of us is aware that to uproot the past too completely is a danger without measure. It must at the least produce a profound psychic discomfort. For we do not know how much our perception of the present and our estimate of the future depend upon our sense of what has gone before. To return to an old neighborhood and discover it has disappeared is a minor woe for some; it is close to a psychological catastrophe for others, an amputation where the lost nerves still feel pain. This century must appear at times like a great beast which has lost its tail, but who could argue that the amputation was not self-inflicted?

There seems at loose an impulse to uproot every vestige of the past, an urge so powerful one wonders if it is not with purpose, if it is not in the nature of twentieth-century man to uproot himself not only from his past, but from his planet. Perhaps we live on the edge of a great divide in history and so are divided ourselves between the desire for a gracious, intimate, detailed and highly particular landscape and an urge less articulate to voyage out on explorations not yet made. Perhaps the blank faceless abstract quality of our modern architecture is a reflection of the anxiety we feel before the void, a kind of visual static which emanates from the psyche of us all, as if we do not know which way to go. *end*

If we are to spare the countryside, if we are to protect the style of the small town and of the exclusive suburb, keep the organic center of the metropolis and the old neighborhoods, maintain those few remaining streets where the tradition of the nineteenth century and the muse of the eighteenth century still linger on the mood in the summer cool of an evening, if we are to avoid a megalopolis five hundred miles long, a city without shape or exit, a nightmare of ranch houses, highways, suburbs and industrial sludge, if we are to save the dramatic edge of a city—that precise moment when we leave the outskirts and race into the country, the open country—if we are to have a keen acute sense of concentration and a breath of release, then there is only one solution: the cities must climb, they must not spread, they must build up, not by increments, but by leaps, up and up, up to the heavens.

We must be able to live in houses one hundred stories high, two hundred stories high, far above the height of buildings as we know them now. New cities with great towers must rise in the plain, cities higher than mountains, cities with room for 400,000,000 to live, or that part of 400,000,000 who wish to live high in a landscape of peaks and spires, cliffs and precipices. For the others, for those who wish to live on the ground

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307-301~~14 OUR ARGUMENT AT LAST PRESENTED~~Science a.k.a. Metaphor

Now I will give you a set of equations. They are not mathematical, but metaphorical; and therefore full of science. I repeat: they are equations in the form of metaphor; so they are full of science. It is just that they are not scientific. For they are equations composed only of words. I am thus trying to say my equations are a close description of phenomena which cannot be measured by a scientist. Yet these observations are clear enough to say that interruption is shock, and shock deadens mood, but mood then stirs itself to rouse a wave. Why? Well, the sum of one's experience might suggest that it is probably in the nature of mood to restore itself by raising a wave. Of course, if the wave is too vigorous a response to the shock, new waste may be left behind. But if the wave is adequate to the impulse which begot it, the wave can clear the waste away. So we come to the measure of the absurd, and its enigma: some art movements serve to wash out the sludge of civilization, some leave us deeper in the pit. The art of the absurd is here to purify us or to swamp us—we do not know—suddenly, we are back at the GULF sign. Only now we must recognize that we are confronted by no less than the invisible church of modern science. No small matter. Science has built a wall across the route of metaphor: poets whine before experts.

The difficulty is that none of us, scientists first, are equipped to measure the achievements of science. That vast scientific work of the last fifty years has come most undeniably out of the collective efforts of the twentieth century scientist, but the achievement came also out of the nineteenth century, the Enlightenment, and the Renaissance. Who may now measure where the creativity was finest? The scientists of the last five centuries were the builders of that foundation from which modern scientists have created a modern science. Only these ancestors may have been more extraordinary men. They were adventurers, rebels, courtiers, painters, diplomats, churchmen. Our scientists are only experts; those of the last decade are dull in person as experts, dull as Jonas Salk, they write jargon, their minds are narrow before they are deep. Their knowledge of life is incarcerated.

The huge industrial developments and scientific advances of the twentieth century—the automobile, antibiotics, radium, flight, the structure of the

atom, relativity, the quantum theory, psychoanalysis, the atom bomb, the exploration of space—may speak not so much for the genius of the twentieth century as for the genius of the centuries which preceded it. Modern science may prove to be the final poisoned fruit of the rich European tree, and plague may disclose itself as the most characteristic invention of our time. For science was founded originally on metaphor, would go our *Argument*, and the twentieth century has shipped metaphor to the ghetto of poets. Consider: science began with the poetic impulse to treat metaphor as equal to equation; the search began at that point where a poet looked for a means (which only later became experiment) to measure the accuracy of his metaphor. The natural assumption was that his discovery had been contained in the metaphor, since good metaphor could only originate in the deepest experience of a man; so science still remained attached to poetic vision, and scientific insight derived from culture—it was not the original desire of science to convert nature, rather to reveal it. Faust was still unborn when Aristotle undertook his pioneer observations.

There is a danger in metaphor, however; the danger which is present in poetry: contradictory meanings collect too easily about the core of meaning; unconnected meanings connect themselves. So, science sought a methodology through experiment which would be severe, precise, and able to measure the verity of the insight in the metaphor. Experiment was conceived to protect the scientific artist from ambiguity.

Experiment, however, proliferated; as the scientist ceased to be a great amateur and became expert, experiment ran amuck, and laboratory men of partial, determined, fanatic brilliance became the scientist's director rather than his assistant. The laboratory evicted the mind; the laboratory declared itself the womb of scientific knowledge; laboratory methodology grew as cumbersome as the labor codes of a theatrical union. Metaphor disappeared.

It was replaced by a rabidity of experiment, a fetishism of experiment. Mediocrity invaded science. Experiment became a faith, experiment replaced the metaphor as a means of inquiry, and technological development pushed far ahead of even the most creative intuition. Penicillin was discovered by accident, as a by-product of experiment—it did not come at the end of a poetic journey of the mind. No, it was an orphan and a bastard. And by similar mass methods were all the other antibiotics uncovered, by observing the bactericidal action of a million molds: those which gave the best laboratory evidence of success were marketed by drug companies. But the root of the success was not comprehended. There was no general theory

to point to a particular mold for a specific disease. No metaphor. Metaphor had been replaced by gross assay.

Metaphor. The word has been used generously. Would an example be welcome? The Argument can try to provide it. A modern disease, for example, as it is comprehended in a laboratory, is explained to the laboratory technician, the student, and the layman, as a phenomenon made up of its own pimples, rash, swelling and development, but the disease is not ever presented as a creature—real or metaphorical—a creature which might have an existence separate from its description, even as you and I have an existence which is separate from the fact that we weigh so many pounds and stand so many inches tall. No, the symptom is stripped of its presence. Of course, psychoanalysis made an attempt to say that the root of one disease could be similar to the root of another whose symptoms were different; it was a way of hinting that the metaphor ought to return. Such an approach might have wished ultimately to demonstrate that a malfunction of the liver and an inflammation of the eyes were both connected to despair at one's position in society. But psychoanalysis was hungry, and dependent upon the sciences: like most welfare cases it was therefore not in a rush for poetry—rather it rushed to advertise the discovery of each new tranquilizer for each disorder in emotion. It was anxious to show itself respectable. So psychiatry became pharmacology.

Let us, however, try to travel in the other direction, let us look for an extreme metaphor of disease. Let us suppose that each specific ill of the body is not so much a dull evil to be disposed of by any chemical means whatever, but is, rather, a theatrical production presented by some company in oneself to some audience in oneself. To the degree then that our illness is painful, detailed, clear, and with as much edge as a sharply enunciated voice, the particular disease is a success; the communion of the body (the statement sent from stage to audience) is deep, is resonant. The audience experiences catharsis—at the end of the drama, the body is tired but enriched. By the logic of our metaphor, that is a good disease. The illness has waged conflict, drama, and distress through the body, and has obliged the body to sit in attention upon it, but now the body knows more. Its experience has become more profound, its intimate knowledge of its own disharmony is more acute.

By this reckoning, a disease is the last attempt (at a particular level of urgency) to communicate from one part of the body to the other, a last attempt to tell us that if we do not realize the function before us is now grievously out of harmony, then we will certainly sicken further. On the

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other hand, if the disease which presents itself is not accepted, if one's suffering is not suffered, if there are no statements of our suffering enunciated through the caverns of the body, but if instead our disease is averted by antibiotic, or our pain is silenced by a sedative, then the attempted communication of the illness has failed. The disease having no other expression, sinks, of necessity, into a lower and less elegant condition, it retreats from a particular pain or conflict into a bog of disharmony. Where one organ or two might have borne the original stress, now ten organs share ubiquitous tension. A clear sense of symptom tends to disappear. Infection begins to be replaced by virus, a way of saying the new diseases are not classifiable—their symptoms reveal no characteristic form. One is close to the plague.

If my metaphor is valid, then drugs to relieve pain, and antibiotics to kill infection, are invalid. They are in fact liquidators of possibility, for they deaden the possibility of any quick dramatic growth. A disease checked by an antibiotic has taught the body nothing—nothing to terminate ambiguity—for the body does not know how well it could have cured itself, or even precisely what it had to cure. Yet ambiguity is the seat of disease. Ambiguity demands double communication to achieve a single purpose. It demands we be ready for a particular course of action and yet be ready for its exact opposite. So it demands double readiness or double function for single use. Ambiguity is therefore waste. A man brought back from death by chemicals his own body did not manage to provide cannot know afterward if he should be alive. Small matter, you may argue; he is much alive, is he not? But he has lost biological dignity, he is crucially less alive in a part of his mind and his body. That is one reason metaphors are not encouraged near to science now, for one would then have to say that the patient is alive, but his soul has died a degree.

So the Argument would demand that there be metaphors to fit the vaults of modern experience. That is, in fact, the unendurable demand of the middle of this century, to restore the metaphor, and thereby displace the scientist from his center. Would you call for another example? Think of the elaborate architecture in the structure of a protein molecule. The scientist will describe the structure and list the properties of the molecule (and indeed it took technological achievements close to genius to reach that point) but the scientist will not look at the metaphorical meaning of the physical structure, its meaning as an architectural form. He will not ponder what biological or spiritual experience is suggested by the formal structure of the molecule, for metaphor is not to the present interest of science. It

is instead the desire of science to be able to find the cause of cancer in some virus: a virus—you may count on it—which will be without metaphor. You see, that will then be equal to saying that the heart of the disease of all diseases is empty of meaning, that cancer is caused by a specific virus which has no character or quality, and is in fact void of philosophy and bereft of metaphysics. All those who are there to claim that disease and death are void of meaning are there to benefit from such a virus, for next they can move on to say that life is absurd. We are back once again at the enigma surrounding the art of the absurd. Except now we have hints of the meaning. For if the Argument would propose that a future to life depends on creating forms of an intensity which will capture the complexity of modern experience and dignify it, illumine—if you will—its danger, then the art of the absurd reveals the wound in its own heart and the schizophrenia of its impulse, for the art of the absurd wars with one hand against the monotonies of all totalitarian form in politics, medicine, architecture, and media communication, and with the other, trembles and is numb to any human passion and is savage toward discourse, for the danger is palpable and the discovery of new meaning may live in ambush at the center of a primitive fire.

~~Well, enough of such metaphor. Let us go off to explore the tributaries of form.~~

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THE METAPHYSICS OF THE BELLY

PP 262-299
Cte
35 PP

length

~~Don't~~
~~to~~
~~Stonewall~~

INTERVIEWER

I feel anxious today. I can't seem to get serious. A year ago we had an interview. "The First Day's Interview," you called it. You said at the time it was the beginning of a book. ~~You were going to call it *The Psychology of the Orgy*. Then I don't hear from you again.~~ Months go by. ~~All these months.~~ The piece gets printed. I become a bit of a figure. Suddenly you call me up. Let's go on with the interview, you say. I arrive tape recorder in hand. Now you say you want to do a book on Picasso. I'm confused. I don't know anything about Picasso.

MAILER

That's one reason you were chosen.

INTERVIEWER

I feel like the old lady in *Death in the Afternoon*. Tell me, what happened to *The Psychology of the Orgy*? That pricks the ears much more than Picasso. *Psychology of the Orgy*—it's not like you to throw away a good title.

MAILER

What I have to say about Picasso may not be so dull.

INTERVIEWER

I think he'll be the pretext for you to express yourself on a thousand subjects. I wonder if you have any real personal attachment to Picasso's work?

MAILER

Picasso is good for my eyesight.

INTERVIEWER

Look, I have a confession to make. Our last interview was a vast success in certain limited circles. Marvelous, people kept saying to me, the way