

LA BELLE DAME

Roland Menge

LA BELLE DAME 2

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for Jeanne

LA BELLE DAME 4

She found me roots of relish sweet,
And honey wild, and manna-dew,
And sure in language strange she said
'I love thee true.'

“La Belle Dame sans Merci”

John Keats

Thomas Steward lived in a small apartment on Nob Hill in San Francisco. His apartment consisted of two rooms, a large room that he slept in and used as a living room, and a kitchen that was just big enough for a table and two chairs. He used the kitchen table as a desk. The refrigerator was bare except for a couple of pieces of fruit and some cold water.

The dish counter was stacked with notebooks, paperback books, and sketchpads. Here and there among them were the taxicab waybills and city maps he needed in his work. He drove cab four nights a week, and on his remaining three days attended art classes in a community program.

Steward was 29 years old, a good-looking young man with clean Nordic features, lean and athletic in appearance, but with a tentative look around his eyes suggesting he was quiet and unsure of himself. He had come out of college in 1967 at the height of the Vietnam War and had devoted his post-college years to various activist programs. In the midst of this, at age 25, he had married a young woman that he had loved very much but had had little in common with except sexual attraction and a naive faith in the experimental fervor of those years. This marriage, which had been complicated by his need to fulfill alternative service as a conscientious objector, had lasted only a year and a few months; still it had left him with a sense of failure and personal worthlessness that in the restless years since then he had worn on his brow like the mark of Cain.

Steward had hitch hiked around the country for a half year or so following the breakup of his marriage, living from a backpack, then he had stayed with some old college friends on a communal farm in New Hampshire, and then had gone back to his home state Minnesota and worked in a carpentry collective,—as in the parlance of the era it was called.—But nothing had satisfied him. Finally, Steward had come to San Francisco to make a new start. He had lived in San Francisco for a year and a half and had driven cab for about a year. His art classes were a recent development in his life, his last in a series of attempts to salvage his earlier hopes of finding his

way to an occupation that made sense to him. Though only able to work on his art part-time, he was as serious about it as might have been the case with Vincent Van Gogh. He was impractical but idealistic, the kind of person who does one thing at a time and does it intensely. He drew everything,—not only the models in his classes, but people he saw on the street, the chairs and plants in his apartment, and his own face, which he observed in his the oblong horizontal mirror in his kitchen cabinet and depicted as more severe than it was in actuality.

A half-block from Steward's apartment was a busy thoroughfare called California Street. The cable car ran down this street. Along the sidewalk were small shops, restaurants, and bars. Every evening, at some time or another, Steward came by. He always dressed the same way, in a blue denim railroad coat, brown corduroy pants, and black tennis shoes, and he always seemed in a hurry; he could scarcely walk a block without breaking into a run. Often he carried a sketchpad or book and appeared lost in thought. On his driving nights he came by with his clipboard and maps. His life was as evenly divided as his schedule. On his driving nights, due to the nature of his occupation, he got around and saw his few friends, who all drove cab. On his off nights he kept to himself. He was a lonely guy and still had the same feeling of inner emptiness that had been with him since the breakup of his marriage.

Among the shops on California Street was a small bar called Club 1550. Steward had been in this bar a few times since it was right around the corner from his apartment, but he had never noticed much about it except that it served as a kind of living room for the men who lived upstairs from it in the rooming house called the Stanley Hotel that occupied the upper stories of the same building. The bartender was a big man with a mustache. There were red lights around the side of the bar and a pool table in the back. Whenever Steward came in, he ordered a beer and sat by himself at one of the side tables. He felt awkward in bars and was too shy to initiate conversations with strangers.

One evening when passing by, however, Steward

noticed that instead of the guy with the mustache a woman was tending the bar. Steward got a glimpse of her as he passed by. She was at the far side of the bar by the pool table. Just as he looked in, she raised back her head in a smile. Something about her was immediately appealing to him. Whenever he came by, he craned his neck to see if she was there. Apparently, she worked only a few nights a week. Then one night, observing she was there, he went in for a closer look.

She came over at once to take his order, smiled at how uncomfortable he seemed, brought him a beer, and smiled again, more faintly. She appeared to be in her late 20's. She had light-brown hair, shoulder-length and fine in texture, an oval face, small nose and mouth, and serious green eyes; she was of medium height, full-figured with hips that seemed too large for her shoulders, and small, shapely breasts that tilted to the sides. When she smiled at him, she brushed her hair back from her brow and tucked it behind her left ear. The silver loop in her exposed ear was the only thing overtly feminine in her apparel. She was dressed in jeans, a T-shirt, and a flannel shirt that she left unbuttoned and wore outside her pants in an obvious effort to deemphasize the largeness of her hips.

While Steward sipped on his beer, she came over with a dish-towel in her hand and chatted with an old man who was the only person between Steward and the door. Although there was an empty barstool next to him, the old man was standing at the bar. He had two glasses, a tall glass with beer and a short glass with whiskey. Now and then he would pour some of the beer into the whiskey and swish it around with his straw. He looked depressed.

“How you doing, Clarence?” the intriguing waitress said to him. “You’re not looking too chipper.”

“Oh, I’m doing pretty good,” he said, looking up. “I’m doing alright.”

“And how’s Katherine? I heard she’s back home.”

“Why, yes, she is, but she’s still pretty sick.”

The waitress talked to the old man for a couple minutes, then squeezed his hand, and went back over to the other side

of the bar by the pool table. This was just an ordinary bar-room interchange, but what impressed Steward in it was her straight-forwardness and plain manner. She interacted with the younger men in the same genuine way. She joked with them, seemed concerned about them, even exchanged crudities with them, but kept her own ground. There was something solid and substantial about her, a complete lack of pretense or coquettishness. Another thing he noticed was that as soon as she stopped smiling her face became sad, almost severe, a severity that contrasted with the girliness of her features,—not only contrasted with them, but tightened her face across the forehead in such a manner that she suddenly appeared almost mannish. Sometimes she walked to the quiet side of the bar and stood by herself looking pensively toward the street. Then her face changed again, filled with rich nuances of emotion that he found interesting and attractive. At such times, with her small hands clasped together in front of her above her round hips, and her lovely face set firmly in a thoughtful pose, she looked like a Renaissance woman. She made him think in particular of Rembrandt's woman at the half-open Dutch door.

Steward ordered a second beer, drank it quickly, and got up to go. At the door, he glanced back. She was standing by the pool table with a small group of men. She waved at him and called, "Good night now. Come back."

As Steward lay in bed that night, the face of this woman kept coming back into his mind. Her loveliest feature was her eyes; they were intelligent, sensitive, and most of all, sad. He thought about how she had brushed back her hair when she smiled at him. In his mind's eye he saw her exposed ear with the silver loop.

Whenever a woman entered Steward's life in any force, she did so in this imaginal way, capturing his image-oriented mind. He was odd in that his relations with women had been limited and intense (as, indeed, had been everything in his life due to his one-mindedness). He had attended an all-boy's high school, and for three of his four college years had attended an all-men's university. In part due to this, and in part due to his social awkwardness, he had finished college

with little experience of women, either emotional or sexual. His wife had been the first significant relationship in his life, the first woman he had really gotten to know, the first he had loved. Since then Steward had had occasional affairs, many of which had ended unhappily because of his restlessness and indecisiveness.

Generally-speaking, his love-affairs had taken place in groups, each group occurring at some time in his life when for some often unrelated, incidental reason Steward had felt good enough about himself to overcome his basic quietness. One of these groups of affairs had taken place the previous summer when Steward had arrived at the philosophical decision that he wanted to live fully in the present. Various women, friends of friends from Minnesota, had come to town on summer visits,—the town in this case being not just any town but the fabled San Francisco.—Steward had shown them around in his cab and had found himself in the odd role of cavalier. It was a role that seemed out of character to him, but that he so much wanted to believe in that he had played it to the hilt. This had gone well enough until at the end of the summer when he had become involved with an 18-year-old girl that he had first initiated in sex and then proved unable to satisfy. It wasn't impotence exactly, as he saw it, but an inability to detach his body from his mind,—this plus shame at the faked *joi de vivre* that he had used to win her interest. Ironically, far from lessening Steward's ongoing interest in women, this experience with sexual incompetence had heightened his interest to a feverish pitch, such that now he noticed every woman who approached him on the street. When women glanced at him, he met their eyes head-on. The feminine world, which he had never been able to understand, was now more mysterious to him, more incomprehensible in its mixed sting and softness than it had been before; and this sense of mystery was increased further by his new awareness of age, because in a panicked, irrational way, Steward sensed that time was running out for him, whatever it was he needed to understand had to be met and understood while he still had a chance. Drawing from this, the waitress in Club 1550 was especially appealing to him because her straightforwardness

and lack of frills made her seem more basically feminine; it was just such basic femininity that Tom Steward wanted to confront.

Determined to interact in some substantial way with the severe-faced, green-eyed waitress, Steward returned to Club 1550 in the following week. He took a seat at the counter. As before, she came over to take his order, smiling inscrutably at him. It was quiet in the bar. The old man Clarence stood in his usual place near the door pouring beer in his whiskey. Some young men were playing pool. A man and woman sat at one of the side tables speaking in low voices. The waitress was dressed as before, in jeans, a T-shirt, and an open flannel shirt. Her hair was tucked behind her ear. When she turned her head, her earring flickered in the light. She came down to Steward's side of the bar and conversed with Clarence as she smoked a cigarette, then when she went back to the other side of the bar, she left her pack of cigarettes on the counter between Steward and the old man. Later, she came around the bar with a cup of coffee in her hand and sat on a stool by her pack of cigarettes. She sat facing outwards so that she was turned in an opposite direction from Clarence and Steward.

After a while, she looked at Steward. It was her usual look, friendly not in the least flirtatious, a firm, thoughtful look. Once again, he noticed the mannish severity of her brow.

"You must live around here, don't you?" she said.

"Yes, how did you know?"

"I always see you come by. You always wear that same blue coat."

He laughed. "Yes, that's the extent of my wardrobe."

"What do you do?"

"Drive a cab," he answered apologetically.

"Too bad."

"Why is it bad?"

"You must hear a lot of crazy things. You must see a lot of crazy people."

He nodded. "I'm afraid you're right."

Soon after this, she went back to the other, side of the

bar. He went out, waving good-bye. This brief interchange with her wasn't as much as he had hoped for, but it had shown some mild interest in him on her part, he concluded. Whether this interest was romantic or just friendly, he wasn't sure. At first Steward felt encouraged by what had happened and then discouraged and frustrated because he realized how hard it would be and how long it would take to get to know her in the bar.

Steward had one close friend that he talked with about women, a Jew named Solomon Weinstein who drove cab for the same small company and whom he saw on the streets now and then. Weinstein was a huge man with black frizzy hair, a wide handsome brow, an Aramaic nose, and a black bushy beard that made him look like a patriarch. He was from Brooklyn, New York. He had come out to San Francisco with the intention of studying primal therapy, but for some reason or another, he had become disenchanted with that, and had taken up cabdriving as a way to support his numerous political and artistic projects. Weinstein was a kind, affable man who was liked by everyone and regarded as a natural leader.

Steward admired Weinstein because this "cabbie poet," as some of the drivers called him, managed to balance his intellectual life with mundane life; he was the sort of person who engages with everyone and is everyone's confidante. Steward and Weinstein had known one another for only a few months but they were on intimate terms and knew the intimate details of one another's lives. They talked about everything from politics to traffic patterns, but most of all about women.

On a night soon after this, Steward and Weinstein sat at a table in a bar in North Beach called The Paradise Cafe. A steady stream of cars passed by just on the other side of the window where they looked out from a table arranged with candles, beer bottles, and a mixed pile of pretzels and beer nuts. Across the street were some apartment buildings, and, next to them, a two-story brick school, in the large windows of which could be seen the flashing reflection of the neon lights of some of the nightclubs obliquely in view on The

Strip. This bar was on Broadway Street just down from the nightclub section where the street was darker and dipped down toward the onramp that led to the Bay Bridge. It was Sunday night. By custom some of the younger cabdrivers congregated at this bar every Sunday night about midnight since after midnight on Sunday there wasn't much business on the streets.

"She put her cigarettes next to you, she came over to talk to you—that certainly indicates a certain amount of interest on her part," Weinstein was saying, stroking his beard. "So what happened then?"

"Not much, Sol, I'm afraid. Not much at all. We had a meaningless conversation. I can't remember what she said... Oh yea, she asked me what I do. I told her I drive cab."

"I suppose she was impressed."

"To say the least. She asked me for my autograph."

The bar was a hubbub of activity. There were a couple small conventions in town and most of the drivers had had a good night. A yellow haze of smoke buffeted by the ceiling fans hung over the swarming bodies in the room.

"The odd thing about her," Steward remarked in his intense manner, "is she always has this mask of severity on her face. Mask is the only way to describe it because it seems put on. I don't mean contrived, and when she smiles, it isn't there, but it's such a total cover-up, you know. It's hard to know what she's thinking. It's a kind of poker face, you know what I mean, Sol?"

Weinstein shrugged. "Yea, I think I do, Stewie. You see women like this everywhere, and especially in places like bars. They've learned a tough facade. It's what they need to get by because they're dealing constantly with people who are looking to take advantage. It's like us in the cab. You got to keep your guard up all the time. Have you ever had an experience with that?"

"Yea, once, actually. I came back from Christmas, you know. Minnesota nice."

"And what was the result?"

"Nice to the wrong person, got robbed."

"Guy with a gun?"

“Knife to the throat.”

“Well, point made, I guess. Who can say what her experience with men has been? I wouldn’t be surprised if she’s been raked over the coals.” .

Steward nodded. “Nothing to play around with.”

Weinstein smiled. “But still you might try.”

When it came to women, the two friends were like night and day. Weinstein was extroverted but cautious; Steward was quiet but impetuous. He was shy but managed to initiate affairs with pure brash guts. It came from his basic intensity and impatience, and Weinstein knew this very well as he had observed Steward in action pushing ahead.

The conversation lagged off. A couple of other drivers came over to talk. The topic of conversation changed from women to the various adventures of the previous night. There was the usual exchange of cabdriver stories; all of which began the same way, “Picked up this guy...” or “picked up this lady...”

Steward and Weinstein took turns driving one another home from work, Steward using his cab to take Weinstein home, and Weinstein using his personal car. Later the two of them sat in the front seat of Weinstein’s car. Whenever Weinstein drove, he kept his window open and stuck his nose out like a dog. They were riding down a deserted thoroughfare through a corridor of blinking yellow lights.

“You’ve been very quiet, Thomas,” said Weinstein, “You still have your mind on that lady?”

“Still have my mind on her, yes, though I’m not so sure it’s doing any good.”

“So what have you been thinking?”

“I guess there’s nothing more to say. It’s just going to take patience.” This thought brought a pained expression to his face. Then he smiled. “But you ought to see her, Sol,—full body, oval face, sad eyes,—a real Madonna.”

Again, the conversation lapsed, but later, when Steward was walking from the car to his door, he turned around and looked at Weinstein, who was still in the street, waiting for him to go in.

“You know, Sol, I just made a tremendous decision.”

“What’s that?”

“I’m going in there tomorrow night and point-blank ask her out. You may favor the slow approach, but the prospect of spending my whole life in a bar isn’t especially appealing to me.”

“Now why do I think you might actually do that?” Sol remarked as he drove off.

From this moment until the next night, Steward’s mind was on his new plan. He went running the next morning and later went down to work out at the Tenderloin YMCA. This was how he prepared for any such event,—with exercise and with intensity building until like an obedient automaton, unable to turn back, he implemented his plan.

All day long Steward felt distracted. He tried to draw and read but he couldn’t concentrate. Then about 7 P.M. he smoked a joint that Weinstein had given him. Sitting at the kitchen table, he studied the reflection of his face in the oblong horizontal mirror. Then he went out. In his stoned state of mind, the whole situation seemed absurd. At the pizza joint on the corner, couples were seated by candles at the tables by the window. Steward came by in his blue coat with the collar up, his hands in his pockets, and a frown on his brow.

Like a lamb going to slaughter, he approached the bar and went in and took the place in the middle that he had visualized in his mind. The old man Clarence was standing in his usual place. He looked up and nodded. “How do you do?”

The green-eyed waitress came over to get his order, smiling at how uncomfortable he looked. “Well, if it isn’t Blue Coat. I suppose you’d like a beer.”

He nodded seriously. She brought him a beer and went back to the other side of the bar. He sat hunched over his beer and looked at the wall above the cash register where there was a hodge-podge of postcards, newspaper clippings, and sports pennants which were tacked, taped, and plastered on it in every conceivable fashion. The juke box was playing. Her voice could be heard above the other voices in the bar.

When he finished his beer, Steward got up, walked down to the other side of the bar, and motioned to her. She came over, expecting to get him another beer. He looked at her with a feverish intensity. She smiled.

“You should come over by the pool table. You look so gloomy over here by yourself.”

”Listen,” he said, frowning. “This may sound rather stupid, but the only reason I came here tonight was to ask you out. So I’d like to ask you directly, ‘Will you go out with me?’”

She looked surprised. Her face flushed slightly. “No one ever asks me out,” she said. “They just make cow eyes.”

Since this wasn’t exactly an answer, Steward looked to the side. He watched one of the men at the pool table make a shot. He felt foolish. It suddenly occurred to him that he had made a mistake. He began thinking how he could make a graceful exit. But when he looked back, he discovered that she was smiling at him. She brushed her hair back from her brow and tucked it behind her ear.

“But if you really want to, I’ll give you my number,” she said. She tore off a receipt slip from a pad by the cash register. On it she wrote a phone number and beside it the name, “Sarah Kerwin.”

She shrugged. “I’ll be home tomorrow at 6 P.M. You can call me then if you want to.”

“Well, thank you, thank you. That’s really fine,” he said, nodding. “And I will call.” He picked up his coat. “I won’t hang around now.” He went immediately out. At the corner by the pizza joint, he broke into a run and ran the rest of the way back to his apartment.

He called the next evening at the appointed time and made a date for the following Monday.

The next night he drove cab. He spotted Weinstein coming toward him in the opposite direction on Stockton Street in Chinatown. They hollered to one another from the windows of their cabs.

“You talk to Green Eyes?” Weinstein yelled.

Steward held up the slip with her phone number on it. “I’m going to see her Monday night.”

Weinstein's bearded face lit up with unfeigned admiration. "The kid is invincible! Give him one night and he gets her number!"

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Tom Steward went to see Sarah Kerwin the following Monday as he had said. It turned out that she lived not far from the garage where he picked up his cab, in a three-story brick apartment building next to a corner grocery store.

She met him at the door. "Oh, it's Blue Coat. You know, I never asked you your name."

"Thomas. Thomas Steward."

"Thomas. That's a nice name. Come in."

She lived in a large flat. Immediately to the left of the outside door was a kitchen. It was this room into which she first ushered Steward. The kitchen was scantily furnished—just a table and some chairs, the curtains were faded. The kitchen table was strewn with books° Steward immediately noticed that there were children's drawings on the wall. Soon he observed that a pair of tiny eyes was watching him from the dark hallway. When he looked towards them, they retreated down the hall.

"Well, this is the pad," said Sarah Kerwin apologetically. She showed him around. Her own bedroom was in the back. The window looked out to a small backyard bordered by a high plank fence on which fell the trapezoidal projection of the light from the small lamp on the eatable beside her unmade bed. On this eatable was a record player; a few record albums were stacked against the legs. At the foot of the bed was a small dresser. The room seemed sparse and cold; it lacked the feminine accoutrements that men expect to find in a woman's room.

She led him back up the hall to a closed door. The door was poorly fitted to the door jamb; a horizontal shaft of light came out from the bottom where there was a large gap between the bottom of the door and the floor. She tapped on the door.

"Aicha, are you in there? I'd like to introduce you to someone."

The door opened, revealing an amazing mess of crumpled clothes, toys, coloring books, and story books strewn around and on top of a single mattress in the middle of the floor. In the midst of this astonishing confusion stood a diminutive version of Sarah Kerwin, a girl about seven years old with the same stocky body and nearly identical facial features—the same small nose and mouth and oval face—but with darker hair and eyes. And when Sarah Kerwin introduced her to Steward, she nodded and looked at him with the same straightforward look, never bashing an eye.

Sarah laughed. “Aicha, how can you live in the midst of such a mess?”

“It’s not a mess,” said Aicha firmly, in the meanwhile eyeing Steward with frank curiosity. “I like it this way.”

Sarah showed Steward the rest of the apartment. Across the hall from her own bedroom was a sitting room with a bookcase, a piano, and with batik hangings on the wall. Next to Aicha’s room was another bedroom which, she explained, belonged to a gay man named Rusty whom she gave room and board in exchange for child-care.

Later, they stood in the kitchen and talked. Sarah was dressed in jeans and a white blouse. She looked fresh and clean and smelled faintly of soap or perfume. She acted more relaxed, less defensive, than she had seemed at the bar, displaying a lighter side of her personality. At the same time, she showed herself to be a serious, articulate woman. She had been, as she described it, “involved in the Movement, working as a printer at a radical press.”

“But you know how that goes,” she said. “People got older. They went off to lead their practical lives. And where was I? I was nowhere. I was getting stoned all the time, trying to be a free spirit. And I was for, a while, I guess, but never got anything done. I just let everything go until my life became totally oppressive. Then I split up with Aicha’s dad. I had to get my act together in order to survive.”

“He doesn’t help you out financially?”

”Oh, he does from time to time, you know how it goes. He’s an artist, the undisciplined type. I see him from time to

time. But if I had depended on him, I'd have been down the tube a long time ago."

She explained that she was taking courses in linguistics at a state college and hoping to get into graduate school. That was why she worked at the bar. She worked four nights a week and was taking ten credits of classes.

After a while, Aicha came out in the kitchen to get some milk from the refrigerator. She smiled at Steward as she walked in. She poured herself a glass of milk and sat at the kitchen table.

"And Aicha and I went around the world, if you can believe it," said Sarah, smiling. "Didn't we, Aicha?"

"Yes," said the girl, "but I was so little that I can't remember it."

"Around the world?" said Steward.

"Yes," said Sarah. "My mother died a while back. I inherited some money. It wasn't much. My mother spent her whole life getting to a point where she could start her own millinery shop. This was in Oklahoma City where I grew up. My mother and father were separated. My mother and I lived in an old neighborhood with a lot of little houses—you know, the kind with a little yard, and each yard has some bushes and a couple trees. I got this money and wanted to do something special with it so, just like that, we went around the world. I just wanted to prove that we could do it. I suppose it was a foolish thing to do. We started out in Europe and then wound up in Turkey and the Middle East. Of course, I wasn't lacking for masculine attention. A single mother with a child brings out the protective instinct in Arabian men. It blows their minds!"

Steward laughed. He nodded thoughtfully, looking first at Sarah and then at the diminutive version who sat at the table looking directly toward him with intelligent eyes.

There was a neighborhood bar around the corner from her place. They went there later to sit and talk. She sat at the very end of the bar.

"I always sit over here because nobody bothers me," she remarked.

Steward had hoped to be more in command of the

situation than he felt; she was more formidable than he had expected her to be. When he looked at her face, her eyes distracted him from the conversation. He noticed that her irises, which in the light from the lamp above her appeared brilliantly green, were circled by a faint but distinct ring of gray.

“So what do you really do?” she said. “You seem too intelligent to just drive a cab.”

He told her about his artistic studies. Remembering how she had criticized her ex-lover’s lack of discipline, he tried to present himself in the most solid terms. Even so, he felt unconvincing as he talked; he felt as though he were outside of himself. Looking on from the side; his words came out with a hollow ring and in a higher pitch like that of a boy; then, later, to top it all off, he made a feeble pass which met with no success. By this time, they had returned to her apartment. They were sitting together on a couch by the piano.

She laughed and warded off his hands, leaning away from his nose and mouth which he had pressed into her face like a puppy.

“For such a quiet guy, you sure come on like a tiger. I try to make a distinction between liberated and loose.”

He didn’t like being regarded as quiet. He felt humiliated, felt like he had tried to play Don Juan and been cast as The Fool. But at the door, noticing his consternation, she took his hand, looked at him sweetly, and kissed his cheek.

“I would like to see you again, Thomas. Will you call?”

He nodded assent. “I’ll stop by the bar.”

No sooner had he left her than his own world settled on him again. The fog horns droned from the bay. He walked homeward slowly, his collar up against the wind, his hands in his pockets. Standing on a hill above Van Ness Avenue, he watched the traffic pass—a stream of white lights, the light reflected dully on the pavement. In a store window on Polk Street, he studied the vague reflection of his fade.

Arriving home, he sat alone in the rocking chair in his large room, looking at the familiar objects in his apartment—

the lamp on the China box by his couch, the books on the shelves by his closet, plants by the window. Then he opened the double doors behind which his stow-away bed was stored upright against the wall. He pulled the bed down to the floor, arranged the covers, and lay down. What he remembered about her was her eyes—the gray circles around the green irises. And what did he want from her? He didn't know. He always rushed ahead because it was impossible for him to consolidate, to sit still, at least where women were concerned. He felt attracted to her, wanted to make love to her, but at the same time already felt constrained. And constrained by what? By the possibility of a heavy involvement. He found his solitary life oppressive at times, but also felt that it was the life he was supposed to live, that there was something in it that he was supposed to confront. Women were all he cared about, the only truly beautiful things in life, and yet they remained on the periphery to whatever was at the heart of this confrontation.

Several nights later, he drove cab. He stopped in at the bar to see her, parking his cab in the narrow alley between the bar and the flower shop next-door

Coming around the corner of the bar from the alley, he saw her inside. She was standing at the sink, washing some glasses, with a sad, thoughtful look on her face. He realized when he caught this first glimpse of her how beautiful she was, and how much he already cared for her. He pushed the door open. She looked up and smiled. There were only a few people in the bar—a couple by themselves at a back table, two men playing pool. The juke box was playing.

She assessed him firmly and then a little smile came to her lips. She nodded. “So it's you. I didn't think you would come.”

He laughed. “Didn't think I would come—why not? I told you I would.”

She shrugged. “I know you did, but you know how people are.”

‘How are they?’

“More complex than they suppose. They underestimate the complexity—

“The complexity of what?”

“I don’t know. The general complexity, I guess.”

He looked at her. She wasn’t wearing her usual jeans and T-shirt costume but, instead, a blue evening gown which somehow seemed incongruous with her personality. The dress had a low-cut V-neck which slightly exposed the roundness of her breasts. She had green earrings in her ears and a green jade heart on a silver chain on her neck, still, when she lit her cigarette, and swept back her hair from her moist forehead, there was something masculine and boyish about her; she looked like a feminine boy in a dress.

She noticed him looking her over and shrugged apologetically. “I always wear this dress when I need more money. When I let my boobs hang out, I make more money on tips.”

He laughed. He found her ambiguous gender intriguing. He felt himself to be in vague complicity with her, though what exactly was the nature of this complicity, he didn’t know.

It was a few minutes before closing. She sounded last call. The two men who had been playing pool went out with their arms around one another’s shoulders like Army buddies. The couple who had been sitting by themselves went out silently, waving good night. Sarah locked the door and began gathering the dirty glasses, sliding them down the counter toward the sink.

“You can help me if you want to,” she said.

He got up and nodded’.

“If you want to, you can take out the trash. There’s a bin in the back.”

They washed the glasses and ashtrays, lugged in some boxes of beer from the back-room, swept the floor, put the tables in order, and finally sat down at a table by the juke box. She put a quarter in the juke-box and sighed.

“Another day, another buck.”

Outside on the sidewalk, the two men who had been playing pool were standing by a fire hydrant. Some of the other men who lived upstairs in the rooming house had joined them. She motioned toward them. “Sad eyes. They

have nowhere to go. The same old thing again and again.”

He said nothing, just nodded thoughtfully. She was counting her tips, arranging the coins in little piles of nickels, dimes, and quarters. “See, what did I tell you? Eleven dollars and thirty five cents! Now that ain’t pigeon shit! Last night I only made three bucks.”

She motioned outside again. “It’s true. They’re sad. They’ve no place to go. And would you believe it, Thomas? They all get around to making a pass. Every one of them, and every night in some way. And it’s always in some half-hearted way that they know won’t work. It’s just a perfunctory pass, like some orange peels for the Buddha. And look at me. Am I a great beauty?”

“You look pretty good to me.”

“Sure, I look okay. As they say, I’ll pass. But it’s not even a personal thing. It doesn’t matter that it’s me. It’s the same every night. When it’s time for last call, they ask me to bed down.”

“And do you?”

“Oh, come on, Thomas. You’re too decent to say that. Do I look like a floozie? It’s bad enough going through the whole trip of learning the necessary facade of toughness that you need to get by without having decent people regard me as a whore, and yet be okay with them—because they’re not bad guys, they’re not wolves in the classical senseBut you, Thomas, I can tell you’re different. You try to hide it but you’re nice. You’re the gentle type.” She smiled. “I got you pegged.”

He shrugged.

She smiled. “Am I right?”

“A wolf in sheep’s clothing. You’ve heard the old story.”

“Is that what you are? I’ll bet you’ve had your share of poor innocent women.”

“No, to tell you the truth, I haven’t.”

“And what have you had then?”

“Just sporadic affairs,”

“And what happened to them?”

“What happens to anyone: They just didn’t work out.”

She seemed bothered by his comments. She looked sad.

“You want more details?”

“No, details don’t matter.”

“You seem bothered.”

“Oh, I am bothered, but it’s not you... I’m just not that resilient, that all. It’s just so depressing, isn’t it, how people come and go?”

Later they went out. He watched as she fitted the padlock on the door. The streets and sidewalks were deserted. A trash truck was coming down the hill, its yellow lights blinking. She saw the back end of the cab.

“I didn’t know you had your cab. Can you give me a ride home?”

“Of course.”

She was quiet on the way to her apartment. She sat on the far side of the seat by the window, looking out. They headed up California Street toward Van Ness. An old man with white hair and a white beard was scrounging through a trash can. An old Chinese couple stood on the corner beside a blinking semaphore. The man carried a paper bag; the woman held the man’s arm and stood twisted to one side. They crossed the street, the man looking gravely ahead, the woman limping. Some male hookers, young men with pretty faces, stood on another corner smoking cigarettes.

“You look sad,” he said.

She looked at him and smiled wanly. “Not sad, Thomas, just tired.”

“Well, at least you did well on tips.”

“Yes, I’m glad about that.”

She looked out the window again and then looked back at him. “Do you like it when I call you ‘Thomas’? I bet you don’t you seem like the, short-name type.”

“I never have liked it, but when you call me that, it seems okay.”

“Just okay?”

“No, more than okay. I guess I like it.”

She smiled. “I’ll call you ‘Thomas’ then.”

“Well, we got that much settled, at least. What’s next?”

“Who can say?”

At her apartment, he pulled the cab to the curb, shut off the motor, put his hand on her shoulder, and began caressing her neck. She was still on the far side of the seat by the window, and still turned away from him.

Finally she looked at him and said: "Not here, Thomas. Do you want to come in?"

He nodded and looked at her gravely. "Are you sure you want me to?"

She touched his hand. "Yes, I'm sure. Come in. Can you park your cab here?"

"My garage is right down there on Sutter Street. I'll bring my cab in and then come back."

"I'll go with you. I can wait outside."

"There's nobody there at night. I put my money in a slot."

At the garage, she sat and watched as he read the numbers from the meter and wrote them on his waybill. He counted his money, arranged the bills face-up and in order of their denomination, folded them in half, and then folded the waybill around the money so that it made a square packet. On the face of this packet, he wrote his name and the number of his cab. Then they got out of the cab and locked all the doors. He ran across the street with the packet, dropped it in the safe box slot, and came running back with his blue coat in his hand. He threw it over his shoulder. They walked up the street without talking. She was wearing a Peabody coat that matched poorly with her dress. She buttoned the coat at the neck and seemed lost in thought. There were some small trees on the side of the street. The branches swayed in the wind. A cab came by; the driver honked; Steward waved.

Her apartment building was two blocks from the garage. He watched as she opened the front door. The front lobby was dark—the only light was a small lamp that stood on a table by a large gilded mirror. She led him to the door of her apartment. .

She put her finger to her mouth. "We have to be quiet," she whispered. "Aicha is sleeping."

He followed her down the dark hallway to her room, stepping over some clumped up clothes and toys that had

overflowed from Aicha's room. She turned the handle of her bedroom door and opened it quietly. They went in. She turned on the AP lamp on the entable by her bed and put a record on her record player, then took off her coat and put it in the closet. Steward sat down on her bed and looked around him, newly impressed with the starkness of her room. On her dresser-top, beside a comb and hair-brush, was a flowered jewelry box which was faded and looked very old; it was the only object in her room which could be identified as feminine.

Next to the jewel-box was an encased photograph of a young man with dark hair and a beard.

She saw him looking at it. "Aicha's father," she said. "And the jewel-box was my mother's. It's the only memento of her that I have. I'm not the sentimental type."

Steward nodded. "You never mention your dad."

"I never knew him much. My parents were separated. I do see him from time to time. He lives in Oklahoma City. I'm going out there for Thanksgiving. It's not like we're father and daughter. We're just friends."

She sat down next to him on the bed. He kissed her cheek.

"Should I get a candle?" she asked. "I think I have one in the kitchen."

"Yes, that would be nice."

She went to the kitchen and came back with a candle in a glass container. She lit the candle and put out the lamp. The light from the candle flickered on the walls of the room and outside her window on the plank fence in the back yard.

She looked at him gravely; she shrugged. He kissed her again, pulled her towards him, and began loosening her dress.

He had been through this moment of anticipation many times before, and with a reaction to it that had varied through the years. During his marriage, he had felt himself to be a good lover, but his brief experience with impotence had shaken his confidence. It was the moment during which he was positioning himself that he felt most insecure. Once inside of her, he felt more sure of himself.

She made love quietly, with the same sad expression that she wore in the bar. She sighed when he sunk into her, then made no sound at all. He watched her face for some indication of what she wanted, some reassurance, but her eyes were closed and she seemed distant.

“Don’t wait for me,” she whispered. “When you want to, just come.”

Afterwards, they lay without talking. In the morning when he awoke, she was already up.

“You can get yourself some coffee,” she said. “There’s some water on the stove. You might have to heat it.”

Her daughter was running around nude. Apparently this was by a matter of principle. Her gay house-sitter came in. He was a pleasant-looking man with long hair and a beard and a charming personality.

Afterwards, they went for a walk. There was a park a few blocks from her house on the top of a hill. A wide stairway led up the hill from the lower side. They walked up the stairs together and sat on the grass at the top of the hill next to a children’s playground. To the east were the tall buildings of a medical center; beyond them some of the downtown buildings could be seen. In the other direction were the Victorian houses and brick apartment buildings of the residential section where Sarah lived, with here and there among them, a church steeple or a school. Steward felt bad about how poorly their first sexual encounter had been; judging by her silence, she felt the same way; and yet the subject was astutely avoided. She wore a red kerchief which she tied under her chin like an old lady; her face looked plain and pale. As on the previous night, she wore her peabody coat; she walked along with her head bent slightly forward and her hands in her pocket. Steward walked beside her with his blue coat slung over his shoulder.

“When Aicha was first born, I used to come up here with her,” Sarah informed. “I used to sit here and look off. I like this place. It reminds me of a pyramid. I like the wide steps.”

“Was that a good time for you, after you had Aicha?”

“Oh, it was in a way. I didn’t plan to have her, you

know. It just happened. I mean, I got pregnant and almost had her by default. I thought about an abortion but couldn't make up my mind to go ahead with it. Even after she was born, the whole thing seemed unreal to me. Me with a child—it seemed very strange. But, of course, I do love her, I've loved her all along, and I was very lonely because Carlos and I—Carlos is Aicha's dad—we weren't getting along. So it was nice to have some other person around. I was so fucked up then. I won't bore you with all the terrible details." She laughed. "I'll save them for my therapist. Haha. I'm just kidding."

"I wouldn't mind the details."

"I know you wouldn't, Thomas. But I'll spare you anyway."

It was a beautiful morning. There were some pine and eucalyptus trees on the side of the hill and some dirt plots with flowers. From the branches of the trees, some song sparrows were singing. It should have been a special occasion but he felt restless and wanted to be off by himself. The bad sex of the previous night had placed a burden on him, and her somber talk made the whole situation seem oppressive.

As if she detected how he was feeling, she tried to change the mood of the conversation on the way back to her apartment. She talked about how beautiful the day was and how San Francisco was such a beautiful city. He chimed in but the sad mood lingered on nonetheless.

He kissed her goodbye at the door.

"I have to be going," he said. He was going to say that he would phone but due to his confusion said nothing.

Halfway down the front hall, he looked back at her. She was still at the door of her apartment, watching him leave.

"Will I hear from you again?" she asked. "I don't need to know when, but I would like to know if."

He smiled. "Of course, you'll see me. I'll stop in at the bar. Next week sometime. Okay?"

She smiled. "Okay. Thanks for bringing me home last night."

"Anytime, Sarah. Service with a smile."

He went out. His first thought was to go home, but after walking a couple blocks in that direction, he changed his mind and took a bus out to the ocean. He spent the rest of the afternoon hiking along the cliffs above Land's End, feeling confused. He felt relieved to be alone.

3

During the year that Thomas Steward had lived in New Mexico—this, again, was the year his wife had left him, and the reservation border town of Gallup had been his location at that time,—he had kept a journal (or, actually, a series of them) in which, in daily entries made in meticulous hand, he had asked himself again and again what had gone wrong with his marriage, how he had failed in it, what hope there was for the future, and so on. Steward was studious by nature, and so he had resorted to this studious method to investigate the confusion that her departure had brought about in him. There was some irony in this, he knew very well, because it was precisely this tendency to intellectualize which his wife (whose name was Christine) had found his hardest trait to accept. Steward knew it was true, as a good friend had once told him, that he was “too ponderous,”—in general and especially that had been the case with respect to Christine, a free-spirited type who loved music and had little interest in philosophy or abstract ideas. Steward had wanted to be less ponderous so to be more acceptable to Christine, but in the end, out of desperation, he had fallen back upon self-analysis because it had had proven to be the only way out of his depression and perplexity.

There had been more to Steward's ponderousness, of course, than just brooding on his own situation. He had been concerned, also, with the related, more general questions his experience had forced on him, questions regarding sexuality, sex roles, the possibility of a man and woman ever having a good long-term relationship, the viability of marriage as an institution, and so on,—it must be kept in mind that the breakup of his marriage had happened in the years 1969 and 1970 when questions like this were being debated by many people; everything conventional was being thrown to the

wind by the rebellious, hippie-era young people of that time. Steward had hoped to be through with these questions by the time he left Gallup, but his experiences in the years that had followed had only increased his bewilderment. In New Hampshire, for example, during the time Steward was working there on a communal farm, he had lived with four other adults, two of them a man and woman he had known in college. He had known them both as single persons, and then had gotten used to them as a married couple, only to have them both give up on this and declare that marriage was an archaic institution. The other two adults on the farm were single women, but with children from past marriages. So there again had been complications.

One of the main reasons why Steward had gone to New Hampshire was to confront this sort of social behavior. Deep within himself, he wanted to believe that he could love and be loved by some woman in a conventional way. He knew that he needed the emotional security of such a relationship; and yet as a result of his years in alternate activities of one kind or another he had also felt a need (an intellectual need but a need nonetheless) to be loyal to the vague ideals of the "Movement." He was ready, if this was required, to deny his personal emotional needs in order to further the greater cause of increased personal liberty (that is, the cause of creating a societal situation,—creating it by living it.—in which such personal liberty was possible). But all this had added up to a clash of emotional and intellectual concerns of such intensity that it stood in the way of everything else he wanted to do with his life. And where had all of this questioning led? In recent years, Steward had seen many of his friends who had led so-called alternative lifestyles, abandon these lifestyles, and in subtle ways often disguised to themselves, take up conventional lives.

Steward alone had held out among those he had known; conventional life disgusted him; he had nothing but contempt for people who tip-toed through life with cautious decisions. And yet he, too, had carried his questioning to the point of sterility and exhaustion, and in his own way had rejected it. In Minnesota, as another example, during the year before he

had left for San Francisco, he had belonged to a men's group in which, seated in a circle with these other men, he had discussed sexuality and sex roles even more, the same tired topics that he had picked apart by himself in his journal in Gallup. This too had led nowhere. The only times the men's group had truly hit it off as a group were the times they had played basketball together or gone out together for beers. One of the main reasons why Steward had left Minnesota and come to San Francisco was to escape the serious life he had led in Minnesota and the serious people (so many of them like himself) who had discussed these topics so fervently. Steward wanted to be through with that serious life forever. He wanted to be not an intellectual because but a romantic man. He wanted to believe a romantic life was still possible.

After leaving Minnesota, however, Steward had found out soon enough that the mind was its own world and place did not matter in that regard. He had wanted to become a different person with a different mind, and had imagined that a different place would make him such a different person, but here he was, in a different place while still the same person with the same mind and with the same feeling of emptiness and worthlessness that he had felt since being rejected by that one woman, Christine, who by this time was already years in his past. If any difference had happened in his new life, in terms of his ponderousness, it was only that the increased fragmentation and discontinuity of his new life had increased his sense of worthlessness all the more and imprinted the mark of Cain all the more indelibly upon him. He had lost even more severely his sense of who and what he was and of what his purpose was. He had learned he would not be able to stop being the same person living in his same old mind.

And what exactly did Steward want, anyway, from his new surroundings? He didn't know; sexually especially, he didn't know. At first, he had told himself that the cause of the burden he felt was the false demands of what he called traditional masculinity, and he had told himself he hated this traditional masculinity with a passion because it represented

all that he had hoped to become but had failed to become,—the man of the world, the man of action, the competent, established man. The man of action: here was another irony, he knew, because far from being disposed toward action, he had the disposition of a mystic. Far from wanting to act, he wanted to stop acting in order to receive and turn inward. What this amounted to was a kind of inversion, he was well aware; if not a sexual inversion, then at least a psychological one. He told a friend: “I want to be more feminine;” and yet he didn’t want to be a woman, exactly; he just wanted to be more receptive. No wonder, then, he had acknowledged to himself, that he found Sarah Kerwin’s ambiguous gender so appealing. In it he saw a mirror-image of his own ambiguity, with right made left, and left made right. He was drawn to it but also despised it, just as he loved himself, in a way, but nonetheless hated everything he found within.

During a brief period,—this was right after he arrived in San Francisco, when his anonymity in a new place had given him greater freedom than he had known before,—Steward had made the gay circuits, an odd participant because, though with his hair grown longer he had managed to look foppish enough, he had never indulged in gay sex, never even felt a true interest in it;—that is, except once when he had participated in a *menage a trois*, though his interest had been in the female third of that. Then Steward had gone from this experiment, and his guilt about it, to the forcedly-casual flings, the exaggerated heterosexuality of the previous summer, bringing an increased confusion to every new affair. In his strangely cerebral way, Steward wanted to know what a woman “was,” wanted to experience the female body as he had never experienced it before; in short, he had wanted it to be more than it could be. This long process had reached its conclusion in his last affair, the young woman he had initiated in sex, when Steward had looked at her glowing white body (and, truly, in the bright sunlight that morning, it had contrasted so sharply with the flaming redness of her hair that her flesh had appeared as though transfigured or illumined from within); he had contemplated that and had felt terrified of it, almost. He should have gone out to that

beauty, he had told himself, but instead it had thrust him deeper into himself.

Had he been more secure in his own sexuality, Steward had told himself, he might have been more calm in face of the sexual confusion that he had thereupon encountered in Sarah Kerwin. He saw her several times in the next couple weeks, each time spending the night with her, and each time it went the same way: an evening of conversation, a vague feeling of kinship, then sex which left him, and for all he could tell, her too, dissatisfied. She made love with a blank expression on her face or else with an expression of muted anger. At times he misinterpreted her sighs to be sighs of pleasure and discovered later, through some awkward revelation, that they had been sighs of discomfort or pain. He kept telling himself that he wouldn't go back to her and yet he did. He found her desperation and lack of emotional demonstration oppressive; and yet her sadness and firmness struck deep chords in him. Her sadness was the sadness of an enigma. He wanted to break through her Madonna mask. Her qualified approval of what he was and did, and especially of his sexual performance, made him yearn all the more to be fully accepted by her. But she held her distance, gave cryptic answers to his questions, while at the same time looking at him with unmistakable familiarity. What it was, he decided, was that she looked at him as though she had long been his friend or had known him before. And while she seemed dissatisfied in bed, she encouraged him in other little ways and seemed to want his company.

One night they sat together in her room. The small lamp on the entable by her bed sent a harsh light on the plain walls of her room. Outside her window, on the plank fence across from it, was the now-familiar trapezoid of light formed by the oblique projection of the light from the lamp. He sat looking at it blankly. It was divided in half by a dark thick line—this the shadow of the wood division between the upper and lower parts of the window. The upper half was further divided into two areas due to the filtering effect of the shade which was pulled down part-way. Above the dark dividing line was the grotesque shadow of a potted plant, it

branches distortedly large on the side of the window furthest away from the lamp. Next to him, Sarah Kerwin, the severity of her brow emphasized by the same harshness of light, sat looking downward, preoccupied with something. Steward, looking at her, was newly impressed with the sexual ambiguity that intrigued and at the same time exasperated him. Then she looked up and turned toward him so that the same light, now coming from a different direction, was caught in the greenness of her eyes. He looked at her with momentary wonder, distracted by her loveliness, feeling in awe of it.

“I don’t understand you,” he said.

She inclined her head to one side and smiled sadly. “There’s nothing to understand. I’m just me.” She looked down again. Once again her face resumed its almost masculine severity.

They sat in silence for a while. He looked at the flowered jewelry box on her dresser, then looked at the photograph of Aicha’s father, who had the look of a poseur—he had not a full beard but a little goatee, like something out of Paris at the turn of the century. His smile was self-conscious and vain.

“You know what’s wrong with you,” she said suddenly, looking at him again. ,

“No, I don’t.”

“You want everything to be perfect. You can’t accept imperfection in your self, and for that reason you can’t accept it in anyone else.”

“And to what does this apply right now?”

“To our sexual life, what else?”

“Sarah, our basic problem is not my expectations, and I’ve told you what it is again and again to no avail. So what use is there in saying it again.”

“Say it again anyway. There’s nothing else to do. I’m bored.”

“To say it very simply, I don’t know where you’re at. I don’t know what you like or don’t like. You give me no indication at all of what’s going on in your mind. I look at your face. No expression at all. You’re like some weird

Egyptian sphinx—a breasted lion with a frowning face.”

She laughed.

“Poor Thomas. It must be an ordeal.”

“All’s I’m saying is that you have to tell me more. When you sigh, I can’t tell if it’s from pleasure or pain.”

She laughed again, throwing back her head.

“Probably from both.”

She got up and went to the window. She looked at him gravely. “What you don’t understand is that I’ve been through this too many times, I’ve talked about these things too many times, thought about them too many times, worried about them too many times.”

“But can’t you understand that I’m in the midst of a relationship with you and that it’s important to me for you to like me?”

She sighed with exasperation. “I do like you, Thomas, in a cuddly sort of way. I don’t have a tremendous need for sex, and you’re so wired. Sometimes the way you act seems unreal to me. It’s too much. You’re so restless. And anyway, I don’t want to discuss this any more.”

He went out that night determined to never see her again, and stayed firm in his resolve for a week. Then one evening he received a phone call from her. Her voice on the phone sounded higher in pitch. She seemed unsure of herself.

“Is this Thomas?”

“Who else would it be?” He felt angry at her though why he didn’t know.

“I just wondered how you are.”

They talked for a while. She seemed depressed. It made him feel like he had been mean or neglectful to her in some way. And yet he knew that he hadn’t. They had known one another for only a few weeks and already the relationship was a mess. He made no commitment as to when or if he would see her again.

One evening he talked to Weinstein about her. They were sitting outside the garage in Steward’s cab drinking beers.

“It doesn’t sound like there’s much more positive in it anymore,” Weinstein said.

Steward nodded. "Not much."

A semaphore blinked on the corner. A light rain was coming down. The dog that kept watch of the garage, a large collie, came over to the iron gate that was drawn across the entrance driveway each night, and stood looking at them.

Steward threw out a part of an old sandwich which the dog gobbled up in one bite. A siren rose and faded in the distance. Another cab came by. They both waved.

"The weird thing is I care about her. I feel this weird kinship with her. And she cares about me in the same way. It's not precisely sexual, and yet the sexual attraction is there. Sometimes I wish it wasn't because it just gets in the way.

"She strikes a hard bargain," said Weinstein. "She wants you but in her own way. It's clear that she wants you for something."

"She's a lonely person."

"She doesn't have any friends?"

"I don't know. Not many. At least not many close ones."

They were silent for a while. The collie was still at the gate, looking at them expectantly. Steward threw out a corn chip that he found on the seat. The dog gobbled it up then looked up expectantly again.

"You know another weird thing about her?" said Steward.

"No, what?"

"She's sad. You would think that her sadness would be a turn-off. But it's the most appealing kind of sadness. She's always looking at me with those sad Madonna eyes."

"The way you describe her, she's a regular type. You know, like Keats' 'la belle dame'."

"No, I don't know."

"I met a Lady in the Mead,
Full beautiful, a fairy's child,
Her hair was long, her foot was light,
And her eyes were wild."

Steward laughed. "That's her alright: 'La belle dame.' I like that. How does it end?"

Weinstein laughed and frowned, straining to remember

the words. At last he came up with them.

“And this is why I sojourn here
Alone and palely loitering;
Though the sedge is withered from the lake
And no birds sing.’ “
They both laughed.

“A terrible prophecy,” said Steward. “But that’s Sarah alright, ‘la belle dame.’”

“‘La belle dame sans merci,’” said Weinstein. “The lovely lady without mercy.”

“Just the same,” said Steward. “She’s alright.”

“You sound like you’re weakening in your resolve.”

“No, not weakening. I just feel sorry for her. I feel sorry for both of us, to tell you the truth.”

Steward was still determined to not see her again, but the next night he drove cab, he impulsively stopped in the bar. When he came in, she was standing in the back by the cooler. The bar was almost deserted—just a couple guys in the back by the pool table watching TV. Even the old man who always stood up was missing from his familiar spot by the door. Neither of the men turned to look at Steward when he came in, but when Sarah Kerwin saw him, her face brightened up. She smiled and came over with a beer.

“I thought you wouldn’t come back. I guess you got tired of my moods.”

He shrugged. “Everyone has moods. Look at me. I’m the weirdest one of all.’

She smiled. “Yes, you are kind of weird. But I’m still glad to see you. Its been a boring night. As you can see, there’s nobody here.”

“Yea, not even Clarence.”

“Yes, poor Clarence. His wife died a few days ago.”

“Really? Too bad.”

“He hasn’t been around. Him and nobody else. It’s like a ghost town.”

“Same on the streets.”

It was near closing. He helped her clean up. Her books were sitting by the cash register along with a spiral notebook. On the cover she had scribbled a quote from Jung: “Neurosis

is self-division.” Some of her daughter’s drawings hung on the wall above the cash register in the midst of the postcards and newspaper clippings that were tacked and taped there beside the trademark signs for the various brands of beer that were sold in the bar. Each of these drawings had stick figures, a tree, and a prominent sun, and bore the name “Aicha” on the bottom corner. By this time the two customers had gone out and Sarah had put out the red lights on the side of the room so that the only lights still on were the small lamp above the cash register and the overhead light in back by the cooler. Sarah was in back of the bar in the store-room. He could hear her arranging the boxes. He looked around the quiet room, feeling a strange peace in its emptiness. For a moment he thought about his past, not about any particular event in it but about its generality. It seemed odd to him that here he was, a mature man, a cabdriver in San Francisco, waiting in a dark bar-room for a woman who worked as a bartender. She came out of the store-room lugging a box of beer. He went to help her. She smiled. Her forehead was moist with perspiration and her moist hair was pulled back tautly and tucked behind her ear. He watched her walk to the front of the bar to unplug the juke box, noticing at one and the same time her loveliness and her imperfections. She was wearing her usual outfit: jeans, a T-shirt, an open flannel shirt.

In the short time he had known her, she had put on a little weight. It wasn’t much but it took the edge off her beauty and made her look chubby. He noticed this as she walked back toward him with a dish-towel in her hand, then in the next moment, while she stood by the cash register counting the money with the light from the lamp above the cash register falling softly on her’ face, he noticed again how beautiful she was, and what great strength and dignity she had in her face. This is the way he kept going back and forth, so that his feelings for her were impossible to unravel and put in any comprehensible order.

Later they sat by the juke box at a table drinking a final beer. She looked at him, studying his face. He looked back. They sat in silence for a while and then she said: “Did you

have a bad night?”

He shrugged. “There’s nothing doing, that’s all. Nobody around. I just try to keep moving. It’s the same old thing again and again—Chinatown, down Columbus to the Wharf, Polk Street to Union, back to Polk Street again. It was nickels and dimes all night. Sometimes it gets weird driving around by yourself.”

“I imagine it does. But you seem to like it, too.”

“Yea, I do like it. I like to drive. I like to be alone.”

“How come?”

“I don’t know. I just like it. Sometimes it has a poetic dimension to it. I can’t explain it. Sometimes it seems like my true environment, at least true for now.”

“You were angry at me, weren’t you?”

“Not angry, Sarah, just frustrated.”

“You mean about sex?” • il

“That’s the focus of it, I guess. You make me feel like a sexual incompetent. You don’t seem to understand how important it is to me to have some kind of sexual identity.”

“I do understand, Thomas. The problem is we’re both so mixed up. It’s this weird collision of our insecurities, I guess. And what you don’t understand is that, first of all, it’s hard for me, too. And, secondly, I’m not a highly sexed person. I don’t particularly like having some frothing idiot ram me in the ass. It seems weird to me. It makes me feel dependent.”

“You don’t mean that, Sarah. You always take such extreme positions. What good does it do to discuss things with you? It’s like talking to a maniac.”

She laughed. “We’re both crazy, Thomas. Why does everything have to be so heavy? Why can’t we just be good friends.”

“Well, for one reason, because we keep falling into these situations. I don’t understand why that happens since you’re such a sexless person.”

She laughed. “Well, I do like to keep trying.”

“You know what you are?”

“No, what?”

“A walking paradox.”

She laughed. "I like that one, Thomas. Sometimes you're amusing!"

"I wasn't trying to be funny. Let me ask you mean to say you've never enjoyed sex?" e

"Well, sure I do, in an affectionate way."

"You're totally insane."

"Am I really?"

"Yes, in my humble opinion."

"I did have good sex for a while. With this guy I lived with in North Beach. We had a terrible relationship. He used to throw me down and fuck me whenever he wanted to. And he was always coming home with other women so I was terribly jealous. But the sex was wonderful."

He groaned.

She laughed at his consternation. "That's what it takes for me to have an exciting relationship, a good sick dynamic right in the middle of it."

The whole thing was so absurd that it seemed amusing to him. He shook his head, looking at her with an ironic smile on his lips.

"So now you know where I'm coining from," she said.

"So if you liked this dynamic brute, how come you like me?"

"Because you're sensitive. Because you're a nice person. And anyhow it doesn't matter if you're a brute. I mean, that happened when I was 19 years old, and now I'm 27. A lot of water has gone under the bridge. And I have my focus on other things now. Look Where I live, Thomas. Look where I work. I don't want to live this way my whole life. So I'm not even concerned about sex any more. It's all in my past."

"You can't just give up on it."

"Well, I have."

"No, you haven't."

"Yes, I have. It's not even a part of my psyche any more."

"Again, you 're taking a ridiculous extreme position. You should hear yourself, Sarah. Why don't you just admit that you care."

She laughed. "Okay, then, I do care, but I don't know what to do about it. And what does it matter since I'm essentially a loner. You like being a loner. You said you like it, so why can't I?"

They went out. It was a chilly night. The streets were moist from the fog. The fog was so low that it reflected the lights on the streets. The southern sky was tinted orange from the dry docks in the South of Market district.

They got in the cab. He revved up the motor. They drove along without speaking.

"You are right that I take an extreme position," she said. "I just do it in desperation."

He said nothing in response to this.

"Do you think we can still try?"

"Try what?"

"To have a love relationship."

"Sure, why not?"

"I'm being serious, Thomas."

"Yes, Sarah, we can try."

"I don't want to talk a lot about everything. I don't want it to be so constantly heavy."

"Sure, I, understand. We'll try to be good friends."

At her house he said to her: "Does that mean you want me to come in?"

"Yes, I suppose it seems stupid after everything I said. But I would like to be with you tonight."

When he came back to her apartment after dropping off his cab, she met him at the door in a night-gown. She shrugged her shoulders and smiled. He followed her to her bedroom. They sat down together on her bed. She had taken a bath while he had gone to the garage. She smelled faintly of perfume and her hair was freshly combed. She had brought a candle in from the kitchen.

She lit the candle and turned out the light. In the flickering light from the candle, she looked very lovely. She looked at him. He swept back her hair.

She seemed very sad.

"I feel like I talked so stupidly," she said.

"No, you didn't," he replied. "Here, lay down, Sarah. I'll

rub your back.”

She lay down. He began caressing her neck. With her head resting on the pillow, she looked gentle and lovely and her upturned nose made him think of a rabbit. He smiled at her, then looked around the room. For once he felt fully at one with her. Far off he could hear the fog horns droning.

“And how about you?” she said. “I suppose you’ve had some lovely affair.”

“I’ve had just a few,” he said. “I was very much in love with my wife.”

“With your wife?” she said. “You never told me.”

“It didn’t seem important, I guess. It’s so far in the past.”

“What happened to her?”

“I don’t know where she is.”

“Whose decision was it to break up?”

“Hers.”

“Was it hard for you?”

“Yes.”

“Why did she leave?”

“She just fell out of love.”

An image of his wife came into his mind. It brought with it the dully painful associations that it always did. He thought about her a moment, then forced her image from his mind. He looked back to Sarah Kerwin and began caressing her again. She turned over and reached out her arms to hug him. He lay in her arms for a moment then began kissing her face. He felt affectionate to her. For once he wanted to make love to her, to make love not only to her body but to her, to whoever this woman was. But due to the long discussion that preceded it, their love-making was all the more self-conscious and awkward. It ended the same way, in mutual frustration. He was so concerned about whether she would come that he didn’t enjoy it himself. Finally, in desperation, he allowed himself to come. Then they lay side by side without speaking. In the morning when he woke up she was sitting on the side of the bed, arranging her hair. She was nude. When she got up to get her clothes from the closet, he noticed that her backside and thighs were flabby. Her face

looked severe.

For the first time she looked ugly to him. She seemed impatient to have him leave. She was in a bitchy mood. He heard her out in the hall arguing with her daughter.

He passed her on his way down the hall.

“Thomas, I’m in a bad mood. I’m sorry.”

“I understand.”

“Will you give me a call?”

“Sure, I’ll call you.”

He went out, relieved to be away from her again. That night he saw Weinstein. They went to Chinatown to an all-night restaurant. They sat at a back table, placed their orders and talked while they sipped on their tea.

“So how is ‘la belle dame’?” asked Weinstein.

“It’s a mess,” said Steward. “A total mess.”

He told Weinstein the whole story of what had happened. He said that she regarded him as “nice” which instead of making him feel good, made him feel innocuous and effeminate; said that he wanted to be more feminine in a philosophical way, but no longer wanted to be feminine in a sexual way; and said that Sarah’s androgyny was appealing to him for the simple reason that he wanted to break through it, but was ready to give up on trying. And now he had made a further commitment to her, which made it all the more difficult for him to extricate himself from the relationship. He conveyed all this information in a feverish jumble, and ended up by repeating, “It’s a mess.”

“So why are you sticking with it then?” asked Weinstein.

“I don’t know. I guess because I’ve had so many disastrous relationships. I’m just trying to avert another catastrophe.”

They said nothing for a while. Then Weinstein observed: “An interesting thing is you’ve both departed from your given sexuality in analogous ways and yet you can’t accept one another. She’d like you to be more masculine and you’d like her to be more feminine. Isn’t it true?”

“I suppose it is.”

Silence again.

“But there’s more to it than that,” Steward went on. It’s not just that she’s departed from a given sexual role. It’s much more than that. She’s at war with everything she is. Deep inside herself, she hates herself for being a woman. She hates the whole idea of receptivity. I mean, isn’t it true that man is naturally transcendent and woman is naturally immanent?”

“I don’t know.”

“Even Simone de Beauvoir says that.”

“So is she the spokesman of all the women in the world?”

“Spokesman of some.”

The waiter brought several plates of steaming food. They stopped talking for a while and concentrated on eating. It was 4 A.M. They were the only people in the back of the restaurant. A Chinese kid was mopping up the floor. In the front by the door sat a group of men conversing in Chinese.

She’s an intellectual woman,” Weinstein opined. “Can a woman like this in this day and age just point-blank accept whatever’s been instinctually and naturally given? I read somewhere—I don’t remember where this was—that the proudest intellect stands in the most direct relation to animality. And from the way you describe her, that’s just the impression I have of her, this fiercely proud person. Even the mask you talk about. That’s part of it, isn’t it? That’s that fierce pride. And you try to imagine a person like this being submissive, even sexually-submissive... I’ve known women like this. A lot of them are dykes. I can’t blame them, really.”

“Neither can I. But Sarah is no dyke.”

“Even so, she’s an intelligent woman, and in order to carve out some domain for herself, she has to cut off part of her psyche.”

“I don’t think that’s true Sol. I don’t think that sex has to involve submission.”

“Not in actuality, maybe,” Sol Weinstein answered. But, traditionally, that’s been a great part of it. And it’s a great part of the gay world, too—fist-fucking and all that. Who in their right mind would want a fist up their ass? But some

people do.”

“But so much of the gay world is characterized by gentleness,” Steward remarked.

“Still it involves submission. Tell me this: when you’re screwing a woman, what is it that excites you about it. Isn’t it in part the idea of violating something beautiful, of pushing through it, tearing it apart? That’s what passion is, isn’t it? And what’s passion for a woman? It’s being pushed into, it’s being fucked. Haven’t you ever had a woman whisper, “Fuck me, fuck me”, when you were giving her the shaft?”

“Give me a break, Sol. I wasn’t born yesterday,” Steward said. “I know that women like to be bounced around a little bit, but that’s not submission. It’s like a ritual. It’s a dance.”

“But it still has those psychological overtones, and any liberated person has to deal with them.”

“I don’t want to be liberated, Sol. God spare me from that. If I wanted to be liberated, I wouldn’t be here driving this damn cab.”

“So what do you want then?”

“I want to a passionate man. More than anything else, I just want to be an ordinary, passionate man. I mean, I know you don’t like the Bible, but tell me this, of John and Peter, who’s the most appealing?”

“I don’t know. Did you forget I’m a Jew.”

“Peter is. At least to me. And do you know why? Because he’s passionate, because he’s willing to make a fool of himself.”

“So if you want to be so passionate,” Weinstein interjected, “you’d better not lose sight of your animality.”

“Don’t worry about me.”

“I am worried about you, Stew. You keep thinking so much about sex, and you’re going to wind up as a sexual nonentity.”

“I already am. But, you know what?”

“No what?”

“I’m a nice guy. Just ask ‘la belle dame’.”

They went out laughing. They drove around talking.

Some of their finest moments together were when they rode around in' one another's cabs. Steward was driving. He was an excellent driver. He had the instincts of a racer. It was one of the few things that he felt sure he could do well. Seated behind the steering wheel with his shirt rolled up, he felt secure in his masculinity. He liked being a workingman, liked it much more than the various professional roles he had tried out at different times in his life. In them he had always felt contained. He liked to be out and moving. Life without movement was inconceivable to him.

When they were out like this together, Weinstein and Steward felt a silent complicity because they both regarded cabdriving as not just a job but as an experiment, a deliberate alternative existence, a kind of Whitmanesque adventure. They had given nicknames to various other cabdrivers that they both knew, had nicknames for some of the regular crazies they saw on the street, and even had divided the 15 cabs in their company's fleet into "yin cabs" and "yang cabs"—the yin cabs were light and sprung off the bumps; the yang cabs were heavy and settled into them.

They drove down Columbus to the Wharf. There was no one around. The neon lights on the restaurants were out. By this time the sky in the east was beginning to lighten. There were a couple fishing boats in the water near Angel Island. Except for them, the bay looked deserted and calm.

On the way home, Steward said to Weinstein: "In any case, we didn't get to the heart of the matter."

They were in Weinstein's car.

"And what's that?"

"Her self-destructiveness. That's what bugs me the most. For instance, she's getting fat. Who am I to care, right? But it's just a case of her destroying herself, deliberately destroying her beauty. And why? Because she hates it."

Getting out of Weinstein's car, Steward said: "Listen, Sol, I got an idea. How about you and I go over to the bar one night? I want you to meet her."

"You want me to tell you if she's fat?"

"I just want your opinion of her in general."

"Why are you going on with this: Why don't you just

drop it?”

“At this point I can’t. I just made a new commitment.”

“Why don’t you unmake the commitment?”

“She’d take it too hard.”

At Steward’s insistence, Weinstein accompanied him to the bar. They came in together, Steward dressed in his blue coat and Weinstein in his usual Army coat, Steward looking thoughtful, Weinstein limping along beside him, scratching his beard.

Sarah Kerwin greeted them cheerfully. Weinstein was his usual charming self. He looked around the bar and asked Sarah about her studies, commented on the drawings on the wall, played pool with some of the men, and whispered to Steward, “She’s absolutely lovely.”

But afterwards, Sarah was fierce with anger.

“You made me feel so bad. I felt like a cow at a fair.”

Steward apologized and said: ‘He’s my best friend. So what’s wrong with him meeting you?’

Weinstein’s appraisal made Steward feel all the more ambiguous about the relationship. Looking at Sarah as he sat beside Weinstein, he thought to himself: “Yes, she is lovely. I was wrong.”

4

On an afternoon soon after this, Tom Steward stood in his apartment, looking out the bay window which formed the entire eastern wall of the largest of his two rooms. His apartment was on the second floor of his building. On the corner below his window was a Chinese grocery store with a sign that said, “Wu Wei Groceries—Beer, Liquor, and Wine.” There were some children playing on the corner. Standing at this window, Steward could see up the block to the other corner where there was a semaphore that changed endlessly from green to yellow to red and then back to green again. Some people stood at the corner waiting to cross. A cable car came by. A constant stream of cars passed up and down the street. He could see the street sign that said “California.” He thought of Club 1550, mused for a moment on Sarah Kerwin, who was much on his mind, then looked

back up the block toward the grocery store. The buildings on the street across from his window were all three- or four-story Victorian-style apartment buildings like the one he lived in himself. Each had a central door, and above and to the sides of this central door, rows of bay windows; each bay window belonged to some occupant who was completely unknown to him. The buildings were built right next to one another and flush to the sidewalk. The only greenery in sight was one round-shaped tree that was next to the semaphore on California Street. The buildings were painted in various shades of tan, white, and gray. There were flowers in some of the windows. In front of his own window was a foot locker on the top of which were several potted coleus plants. Next to them was a huge Boston fern. A draft of air came through the window. The leaves trembled in the passing air and then were motionless again. It was near sunset. The buildings across the street were softly touched with orange light.

Steward stood looking out the window until the sunlight on the buildings across the street faded in intensity, then, as often happened to him at sunset, a vague feeling of apprehension and malaise came over him. He walked back into the room, putting on the lamp by the couch as he walked by, then another few steps took him up the little hallway to his kitchen.

Steward sat down at the table and put on the lamp. On the table was a blue spiral notebook and a pen. He opened it and wrote: "Tomorrow: spend three hours drawing." He was always jotting down such directions to himself. He sat with his head in his hand for a moment, tapped the pen on the table, opened the notebook again, and wrote: "As for Sarah Kerwin: Keep the relationship as positive as possible. Don't lay any stupid little trips on her. She's right—I expect everything to be perfect. That's why I won't let her be herself. Trying to make her what I want her to be instead of being supportive."

He was in the habit of making daily entries like this in his journal. He was continually evaluating his life and examining his motives. In retrospect he found fault with

almost everything he had begun with good intentions, because in retrospect it always seemed to him that he had boggled everything up.

On the counter across from the table, stacked up against one side of the oblong horizontal mirror that divided the upper and lower portions of the cup-board, were his sketchbooks. Next to them were his pencils, which were all newly-sharpened and arranged side by side together with their sharpened ends all facing the same direction. He got up from the table, reached over for the sketchbooks, and sat down again. With the same studied expression on his face, he paged through them. There were six sketch-books in all. His early drawings were mostly of models, and most of the models were women. They were correct in proportion and perspective but due to their linearity looked primitive. Some of them were done with painstaking detail which made the portrayed models look rigid and unreal. He was aware of this, but didn't know how to correct it.

In addition to the drawings Steward had done of models, he had done a series of self-portraits (all of them in pencil) which he had labeled, "Self-portrait #1," "Self-portrait #2," and so on. There were twelve of these; in all of them he had portrayed himself as somewhat severe and forlorn. He also had many drawings of hands, hands in all kinds of holding positions and gestures; conceptual drawings with titles such as "Line and Mass," "The North Wind and the South," "An Abstract Danger," and so on. Many of his drawings had sexual connotations. The drawing called "Line and Mass," for example, was an attempt to convey volume without the use of shading: it depicted a man and a woman; the man was muscular and had a demonic, almost mask-like face; the woman, who was in front of the man, turned away from him, but looking back over her shoulder at him, had large breasts and hips; one of the man's arms was raised in a fist. There were various drawings of women in provocative poses,—not explicitly sexual but with a suggestion of latent sexuality.

In addition to these drawings, Steward also had a series of drawings of Joan of Arc, whom he portrayed as a young woman with a boyish figure. It might have been said that for

some odd reason he was obsessed with Joan of Arc. He had even gotten a book about her from the library and had read the 15th Century transcripts of her trials. His drawings showed her in different poses, with different armor, and always with a latent mystical dimension indicated by something like a church or rising sun.

The only characteristic all of Steward's drawings had in common was their excessive dependence on line. He was too impatient to use shading and anyway wanted his drawings to be clean and precise. Looking at them, Steward felt a certain satisfaction in what he had done. He had sprayed all of the drawings with hair-spray which worked as a fixative and prevented the lead from smearing. But at heart he doubted his talent and only kept up out of desperation. He had nothing else to fall back on in order to prove to himself that he wasn't as worthless as he feared himself to be. His underlying insecurity, his feeling that somehow or another his artistic studies were a last-ditch effort to save himself from some vague perdition, had given his studies a frenzied, panicked quality. He seldom felt calm. To the contrary, he felt like a hounded man, but hounded by what he didn't know. He felt the same about Sarah Kerwin, felt that somehow or another she was his last chance, that he couldn't bear to go through the emotional travail of another relationship. And even the nickname "la belle dame", which had begun with nothing but innocent amusement on Weinstein's part, had started to contribute to this new gravitas. Somehow the name made her seem more formidable. Sarah was indeed "la belle dame," Steward thought, with a mysterious power that held him to her. Like it or not, she was fated to play some role in his life.

Steward put his sketchbooks away and walked into the other room. Now the street outside was dark. An arc light swayed in the wind. The Chinese grocery store was closed for the night. There were lights in some of the bay windows across the street. Looking toward California Street, he watched the semaphore changing—green, yellow, red it went, then the same intense green again.

Somehow the semaphore represented the entirety of his

cabdriving experience, Steward thought, his experience with the city night for whatever it had been. And looking at the semaphore, he felt that Sarah Kerwin was somehow related to this, too, if for no other reason than because her terrible loneliness was the same as the loneliness he experienced when he was driving cab by himself. She had the same appeal and the same elusiveness of meaning.

Next to the double-doors that led to his stow-away bed was the single door that led to his closet. Steward opened it. Inside were several pairs of pants, a couple shirts, and his blue railroad coat. On the floor were some tennis shoes. He took out the coat, put it on, buttoned it, and stood lost in thought. Then, as if suddenly remembering himself, he went out and bounded down the stairs.

As soon as he was outside, Steward realized he had nowhere to go. He thought of Club 1550 and then thought: “No better to keep some distance for a while.” He walked down to Polk Street and sat in a coffee shop. Two gay men were clowning back and forth, leaning toward one another affectionately.

“You mean you’re going to abuse me!” said one of them. “Oh horrid! You mean I get to be abused! I can hardly wait!” Then seeing Steward smiling, he cried, “She’s an absolute brute!”

Everything that happened to Steward now such as this passing vignette seemed related to his sexual confusion. He walked down the street by himself. The street was full of people, but he felt very much alone. Couples strolled by: beautiful women, elaborately coiffed, their faces delicately painted, their lips curled in smiles, their hands on the arms of confident men in three-piece suits. He came by, his hands in his pocket. One woman looked at him with curiosity. He looked away, ashamed of his appearance and dress. He walked down Polk Street to the municipal pier, walked out on the pier, stood looking at the dazzling lights of the city. A faint murmur of sound—mixed voices and indistinct music—came from the brick buildings of Ghirardelli Square, a short distance from the pier. He walked to the very end of the pier where there was a round concrete tower. Some

seagulls flew by crying in high shrieking voices. He felt terribly alone.

Steward walked back. On the sidewalk by the Aquatic museum, a woman came by, pushing a shopping cart full of clothes and other paraphernalia. His first thought was that she was beautiful; she had dark hair and a well-formed face; but when she came near to him, he noticed that her face was frenzied. She was mumbling to herself: "A little bit of this. A little bit of that. So why? I don't care. Do you think I care?," she shot her dark eyes at Steward. "Ha-ha! I don't care at all..." He watched her go by.

Steward walked back down Polk Street. A cold fog had come in. He put up his collar, buttoned the top button of his blue coat, and walked hurriedly along with a frown on his face and his hands in his pockets, lost in thought.

At Broadway Street, he broke into a run. He ran three blocks at a fast pace, then suddenly slowed to a walk again. At a record store, he looked at the albums displayed in the window. On one of them was a female vocalist who stood on a beach with the ocean behind her. It was night. She wore a shoulderless dress with a leather-throng necklace on which hung white soapstone carvings of a half-moon and a small star. On her right arm was a silver-ringed bracelet; on her left hand two golden rings. Behind her, silhouetted against the purple-blue water, was the dark form of someone passing by on a horse. She was looking to the side, illumined by some source of light that came from above her and to her left side. The inside of her bare left arm and the indentation formed when the roundness of her upper arm met her shoulder were shadowed in darkness, as was the area which extended from between her breasts to her navel, as was her right side. She had dark hair and dark eyes; the white in her eyes and teeth gleamed like a pearl; her lips were parted, the upper lip pouting; her eyes expectant. On another album cover, a man sat by a piano, one arm resting on the top of the piano, his head on this arm, his hand behind his right ear. The top of the piano was open such that the sound chamber could be seen; on the scoreboard above the keys was a glass of what looked like whiskey and an ashtray full of cigarette butts.

He walked on, lost in thought. Turning the corner, he saw the square wooden sign that said "Club 1550." He went by, not expecting or wanting to go in, but looking sideways to get a glimpse of Sarah Kerwin. She was standing at the far end of the bar by the door. Her hands were folded in front of her stomach. She was leaning with one arm on the bar and her weight on one hip.

As he came by, she looked up. When he was already past her, and could see her only in the periphery of his vision, her hand went up in a wave. He walked on by.

Her voice came from behind him: "Thomas, aren't you even going to say hi?"

He looked back. "I didn't think you saw me. I'm in a down mood. I just want to be alone."

"Well, won't you come in for a beer? You don't have to talk. It might up your spirits a little if you're feeling bad."

He turned around. She was standing on the sidewalk in the shaft of light from the open door of the bar. She looked different outside of the bar than inside it. She looked smaller. Her shoulders looked exposed. She was holding a dish towel in both hands in front of her stomach. Her hips, the way her lower stomach curved inward toward her mound, made him think of a little girl. Her face was raised up such that her nostrils were more prominent. It was like an animal sniffing. He laughed and shook his head. He came walking towards her.

"What are you smiling about?" she said, eyeing him with curiosity. "You're smiling like a lunatic. Have you had any supper?"

"No," he said. "I was going to go over to the soup kitchen, but I wound up walking down by the pier."

"I'll get you some chili. Did you know we sell chili?"

"No."

"We just got a chili machine. We sell it for 65 cents. For you it's free."

He went in behind her. The bar was crowded with people. The juke box was playing. Clarence was in his usual place by the door once again. In front of him were his two glasses of whiskey and a beer; he was swishing the whiskey

around with his straw. Some people were in the back playing darts.

She came over with a beer and some chili. She nodded toward the people who were playing darts.

“We have a dart tournament every two weeks. Do you want any crackers?”

“Yes,” he said. “Thank you.” He unwrapped the crackers, dumped them in his chili, and mashed them up with his spoon. He held his spoon with his whole hand as though he was holding a handle.

“Go to it,” she said, laughing. “You’re so odd.”

“Why am I odd?”

“You tell me. I don’t know.”

He smiled. He ate his chili in big gulps, scarcely bothering to chew. The bar was a hubbub of noise.

“So what have you been doing?” she said.

“Been trying to get going on my artwork again.”

“You been doing any drawings?”

“Did some this morning.”

“Drawings of what?”

“Looking at my hands in a mirror.”

“Do you like them?”

“I guess so. I don’t know.”

“Will you show them to me sometime?”

“Maybe. I don’t like to show people what I do.”

“How come?”

“Makes me feel self-conscious.”

She laughed. “I’ve wondered how you’ve, been.”

“I’ve been okay. I was thinking about you.”

“What were you thinking?”

“That I want to be supportive. I want to understand what you want for yourself.”

“So do I. Maybe we can figure it out.”

Afterwards they took a cab to her house together and wound up making love. It was the same thing. She sighed and groaned and seemed uncomfortable. She seemed angry at him. He was just beginning to get lost in the rhythm when she suddenly cried out: “Don’t do that!”

“Don’t do what?”

“Don’t kiss me like that. Whenever you kiss me, you stick your nose in my eye! And you slobber all over me! Can’t you keep your saliva to yourself?”

He was still inside her. He tried to pull out.

She held him in with her arms. “No, I’m sorry, Stewie,” she said, her voice suddenly changing. “Please let’s go on.”

He wrenched himself away from her. “Since when do you call me Stewie?”

“I heard Sol call you that. You don’t like it? Let’s go on.”

“Go on with what, Sarah? You make me feel like an absolute incompetent. What could I do that you would possibly like?”

He got up.

“Now what are you going to do?” she said.

“I’m going home to my own bed and jack off.”

She shook her head. “I’m sincerely sorry, Thomas. I really am. I spoke rashly. Please stay.”

He did stay but the next morning he got up early and left. He kissed her goodbye.

She opened her eyes sleepily. “Are you mad?”

“What does it matter? I just want to be off by myself. I’ll call you next week.”

“Alright,” she said. She closed her eyes and pressed her face into the pillow.

He sat looking at her a moment. It was sunrise.. The sun had just appeared in the open space between the two brick buildings beyond the plank fence. There were some towels hanging outside one of the buildings, on a wood-railing back porch on the third floor. The towels were orange and red; they shone in the early morning light with a fresh intensity of color. Some of the sunlight, coming through the window, shone on the mass of hair around Sarah’s sleeping face. She looked strangely beautiful and peaceful like a child. He pulled the blankets up around her shoulders, kissed her brow, and went out. Emerging from the front door, he sniffed the fresh morning air and felt the coldness of the morning on his cheeks and nose. He walked along jauntily. His somber mood had suddenly left him.

An hour later, he was hiking along the cliffs above Land's End, looking out toward the gleaming expanse of the ocean. It was a brilliant day. There were tiny red flowers amidst the rocks. Far from shore he could see the vague dark outline of the Farallon Islands. Some pelicans flew by in a single file following the furrow of an incoming wave. The beam on the Point Bonitas lighthouse turned around and around; each time it turned in his direction, he saw for an instant its intense white light. He no longer felt bitter toward Sarah. Looking at the ocean,—which had existed for many generations, he reflected,—he thought of the inconsequence and smallness of his own concerns.

Alone in his cab that night, a different mood came over him. At first he felt okay, but, as night settled in, he felt more and more distressed. This often happened to him. He would be feeling alright, feeling on top of the world, and then a vague feeling of panic would appear inside of him, swell up larger and larger, until it overcame him and enveloped him. Once again he felt terribly alone. It was a quiet night. There was hardly any business on the streets. He sat for a while in the cab line at the Greyhound depot watching all the various degenerates walk by, then, finding himself still only third-up after an hour on the stand, he pulled out and began cruising the streets. The sky was overcast. A light rain was coming down—just the worst kind of rain so far as driving was concerned because it was enough to need the windshield wipers but not enough to keep the window clean; the wipers creaked back and forth;—it irritated him to no end. He drove up Market Street, took one unsuccessful swipe at the gay bars on Castro, and cruised down Market again, trolling for fares with no luck.

Then back to Greyhound. He sat watching the blind-man beggar who he knew was no real blind-man, since he had seen him walking along one time with a girl friend and without his white cane. Another hour passed. He pulled out again. Down Market to the Regency Hotel, along the waterfront to the Wharf, where he picked up a man and woman who were talking about real-estate. Passing the bars on Union Street, he observed there were couples inside, men

and women whispering to one another—they dwelled in a world that was incomprehensible and strangely alien to him. They were happy.—Were they happy? He didn't know.—He felt like an outcast, like some kind of ineffectual pariah. The greatest burden of all was his sexual incompetency.—And yet was he truly incompetent? Were they, the confident men in three-piece suits, were they more competent? He didn't know.—He thought of Sarah. Again, what he thought of, the image that came to his mind when he thought about her, was her green eyes, and how they were ringed with a tiny, almost imperceptible gray line; and he thought of her sadness. Was she really sad? Yes, he answered himself, Sarah Hewitt was truly sad, and truly, irredeemably distant from him, and not only from him, but from every creature in the world... most probably, she was even distant from her own daughter, that darker-eyed, precocious, straightforward, diminutive version of herself... yes, most probably, she was distant from her own flesh and blood.

What he wanted to do, what he really wanted to do, he acknowledged to himself, was to throw her down and rip off her clothes, and fuck her as she had never been fucked before. What he wanted to do was stick his finger up her ass and ram himself into her and tear her apart and tear apart her sadness and tear down her mask and tear away the sorrow that was everywhere he looked, that had brought down the world. What he wanted to do was to tear away the sadness in her eyes. What he wanted to do was to connect with her beauty once and for all. He felt terribly constrained. He felt as if inside of him, deep within, was some terrible dark power. He wanted to unleash this dark power on the world. He wanted to vent his contained masculinity. He wanted to drive through and meet the world with a sword. He despised her because she would not let him be what in his deepest self he felt himself to be. He loved her because his life was empty without her. He felt himself coming apart at the seams.

Late that night, as Steward sat in his cab with a gloomy expression on his face, looking like the world had come to an end, he came upon Solomon Weinstein again.

“My God,” said Weinstein. “What’s wrong with you?”
“Nothing,” Steward answered. “I’m just falling apart.”

Weinstein laughed. “You look all there to me.”

“Inside of me,” said Steward. “Inside of me, I’m falling apart.”

They were stopped at a cab stand at the end of the cable car tracks on Fisherman’s Wharf, Weinstein came over and sat next to him in the front seat of the cab. Next to Steward on the front seat was a girlie magazine. Weinstein picked it up and looked through it. “So when did you start reading this shit?” he said.

“I don’t read it. I just look at the pictures.”

“Look at the pictures? Does it give you a charge?”

“I like to look at the pictures and jack off. So what’s it to you?”

Next to the girlie magazine was a paperback book: *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*,” by Thomas Merton. Weinstein picked it up and threw it down.

“Stewie, I hate to tell you, you’re a real mess.

“So throw the damn magazine out the window,” Steward returned. He tossed it out the window into a pile of trash.

“You know what they got in there, Sol? Two things: pictures of asses and cures for impotence. So you know where I’m at.”

“How do they cure impotence?”

“Some kind of cream.”

“That’s absurd.”

“They’re making a million and we’re pushing hack. I tell you one thing, though. ‘La belle dame’ and I are going to have a, good talk.”

“Good talk about what?”

“About everything. About her self-destructiveness. About how she keeps herself fat because she’s afraid to be beautiful—”

“My God, Steward, you’re still on that?”

“—About how she doesn’t like to be screwed. Did you ever meet a woman who didn’t like to be screwed?”

“All kinds of them. Too many. Either they didn’t want to be screwed or they didn’t want me to screw them. I can’t

figure out which it was.”

“I’m sick of the whole routine. I wish I was gay.”

“If you’d like me to stick my fist up your ass, I’m willing. Or maybe we can use the tire-iron.”

“I’ll take a rain-check for the time-being. Now if you had a broom-stick, that might be more interesting.”

Later that same week, Steward somehow wound up at Sarah’s house again and somehow wound up in her bedroom and in her bed, and somehow wound up inside of her, straining away and looking at her enigmatical face, trying to figure out what she wanted. But things turned out as they always did, in mutual frustration.

Afterwards, they lay together on her bed.

“Sometime remind me to give you a scissors so that so that you can cut your fingernails,” she said.

He sighed with exasperation. “Sarah, the problem is not my fingernails. The problem is you don’t know what you want. You want me to be nice. But when I’m nice, it doesn’t turn you on. Why not admit it for once?”

“When I say I don’t want you to be aggressive, Stewie, I don’t mean I don’t want you to be emphatic. I wish you could understand the difference. It’s really about time. You’re almost 30 years old.”

He sighed again. It was dark in the room. They no longer bothered to light a candle. She was smoking a cigarette: each time she puffed on it, he could see the tip of the cigarette glowing, a tiny spot of orange brilliance in the otherwise unlighted room. Then he could hear her expelling the smoke from her lungs with a huff.

“We might as well talk about something else while we’re in the midst of these psychological convolutions,” Steward said, watching her cigarette tip brighten.

“What’s that, Thomas? I suppose you’re going to tell me how restless you are. You’re like a puppy, always kicking around in bed. You can never sit still. Don’t you ever relax?”

He didn’t respond. He watched her cigarette brighten, then grow dark, then brighten again. He felt very angry.

“So what is this big revelation?” she said.

“You’re overweight, Sarahl. You abuse yourself. You abuse

your health. Maybe that's why you hate everyone. It's very simple. You hate everyone because you hate your own beauty, because you hate the very nature, the given nature, of life."

He lay back, satisfied with the truth of his statement. For a while, he thought she had no response at all. Then he noticed her cigarette was no longer glowing. He heard her sobbing.

"So now what's wrong?" he asked.

"You knew, you knew, you just knew where my weakest spot was," she said, her voice coming through the darkness, alternated with loud sobs. "You play like you're so innocent with your little boy act, squirming around on the bar stool: 'Oh, please give me your number. I don't know about bars.' But you're not so innocent. You don't fool me. You're an angry, destructive person, and don't tell me it isn't true."

She broke down into tears. He tried to hug her. She pulled away. She repeated: "Don't tell me it isn't true."

Her tears had an immediate powerful effect. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," he protested. "How was I to know that that was your weak spot? I was just trying to be constructive. I was just trying to point out how you're at war with yourself. How was I to know? You're such an enigma! I'm sorry, Sarah. I really am. You're a beautiful woman—"

"Liar!" she cried.

"—a beautiful woman. You're just a little bit chunky and you could be perfect."

"Who are you to tell me that I'm chunky!" she cried. "What right? What right?"

She broke down into deeper, more abysmal sobs. He sat on the bed, shaking his head, and muttering to himself: "This is absurd."

"It's not absurd!" she yelled.

"Okay, then, it's not," he said. He tried to hug her. She wrenched herself away from him. He repeated in his mind: "Totally absurd."

She allowed him to put his hand on her back. He rubbed her back, looking out the window, shaking his head in

confusion.

“So forget it then,” he said. “I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings. I didn’t.”

He mumbled this so indistinctly that it was as if he was talking to himself. She made no response. In the morning, she accompanied him to the door. They were both exhausted from the previous night. Standing at the door of her apartment, looking across the front lobby toward the street, he could see, framed by the small window next to the exterior door, the sunlit leaves of the small tree on the boulevard, but nothing could dispel the dark mood that lingered from his

awkward attempt at honesty. He stopped at the door, as if wishing to say something to right the situation. No words came to his mouth; he shrugged. He looked at her. She returned his look steadily but said nothing.

“What can I say?” he blurted. “I’m sorry. I was trying to be constructive.”

“It is ridiculous,” she said softly. “We tear each other down. It’s so weird, isn’t it? I mean, men and women. They’re like magnets. They collide and then ‘bam’! People are always looking for more than they can possibly get.”

He laughed. “I’ve bammed enough for a little while, I think.”

“And so have I,” she said, smiling. “I guess you didn’t know how self-conscious I am about my weight. How could you have known? Poor Aicha’s the same way. She has a body just like mine. We’re in the wrong century, that’s all.”

He walked halfway across the front lobby. Since he hadn’t heard the door close behind him, he knew that she was standing at the door watching him leave. He turned around. She met his eyes sadly.

“So what will you do today?” he asked.

“Clean up, I suppose. The apartment is a mess.”

He turned around again.

She called after him: “Well, have a good day.”

He looked back. “I suppose I won’t see you again,” he

said.

“It’s up to you.”

He shrugged, looked downward thoughtfully, turned to leave without responding.

“But I wish you would tell me one way or the other,” she said.

He turned around for the third time. “Okay, then, I will.”

“That’s not good enough. You need to tell me when.”

“Next week sometime. I’ll stop at the bar.”

He went to see her at Club 1550 on Wednesday. She came over and sat next to him but not with her previous enthusiasm. “Well, since the last time I saw you, I lost a couple pounds,” she said.

“Hey, that’s wonderful, Sarah.”

The next weekend, Sarah Hewitt went home to spend Thanksgiving with her father. When she returned, as pre-arranged, he met her and her daughter at the airport in his cab and brought them home. He had been over to the Paradise Cafe and had smoked a couple joints. He was so stoned that she pulled Aicha over to the side of the seat by her and held her protectively. It made him feel incompetent, and impressed him all the more with how poorly he fit into a domestic life.

When they arrived at her apartment, she wouldn’t let him come in. She seemed distraught. She said that while at home she had gotten together with some of her old friends, all of them women about her same age. They all looked very beautiful, she said; they had settled down into conventional lives.

“It made me feel like some kind of wierd marginal person. And to make things worse, there was a full-length mirror in the hall. I couldn’t avoid it. You were right. I look like a pear. No wonder you hate me. I look so ugly.”

5

Tom Steward did in fact feel badly about how he had pushed Sarah Hewitt into such self-loathing. He hadn’t expected she would turn out to be so self-conscious. In retrospect, he realized that in his impetuous attempt to

correct the situation, he had complicated it all the more, and had deeply hurt her. Instead of making him want to quit the relationship, this made him more determined to stay, because it seemed to him that to leave it at this point would just create bad feelings all around. And seeing Sarah's more vulnerable side made him feel more affectionate toward her. When she began to rebuff him, he felt all the more drawn to her.

"When she cried, it was like the whole mask fell off," he told Weinstein. "For the first time, I saw who she really is. She became a person to me."

"She acted like you expect a woman to act, is what you're trying to say."

"Give me a break, Sol. It's more than that. I realized that I care about her. And I do."

She was still angry at him, he soon realized, but too insecure to totally reject him. She alternated between anger and trying to please him. He didn't see her for over a week, but she was always on his mind. Whenever he thought about her it was with confusion. All of his feelings for her, both good and bad, were stronger because he had seen her cry, because by crying she had invaded parts of his psyche where before this she hadn't been present. Now wherever he looked in his mind, he found her. This made her all the more powerful a personage in his life. He felt more drawn to her, more concerned about her, but, at the same time, more frustrated because he couldn't please her sexually, and more bitter toward her because she would not be what he wanted her to be. The whole situation was further complicated by his guilt and by his ceaseless analysis of his guilt: He felt guilty because he had hurt her, but was glad that he had hurt her because she had made him feel incompetent; he realized this, and felt guilty because he was glad, and so on ad infinitum. This tendency to feel guilty and then analyze his guilt, and then to feel some emotion regarding his analysis, about which emotion he felt further guilt, was like a worm, he knew, that was burrowing in his brain. He realized that this worm was in his brain but could not get rid of it.

Soon after this, she invited him over for supper for the

express purpose of working out some reconciliation. He went because whenever she called him he could not refuse.

Oppressive as the situation was, he still hoped that there might be some solution. They sat in her kitchen in silence. She had cooked a vegetarian meal. There were some daisies on the kitchen table in a vase.

“Se, Stewie,” she said. “I’ve been reforming my whole life.”

Aicha was spending the night with some friends. The only sound in the kitchen was the hum of the refrigerator. After supper, they went to a movie. The theater was only a half-mile away so they walked. She made no effort to beautify her appearance. She wore the same dark coat that she always wore. The purple kerchief on her head was pulled so tight that it made her face look bare and old. She walked along with her hands in her pockets, looking sad and withdrawn. She wore plain clunky shoes that made her legs look thick. He tried to look at her and tell himself that she was lovely, but instead felt angry because of her refusal to do the few things that would have made her appear more attractive.

Steward knew he had no right to ask Sarah to do these things, and he resented his lack of control. Her reaction to his criticism of her weight had set up a new dynamic where he felt that anymore he could not ever criticize her at all for fear of precipitating another crisis. He felt frustrated and unable to order his feelings.

At the movie, they sat in the back, hardly touching one another. The film was an Italian romantic comedy. At one point the hero made love to a woman who was grotesquely obese. Her legs were so obese that they were wringled with fat. The film made much of the absurdity of his attempts to make love with her by showing him from various perspectives as he tried to approach her. The audience roared with laughter, but Steward and Sarah sat in dead silence.

“I suppose when you saw, that fat woman, you thought of me,” she threw out when they were walking back to her apartment.

“No, I did not, Sarah. I’ve never thought of you as an obese person, not even a fat person.

“Sometimes you can be so despicable,” she replied.

“Maybe it’s time you face up to how you’ve gone through life saying things for effect.”

“I’ve never said anything to you for effect. I like and respect you very much.”

They walked on in silence. When they arrived at her building, she asked him to leave. They were standing at the front door. He shook his head, hesitant to go.

“So what good was this then? What good was our attempt at reconciliation? I thought we were going to figure things out.”

She looked at him sternly. “I’m very tired. What would it lead to? We would try to make love. While we were making love, I’d keep thinking that that’s what I look like to you. A freak, something to laugh at.” She was not exactly crying but her eyes were red.

“Sarah, you’re being ridiculous. You know you’re being ridiculous.”

“I’m a lonely person, Thomas. You think you can just use people for your amusement? Well, you can’t use me. I’m a lonely person. I don’t have any close friends. I trusted you, and you tore me down.”

He tried to hug her but she pulled herself away.

“We can talk some other time,” she said, straining to keep her composure. “Right now, I’m in a terrible mood.”

He watched her walk through the inner hallway to her door. She walked quickly with her head hunched into her shoulders. At her door, she turned back and saw he was watching. She looked at him steadily for a moment but didn’t wave goodnight.

He watched the door close behind her. He turned and headed home, arriving about midnight. For a long time, he paced back and forth in his apartment, putting everything in order. There were books and clothes strewn on the floor and the plants needed water. Then he pulled down his stowaway bed and lay in the dark unable to sleep. For the first time then, he understood how terribly he had hurt her. A great wave of

emotion went through him. He realized that despite everything that had happened, he was starting to love her, really love her. At the same time he felt terribly constrained because the situation seemed so impossible.

He went to see her the following night at the bar. She refused to speak to him. The more she rejected him, the more he felt as though he was in love with her.

He explained all this to Weinstein on Sunday night where he ran into him at the usual Sunday night gathering at the Paradise Cafe. By this time, it was early December; the tourist season was over and the rainy season had started. It was drizzling outside, a cold, dreary drizzle that had kept everyone indoors.

The atmosphere in the bar had waned considerably from what it had been several months before. Everyone was worried about meeting bills. Weinstein was planning a trip to New York, to Brooklyn where he had grown up, because his father was sick. Steward and Weinstein sat at their usual table by the window. A candle burned on the table next to two bottles of beer. Steward and Weinstein drank their beers slowly, now and then exchanging comments. They were in a somber mood.

“Now that you’ve nearly destroyed her, you start thinking that you’re in love with her,” Weinstein said. “Can’t you understand this as just some weird kind of rejection syndrome? If you want to know what I think, I’ll tell you frankly. Stewie, I think it’s too late to salvage this relationship in any way. In the first place, you’ve ruined the aesthetics of the relationship. She’ll never forgive you for that. Even if she could forget it as an insult, pure and simple, she couldn’t forget it as aesthetics. And do you know why? Because she’s a romantic at heart. It’s written all over her face, much as she would deny it. That’s what she wanted from you, Tom, another try at romance. But you’ve ruined it for good by making her feel like she doesn’t fit in the role that she was imagining for herself. So what’s the sense of thinking about it anymore, Stew? The best thing to do is just leave it alone. Let her go her own way.”

They rode home hardly talking. Steward looked out the

window. "I can't believe it," he remarked. "Another fucked-up relationship."

"What can you say, Tom? It happens all the time. It's nothing new. If she falls apart, are you willing to pick up the pieces?"

"I don't know."

"Think about it, Stew. This is getting to be a serious situation."

Steward did think about it. He knew Weinstein understood him better than anyone else. To completely forget her at this point seemed absurd; but to go on seeing her seemed not only absurd but also destructive; he accepted it begrudgingly as the lesser of evils. The only way he could forget her was to turn his mind to other things. He began giving more attention to his art, and, at Weinstein's invitation, began going over to Weinstein's house for supper one night a week. Weinstein lived in the Mission District in a flat which he shared with two women, one of whom had a eight-year-old son. Weinstein wasn't involved with either woman; he had a small room in the back with a mattress on the floor and books strewn all around it.

These once-a-week suppers provided Steward with enough companionship to take the edge off his loneliness; he liked both of the women, but for various reasons, neither was available to him. One of them, a beautiful Jew, was involved with another man; the other, a pale, aspiring poet, was unattractive to him.

Steward took turns at making meals. At times, he went for walks with Weinstein and the Jewish woman's son. For several weeks, he didn't see Sarah. None the less, she was much on his mind. He found it impossible to extricate her from his psyche. Several times, he passed by the bar, looking in the window. She pretended not to notice him, but he knew that she hadn't forgotten him. He knew that she was feeling lonely and was still hurt by the insult that he had given her. He felt responsible for her; his strange sense of kinship with her persisted no matter how much he tried to tell himself that it was in the past. Finally, he hit upon a plan, which was to go and see her again, and try to put the relationship on the

basis of a friendship, that is, without any sexual involvement. And he decided to ask her out for supper at Weinstein's one night, hoping that she might strike up a friendship with one of the women that lived with Weinstein. He talked to Weinstein about this plan, and mentioned it to the two women. Everyone agreed to cooperate;—they did this half-heartedly, but nonetheless they agreed.

With this in mind, Steward stopped in at the bar. His cab was parked out front in the street, the warning lights blinking. The bar was quiet. There were a few guys in the back by the pool table; a middle-aged man and woman sat by one of the side tables. Sarah stood by the counter by herself, eating some chili and looking in a book. When Steward came in, she looked up and watched him walk towards her. She didn't smile.

"Can I have a beer?" he said.

"Of course, you can. That's what this is. It's a bar."

She brought him a beer.

"Are you angry at me because I stopped by?" he asked.

She shook her head. "No, I guess not. I've wondered how you are."

"I've been okay. How about you?"

"There's not much to say. I've been studying all the time. I've been lonely."

He sipped on his beer. She stood watching him but said nothing. After a while, he got up. "My cab's in the street, Sarah. I have to go."

"How strange you are. Why did you stop by?"

"I had this idea we could start over and just be friends, but it all seems so hopeless." He had his coat in his hands. He watched her to see if she would reply.

She was dressed exactly as she had been on the night he first saw her—in jeans, a T-shirt, and an open flannel shirt. Her hair was tucked behind her left ear; in her exposed earlobe was the same silver loop he had noticed that first night when he had wondered what was behind her tough facade. Now he knew that there was a vulnerable person behind that facade, and far from wanting to desert her, he wanted to caress her and take care of her. She looked at him, then

looked away.

“The way we left things, nothing was decided,” she said, looking back. “I thought I wouldn’t see you again. I didn’t know. I didn’t know if I wanted to see you. I do care about you, Stew, but it seems like the closer we get to one another, the more destructive we are. So how could we be friends? It seems so impossible.”

“I suppose by keeping in touch,” he ventured.

She smiled. “That’s your whole problem, Tom. You’re so impractical. And so am I, at heart. But I’ve learned to be practical because I’ve been placed in this weird situation where I’m a mother, and I need to survive, if not for my own sake, then for Aicha’s. So I’ve learned to survive, but in the process of learning it, everything else has been killed off. It’s this continual balancing act. I’m like a juggler. And where do you fit in? I don’t know. Your one greatest asset, the thing that makes you so hard for me to deal with, is you look like Prince Charming. So I look at you, and I think, ‘This is Prince Charming.’ I want you to come through with this impossible role. I want you to be all collected, but you can’t be collected, because your energies are scattered. They’re scattered all over the universe, Tom. You’re so immature.”

He shrugged hopelessly. “What can I say? I’m a cabdriver. I’m trying to be an artist. I feel this bond with you. I don’t know if it’s sexual. I mean, it seems like we have all these sexual difficulties, and I need to feel sexually competent, and don’t, so maybe the solution is to forget about the whole sex routine, and just be friends. Because, anyway, I have this weird idea that an artist should be celibate.”

She laughed.

“I really do, Sarah. When I was young, I wanted to be a priest.”

She laughed again. “Yea, you would make a great priest, if there was some little floozie under your cassock sucking your cock.”

“So that’s what you think of me. You think I’m a low-life.”

She smiled and shook her head. “No, I don’t think

you're a low-life, Stewie. But I think underneath all your thinking and analysis, you're a very basic person, a very basic man, and what you need is a very basic woman who will cure your insecurities. But Sarah Kerwin is not this basic woman. She was at one time, perhaps; but that was a long time ago, in the primeval past. I don't mean the phylogenetic past, I mean my own personal past. I'm almost 30 years old. I've been screwed and screwed and screwed, and I'm tired of the whole physical trip. I'm tired of caring if I'm a normal or abnormal person. I'm tired of heavy discussions. I hate to say it, but I'm tired of life, tired of all of it except whatever little piece of it I can carve out for myself. I mean, I once thought that people were supposed to be noble. But look at me, Sarah Kerwin, the bartender, do I look noble? I don't feel it if I am. I just feel like I'm me."

He turned to leave. "Okay, then, I'll go. Do you know what I leave to you, Sarah Kerwin, walking paradox? I leave to you the rest of your life. I leave to you your own stupid solitude and pride. I mean, it's true I have a dick, but I'm also a person. In my own weird way, I've tried to be your friend. So okay then, goodbye."

She laughed. "What a flare for melodrama you have. I'm truly impressed. Listen, Thomas, do me a favor, okay?"

"What?"

"Sit down and have some chili. You look like a raving lunatic. Have some chili, okay? "

He smiled and sat down. She brought him a bowl of chili and some crackers, which after removing them from their cellophane wrapper, he mashed up with his spoon. For several minutes, he was intensely absorbed in the chili, which he ate in his usual gulps like a hungry animal.

She laughed. "Tom, you're something else. Your one saving grace is how basic you are. I put you down for it, but to tell you the truth, I like it."

She brought him a second bowl of chili which he ate more slowly. "So tell me this wonderful plan for a-sexual companionship. Even on a purely philosophical basis, the idea is intriguing. It reminds me of when I was a teenager. I was so self-conscious about my body. I never even touched

myself, let alone let anyone else touch me. That's the time for Platonic friendships. And here I am, 30 years old almost, with a well-worn cunt, and I'm going to become Platonic again. It's very interesting. I'd like to hear about it."

He smiled wryly. "Yes, I can tell you're interested."

"I am," she said, laughing. "I sincerely am. Because maybe some wired spiritual trip is the solution to my dilemma."

He laughed. "Maybe. so." He kept eating his chili.

She watched him. Finally she said: "Thomas?"

He looked at her. "Yes."

"I'm waiting to hear about your plan."

"Oh, I don't have any big, stupendous plan," he said. "I just thought that we could keep in touch, you know. Maybe we could see one another during the day when we wouldn't get physically involved. And then we could just get to know one another, and all that."

"And all that?"

"You know what I mean. It wouldn't be so heavy. It would just be a friendship. It wouldn't be a romance."

"So when should we meet then? I have classes every day."

"I don't know. You know what I was thinking?"

"What?"

"I was thinking maybe sometime you could come over for supper at Weinstein's house."

"What for? I hardly know him."

"I don't know. He lives with this little group of people, you know. You always say that you don't have any close friends."

"What kind of people?"

"Two women. Their names are Penny and Gail."

"He lives with two women?"

"Communally."

"I see. So what are they like?"

"Just people. I don't know. I guess you would call them Noe Valley Specials. You know what I mean—latter-day hippies, alternative types."

"It sounds so exciting. I like to meet other people who

are abnormal, other social deviants. It's so nice of you to ask me."

He shook his head. "So forget it then. So who are you going to be friends with then? So you want to meet some weird three-piecer who works for Standard Oil? What's it to me? Or maybe you want to meet a social-worker who lives in Pacific Heights and drives all the way to Strawberry Point to take a sun-bath. I know some people like this. So what's it to me?"

He got up to go. "I have to hit the streets, Sarah. You know what I've made tonight? Thirty bucks gross. Haven't even paid for my cab."

"So when is this big dinner?" she said.

"I was thinking Tuesday. I have it off and Weinstein does, too. And I know you do, if you have the same schedule."

"Okay, Stewie. I'll give it a try."

The next Tuesday, he met her at her apartment to take the bus to Weinstein's. Aicha came, too. Sarah wore jeans, a white blouse, and a blazer; her daughter wore her school-clothes. For a long time they stood at the transfer point on Castro and 24th Street. There was an ice-cream store across the street. A line of people was waiting to buy ice-cream. Aicha kept to herself, avoiding Steward. Sarah was in a strange, girlish mood. She talked excitedly in a voice that sounded higher-pitched than normal, holding Steward's arm, and looking around him up the street for the bus. She had been to a seminar the previous weekend at which some professor had talked about how few jobs there were in linguistics because the government was cutting back on programs. The only program of interest to her, she said, was at Halifax University in New York. The purpose of the program was to compare the evolution of Chinese ideograms with the evolution of the sterical configurations of certain organic molecules, complex carbohydrates. Both underwent a gradual change: the molecules because of the stress and strain of their chemical environment; the ideograms, and along with this, the phonemes which represented the same concepts as those represented by the ideograms, because of

the stress and strain of human imprecision. Sarah explained it so articulately that it made Steward, who anyway was in a bad mood, feel stupid. He couldn't think of anything to say. The more Sarah talked about the seminar, the more sarcastic and bitter she became. By the time they got to Folsom Street, where Weinstein lived, she had worked herself into a diatribe about jobs.

“That's the absurd thing, Tom. When it comes right down to it, there are maybe five worthwhile jobs in the whole field of linguistics. And the rest of those people, you know what they're doing? They're doing nothing. They're doing support work like me. It's the same old story—all these smart people running around doing boring, nonsensical, and sometimes even destructive jobs. Like making freeways, for instance, or making napalm or herbicides. All these smart people with their heads up their asses, or else they're stuck in the rat race—did you ever think about that? What a mind-blower! What a drag!”

The meal turned out to be quiet and awkward. The women had nothing to say to one another except niceties. The pale poet, whose name was Gail Hudson, seemed to resent Sarah for her physical loveliness. The other woman who was not short in loveliness herself busied herself with chores and seemed distracted. Weinstein's charm saved the situation from being a total disaster, but just barely. Soon after the meal, Sarah announced she had homework to do, and had to leave. There was a further exchange of niceties. Steward went out with Sarah and Aicha. It was two blocks to Mission Street. They stood watching for a bus. It was a cold, windy night. Mother and daughter huddled together, saying nothing.

“Did you enjoy yourself?” Steward asked.

“It was alright,” she answered cryptically. Aicha never even looked in his direction.

After ten minutes of shivering in the wind, Steward hailed a cab. They rode quietly, scarcely talking to one another. On the way to her house, Sarah scolded her daughter for eating too much, all the while looking sideways at Steward as if to say, “See what a syndrome you've

created.” He sat at the far end of the back seat, looking out the window. By the time they arrived, he felt exhausted. He was just beginning to realize that the evening had somehow ended up as a disaster. He paid the fare. It was \$2.10; he gave the driver four dollars. They got out of the cab. Aicha went in. Steward and Sarah stood by themselves, shivering in the wind, and looking up the street toward the lights of the corner grocery store. A light rain had begun to come down.

“You can go home,” she said.

“I’d like to come in,” he replied.

She looked at him a moment, shrugged her shoulders, and unlocked the door. He followed her across the front hall past the lamp by the mirror, then stood behind her as she unlocked the door to her apartment. The interior of the apartment was dark except for the light that came out from the bottom of the closed door to her daughter’s room. A record was playing. They walked down the hall without turning on the light, then into Sarah’s room. She reached over to put on the lamp on the entable next to her bed. Steward sat down on the side of her bed. He looked at her. She was standing by her dresser at the bottom of the bed.

“I’m going to get myself a drink,” she said. “Would you like some?”

“Yes.”

He watched her go out of the room, then looked out the window toward the trapezoid of light on the fence. A cat came by, scaling the top of the fence in the dark. He got up and went to the dresser to look at the flowered jewelry box. It was made of wood, painted with black enamel; the flowers were pink and white. The enamel and painted flowers had worn so thin that in places the grain of the wood could be seen. He sat down again. He heard her in the bathroom, then heard her open the cupboard in the kitchen, then heard her breaking out some ice cubes. She came back with the drinks in two water glasses. She was dressed in her nightgown. She gave him one drink and sat down on the bottom of the bed. He moved closer to her.

“Let’s get one thing straight before you get your engines going,” she said. “We’re not going to make love. We’re

going to sit here and talk and then you can go home.”

He nodded. He moved across from her on the chair next to the bed. She seemed distraught. She frowned as if thinking what to say. She lit a cigarette. The only sound in the house was the faint music coming from her daughter’s room. She looked at him.

“Tom, I know you meant well by tonight. But when I meet people like that, it just convinces me all the more strongly that all that is in the past. I mean, that whole 60ish way of looking at life. And even this situation between us where we try to transcend sexual differences, and soon, and so on, that’s in the past, too. I just feel that I’m very different from those kind of people anymore. Do you understand?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“I can’t go back to where I was before. I don’t know where I’m going to, you know, but I know I can’t go back and be what I was. I have to move away from what I was. I have to be something new.”

“I feel the same way. They’re just friends. or not even friends, really, except for Sol. They’re just acquaintances. I moved here to San Francisco to get away from a similar scene in Minnesota. I moved away from there to get away from my serious mind. And here in I am in San Francisco as serious as always.”

She seemed upset because he was answering her so glibly. She kept frowning.

He watched her for a moment and then spoke. “Well, what can I say, Sarah? I tried. I realize you’re lonely. I’m sorry I can’t do anything about it. I tried to be your lover. No matter what I do, I can’t satisfy you. You have no idea how much I’ve thought about it. But I don’t understand you. I don’t understand what you want.”

“I know you’ve tried, Stewie. I know you’ve tried to understand. But what you need to accept now is I need to go my own way. I mean, what can we do for one another anymore? Every time we see one another, we get into these weird sexual scenes. It never works out. And do you know why? I don’t enjoy sex, that’s all. It’s no longer a part of my life. If you could detach yourself from it a little, then maybe

you could understand that it's my problem, not yours. But you're such a paranoid, insecure person.

"And what am I? Look at me, Stewie, don't you know me at all? Can't you see I'm in the midst of this tremendous struggle for everything? For my whole life, for my sanity! It's only with the greatest effort that I manage to hold on. There's nothing wrong with you, Tom, but I need someone who's strong."

Two weeks later, Weinstein announced he had purchased his plane ticket to New York. Steward drove with him to the airport and watched his bearded patriarchal friend limp in to the terminal, and then he was truly alone.

6

Before Tom Steward on an evening soon after this, in his art studio-kitchen, was a mural-like picture of a blond man in a blue baseball cap who sat in the back seat of a cab with an ape; behind this man and ape, framed by the back window of the cab, was a colossal traffic jam; the cabdriver's one bespectacled eye watched them through the rear-view mirror. The man was drawing on a cigarette; the ape, though chained around the neck, looked out the side-window with an intelligent expression. Next to this cabbie-mural, taped onto the wall beside the other picture, was another that Steward had cut out from some book about art, a night-time scene by a cabbie artist. This picture was of a downtown street. There were bright lights and lighted windows on both sides of the street. The sides of the street, on the picture-plane, ascended upward and inward, converging on an imaginary focal-point on the horizon, where, above this focal-point, was the night-green water of some river, and, above this water, the spires of a bridge silhouetted against an orange and red sky. The sky swirled from this focal point, breaking into streaks of purple that swirled around an orange sun. Add to these aspirant, upward-curving lines the semaphore, the mysterious semaphore that changed endlessly to red, green, and yellow; concentrate the dark air around the semaphores so that it was viscous like a sea; charge this air with the cries of sirens that rose up in the midst of sleeping

buildings, rose up, whirled around, and moved toward one another, toward wherever a fire burned in this dark sea; populate this darkness with the furtive faces of those deformed people that came out at night like bugs from under rocks and never came out in day because they were ashamed of what they looked like; and then these pictures together represented what to Steward was the mystery and magic of the city night and represented what he felt compelled to find there.

Up to this point, Steward had been pursuing his vague artistic studies with a sense of desperation. He believed in them enough to stake his life on their unfolding, but art required concentration and concentration required self-enforced seclusion. Now with Sarah Kerwin behind him, Steward gave himself all the more resignedly to this seclusion. There was a paradox in this, however, that Steward was well aware of: Art was supposed to be about life, but with such self-containment it became theory instead,—gray analysis, lifeless burrowing into one's own consciousness and past. Even his explorations of the city-night, Steward knew, had taken on this character. The city was real; of course, it was real; but it was also the dark places and labyrinthine passages through which he drove his cab alone, places and passages which, for all of their apparent reality, could have been those of some kind of nether kingdom. He was always moving. Ahead of him was a corridor of semaphores that, due to his knowledge of their patterns, clicked from red to green in front of him as if subject to his command; the red, green, and yellow of the semaphores illumined the sides of the buildings next to them, and the dull surfaces of the streets below them, and radiated out into the darkness like the bioluminescence of creatures who live at the bottom of the sea. The cab plunged forward with headlights that shattered this darkness for that moment when he darted through, then closed in behind him with its intangible and irrepressible darkness and sadness again. Sarah Kerwin was now part of this darkness, too, Steward knew, because she represented to him how he himself, not wanting to, had contributed in making this darkness and

sadness, and was powerless to stop it.

December passed. One night in early January, Steward stopped in Club 1550 to see her, but she turned coldly away, acted as if she didn't see him at all, while he watched from the other side of the room, marveled again at how lovely she looked in the orange and red light of the bar, cursed himself again for having harmed her self-esteem, and noticed again with what visible tension of the face and shoulders she held her ground and resisted speaking to him.

January, February. Gray clouds pressed low above the lighted buildings. The Zodiac killer was in the midst of a new spree of murders. The streets were deserted; the rain poured down night after night.

With Weinstein gone, Steward had little contact with other people; he kept to himself. Business was bad, just nickels and dimes. He drove up and down the hills with the windshield-wipers creaking, looking off toward the rain-washed streets that glowed with the light of the unheeded semaphores, then walked home alone down a deserted thoroughfare through a corridor of rain and blinking yellow lights. A couple times, too, he went over to North Beach to the Paradise Cafe, but the bar was deserted, just empty chairs and unused tables while the waitress sat at one side looking blankly toward the street.

Suddenly it occurred to Steward that his life had come to nothing, that there had been no fruition. The excitement of the previous summer, his sense of living a romantic life, his notions about the mystery of the night, all seemed as though they had been an illusion; and the women he had loved, all the pretty faces that blended into one, they seemed like an illusion, too, like so many islands of companionship and sunlight in the midst of his essential loneliness and darkness. He looked back over his past life, and realized that his wife had been the only woman that he had loved, really loved, really cared for, and that ever since his disappointment with her, he had been trying to prove to himself that he could love women sexually with no expenditure of heart.

He lay alone at night, listening to the fog horns from the bay which sounded again and again as though from some

faraway kingdom. Now and then, as in circles of overlapping sound, the wails of fire engines rose up in the air from the various sectors of the city. He went on walks by himself. The semaphores clicked unheard on silent streets. Sometimes he walked up to the top of Nob Hill and stood by the Episcopal cathedral, looking off toward the southern part of the city. The street lights and neon signs on the sides of Taylor Street, which led down the hill toward the Tenderloin District, converged at Market Street with another line of lights which intersected with it at an oblique angle. At this convergence was an immense red neon sign that said "Billiards;"—that was Amy's All-Night Pool Hall on Market Street. Above this was the mound of lights that shone from the side of Bernal Hill, which was beyond the district where Weinstein lived. To one side of the hill, a part of the freeway that led to the airport could be seen: a stream of white lights moved in a never-ending procession toward the city. Looking at this, he remembered how he himself had been among those lights, looking out over the dashboard and meter toward a river of red tail-lights that carried him along as in a trance; and he remembered how, after rounding the big bend on Highway 80, the city sky-line so startlingly loomed up from the darkness, glowing with lights like the Emerald City in the Land of Oz. He remembered how much the city had meant to him, and felt a resurgence of his love for it, though now as never before, this love was tinged with sadness and his sense of worthlessness and futility.

He began to be obsessed with his lack of arrival at anything substantial. He concentrated all the more on his artistic studies, secluded himself to such an extent that to talk with anyone at all seemed strange to him. He surrounded his activities with elaborate philosophications about the meaning of art, and about art as a spiritual activity, filled up notebook after notebook with drawings, never escaping from his linear style. He began experimenting with color. He worked in acrylics and created bizarre images which he was ashamed to show to anyone and which he told himself represented his spiritual journey. He began to experience odd body sensations. When he walked down the street, the sidewalk

seemed too hard beneath his feet; his whole body jarred with every step. He began to talk to himself, was discourteous with everyone, and was beside himself with loneliness and desperation.

He made a huge canvas chart so that he could learn to mix colors. This was at the suggestion of the woman who oversaw the community art classes at Fort Mason where he went a couple days a week. On this chart, per her instructions, he crossed twenty colors with twenty others in the manner of a highway-map mileage chart. It was his first experiment with oils. For each combination of colors, there were three boxes so that the two colors could be mixed in various proportions. In all, there were 1200 boxes. He filled in 78 of these boxes and then lost patience with it. The unfinished chart hung like a tapestry on his kitchen door. His sense of being pursued and inevitably condemned increased to the point of near-despair.

His body felt stiff and old and strangely-contorted, as though twisted to one side. He knew that what was behind this was his feeling of being forever banished from the world of men; knew that this self-assessment was irrational, and yet could not escape it. He felt like a hunted man, like an outcast, a pariah; and it was all because he had inflicted a wound for which he imagined he could not be forgiven. Had he inflicted this wound deliberately, then forgiveness might have followed some deliberate confession or some deliberate self-rehabilitation. But the wound was intrinsic to everything that he was; it was part of him, as though a part of the grain and fiber of his substance, a product of his alienation from himself and of his inability to escape what he was. For this reason, it couldn't be forgiven and hung upon him like a curse. He wandered up and down the streets by himself. He no longer had the hopeful look that he had had only a couple years before. He could no longer see any way that would lead to personal fulfillment or happiness. Every way led outward from him and then, inevitably, doubled back toward himself, toward his own inner darkness.

Then, late one night, when he still had his cab, he got terribly stoned on some Columbian grass, more stoned than

he had ever been, and to such an extent that everything in the world seemed repulsive to him. He drove home, parked by the corner fire hydrant, and walked up the common stairs in his apartment building, amazed by the familiar surroundings which eked of his small existence, saw them with all their associations from his life, and yet saw them as if he had never seen them before, as if shining with a strange and alien beauty and terror. Everything terrified him; his body terrified him. He began to think in terms of half-life: "Thirty more minutes, if I can only bear it, and I will be half as much stoned." He walked down the short hall to his bathroom and stared at his face in the mirror. Its clean-shaven boyishness astounded him, and yet when he examined the image in the mirror more closely, put his nose against the glass so that the mirror clouded with vapor, he saw that this image was not that of the face of a boy but instead was that of a man who was masquerading as a youth. He noticed how long his face was, like that of a horse. He smiled. He looked like a horse that had bared its teeth in a neigh. He took a piss. His cock felt like a sausage. It made him laugh: "Ha-ha-ha." He jacked off by looking at pictures of naked women in a glossy magazine. Then, with his wet cock still hanging out of his underpants, he went back into his living room to look at his drawings. He paged through them. They were depressingly primitive, nothing but lines.

He looked at his drawing, "The North Wind and the South." The north wind was angular lines; the south wind was wavy ones. What a stupid idea! He put on his clothes, bounded down the steps, and went outside to his cab. He suddenly discovered that there were no lines anywhere. He walked through the various spaces that he had perceived of as made up of lines,—no lines at all. His whole approach to art had been stupid and trivial. He went up to his cab and unlocked the door.

When Steward got in his cab, it occurred to him that he knew where everything was. He always put his little things in exactly the same spot—his money under the seat in a brown paper bag; his waybill and pencil on the visor; his empty yogurt cartons and other trash to the left of the seat

between the seat and the door; his pen in the ashtray; his notebook on the seat. He turned the key and started up the engine. A light rain was coming down. The streets were deserted. He drove along with the windshield wipers creaking. The cab, its four wheels reacting to the up's and down's and crevices in the streets, was like an extension of his own body, like a part of himself; he knew the cab's every whim, knew when it felt good or got hurt on a bump.

Down Hyde Street to 8th, 8th Street to Folsom, Folsom to 5th Street—he had no particular destination. It was a cold, dreary night. He felt more alone than ever before. A drunk man accosted him, opening the right front door. Steward barred him from entering by leaning over and extending his hand. “You got any money?” he said.

The old man held up a small wad of crumpled one-dollar bills. Steward pulled back his arm. The drunk man got in. He had white hair and a face that was burned or scarred on one side. He smelled of liquor. His breath smelled like garbage.

“So where are you going?”

“Detox on 8th Street.”

The Detox was a detoxification center for alcoholics. Steward flipped the meter arm, did a U-turn, and headed down 5th Street for Harrison. He was still stoned. The old man kept falling over toward him. Steward kept pushing him back toward the other side of the seat. At the Detox Center, the old man got out. The fare was \$2.90; he gave Steward \$3.00, then asked for two dollars back.

“You know how it is, Mac. It takes a hell of a lot of conniving to stay drunk.”

Steward eyed him a moment, then gave him back the three dollars. “Sure, I know how it is. Take care of yourself.”

The old man's voice faded behind him: “Thanks a million, Chief. God bless, God bless...”

Driving away, he tried not to think about what had happened. It was just a small incident but seemed threatening. He had dwelled in this night-time world for over two years, had always felt a strange appeal in it, but had always felt himself removed from it, a visitor. Now he felt himself sinking further into it. It wasn't that he regretted his

kindness to the old man. No, far from that, Steward realized how thin a line divided him and the old man, how much he was like him, how much the old man represented what he might become in the future. The one thing that up to this point had saved his self-esteem and made him think that he was different was his identity as an artist, fragile and incomplete as it might have been. Now that, too, was giving way. He brought his cab back to the garage and sat by himself counting his money. All the other cabs were already in for the night, parked along the curbs for the entire length of the block on both sides of the street. It was 4 A.M. Having nowhere else to go, he stayed out later the rest. He got out of the cab with his folded waybill in his hand, walked across the quiet street, dropped in his waybill, sighed for a moment at the prospect of having to walk all the way home by himself, then putting on his blue coat, he walked down the street.

It was a chilly night; a thick fog had come in. The sky looked purple. On each corner that he passed was a yellow blinking semaphore. He looked at the semaphore, feeling the same indefinable kinship with it that he had felt with the old drunk,—the same kinship but also the same vague dread, because like the old man it now more and more represented to him a world that was closing around him. Arriving at home, Steward contemplated the various objects in his apartment now visible in the first gray light of dawn, he was impressed again with the paltriness of his own existence. His sketchbooks were strewn on the floor where he had thrown them in disgust; in the bathroom, next to the stool, was the girlie magazine he had looked at while masturbating. He opened it up: beautiful young women in provocative poses, images that due to modern technology were real and yet strangely unreal. More than anything sexual, what these images represented to him was his own incompetence, his confusion. He opened his closet: three pairs of pants, several shirts, his tennis shoes on the floor, the vague smell of his own body and of his own presence in the world.

The weeks past by, one after another. He gave up on his artwork; he couldn't bear to look at what he had done; every

picture branded him as a failure. During the day, he walked up and down the streets, took the bus to the beach, walked along the ocean, picked his way through bookstores, trying to manufacture in himself a resurgence of hope and self-confidence. At night he ate by himself in various cheap restaurants where he spoke to no one. Sometimes he walked past Club 1550, looking in the window to see if Sarah was there. When she was there, and he saw her, he felt a pang of sorrow at every sight of her face; when she wasn't there, he felt an inner emptiness. Once when she saw him; her eyes met his sadly and turned away.

His one and only activity that made any sense, the sum and meaning of his existence, was his cab. Driving down the street with his shirt rolled up to his elbows, he felt like a man. When he stopped in for coffee, people looked at him and thought, "That's a cabbie." It gave him an identity to fall back on. This identity was the rock-bottom of his existence. He felt proud of it and yet the prospect of driving a hundred miles a night for the rest of his life was depressing. To do this required a tremendous amount of energy. Sometimes, riding up and down the deserted winter streets by himself, obeying the semaphores like a man in a trance, a strange calm came over him, Tom Steward didn't care. At other times, his loneliness and lack of direction were unbearable to him. Bouncing down the street, his body swaying back and forth in response to the changing surface of the street, he sighed with utter fatigue; his body ached from the foot that pressed the gas pedal to a point between his shoulders on his upper back where his body was tightened, contorted, in response to the movement of traffic in front of him. Moving along like this, his pelvis and lower back sunk in exhaustion to the seat, his whole being jarred to the quick with every bump, his body aching with numbness and despair, he felt like a crucified man, felt as though his whole paltry existence had been nailed by his meaningless forward momentum to the insipid softness of the seat. A crucifixion, and yet there would be no "Eli, lama Sabathani;" there would be no glorious resurrection, no showing of the wounds; there would be no ascension, and no tongues of fire except the

meaningless burning of the semaphores at the bottom of the viscous sea of the night.

Every night, by the time he finished, Steward was bone-tired. Arriving at the garage, he rested his head on the steering wheel. What was it all for? If it was just for himself, it meant nothing.

Every night the drivers met at the garage a little while after closing, stuffed in the cab of whoever got there first, to talk and smoke joints. The grass that passed around was the very best. The men who smoked it were good, ordinary men. He started to attend these sessions, at which he was an odd participant because he was so quiet and self-contained. He was accepted at them for the sole reason that he was a cabbie and had been a cabbie for two years. The other men relaxed when they spoke grass; Steward's reaction to it was entirely different; he became self-preoccupied and quiet. He never had his own grass. He tried to make up for this by bringing a six-pack of beer. The weird thing was that he didn't like to be stoned; he knew it brought out his worst qualities and exaggerated his paranoia and his sense of worthlessness; knew that it exacerbated his strange body sensations, made him feel as though his acting personality was removed from his mind, such that his voice came out as though a tunnel, knew it made his body feel all the more twisted, all the more bare, as though possessed of no inner cushioning; knew it made everything that presented to his senses all the more glaring, burning into his mind like an impression burned by an electric carver into wood; knew this, and yet he sought it, because life without this false intensity was alien to him, muffled by boredom. But was this intensity false? Maybe it was brought about by contact with a dimension of reality he otherwise didn't see. He wanted to tear himself apart, tear apart his mind, obliterate his existence such that he might receive... But what? Steward didn't know.

Despite his misgivings about grass, however, Steward soon decided to buy his own supply. Though he had always, during his years in San Francisco, lived amidst people who smoked grass, he had never had his own supply. To get it, he enlisted the aid of a cabdriver friend. The person who sold it,

a latter-day Hippie, lived in a Victorian house on Castro Street, a couple blocks from Market at the bottom of the hill that divided Castro Village from Noe Valley. The house was a three-story Victorian with bay windows and curlicued eaves; the room in which Steward and his friend were led had a wide window that looked southward toward the Bay. Everything was done with phony hipness and camaraderie, Steward observed. On the way upstairs he noticed that several rooms had expensive stereos. Young women with long hair lounged on the pillowed chairs looking at record albums. Pictures of swami's and guru's hung on the wall.

At the elaborate little ritual, in which, while seated around a bowl of marihuana, the grass was presented for approval and sold (there were four prospective buyers including his friend and himself), Steward sat with the other, at first trying to adjust to the situation by being courteous, but eventually showing his contempt for the whole proceeding by talking about conventional politics. By the time he left with his plastic bag full of grass, he was thoroughly stoned. He had ridden his ten-speed bike over to meet his friend. He rode down Castro Street on his bike. The sky was overcast; a light rain had begun to fall. Everything seemed strangely heavy, as though floating in the same viscous sea that before this he had only imagined to exist in the night. There was something yellow and hazy about the air around the Victorian houses, the shops, the gay men in levi's that stood on the corners, as though this whole world had been compressed all the more and squashed together with such a finality of compression that it seemed inescapable.

That the daytime world now manifested this same odd compression of features, this same alien beauty, and same meaninglessness of the night, was a source of consternation to him. He rode home as quickly as he could on his bike, the wind and rain chilling his face and hands. By the time he got home, it was dark. Lights had appeared in the bay windows of the apartment buildings across the street from his apartment; the Chinese grocery store was closed. He was glad to be alone. Once, later that same night, he went out, but

he moved furtively, avoiding the eyes of other people, and when he saw pretty women with men, a pang of sorrow went through him, because he realized that he was getting old, and that young women no longer noticed him or regarded him as part of their world, as a desirable match. He had nothing to fall back on except his solitary existence, his cabdriving, his sketchbooks, his elaborate philosophications about the meaning of life. In his stoned state of mind, sitting at his kitchen table, dividing the seeds from the clumps, all this had much more significance to him, and yet, at the same time, seemed all the more hollow; his drawings glared out at him, obvious in their shortcomings, but nonetheless manifesting his soul, his genuine spirituality. From then on, Steward realized, in his foreseeable future, his world would consist of himself, the room he worked in, on the walls of which he had tacked up various admonitions to himself (“A poet should know all classes of people as one of them.”): himself, his cab, the city night, his room, his efforts in self-learning, perhaps unrecognized, and nothing else.

The truth of the matter was Steward didn’t like to be stoned. Maybe it was a good thing for other people, an innocent occupation; but for him, it was more than that: it brought out the worst of him, made all the components of his psyche distinct, and not only distinct, but paltry in their discrete existence, like a drinking glass made to stand by itself, and revealed as consisting of nothing but glass. So was he: nothing but glass, or worse than that, like Keats, his name writ on water. And through all this time, as he was quite aware, he had remembered Sarah Kerwin, and why? he had asked himself. Because Sarah, despite her imperfections, despite her ambiguity of gender (indeed, because of it), was the one person in the world that seemed able to understand him; her rejection of him, her judgement of him as being insubstantial was the most painful evaluation of his worth that had ever taken place.

On those few times when he had seen her, when a pang of sorrow had as a result rushed through him, he had thought to himself: “I loved her. Sarah was the one I was meant to love. I loved her and I blew it. My stupid insecurities, my

hatred of imperfection, and to put it on her instead of myself... I'm a fool! A fool! There's no hope for me now..."

Then in early April, after a couple weeks of passing the bar and never seeing her, Steward began to suspect that she was gone. He stopped in at the bar. The only person that he recognized was Clarence, the old man who always stood in the same place at the corner of the bar and mixed his whiskey with beer.

"Have you seen Sarah Kerwin?"

The old man looked up, his whole face showing his weariness. "Sarah? I haven't seen her. She was a sweet lady. I heard she quit. I heard she moved..."

Steward stopped out at her apartment building. Her name was gone from the mailbox. He stopped in at the bar again. Clarence wasn't there; the only person Steward recognized was a hippie type who lived upstairs in the Stanley Hotel, a bearded guy with a head-band.

"Have you heard anything about the woman who used to be the bartender here?... You know, Sarah Kerwin, looks like a Madonna... Used to laugh and joke around..."

"Course, I know her," said this man, who identified himself as Ralph, and who, after sipping nonchalantly on his beer, smiled at Steward enigmatically. "Sure, I heard of her, and I've seen you around... You used to hang out with her, didn't you? I heard she gave you a rough time."

"So what's that to you?"

"It's nothing to me, buddy. I just hear tell that she's hard on her men."

"Oh yea? You know this from personal experience?"

"Let's say I know it from the personal experience of personal friends."

"All I want to know is where's she's at..."

"She's a student, right? Incurable student. Maybe she's in Berkeley."

Steward went out with a feeling of despair. He resigned himself to her being forever gone from his life, and told himself there would be 'no other woman in his life. Then in late April, another incident happened. He was driving his cab down Bush Street toward downtown, when he saw, standing

by herself on the corner of Bush and Leavenworth, a pretty young woman, a girl really, about 18. Steward had turned left from Hyde to Bush, and, consequently, was stopped by a red light. The girl, who had light reddish-brown hair tried not to look at him, but she was obviously disconcerted.

He leaned over and rolled down the right-side window. She looked at him, unsure, what to make of him.

“You need a ride?” he said.

“I guess so,” she replied. She opened the right-front door and got in. She was carrying a small green pack, in the side packets of which some paperback books could be seen. She stared ahead over the dashboard, seeming embarrassed by being in a cab. She looked at Steward unsurely; for a brief moment her brown eyes caught the light that filtered through the windshield. Steward, looking at her, remembered the dreams of his youth, remembered his youthful dream of being worthy of such a young woman.

“So where are you going?” he said, leaning towards her, feeling at one and the same time his youth and his age. “No need to worry. I’ll take you free. It’s a slow night. I got nowhere to go.”

“Guess I’m going to North Beach. You know any cheap hotels? My boyfriend kicked me out. We had a horrible argument. It’s just as well. I just need a place to stay for the night...”

He drove toward North Beach. “You could stay at my place,” he said, “It’s not much. I live alone. You could sleep on the couch.”

“Could I really? My dad was a cabdriver in Cleveland. I just need a couple days to get on my feet. I can tell you’re okay. You wouldn’t resent me for it?”

“No, I wouldn’t resent it.”

He took her to his apartment, gave her his keys. He had no ulterior motives in setting up this arrangement, but just the same, later that night, he couldn’t resist making a half-hearted pass at her.

“If you’d like to, we can get stoned.”

“I’d love to. I’ve only been stoned a couple times.”

He rolled a joint in the kitchen, came in, sat down next

to her on the couch where she was lying in her sleeping bag. She talked volubly about her problems. She had hitched out from Cleveland the previous summer.

Steward listened to all this sympathetically, and then began caressing her back. He leaned over her: "If you'd like me to, I'll give you a backrub."

Her eyes widened when she recognized his intentions. She turned coldly away. Early the next morning she left before he woke up, taking the money he had left in the pockets of his coat.

Again, this was only a small incident but it convinced him how low he had come, how he had descended to a point where he was willing to pilfer from the city whatever he could take from it, and the look that the girl had given him was the look of disgust young women reserve for lecherous old men.

Steward decided to make some attempts at self-rehabilitation, but when he considered all the possibilities available to him, found out that not much could be done. He tried to think of ways that he could meet other people, went to bars by himself; nothing worked out. Much as he wished to prevent it, his life more and more was pervaded by bitterness. Walking down Polk Street, observing the gay men on the street, a kind of instinctual dread came over him. It wasn't a judgement of their homosexuality, so much as a judgement of his own inversion and of how his incurable self-absorption was taking him to ruin. He stopped one night at the record store window where several months before he had stopped on his way to see Sarah Kerwin. The same display was still in the window, the same picture of a woman in a shoulder less dress standing on a beach with a man on a horse behind her and a half-moon and star on the bracelet on her neck.

He thought of Sarah and realized that all his past life and past disappointments had converged on her, felt a deep sadness because things had ended so badly, and along with this, a lingering anger and resentment because of the judgement she had made of him. At the same time, he felt more in love with her than ever and still believed that she

was fated to be his friend. So he kept looking for her and asking people if they had seen her. But no one knew where she had gone.

7

Then one night in early April, Tom Steward was sitting by himself in his rocking chair in his apartment when Sarah Hewitt called unexpectedly. It was about 2 P.M. He was stoned and in a down mood. He was glad to hear her voice. When the phone rang, he had an odd premonition that it was her.

“Thomas, is this you?” she said.

“Yes, of course. And glad to hear your voice.”

“What are you doing?”

“Just sitting here alone.”

“I was down at the Rose and Thistle. I’ve been hitting it pretty hard. I guess it’s stupid of me to call,” she said. “It’s been a couple months.”

“Not stupid at all,” he interjected softly. “I’ve wondered about you. I’ve been past Club 1550 a few times. I used to always see you there—

“Yes, I know you saw me that one night—”

“And you didn’t say hello.”

“It wasn’t easy for me, Thomas. I was trying to do what was best for both of us.”

“And then I didn’t see you. I heard that you quit.”

“Just couldn’t take it any more.”

“And you moved out of your place, didn’t you?”

“Yes, Rusty moved in with his partner. You know, my gay house-keeper. And then after I quit the bar, all that space seemed extravagant.”

“So where do you live now?”

“In the Mission—on Folsom Street.”

“Oh yea, is it nice?”

“It’s big enough but it’s bare. There’s not enough sunlight. I only have one window that gets sunlight.”

“So what have you been doing?”

“Same old things.” Her voice on the phone sounded quiet and sad. “I still have my hopes on the Halifax program.

I've been studying Mandarin."

"Hey, that's really great."

"Ning how ah?"

"Wow, that sounds like Chink-talk."

"It means, 'How are you?'"

"Hey, pretty impressive. How do you say 'Pretty good alright'?"

"I don't know."

"That's what the Navajo's said in Gallup. Kind of a joke, you know."

There was another brief silence. He was still sitting in the rocking chair. The phone was hooked up into the wall by the couch, and the cord was too short, so in order to talk into it he had to lean forward. He kept nodding his head.

"Wow, Chinese, that's really something," he said.

"Thomas," she said, her voice becoming more serious, "The reason I called you, to be frank, is because I'm terribly lonely. Aicha is spending the week with her father. He took her up to Seattle to see his parents. I've been depressed. I try to tell myself that I'm a mother and that she's my daughter, but the truth is I depend on her terribly for companionship. So tonight I've been hopping the bars. I've been going into all these slick bars full of attractive young women. It doesn't make me feel good; it just makes me realize that I can't do this any more. I'm getting to be an old lady."

"You are not an old lady, Sarah."

"I feel like an old lady."

"Have it your own way then."

"I feel stupid I called you after all these months."

"Boy, you are really on a downer, Sarah. There's no need to keep apologizing for yourself, especially to me. I mean, who am I? It's not like I'm a lawyer. I'm a cabbie, you know."

She laughed. "Yes, I know. Are you still pursuing your art?"

"Yea, I pursued it all the way to the trash can."

"So now you're into Dada?"

"Yea, I've finally surrendered to my Dadaistic tendencies. I'm into life. You know what I mean. I just walk

around being happy.”

“Do you really?”

“There’s nothing to it, Sarah. All you have to do is give up craving.”

“I didn’t realize I was talking to a guru.”

“You never did think very much of me. See, you were looking at the Buddha and you didn’t even know it.”

“I have to admit that I didn’t know you were the Buddha. But I always thought you were alright.”

“Did you honestly?”

“Yes, I honestly did.”

Silence again. She sighed. “To go on with my little speech about loneliness. Tom. I was wondering if I could come up there and stay with you one night... I mean I’m really at wit’s end. I just can’t bear to go home. I was thinking of getting a room somewhere... I don’t know where... I don’t have much money—”

“I’d love to have you, Sarah. I can’t imagine anything more wonderful. I’m being sincere. If you want to, you can sleep on the couch.”

“Do you think it would be alright?”

“Yes, I think it would be alright.”

“Is that an official invitation?”

“Yes, please accept my official invitation.”

“Okay, then. But Stewie...”

“Yes.”

“I just want to make it clear that this doesn’t mean that we’re starting our relationship again.

“I understand, Sarah. You’re welcome as a friend. You don’t have to provide me with any services. You can just camp on the couch. I really care for you, Sarah. Please don’t feel embarrassed because you need a friend.”

“Okay, Tom. You’re being so nice to me. Thank you. I’ll be right up. I’m a little drunk.”

“You want me to come and meet you?”

“No. I’ll see you in a little while.”

After she hung up, he paced around the room, smoking the rest of the joint that he had started before she had called. Thoughts rushed through his mind. He was worried that she

would change her mind and not show up. He took a quick shower. Then the buzzer rang. Still wet from the shower, he rushed to the door. He pressed the button that released the outside door, dried himself quickly, and put on his pants and a T-shirt.

He heard her coming up the stairs and opened the door. He saw her coming up the last flight of stairs. She was dressed in the same dark coat that she always wore; her hair wet and messy, her eyes red from either the liquor or from crying. As soon as he saw her, all his strong feeling for her swelled up inside of him. He realized that he did indeed care for her as he had said. He was determined to transcend his sexual appetites and be an honorable man.

She came in, took off her coat, and shrugged. "I must look terrible. I'm drunk."

"You look wonderful, Sarah. Come in and sit down. I have some grass if you'd like some."

"Yes, I would, to tell the truth. I might as well be a total degenerate.

He laughed. "I'm already stoned."

He rolled a joint, lit it, and passed it to her. She took it, puffed on it, passed it back to him, swept back her hair, settled back on the couch. Suddenly she began crying. He leaned over toward her, brushing her brow. She pulled away from him, shaking her head, and dobbing away her own tears.

"This is all so stupid, Stewie. I'm sorry. I don't mean to lay it on you. I don't understand what's happening to me." She began to shiver, shaking her head.

Suddenly he realized that she was in a urgent state. He took the quilt off the couch and put it around her shoulders. She kept shivering. He kissed her on the brow.

She smiled. "I'm okay, really. I don't know what's wrong with me. I'm okay. Don't worry. This is all so stupid, isn't it?"

He leaned toward her. "I don't think it's stupid, Sarah. Here, you just keep warm. Everything's alright. I got some canned soup. Would you like some?"

"Well, I guess so. They say you should eat..."

He went out in the kitchen, opened the cans, put on the soup. He looked in at her. She was wrapped up in the blankets, still dobbing her tears. He stirred the soup a little, went back to her, kissed her again on the brow, and murmured, "You'll be alright."

She mumbled, "I feel so stupid."

"You're not stupid," he said. "Just relax."

He brought in the soup and fed it to her in spoonfuls. She accepted it like a sick child. He kept saying, "You're alright, Sarah. You're alright."

At last she calmed down.

"How much did you drink?" he asked.

"I don't know. A lot."

"Here, now, Sarah, lay down."

She lay down for a moment. He covered her with the blanket.

"You're a real mess, Sarah."

"Yes, I know I am. I'm sorry. And you know what, Tom? I don't even care."

"Yes, you do. That's just your problem. You care too much.

"No, I don't care. I don't give a shit about anyone."

"Yes, you do. You care about Aicha."

"That's just instinct. She's like a part of my own body."

"Well, okay. I can't say that I understand that. But I do understand that you're in one of your extreme moods."

"Maybe I am."

"Yes, you are, Sarah. Just go to sleep."

She closed her eyes. He pulled down the stow-away bed, and prepared to lay down.

"Thomas?" she said.

"What?"

"I don't want to sleep alone."

"Well, if you don't want to sleep alone, I'm afraid I'm the only thing available."

She smiled. "Okay, I'll take it."

She got up sleepily. She still had her coat on. He unbuttoned the coat, and then unbuttoned her blouse and unzipped her pants. She stood by the side of the bed like

a child. Her eyes were closed. When she was all undressed, she stood by the side of the bed in her underpants, bare-breasted, her eyes still closed.

Looking at how her breasts tilted to the side, he remembered his first impressions of her.

“Sarah,” he said.

“Yes.” She opened her eyes. Now once again he noticed how her green eyes were ringed with gray.

“Would you like to wear one of my T-shirts?”

“Yes.”

He got up and opened his closet door. On the floor was a cardboard box full of underwear. He brought a T-shirt to her. She put it on.

“Here, get in bed.”

She got in. He covered her shoulders with the blanket. He sat on the side of the bed, smoking the remainder of the joint, then got himself. Immediately she snuggled up next to him and began rocking her pelvis against his thigh. He laughed. “Sarah,” he said. It was dark in the room. He had his arm around her back and was caressing her rear end.

“What?”

“I hate to put a damper on this situation, but I was bound and determined to transcend my sexuality.”

“Thomas, you know what’s wrong with you?”

“No. What?”

“You think too much.” He took this remark as a put-down. Out of anger, more than out of anything else, he bit the nape of her neck, bit it fiercely. She sighed. He rammed himself into her and fucked her as he had never fucked her before, so that in the frenzy of his movement he brought out of himself once and for all, all of his hatred of her and of how she had contained and controlled him, and at the same time all of his love and passion for her, all of his desperate searching for the feminine world. He stuck his finger up her ass and moved his cock back and forth so that he could feel the thin wall of tissue between her ass-hole and her cunt, and rammed himself against her again and again, not caring what she thought of him. In his stoned state of mind, the animalism of this movement was exaggerated all the more.

He thought that, thus fired with passion, he would please her, but after an eternity of sighing she whispered: "Don't wait for me, just come."

He let himself go with despair at his incompetence, then lay down beside her.

She said softly: "That was nice, Thomas. Thank you."

"But you didn't come."

"I'm an a-passionate person, Tom. I never come. I'm too detached from it. But I do like it."

"Okay, I just don't understand."

"Stewie, you don't need to understand everything. Just go to sleep."

They nestled together in silence for a few minutes and then Steward said. 'You see though what a dilemma this places me in.'

"Because you're an insecure, paranoid person."

"Because I'm a normal man."

"There's no need for you to regard my problems as your problems then."

"What I don't understand is why you place yourself in this situation. You think that I'm not a sexual being..."

"I know you're a sexual being. But why do you persist in seeing something as your problem instead of mine?"

Because you're a glutton for punishment. So suck it up, suck it up! Make yourself feel good! Suck up all the punishment you can get! Ha! You're so insecure!"

"You didn't answer my question, Sarah. Why do you place yourself in this situation at all. It's not just a lack of passion but pure deviousness. You use the bedroom as a battleground. You prevent me from showing passion; it makes you angry whenever I treat you like a woman; and when I'm not passionate, you're contemptuous because I act passive and cautious. So what can be more devious? Making love, but you're not making love, you're making war. Well, I'm sick of this whole routine!"

He sat up in the bed.

"Now who's talking in extremes?" she cried. "You're so insecure! Tell me about your feelings, Stewie, your real feelings. Ha!"

He laughed scornfully. He was now sitting on the side of the bed. She was wrapped up in the covers with a contemptuous smirk on her face.

“You say that I’m so insecure. And why? Because I tell you the truth, because I tell you how I feel. And there’s Sarah Kerwin wrapped up in the covers, hiding behind her phony mask. So big deal, Sarah. You don’t fool me anymore. You’re just as insecure behind your walls as I am when I’m up front. I mean, if you were this big, powerful person behind your walls, I might be impressed. But you’re not a big, powerful person, you’re just stupid Sarah Kerwin, this weak little girl surrounded by walls. You’re a joke, Sarah. You’re a total catastrophe. You make me laugh!”

She threw the covers off her, jumped up from the bed, and stood in her underpants and his T-shirt, glaring hatefully at him. By this time, it was early in the morning. The first light of dawn was coming through the window. She went over to the phone, still glaring at him. She dialed for a cab.

“What’s the address here?”

“1451 Larkin.”

“1451 Larkin,” she repeated into the phone.

She put on her clothes.

He shook his head in despair. “I can’t believe it. You’re actually going to leave in the midst of...”

“Yes, I’m going to leave,” she said fiercely. “Don’t worry, Matthew. It will do wonders for your paranoid delusions.”

The buzzer rang. She went out. He got out of bed, went over to the window, watched her get in the back seat of the cab, watched the cab go out of sight. He sighed. He lay down in bed. The whole situation was hopeless. He no longer cared.

He resigned himself to the prospect of a celibate life. He went back to bed.

At 10 A.M. the phone rang again. He picked it up, half-awake.

“Tom?”

“Yes.”

“This is Sarah Kerwin.”

“Hi Sarah. You get home alright?”

“Yes, I got home.”

“Sorry I got mad at you.”

“Don’t apologize, Tom. I’m the one who should apologize.”

“You don’t need to apologize.”

“Yes, I should and I do.”

“Okay, Sarah, thanks.”

“You were very nice to me. I must have been obnoxious. I was drunk.”

“You weren’t obnoxious.”

“Yes, I was.”

“Okay, well, anyhow it’s all forgotten. Listen Sarah, will you give me another chance?”

“No, I won’t.”

“Okay, then, Sarah, well, good luck to you and all that.”

She hung up fiercely. He was too tired to care. He went back to sleep.

A couple weeks after this, Weinstein got back from New York. He and Steward were walking down Mission Street, each with a shopping bag full of groceries.

“There’s no reason to be so glum about it,” Weinstein was saying. “Let’s face it. This kind of thing happens ,again and again. A total catastrophe. So chalk it up to experience. Even you can detach yourself enough from the situation to understand that objectively she’s not that bad. She’s just fed up with men in general and you’re her scapegoat. You can’t blame her. You struck her a blow that no woman would forget. She probably still cares for you but at the same time she’s been waiting to get her revenge. You can’t blame her. You know very well that she’s alright. She’s a feisty person. She’s got a lot of fire. I mean, how many people do you see walking around that have a lot of fire? Most of them have sold their souls for some mansion that overlooks the bay. But Sarah is a real scrapper. You got to hand it to her.”

Steward, his hands in the pockets of his blue coat, walked along beside Weinstein with a thoughtful frown on his face. “Yes, I don’t feel any resentment toward her. You’re right. I admire her anger. I admire her fire. It just

makes me love her all the more, or if not love her, at least, admire her. But I agree with you. She's a thing of the past. It's just a little hard for me to accept. 'La belle dame' is a thing of the past. I met some guy at Club 1550 called Ralph. He said to me, 'Sarah is hard on her, men.' I suppose it's true. I should know. But the wierd thing I still love her. I'll always love that lady. I always. will. She's the most fucking ornery person that I ever met, and I'll still love her. And you know why? Because she's real. She's Sarah Kerwin, pure and simple. No frills, no pretense, just Sarah Kerwin. There's only only one place I don't care to meet her. You know where that is, Sol?"

Weinstein laughed. "No. tell me."

"In bed."

Weinstein laughed all the louder.

Steward, after looking sideways at Weinstein and enjoying his friend's amusement, went on in his feverish monologue.

"Because Sarah Kerwin, well, most probably she's the woman of the future. I mean, that's her main problem, her great big futuristic brain. Mankind is moving forward. Ever since Adam and Eve, or the caveman, or whatever, it's been moving forward, and sexuality and the body, they're things of the past. They're going to be transcended. People like me and you, Sol, in a hundred years, with genetics and test-tube fertilizations and all that, people will look at me and you as like apes, like cave men with clubs..."

"They'll look at you as a caveman, Stewie. Speak for yourself," said Weinstein. "That's a peculiar thing that I've noticed about you, how you look like a monkey."

Steward laughed.

Spring had come again. There was a fair amount of business on the street. He had a good summer, seeing Weinstein now and then, though he hadn't tried to initiate any new affairs with women. Then one day in early fall he and Weinstein were walking down California Street when they ran into Ralph, the hippie type who hung out in Club 1550.

"Hey, aren't you the guy that used to go with Sarah

Kerwin?" he said, looking at Steward.

"Yea," said Steward. "You see her?"

"She's in the club right now, bent over a stiff one."

Steward and Weinstein walked down to the bar. When they walked in, they saw her on a bar stool. She noticed them and her whole body stiffened. She was half-drunk. She stared at them.

"Well, if it isn't Tom Steward and his friend."

Weinstein nudged him. "See you later. I'm going to play some darts."

As soon as Weinstein was gone, she softened. "I'm glad to see you, Tom. Sit down."

He sat down beside her. He called to the bartender: "A Rusty.Nail with a cherry in it, please." He looked at her:

"Well, Ms. Kerwin, could I buy you a beer?"

"Sure, I'll take a Vodka gimlet."

"And a Vodka gimlet," Steward called to the bartender, "for the lovely lady here with the green eyes."

"So now you start to notice my eyes," she said.

"I've always noticed your eyes, Sarah."

"Look, Tom," she said. "I don't know what you have in mind, but don't start in on anything. I'm not in the mood."

"Okay, I was just kidding. I don't have anything in mind. I've been leading a celibate life, devoted to art."

"How inspiring," she said drily.

Weinstein came back. Steward got up to go.

"So long, Sarah. You won't believe this, but I wish you the best."

"I do believe it," she returned softly. "Same to you. Sincerely."

He got up again but she gestured to him to come back. Weinstein nodded: "I'll wait outside." Steward sat on the stool next to her.

Her face assumed a softer, more caring expression.

"You know that night I came up to your place?"

"Yes."

"I got pregnant from it."

For a moment, Steward didn't say anything, then he said: "Why didn't you tell me?"

“What good would it have done, Tom? I knew from the start that I wouldn’t go through with it. I just couldn’t go through another Aicha, not now.”

“How do you know it was me?”

“In all those months, you were the only one that I slept with, Thomas, just you. You’re the only one I slept with, just you, for more than a year.”

He sighed, shaking his head in exasperation, looking at her. “So you got an abortion?”

“Yes.”

“I wish you had told me.”

“What good would it have done? It would just brought us into this unnatural proximity. It would have intensified the whole situation.”

He shrugged again, lifting up his hands. “I’m sorry.” He got up to go. “What can I say? Maybe I could have helped. I would have tried to help.”

“I know you would have,” she said. “And as it turned out, it was a total botch up. I got an infection. And I blamed it on you. I know unfairly. I’ve hated you so much. That’s why I never called you, because I knew you didn’t deserve it. I was out of control. I’m sorry, Tom. I wish you the best.” She squeezed his hand.

“That’s okay, Sarah. I’m sorry.” He patted her hand. “There’s nothing I can do?”

“No, Tom. There’s no going back.”

He went out of the bar. Walking up California Street, he told Weinstein what had happened.

“She was just laying a trip on you,” asserted Weinstein angrily. “She should take responsibility for her own body, Isn’t that what they’re always telling us?”

“No, she wasn’t being cruel about it, Sol. She didn’t do it in an uncaring way, She just wanted to let me know. “The incomprehensible thing, though. it doesn’t feel real. I mean, I suppose if I’d gone through it with her, I would have felt it more. But it doesn’t seem real.”

Steward stayed up late that night, sat in his apartment smoking a joint. It was the same sad little place where he had spent two years of his life. He looked around, the room—

same rocking chair, same couch with the blue spread, same wooden boxes with coleus plants, same Boston fern. His clipboard and city map and cabbie badge were lying on the couch next to some of his sketch books. The more stoned he got, the more paltry his existence seemed to him. He fell asleep in the chair and woke up when the first pink light had appeared on the buildings across the street.

Tom Steward looked at the buildings sleepily, then got up, put on his blue coat, and went out. The morning sun had appeared above the buildings on top of Nob Hill. There were people on the street going somewhere with intention in their faces. Steward walked along in the midst of them, looking blankly at the dull light on the sidewalk. He kept telling himself that he should care, but he just felt desperate and lonely and empty inside, and felt like his whole life had been put on the block and judged of little worth.