SEVEN CITY STORIES

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for Jeanne

"Was there not a song here, a great discordant song, as strong and as sanctified as in any pious mouthings or wavings of hands?"

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The Blue Jade Heart

Bertie Parker, a 35-year-old mulatto with a face that was badly burned on one side, sold flowers in various bars in San Francisco, a city that he had come to at age 28 from a small town in the South. He was short, almost dwarfish in stature; he walked with his head hunched into his shoulders and spoke with a slur. Though years had passed since the childhood fire which had scarred him, he was still conscious of his disfigurement. He worked at night, keeping to those places in the city where he was already known.

He lived in a basement apartment in the Tenderloin district, a dingy part of town which was a catch-all for desperate people who fitted nowhere else. Across the street from his building, its adobe walls and green dome visible from his window, was an old Spanish church which before the city was founded had been a mission. Every evening at about seven o'clock, when the afternoon masses were over and the candles still glowing in the ornate interior of this church, he knelt alone before the statue of the Virgin, lit a vigil light, and watched its red flame. Then he bowed low, beat his chest, waved his hands in front of the statue, and rubbed them on his face in a way he'd seen poor Mexicans do. He himself was not a Catholic, or, for that matter, a member of any religion; his mother and sister, his only close relatives, had both died in the same fire in which he'd been burned; he had grown up with different families with all kinds of beliefs. But somewhere along the line he had gotten the idea that his disfigurement was the result of a childhood sin, and he was always trying to purge himself of it by leading a blameless life. Even so, he had a constant struggle with the bottle; next to the church was a dry-out bin for alcoholics and Bertie Parker was a frequent guest.

On the nights when he worked, his activities, after his devotions to the Virgin were completed, were as regular as if some overseer had set them. From the church it was just three blocks to the combined flower and antique shop where he bought the individual flowers that he made into corsages and where sometimes, when he was lucky, he sold the odds

and ends and pieces of junk that he came upon in his nightly wanderings. From there he returned to his own apartment which, with its cluttered furniture, decaying flowers and unsold pieces of junk, could well have been an extension of the antique shop. He had only two rooms, a large room that he used as a living room and a tiny kitchen where he worked. The making of the corsages was a laborious task; on an average night it took him more than three hours to wire the flowers together and arrange them carefully on the cut-off cardboard box that he used as a tray. Then, with the tray in his arms and on his back the small knapsack in which he kept his extra flowers, he went out to look for sales. By this time it was often ten o'clock or later. There were more than thirty bars in which he hawked his wares, most of them in the Tenderloin, some by the Japanese hotels near the gate to Chinatown and a few in Chinatown itself. When business was good he made twenty dollars in a night, but there were nights when he suffered a loss because of unsold goods. It was only with a constant effort that he could keep himself in food and clothes and pay his rent; his extra money went into booze.

One of the bars where he did business was a place at the edge of the Tenderloin called "The Idle Hours Saloon." It was situated between a corner store and a coffee shop and was on the other side of a parking lot from one of the larger hotels. The Idle Hours did a fair amount of trade with the people from the surrounding neighborhood who for the most part were a down-in-the-mouth bunch, but it also served as a rendezvous for the hookers who hung out at this bar and the men that they managed to lure down to it from the hotel up the street or from similar hotels in the immediate vicinity. The owner of the Idle Hours, a red-faced, heavy-set man named Joe Harris, who because he had a stunted arm always wore a long-sleeved shirt with the right sleeve knotted to conceal it, received a percentage of this business. He spoke with a street accent like a New York thug and tried to give the impression that he had come up through the school of hard knocks; but the truth was that he had come upon this property through the death of an uncle, had fallen into the

sex business because of the nature of the neighborhood and a series of half-decisions, and, now that he was in it up to his ears, had a hard time collecting his cut from the girls. Next to the bar, above the coffee shop, was a transient hotel where he rented a number of rooms that were used for liaisons; often he could be seen hurrying from the bar to the hotel where with his bad arm tucked into his jacket he patrolled his small domain to make sure that no deals had been struck on the sly.

This bar was by no means the most comfortable place on Bertie Parker's nightly route. In fact, his dealings with Joe Harris had always been troublesome, and there had been one occasion when he had supplied the bar owner with flowers that had not been paid for to his satisfaction. An argument had ensued over just what price had been agreed upon; Parker, eventually, had been thrown out. But he kept coming back to the Idle Hours because, despite his poor relations with Joe Harris, it was one of his most lucrative stops; the hookers always managed to get the men from the hotels to buy them flowers as a joke, and the neighborhood people did their share of buying too.

His entrance to this bar, which happened like clockwork every night at eleven-thirty, was such a regular event that no one gave him a second look when he appeared at the door and began moving between the customers with his tray of flowers in both hands and his head turned to one side as if to hide the scarred half. His face, though striking at first, had been seen many times before. He was regarded as too peevish to be worth an attempt at conversation. And he himself said nothing except the one word 'flowers' which he repeated again and again and uttered so indistinctly that it served no other purpose but to herald his unobtrusive approach. To indicate the price of a corsage he held up his fingers. After a sale had been completed he merely nodded his head. With the hookers he was especially shy, as paralyzed in their presence as if they had been women of great beauty though in the main they were hard-looking and no longer young. He never glanced at them from a distance, not even at the few who were genuinely lovely. Out of self-contempt and fear of sin he guarded his eyes and tried to

keep bad thoughts from entering his mind. He was afraid that if he gave into these thoughts his whole body would be covered with the ugliness that he felt on his face. Next to intemperance there was no sin he hated more than lust.

Bertie Parker was passing through this bar one night, as usual speaking to no one, and with his eyes cast down in the exaggeratedly obsequious and yet sullen manner which he had adopted in the Idle Hours since his altercation with Joe Harris, when he felt a light touch on his arm. He turned to see a prostitute that he had never noticed before, a slightly-built young woman not much taller than he, with a wide face, high cheekbones, and how lovely she was and how slender and small with narrow shoulders, thin arms and just the faintest suggestion of breasts. He held up his tray of flowers for her to see; but instead she looked at him and not with cold curiosity or condescension but with a direct, friendly gaze. Flustered by her attention, he turned away from her, colliding with a man who was hurrying across to the gambling area in the back of the bar that stayed open after hours. All of his carefully-arranged corsages fell to the floor where they were in danger of being trampled in the crowded room. She cried “Oh no!” and with a light motion bent down and began reaching for the corsages, brushing against him as she extended her arm. He had knelt down to retrieve his wares in an almost simultaneous movement; now turning towards her he again met her dark eyes which peered at him from a face flushed with exertion. He looked away but the image of her eyes remained in his mind and he was so aware of her nearness that he hardly knew what he was doing. He watched her small hands as they closed around the flowers. Her fingers were covered with oversized rings. The glass jewels on the rings glittered in the half-light from the orange lamps above the bar counter and he could smell her perfume which had the scent of lilacs.

When the corsages had all been gathered, they rose together and he turned to leave. But again she touched his arm. “No need to run away,” she said softly. “I'd still like to see the flowers. I didn't mean to make you drop them.”

“Wasn't you,” he blurted, confused by her sympathy.

“You didn't do nothing. I drop them by myself.” The muscles on the left side of his face were impossible to control; in order to talk he had to force the words out through the right side of his mouth; even then they came out so garbled that the very act of speech was a humiliation for him. “Wasn't you,” he repeated, shaking his head. He wanted to look at her directly but in facing her he displayed his disfigurement. Overcome with shame, he lowered his eyes and turned the scarred part of his face away from her view. He rocked back and forth with his head hunched into his shoulders and his tray in both hands.

As if aware of his embarrassment, she turned her attention to the flowers, sniffing the various kinds of corsages. Standing in his hunched posture, with his face still twisted to the side, he observed her sullenly as if impatient to get on to other customers. But at the same time he could not prevent his eyes from roaming up and down her slender body. She was wearing a sleeveless black blouse with a low neckline that revealed the first swelling of her small breasts. Set between them, pressing against her moist flesh, was a golden necklace with a blue jade heart.

She picked out a single red rose—among his corsages he sometimes set a single flower like this for contrast—and held it in front of her beneath the jade heart. “How does it look?” she asked. Her dark eyes flashed at him again. In them he could see that same inexplicable good will but there was a knowing there too that he sensed was mocking him. He remembered that she was just another hooker with her body for sale and the thought of it made him cringe. He was anxious to leave her.

Looking across the smoke-filled room, which was illumined here and there with orange and red lamps, he noticed that several men were smirking at him. Then the door of the game room opened; a shaft of light shot momentarily into the bar, disappearing when the door slammed back in place. Joe Harris had entered; he was standing by the small, corner area between the CS 4 bar counter and the store-room which served as a makeshift lounge for the women while they were waiting for tricks.

So abruptly did Bertie Parker turn to leave that he forgot to collect for the rose that the hooker had taken. With his face set in a frown, he began moving across the dimly-lit room to the outside door. But just as he reached it, she intercepted him and placed two dollars on his tray. He nodded and, without looking at her again, went out, feeling agitated by her attentiveness and angry at himself for having cleared the way so slavishly for the owner of the bar.

It was a foggy night. The neon signs and traffic lights on the street ahead of him were obscured by the low-flying clouds which had already enshrouded the upper stories of the buildings and were now swooping down towards the shops and restaurants on the bottom floors. He put up his collar against the cold wind and with his tray of flowers hitched up under his arm hurried along through a section of theaters and hotels where the sidewalks streamed with well-dressed people. Then he crossed a busy street with clanging cable cars and congested traffic and headed through a small park in front of an elegant hotel, not noticing the lovers on the benches or the drunkards beneath the tall palm trees that swayed back and forth against the red city sky. Despite the commotion around him, all of his attention was on the events that had taken place in the bar. He kept thinking about the frail hooker with the milk-brown skin and how she had looked at him with such obvious benevolence. As many times as he had been in the Idle Hours Saloon, no woman there except her had ever said a kind word to him or recognized him in any but the most perfunctory and functional way.

Throughout his entire life, in fact, because of his appearance and social awkwardness, Bertie had had little contact with women. His sexual knowledge, what there was of it, had been gotten from hearsay, magazines, and movies, and always in such sordid or morally rigid circumstances that he had come to think of women, in the main, as a source of evil and nothing more. There was only one kind of feminine beauty that appealed to him, the most delicate kind where he sensed the same serene aloofness from corruption that he remembered his mother had possessed in her face and

bearing and which he found too in the blissful countenance of the Virgin in the old Spanish church where he made his daily visits. That the little hooker had this kind of countenance and yet looked so exotic and Oriental, that she had this aura of fragile innocence and yet was immersed in the world of prostitution, made her seem all the more mysterious to him and made her kindness and interest seem all the more incomprehensible and suspicious.

For a long time as he walked with his flowers, going in and out of the bars and among the customers with the mechanical persistence of a robot, he kept thinking about her, acting out in his mind every detail of what had transpired between them. To do this was not at all unusual for him; he so rarely talked to anyone that when he did he often went over what he had said in this way in his mind; and almost always he found fault with what he had done or felt a lingering shame for the difficulty with which he had spoken.

At first he was just thinking about her look of sympathy, wondering whether it had been sincere of if there had been some contempt in it, and recalling in particular her dark eyes which the more he thought about them seemed, except for his mother's eyes, the gentlest eyes in the whole world; but then he realized that his thoughts had taken a lustful turn and he began to shake his head and mutter to himself, “No, Bertie, no.” The more he tried to force her image from his mind, however, the more it asserted its presence and for the entire evening he was struggling with his thoughts.

When the last of the bars were closed for the night, he headed towards home, trudging along a narrow, deserted street in Chinatown past piles of boxes and trash and dark shop windows with inscrutable signs. Once again he thought of the Idle Hours Saloon. He knew that it was not far from his usual route home, knew that, although the bar would be closed, the game room in the back would still be open, and knew that the women would be gathered behind the locked front door for a final drink before going home themselves. The thought of seeing the little hooker again, if only from a distance, was more than he was able to resist. Despite his self-admonitions, he made his way steadily towards the bar.

By the time he reached the Idle Hours, it was long after closing. The front door was padlocked and the sign above the bar had been extinguished for the night. Going around the coffee shop to the parking lot beside the transient hotel, he paused beneath a billboard sign which had also been put out for the night and gazed at the back door of the bar from which a shaft of light extended to the trash cannisters behind the building. Rats scurried back and forth between the cannisters and the foundation of the hotel. He took a few steps in the direction of the open door of the game room, stopped abruptly, and watched the door from the shadow of a car. Then he wheeled around and went back across the parking lot, cursing himself for his lack self-control.

Again he passed the front door of the bar. Glancing at it, he noticed that the shade on the window in the middle of the door, which at this illegal hour would normally have been drawn tightly to the frame, had only been drawn a part of the way to it. He came to a halt, stared at the door, and, after a moment of hesitation, went over and peered through.

The interior of the bar was dark and clouded with smoke but by the closed door to the game room a lamp was still lit. Beneath it, encircled by orange light, was a group of people which included the owner of the bar, several women who were seated on the padded chairs in the corner lounge, and some men in three-piece suits. The men were joking back and forth and looking at the women; in response to their comments the women stretched their bodies and smiled. Among them, seated next to Joe Harris, was the hooker with the Oriental eyes. He had his good arm around her shoulders. His puffy face was set in an unnatural grin. She was not stretching herself like the others; she was slumped in her chair as though very tired and seemed lost in thought.

When he saw the owner of the bar and the prostitute together, Bertie Parker raised back his head. A wince of jealousy went through him. He felt pain which he had not felt in a longtime, a terrible pain, and yet he could not tear himself away from the door. In the orange haze of the dark bar her pretty features were barely discernible; he pressed closer to the window but the glass clouded over with the

condensation of the vapor in his breath. He wiped off the film of condensation with his hand, gazed at her some more and at last turned to go. The city was so quiet now that the fog horns on the bay could be heard. A siren rose up in the distance, wailed more insistently, as it came nearer, and then faded off in the air. The stoplights were blinking off and on and the buildings leaned together in the down-pressing fog.

The next night, when he came into the bar with his flowers, he looked CS 6 for her at once. She was sitting in the lounge, combing her long hair before the mirror on the back wall. Joe Harris, his round face contorted with anger, stood by the door to the game room negotiating with some men.

With his head drawn so tightly into his shoulders that he seemed without a neck, Bertie Parker began moving around the room. “Flowers, flowers,” he said under his breath. His eyes darted back and forth between the customers and her. Twice he passed near the lounge but she had turned from the mirror to some of the other women and was involved in a conversation with them. He sold three corsages and then took a seat by a window that looked out to the street. He placed his tray of flowers on the table next to him and took his knapsack from his back. In the side pocket of the knapsack, wrapped in newspaper, was the red rose which he had brought especially for her.

He had given up hope of being recognized when he saw her approaching him across the hazy room with a cocktail glass in one small hand and with the other hand poised in the air as if for balance. He felt suddenly confused and looked out the window.

She sat down next to him with no word. He could feel her warmth beside him, could smell her lilac perfume; but now that she was so near to him he could not bear to look at her. Then, for no apparent reason, he felt a deep anger rising up inside of him. Unable to contain himself, he swung towards her. Her dark eyes peered at him from above a white carnation that she had raised to her nose. He wrenched it away from her and turned back to the window. Across the street was a drag bar where some transvestytes in flamboyant

costumes were entering to a chorus of hoots and cheers from the people who had gathered by the door. But he did not see the cheering people or the pretender who was passing between them. All he could think of was how her eyes had widened when he had yanked the carnation from her hand.

“I was only looking,” she said after a silence which seemed interminable to him. Her voice was even more soft and musical than he remembered it.

“Didn't bring them for looking,” he muttered. “Didn't bring them for looking or for smelling neiffer. They'se to buy.” He looked at her, searching her face for derision, but instead he found a steadfast, caring gaze. He turned away and raised his hand to his face.

“Well, I didn't mean to bother you,” she said softly, bracing her arm on the table as if about to leave. "Honestly, I didn't. I was just looking for a rose like the one I bought the other night. Roses are my favorites. I don't know why. I guess because we had them when I was little."

The way she talked, in such plain words and with no affectation or coarseness, and always with a quality of sadness and self-deprecation in her voice, just reinforced his suspicion that she was not a hooker like the other hookers, that she was fragile and innocent and infinitely better than the rest of them, a delicate creature trapped in a sordid world which she did not deserve. And yet he knew very well that she was in fact a prostitute and that because of this all of her words and actions were nothing more than an artifice, a snare. Though she continued to look at him with warmth in her eyes, he could not believe that her good will was genuine.

He reached for his knapsack and with a sigh of exasperation fumbled for the rose. He unwrapped it carefully and set it on the table in front of her.

“So you remembered,” she exclaimed. “And it's so beautiful. Oh, I just love it!”

He said nothing but a thrill of joy went through him as he watched he take the rose in her hands. His eyes roamed from her face to her slender shoulders and small breasts. She was wearing a brown blouse which made her eyes look even

darker. Around her neck was the golden necklace with the blue jade heart. About her whole being was an ineluctable softness that he wanted to touch but he knew he could not and so he looked away, wanting to be rid of her forever while she went on in her melodious voice, talking about some purple flowers she had seen in the brown sand by the ocean when she walked now and then by herself.

“But I bet you never go out there, do you, Bertie? I hardly do either anymore because I always work at night.”

The more she went on like a schoolgirl, the more furious he became and the more it seemed to him that her talk about the ocean and the flowers was just an act. When she mentioned his name so glibly, he flared up. “So who gone and told you my name?” He could feel the muscles twitching in his face.

“How come you're acting so weird?” she said, her eyes widening again in response to his sudden loss of temper. "Everybody knows who you are.”

He was glad to see her eyes widen with fear, glad to see that his anger had some power over her. He studied her face again, looking for some falseness in it, but it seemed to him so astoundingly lovely that he could not tell what motives it masked. Finding no obvious distain in her gaze, he became all the more irritated with her. “Ain't no use in you coming around and messing with me,” he blurted. “Ain't nuffin in it for you. You just does it ‘cuz you hates me."

She shook her head in exasperation and looked at him with a drawn, weary expression as though to have her intentions subjected to such scrutiny was a cause of great distress for her. She was holding in the rose in both hands, passing it back and forth from one small palm to the other. “I can’t understand you at all,” she sighed. “What makes you think I hate you? I was just making conversation with you.”

“Ain't nuffin in it," he repeated. “Ain't nuffin in it at all." Looking across the room, he noticed that Joe Harris was standing by the bar counter observing their interaction with a smirk on his corpulent face. He sank back on his chair into the shadow of the pillar beside the table. He kept waiting, for her to vent her contempt of him but she said nothing more

and made no move to leave the table. Then her voice came back at him, soft and measured in cadence. “You think I hate you because of your face. But maybe I see something in you besides that. I mean, look at me. What am I?” She waved her hand in front of her partially-exposed breasts. “I'm just a two-bit hooker. And the fact is I like you, Bertie. I think you're kind of interesting. I really do.”

He studied her eyes to see if there was mockery in them. “How come is that?" he said from the darkness after a long pause. He leaned forward into the orange light that shone down from a nearby overhead lamp. The right side of his face twisted into a smile. His good eye squinted at her while his bad eye kept staring as in terror. “How come is that, that I is so in-tah-res-tin then?"

“Because you're different, Bertie. That's one good reason, I guess. Look at all these guys around here. They just lay around and booze it up and they got their minds on one thing and one thing alone—you know very well what it is. And meanwhile Bertie Parker is going in and out of the bars and walking all over the city like a madman. Oh, I don't really mean like a madman. What I'm trying to say is I know you work hard.”

When he heard her say this, he swelled up with pride and his eyes began to water, especially the bad one which often shed large tears which he could not suppress. Embarrassed, he looked back out the window to the bar across the street where the crowd that had been there before was now gone. Above the door of the bar was a neon sign in the shape of a dancing girl with flashing tits. The sign was blinking off and on, bathing the street and nearby buildings in a pulsating green light. He looked back at the prostitute; she was regarding him with same kind expression on her Asiatic face.

“And the way you do your flowers,” she said, smiling at him. “It's like a little of work of art. You must spend a lot of time at them, don't you?”

“Uh-huh,” he mumbled. “Uh-huh. Sure does. Does them at home.” His embarrassment grew so acute that he could not look at her at all. He slumped back into the shadows with his

thin hand raised to his face. When he lifted up his head again, he looked not at her but across the dark room and saw that the owner of the bar had moved closer, within earshot. He stirred in his seat.

The hooker, too, had noticed the bar owner's approach. She tapped his hand lightly and began to get up. “I guess I have to go now. The big honcho is giving me the eye. I'll see you next time, okay?”

He glanced at her again, trying to determine if her words about her boss indicated an underlying affection or attraction for him, but he couldn't tell if she was eager to go to him or annoyed by his vigilance.

Gathering his flowers together, he watched her glide across the smoke-filled room. Her feet, clad in black sandals, hardly left the floor, seemed to slide rather than step across the worn boards. Among the people in the room she looked as tiny as a child. Her shoulders seemed too thin for her wide hips which, despite her gliding motion, swayed back and forth as she walked. When she reached Joe Harris, he put his good arm around her shoulders, leaned his huge head down to her ear, whispered something to her, and pushed her gently in the direction of the game room towards which she headed with a quickened but still graceful movement of her silent feet.

As soon as she disappeared into the back room, he got up and for several minutes, to disguise the importance to him of her exit, wound his way between the customers again, chanting “Flowers, flowers, hey, here we go, flowers” in a low, garbled drone. But he was hardly aware of what he was doing. In his mind he could still see her intent eyes, still smell the faint fragrance of lilacs which .-emanated from her small, softly- rounded breasts; and he could still hear her words of encouragement and praise. Though it was true he worked hard and knew he worked hard, he had never thought of his labor as anything other than what was required to survive. Though, as she said, he took great care in making his floral arrangements, he had never before been complimented for them by someone whose opinion mattered so much. And no one before had ever spoken to him so

directly about his disfigurement or with such matter-of-fact acceptance of it as if his appearance was of no consequence at all in reckoning his personal worth.

Having made no further sales, he headed out of the bar. It was now about midnight. There was still a couple of hours of selling time left before the bars closed for the night. It had started to rain. He took off his knapsack, pulled a piece of plastic from the front compartment, and, with his flowers thus protected and his jacket buttoned to his neck, hurried towards Chinatown where his most lucrative spots were located.

As often happened with him, the rain brought out his feelings of insecurity and for a moment, despite the glow which still remained inside of him from his encounter with the prostitute, his mind turned to practical concerns. The preceding night, because of his preoccupation with her, had been a bad one; he had returned to his apartment with just enough cash to pay for the next evening's wares. At home he had some small savings but his rent was due in twelve days. He took his wad of money from his hip pocket and counted it slowly; in his first two hours he had grossed fourteen dollars; if he could match that amount in the last two hours he would come in with an eleven dollar profit for the night. He began to figure out just how many decent nights he would need in order to pay his rent which was a hundred and ten dollars per month. But he had never been good at math and he knew there was no way to determine if the next twelve nights would be good or bad. After making a silent resolution to himself that he needed to work steadily and save more, he began to think about the prostitute again.

The rain was coming down harder now, but in spite of the rain and his worries about money, he felt strangely carefree as if some tremendous burden had been lifted from his shoulders. He was not walking as he usually did with his head scrounged into his narrow shoulders and his eyes on the ground but with a more upright carriage and his eyes straight ahead. Looking at the street ahead of him, he noticed how large and solid the buildings were, how distinctly defined against the gray sky which was not gray, throughout but a

blend .of the neon hues of the city lights below it. The people who came towards him—he had entered Chinatown now and was trudging up the hill towards the curled eaves of the gilded roofs above the brightly-lit shops—they, too, seemed very large, very real, and so lovely that just to look at their faces threw him into meditations which he could not articulate. He kept thinking about the Idle Hours and how the hooker had called his flowers a little work of art. Looking down at his tray, he again filled with pride and this time he made no effort to hold back his tears. He was crying and yet he felt excited and joyful, more joyful than he had felt in many years.

Towards the end of the night, though, a different mood came over him. It was long after closing. Again he was passing through Chinatown, but now the streets were almost deserted and the shop windows were dark. In his hip pocket he had thirty dollars; he had earned more than in any night in the past month. He was feeling exhilarated by his success and his thoughts were still on the prostitute whose image had fixed itself firmly in his mind as though in the very center of his being. Looking ahead, he saw a pair of lovers coming his way. The man was well-built and handsome; the woman, who was lovely, had her lips pressed to his neck. When he saw the dreamy look in this young woman's eyes, it occurred to Bertie Parker all at once, as in a flash, that, however favorably the hooker might regard him, he could never be to her what this well-formed man was to this woman on his arm. No matter how genuine the hooker's interest might be, it was not the interest of a woman for a man. The instant he realized this, his mood altered from joyful to sad. He walked along as he had before with his body twisted to the side.

A little further up the street, when he was still in this desultory frame of mind, he saw another figure approaching him, a lanky, bearded man with a tattered blanket around his broad shoulders and his large, bony hand extended for change. This was a person that Bertie Parker had seen many times before; he knew that he was crazy and that he lived in some cardboard boxes in the alley behind the Great Eastern Restaurant, knew that he never spoke to anyone, was

constantly angry, and mumbled to himself; but he had never interacted with him in any way and in fact had several tines crossed the street to avoid him. Now for the first time he looked into the crazy man's defiant face and the eyes that gazed back at him were more sad and desperate than any eyes he had ever seen before. With almost a reflex action, he reached down into his pocket for a coin and placed it in the crazy man's palm. Then he moved quickly away from him though for another fifty feet or so he could smell the foul odor which the crazy man emitted.

After walking another half-block, he felt an impulse to turn around. The crazy man was standing in the doorway of the Cantonese bank; he raised up his hand in a fist and with a peevish flourish swung his blanket around in front of him and headed off in another direction.

Bertie Parker watched him disappear into the alley at the end of the next block. Then he hitched up his tray under his arm and began walking towards home. Again it had started to rain but he didn't bother to cover his flowers or button up his jacket. He felt depressed and exhausted and his thoughts were jumbled and confused. The hooker's image was still there in the center of his mind just as it had been for the entire evening. He could still see her wide face and slanted eyes with their relentless good will, could still see her thin shoulders and her small breasts with the blue jade heart rising up and down on their moist surface when she breathed; but far from being a comfort for him, far from relieving him of some unidentified burden as it had done several hours before, it was now a new kind of burden, a new form of oppression. He tried to force it from his mind but he could not.

Almost involuntarily he went over the events of the night, from his meeting with the hooker in the Idle Hours Saloon to his feelings of elation and hope to his movement through the bars, which now when he looked back at it seemed like a dream, and finally to his encounters with first the young lovers and then the crazy man from the Great Eastern Restaurant; and suddenly it occurred to him in a vague, unarticulated way that, far from being what he wanted

to be, a man worthy of a woman, what he was in reality was a kind of outcast like the crazy man with no real home and no loved ones. “Freak” was the word that came to his mind, and he repeated it again and again. The more he thought about this, the more he hated himself for being what he was and the more he despised himself for having betrayed his feelings to the hooker by acting so flustered and embarrassed in her presence.

As he exited from Chinatown to the deserted financial section which he needed to pass through on his way home, he began thinking about booze and shaking his head. Not far from his apartment, and on his route there, was an all-night newsstand where he knew he could get a so-called wet paper for five dollars.

As he came near the stand, he noticed that the blindman who ran the stand from three o'clock on was just getting out of a cab across the street. The cabdriver positioned the blindman and with short steps like a penguin the blindman angled across the sidewalk to a newspaper box, rammed into it, backed off, fumbled for the lock on the metal tube that held the coins, collected the money in his large hands, and put it deep in the pockets of his knee-length gray coat. Then with his eyes staring blankly beneath the turned-down visor of his baseball cap, he made his way with the same small, penguin-like steps to the stoplight on the corner, inclined his head to one side as he listened for the sign to click from red to green, and with his cane tapping back and forth in a one-two-three motion came across the street towards the stand. Bertie Parker was awaiting his arrival with a five-dollar bill in his thin hand; but when the blindman was several steps away from him, he shook his head violently, pocketed the bill, and continued down the street, mumbling, “God damn little no-count, you ain't going to get drunk.”

Arriving home a few minutes later, he descended the concrete steps to his door, which was separate from the main door to the building, turned his key in the lock on the door and went in, passing through a cluttered storage area on his way to the back of the basement where his two rooms were located. Unlocking a second lock, he went in. In the very

corner of the largest room, beneath the two shoulder-high windows that looked out to the dome of the church, was a shelf made of cement blocks and planks. It was stacked with old pictures, rusty pots and pans and kitchen utensils, lamps, radios, clocks and other electrical appliances which for the most part didn't work—all of these were objects which he had collected and been unable to sell and which he now kept as mementos and household decorations.—On the floor were some disassembled radios from which he had ripped the copper wiring; when he had gathered a pound or so of copper in this way he brought it to a metal shop in the Mission District where he sometimes got a good deal.

On entering his apartment he went immediately to the bottom-most cement block in the corner of the room, knelt down in front of it, and lifted it with one hand while with the other he withdrew from beneath it the wad of dollar bills which he hid there for safe-keeping. He counted the bills in the wad; there were fifteen in all. To this he added a five and eight one's, his take for the night. After replacing the wad of money beneath the cement block and straightening out the planks on the shelf, he took the remaining seventeen dollars, which was what he needed to buy his flowers the next day, and hid them between some corroded pots that were stacked on the top shelf. Then he threw himself down on the couch that he used as a bed and covered himself with the two Army blankets that were always lying on it in crumpled disarray. With his hands behind his head, he looked out the window to the dome of the church which was vaguely silhouetted against a reddish-purple sky. Here and there, where the city's lights were reflected on the low clouds, the sky glowed with a diffuse yellow light like muted lightning. For a long time, he stared at the sky; but as soon as he closed his eyes he could see her looking at him and see the crazy man from the Great Eastern Restaurant with his fist raised in the air; and once again he felt a deep, unspeakable sadness and despair.

Again he thought of the newsstand. He shook his head and muttered, "No, Bertie, not that." But even as he was saying these words, he knew that the battle was lost. He kept rubbing his face and smacking his lips. At last he jumped up

and with no hesitation went over to the pots on the shelf and took from between them the money that he had set aside for his flowers.

He returned in a quarter of an hour with a bottle of whiskey hidden beneath his jacket like a contraband good. He unlocked the outside door and looked back for just a moment to the deserted street behind him where above the downtown buildings the sky was lightening from an indigo to an aluminum blue. Then, moving rapidly with his small feet planted widely and his toe pointed out like a sailor, he made his way between the boxes and old refrigerators and stoves in the basement storage area to his own door in the back of the cement-floored room. With trembling fingers he unlocked the second door and went in, glancing at the dome of the church which on its eastern side had begun to show the first light of the morning. He sat on the tattered couch, took the bottle from his jacket, held it at eye-level, and stare at it with hatred while his facial muscles quivered. Then he uncapped the bottle and raised it to his lips.

For the next week he was alternately drinking, sleeping, sitting on the side of the couch with his head in his hands, or walking back and forth in the several places in the neighborhood where liquor was sold. He was careful not to buy so much booze in one place that his condition would be known. But just the same it was not long before the various people in the vicinity thit he knew but never spoke with—the store owners, street blacks, hookers, cops, dirty-faced children and old people on benches who were familiar with his habits—betrayed by their stares and occasional smiles of condescension or amusement that they were aware that he had gone off the wagon again. And all of this time, whenever he was alert enough to do so, and despite his wanting to forget her completely, he was thinking about the prostitute at the Idle Hours Saloon, thinking about her face and eyes and how she looked at him more than anything else, and never formulating his feelings for her beyond a dull recognition that her continual presence in his mind was almost more than he could bear.

Towards the middle of this week of boozing, in the early

evening when the streets were jammed with honking cars and the sidewalks crowded with people, he was on his way to get a fresh supply of liquor when he saw her emerging from a low-rent motel with a baby in her arms wrapped in a blue blanket. He began to go across towards her but checked himself, retreated into a doorway, and watched her walk by on the opposite side of the street. The baby was crying and she looked troubled and weary. Two heavy-set men in T-shirts who were sitting on the steps of an apartment building drinking beer said something to her and laughed as she passed by them. She raised her head back, let out a long sigh through puckered lips, and, with her eyes almost closed, lifted her thin hand weakly as if to ward them off like flies. For a moment, though she continued to walk at the same rate, her whole posture changed; her shoulders sagged and she shifted the infant from one arm to another. Then, looking up towards the stoplight on the next corner, which had already turned from "walk" to a blinking "wait", she drew herself erect again and quickened her pace. Bertie Parker kept watching her until she blended into the streaming people on the other side of the intersection. Just to see her so close filled him with anguish; he followed her progress with a hungry, fascinated gaze.

"A mother then," he thought to himself. There was something about how she had looked at the blanket-wrapped infant in her arms which had left him with no doubt that the baby was hers. "A mother then," he repeated. "So her got a kid." That her frail body had produced a child seemed almost unbelievable to him. It magnified her in his mind while at the same time it made her seem in need of protection. He imagined himself beside her, defending her from booze-drinking men. But to do that he would have to be in a special position with her; he would have to be her man. And to be her man was impossible, he thought to himself, for not only was he disfigured but also he was as bad as those from whom he wanted to protect her; he too was a drinker; he too desired her, and desired her so much that what her mother-hood was most of all was an unwanted complication. He left the doorway from which he had watched her pass by and

walked up the street to the store on the corner where with downcast eyes he bought another bottle of whiskey. Then he hid the bottle in his jacket and started home.

That night he couldn't sleep. He wandered around in a drunken daze. Though he had no flowers to sell and no idea what he was doing, he followed his regular route through the city, going first to the Idle Hours Saloon, just close enough to see the green-neon dancing girl on the bar across the street from it, then past the hotels and theaters to the financial section where the buildings were dark and enshrouded in fog, then through the pillared gate of Chinatown and past the small shops with their Oriental pottery, jewelry, trinkets, and Buddha statuettes. In the window of one of these shops he noticed a jade heart. It was made from the green stone which was everywhere displayed but just the same it reminded him of the blue heart that the hooker always wore. In spite of his drinking and continuous movement, her image was still strong in his mind; now for the first time he surrendered to her presence; with a wordless acquiescence he understood that her influence could not be dispelled; and then in almost the same instant it occurred to him that he didn't know her name;—yes, strangely enough, he had no idea what it was.—He continued up the narrow street between the curly-eaved buildings, stopped in a crowd of people to watch a painted-faced man in a tuxedo who was making music with clicking knives; but he kept thinking to himself that he didn't know her name. He began to wonder what it was, her real name not her street name.

He returned across town to his own neighborhood and before going home went by the motel where he had seen the hooker with her child. It was a two-story, L-shaped building with a parking lot and a triangular sign in the lap of the "L" and a generally dilapidated appearance. All of the windows were dark except for two on the second floor where behind a drawn shade a shadowed figure was moving back and forth. As he looked at this figure, which was impossible to define, he thought to himself that it was her. He took a few steps towards the exterior stairs that led up to the walkway which connected the numbered doorways on the second floor, then

turned around and hiked the other way. But his mind was still on her. Once again he wondered about her name, and later that night, as he lay on the couch with his hands behind his head, he wondered about it some more. He kept guessing what it was, mouthing various names to himself. It was as if he felt that in the very knowing of her name he would have a claim on her which he had not had before. But he could think of no name that did her justice and the more he thought about her the more hopeless it seemed that he could have any kind of claim on her at all. In the morning, when the first glitter of sunlight appeared on the dome of the church across the street, he went out for more booze. Arriving home a few minutes later, he drank it in big gulps, settled back on the couch, and fell at last into a fitful sleep.

With each passing day the liquor that he was consuming became more repulsive to him. For over a week he had eaten close to nothing; he had no desire to eat, no desire to do anything except drink, and yet the smell an taste of the booze made him nauseous. His stomach was churning. Now and then he felt a sharp pain in his side. He began vomiting blood. These symptoms were familiar to him; he welcomed their appearance, thinking to himself that they were a just punishment for his excesses. After several more days had passed by, he noticed with mixed apprehension and relief that the money hidden beneath the cement block in the corner of his apartment was almost used up. That evening, having drunk his last bottle in a final fury of self-contempt, he presented himself at the detox center next to the church and followed the kindly brother who met him at the door to an oblong room which was crowded with foul-smelling men.

From one of the cots which were lined up along the walls as in a barracks a tall, thin Indian with a long, sad face, glazed eyes, a wispy mustache, and graying-black hair that was pulled behind his neck in a snarled mass, rose up and, apparently recognizing him from somewhere, enclosed the flower vendor in an exaggerated embrace. But Bertie Parker hardly looked at him. No sooner had he sat down on his assigned cot when he felt dizzy and violently sick. He spent the night in another room where there was no furniture at all

and no windows, lying on the floor in a pool of vomit from which, when he awoke in the morning, he had scarcely the energy to lift up his head.

In late afternoon of the next day he left the center at last after trying, at one of the brother's encouragement, to eat some beans and wieners which he couldn't get down. He still felt weak, dizzy and sick to his stomach. Emerging from the back door of the detox center, he glanced up the street. The sun was near the horizon above some white apartment buildings which were jammed together on a treeless hill. The buildings, sidewalks, pavement, and faces and bodies of the people who hurried past him, were all bathed in the orange light of the waning day. He stared at this scene like someone who has just awoken from a dream and is as yet uncertain if what he sees is real. It was a beautiful scene and still the orange light disturbed him; the glowing buildings and people were too visible, too real. Noticing that the door of the church was standing wide open, and observing the cool darkness beyond it, he crossed over to it, entered the church, and, passing an old woman who was whispering so loudly that her prayers filled the candle-lit quietness of the sanctuary, he made his way to the Virgin's statue, knelt down before it, and buried his face in his hands.

Even while he knelt there, feeling unworthy to wave his hands before the statue, and just wanting to be in the Virgin's presence, the practical problems which now confronted him intruded into his mind. First there was the rent which was due in three days. He knew that he could get an extension on the date of payment if he asked for it but not without a humiliating scene that he dreaded. And then there was food; to pay the rent he would have to go hungry unless he asked for credit from the Chinese woman who ran the cheap restaurant where he usually ate; but in this situation, too, there was the probability of shame, the prospect of asking for the credit in front of her two daughters who would stare at him with their doe-like eyes. Not to mention the horror of his sins which he could not keep in control; he rubbed the good side of his face, almost expecting to discover that it too had been covered with ugliness because of his transgressions.

Feeling restless and disturbed, he left the church and headed for the antique shop. Already he had decided that he needed to begin working right away; the thought that, with his flowers as a pretext, he might see the prostitute again heightened his agitation to a feverish pitch. After humbling himself before the owner of the shop, he managed to secure a night's supp of merchandise. Returning to his apartment, he sat in his kitchen making arranging his corsages with the utmost care. Then he went out, intending work extra hard in order to make up for his nine days of negligence. But he was hardly attuned to what he was doing. Only when he turned towards the Idle Hours Saloon did his being come to life again with a strange excitement that made his body tremble.

From a couple of blocks away, he could see the red neon sign that said “Idle Hours” and could see that beneath the green-neon dancing girl on the bar across the street from it an unruly crowd had gathered again for some flamboyant festivity. The street, nearby buildings, and even the faces of the people in the crowd, were tinted by the flashing green light. He pushed through the midst of them with his tray held tightly to safeguard it from being jostled while in a barely audible tone he muttered curses at anyone who came near. Without even looking at what they had assembled to watch, he continued to the door of the Idle Hours Saloon.

It was obvious from the glances that greeted his appearance in the murky interior of the bar that everyone knew that he had been on a binge. He disregarded the tight-lipped smiles of the half-drunk men who craned around on their stools to look at him, and shoved off into the customers with his tray of flowers held up on his palm like a waiter. “Flowers, yes, flowers,” he droned as he scanned the dark room for the prostitute's face. But she was nowhere in sight. He made a circuit of the customers, feeling more and more disappointed. Then when he was about to leave he saw her enter the bar from the game room. She was dressed in a floor-length blue gown; her small, brown hands were folded demurely in front of her wide hips; her Oriental eyes seemed troubled and distracted. For a moment she gazed into the smoke-filled room with absent-minded detachment; then,

seeing him in the corner where he had retreated by himself, she approached with small, graceful steps.

A thrill like an electric shock went through him when he saw her coming. Not wanting to betray his excitement, he turned away from her as if he hadn't seen her, but he could sense her presence more and more strongly as she drew near. Then she was beside him; he could feel the warmth radiating from her body and smell her lilac perfume.

“Bertie,” she said, addressing him like an old friend. “I was worried about you. I thought you got jumped or something. Are you okay?”

He thought to himself with relief that she was unaware that he had been on a spree. He felt overjoyed to see her but at the same time he felt his anger rising up inside of him. “So was that to you if I’se okay?” he said between his teeth, not looking at her. “No body done axe you to mind affer me.”

She sighed with exasperation. “I wasn't minding after you, Bertie. I was just wondering where you've been.”

“Ain't been no where,” he said, his words all garbled together. “Ain't been no where no how. Don't hab no where to go.”

“Well, you haven't been around here, is all I meant to say,” she said patiently, standing so close to him that her thin arm was brushing against him.

“Been where I wants to be,” he responded, moving away from her so that she was no longer touching him and studying her face with suspicious scrutiny. The luminous eyes which gazed steadily at him gave not the slightest indication of anger or contempt, but he kept staring at them until in their very lack of malice he detected ill will. “Been where I needs to be and that’s away from you. Cuz you ain't nothing to me. You ain’t nothing but sweet-talking and gray. All you got to do is make words. Well, your old sweet words ain't nothing to me... Who are you any how to come on asking if I’se okay? You ain't nothing to me, girl. Don't eben know your name.”

In his excitement he had spoken more words himself than he had spoken in a long time. And though he looked at her with his good eyebrow lowered in derision while his bad

eye kept staring as in fright, still inside of him he was hoping that she would not be turned away. Even as he said that he didn't know her name, he realized how clumsy and weak was his bid to gain a new status with her. Like someone who had placed his bet on a roulette wheel, he watched her face and waited for his wager, clumsy as it was, to succeed or fail.

The significance of the name was not lost on her. She paid no attention at all to the malevolence he had spoken and went directly to what she perceived as the main point. "So you don't know my name. Well, you never asked for it before. You can know it if you want to."

"Just said I wants to know it."

"Well, okay, then—'Elaine'."

He said nothing, searching her eyes.

"So now you know it all right?"

"Ain't nothing to know, cuz it's a street name, that's all."

"It's not a street name. It's a real name. And the only one in this room who knows it is you. Just listen if you don't believe me. They all call me 'Bernice'."

Bertie whispered the name to himself. It was just a common name but he liked it. He looked at her face again, noticing that her dark eyes did not twitch in the least as they might have had she uttered a lie. Then he noticed that around her slender neck was the golden necklace with the blue jade heart. That her name was so plain while she herself was so incomprehensible just intensified his wonder.

Soon after this she said she had to go. Joe Harris had entered the bar from the game room. With his stunted arm inside of his jacket, he had walked to the bar counter and gestured to the bar tender for a drink. Bertie Parker watched her cross the orange-tinted room to Joe Harris who leaned his red face to her ear. Then he went out. He kept saying to himself, "Elaine, Elaine," recalling her words that he was the only one who knew her real name. He brooded on this as he made his way through the hotel section to the park where the tall palm trees swayed back and forth against the red sky. "Elaine, Elaine," he kept whispering to himself.

From this night forward, he no longer made an effort to

expel her from his thoughts. Now her image was always on his mind, in the forefront of everything he did. Every afternoon near sunset, after leaving the old Spanish church and before going to the antique shop, he walked the several blocks to the low-rent motel where he had seen her during his binge and waited to see if she would pass by. On some days he didn't see her at all but on most days he did. Sometimes she came out alone, carrying a large tote bag; at other times she had her child in her arms wrapped in the same blue blanket that le had noticed before; now and then she emerged with Joe Harris who walked be side her with a limp because of the imbalance created by his stunted arm aid scarcely had a word to say to her except of direction or anger. Among the other people on the sidewalk, she appeared as small and fragile as a thin girl of fourteen; her tiny face with its high cheekbones and Asiatic eyes always had an air of urgency about it. Returning to his apartment, he would lie on his couch and think about her, recalling some gesture or kind words which had made an impression on him. And he began to imagine himself in the act of making love to her though he had no idea at all of what was involved in the ritual of sex and though, in order to think of himself as her lover he had to imagine himself with an unscarred face. Whenever he pictured her in his mind, it was with the blue jade heart between her breasts; it was as if the jade heart was the symbol of all the mysteries about her which he could not understand.

This went on for more than a month. Every afternoon he was in the doorway across from the motel waiting for her to come by. Every evening he brought her a red rose which he had selected with the greatest care. There were many exquisite moments when she met his glance with those kind brown eyes of hers which were so sad and so free of condescension and pity. He swung wildly from tender, protective thoughts to desire, aware that some great change had taken place inside of him and that he had given himself over to a feeling which before he had avoided at all costs. Walking along by himself late at night, with his tray of flowers under his arm and his burned face bent down in

thought, he would understand in a vague way that his mind was no longer his own, that it was filled throughout with fantasies that were ugly and sinful. But he could no more resist these fantasies than he could make them actual, no more force her from his mind than he could possess her in real life.

Then one night, when he was putting his money beneath the cement block in his basement apartment, it occurred to him suddenly that he could pay he for her favors. Simple as the idea was considering her profession, he had never thought of it before. For a long time he sat on the floor by his wad of money, looking at it blankly. A new image entered his mind of her standing naked before him, actually before him, and of his going forward in reality to possess her. Picking up his money, he counted it several times. After making a financial recovery from his binge, he had managed to save about twenty-five dollars. Later he went out and walked up and down the alley beside his building, muttering to himself, “No, Bertie, no! A den of sin!”

The next time she sat by him, he said, “Say somebody want you, how much do he pay?” He slumped back in his seat, his face hidden in the shadows. Though his face was twisted away from her, he was still watching her intently, studying her every change in expression.

“How come you want to know that?” she said, sniffing the rose that he had brought for her. She treated the question as matter-of-fact and betrayed no surprise. With both of her small hands on the stem of the rose, she peered across the table at him. She was dressed in a plain blue, sleeveless dress and was wearing little half-moon earrings and the golden necklace with the blue jade heart. In the center of the table was a candle in a red glass container. Next to it was a vase with small purple flowers.

“Just want to, that's all,” he replied from the shadows, undressing her with his eyes.

“Oh, I don't know,” she said, looking back to the rose and then around the crowded room. Some men in the back were playing pool by the single pool table across from the prostitutes' lounge. A jukebox was cranking out a country

western ballad. “Depends on what they want.”

“What you mean what they want?” he persisted. He had no idea what the bill of fare might be.

“Well, you know, some want a quickie, or I guess it’s all they can afford, and some are after the whole routine.”

“So how much for that?”

“How much for what?”

“The whole routine,” he replied, looking nervously from her face to the candle on the table. Someone came in the front door; the flame bent to one side and almost went out, then flared up more brightly within the red glass that enclosed it.

“Oh, I don't know,” she said wearily. “A hundred dollars, maybe more. It all depends on what they got.”

He darted his eyes from the candle flame to her face and, after gazing at her fora moment, imagined that he detected a puzzlement there which he had never seen before. So she was aware of his intentions then. Well, that was how he wanted it to be; he wanted her to know that he was desirous of her, that he was as much a man as any of the men in the room. He leaned forward into the flickering red light from the candle. His mouth screwed up into a lop-sided smile. “Guess they want you preddy bad.”

“They don't know me like you do,” she said with an admonishing look, as if to check his thoughts before they went too far. But he could think of nothing but the hard sum she had mentioned.

“Just the same, just the same,” he said with the sane twisted smile, “they must want you preddy bad.” As he left the bar, he muttered to himself, “A hundred dollars.”

That night, after his usual circuit of bars was completed, Bertie went over to a sidewalk cafe in North Beach that stayed open for an hour after the taverns had closed. There he managed to increase his take for the night by five dollars. Returning home through a deserted Chinatown, he looked down the alley behind the Great Eastern Restaurant and saw the crazy man bent over some torn-up boxes that he was using to reinforce the roof on his cardboard house.

For a long time Bertie Parker stood in the doorway of a

fish market watched him in silence; then he shook his head slowly, curled his hand into a fist, and went on.

As soon as he arrived at his apartment, he pulled a chair from the kitchen to the bathroom, undressed, and stood on the chair in front of the mirror on the medicine cabinet, studying his disfigured face and brown body which from all of his walking was lean and sinewy like the body of a runner. Then he played with himself until his phallus was rigid and turned to the side so that he could see how it stuck out from his body. It struck him as almost a revelation that he was in fact a man. Looking at his thin, scarred face, he saw something dignified and beautiful in it which he had never see before. Lying in bed that night he tried to see himself through her eyes and imagine how he would look standing naked before her.

He began working seven nights a week, and enlarged his regular route by starting earlier and going every night to the more distant bars where in the past he had only gone when he needed money for rent. As soon as the bar; had closed, he went over to the sidewalk cafe in North Beach and stood there with his flowers for another hour and a half. Every morning, when the first blue of the dawn had lightened the purple sky above the buildings, he added more bills to the wad of money beneath the cement block in his apartment. He still began his work-day with a visit to the old Spanish church, still went through his self-designed ritual, waving his hands in front of the statue and rubbing them on his face; but now when he bowed low before the Virgin he was thinking about Elaine. He no longer considered whether his intentions were sinful or whether a sin of such immensity would cover his whole body with the ugliness he feared. When at times he heard a voice inside of him that told him not to go on, he forced it from his thoughts with as much violence as he had used before to keep his mind free of lustful ideas. Lying in bed at night, he could see her naked before him with her small hands folded above the soft hair on her mound; he could smell her lilac perfume. Beneath that floral aroma would be another, more animal fragrance. He could feel her moist lips as he parted them gently. Driving through to her

center, he would learn the secret of the blue jade heart.

For several weeks he continued at this difficult schedule, returning his apartment each morning so tired that he found it impossible to sleep; and although there were times when he thought of giving up on his plan and using his saved money for a binge, he warded off these temptations and persisted in his obsession, spending nothing at all except what was absolutely needed and denying himself the little comforts like desserts at his meals that he normally indulged in.

Then one morning when he counted his money he realized that the time had come. The very thought of it threw him into a state of agitation. He took up the money in his hands (to make sure that he had enough, he had saved fifty dollars more than the hundred dollar sum which she had mentioned) and paced back and forth from his living room to his kitchen and around in a circle like a lion in a cage. Now and then he stopped in his bathroom to study his disfigured visage in the mirror. All of this while, his thoughts were on the most intricate details of how to broach the subject to her at the bar; he kept acting out approaches which even as he imagined them seem clumsy and foolish. At last he lay down without sleeping, with his money i his hip pocket where he could feel it; but he found it impossible to sleep.

Throwing off his ragged covers, he jumped up again, grabbed his denim jack and went out. It was the middle of the morning, a bright sunny day. The streets were crowded with cars and buses. People stood on the corners waiting to cross. But he saw none of this. He went on in a daze, anxious for the time to fly by and yet afraid of the inevitable confrontation which the evening would bring. There was no turning back now, no possibility except to speak the awkward sentences that were forming in his mind. Without knowing where he had been, he returned to his apartment in late afternoon and threw himself down on the couch a/ second time. He had worked the night before and had now gone for thirty hours without rest. Despite his agitation, he fell asleep; but even in his sleep he rolled restlessly from one side of the couch to the other and now and then flailed his

hands without waking up.

When he opened his eyes again, it was already getting dark. He jumped up, his body trembling. Looking out the window to the dome of the church, he saw that it was raining. A long line of haggard men stood outside the adobe walls of the old mission, waiting for a handout.

He reached for his jacket and left. Only at the corner did he think of his flowers. To enter the bar without them would alert everyone that he had come with unusual motives. He hurried to the antique shop, selected some flowers, hardly looking at them except for the small roses that he planned to make into a bouquet for Elaine; and then, with the flowers in a plastic-covered box, he trudged back to his apartment.

When at last the corsages were done, just enough of them to fill up his tray, he wrapped the bouquet of roses in plastic, put it by itself in his knapsack, and stuffed the sack with crumpled paper to give it an appearance of fullness. Now all that remained was to extricate his money from beneath the cement block in the corner. He counted it slowly, checked his hip pocket for holes, put the money inside, patted it with his hand, swung the knapsack to his thin shoulders, and with his tray of flowers under his arm headed for the bar.

A strong wind had come up as if out of the ground. The drizzle had changed to a light rain. From his jacket he pulled a gray stocking cap that he placed on his head and pulled down over his ears. He felt his hip again to make sure that his money was still there. Turning unto the street that the bar was on, he could see its red sign in the distance beside the green- neon dancing girl on the drag bar across the street from it. Beyond them were an assortment of other signs and lights of various colors, shapes and sizes which rose up steeply from the valley in which the bar was situated to the top of Nob Hill a mile or so away. Looking down a street which angled towards Chinatown, he noticed that the crazy man from the Great Eastern Restaurant had wandered far from his usual haunts. He was wrapped in a long, ragged blanket that trailed behind him; on his unshaven head was a three-tiered hat made of pastry boxes; and in his large, bony

right hand he was brandishing a knife. Bertie Parker hesitated a moment to watch his approach, then he went on in a daze, feeling agitated and apprehensive.

Coming into the bar, he immediately looked for her. She was sitting in the lounge with another woman who was leaning over her and telling her something in a whisper. Whatever this whispered message was brought a sudden change in her posture, and bracing her slender arms on the tufted arms of the couch she began to get up. Then, remembering her small purse, she reached down for it, and, while bent over to pull it from the bottom of the couch, with her small breasts almost entirely exposed by how her loose dress with its deep-cut neck draped down from her slim torso, she looked up with her gleaming brown eyes and, glancing across the half-lit room, suddenly caught sight of him in the corner where he had gone to take the bouquet of roses from his pack.

Not knowing how to acknowledge her glance, and anxious not to betray his extreme agitation, he looked at her as if in fright and nodded slowly while continuing to fumble with the straps on his knapsack. Again he felt his hip pocket. Beneath the cloth of his jeans he could feel the neatly creased square of twenty-dollar bills which he had brought with him. There were seven of them and one ten-dollar bill. In his other pocket he had a wad of crumpled one's.

In response to his nod, she waved her small, brown hand. Glancing at her tiny face in the mirror, she rearranged her long, dark hair, and then, ignoring the comments of the drunkards at the bar, she came towards him across the dark room.

“It's so nice to see you, Bertie,” she said in her amiable way. “But I only got a minute. I just got lined up with a trick.”

It upset him that she was on her way to another man. He stared into her face and noticed that her eyes were bloodshot and that there were dark shadows beneath them. She looked worn out and nervous; he could see the blue veins that stood out distinctly on her thin hands and arms and at the base of her slender neck where the golden necklace was that held the

blue jade heart. There was something about this faint suggestion of twistedness and disease which excited him all the more, and made her luminous eyes and small breasts seem all the more startling.

He nodded slowly while his thoughts raced around in his mind. That there might be a complication of this sort was something which he hadn't anticipated at all. He tried to remember the words that he had prepared to say to her, but he could not draw them out from the whirling confusion inside of him.

He opened his mouth as if to speak, just the one side of it which he could control, then he closed it again, bit his lips, and with a sad, mournful, beseeching look, shrugged his shoulders helplessly and said, “Okay, then, just go.”

She touched his arm softly. “I don't want to make you feel bad. You think I don't want to talk to you, Bertie. Is that what you think, right? Well, you don't understand the pressure, you know... You just don't understand. This dude has a lot of money, you know... A real power trip... he can hold out his big bills and say, ‘Do this and do that’... Oh, I know you think it's awful. And it is. It’s... No wonder people laugh at me...”

“I don't,” he said.

“Oh, I know you don't, Bertie, you're a friend, a real friend. And I don't want to leave here. I just want to sit down and talk."

“So come on with me then,” he said suddenly, his face contorting into a half-smile, half-frown that made him look unnatural and frightening. “So come on with me then. I got money too.”

She stared at him a moment as if uncertain what he was getting at. Her attention was still on the other side of the bar where Joe Harris had now entered from the game room.

His face stinging with shame, Bertie looked away from her and stood with his whole body trembling and his tray of flowers grasped tightly in his perspiring hands. “So come on with me then,” he repeated, this time uttering the words in such a jumbled mess that they were impossible to sort out though in their rhythm they could be understood as a

repetition of his previous statement. And once again he emphasized, “I got money too. Got a hunderd and sixty dowers.”

It was only then, apparently, that she understood his intentions. A quizzical expression clouded her small face. “What are you talking about, Bertie? You don't mean that. How can you mean that?”

“Yes, I am. Yes, I means it,” he said, his eyes flashing at her. And again his face contorted into a one-sided smile. His right side grimaced while his left side stared at her in terror.

He could not bear to look at her. He turned away and stared out the window where a group of people had gathered by the drag bar again. Someone in their midst was drawing a great deal of attention. All of the people in the crowd had their heads thrown back in amusement.

There was a long silence and then, with weariness in her voice, she whispered, “But don't you understand, Bertie? I don’t want to be on that basis with you. It wouldn’t be good for you, wouldn't be good for me. It just wouldn't do no good at all, Bertie! Can't you see what it would do?”

He looked back at her and saw an expression of horror on her face which he had never seen before. He knew at once that he had made a terrible mistake, that he had misunderstood what he was and what kind of relationship he could have to her. She had backed away from him a half-step and was regarding him with mixed affection and confusion in her bloodshot eyes.

Just then, at first unnoticed by both of them, Joe Harris came up beside her with the broad fist of his good hand resting on the stunted forearm of his rudimentary left arm. Her look of confusion changed to fear.

Harris observed her sullenly. “I thought I told Becky that you were wanted in the hotel.”

“Yea, she told me, Mister Harris. I just got detained.”

“Got detained how?”

“Just got talking, I guess.”

“So since when are you talking when those lawyer-dudes are up there with their stash?”

“Yea, I know about the money. I wasn't thinking. I was

feeling all worn out."

"So what were you talking about, woman? So what was this big topic of conversation?"

"Wasn't any big topic. We were just making conversation, you know," she said, looking nervously at him. Next to his immense body she looked all the more childlike and thin. She kept wringing her hands together and looking from Harris to the several other women who had come up to watch the argument.

Harris reached forward with a sudden motion, grabbed hold of her neck and shoved her against the wall. "I said about what."

"Don't be mean to me," she whined, grabbing his large hand with both of her small hands. "Ouch, ouch, that hurts."

He loosened his hold.

There had been a great deal of activity in the bar but now all eyes were on the flower vendor, the prostitute, and the owner of the bar. Bertie Parler kept staring at Joe Harris, his thin face lit up with alarm.

"I told you I'm fed up with your stupid acts of mercy with this dude. He comes in here and makes goo-goo's at you. I told you I'm fed up with this freak. You listening to me, Bertie? I'm talking about you," said Harris, turning to the mulatto and then back to the frail prostitute who was still wringing her small hands together and darting her eyes back and forth from the proprietor to the vendor. "Didn't I tell you that?" he repeated, leering at her.

"Yea, you told me. But he comes up to me, you know."

"Comes up to you about what?"

"About nothing. He just wants to talk."

He grabbed her around the neck again and slammed her against the wall so forcefully that she made a strange, gurgling noise that sounded as if it was coming from the bottom of her throat. Her dress slipped down from her left shoulder, revealing one small breast on which the nipple stood out rigid and purple. She started to moan, "Oh, please don't do that. I can't breathe."

He let go of her. She pulled up her dress and looked around, her eyes wild with distress. By this time the juke box

had stopped playing; a total silence filled the room. The people on the bar stools had turned around to look. Some of the other women had come up behind Elaine and taken a gentle hold of her thin arms.

"So what did you talk about then?"

"He wanted a trick," she replied, still gasping for breath. "He brought me some flowers." He had not, in fact, presented her with the bouquet of roses, but she had seen them on the table and knew that they were meant for her. She wanted if possible to divert Harris' attention from the trick to the flowers.

"What kind of flowers? Let me see them."

She reached for the roses and held them up for him to see. He grabbed them from her hands, threw them on the floor, and stamped on them. "These flowers are dead."

By now about half of the customers had gathered around the threesome in the front corner of the bar. There were a half dozen or so young men in jeans, a couple of well-dressed drunkards who looked like renegades from the financial district, and an outrageously effeminate man who pressed his long, thin hands together and said, "Joey, darling, you're making this into more than it has to be, you know. He's got a dong like everyone else."

"Sure, he's got a dong. A ding-dong is what he's got. Ding-dong Bertie with his flowers that are dead."

Everyone laughed and began rearranging their positions and going back to the bar counter as if the confrontation was over. But Harris held his position and, following this moment of rearrangement, everyone looked at the trio again with redoubled seriousness.

Bertie Parker, aware of all the eyes on him, had drawn further back into the shadowed corner. His hands were raised up slightly from his hips as if he was ready to make a dash for the door, but his shoulders and head had slumped down so low that he seemed to be regarding the faces gathered around him from a bent-down position like a wrestler. His beady eyes moved back and forth from Harris to the crowd to the little hooker who was now in the center of a small group of five or six hard-looking women with painted eyes

and firmly-set mouths.

"So he was going to buy a trick, is that right?" said Harris in his low voice, immediately recreating the mood of tension which had been temporarily dispelled by the moment of laughter.

"Holy Cow, Joe, lighten up," one of the older women exclaimed in a raspy, tough voice. "How come you're coming down on her so hard?"

But Harris looked around so fiercely that the older prostitute backed off and made no further comment. Then he looked at Elaine, as if to remind her that his question had gone unanswered.

"Yea, he says he's got money," she replied after a pause.

"That true, Bertie? You got dough?"

"Yes, I has," said the mulatto in a barely audible jumble. "Has the yankee dower. Nothing wrong with that."

"Okay, then, Bertie, well you take your yankee dollar and you shove it up your rectum. You hear what I'm saying? You take your goddam money and you stuff it up your stinking asshole. And after you do that, you can take your asshole out the door. I don't want to see you in this joint no more."

Bertie Parker reached over for his tray of flowers which was sitting on the table where the bouquet of roses had been. He picked up his knapsack, swung it up to his shoulders, and made a motion towards the door. But then he looked back into the room where Elaine was standing in the midst of the other women and saw that her dark eyes were fastened on him as if to determine if he would give up the battle without a word of protest. Instead of following through on his feint at the door, he kept his place, standing somewhat awkwardly with his skinny legs spread apart and his tennis shoes planted solidly on the floor. His feverish eyes scanned the dark room and came to rest again on the sad eyes of the hooker.

After regarding the vendor for a moment with lowered eyebrows, Harris struck out at him, knocking the flower tray from his hands and scattering the corsages on the floor. "These flowers are dead," he said again. "You hear what I'm saying, Bertie? And you're dead. Everything about you is the

death. You breathe the death. You look like the death. When you walk down the street, it's like the death is walking down the street."

Bertie Parker started to rock back and forth from one foot to another, his head bobbing up and down. He shook his index finger at him. "Going to sue you. Yes, Harris, I will. Going to sue you. Uh-huh. Going to get the poh-lices on you. Uh-huh, I will."

Everyone laughed. Even Harris' broad face wrinkled into an unnatural grin. But his eyes were not smiling. He stepped forward, kicked some of the flowers under a table, and said, "I told you to go. We seen enough of your act." Then he looked over to the hooker and said, "And you can go, too. You hear me, Elaine? I said you can go."

When Bertie Parker heard Joe Harris call the hooker "Elaine," the name which he thought that he alone knew, he felt as if a great darkness had closed around him. "Liar, liar," he mumbled to himself. With a strength all out of proportion to his size, he rushed forward at the immense chest of the owner and sent him reeling against the wall where a protruding nail caught the sleeve on his bad arm and ripped it all the way to the elbow, revealing his stunted forearm on which the fingers looked like toes.

If one of the others hadn't caught him, Harris would have fallen; but, as it was, he was more embarrassed than hurt. Grabbing the mulatto by his skinny shoulders, he rammed his large knee into his groin. Parker swooned and fell into a ball like a rolled-up caterpillar. Then he jumped up again and bobbed back and forth. "Don't think you got me. Oh, no. Going to get your ass good. Going to sue you. Going to sue your old ass. Going to get the poh-lices on you. Uh-huh, I will." In his excitement he was saying the words so clearly that everyone understood them. A couple of young men stepped between the two of them to prevent further violence.

No sooner had Bertie Parker repeated his threat about the police when a siren wailed in the distance. As he looked over the arm of the man who was restraining him to the ruddy face of the owner, he was conscious of its approach.

For a moment he was thinking that by the mere statement of his intentions he had called up the police from the heart of the city to redress his wrongs. And soon in fact the siren stopped outside. But no one came through the open door of the bar. Then a noise went up, the chorused chant of a crowd. Everyone went to the front of the bar and looked out to the street.

Taking advantage of the commotion, Bertie Parker slipped between the customers and through the open door. The street outside was aglow with the red and blue flashing light from the blinkers on the police cars. A hard rain was coming down; the low sky above the buildings was an unreal blend of orange, red, and purple. There were five police cars, three on one side of the bar and two on the other; and it seemed as if all of their red lights were blinking at different rates. The reflected light in the sky was irregular, too; it kept changing in hue and intensity, rising and falling and then quivering like the flame of a candle. Meanwhile, the green-neon sign on the drag bar was flashing off and on at a slower, more pulse-like pace. In the parking lot beside the bar, a large group of people had gathered around a lanky figure in a three-tiered hat. It was the crazy man from the Great Eastern Restaurant. His tattered blanket lay next to him on the ground.

Clad in jockey shorts, with his knife raised to the sky, the crazy man was gesturing at the onlookers and cursing them beneath his breath. Already the cops were moving in with their billy clubs out. The crazy man made an effort to run but one of the cops got a hold of his arm. He twisted and turned like a fish on a hook. A roar of mixed laughter and boos went up from the people who were treating the episode like a carnival show. Soon the cops had the crazy man’s arms behind his back and were pushing him towards the nearest police car where the red lights were so intense that an old man beside it was shielding his eyes.

From the doorway where he had hidden after leaving the saloon, Bertie Parker watched this whole scene with his scarred face lifted back like an animal sniffing the air outside its hole. Then he noticed with great interest that next to the

old man by the police car was the same tall Indian who had embraced him in the mission. Just as the cops approached the car with the crazy man in their clutch, the Indian jumped out, gave them a tremendous shove and darted off through a nearby alley. The shove provided enough of a jolt for the crazy man to break loose. For just an instant his naked body contorted in freedom. As he flailed his arms around, he lost hold of his knife. It came sailing over the heads of the crowd and landed in the doorway where Bertie Parker was standing. Bertie looked down at it, observed that no one had seen it, and covered it with his foot. Then the cops rushed at the crazy man again. Without looking to see the second capture, Bertie leaned over and picked up the knife. He started for home with the knife in his jacket pocket. Behind him the crazy man was shouting, “America! America! My mother is sleeping in the hall!”

After walking a half block, he turned unto another street which was darker and more deserted. Now once again he was alone with his thoughts.

In the excitement of the crazy man's struggle, he had forgotten his own shame. Now he remembered it with added poignancy. His mind went over the events at the saloon but they were almost too painful to think of. Already, he was shaking his head against the booze and already he knew that the battle would be lost. He kept walking around with his head lowered and his hand in his jacket pocket on the knife.

How long he wandered he didn't know but when he went to buy booze he discovered that the stores that sold liquor were already closed for the night. Passing the newsstand near his apartment, he noticed a cab pulling up across the street, saw the-blindman in the back seat, and thought to himself with wonder that it was already three o'clock. Soon the blindman, dressed as usual in his gray coat and baseball cap, emerged from the back seat and stood rubbing his deep-set eyes while the cabdriver positioned him in the direction of the newspaper box. But something was wrong; as soon as the cab had pulled off, the blindman, as if doubting the cabbie’s orientation, headed off at a different angle, colliding with the corner pillar in the two-sided open vestibule of the drug store

on the other side of the sidewalk. Three times he backed off from the pillar and then rammed against it again until a passerby stopped, exchanged a few words with him and pointed him in the right direction. Then, having collected his money from the box, he came across the street with his cane tapping back and forth on the pavement and his shadowed eyes staring blankly ahead. Within a few minutes, Bertie Parker was on his way home with a bottle in his jacket pocket beside the crazy man's knife.

Arriving in his apartment, he threw himself on the couch. When he shut his eyes, he could see the horror on her face and hear her saying, “He just comes up to me, that's all.” He could see her naked breast, the nipple rigid with fright.

He drank the liquor in big gulps and lay back on the bed. The ceiling was whirling around above his head. Then flames rose up in the midst of the whirling. He was in a shabby room by himself in a house far away. Outside his window the robins were shrieking. He jumped up and rushed into a hall above a stairway. His mother was there below the stairs, her clothes in flames, yelling, “Bertie! Bertie! Oh, God, have mercy! This fire is eating me up!” He started down to her but the fire was there like a wall. He turned around to run away from it but the fire was behind him now blocking his escape. Frantic with fear, he rushed through the glowing orangeness toward the window in his room. His clothes burst in flames as if they had exploded. The fire was gnawing at his face. “Oh, God!” he screamed. “Somebody help us! Oh, God!” Then he was flying through the air, his face burning like a torch.

The whirling stopped and he was back in his basement apartment again. He jumped up and rushed through the door. As he hurried up the street, he remembered the knife. He took it out of his pocket and felt the sharp edge

As he approached the back door of the saloon, he could see that everyone was still there. The game room was so crowded that no one noticed his entry. He passed quickly through the game room and into the main part of the bar. The interior of the bar was dark and clouded with a haze of filtered light and trapped smoke. But despite the murkiness

of the room he immediately spied the owner and the hooker by the counter. They were standing close together. He had his good arm around her bare shoulder; her lips were pressed against his thick neck.

When Bertie Parker first entered the room, the hooker's eyes were half shut. But when he brandished his knife, they opened and stared.

Joe Harris took a few drunken steps towards him, laughing. “Well, if ain't Bertie Parker. It’s the burn-face. It’s the death.” He swayed back and forth unsteadily as if expecting an attack.

But Bertie Parker leaped past him. In a single bound he was at the prostitute's neck. One-two-three—the knife went in. The first time it caught on her necklace but the second and third times it struck clean. She gasped and fell back. A stream of blood like a fountain shot out of her neck. Then a white flash hit him from the side. Bertie Parker went down. But as he fell he struck out against Joe Harris and got struck from somewhere himself.

When Bertie awoke again, he was in a small, white room that was moving somewhere and rocking back and forth. At the end of the room was a window through which the city skyline could be seen, withdrawing rapidly behind him. Above him somewhere a siren was wailing and n a jolt he understood that he had been gravely injured himself. He lifted up his head and someone pushed him gently back down.

It was then that he raised his hand to his throbbing face. Entangled in his blood-stained sleeve was the golden necklace with the blue jade heart.

Three Musketeers

"Haw-haw-haw. Who you going to stick with, Jody?"

"Just with Daddy and with nobody else."

"And Tommy, how about you?"

"Just with you, Dad."

"Haw-haw-haw. Tommy, Daddy, and Jody, we're the three musketeers."

It was a chilly summer night in San Francisco. Jody Miller, a five-year old girl with red hair and blue eyes, sat in the back seat of a cab with her father and brother. They were passing through a poor neighborhood of rooming hotels, apartment buildings, and dingy bars. On a nearby corner, some "queens" in flamboyant clothing gestured at passing cars. Her freckled nose was pressed against the window pane, but Jody Miller hardly saw them. She gazed beyond them down an intersecting street where a half-moon had just risen above a mosaic of city lights. Then her father's heavy arm settled on her shoulders; she felt his moist lips and scratchy whiskers on her cheek.

He pulled her close to him. "And what's wrong with the little musketeer? How come so glum?"

"Not glum," she responded. Just the same she made no effort to free herself from the reassuring warmth of his arm. She looked over at her eleven-year-old brother who was on the other side of the seat with his brown hair in his eyes and his attention on a piece of string that he was trying to tie into some kind of elaborate knot that with a single tug would come apart. For a moment her father's kind words, and the sight of her father and brother sitting peacefully together, persuaded her that everything was all right. But she knew that her father's moods altered quickly, that he and her brother went with almost no warning from being on decent terms with one another to vicious arguments; and she was still thinking about the events of the previous night.

"She's worried about Ma," said the boy without looking up from his piece of string. He gave it a sharp pull, but the knot just wadded up more tightly He shook his head in exasperation and started picking at it.

"Is that what you been thinking on?" the father asked, hugging her again. "Is that what's got my sweetheart sad?" He spoke in his usual gruff voice, but with a higher than ordinary pitch, and his words came out faster than they normally did. Then, even as he talked, the meter clicked and registered another twenty cents. He reached for his back pocket as if to check for his wallet, let out a barely-audible sigh, and stared ahead with his lean features set in a frown.

The girl heard the tension in her father's voice, glanced up at him one more just long enough to see it reflected on his face, and just like that her feelings of security vanished. Without responding to his questions, she peered ahead where he was staring—beyond the meter and the blue hood of the cab to the sea of red tail-lights that moved with them in counter-balanced motion down the busy, one-way street.— The driver swung across the line of traffic from the left lane to the right and hit the next intersection at the exact instant when the sign turned from red to green. But she wasn't watching the stoplight change. In her mind she could see her mother's pale face and restive eyes, and hear her pleading for the reconciliation which seemed impossible to hope for.

"You know her," said the boy. "Always a-worrying, right? And you just watch her, Pa, you just watch. Soon as she sees Ma, she'll start in bawling again."

"Well, she's not going to see Ma," the father replied. "She's not going to see Ma. Ain't I been saying that all day?"

A moment of silence intervened. The girl drew back her head and sniffled but managed to hold back her tears. Then, with a burst of static, the cab radio came on: "Pacific, Turk and Franklin... Who's that on Van Ness?... Pacific Forty-Three with a rolling bingo, get the Nelson Hotel..." There was another burst of static and silence again.

"Anyhow," continued the father at last, looking over the meter to the motley row of porno bookstores and movie-houses along the street where they were traveling now, and speaking as if the girl were not present, though he still had his hairy arm around her small shoulders, "it ain't so easy for her, you know. She's just a little ' un. Now don't you forget.

And she don't understand that her mama is sick."

"Sick," scoffed the boy. "All she is, is zonked."

"Well, sure, sure," the father responded. "But being zonked like that, Tommy, that's a sickness. That ain't her fault."

"Yes, it's her fault," the boy insisted, glancing up for the first time from his piece of string. He had a freckled nose like his sister's, sullen gray eyes that were set too close together like hers; and, though his face was broader and rounder, he had an air of desperation about him that made him look like his father.

"She ain't zonk," the girl blurted; and the look of urgency that had been on her father's and then on her brother's face appeared on hers. She let out a long sigh and started sniffling again.

"The word ain't ' zonk'," the boy sneered. "It's ' zonked' with a ' d' at the end. Stupid Jody! Can't even talk."

The girl took a prolonged, trembling breath. The freckled nose crinkled. Then she buried her face in her small hands and began weeping so quietly that only the up-and-down motion of her shoulders betrayed her distress.

"There she goes again," the boy said, shaking his head.

"Hey, Tommy, hey!" the father shot out. "Ain't no use in being mean. You better act right!"

When she heard her father's threats, Jody Miller shook all the more and started crying aloud.

"Crybaby Jody," the boy persisted. "Always bawling about nothing."

"Now I said to cap it, son. I ain't a-warning you again."

They had already rounded the last turn of their trip and were passing down another heavily-trafficked street where there was a retreading outfit on the corner, then a couple of brownstone apartment buildings, and then the crowded parking lot of a motel with a dirty, beige stucco exterior and a restaurant that stayed open all night. The cab pulled up in front of a red-brick structure with a sign that said: "Astoria Hotel, Rooms by the Day, Week, or Month, Reasonable Rates."

The driver, a small, wiry man with dark-rimmed glasses

and gray hair swept back from his tired face, jumped out to open the door. The meter had stopped at "3.20."

The father pulled himself stiffly from the seat. Standing on the sidewalk, he looked taller and more constricted through the shoulders than he had looked in the cab. He took out his wallet, thumbed through the worn bills inside, and handed the driver three one's. Then he dug into the pocket of his jeans and came up with two quarters. "Wish I could do a little better. Now I know you work hard."

"Hey, chief, that's all right," said the driver, waving his hand. "You go on now, and take care of that little girl." He winked at her. "I can see she's going to be a fine lady."

The girl stared at him with bloodshot eyes. Her sobbing had subsided. In her arms was a blonde-haired doll that was missing one hand but arrayed in a silky gown and silver shoes. The driver nodded and smiled, revealing his stumpy front teeth, then went around the cab and got in. She watched the cab pull away from the curb and screech around the corner by the grocery store at the end of the block. Then she rubbed her eyes with the bottom of her shirt, looked up at her father who was standing beside her and over at her brother who, with a defiant expression on his face, was waiting at the top of the four steps that led up to the front door of the hotel.

She and her father, hand in hand, climbed up to the door and followed her brother inside. The door opened to a drab lobby where three old men in shirt sleeves and two young blacks with ironed hair were watching a boxing match on the faded TV in the far corner of the room. Without nodding at them or saying hello, the man and the girl passed behind them to the back corner of the lobby where there was a check-in counter protected by an iron cage with a crudely-printed sign: "No credit. Don't ask." To the side of the counter was a narrow hallway illumined by a single bulb that hung from the ceiling on a frazzled cord. At the end of the hallway were a coke machine and the door to the elevator.

The boy ran ahead to press the button for the elevator. He leaned his ear on the door and kicked it with his booted foot. Then, seeing a roach by the empty bottles that were stacked in plastic racks beside the coke machine he jumped

for it and smashed it. Only the back part of the insect had been crushed; its front feet and antennas were waving wildly around. He picked it up carefully and ran with it towards the girl.

"Oh!" she cried. She covered her face with her hands.

The father lashed out and sent the boy flying against the wall by the elevator door. "Now I told you, Thomas Miller, you leave your sister alone."

The boy was on his feet in an instant, rubbing his mouth with his dirty fingers. "Sure, Pa, sure. You're always sticking up for her. You don't give a care for me."

"Now I don't want to hear it. You understand what I'm saying?"

"Don't want to hear it cuz it's true."

Once more the man's hand flew out. The boy fell back again, wiped his mouth a second time, and stared at his father with fire in his eyes. With no further protests, he rose and withdrew a few steps from them with his face set in a scowl. The door to the elevator opened. A tall, emaciated man with bandaged arm came out, his eyes glazed from junk. The three of them went in and stood in silence while the elevator ascended to the third floor. The girl was sniffling again.

The room in which they had lived for ten days was at the end of the hall next to a window that looked out to a fire escape. The man went to turn the key in the door to the room but the lock was already undone. He held his finger up for the children to be silent. Someone was inside, walking back and forth. "Now that's a strange one," he whispered. "We ain't got nothing to steal."

He pushed the door open. In the midst of conglomeration of cardboard boxes, blankets, mattresses, and clothing, was a small, haggard, woman with broad, bony face, close-set, feverish gray eyes, and tightly-pulled-back red hair who jumped when they first entered, then gestured imploringly with long, skinny hands.

"Roscoe give me the key," she said in a high, plaintive voice. "I was awaiting for you all to come home. Don't be mad at me, Del. I just want to talk. Honest to Jesus, I had all

the mad I can take."

The girl rushed forward and buried her face in her mother's skirt. She began crying again, this time more loudly and with more copious tears. Then she felt herself being lifted into her mother's arms; she could smell the faint chemical odor that her mother's body always had.

"Baby, baby, no need to cry," the woman cooed. "No need to cry cuz Mama is here."

The girl stopped wailing and sobbed with more restraint, rubbing her nose on her mother's flowered blouse. Then her mother shifted her from one arm to another and said aloud in a calmer voice: "Say something, Delmar. Won't you talk to me, please?"

The girl looked across the room to the door where her father stood with his long legs spread slightly apart, his feet in their worn, brown shoes planted firmly on the bare wood floor, his large, thin hands held awkwardly at his sides like a person not used to standing still. His head was inclined away from them, his forehead wrinkled with what appeared to be distress, but his jaw was tightly set. At first his eyes were half-closed; then they opened and stared.

"Ain't nothing to talk about, Sharon. The talking is done."

"I just can't stand it anymore. I'm all the time alone."

"So what happened to what's-his-name? Go look him up."

"I told you, Del. That there, it's all done. Di'n't I explain it last night? You don't even listen no more when I talk. It's all over with, Delmar. Oh, please, won't you forgive and forget? What I done, I was foolish. I was all mixed up. And so help me, Lord Jesus, I can't stand it alone."

The girl watched her father as her mother spoke, and noticed that his stern expression had softened. For a moment she observed something in his eyes which she had not seen in a long time, and she wanted so much for that something to stay. She glanced at her brother, who stood apart from them with his hands clenched into fists, then turned to her father again. He shook his head slowly and walked over to the two windows in the back of the room, beyond which was nothing

except the gray stone of another building where from some unseen source a purple light flashed off and on. Finally he returned, standing so close to her now that she could see the wrinkles around his blue eyes. The softness was gone from his face, his jaw set firmly once more.

"What you done, Shar," he said after a pause. "There ain't no going back on it. There ain't no way to forget."

"I di'n' mean no harm," the woman replied in almost a whisper. "I di'n' mean to do no wrong."

"So what you call Russell then?" the boy suddenly screamed. "What you call that nigger?"

The father swung towards the boy and raised his hand. "Now keep a lid on it, son. This ain't no business of your'n."

"How come it ain't my business?" the boy cried, brandishing his fist. "How come it ain't my business, cuz ain't she my mom?" He ran out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

The three of them watched the boy go out. There was a deadly silence after he left. The woman set the girl on the floor, covered her face, and let out a long moan. The man went over to the windows a second time. His heavy breathing could be heard. Now and then he shook his head.

Jody Miller was no longer sobbing. She took a couple of steps away from her mother, stood with her tiny hands clasped beneath her chin in the exact same way her mother was standing, darted her eyes back and forth between her parents, crossed over to the woman again, and peered into her wild eyes, which were tinted with yellow and streaked with red lines. For a moment she was crushed with a violent hug, then her mother let go of her and paced back and forth amidst the cardboard boxes.

"See what it's come to!" the woman exclaimed, throwing up her thin arms. "Di'n't I bear you two young ' uns?"

"Sure you bore'm," he replied in a suddenly calm and deliberate voice tinged with sadness. "And you were a good mother at times."

"And now you're turning them against me."

"That I ain't done."

"Oh, yes, you have!" She stopped in front of him with enflamed eyes. "Oh, yes, you have! Just look how they act!"

"I ain't done no turning," he repeated, his tone becoming shriller. "You done the turning yourself."

"So I suppose you been such an influence, livin' off a scam!"

"Least I been here."

She started pacing around again, gesturing with her thin hands. "Oh, think a minute, Delmar! We don't need to be this way. Please, please, just think a minute, won't you? Can't you see I'm falling apart?"

He sighed. "Yea, I can see you're falling apart. I can see you're fucked up on amyl. I can see that your ass has been worked on by that dude. And I'm sick of it, Sharon. I don't want to see it no more. You hear what I'm saying? I'm sick and tired of your whole act. So ain't no use for you to come around here no more, crying and moaning about how he's got you doing tricks. Cuz we been through this before, Shar. And what it comes down to is you're a two-bit slut."

She charged at him with flailing fists. He grabbed her by the wrists and wrestled her unto one of the boxes where she broke down in tears. "You was doing me wrong, Del," she moaned between her sobs. "You di'n' treat me like a woman. You made me feel like a board. And that there with Russell, like I told you, it's done. I di'n' know what I was doing, Delmar. I was reeling and a-rolling, and you made me feel like a board."

The girl had watched this entire interaction with wringing hands. Now she rushed up to her mother, clung to her thin arm, and let out a long wail followed by intermittent sobbing and moaning.

"You're the one I can count on," her mother whispered in her ear. "Ain't you, Jody, sweetheart? Ain't you still mine?"

The girl stared into her mother's crazed eyes and nodded through her tears. "Yes, Mama, I'm your'n."

As if the woman's restlessness, now that she was seated on the box, had transferred to him, Delmar Miller started pacing around the room, winding up again at the two

windows where he stood and looked out to the flashing purple light on the gray stone outside. Then, when the woman and child had ceased their crying, he came back across the room to them, shook his head slowly, and said, "Now, Sharon, I want you to leave."

The woman wiped her tears and stood up. "And what if I won't go?"

"Then I aim to throw you out."

When she kept sitting where she was, he tried to grab her by the wrists. She struck out and scratched his cheek. He slammed her against the wall and slapped her across the face. A little stream of blood came running from her nose.

The girl let another wail and hung to her mother's thigh. The man went over to one of the boxes, dug around in it, came out with a rag which he examined to make sure it was clean, and brought the rag over to his wife for her nose.

"Now I'm sorry I had to do that," he said. "But you're still going out."

He grabbed her once more and began pushing and dragging her towards the door. She offered some feeble resistance but let herself be moved along. She was bawling again and the girl was hanging on her leg and bawling in unison with her. He got his wife to the door, shoved her outside, and yanked the girl back in.

For a long time Sharon Miller could be heard outside the door, whimpering and moaning. "That thing with Russell, it's done. Honest, Del, it's all done. Won't you please let me in? Oh, Del, if you don't let me in, I swear to the Lord God Almighty I'll get back at you somehow!"

The girl sat by the door sobbing until her mother's whining stopped. She pressed her ear against the door and heard footsteps going down the hall.

"Mama!" she called. "Mama, come back!" But the footsteps kept going until they faded out. She looked over at her father. He was standing by the window, staring out with a cigarette in his hand. "Mama, come back," she whispered.

She crawled over to one of the mattresses on the floor, sprawled out on top of it, and covered her head with a blanket. She cried softly to herself until she fell asleep.

When she awoke again and pulled the blanket from her face, it was dark inside the room. The only illumination was from the purple light outside the window which was still blinking off and on. Her father was lying a few feet from her on the same mattress with an empty whiskey bottle beside him.

She rolled over to him and rested her head on his leg. He stirred in his sleep, mumbled something, and covered her shoulders with a blanket. Soon the door opened quietly and her brother came in. Without speaking or removing his clothes, he settled down on another mattress on the far side of the room.

She nestled closer to her father and watched the purple light flashing on the wall. It felt good to be so close to him; she could smell the familiar sweat-and-booze odor of his warm body; but she kept thinking about her mother's wild eyes, and how her mother had whispered, "You're the one I can count on. Ain't you, Jody, sweetheart? Ain't you still mine?" And she could hear herself saying, "Yes, Mama, I'm your'n."

The next morning she got up early. Her brother was already up, playing jungle-gym on the radiator pipes in the hall.

He noticed her when she came out. "Where you going?" he called.

"Just somewhere," she replied.

"You ain't going nowhere unless you tell Dad," the boy said, jumping down from the pipe he was climbing

But she was already halfway down the hall, running as fast as her little legs would carry her. "Go where I want to!" she yelled back.

"You better not go to Ma!"

She scurried down the steps by the elevator shaft, tore across the front lobby, and went out. The sun had just risen above the buildings. The streets were resplendent in the early morning light. She raced down the sidewalk, her red hair flying behind her, her small feet tapping lightly on the concrete.

Two blocks down she came to another hotel. An old

man recognized her and let her in. She pressed the elevator button for floor number five. Her mother's room was near the end of an L-shaped hall. By the time she got to it, she was out of breath. She pounded on the door and stood panting, waiting for it to swing open. But the door didn't open and no answer came from inside.

She pounded a second time. Again there was no reply. She reached up for the knob and discovered that the door was unlocked. She pushed it open and went in.

Her mother was lying in the middle of the room, surrounded by a pool of blood. At first she didn't understand what had happened. Then she threw her- self down beside her mother, shook her shoulders, and whispered, "Mama, Mama, are you dead?"

For a long time she lay on top of her mother's body, convulsing with sobs. Then she looked up at her face and saw that it was covered with blood.

She began to lick her like a puppy, trying to wash off the blood with her tongue.

A Brief Encounter

Jim Warren had driven a cab for three years, but he had been the kind of cabbie that doesn't have a radio and just picks up people on the street. In San Francisco they call this type of driver a "pirate." Then finally he found a job with a company that was radio-dispatched. It was a whole, new ball-game for him. He knew where the streets were and knew all the traffic lights, but he didn't know the names of the bars because he had never paid much attention to them.

He was 32 years old, a thin, clean-featured young man with brown hair and brown eyes who did everything in a hurry and got flustered when he messed up. He drove only three nights a week, spent his other four days taking art classes at a community college, and regarded his studies and job as complementary activities, both part of an effort to understand life and express his growing awareness. He was totally absorbed in what he referred to as his "artistic path" and thought it should involve such an all-encompassing effort.

On his second week on his new job, he received an order on the radio for a place in the Mission District called Faye's Club. He knew the Mission like the palm of his hand but had never heard of this particular saloon. So he did what he always did in such a situation—took the order anyhow, rushed to the designated cross-streets, and drove up and down scanning the neon signs.

When he couldn't find the bar, he searched for a phone booth where he could look up the address.

The phone booth he located was on a dark corner by the subway station at Mission and Sixteenth. A pretty, young black woman in tight pants was standing by the bus stop about a hundred feet away. As he picked up the tattered phone book and flipped through the yellow pages, he thought to himself that most probably she was a hooker of some kind. A car came by. She flicked her head and stuck out her rear end. He found the listing that the bars were under, glanced at her again, and noticed that she was coming towards him, swinging her wide hips.

"Want a date?" she asked in a pleasant voice, smiling over her shoulder as she passed.

"Got an order," he replied, gesturing to his cab which was double-parked in the street with the warning lights flashing. He looked back to the phone book until she had gone a few steps further then looked up again and watched her walk away.

Like many of the younger, more inexperienced drivers, he was curious about hookers. He had had a few innocent adventures with them in his several years of driving and once had taken off on a plainclothesman who had tried to arrest a prostitute who was riding in his cab. But he had never paid for sex and had thought of this as something which only desperate or jaded people did. Lately, though, he had come to the conclusion that his whole approach to cab-driving and art was too starry-eyed and timid; he felt that he needed to break through to new ground, and especially to force himself into situations where he could learn more about the sordid side of life that he was always seeing from his cab but holding back from. A couple of times that week he had slowed down when hookers nodded at him, but each time he had gone by.

He kept his eyes on the prostitute until she stopped by a store-front down the block. Then he turned back to the phone book, found the address for the saloon, ran over to his cab, and jumped in. As it turned out, Faye's Club was just on the other side of the intersection. It was a sleazy, little place with red Dutch doors and an unlit sign.

He screeched to a stop, jammed the cab into "park," rushed inside and shouted, "Somebody call a cab?"

The interior of the bar was poorly-illumined and the air was heavy with smoke. At the counter, in front of a fat lady bartender with frosted hair, were five men on stools who all looked drunk. In a dark corner by the juke box a man and a woman were arguing in Spanish.

"It's canceled. I phoned in that it was canceled," said the woman, lifting up her hands.

He nodded and waved. "See you next time then." Without waiting to see if she'd offer him a dollar for the no-

go, he turned to leave.

"I'll take you if you're vacant," said one of the drunkards, looking over his shoulder. "I won't be much trouble, partner. I'm only go-go-going the-ree blocks."

"Hey, you know, I just remembered," said Warren, "I'm due at the garage." He had suddenly decided to go after the hooker.

He roared up to the corner, made a U-turn in the intersection, raced back to Mission Street, and headed up Mission in the direction she'd walked.

Three blocks away was a hamburger joint that stayed open all night. He pulled up in front of it and looked over the people in line. When he didn't see her, he shoved the cab in gear again and hurried up the street for another couple of blocks, dodging in and out of the moving cars. Another two blocks; she couldn't have gone further than that. He shrieked through another U-turn, ignored a man who was trying to flag him down, and patrolled the other side of the street which, now that the bars were closing for the night, was filled with young Latins, the guys with their collars up and hair swept back and the girls with long, dark hair and slit skirts.

He was about to give up when he saw the hooker crossing the street towards the hamburger joint. He swung a louie and pulled to the curb. When she came swinging past, he motioned at her. She moved her lips as if to say. "You want a date?" He nodded and gestured with his hand for her to get in. She opened the door and sat in the front-seat.

He drove down the street. A half-block or so from the hamburger joint was a narrow alley that led between some three- and four-story Victorian apartment buildings that were all crammed together and dark.

"So what were you thinking of?" she said.

"I don't know. Whatever," he responded. It had occurred to him all of sudden that he didn't really know how to go about this and didn't have any place to take her. He thought of his studio apartment, but he was afraid that someone might notice him coming in with her, especially since she was black. He hardly ever had any female visitors at his

place and a lot of the tenants were night hawks.

"Hey, wait a minute now, you ain't a poh-lice, are you?"

He shook his head. "Do I look like a cop?"

"Just the same, thought I'd axe. 'Cuz if you're a poh-lice, you has to say yes."

"I am not a policeman."

"Well, then, all right."

He had reached the end of the block. Not knowing where to go, he turned back to Mission Street. "I just don't know how to go about this," he said.

"Oh yea, you never done this before?"

"No, I never have."

She laughed. "Well, cheapest thing is a blow-job. I mean, if you're having a slow night."

"How much for that?"

"Well, you can have it for fifteen. 'Cuz I ain't been doing so good neither."

He turned unto Mission Street which was crowded with young Latins. A blow-job was not exactly what he had had in mind. From Mission he headed of unto a side-street. But there, too, the bars had just closed and people were moving back and forth.

He pulled the cab to the curb. "Hey, maybe we should forget this whole deal. I'll give you a couple of bucks for your time."

"I don't get it. What's wrong?"

"I don't know where to go."

"Ain't nothing to be scared of. Cabbies just drive somewhere, you know. I mean, 'cuz they have cars."

He swung out from the curb, stepped on the gas, and drove towards the industrial area south of Market where there were factories and warehouses that were closed at night.

"I get lots of dates with cabbies," she said. "I got this one dude who drives for Yellow. What kind of taxi is this?"

"Pacific."

"Well, I ain't had no Pacifics. Mostly Yellow and Orange... Hey, was that you by the phone booth? How come you let me go by?"

"Had a no-go."

She laughed. "Was getting cold feets, that's why."

She kept chattering on. "I had this one dude for Orange. Used to come and see me ev'ry Tuesday night. Ev'ry Tuesday night. Now he was messy, let me tell you."

He was starting to think once again that this little episode would end up as a catastrophe, but he didn't want to make another attempt to end it.

Now that the bars were closed, the stoplights were on blinkers. He was roaring up the street, touching on the brakes ever so slightly at every corner where the flashers were amber, jerking his head around to look up and down the intersecting street, and then racing off again towards the dark factories in the distance.

He crossed a railroad track and pulled to the side by some parked cement trucks and piles of gravel.

"Oh no, you got to go where there's lot of cars," she said. "Cuz the poh-lices might come by, you know, and they'll wonder why we're stopped. You got to go to a factory or something. They won't see me 'cuz my head will be lower than the dashboard."

He started looking for a factory that was still open. He found one at last—a big, square building next to a bus lot with only a few windows that faced the street. There were all kinds of cars and trucks parked in the street perpendicular to the sidewalk. The whirr of engines cane from inside.

He pulled in next to a panel truck that shielded the cab from the windows.

"Sure this will be fine," she said. "They won't see us here."

She twisted around to take off her sweater. For the first time since the deal had been struck, he looked at her closely. She was younger than he had thought, not much more than twenty. Her nose was too wide and her lips protruded too much, but all in all she was a beautiful woman.

He pulled out his bundle of money, turning away from her to look at it.

"No need to hide your money," she said, sitting with her sweater in her hands. Beneath the sweater she was wearing a

purple blouse that was torn on one shoulder. “If I’m gonna steal now, I’m gonna steal grands. I ain’t gonna bother with no little wad like yours.”

He gave her a ten and a five.

“And give me a one for four quarters, okay? That way I can go home with thirty-one dollars. And, hey, will you give me a ride when we’re done? I live at Oak and Divisadero, you know, out in the Haight.”

He took her four coins and handed her a dollar bill. “I don’t know,” he said, studying her face. “That makes me a little paranoid, you know. Maybe you got some big honcho there who’s gonna knife me.”

She laughed. “Ain’t nobody there but me and my kid. How come you don’t trust me?”

“You didn’t trust me, did you? You were asking me if I was a cop.”

“Didn’t think you was, really. Just checking, that’s all.”

“Well, that’s all I’m doing, checking.”

“So I’m telling you I’m cool.”

“Okay, so I’ll give you a ride home.”

She smiled and shook her head at him. “Well, take down your pants.”

He fumbled around with his belt and zipper and slipped his pants down over his knees.

“I suppose you want to feel some tit.” She pulled up her blouse and lifted her bra up over her breasts. She had the most beautiful breasts he had ever seen. Her torso curved down to a tiny waist with the exaggerated angle that black women sometimes have.

He started feeling her breasts, running his fingers back and forth over her nipples; then he ran his hands down her stomach to her slender waist, felt along her belt-line and tried to get inside her pants—a woman’s ass was what excited him the most. But her pants were so tight around the waist that he could only get a couple of fingers inside.

“If you take your pants down,” he said, “I’ll give you five more bucks.

“I’m bleeding. I just had an abortion and they screwed it all up.”

"I just want to look at it."

She pulled away and glowered at him. "What do you want for a funky twenty bucks?"

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry," he said. He resumed his explorations. She bent her head down and worked vigorously up and down on his cock. It was all so strange that he couldn't relax. He kept feeling her breasts and looking out the window to see if anyone was watching. Some factory workers had come outside on their break. They were sitting on the front steps of the building about a half-block away.

She looked up and said. "You come fast or slow?"

"Slow, I guess."

She got up. "Well, okay, then. I'll give you your fifteen back. 'Cuz I got to get home. I got to let my baby-sitter go. She leaves at three."

"Not that slow," he protested.

She bent down again. "You like it better it I suck you or jack you off."

"Some of both, I guess."

She rubbed his foreskin up and down, put her mouth down to his cock, gave it a good jerk, and sighed from exasperation. She got up again. A car came by. She watched it pass.

"Here, look, put your legs on my lap."

He frowned. "How come?" He was afraid that his money would fall out of his pants or that she would stick her hands in his pockets when he wasn't watching her.

"I ain't gonna take your old money. Just believe me, okay? This is the best way to do it 'cuz I got you right here."

He shrugged his shoulders and turned towards her. She arranged his legs on her lap and bent down a third time.

He lay back against the door, feeling her breasts with his hands. "Just like a black savage," he kept thinking to himself. But he couldn't focus on her. When she moved her head back and forth, her tits swayed from side to side. He kept feeling where her breasts met her upper stomach, then up an down her torso and around her wide hips.

"Come! Will you just come!" she whispered.

At last he felt a climax coming. He motioned to her.

"Yes, tell me. I'll catch it in my mouth."

She caught the sperm in her mouth and spat out the window.

He sighed, pulled up his pants, and started up the engine.

They sped up Sixteenth Street towards Divisadero. She seemed relieved that it was over. Her mood changed and once again she started talking. She went on and on about how she always played the Mission.

"Cuz you don't make as much out here as downtown but there's less girls on the street and the poh-lices are cool... So you haven't driven a cab long, has you?"

"Only two weeks for this company but almost three years for Sunshine."

She only heard the "two weeks" part of the answer. "Well, no wonder you act scared. You only been out here two weeks."

He was still flustered and excited, angry at himself for blowing the fifteen dollars. He zoomed up the street, barely pausing for stop signs. Just as he glided through one of them, he looked to the side and saw a cop car sitting a ways down the block. Soon red lights were flashing behind him.

"Didn't make the stop." he said, drawing in his breath and pressing his lips together tightly. That made two tickets in one month.

She didn't seem worried. She patted his hand. When the cop came up and looked in the window, she waved at him. "Hi, Tony, it's me, Berlenda. I'm on my way home. Be easy on him, will you? He's a nice guy."

The cop nodded at her, asked for a driver's license, and went back to the patrol car to do a radio check.

"He knows me from the Mission," she said. "He always sees me on the streets. He's always saying, 'Now what's a fine girl like you doing out here?' He's a pretty good dude. He'll give you a break."

The cop came back with a ticket. "It's just for the stop sign. I could have nailed you for speeding. Slow down, Geronimo."

They rushed off again. She kept on talking. He hardly

heard what she was saying. He was cussing himself out.

"How cone you feel bad?" She patted his hand again.

"Just feel bad about the ticket."

"Oh, 'cuz you're a driver, right? You got to keep a good record?"

"Yea."

"If you come back this weekend, we can fuck. I won't be bleeding anymore. Come back on your night off. We can go where you live. You got your own place?"

"Yea, kind of."

He let her off by a three-story brick apartment building that looked all run down. His shift was ten hours; he had fifteen minutes to get back to the garage which was five miles away. He raced down Oak Street towards the downtown skyline. Already the eastern sky was purple and red. On this particular street, since it was a main thoroughfare, the stoplights worked all night.

His cab was the only vehicle on the road. He was hunched back in the seat, rocking back and forth in response to the bumps, all of which he knew and which he was hitting on purpose. And he was hitting all the stoplights right on the button. Bing-bing-bing—they were going down like ducks in a carnival shooting range.

He pulled into the garage with a couple of minutes to spare. At the gas pump he counted his money. Two tens, two fives, and forty-five singles. After paying for his gas and cab rental, he would have forty bucks. The ticket would cost twenty. He had given fifteen to the hooker. So he would be going home with five dollars.

It was six blocks from the garage to where he lived on the side of Nob Hill. The streets were deserted. Red and yellow lights were blinking on every corner and even the hookers had gone home. He trudged up the hill in the corduroy coat that he always wore when he worked. All the way up the hill, he kept mumbling to himself, "What an idiot! I screwed up the whole night! I bet I got VD!"

Next of Kin

1

It had been a slow night, as Sundays often were; and, to make it worse Jake Kowalski had spent a couple of luckless hours in the airport cab line. Having returned to the city with no fare, he was passing through a poor section of the San Francisco downtown on his way to the Greyhound Depot where the bus from Reno was due in eighteen minutes at nine o'clock.

An hour before, the fog had come in. Now it was low in the sky, pressing against the roofs of the dirty brick buildings on both sides of the street. Along the sidewalks was a hodgepodge of taverns, wino missions, lobbies of transient hotels, and grocery stores with barred windows. As he drove by, Jake Kowalski surveyed this scene with a weary recognition of things which though sordid he had seen countless times before. He was a big, broad-faced man, about 45 years of age, with muscular arms and shoulders, a large stomach, and rugged features that were characterized most of all by their lack of any expression except for the constant small frown in the center of his brow. His eyes moved in an automatic circular motion from the tail-lights of the cars around him to the stoplights further up the street to the doorways on his left and right where there might be a fare.

The bus depot was on a parallel street a block to his left. As he reached the intersection where he had to turn off, he noticed a man with his hand in the air beneath the neon sign of a bar in the next block. He pulled out of his turn and swung towards the bar, giving the man with the upraised arm a quick appraisal as he approached. Experience had taught him that the trips out of this neighborhood were often more trouble than they were worth he was still thinking of the bus from Reno and all the people who had blown so much on the games that they wouldn't balk at another ten or fifteen dollars for a long cab ride home; but he figured that any passenger from this low-budget saloon would not be traveling far, and that he could zip him wherever he was

going and yet make it to the depot on time.

As he drew alongside the curb, though, he observed that the person beneath the sign was not much more than a kid, at most 20 or so, and that he was unsteady on his feet. When the front door opened on the other side of the cab, he leaned across the seat and held up his hand. “You got any money? I don’t have time to mess around.”

“Hey, chief, take it easy,” said the youth. “It’s not for me. It’s for this lady. She’s on her way out.”

There was something unnatural about how the kid said “chief.” Kowalski didn’t like the bright-eyed face that peered in at him and didn’t like being roped into a fare with someone he couldn’t see from the cab. “Some kind of boy scout playing down and out,” he mumbled to himself, “and now he’s doing his good deed.”

The youth got up to look behind him. When Kowalski didn’t move, he stuck his flushed face inside the cab again. “You don’t want the fare?” he asked with less bravado.

“Yea, yea,” Kowalski replied in his deep voice which always sounded tired and never varied much in forciveness. “Sure, what the hell.” Even if it was some woman who was bombed out of her mind, he could probably get her where she was going in five minutes or less. And then he could buzz it over to the depot and maybe still salvage the night.

He extricated himself from the seat that he hadn’t budged from in more than three hours, rose up beside the cab, stared at the youth who was standing with his weight on one leg and his head cocked to the side in a defiant drunken pose, and thought to himself that if the kid was trying to pass as degenerate he wasn’t doing half-bad, but that nonetheless he had a ways to before he could qualify for the distinction. He was, in fact, a healthy-looking young man, slight but solidly-built, with brownish-blonde hair that was neatly combed back in James Dean fashion, and features which if not handsome were regular and pleasant. But his clothes were torn and dirty and his eye despite his posing, seemed scared.

“So where is this lady?” Kowalski said dryly. “I don’t have all night.”

"Right over there," said the youth, pointing not to the door of the bar as Kowalski had expected but to a narrow alley beside the bar which was blocked by an illegally-parked van. About thirty feet back from the sidewall , her small figure shadowed by the side of the building, was an old woman in a long, blue coat that looked too heavy for the weather which though foggy was mild. She was leaning towards a door that apparently led up to some apartments above the bar, shaking a padlock and muttering to herself, "The door is locked. The door is locked."

Kowalski groaned and looked at his watch. It was fifteen to nine.

After jiggling the lock several times, taking a half-step from it, and then jiggling it again, she finally started towards the cab, limping on her left foot which was wrapped in a dirty Ace bandage. Whenever she placed down her bandaged foot, she sighed, "Oh." In her left arm was an immense purse that looked like a shopping bag. She was wearing a black pill-box hat which fit her head so tightly that her face looked even more tiny and drawn-together than it would have looked without it. Her right arm was extended as if for balance.

"She's got a sore foot. She had some kind of operation," said the youth glancing towards Kowalski as if he expected this information to elicit sympathy.

"Yea, I can see she's got a problem, "Kowalski responded, looking at his watch a second time.

The old woman advanced three steps, hesitated, looked back to the door and then limped back to it to check the padlock again. Kowalski let out a long moan and gave the inebriated kid such a cold stare that he paled, shrugged his shoulders, and turned to leave. Several buildings down was a store where two winos were sitting on the sidewalk passing a bottle back and forth. The youth negotiated his way to them and sat down. The winos greeted him with exaggerated comradery and handed him the bottle. The youth took a sip and continued to look up the street at Kowalski.

Once more the old woman turned towards the cab. She was looking through her purse as she hobbled along. "My

God, my God. Now where is my wallet? I had it a minute ago. Oh, here it is! I must be going insane! Oh, I don't think I can make it. My God, my God, I got to go to the store. Hamburger and mayonnaise. Let's see now. What else? No, the hamburger will do..." She kept saying the same things again and again and seemed lost in her thoughts.

Kowalski watched her slow approach for a moment, then suddenly softened and ambled towards her with a side-to-side motion like a bear. He nodded at her, his wide face showing no emotion at all. "Let me help you there, ma'am. Looks like you got a bum foot. Just grab me here by the arm."

"And such a strong arm it is. I can see," she said, growing more alert and walking with a lighter gait though still favoring her left foot. "I've got to go to the store," she repeated, falling in beside him as if he were an friend. "The one on the hill—you know where it is?"

"Know where it all is," he responded, glancing at her face which struck him simply as a very old and dried-out face with moist eyes that had suddenly become more intimate than he cared to deal with. "But let me tell you some thing, lady, on Sunday evening that store is a mess. All kinds of out-of-towners, you know. Why don't you go to the Safeway in the Mission. It won't be such a hassle."

What he was really worried about was getting stuck in the parking lot at the first store where there was often a jam of people going in and out.

She didn't reply to his comments so he said again, "It won't be such a hassle, ma'am. Is that all right with you?"

Just as quickly as her mood had altered from her initial anxiety to exaggerated trust, it changed to suspicion. She squinted her eyes at him. "No I just said where I want to go, young man. Don't try your tricks on me."

He gave up the battle and led her to the cab. He opened the back door, but she gestured to the front; so he flipped the back door shut, threw open the front door, and helped her in. Her body had a strong smell of moldy clothes and urine. Then, as he was closing the door for her, he looked down the street towards the conglomeration of ramshackle buildings,

swirling fog and city lights behind the cab, and saw that the kid with the James Dean haircut was still sitting on the sidewalk in front of the store though the winos were gone. Kowalski drew in a long breath, went around to his own seat and got in.

He was still hoping to make it to the depot on time. The grocery store, she had mentioned was on the top of Nob Hill about a mile and a half away. If he made all the stoplights he could be at the store in a few minutes and race down to the depot to catch the stragglers from the bus.

No sooner had he swung his huge body into the seat when he yanked the car out of park and into drive and with a quick look over his shoulder pulled into the street. The stoplight on the next corner was already flashing "wait." He leaned forward towards the windshield, stepped on the gas, and charged at the intersection. But just before he got to it, the green light popped to yellow. He jammed on the brakes, arched back in the seat, and blew air through his nose like a reined-in horse.

"Too bad, too bad," the woman said. "The sign turned red."

He didn't look over at her. He said nothing. He pulled down the visor where his trip sheet was attached with a rubber band, took out the stubby

pencil that was with it, and scribbled in his origin and destination. Then his eyes followed the figure of a woman in a blue dress who was crossing the street in front of the cab.

"Too bad for me, too good for you," the old woman piped up again, raising back her head as if she had made a touché.

He turned his broad, impassive face towards her. "Oh, yea, so how is that, ma'am? You think I like the red light?"

"Oh ho! You don't fool Elsa Nielsen. Your little timer is clicking away. Tick, tick, tick. I can hear it. You make your money if we're moving or not.

The truth was that ticking meters had gone out years before and anyhow his timer didn't work and he'd been trying to get the mechanic to fix it for several days. But to pacify her he slammed the flag into the nine o'clock position.

"So are you satisfied, lady? I turned the timer off."

"Oh ho! You don't fool me! The light is turning green."

The semaphore was in fact clicking over from red to green. He shook his head, stepped on the accelerator, and leaned against the window as he swung the cab unto an obliquely-connected street that led towards Nob Hill, the side of which could be seen in the distance, a mishmash of apartment buildings, high rises, hotels, traffic lights, street lamps, and other lights and signs of various colors and sizes all obscured and flattened to the eye by a moving sea of reddish-purple fog.

Coming around the curve, he observed that the next stoplight was about to turn from green to yellow. That was the key intersection; if he could make it through that one, he could get a streak of greens all the way up the hill then, if he managed to get ahead of the sequence of synchronized stoplights he could hit the one-way street near the top of the hill on a red, and take a free left towards the store, catching the end of another sequence of greens There would be one, unavoidable red when he made a right turn to go around the block to the store which was a ways to the right on a one-way street that went the wrong direction; but from the store to the depot it was pretty much a straight shot, and, if he played it right, all greens, though this last series of signs was set at twenty miles per hour instead of at thirty. Even so he could make it to the Greyhound Depot by nine o'clock. Yea, he still could make it.

Luck was with him now. He hit the key intersection on yellow, swung to the left through a narrow opening between the curb and a slow-moving bus, and roared up the hill, assessing the subtle changes in the configuration of twisting-turning tail-lights on the street ahead of him.

Meanwhile, he was aware, though just vaguely, of his passenger who, to his great irritation, kept sighing, "Oh, oh, oh," as she sat with both of her hands on the dashboard as if anticipating a crash. Now and then her chin sagged but she lifted it again with an obvious attempt at self-dignity and composure. At one point she reached into her large purse to check for her wallet. As she did her hands trembled; it

appeared that this trembling was beyond her control. Her clothes, though years before they may have been presentable, were in disrepair. The main purpose of her coat, it seemed, was to conceal their condition. His years of driving had taught him that those who were genuinely poor made every attempt to hide their desperation behind a facade of normalcy. “This old bitch is on the skids,” he thought to himself.

In looking at her, he let his attention slip from the traffic. A car in front of him came to a sudden stop. He jerked on the brakes, glanced over his left shoulder, and saw that the oncoming vehicles were packed too closely for him to force his way through. The grim faces that sped towards him seemed to be taking a small pleasure from a cab being stuck. A huge black man with an Afro haircut got nonchalantly out of the double-parked car and gave him a contemptuous stare. Seeing a hole in the traffic, he jerked the cab out into the middle of the street, flinging his finger at the black man. “Fucking shoe job! Why don’t you go back to the Congo, you half-assed spade?!” He stomped on the gas and flew forward towards the next intersection but the semaphore there had already turned yellow. He jammed on the brake, let out a long sigh and gritted his teeth. “The spook thinks he owns the goddam street.”

Looking to his right, he saw that the old woman was watching him with alarm, and noticed that she had the same kind of uncontrollable tremor in her face as in her hands. He thought to himself that he should say something civil to her. But before he could think of anything, she clasped her hands together, glanced at him just long enough to meet his eyes, and then, from what seemed to be embarrassment about her facial tremor, looked away toward; the traffic that was zooming by on the cross-street. “Oh, such a commotion!

And you poor fellow! You have to keep moving all the time!”

He noticed her self-consciousness and was taken aback by her sympathy and abrupt change in attitude. “Oh, I don’t know. I’m just trying to make it like everyone else.”

“Even so, it must be hard.”

A silence intervened. He pulled down the visor again, remembered that he had already recorded the trip, and noticed that there were only five written down. Five trips in five hours. That was so ridiculous that it wasn't even funny. And his rent was due in three days. He stared at the intense red sphere on the stoplight and then looked back at Elsa Nielsen. "So what happened with your foot? Kid said you had an operation."

"Operation," she said, stirring in her seat. Obviously, this was a matter of great concern to her. "What I call it is a butcher shop. I can't even walk. And now the Medicare won't pay. So they're sending me bills." She rummaged through her purse, found a couple of tattered pink slips and held them up. "They all have their little specialties, you know. So let them have their medicine. Money-getting is what it is. It's not like in the days of Hippocrates."

He had no idea who Hippocrates was, but he took her statement to mean that some past standard had been lowered. And with this in general he was in total agreement; even the cabbies were not what they had been.

The light turned green. He started up the hill again though with some of his enthusiasm irretrievably absorbed by the unexpected red light. Several minutes later he arrived at the immense parking lot of the all-night super-market which, just as he had feared, was so jammed with cars that they were queued up in the street.

He quickly assessed that to wait in line would take another ten minutes He glanced at his watch; it was seven minutes to nine. Without trying to push his way into the parking lot, he pulled up in front of the line of cars and went around the cab to let the woman out.

"So this is what you call service," she said as he opened the door.

"I told you, ma'am, a hassle. I go in there, I get all tied up."

"And since when do you let off people in the street?"

He made no reply. She began fumbling for her wallet which though she had located it in the cab she had now managed to lose track of again. At last she found it in a front

pocket where there were two outer layers of plastic each, with several clasps that she undid one by one. Inside of her wallet was a coin compartment where there were more clasps. She squinted at the meter and said the price to herself beneath her breath as she counted out coins. All this while she kept sighing, “Oh, oh, oh,” so regularly and automatically that she seemed unaware of this constant refrain.

Kowalski stood with his hands on his wide hips, regarding her with pressed lips as she looked at the meter a second time and mouthed the amount again with a look of great concern.

“Hey, forget it, lady,” he said suddenly, moving towards the cab. “This one’s on me.”

“Oh, I couldn’t!”

“Hey, believe me, I don’t need it. I just made it big on the horses. I’m doing all right.”

He opened the door of the cab and looked back.

“But I wanted you to wait,” she said, still standing in the same place with her large purse under her arm, her wallet in one hand, and the other full of coins.

“Hey, lady, I’m not a good-will wagon, you know. I’m trying to make a living.”

“So take what you’ve got coming then!” she cried, holding up the coins. Here, take it, please! No one asked you for your charity!”

He saw at once that he had offended her pride and was sorry for it. He sighed, closed his eyes, opened them again, and gazed at her with his broad face set resolutely and his forehead wrinkled between his thick eyebrows. “That’s not the point, ma’am. The point is I can’t wait. I’ve got business to tend to. I’ve gotta keep on the go.”

“I was going to pay you for your time.”

“Yea, I know that, ma’am,” he said, trying to make up for his insult with a more courteous manner. He surveyed the parking lot, remembered that his timer didn’t work, and thought to himself that this would end up complicated and that he wouldn’t feel right about taking her money for sitting. “The deal is, this bus is coming in.”

"Well, all right, then," she said, her voice changing from insistent to apologetic. "But how will I get home?"

He reached for the pad of receipt slips on the dashboard and, using the top of the cab as a writing desk, scribbled a phone number on the first sheet of paper and tore it off. Then he lumbered back to her with the receipt slip in his large hand. "Here's the number of a company, ma'am. All you have to do is give them a ring."

"But will they really come? Oh, I just bet they won't come. They never do!"

"Sure, they will come," he replied. But as his words came out, he was thinking that even the jokers who did grocery runs would stay clear of this jam. So maybe they would park their cars in the street and run in to find her. They were just about dumb enough to do that. At least, the rookies would do it. For years he had worked without a radio, depending on street savvy to survive, and he regarded himself as a shade above the drivers who needed radios to get fares.

"Sure, they will come," he repeated. He glanced at his watch again. It was five minutes to nine. Four large steps took him to the side of the cab. Without looking back at her, he swung himself into the seat and started up the engine. But, as he pulled away from the curve, he could see her in the rear-view mirror, standing beneath an arc lamp in her long coat and pillbox hat with her face lifted and her hands clasped in front of her, staring at the store with an exaggerated anxiety that was out of proportion to the actual situation.

"So what was I supposed to do? Hang around all night?" he muttered to himself. He knew he had treated her wrongly, especially in waving off the fare and then coming at her with the good-will wagon routine. But whatever he had done, it was done. He just wanted to make it to the depot before the whole busload was gone.

He got solid greens all the down the hill. As he drove through the al-

ley behind the debarkation stalls at the depot, he noticed that the bus from Reno had already arrived. The passengers,

dressed in leisure suits and with satchels under their arms, were gathered in a semi-circle around the driver who was throwing off the larger pieces of luggage from the compartment at the bottom of the bus. Some of them still had their sunglasses on and looked blasted enough to take a cab to Sacramento.

He roared past the bus to the street, drew up parallel to the first cab in line, and backed to the last position. There were nine taxis ahead of him Within a few minutes eight of them went out; and he could tell by how the drivers flipped the luggage in and hopped to their seats that they had gotten good fares. The ninth cab moved forward to pick up a sailor who asked if city cabs could leave town. And then the business died. A few stragglers came out but they were obviously waiting for relatives or friends.

He jammed the transmission into park, jerked the key from the dashboard and with his eyebrows knit together trudged to the corner where there was a store that sold coffee. “So fuck me,” he said in the same, uninflected voice that he talked in all the time. He was still cussing himself for wasting two hours at the airport. “I should have played the streets. Now my goddam rhythm is messed up.”

He emerged from the store a few minutes later with a Styrofoam cup of coffee in his hand, poured the top part of the coffee into the gutter as he always did for good luck, and walked slowly back to the cab, scanning the whole scene—the immense, lime-green depot with its gigantic, vertical, red-neon letters that spelled “B-U-S”; the wide, dirty street on which the only vehicle was the newspaper truck that had stopped in front of a squat vendor with a stubby cigar; and, a block and a half up where the road bent to the right, the dark forms of various five- and six-story buildings that the fog had joined into a single fabric of monotone gray.

He slumped down into the cab and watched the fog gusting down the pavement. Another taxi pulled up behind him with its radio blaring so loudly that he could hear the dispatcher’s chant: “There’s too many of you now. You’re all coming in at once. I got ya, two-eighty. Fifty-oh, where are you? Fifty-oh at Eight and Folsom, can anyone beat that?

Fifty-oh, get the M & M Club for a blindman. You got to help him out. Ladies and gentlemen, I'm sorry to inform you once again, the board is clear."

So it was just a zero night then. Everyone was doing bad. He reached beneath the seat and pulled out the brown bag that he kept his money in to safeguard it from thieves. From the bag he withdrew a wad of crumpled dollar bills. He sorted the bills into groups of five, each of which he folded in half and transferred to his hip pocket. There were three groups of five and three one's—eighteen dollars in all, not enough to pay for his cab. So the night would come to nothing then. Well, let it be. He always got something from the streets even when he didn't make a cent. "Well, okay, then," he said to himself. "I'll just drive around."

Strangely enough, this thought comforted him. There had been a time years before when just to drive around had been all he wanted. He felt as if the anxiety of the earlier evening had suddenly dropped off. He settled back in the seat and lit up a cigarette, looking at the depot. There wasn't much activity there now, no people with luggage, just the usual degenerates and hucksters, and the girls with lost eyes hanging on the arms of doped-up boys

As he watched the door of the depot, no longer expecting a fare, he noticed an odd couple who were standing to one side by the newspaper shack. The woman was wearing blue slacks, a fake sheepskin coat with synthetic fur around the neck and wrists, and a flower-printed kerchief that was tied beneath her chin in a peasant-like manner. She had thick glasses and the blank eyed gaze of someone who didn't quite understand all the complexity around her; she was a "babe in the woods," in other words, Kowalski thought, and not at all a beautiful woman; most likely she had never been pretty. The man, on whose lean, intense face was several days' growth of beard, stood with his arm around her shoulders, staring up the street where the arc lamps, green spheres of the stoplights on the next corner, and, here and there amidst the dark, rectangular forms of the buildings beyond them, the smaller rectangles of lit-up windows, were relieved against the fog-gray sky. There was

something in their bearing which suggested that they were on an official journey of some kind, perhaps a journey, to see .a doctor or a lawyer or to rearrange their lives.

Kowalski was feeling weary from his bad luck; and the sight of this couple, who were much like people he had known in his youth, struck a deep chord in him. In a vague way he understood that he was allied with individuals like these against an enemy which he couldn't define. Involuntarily his mind replayed the events of the early evening. And then, in passing, he thought of the old woman and felt ashamed of how he had treated her.

2

A week later, on the following Sunday, Jake Kowalksi was driving again through this same neighborhood. It was near sunset. In the orange light of the dimming sun the cheap hotels and dusty-windowed stores looked less dismal than they usually did. Even the winos and alkies who sat in doorways or alleys passing bottles between them seemed hopeful and serene.

Kowalski, too, was in a good mood. Earlier in the day, prodded into it by one of the more gregarious drivers, a guy who lived in the same rooming hotel where Kowalski lived, he had gone to lunch with several co-workers, a rare occurrence in his solitary life. He had even cracked a joke which everyone had laughed at, had said that the baked apples looked as if they'd been dehydrated to start out with and had been soaked in water before they were cooked. Now, as he traveled along, he was repeating this joke to himself.

In addition to this, he had come out of the garage with a bang, had gotten a fare right away to the avenues, a six-mile trip, and in that unlikely part of the city where there was seldom business on the street, had picked up a woman at a bus stop who was late for work and in a hurry to get downtown. No sooner had he dropped her off when a man had hailed him who was going to the airport. From the airport, where he had found the cab lot deserted, he had double-loaded in. "How sweet it is," he muttered to himself

as he zoomed towards the depot with his window open, a big cigar in his sinewy hand, and his nose lifted up to smell the salty air that wafted in from the bay.

Turning into a narrow alley that provided a shortcut to the street that the depot was on, he saw a bent-over figure in front of him trudging between the running and skipping brown-skinned children of the Polynesian families that lived on this particular block. He immediately noticed that this trudging person was dressed in an unseasonably heavy gray coat, and realized that it was the old woman. At the same time he recalled that he had done her an injustice which he hadn't set right.

She was still wearing a bandage on her left foot and still limping, though not as markedly as the week before. In her hands was a shopping bag full of what appeared to be old dishes. The only change in her costume was a plastic pink carnation that she had pinned to her black pillbox hat.

He pulled up next to her, leaned over to roll down the far side window and yelled out at her, "Hello, there, ma'am. Remember me?"

She glanced at him for just an instant, lowered her eyes, and turned to the side. It was obvious from how she held her bag in front of her with both hands, as though keeping a secure grip on it while hiding behind it, that she wasn't at all certain who he was and furthermore was acutely embarrassed by the uncontrollable twitching in her face which seemed to grow worse as she became more anxious.

"Uh huh, uh huh," she said, regarding him suspiciously from the corner of her eye, "why, of course, I remember. So how are you today? Fine, fine, I can see. Got your cab. Driving around then. Hard at work, I bet. Well, good for you, good for you."

Having done him the courtesy of this unconvincing recognition, she continued down the thin strip of concrete that served as a sidewalk. What she wanted most of all, it seemed, was to get away from him as soon as possible.

He shrugged his shoulders and drove on. But after he had gone the length of five or six of the dilapidated houses that were crammed together along both sides of the alley, he

observed in the rearview mirror that she had set her bag on the hood of a car and was leaning against it to rest. It occurred to him that she had another two and a half blocks to go to her apartment. He came to a stop and backed towards her, honking at the black-eyed, black-haired kids who had closed in behind the cab like water behind a moving ship.

"Hey, you might as well hop in," he hollered when he drew alongside of her. "I'm heading right over where you live." Actually, the depot was on the near side of her alley; but he figured he could take her home and then buzz around the block to the store on the corner for a cup of coffee and maybe a hot dog, too, to celebrate his good luck at the airport.

"Oh, I couldn't do that," she said, turning her head every which way to avoid a direct confrontation with his eyes. She picked up her bag and began walking as quickly as she could, sighing "oh" with every other small step.

"What do you mean, you can't do it?" he called, following beside her. "So what's the big deal about sitting in a cab?" He knew that he was being strangely insistent; but he went on, carried forward by the momentum of his impulsive good will. "No sense in breaking your back." He kept looking at her, his forehead creased in a frown.

After thirty feet of this, she came over to the window of the cab and peered in. "Why, I don't even know who you are."

"Sure, you know, lady. I picked you up, it must have been last Sunday. Took you up there to that supermarket on the hill. Tried to give you a free ride and you got offended. Then I had to take off and you got upset. So I gave you the number of that radio company. Don't you remember? I told you to give them a ring."

"Oh, well... I'll be... You mean to say... Was that you?... So you were just riding by then? Well, I might as well get in."

It still wasn't clear if she understood what he was talking about or had just given up on getting away. But nonetheless she opened the door, set her bag carefully on the seat, and with a considerable effort pushed it far enough into

the cab to provide herself with room to get in.

He nodded slowly as she arranged herself on the seat. The sides of his, mouth curled up slightly. His pale blue-gray eyes were as grave and serious as ever.

"Well, it's only a little ways, you know," she said, folding her hands on her lap. "I walk it all the time."

"Just the same, you might as well ride."

"Well, yes, I suppose. Isn't this something, though! You're so kind."

"Like I said, it's right on my way."

The trembling in her hands and face had subsided; she seemed suddenly more at ease though still not entirely trustful. He threw the transmission into drive and moved slowly down the alley, tapping on the horn to alert the Polynesian children who in the interval had reclaimed their blacktop playground. On reaching the street, he glanced to the right and, with a smooth, practiced motion, swung to the left and blended in with the oncoming traffic.

The woman sat with her left hand on her bag, her right hand on the dashboard and her face lifted up to keep an eye on the road. The sun had sunk lower now, so low that it could no longer be seen in the western sky; but the buildings were still tinted with orange. In the next block, distinct against this orange-toned landscape, were the red-neon letters that said "B-U-S." As Kowalski drove past the depot, he noticed that the curb outside it was lined with taxies all the way from the news stand by the main door to the store on the corner. The drivers, with bored expressions on their faces, were standing next to their cars drinking coffee. He tooted at them and raised back his head in a half-nod of greeting which they acknowledged with the same, almost imperceptible gesture. So business was slow, he thought to himself, feeling all the more satisfied with his own good fortune.

Just across from the news stand, between a gray-pillared edifice that had once been a post office and a dumpy, little store that sold dirty magazines and sexual devices, was the alley where she lived. With a light touch on the brakes, he eased into it and, passing between a deserted parking lot and

the brick-walled backs of various three- and four-story commercial buildings, arrived at her padlocked door which was on the rear corner of a smaller, brownstone structure on the far side of the parking lot.

He turned to look at her again. “So here it is, ma’am. Now that wasn’t too bad, was it?”

“Oh! Well, I’ll be! How did you know where I lived?”

“Like I told you, ma’am. I took you to the store.”

“You did? Well, just imagine. And you remembered then. Well, good for you. And how much do I owe you then? Oh dear, you forgot to put your meter on! What will we do?”

He shook his head, realizing that she was more confused than he had recognized before. “I already told you, ma’am. I was just giving you a lift.”

He pulled himself from the seat and walked stiffly around the back of the cab to help her out.

She allowed him to take her hand but when he reached for the bag she darted her eyes at him and held unto it tightly.

“Whatever’s in that bag,” he said, regarding her with a bemused expression on his wide face, “it must be pretty valuable.”

“Oh, dishes. I collect them, you know.”

“Oh, yea? You sell them or something?”

“Yes, sometimes I do, and sometimes I just keep them for myself.”

With his assistance she drew herself slowly from the seat. He took her by the arm, and helped her to the door. Then he stood towering above her as she fiddled with the lock, trying to find the right key.

At last she found the key, turned it ever so carefully in the lock as if afraid that it would break, and pushed against the door with her skinny shoulder. It swung open with a creak. Inside was a long, narrow stairway which led straight up without a landing to the second floor. To the left of the entrance was another door which apparently led to the bar; loud music and talking could be heard on the other side.

“Hey, you know, ma’am, that’s quite a climb you got ahead of you there,’ said Kowalski, gazing at the stairway

which had no railing and was poorly illumined, with a single, flame-shaped orange bulb in the middle on a curved, candle-like holder that came out from the wall, and at the top, where there were several doors with numbers on them, another bare bulb, this one of a more usual shape, which threw a stark light on the second floor landing and the dirty, patched ceiling above it. “Why don’t you let me give you a hand with that bag. You can trust me. Really, ma’am. I’m not going to steal it from you.”

She hesitated a moment. “Oh, it’s such a bother.”

“Hey, believe me, it’s not a bother. I already made a bundle and business is dead. It won’t hurt me to walk up the steps. I live upstairs myself. Three goddam flights of stairs. Got to walk them every night.”

“Well, all right, then,” she said, smiling. “You’re so kind.” It took her a long time to climb the stairs. At each step she needed to place both of her feet down in order to step up with her good foot. She kept apologizing for her slowness while he, with the bag in one large hand, his other hand on her thin arm, and his head slumped into his broad shoulders and spine rounded to bring himself as closely as possible to her height, kept reassuring her, saying, “That’s all right. That’s all right. No bother, lady. What the hell, we’re almost there.”

When at last they reached the top of the stairs, she turned to the left to the front-most of the three numbered doors, which were all painted a firehouse red, and again began going through her keys one by one, trying five or six of them unsuccessfully until she found a tarnished key that undid the lock.

He bent over to set the bag on the floor but she stopped him with her hand. “Oh, you’ve been so kind,” she said. “Why don’t you come in? I could make you a cup of coffee at least.”

Her offer of hospitality, coming as it did only several minutes after her exaggerated suspiciousness, caught him slightly by surprise. But he was getting used to her irrational changes in attitude and starting to think that everything about her could be explained by the basic fact that she was

thoroughly confused and hardly knew what she was doing from one moment to the next.

He looked at his watch. It was eight-thirty. Business would probably be slow for another couple of hours. “Why not?” he thought to himself. “I might as well see how the old gal lives.”

“Sure,” he said, nodding at her. “That would be real nice.”

The first thing he noticed when she opened the door was that the single room within had a strong smell of mildew and urine. Along the wall by the entrance were stacks of cardboard boxes which were filled with old clothes, dishes and junk of one sort or another. Aside from this somewhat-disorderly pile of collected articles, the rest of the apartment was arranged with an obsessive tidiness. In the innermost corner was a green sofa on which she apparently slept; several blankets were neatly folded on one side. Next to the sofa was a small table with a hot plate and toaster. In another corner, by the two windows which faced the street, was an old stuffed chair with tufted arms, and a vanity mirror that was covered with so many photographs that to use it a looking glass would have been impossible. On the wall above the mirror were framed prints of idyllic scenes.

“Oh, it’s such a mess,” she said as they walked in.

“Oh, no, it’s very nice,” he replied, observing that, despite her excessive orderliness, everything was covered with a layer of dust. Then, as he set the bag of dishes on the floor next to the last of the boxes by the door, he glanced back along the row of piled-up goods and saw that one of the boxes was covered with bugs.

Meanwhile, she had crossed the room to the corner which served as a kitchen. He watched her as she bustled back and forth between the small sink on the back wall and the table beside it where there was nothing except a jar of instant coffee and some plastic flowers in a blue porcelain vase.

“Well, don’t just stand there,” she called. “Come on in and make yourself at home.” All her distrustfulness had vanished, it seemed; and, as if pulling it from somewhere in

her past, she had settled into a role of hostess which apparently she had once been quite used to.

He shrugged his broad shoulders and took a couple of short, heavy, hesitant steps into the room which, organized as it was into areas for storage, eating, and sitting, was packed to the gill with furniture and boxes except for the small opening in the center where these areas converged. After pausing in this opening, he eased himself between the vanity dresser and a large metal footlocker, and lowered himself into the green chair by the windows that faced the street. The seat of the chair was nothing but bare springs covered by newspaper and cardboard.

He sunk back into the chair, feeling so large and awkward in these cramped surroundings that he hardly knew what to do with his arms and hands. He glanced back at her just long enough to see that she was still bent over the hot plate on the table, then he looked across the street where above the buildings the sky had faded now from orange to a violet red. On the corner down the way was a mission with a sign that said, “Jesus Saves.” In front of it was a Salvation Army band, a motley group with a drum, three bugles, and a pair of tambourines. Some down-and-outers had gathered around. Among them was the youth with the James Dean haircut who had first hailed the cab.

There was something about this scene which struck Kowalski as very grim and he thought to himself that the young man’s destitution was probably more genuine than he had supposed. Then he turned towards the old woman again and saw that she was crossing the room with two cups of coffee in her hands. It occurred to him that the chances were that she would die in this cluttered room by herself. Yes, it was all very grim and what he really wanted to do was to be out in the fresh air alone. But out of courtesy he kept his place and made a silent resolution to be as kind to her as he could manage.

She handed him a cup of coffee, smiled, and sat down on the foot locker across from him with her hands folded on her laps and her moist eyes staring intensely at him from above her drawn cheeks. She had taken off her pillbox hat;

the gray hair beneath it was matted up into a bun.

"So have you lived here long?" he said to initiate a conversation.

"Oh, a long time, a long time," she responded, closing her eyes as if to gather her thoughts. "My husband died. He was a steam-fitter, you know. And we never had our own house. He drank it away, you know, the poor man. So I couldn't keep up our payments where we lived. And then I came down here. Oh, not right away. No, I lived somewhere else. I think it was Russian Hill or some place like that. But I've been here a long time."

"You never had any children?"

"Yes, I did have one, but he died."

"Oh, too bad. How was that?"

"Tumor. Brain tumor. The poor, little fellow died when he was nine."

She said this in almost a matter-of-fact tone. If she had any lingering emotion about the long-past loss of this child, he could not detect it. He turned from her to the photographs on the mirror beside him. The centermost of them was of what appeared to be a family: in the middle on a chair sat a stern-faced, long-headed man with a full, black beard; next to him, with her hand on his shoulder, was a strong-looking woman with deep-set, intelligent eyes and long, dark hair that was pulled back tightly from her broad forehead; between the man and the woman was a slender, pubescent girl with full lips, a mane of curly hair, and clear, wistful eyes that in their hopefulness contrasted with the adults' severity; seated cross-legged on the floor was a small boy with his hair cut in bangs.

"Those your people?" Kowalski asked, nodding at the photograph.

"Why, yes," she replied, her face lighting up. She tapped her finger on the stern-faced, bearded man: "My father." Then she tapped it on the other figures, the woman, the boy, and the girl: "My mother. My brother, Matt. And the ugly creature is me!"

"Oh, come on now. Why, you weren't ugly at all. How come you say lies like that? Why, you were pretty, ma'am,

yea, really pretty," said Kowalski in all sincerity. "And where's your brother now?"

"Died in the war."

"Oh, no. The First World War, must have been."

"Yes, that's what they called it."

"So how'd that happen, he die in action?"

"Caught a fever and wasted away."

"Oh, no. Where was that?"

"In the trenches. In France."

"Too bad, too bad."

He looked back at her and studied her face for a moment, hardly able to associate it with the pretty girl in the photograph. But then he saw something in the eyes; yes, strangely enough, the wistfulness was still there; not there as strikingly as in the picture, but nonetheless still there. And there was something noble in the lines around the eyes; what it was exactly he didn't know. Next to him on the dresser-top lay an official letter of some kind. On it was her name and address: "Elsa Nielsen, 15 Freemont Alley, San Francisco, CA." He had heard her name once before in his cab but had forgotten it. Now he repeated it to himself and at the same time, as with a sudden revelation, recognized her as a human being with a life and a past.

"Nielsen, what kind of name is that anyhow?" he said. "Norwegian or something?"

"Swedish."

"You don't say. And your people...

"Miners."

"Well, I'll be. Where was that?"

"Indiana."

"You don't say."

"Uh-huh."

"Well, I didn't even know they had mines out that way."

"Oh, yes. Little mines, but mines just the same."

"Coal mines, I suppose."

"Bituminous."

"You don't say. And non-union, I imagine."

"Oh, yes."

"I bet they worked hard."

"Sixteen hours."

"Sixteen hours a day, you mean?"

"Oh, yes, and six days a week."

"Imagine that. Imagine that. Yea, I used to hear stories of those conditions when I was a kid."

He had, in fact, as a small boy, heard tales of the conditions that people had been subjected to before the unions had taken hold. He had grown up in southern Ohio, the son of a carpenter, and many of his father's friends had worked now and then in the low-ceiling scab mines across the river in northern Kentucky.

He asked her a few more questions and out of them got a general idea of her life. Her mother, it seemed, had run a boarding house for miners. Her father had eventually quit the mines to work in the steel mills in Gary. While living there she had met her future husband. With him, soon after their marriage, she had come out West. Her first child had been born with the umbilical cord around his neck and both she and the baby had almost died. After that she had been unable to have other children. All this he pieced together from bits of information she supplied. She had been a hardworking, dutiful woman, he gathered, who at first had assisted her mother in the boarding house and then had been loyal to her husband despite his intemperance; and her life had been punctuated with these various deaths—her parents', her brother's, her husband's. He listened to her with increasing sympathy; he felt that he and she were somehow from common stock though his ancestors had been Polish and Irish.

At the same time, he found himself thinking about his own past. He, too, was no stranger to death. His parents had both died in a car accident when he was ten. For six years after that, he had lived with various foster parents whose main interest in keeping him, so far as he had been able to determine at that time, was to collect the money that was forthcoming for government wards. Then at sixteen he had hitched to Los Angeles and shipped out in the merchant marine. During that romantic period in his life, at age twenty-one, he had fallen in love with a dark-haired Jewish

girl whom, after much vacillation, he had left to return to the sea; and who soon afterwards had contracted some strange kind of leukemia which had progressed so rapidly that by the time he got back she was already dead. Since then he had had some isolated romances here and there; but no one had ever taken her place in his mind; and as the years had gone by he had become more and more cut off from intimate friendships of any sort.

He looked back at Elsa Nielsen for a moment; she met his eyes briefly with an expression that suggested a genuine, trustful affection; he noticed that the twitching in her face had altogether stopped. Then he gazed out the window where now the sky was a dark blue. Traffic was roaring by on the street below. The Salvation Army band was gone and the youth with the duck back haircut was nowhere in sight. Once again he thought of the girl he had loved in his youth and suddenly felt a deep sadness and yearning which he had not felt in a long time. Then, turning back to the mirror, he saw a picture there of some young girl who it seemed to him resembled this girl in his past, not so much in exact features but in that dreaminess which young women often possess. He felt all the more disturbed and, without making reference, to the picture, leaned forward in the chair. “Well, ma’am, this has been very pleasant. I sure appreciate your hospitality.”

With both her hands on his arm and her face beaming, she accompanied him to the door.

Several days later, he was driving by her building when he saw her in the midst of a group of people in front of the bar. She was pushing a shopping cart full of clothes and dishes and mumbling to herself. “Oh, oh, oh. I have to catch the train. It’s almost time. I have to get there right away.”

He pulled his cab to the curb, got out, and looked over the shoulders of the crowd. “Old Elsie has flipped again,” someone said. “This happens all the time.” A couple of alkies started teasing her: “If you’re looking for the choo-choo train, it goes right down Howard Street.”

He pushed his way through and took her by the arm. “Come on, Elsie. You aren’t going till tomorrow. Come on

now, I'll give you a hand."

"Matthew, Matthew," she cried with wild eyes. "Oh, I'm so glad to see you! They said you were dead." She hugged his arm. "They got me all mixed up. And see, they cut up my foot."

"Yea, I can see that. Well, come on. You better take a little rest."

To the amusement of the alkies, he began pushing her cart towards the alley. But just then the youth with the James Dean haircut came up and took hold. "I'll bring it for you."

Kowalski turned to the youth and saw that he was doped up on something and in general in a worse state than he'd been in before. His eyes were glazed and almost frantic, his shirt was hanging open, and his pants were dirty and torn.

By the time they got to the door, the woman had calmed down. Kowalski thought to himself that there was no reason for his continued presence. "Can you help her upstairs?" he asked the young man.

"Yea, sure," the youth replied, gazing at him eagerly as if wanting to prolong their meeting.

Kowalski stared into the young man's eyes. He wanted to say something fatherly to him. But no words came to his mind so he just nodded and waved goodbye. "Well, all right, then. I gotta hit the streets. Take it easy, kid. And thanks a lot."

In a little while he was back in his cab and in the midst of traffic. But he kept thinking about the old woman and how she had called him her brother's name. He felt that a bond had been set up between him and her and that he was somehow responsible for her well-being. And he kept thinking about the youth's troubled eyes and apparent eagerness to talk.

The next day he bought a small bag of groceries and, as soon as he picked up his cab and drove down to Elsa Nielsen's apartment. He found her outside her door where she was folding clothes into a box. She greeted him cautiously as if she partly recognized him but wasn't certain who he was. He gave her the groceries and left.

Later he looked around for the youth but he was

nowhere in sight.

3

Several more days went by. Once again it was Sunday night. Kowalski was on his way to Twin Peaks with a frizzy-haired young man that he had picked up downtown.

After they had gone about a mile, the young man produced a thick joint which he offered to share. In his youth Kowalski had been a big drinker, but now he no longer indulged. Occasionally, though, when someone came up with grass, he allowed himself an out.

"I could use a little puff," he said, eyeing the passenger's shadowed face in the rear-view mirror. "Hey, but don't think it's coming off your fare."

The passenger went on and on in a dated hippie jargon about how he was wired to the whole cosmos. Kowalski hardly listened to him. He kept staring ahead at the winding road. Now and then, when the joint was waved in front his nose, he grabbed it and took a long drag.

"Hey, you know, I like you, man," the young man suddenly announced.

Kowalski looked again in the rear-view mirror but could only see that the person in the back seat had a lot of hair and was wearing dark glasses. He studied this hairy, spectacled image for a moment and then turned back to the road without responding.

"You know why I like you, man?"

"No, I don't, brillo-head, but I'm dying to find out."

The young man laughed. "Because you don't give a rat's ass. That's why. You know what I mean, man? You don't give a damn. You just cruise around. I can relate to it, you know. Captain America or something like that. Just tour around and look at the sights. I can relate to it, man. You got it made."

Kowalski said nothing. He buzzed past a Mercedes Benz that was double-parked on a curve, leaned over to frown at the driver, and threw up his finger in an obscene gesture.

"Haw-haw-haw!" the young man cried. "Hey, that's you all the way. Don't give a rat's ass. Hey, man, you're a super

cabbie, you know. Captain Vespuciolli or something like that. I mean, like we're flying, man. This is the most far-out thing I've done in the past ten minutes. I'm not kidding you, man. I'm dazzled. I'm totally dazzled."

Soon they arrived at an elegant three-story brown-stucco house on the very top of the hill which the passenger identified at his parents' home. The meter said two-eighty. He whipped out a five dollar bill and waved off the change. Kowalski was going to refuse the large tip because of the grass, but then he looked again at the house and changed his mind. He watched the young man go, backed into the driveway, and turned around to return to the city

Driving down the hill, he noticed that the cab felt heavy as if weight down to the road, and thought to himself that he was very stoned.

Across from the intersection where the road he was on met the wide boulevard that led down the hill was a parking lot that overlooked the city. On a sudden impulse, he rolled across to it and got out, swinging his arms which also felt unusually heavy, and breathing in the cool night air which smelled of fog and the sea.

From this vantage point, the whole city could be seen. On his far left marked with orange lights against the dark forms of the hills in Marin County, was the Golden Gate Bridge. Immediately below him attached like a giant vaulting appendage to the glimmering buildings in the city's heart, was the yellow-lighted span of the East Bay Bridge. The westernmost of the downtown buildings were enshrouded in a cloud of fog which was pressing in from the peninsular hills; the buildings further east stood out clearly against a cloudy sky that reflected the lights of the city. Further to his right, beyond the knob of a night-darkened, residential hill, were the crisscrossed lines of lesser streets illumined by arc lamps; that was the Mission District with its three- and four-story apartment buildings and street-level stores.

Far in the distance, where the lighted arm of the Bay Bridge met the indistinct outline of the hills on the east side of the bay, were the shimmering cities along the shore.

They shimmered like that, off and on like jewels,

because of the air currents, he thought. Yes, the air currents did that. Or so he had heard as a boy. He had seen this view many times, but it seemed almost incomprehensible to him. He felt as if he had come from some faraway planet and was looking the earth for the first time.

Getting back in the cab, he drove down the hill where there was an area of gay bars. It was the night of a fair. The whole valley was teeming with young men in T-shirts and jeans. Groups of them were dancing in the streets. Music blared from the bars along the crowded sidewalks. Here and there in the crowd were people in flamboyant costumes.

The cab felt heavier now, more weighted to the road. His body, too, felt thicker, slower-moving. It was as if he was in a dream, trapped in a viscous medium, unable to quicken his motion which was resisted by some countercurrent or relentless undertow. Looking off to the ragged silhouette of Victorian houses on a nearby, dark hill, he noticed how the light from the arc lamp between the houses was reflected on the low clouds above their gabled roofs and how it was thrown back by the clouds to the streets where it covered the pavement with a dull, fluorescent sheen which again was radiated upward so that the air itself was pervaded with a yellow tone; and he thought to himself that the hill, the houses, the arc lamps, the clouds, the streets and the air were nothing, really, but forms of the same thing, and that there was no way he could escape their influence.

There were dancing people everywhere. He couldn't get through. He began pushing his way into the crowd with the hood of the cab, shouting, "Get out of the way, you fucking queers!"

Two of the dancing men threw up their hands and yelled at him. He pulled to a stop. They came across to the cab arm in arm and got in the back seat.

He looked at them sternly. "So where you going?"

"Anywhere downtown."

Once again he started jamming the car through the swarming bodies. A tall, gangly fellow with a neatly-trimmed beard jumped on the hood of the car and swung his arms around to amuse his friends. Kowalski lurched the car

forward and jerked on the brakes. The bearded guy slid off the hood, fell to the ground, jumped up nimbly, and gestured with his finger.

"Oh, now isn't he a wild one!" one of the passengers remarked."

With a never-changing grim expression, Kowalski pushed the car through to the end of the nightclub area, made a right unto another street where conditions were normal, and, with the crowd behind him at last, raced towards the downtown skyline which could be seen in the distance, the gray forms of giant buildings here and there dark or glittering with lights, obscured in wispy fog or clearly defined against the city's glowing purple sky.

Now he felt in command and more than ever in tune with his machine. The cab, with its four appendages, the wheels, was like an extension of his own body. He could feel how it felt when it sunk in on the holes in the road and darted away from them with all the resilience of a deer in the forest. But still the air was heavy. The lights and buildings in front of the charging hood seemed unreal and without depth as if painted in two dimensions on the windshield. He wanted very much to get the stoned feeling out of his mind. He kept blinking his eyes and shaking his head while watching in the rearview mirror to make sure that his passengers didn't see him.

The two men got out at a gay bath in the industrial section not far from the Greyhound Depot. He drove another two blocks to a filling station that was closed for the night, wrenched himself from the seat, and walked around slapping his face and swinging his arms. "What is this shit? What is this shit?" he kept saying to himself; and his words, as he repeated them, felt echo-like and far away as if coming through a tunnel. The events of the past hour, when he tried to recall them, seemed disjointed from one another and, separated from the present by the heaviness that was everywhere around him

For several minutes he paced back and forth. Then he paused to rub his face and was so carried away by the warm, circular sensation his hands made on his face that he closed

his eyes and surrendered to this feeling until suddenly, deep inside the secure, spherical world in which he now found himself, it occurred to him that he was not alone, that all around him were windows where people might be watching. He hurried back to the cab, fumbled for the key, started the engine with a roar that sounded strangely distant, and with ponderous movements wheeled into the street.

Soon he was lost again in the bumping-rocking rhythm which was so familiar to him. Without thinking where to go, he followed the loop that he always followed in this neighborhood at this time of night—first up a one way thoroughfare called Howard Street past the gay bars that by their colored lights, jubilant men on the sidewalk, and open doors from which blared indistinguishable music with a persistent, thumping bass, stood out against the closed shops and quiet buildings around them; then over a block and down another one-way thoroughfare called Folsom Street which led in the other direction past similar bars, loitering men, and stretches of darkness; then across a perpendicular street towards the red-neon letters that said “B-U-S.” The sky above the city was violet-orange; the streets shone with the oppressive yellowness he had noticed before. He kept shaking his head.

Finding a long line of cabs at the depot, he glanced up to the next corner, observed that the light there had just clicked from red to green, and swung to the right through Elsa Nielsen’s alley which sometimes, when this stoplight turned red, was the fastest route to another depot where the bus from the airport came in. The dirty bookstore on the street was still open; several men, their backs to-the window, were paging through the magazines; but the alley beyond it was dark and deserted. The immense parking lot that bordered the alley on one side was deserted, also, though here and there illumined with arc lamps that made little pools of light on the pavement.

Kowalski gazed absent-mindedly at the shadowed expanse of the lot, not expecting to find anything there except the same, intolerable thickness of weighty, distant forms, viscous air, and murky, yellow light which, despite

his continuous change of location, he could not get away from, and which in its very sameness was all the more unbearable. Then, in a far corner of the blacktop, between a billboard sign and a parked car, he noticed a flurry of movement. His first thought was that some winos were fighting; but when he slowed down to look more closely he saw a small figure in a long, gray coat in the midst of a dozen or so larger figures who were swooping in and out at the smaller person like flies.

All of a sudden, as he watched this scene dreamily as if watching a movie, he realized that the gray-coated figure was Elsa Nielsen. Then, to his astonishment, he saw that the figures who were attacking her were kids—yes, nothing more than kids,—though very large. He threw the cab into park, grabbed the tire iron from under the seat where he kept it in case he needed it for self-defense, and, overcome with horror, lumbered across the parking lot, yelling, "Get out of there! Get out of there, you goddam punks!"

Even as he shouted this, the old woman, with a long, barely audible sigh, lunged to the ground. An assailant old enough to have a beard leaped at her and kicked her crumpled body with his booted foot. The others, hearing Kowalski's cries, wheeled towards him and swayed back and forth as if unsure whether to fight or run off.

He rushed into their midst, swinging the tire iron in a wide circle caught hold of something solid. One of the attackers,—this one, judging from his small size and terrified expression, at most twelve or thirteen,—fell back with his hand on his arm, moaning, "Ouch, ouch, ouch."

Kowalski, seeing how young the boy was, hesitated for an instant with the tire iron overhead. Just then a tremendous force hit him from the side.

The tire iron went flying. He fell to the ground and scrambled to get up.

But another, greater force struck him directly on the mouth. He winced, slumped to the pavement, and tried to wrestle himself loose from the bodies around him.

He had nearly given up hope when he heard someone screaming: "You fuckers! You goddam, little fuckers! I'm

going to split you in half!" It was the thin, desperate youth who had first hailed the cab for Elsa Nielsen and whom, though he had several times looked for him in the past week, Kowalski had been unable to find. The youth was wearing the same tattered jeans and flannel shirt he had worn when he showed up to push the woman's cart. His eyes were all glazed and he was wielding the tire iron that had escaped Kowalksi's grip.

The youth charged at the kids who were grouped around Kowalski. The tire iron hit something that made a dull thud. One of the attackers cried, "I'm blind! Oh, help me, Billy! I can't see!"

As if by a common decision, the kids ran off in a horde, dragging and then carrying the one who'd been hit who kept repeating "I'm blind, I'm blind" in a high, childish voice.

Kowalski looked up in a daze and saw that the injured boy was the same one that he had struck on the arm.

The larger, bearded kid who had kicked the fallen woman hung behind the others as if to guard them from the rear. "We're gonna get you! We're gonna get you!" he screamed, shaking his fist. Then he pivoted and raced to catch up with his friends who were scattering in every direction at the far side of the lot.

The thin youth with the swept-back hair stood watching their departure his eyes wild with alarm, the tire iron still in his hand. "Oh, wow, the kid was hurt, the kid was hurt. Oh, no. Oh, no. The kid was hurt bad." Then, as if remembering the situation, he came running across to Kowalski and peered into his face with earnest concern. "Oh, wow, they socked you bad! Can you believe it? Can you believe it! This is unreal. Say something, will you? Are you okay?"

Kowalski nodded his head, raised himself to his knees, and tried to gather his thoughts. "How's the old woman? Is she dead?"

The kid hurried over to her and bent down. "Oh, geez, she's having convulsions or something. What should we do, mister? What should we do?"

Kowalski raised himself slowly to his feet. His mind was spinning. For a moment he felt as if about to pass out.

He bent down again until his head had cleared then stumbled across to the youth and the old woman.

As he drew near he saw that her head was jerking up and down. There was a deep gash in her forehead; her hair was matted with blood. She kept saying "oh, oh, oh," blinking her eyes, and thrashing her arms.

"What should we do, mister?" the youth asked again. "What should we do We better get an ambulance fast."

Kowalski made an effort to think clearly. "Yea, we gotta get her to a hospital fast." Hospital, hospital. There was a hospital a mile away. He could be there in three minutes in his cab.

He bent down and gathered the trembling body in his hands. "Going to take her myself. Find a cop car, okay? Tell them Howard to Tenth to Potrero. You got that? Howard to Tenth to Potrero."

The kid ran ten steps and turned around. "Howard to Tenth to Potrero."

"Yea."

As Kowalski hurried across the parking lot with the woman in his arms, it occurred to him that an ambulance would have made more sense. But his thoughts were still muddied. In any case, it was too late now to change his mind, best to get her there as quickly as he could.

Her head was still jerking but her bleeding had subsided. He set her on the front seat and rolled up his jacket as a pillow. As he zoomed down the untrafficked streets, blaring his horn at every red light, he kept caressing her hair with his hand, saying, "Don't worry now, Elsie. You're going to be all right."

By the time he reached the hospital, her spasms had decreased in intensity. But her hands and face, he noticed, had taken on a bluish tone. "She's going to die," he said to himself. He swung around to the emergency door and rushed in. "Got this old lady. She's hurt pretty bad."

The orderlies came out and brought her in on a stretcher.

Just then the police arrived. "Some kid hailed us downtown. You the cabbie he was talking about?"

"Yea."

"How's she doing?"

"Pretty bad."

The cops went in to talk to the emergency staff and came back to ask him questions in the hall. He described what he had seen of the attackers, told them about the big kid with the beard and the boy who'd hollered he was blind. They said sometimes a blow to the back of the head caused temporary blindness, maybe the boy would be all right. If he showed up at a hospital, that would provide a good lead.

Kowalski listened carefully, relieved that the boy might be okay. Whether the other kids were caught seemed unimportant to him. He just wanted the cops to take off; he had never trusted anyone connected with the law.

"Hey, you got hit there yourself," said one of the policemen as they left. "Better get it looked at."

"Sure." He sat down in the lobby, feeling his jaw. He no longer felt stoned but the immaculate, shiny corridor that led from this small, stark room into the building seemed as unreal as the streets. He closed his eyes and saw a kind of general, terrified face which was first the face of the boy who'd been hit, then of the old woman as she blinked her eyes and thrashed the air, then of the youth with the James Dean haircut who had shown up to help him in the nick of time. It occurred to him that he didn't know the youth's name, hadn't thanked him for what he'd done, and that perhaps the kid needed counsel or was afraid the assailants would return.

He rose and paced around, anxious to leave and find the youth for whom he felt an increasingly father-like affection, but feeling obligated to wait until he received a definite report of the woman's condition. They had taken her into a room about a hundred feet away. People in white or green clothes were going in and out and speaking in hushed voices. But of course she would die; she would die a dog's death. He sat down again, picked up an old magazine, and paged through it while his mind spun around. He kept seeing the same, indistinct terrified face, kept thinking of the youth and thinking he should have said something comforting to him. Once more he jumped up and walked around, stopping at last

at a painting of a two women in red dresses crossing a brown field towards a distant, purple mountain. It meant nothing at all to him; he just wanted the situation to be resolved so he could go.

After a long while, a nurse with a pretty face, green eyes, and a full figure like a medieval Madonna, came out into the lobby. He was at once struck by her beauty and even more by her youthfulness. She was at most nineteen or twenty, and her luminous eyes, despite her serious bearing, shone with compassion and good will.

"Are you some kind of relation to this woman?" she asked.

"No, ma'am. I'm just a cabbie. I brought her in."

"Well, I'm sorry to say that she died."

He experienced a strange mixture of contrasting emotions, impressed by the fact of the old woman's death, which though anticipated still seemed horrible and shameful, glad that his self-imposed ordeal of waiting had come to an end, angry at himself for being glad at something brought about by another's misfortune, and at the same time eager to be approved by this lovely woman who was regarding him with such maternal concern.

"What happened to her anyhow? She got beat up?"

"Yea, by a bunch of kids. Teenagers."

"Wow, it's hard to fathom. Why would they be so vicious at an age like that?"

"I don't know. Guess they don't have what they want, feel crowded in.

"And look, you got hurt yourself."

"Tried to rout them off."

"Well, you got a nasty cut there. We better clean it up."

He thought to himself again that he should leave, 'but she was looking at him so earnestly, her radiant face and full body suggested such hope and possibility of fruition, that he could not tear himself away.

He followed her through a connecting hall that led to a large room where there were examining tables and sinks. In a corner a Mexican couple, the man very drunk, were slouched against one another. An intern in a white coat with an

immense book on his lap was nodding away by a desk; now and then he stirred and looked around the room.

She sat him down at one of the examining tables and studied his cut while, somewhat abashed, he wondered at her glowing face which was all the more appealing to him when it was so serious and intent. With gentle hands she washed his wound and applied hydrogen peroxide and a bandage.

"So you were a kind of friend of hers then?" she inquired in a soft, melodious voice while she worked.

"No, not really a friend. I just knew her from my cab. Picked her up a couple of times. Took her to the store. She was a little bit off, if you know what I mean, going downhill really fast. Sometimes she would recognize me; sometimes she wouldn't. One time she thought I was her kid brother. If you can believe it, this brother died in the First World War. First World War and she was still nursing the loss."

"So she regarded you as almost family then?"

"Yea, I guess you could say that, in her mixed-up way. I mean, she didn't have no family to speak of. People like this, they're all around. You know, they've cut themselves off out of pride or wariness or whatever, or maybe what it comes down to is just the circumstances of their lives. So they don't have no families, and a lot of times no friends. You know what I mean they're just cut off."

"Well, it's so sad. Really, it's so sad. I mean, for myself, well, I just can't imagine it, you know. I'm so connected in every direction. My family lives here. Two brothers and a sister."

"Two brothers and a sister?"

"Uh-huh."

"Imagine that."

"And I'm engaged. I'm going to get married in March."

"You don't say?"

"Uh-huh."

"Must be a fine fellow."

"Oh, yes."

"Well, good for you." He looked again at her direct, intelligent, hopeful eyes and pink skin and tried to imagine what her fiancé looked like—most probably some young,

handsome guy with promise, a doctor or lawyer or something like that. Then, in the next instant, he realized that he was jealous. Yea, imagine that, jealous. And about a woman whom he didn't even regard as a far-fetched possibility. So maybe what it was then was that he was just envious of love —yea, just pure and simple envious of love.

There remained the business of figuring out what to do with the old woman's body. The nurse asked him if he knew of anyone who could attend to a funeral. He said he didn't know of anyone and even if she had one nobody would come. Well, then did he know her address? On a small piece of paper she provided, he drew a rough map with an arrow pointing to the building where she lived. In large, scrawling letters he wrote: "Elsa Nielsen, #5."

"At least I think it was number five," he said rising. He felt tired and his recognition of his own jealousy had taken the edge off his fascination for the nurse. He just wanted to be by himself.

She smiled warmly at him. "It was brave of you to help."

"I just did it on an impulse," he replied, not accepting her praise even in his own mind. Everything she said he discounted somewhat because of her youth and lack of experience. But when he left, he turned around to look again at her fresh, beautiful face. She was still standing in the lobby, watching him go out.

As soon as he drove off in his cab, he felt terribly lonely. Once more he thought of the youth whose name he didn't know. He looked at his watch. was four o'clock. His cab was due in at five-thirty. He headed downtown, no really expecting to find the youth but wanting very much to talk to him before turning in.

After traveling for five blocks along a deserted, quiet street with blinking stoplights, he swung unto another, darker street beside a railroad yard. The sky ahead of him was a dark purple-gray; to his right was a basin where several tugboats were docked by an iron-frame bridge. The sky there was aglow with the orange-red, quivering light from the welding torches in the dry docks along the bay where here

and there a giant derrick shot up from the angular horizon.

This was the quietest time of the morning, a time which Kowalski loved. As he bumped along the brick road, looking off to the dark forms of the empty boxcars in the railroad yard, the swaying, less distinct forms of the tugboats beyond them, feeling himself to be in unspeakable communion with this night-lighted landscape, this virile, functional, impersonal world which he had always loved, his mind passed again, as in a half-waking, half-dreaming imaginal sequence, over the events of the past five or six hours which, though he now felt quite lucid, still seemed disconnected and distant like something he had seen or read about in spurts in a movie or book and had no experienced himself.

The terrified face which he had seen before, the face which was that of no particular person and which, in turn, had been the face of the boy who'd been hit, then the face of the old woman, then the face of the troubled youth whose overtures he had warded off, this face had faded now though he was still aware of it, felt and heard it more than saw it, in the back of his mind. Another image had come forward: the young nurse's glowing face and hopeful eyes. The beauty of them, he thought, the absolute beauty of them. He wanted so much to be young and whole again and worthy of such a face and such eyes.

And yet there had been another pair of eyes, darker but no less beautiful, no less full of hope and trust, that had believed in him, Jake Kowalski, and had looked at him with love and respect. Had he forgotten those eyes? No, he would never forget them. And still he had left. Yes, he had turned away from that love and trust. It struck him now as almost inconceivable that he had done that. But he had.

What was it he had seen? Why had he turned away? He remembered a certain afternoon when they had been walking together in the Delta along some docks where Chinese fisherman were working in a hot, midday sun that gleamed on the brown water. And looking at her, despite his infatuation, he had noticed that she was round-shouldered. Yes, now as he looked back at it, shamed by his long-past vanity, he recalled that it had been this slight imperfection

which had turned him away, which had made him disregard her love and trust, her voluptuous ripeness, and all the other aspects of her being. And had her grief at losing him been a partial cause of the sickness that took her life?

This was a question which for many years he had buried inside of him and which now rose up in him again. Then, inexplicably as it had arisen, it vanished; and he found himself thinking once more of the old woman's death, the boy's possible blindness, and the desperate youth with the troubled eyes. If only he could make up for the wrongs he had done! If only he could erase the suffering he had caused!

He had reached the end of the railroad yard now where there was an old abandoned depot that was being torn down, and, across from it, a hamburger stand that stayed open all night. He slowed down to look if the youth, by some remote chance, was there. But the only customer in the stand was a delivery man who was gazing out the window with a cup of coffee in his hand.

Not knowing where else to look, he continued downtown and stopped at the parking lot where the woman had been murdered. Nobody there. Just the voiceless arc lamps with their pools of yellow light. He stared at the lot for a moment, continued down the alley, and turned unto the street where he had seen the youth watching the Salvation Army band. At the mission on the corner he came upon a youngish man, about 35, bald-headed with scraggly brown hair around his ears and a bearded, thoughtful face blanched from drugs, who was wearing a tan Army shirt, jeans, and dirty, brown suede shoes.

"Hey, fellow," Kowalski called out. "By any chance you see a skinny kid, eighteen, nineteen, something like that, with a kind of duck-back haircut, hair all slicked back, if you know what I mean, brown-blondish hair pretty long, and he always wears a flannel shirt and hangs out around here?"

"Blue flannel shirt?"

"Yea, as I recall."

"A real space-cadet, right?"

"Yea, all the time weirded out."

"Sounds like you're talking about Bato Lenser. That's

what they call him, at least."

"Bato Lenser, huh?"

"Yea, it's just a nickname, you know."

"You see him around?"

"Yea, just a while ago, in fact. I think he headed out."

"What do you mean, headed out?"

"Just that. He was walking towards the freeway with this Indian dude named Sallie. Had a little pack."

"He say something about an old woman?"

"If you mean old Elsie Nielsen, yea, he heard that she kicked."

"How'd he know that?"

"The storm troops came by."

"He went on out because of that?"

"No, he was fixing to go. Said something about it yesterday. Some kind of problems at home."

"What kind of problems?"

"Beats me."

"You know where he lived?"

"Down in the caverns, far as I know."

"What do you mean, caverns?"

"Down there where they're tearing it up for the new center."

"For the new tourist center?"

"Yea, whole bunch of them are living down there in the holes. Got it pretty nice except for the rats."

"So you're pretty sure he's gone then?"

"Sure he went to the freeway."

Kowalski started to leave. The man called out, "Hey, how about a hand-out? You know how it goes, mac. It takes a lot of conniving to stay zonked."

Kowalski handed him a fistful of change and roared off to the nearest freeway onramp. Nobody in sight. He tried a few others. No luck. So the kid and his buddy had gotten a ride.

He stared at the last of the onramps, understood that he would never see the youth again, and, with an unuttered sigh, accepted this reality in the same, dispassionate way that he had accepted the old woman's death.

With his ever-present frown on his broad forehead, he drove back towards the city's skyline. Then he changed his mind and turned suddenly in the direction of the waterfront. He wanted to talk to someone but there was no one to talk to and the waterfront was the one place in the city where he could usually find peace of mind.

There was a particular spot where he often went, a pier beneath the bridge which at this time of night was as serene as a campsite in the wilderness.

Getting out of the cab, he noticed that there was blood on the front seat. He found a rag on the pier, climbed down the docking to dip it in the brackish water, and came back with it to wash off the blood. Then he saw that some of the bandaging from the woman's leg was crumpled on the floor. He kicked it out to the pavement, touched it with the tip of his cigarette, and watched it flare up in an orange flame and disintegrate into ashes.

For a long time after this, he stood looking at the shimmering cities on the other side of the bay. "Those air currents again," he said to himself.

Inside of himself, he felt a deep sadness and wondered why. Was it because of the youth? No, he was glad the kid had gotten out. Was it because of Elsa Nielsen? No, she had just used up her time. She had just died a timely death. Was the sadness for himself then? No, he didn't have enough of a sense of himself anymore, he thought, to care about his own feelings. He just regretted he had come so close without making a true connection.

Michele

1

Jud Gersham had just pulled into the garage at Pacific Taxi and had begun to spray out the interior of his cab, as by company rules he was required to do, when a fellow driver named Charlie Jensen walked up to him and said: “Hey, don’t even ask me what I made, Gersh. I blew the whole night.”

“Oh yea?” replied Gersham, coming around the cab after slamming the side doors and peering at Jensen’s exuberant face. “So how’d you manage that, I’m afraid to inquire.”

Both men were in their middle thirties. Jensen had glasses, a scraggly beard that never grew full, and a stomach that hung over his belt; he was wearing the second-hand gray suit which now, after years of dressing like a hippie, he wore almost every time he worked. Gersham was thinner, more athletic-looking, more intense, with clean-cut, youthful features that might have been called handsome were it not for a facial impairment, a partial paralysis of the left side of his face, which was apparent when he tried to raise his eyebrows or smile.

“Well, the first thing that happens, “ said Jensen, “is this tremendous dry spell. I’m driving like crazy. I can’t get a fare. So gets to the point, you know, I say, ‘Charlie, hey, this ain’t your night.’ I smoke it to the Hyatt. I light up a joint. I’m just sitting there, you know twenty-first in the line, watching all the nice people stroll by. Then I see this female coming at me. Pretty, little thing in high heels and jeans and trying to act like a lady, but a real kid, you know, eighteen, maybe twenty something like that.

“She looks in the window and smiles. I try to look real cool and smile back but she struts on by. I figure, ‘Oh, well, couple of millenniums ago, I could have done better at that.’ Then she kind of hesitates, you know, and next thing, well, she’s in the cab asking me if I’m vacant.”

“I don’t imagine that’s the end.”

“So I say, ‘Am I vacant? Hey, you’re looking at the zero incarnate.’ “

She had gotten in the front seat instead of in the back where a passenger would normally go, Jensen went to recount; and, a few minutes later, she had asked him if he had ever paid for sex.

"She was trying to hook you?" Gersham said.

"Hey, let me tell you, Gersh. She didn't have to try very hard and she offered to do it for thirty bucks."

"So what you coming in with?" Gersham inquired.

"I'm coming in bananas. I'm in the cosmic red."

A couple of other drivers had come up behind Jud Gersham to take their turns at the air hose. For a moment they had waited patiently; now one of them gestured and tapped his horn. Jensen shrugged his shoulders in mock despair and with his suit-tails flying behind him went running across the garage to his own cab which was another line by the gas-pump.

Gersham watched his co-worker's departure with amused disbelief. It wasn't all that unusual for the drivers to have little flings with hookers; but he had always thought of Jensen as a quiet, intellectual man; and so this kind of a venture seemed out of character for him.

By the time Gersham pulled up to the gas line, Jensen was just leaving. Later, though, after parking his cab in the basement garage, he saw Jensen coming towards him again. They joined in walking without speaking. Both of them had driven cab for six years, five years for the small, family-run company where they'd first met, and one year for this company which was larger and better equipped. They were not close friends and had only wound up together at his larger company because, with its radio service and union benefits, it was the logical place to head after five years as a pirate—"pirate" was the cabbie term for a driver that just drove around and picked up people on the street. It was generally considered more romantic to be a pirate because that kind of driver was more on his own; but, sooner or later, as they got older, most of the workers joined up with the larger companies.

"Well, only thing you haven't told me about your little adventure is if it turned out all right," Gersham said,

breaking their silence, as they climbed the narrow steps that led to the upper garage where the cashier's window was located. He was dressed in tan pants and a blue warm-up jacket; his thin face, as he turned towards Jensen, was devoid of expression except for the permanent half-frown above his left eye. His impairment had come about only six months before, the result of a viral infection which had destroyed his left facial nerve, the trigeminal nerve, as it was called. He was still self-conscious of his appearance; not wanting to make grotesque gestures, he made none at all.

"Hey, Gersham, to tell you the truth," Jensen remarked, stroking his beard, "it was more than all right. It was beautiful. Hey, I'm not kidding. No hurry. No bullshit. No do this or do that. It wasn't forced in the least. You know what it was like? It was like making love with this goddess who grooves on everything you do... But the weird thing is, she gave me this slip of paper, you know... Name, address, etcetera... And I lost the damn thing... And she's moving tomorrow... Can't even remember her name. So what's the dif, I guess? I suppose it would just be a street name anyhow."

"You want to see her again?"

"Like I said, seventh heaven. These rosy, little cunt lips, man. You can't imagine."

"How come she's moving?"

"I don't know. Paranoid, I guess."

"So just find her on the streets."

"Naw, she's trying to be discreet, you know, plays the hotels."

They reached the top of the stairs and walked across the upper-level garage to the drivers' lounge, as it was euphemistically called, where there were vending machines and a couple of old pool tables that were mostly used as stand-up desks for filling out waybills. Gersham kept looking at Jensen bearded face, expecting something more to come out of it; but Jensen seemed so distracted that Gersham decided to leave him alone. There were a number of drivers in the room; they were joking back and forth and trading stories.

Jud Gersham figured out his money, peered through the window to watch the cashier counting it out, nodded his head when the cashier said ‘two over” to acknowledge that he had done his little bit to grease the dispatcher’s palm; then, with his fold-up orthopedic seat hitched up under his arm, he waved goodbye to Jensen who looked at him blankly with his pencil between his teeth, and headed across the garage to the street.

Buttoning up his jacket against the cold wind, Gersham began hiking towards his apartment which was eight blocks away on the top of Nob Hill. By this time it was long after the bars had closed for the night. There was not much traffic on the street. The stoplights had been set on blinkers, and it was so quiet that he could hear them clicking off and on as they threw a red amber light on the sides of the apartment buildings that were crammed along the sidewalk.

His walk took him around the edge of the downtown section where the big hotels were located. Looking down the street, he saw a group of prostitutes in front of a hotel where there was an all-night restaurant. Once again he thought of Charlie Jensen. He himself had only once paid for sex, a blow-job in a back alley in his cab. His years on the street had led him to think of, prostitutes, in the main, as hard, embittered women who meted out their time as shrewdly as lawyers; and yet he had maintained a fascination for them. Almost every night, on his way back to the garage, he drove slowly past the hookers who plied their trade only a couple of blocks down the street; he was always thinking about stopping but never did. And so Jensen’s good experience with the hooker was intriguing to him; he was curious what would happen between Jensen and her.

Before not too long, though, he had forgotten about Jensen’s adventure. In its place in his mind were the more pressing problems of his own life. He was an aspiring writer; for several years he had driven cab only three or four nights a week while devoting his free time to his craft. But, more essentially than this, he was a lonely man. Up until eight months before, and for a period of almost exactly a year, he had been living with a woman named Jane Morrow, seven

years younger than he; she was now a graduate student in fine arts at an eastern university. Her departure, though planned, had been a blow to him; aside from its emotional impact, it had made him all the more aware of his own lack of artistic progress; he had never been published, and, in fact, because of self-doubts, he had never even submitted his work for publication.

To make matters worse, he had, when she left, been in the midst of a project on which he'd been stymied for more than a year, a long story about an unhappy past romance, fraught with sexual insecurities on both sides, a romance which he couldn't truthfully portray without facing up to the worst of what he'd been at that period in his life. He had been trying to push his way through this story, working well for days at a time and then lapsing into booze or grass, when he had awoken one morning with the earache which had led in an hour to his facial paralysis.

This had been a further blow. He was a quiet person who in conversation depended as much on gestures as on words, a person for whom social interaction, anyhow, often involved a slight strain; and he had been feeling especially lonely and awkward since his former partner had left. Now he felt all the more cut off, and his isolation had intensified his anxiety regarding his age and lack of fruition.

Soon after the onset of his paralysis, he had taken a month off from driving and by working day and night had forced his way through to the end of his story. But this project, once done, had seemed so imperfect, so tediously rendered, that he could take no satisfaction in it. Now he was driving six nights a week, trying to save up money to leave San Francisco and return to the Midwest, where he had grown up, because somewhere in the midst of all this he had learned that his father was sick.

The doctors said his face would heal. He was taking vitamins and food supplements to speed the process of healing, and in general was attempting as never before to achieve the rigid self-discipline which even in his boyhood he had sought. But he feared that the nervous function would not come back, and suspected that his impairment was a

punishment—either from God or in some subtle way from himself—for his intemperance or for slackness in his efforts at writing. He was afraid that this punishment, this curse, extended not only to his physical welfare but to his creative life as well. He felt himself in continual danger of dissipation; at home he had a calendar on which he made a large "X" whenever he overdid booze or grass. He recorded the exact number of hours he spent at his desk.

A week went by before he saw Charlie Jensen again. It had been a slow night. He was standing in the drivers' lounge, shaking his head at his meager receipts which he had spread out, with the dollar bills in one motley pile and the larger bills in another, on the table in front of him; when Jensen came in and, without saying hello, threw down his waybill and medallion on the other table.

By this time, Gersham had forgotten about Jensen's hooker-friend, but as soon as he saw him he remembered their previous conversation.

"So I suppose you've been up to your usual, degenerate deeds," he ventured, looking across at Jensen with his thin, expressionless face. They were the only people in the room.

"If you mean Michele, yea, I saw her again, " responded Jensen, shrugging his shoulders and smiling with his lips pressed together and his head inclined to one side.

"Well, you found out her name. That's some kind of progress, I guess. This is getting to be a real thing."

"Hey, let me tell you, Jud, it sounds sordid maybe, but it might just be the most uplifting sexual experience of my entire, humble life. We go up to my place. We smoke a few numbers. Fuck around in total leisure. It's like the Krishna and one of his consorts, you know. What can I say? I think I'm in love."

"Oh yea? So how's your old lady figure into all this? She stands there with a fan?"

"Hey, didn't I tell you? My old lady flew the coop."

"Really? Hey, too bad. So when did all of this happen?"

"Past couple of months."

"Wow, I'm sorry to hear that," said Gersham. Suddenly the whole situation made more sense to him. He remembered

a birthday party for another driver that he had gone to several weeks before. Jensen and Mary Beckett, the quiet, obliging woman that Jensen had lived with for as long as Gersham had known him, had also been guests. They had argued about something and left early, Jensen with an angry look on his broad face of a sort which Gersham had never seen there before, and Beckett looking mortified and defiant at one and the same time.

"Never argue with a woman, Gersh. Hey, let me tell you, there's no way you can come out on top. A total lack of reason. I don't care to deal with it anymore."

It seemed strange to hear Jensen, the ex-hippie, reciting these traditional masculine lines. But Gersham, too, had come the whole gamut from male liberation meetings and self-criticism to a newly-retrenched attitude that women thought and acted if not in an illogical way than in a way much different from men. And he was very much aware that they were all changing fast, he and Jensen and the guys they'd started driving cab with, all giving up their old ideals to a certain extent and assuming the give-and-take values that were more compatible with a cabbie's everyday life. Yes, that's what they were now, not artists or politicos, just cabbies. And though he prided himself on his worker-consciousness, this realization, as always, was disturbing to him. He studied Jensen's bearded face for a moment, thinking that maybe Jensen was going through some kind of personal crisis and wanted to talk about it. But that had changed, too. No one talked about private affairs anymore except in a jocular vein. And Gersham felt tired from a long night on the streets.

He turned to go, but as he did noticed that next to Jensen's waybill was the lozenges tin in which Jensen kept his joints. The thought of smoking one was more than Gersham could resist. Jensen always had the best stuff.

"Hey, Charlie," he called across the room, "sell me a number, will you? I'll give you a couple of bucks."

Jensen took one of the joints from the tin. He had neat, little joints that he made in a cigarette-rolling machine. "Hey, just take it, Jud. I don't want your money."

Gersham shrugged and reached for it, feeling like a mooch. “Well, all right, Charlie. Hey, you sure you don’t want some money? I don’t just want to take it, you know.”

Jensen didn’t respond. He was scribbling on a piece of paper. “Here’s something even better, man. Michele’s new address.”

“Oh yea? Thought you were saving her for yourself.”

“I’m not that gone, man. I know she’s a hooker.”

Gersham took it. “Yea, sure, I’ll keep it as a fantasy. Hey, what’s she look like anyhow?”

“Very small and delicate. Wholesome-looking. Pink, pretty face like a college girl, you know. Peach fuzz on her legs. Dynamite body that won’t quit. You get the general idea?”

“Yea, I think I understand.”

“Hey, but being serious a minute, the best thing about her, she’s as sweet as can be. None of your usual toughness. A real sweetheart, you know. I don’t know how else to put it. She really is.”

“Sounds all right,” said Gersham, turning to go.

“Buzz out there sometime.”

“Sure, that’s all I need, an addiction to a whore.”

“Hey, come on, Gersh. Like I said, she’s a sweetheart.”

Gersham strode across the garage with his orthopedic seat under his arm, tapping his breast pocket where he had put the joint. He had made a resolution always to walk home, part of his campaign to save money. But after hiking a block, he saw a cab coming and threw up his hand. Soon he was rushing through a corridor of blinking yellow lights towards his apartment.

The past week had been frustrating for him. He was driving ten hours a night, getting up the next day at one or two o’clock in the afternoon, going down to the Y to work out, and then heading back to the garage—traffic, traffic, traffic with little islands of freedom in between. Business was slow. He was making only four or so dollars an hour, half of what he normally earned; and, if he eased off an hour, that was nine dollars lost since he paid about five dollars per hour to the company for cab rental and gas. All night long

he'd been thinking about getting stoned, telling himself "no, no, no" but at the same time looking around for some driver that he could buy or bum a joint from.

So now he had taken the first step to another, small transgression of his self-imposed rules. It meant nothing, and yet it meant everything, meant he was incapable of self-control. And what if the grass did some damage to his nerve? Yes, there was a chance, a slight chance, it would do that. Who could say? He could feel the continuous fibrillation of the muscles in the left side of his face. Perhaps that indicated a return of function; perhaps it was the muscles' death knoll struggle against atrophy. And all his concern anyhow were vanity, just vanity. He kept thinking about Jensen's hooker friend. Human contact at thirty bucks a shot. No, he couldn't get into that. And he didn't feel right about it, couldn't as easily dismiss it as an assertion of the flesh against a too-proper world as once he would have been able to dismiss it. But the thought of touching a woman again.

The cab pulled up in front of his building, a three-story, beige-colored structure with bay windows in the midst of other, similar buildings. The meter said "1.80." He flipped the driver three dollar bills, ascended the several steps to the front door, and crossed the dimly-lit lobby to his own door which was in the back on the first floor.

On entering his apartment, without looking around or taking off his jacket, he crossed at once through the small bedroom that he used as a study to the bathroom, tore up the slip of paper that Jensen had-given him, and flushed it down the toilet. He made a motion to do the same with the joint but walked back with it into his study, saying, "So what's the dif at this point? I'm doing the best I can."

Within a few minutes he was stoned; but, far from feeling relaxed from it, as had been the case so often in the past, he felt immediately distressed and was aware most of all of the stiffness in his spine and joints from his hours of sitting in the same position in his cab. Returning to the bathroom he stared at himself in the mirror and tried to work the muscles on the paralyzed side of his face; but his left eyebrow and the left part of his mouth continued to sag.

Throwing off his pants and shirt, he began pacing back and forth in his underpants from one end of his apartment to the other. It consisted of four rooms in tandem like railroad cars: a kitchen, a living room, the study, and his bedroom. All of them were meagerly furnished. When he turned on the kitchen light, roaches scurried beneath the burners on the stove.

The only food in his refrigerator was a carton of plain yogurt. He gobbled it down and walked through the living roam, where there were a couch, a studio chair, and a cheap stereo set, to the study where he had a desk made of a door set upon large, wooden boxes and bookcases made of smaller boxes. Potted plants stood on a telephone-cable spool before two windows that looked out to an alleyway between other buildings.

On the white walls, which would have been stark without them, were various landscapes and still-lives done by his former partner, formal and soft with a vibrant resonance of color. Next to his desk, which was on the other side of the room from the windows and faced them, was a display of photographs, cards and cut-out sayings and poems among which was picture of her at his typewriter with one of her paintings in the background. She was a pretty young woman with shoulder-length brown hair, a wide forehead, thick, straight eyebrows, and direct, intelligent hazel eyes.

For a long while he stared at this picture, feeling love and resentment and at the same time a great sadness for how he and she had hurt one another by their lack of a fuller commitment. But such a commitment would have been impossible, would it not? Even now he didn't know.

He sighed and turned to the battered file cabinet beside his desk. In the top drawer, neatly-bound in two blue folders, was his manuscript which he hadn't opened in several weeks. Only when drunk or stoned could he bear to look at it at all.

Later, feeling discouraged, he went over to the closet by the windows where above a cardboard box on the top shelf was a stack of porno magazines that he seldom looked at and was careful to buy in stores outside his own neighborhood

where nobody knew him. He brought the magazines back to his desk, pulled down his underpants, and began paging through them. “So that’s what it’s come to now, jacking off to pictures.”

It was early morning, after sunrise, when he went to bed. As soon as he woke up, he returned to his study and, finding part of the joint on his desk, took it into the bathroom and flushed it down the toilet. Then he hid the magazines inside of a newspaper and threw the paper in the trash barrel outside his kitchen door.

At his desk he wrote in his journal: “Discipline is the key to everything. I can’t have this life without it, can’t have this life without willpower and strength. Remember: clean body, clean mind.” That afternoon at the Y he ran five miles instead of his usual three.

A few days later he saw Charlie Jensen again.

“You ever go out there?” Jensen asked.

“No. I never did.”

“Oh well, she moved anyway. I don’t know where she is. I’ve been trying to find her.”

2

A few nights later Jud Gersham stopped in a motel lounge to pick up an order there, and noticed a small, pretty, very young-looking woman, about 5-1 or so, with short, brown hair and blue eyes, and dressed in tennis shoes, jeans and a letter jacket, standing outside the motel by the bus stop. He nodded at her as he came around the front of the cab. She gave him a bright smile—not a coquettish smile but a straightforward, friendly one of the sort that people give who are new in the city and still well-disposed to strangers. For a moment it flashed through his mind that maybe she was interested in him; then he remembered his face and thought to himself it couldn’t be.

Even so, he was hoping that the order would be a no-go so he could offer her a ride because her wholesome, trustful look was very appealing to him. But, on coming into the bar, he recognized a Chinese businessman who took the cab every night from this motel to Russian Hill. “Hyde and

Vallejo," he muttered to himself. "A dollar-sixty with a twenty cents tip."

As he and the businessman came out, he saw that the woman was in front of his cab, stretching on her tiptoes to peer down the street for a trolley. Again she smiled at him.

Not wanting to betray his disfigurement with a lop-sided grin, he just nodded at her. "Wish I was empty."

"So do I."

After dropping off his passenger and getting his dollar-eighty-five, he circled immediately back to the hotel. Several years before, at a time when cabdriving had seemed a great, romantic adventure, he had gone through a period when he'd impulsively rushed after women in this way, and during this time had had a series of affairs. Now he occasionally went through the same overtures as he had done then, though he no longer believed that anything would come of his initiatives. When he got back to the motel, she was gone.

"So what's the difference?" he said to himself, heading out into the traffic once more. It had been well after rush-hour when he had begun his ten-hour shift; it would be early morning when he turned in. For the next couple of hours there was a flurry of business, but then it slacked off. He settled back in the seat like a weary cowboy in a saddle and braced himself for a long night. As he always did in such a situation, he kept driving, going back and forth from one deserted tourist section to another, and chasing radio orders that were miles away from where he was when he bid. Early in the night, despite the slow conditions on the streets, he was in an exhilarated mood, lost in the constant movement, the panorama of sights and sounds that had been his mainstay as a cabbie. But, after the bars had closed, a different mood came over him; he felt lonely and cut-off in the special way that he had felt since Jane Morrow's departure.

What bothered him most of all was the thought that she had lost faith in him, that despite the matter-of-fact reasons for her leaving, this had been the real factor in her decision to go. And yet she had said again and again that she did believe in him; he knew very well that she needed to be

there, he needed to be here, and so on. The problem, really, was that he lacked faith in himself, or in something larger and stronger than himself that could give him sustenance. Because faith, what was it anyhow? Was it not, in essence, a trust in some kind of suprapersonal power which plucked out the individual life, howsoever humble, and gave it a greater meaning? Yes, it was that; it could only be that; and, try though he had for it, he had not attained it.

Not knowing where to go, he headed towards the industrial section south of Market Street where, among the factories, warehouses, and dingy apartment buildings, were the after-hours clubs and gay baths where he sometimes found fares late at night. No business there. Some guys were fucking in the alley behind a car. He headed down a main thoroughfare, now deserted, where the lights were set on yellow blinkers, glancing for just a moment at the fog pressing against the half-lit buildings in the downtown skyline.

The city night had once been an object of constant fascination for him; now more and more he felt threatened by it, felt himself sinking down into and being overcome by forces he couldn't understand. This fear had always been a part of his cabbie experience, even in that exciting period when everything was new; but since the onset of his facial impairment it had become more intense. At times now he felt himself to be a kind of outcast, a man without promise, relegated by his dysfunction to somber expressions, and worst of all unattractive to women. He was aware, too, that his life as never before was pervaded by sexual hunger and by sexual thoughts that he forced inward and denied.

Reaching the end of the bar section, he turned downtown. Finding no on Market Street where the main buses came by, he drove on through the unpeopled financial district to the hotels where the hookers were standing on the agreed-upon corners. Among them was a Latin with dark hair and dark eyes who gestured at him as he passed by. He made another circuit of the area and cruised by her again without stopping. Then he rode towards the Wharf to check out the motels on the waterfront.

A mile from the Wharf, he heard the dispatcher calling the Holiday Inn. He took the order, outbidding another driver, and then stepped on the gas, afraid the other cabbie would beat him to it. Just as he swung into the brick roadway between the two sections of the motel, another taxi pulled away from the stand. He slammed his hand down on the meter but went in anyhow, thinking that maybe more stragglers were looking for rides.

As he drove slowly past the lobby, peering through the windows to the empty padded chairs, he saw a figure on the roadway ahead of him by the closed door to the cocktail lounge. It was the same small, brown-haired woman in jeans and a letter jacket that he had noticed before.

She waved at him as he came by. He jammed on the brakes and rolled down the far side window without any idea what he would say.

She came running over and jumped in the back seat . “I guess I’ll take you. I had a good night.”

He assumed that she worked in the lounge and was on her way home. She said her destination, a hotel right above the gate to Chinatown about three miles away. He was glad the ride would be so long. He didn’t really plan to hustle her; but it had been such a long, lonely night that he was glad just have a pretty woman in the back seat.

He tried to think of something to say to her, but all that came to mind was “I won’t throw the flag for a couple of blocks.”

“Thank you.”

He headed down Columbus, once more approaching the downtown skyline, now from a different angle. A half-moon had risen above the city’s silhouette; it shone dimly from the wispy fog. Just ahead was the tall, thin, triangular form of the Trans-America Pyramid which looked closer and more distinct than the other buildings though it, too, was partly-shrouded in swirling gray clouds. Traffic was sparse and the stoplights were all green.

He kept watching his passenger in the rearview mirror. She was laying against the back seat with her arms outstretched and face thrown back as if

enjoying the motion of the car. “What a delightful woman,” he thought. Just then she opened her eyes and gazed at him in the mirror. She leaned forward and touched his shoulder. “I know one of your drivers. This is Pacific, right?”

In the way she stared at him, as if aware she’d been watched, in her readiness to touch him, and even in the fact that she’d known she could meet his eyes by looking at the rearview mirror instead of him, there was a degree of understanding he hadn’t noticed before. He shot a glance in her direction. “Yea, this is Pacific. What’s his name?”

“I don’t know his last name but his first name is Charlie and he’s got a beard.”

Suddenly he put two and two together. He turned around to see her more closely. “Hey, by any chance, are you Michele?”

She laughed. “How’d you know that?”

“Charlie’s a friend of mine, kind of. I’ve known him a long time.”

“He told you about me?”

“Sure did.”

“What he say?”

“Well, you’re a hooker, aren’t you?”

“Uh-huh,” she drawled, her blue eyes twinkling.

He kept looking back and forth from the road to her. Somehow he had imagined her as a femme fatale. But she wasn’t anything of the sort, wasn’t spectacular in any way. What she appeared like most was a pretty kid, a high school girl with a thin veneer of seductiveness and sophistication. But that’s exactly what was so intriguing and attractive about her, this suggestion of freshness and naive sexuality. And her whole manner and bearing said, “I’m available. Just make a bid.”

“Well, to say the least, he’s got it for you bad.”

She laughed and threw back her head, smiling so broadly that she displayed her healthy gums and her white teeth which were out of line in the middle. Obviously she was delighted by her power over Jensen; but even in this she seemed ingenuous, like a schoolgirl who’d been informed of a crush.

They were coasting along a deserted, commercial street in Chinatown towards the tunnel that led downtown. He began to tell her about how he had known Jensen in the old days when they had both worked as pirates, and how every night after work the drivers would jam together in one cab for the "midnight mass" as they had termed it back then. Jensen had always been there with his brown briefcase and primo grass; they called him "the Professor" because he'd been a teacher in Ohio—she laughed about that.—The more he talked to her, the more drawn to her he felt, the more his eyes roamed up and down her small figure when he shot his occasional glances to the backseat of the cab. She was really as Jensen had described her, too good to be true. And all he had to do was make an offer. As he drove along, even as he was talking to her, he kept arguing with himself and shaking his head.

The fare was $3.10. When she handed him the bills, her fingers rested on his palm just an instant longer than was needed to place the money there. Then she smiled at him again and waited for a moment with her hand on the door handle. He couldn't tell if she wanted to talk or wanted to be propositioned. When he said nothing, she began opening the door very slowly. He stared at her as she turned to go.

"Suppose you had a busy night. You must be tired," he said, as she gazed at him again. His body trembled.

"Oh, not so tired," she replied, meeting his glance with her knowing, girlish eyes. "How come you ask?"

"Thought you might want another trick," he said, trying to act nonchalant and broaching the subject directly as he felt a person would do who was well-versed in liaisons and matter-of-fact about them; but as he spoke his voice wavered and he realized he'd betrayed his eagerness and inexperience.

"With who?"

"Only two of us here."

"Where would we go though? We can't do it here. The clerk would see. He'd be wise."

"My place is just four blocks away."

"Anybody there?"

He shook his head. “I live alone.”

“Well, okay, let’s go.”

“I don’t have much money.”

“Just say a price.”

“Thirty?”

“Yea, thirty’s all right. I like cabbies, you know. I know I can trust them.”

He nodded silently, pulled out from the curb, and headed up the hill towards his apartment. He made no effort to talk anymore; she, too, was silent looking out the back window.

He parked at a bus stop a half block down from his building, looked back at her, and shrugged his shoulders. “Well, here it is.”

She smiled and got out. They began walking up the street together. There was no one else in sight and most of the buildings were dark.

“Kind of chilly,” he said, looking up the deserted street.

“Sure is. You lived here long?”

“In San Francisco?”

“Uh huh.”

“Yea, quite a while. Six years. How about you?”

“Only six months.”

There was something natural and easy about being with her. He felt like putting his arm around her shoulders and sensed that she would have allowed it if he tried.

On entering his apartment, they crossed through the corner of the living room and stopped for a moment in the study. He turned on the light on his makeshift desk and went over to the windows to let down the blinds. She placed her small purse on the desk and began looking around the room, especially at the paintings, with a pleasant expression on her pretty face as if there was no hurry at all.

“Are you an artist?” she asked.

“No, a writer,” he said, gazing at her and noticing how small and delicate she was. “Those paintings were done by someone else.”

“By who?”

“Woman I used to live with.”

“And where’s she now?”

"Went to school out East."

"Oh, too bad. You must miss her."

"Yea, I do."

"I wish I could do things like this. I've never been creative at all."

He went up to her and put his hand on her waist. She made no effort to move away but kept looking at the pictures.

"And are all these books yours?" she asked, walking over to the stacked up boxes that he used as bookcases.

"Uh-huh."

"And this is where you work?" she said, looking around at the objects in his desk.

He laughed. "You sure are curious, aren't you?"

"I like to learn new things. Do you write a lot?"

"All the time just about when I'm not driving cab."

"How come?"

"I don't know."

"You like it?"

"Sometimes."

"You're kind of strange, aren't you?"

"No, not really," he replied, nodding at her. All this while he had felt a wholeness in her presence that he hadn't felt for months. Now he suddenly became aware of his face again and turned at an oblique angle to her so only the right side of his face could be seen. He looked around at his shabby but well-ordered study, trying to imagine what it appeared like to her. "I'm just one of those schizoids you hear about who, if you know their basic misconception, totally make sense."

"So what's your basic misconception then?"

"That I'm a writer, I suppose."

"But if you know it's a misconception, how come you keep at it then?"

"I didn't mean 'mis'-conception," he said, surprised by her astuteness "I guess what I meant was 'basic premise'."

"Oh," she responded softly. She was standing a few feet away from him the side of his desk; he was leaning against the door which led to the living room. Her small white hands

were folded in front of her thin hips and her clear eyes studied him intently. He kept thinking that at any moment she would say, “Let’s get down to business.” But she didn’t.

“So what’s your basic premise?” he continued after pausing to give her a chance to end the talking if she wanted to.

“I don’t know. I guess that I like money.”

“And here I thought it was that you liked sex.”

She came over and leaned against him. “Why? Do you?”

“Yea, kind of,” he murmured, pressing his lips against her forehead and eyes and then against her mouth. She met his lips with an open-mouthed kiss that seemed genuinely passionate. For a long time he stood kissing her, expecting that at any moment she would stop and ask the way to the bedroom. But she acted as if this was all up to him.

When finally they went into his bedroom, she sat down on the bed without taking off her clothes. He sat down beside her. In this room, too, there were plants sitting on boxes in front of two large windows. The windows looked out to the flat roof of a parking garage. Beyond this rooftop, between the dark forms of the apartment buildings on the other side of the block, a little slice of a hillside could be seen. It was dotted with lights, some of them blinking off and on and changing colors. The half-moon which earlier in the evening he had seen above the downtown skyline now hovered in the sky behind the fire-escape on the building next-door. Its light, coming through the framework at an indirect angle, threw upon the wooden floor of the room a configuration of crisscrossed, slanting lines.

She touched his hand. “How do you like it? A little French? A little half-and-half?”

“What I’d like to do,” he said, peering at her pretty face, “is just take our time. I’ll pay you more if you want.”

She nodded. “Okay, we can do that.”

He unbuttoned her blouse while she stood beside the bed. Around her neck was a leather cord with a stone amulet. She had softly-rounded shoulders and shapely breasts, large for her size. When he caressed her she smiled, and he wished he could smile in return.

"My face is weirded out. Had a problem with a nerve."

"I didn't notice."

He felt very drawn to her, wanted to make love to her in earnest, explore her body with his eyes and tongue; and, to his surprise, she responded as if she desired to be loved in this way.

At first when he undressed, she said, "Oh, we better use a lubricant. You're large." But when the time came for him to enter her, she didn't ask for it again, and seemed so ravenous that he tried to help her come. She kept sighing and licking his face.

After a while, though, her sighing subsided so he came by himself. Then she lay in his arms while he stroked her, nestled there a long time as women do who are satisfied; and he felt as if he was with someone he liked very much and thought to himself proudly that he had been successful with a woman who was used to many men.

Later, turning to the clock beside the bed, he saw that it was a quarter to five and remembered that his cab was still outside. He nudged her. "Hey, I gotta get a move on. I'm due in the garage in fifteen minutes."

He jumped up and went to the other room to get his jacket. Seeing her purse on his desk, it occurred to him how oddly trustful she was. Beneath one of the boxes in his bookcase were some folded twenty-dollar bills. He took out the three newest of them, straightened out the edges, and brought them to her.

She was standing in her underwear, putting on her jeans. Now that his desire for her had been quenched, she struck him as very small, like a twelve-year-old boy.

When he handed her the money, he could tell by her eyes that she was pleased with the amount. "You can stay here and sleep for a while," he said. "I'd like you to stay. I'll give you some money for a cab when you leave."

She hesitated. "No, I better go."

They went out. The sky above the buildings was already colored with the first pink of dawn. At her hotel he leaned over to hug her. Again she met his lips with what seemed a genuine kiss.

3

He went home and slept a few hours. Then he awoke, feeling strangely excited, and immediately thought about her. He arose and went out, not sure where he was heading. A couple of blocks down the hill, he saw a bus coming that went to the ocean. He hailed it and got on.

An hour later he was hiking along in the hills above the wide channel that connects the ocean and the bay. It was a beautiful morning, so clear that the Farallon Islands, twenty miles from the channel's mouth, could be seen, just the faint, shadowy suggestion of them in the midst of a shimmering plain of water that blended indistinctly with the pale blue sky. Standing above a high cliff, Gersham watched the surf breaking on the rocks below. There the water was a mixed blue and green, more intense in color than the water in the distance and more luminous, as if shining from within. Among the rocks were foamy pools which rose and fell with the waves and looked like liquid marble or ice. The hillsides around him were covered with sea pinks, jade, and other thick-leaved succulents, waving grass and yellow-flowered anise, patches of sand with boulders and red poppies, and, here and there on high cliffs, clusters of cypress trees that bent landward away from the prevailing winds.

This was a place where Jud Gerham often came when feeling crowded or confused and where he had been on pleasant walks with Jane Morrow, a place which for him held many memories and which for this reason he regarded as almost sacred. As he walked along, recalling these memories, the glow which still lingered in his mind from his encounter with Michele blended with a recollection of sunlit moments in his past. He stopped at one overlook which commanded a view of the lighthouse at Mile Rock. To his left lay the ocean with its gleaming vastness and striated sky; to his right, before the floating green form of an island in the bay, were the orange pillars and cabled span of the Golden Gate Bridge. A freighter burdened with neatly-stacked containers pushed its way slowly through the channel beneath him, cutting a thin, white line in the undisturbed water. The sun-rounded, earthen-colored hills on the other

side of the channel were rimmed along the shore with gray cliffs and giant, rugged rocks where another lighthouse could be seen, its dull light blinking off and on. Above the ridges of these hills were other ridges that ascended to a tree-covered summit several miles away. It was an idyllic scene, so beautiful as to seem almost unreal and beyond a full perception; with its masses of land and water fading behind one another as they rose towards the horizon, it had the dreamlike quality of the Japanese landscapes that Jane Morrow had copied again and again in her attempts to understand the relationship between two- and three-dimensional space. Thinking of her and her determination, he remembered his own ambitions and ideals, and felt at once a sudden infusion of spirit, and sadness for losing her and for how he had failed to live up to his expectations and goals.

Some six years before when he had made his first tentative efforts in art (he had studied visual art for two and a half years before turning to writing), he had imagined himself as a man with considerable talent. In order to cultivate this talent, he had isolated himself more and more, and in so doing had lost much of the natural charm that he had had when younger. As the years had gone by, he had come to realize, in various stages, that the way of life he had chosen was more arduous than he had supposed; his talents were more limited, the isolation more difficult, the amount to be learned and mastered greater than what he had originally thought. To fortify himself against his self-doubts, his fears about the future, and the general insecurity of an artistic life, he had, also in stages, devised a whole personal mystique, the center pillar of which was his assumption that art was his calling or vocation; along with this calling came certain duties and responsibilities such as to work hard with no thought of reward, avoid dissipation, subordinate practical concerns to the demands of creation, and, most of all, to get the job done. He was a great believer in method; he always did a project from start to finish, and wrote an evaluation after each project was completed. His voluminous journals were full of self-admonitions.

For a long while he had called his vocation his dharma; this exotic term he had gotten from the Bhagavad Gita which he had read in bits and pieces, drawing from it mainly the idea of purposeless searching after good. At that time, in his efforts to define his artistic responsibilities, he had employed a number of Hindu concepts such as avidya, the veil of ignorance, satyagrahi, the force of truth, and samskara, the small step in the right direction;—avidya was what he had to get through; satyagrahi pulled him through it; each completed project, however imperfect, was samskara, another step. When he rebelled against his self-imposed disciplines, he brought himself back to it by repeating the Hindu formula that the only freedom is in the right action; the right action being the fulfillment of the duties consistent with one's particular path. All this Jud Gersham worked out in great detail.

Gradually, though, as he shifted the focus of his writing from his initial abstract and personal concerns to the problems of everyday life and people around him, he came to think of these Hindu concepts as too esoteric and elitist, and attempted to translate them into common terms. Along with this, particularly after the onset of his facial paralysis, he tried to find a way back to traditional religion; for several weeks he attended daily mass (he had been a Catholic in his youth). Many of the ideas which he had rejected earlier for intellectual reasons, most importantly the ideas of sin and grace, he considered again, seriously but with an awareness that his wish for restored health was an ulterior motive. Though he prayed not for a cure but for the strength to accept whatever happened, yet he remained so suspicious of his intentions that his self-criticism impeded his progress; and in the end he dropped these religious observances and adopted once more a skeptical attitude while yearning, as for nothing else, for a spiritual foundation and moral code.

When it came to women and sex, he was all the more uncertain what standards to apply. In his middle twenties he had been married for a year and a half to a woman who had left him. Her loss of interest in him, the trauma of separating from her, his struggle to regain his self-confidence and

stability, had together been the central dynamic of that decade in his life. Since then, with the exception of his four-year, off-and-on friendship with Jane Morrow, who for only a year and a half of this time had actually lived in San Francisco, his relations with women had been limited to little flings in the midst of his essentially solitary existence. He had always set these relations off against his more self-denying pursuits; they had been his main contact with human intimacy and animal warmth. On this account he had justified them; and, on the grounds that it was necessary for an artist to consider all things and maintain a vision of evil, he had permitted himself every kind of lascivious thought. But if a state of grace was a real possibility, if it was necessary, as he had started to believe, for a will towards the moral good, even and especially for an artist, to carry through from the aesthetic to the practical realm; then it would seem incumbent to keep a chaste mind. And yet what aridity of mental processes devoid of passion would such purity create?

What he really wanted most of all was to be married and have a conventional life; but he was unwilling to do this if it meant the sacrifice of his artistic pursuits; and, cornered by his relentless moral logic, lacking the wherewithal to provide for a family, he felt himself faced at times with a celibate state like a secular monk. He seldom considered anymore the various less-total solutions to his loneliness—such as a childless union, affairs with non-damaging, mutually-consented-to sex, and so on—which he had thought of as blameless and partly-satisfying only a few years before. He knew very well that he no longer considered them, that he was cutting himself off, knew very well that his drive towards purity was anti-flesh and against any kind of Whitmanesque understanding of life, that anyhow what he dismissed for lofty reasons was in fact less accessible because of his face;—and this appeared to his mind as a mish-mash of half-truths, vanity, inapplicable archaic notions, and formula-resistant reality that he couldn't sort out. He went over again the differences which had made it impossible to follow Jane Morrow out East—small

differences, particularities, pride, his fear of artistic death, her fear of being tied (yes, that was it) to an unsuccessful man; and he thought to himself that, no matter what woman he became involved with, these same, small differences would crop up so long as he persisted in his craft and made no money at it, so long as his work bore no fruit. And what of the fruitless fig tree that the hungry Christ had cursed? That's what he feared most of all, that he would give up his life and produce nothing of cultural value.

He had reached the westernmost extension of the cliffs where the path he'd been following turned southward around the base of a hill and led through a grove of sun-dappled trees to a stand of eucalyptus that faced Seal Rock. Further down the hill were some cliff side restaurants and a curio shop cars and buses lined the street that wound past them; the sidewalk milled with smiling people in brightly-colored clothes. It was now late afternoon; the sun was low in the colorless sky above the broad surface of the ocean; the surf crashed again and again on the jagged shore where men and boys fished with long rods. He crossed through a tourist parking lot to the street and continued along it past the restaurants towards the public beach which was further down the sidewalk.

A couple of young women strolled by him, their lithe bodies shining in the horizontal light. Once again his mind went back to the previous night. What he remembered most of all was how whole he had felt in her presence, how she had kissed with what seemed like affection. He had never dreamed that being with a prostitute could be so much like real love. The most perplexing thing was what her actual feelings had been. Had he just imagined her desire? Was she some kind of perfect hooker who knew how to make her customers feel wanted? No, that couldn't be. She seemed too naive, too much like a child. felt a fresh excitement and began plotting how he would see her again at the same time as he repeated his arguments against it. Despite his reasoning, he could see no harm in what he'd done; nobody had been damaged; he had paid a fair price. If anything was amiss, it was in the wasting of money that he needed to save;

or, more than that, in the shame of having to buy what a few years ago he could have gotten with his own attractiveness. But, no, there was more wrong in it than that; the situation was abusive and reifying by its very nature. And yet he felt tender and protective towards her; maybe he could see her just to talk. Now he was walking along the cement wall that bordered the beach. It was a meeting place for high school kids; they lounged along the wall, laughing, shouting, drinking beer; bare-chested boys and slender girls with long hair that gleamed in the heightened light of the setting sun. Looking at them, he thought to himself, "How jaded I've become"; and it occurred to him that all these moral arguments had little to do with real life, with this teeming, happy life and vibrant innocence.

By the time he caught the trolley to return downtown, the sun was already dipping in the waves. A chilly wind had come up. The sky blazed with a red and orange glow which gave way to a deeper red and then to purple and blue. For several miles the trolley traveled alongside a wooded park. As he watched the light fade in the trees, he fell into a melancholy mood and felt all the more contemptuous of himself for his inability to keep his life in control.

It was the peak of the rush hour when he disembarked. He was scheduled to work. He trudged towards the garage, passing through a neighborhood of cheap hotels and sleazy apartment buildings where the doorways smelled of urine to an adjoining area, further downtown, where people hurried up and down the sidewalks or stood on crowded corners shaking their fists at buses so crammed with passengers they didn't stop. The streets were full of honking, jostling cars.

"Gonna be a good night," he muttered to himself.

As he strode along, checking out the cabs that raced by to see how many had their flags down, he glanced across the street and discovered Michel on the sidewalk across from him, moving in a parallel direction but more slowly. She was dressed in a red slit-skirt and lavender blazer; under her arm was a denim purse, larger than the one she'd had before; she looked older and more sophisticated but seemed awkward in her high-heel shoes. He made a motion to wave at her; she

kept staring ahead as if lost in thought. At the next corner she paused by a laundromat.

He felt the same, strong attraction for her that he had felt the night before. But he resisted the impulse to yell and, though the laundromat was on his way to work and the stoplight green, didn't cross over to her.

Just as he started on a detour, however, she noticed him and waved. He nodded and walked towards her. She was sitting on the windowsill of the laundromat with her shoe off, rubbing her foot.

She watched him approaching with a smile on her face. "Well, hello there, fellow. You get a good rest?"

She acted in such a matter-of-fact, friendly manner, as though the events of the previous night were no cause for shame or embarrassment, that he was all the more perplexed by her and amazed by her self-possession.

"Naw, I didn't feel like sleeping. I went out to the ocean to hike around."

"Bet you had fun. It's such a nice day." She settled back on the windowsill and regarded him pleasantly. She seemed to take his restlessness as a tribute to her powers.

He gazed into her flushed face, observing that it had a chubby fullness, and that the moist skin around her clear, blue eyes showed no sign of age. It was the face of a pubescent girl, broken where her cheeks were most plump into blemishes faintly discernible beneath her make-up. Her upper eyelids were covered with green. Her outfit made him think of a girl playing grown-up. "Just a kid," he thought. "What an asshole I am."

She laughed at his serious expression. "Hey, how come so glum?

"Got things on my mind," he replied, peering at her. Yes, she was nothing but a kid; and yet the knowing eyes that met his glance had an adult awareness.

"So where you headed? On your way to work?"

"Yea, all set for a big night. How about you?"

"I'm on my way to see Steve. You know, Steve the dispatcher. He lives right over there." She pointed to a building across the street.

He felt a pang and realized at once that it was jealousy. And how foolish, he said to himself, to be jealous of a hooker. Just so he'd been foolish to think she had special feelings for him. Not knowing what to say, he mumbled something about being due at the garage.

"All right, then," she answered, smiling. "Take care." And again she gave him such a friendly, meaningful look that he hesitated, wanting to end the meeting on a more personable level. But no words came to his mind, so he waved goodbye and left.

As he hiked down the street, assaulted by emotions and wondering again if her sexual responses had been feigned, it occurred to him that she was a receptacle, most probably, for the seed of half the drivers in the company; and this slackened his pace somewhat because he'd taken no precautions for disease.

Coming into the garage, he saw that there was a long line of day drivers waiting in their cabs to get to the air-hose and gas-pump. Jensen was standing off to one side, dressed in his gray suit but with an orange shirt and green tie; he liked to wear jarring combinations and still did it a lot despite his conversion to conventional dress.

Gersham went up to him and nodded. "Well, I met your little friend."

Jensen smiled. "Michele?"

"Nothing but the same."

"So when was this?"

"Last night."

"Not bad, is she?"

"No, she's okay."

They both laughed, then watched in silence as one of the cabs pulled out from the gas pump and another moved forward.

After several minutes, Gersham said, "Hey, tell me something, Charlie. You think she enjoys it?"

Jensen nodded slowly. "Yea, I think she does."

"I can't figure her out. What's she in it for?"

"Hey, listen, Gersh. She's making a hell of a lot more than you and me."

"You think so?"

"Damn right."

"She doesn't have a pimp?"

"What's she need a pimp for? S.F. is wide open."

The union steward came along passing out some information about an election. They glanced at it and flipped it in the trash.

"You ever worry about V.D.?" Gersham asked after another moment of silence.

"You use a rubber?"

"No."

Jensen shook his head in mock disbelief. "Trustful, aren't you?"

Yea, I guess I am."

"Well, I've been skinny-dipping myself, to tell you the truth. I figure, you get it, you get it, if you know what I mean. You go down on her too?"

"Yea, come to think of it I did."

"Gersham, you low-life. Well, if your lips burst out in technicolor, you'll know there's something amiss."

"Hey, thanks a lot."

Another taxi moved forward. The gas-man yelled over at Jensen: "This junkheap yours?" Jensen shrugged his shoulders and turned to go. "If you see her, tell her I'm looking for her, okay?" With his dark-rimmed glasses, scraggly beard, unpressed suit and jarring colors, he was a sight to behold as he ambled across the garage, his brown briefcase under his arm.

When Gersham hit the streets, he headed for the hotels and found one with nobody on deck and the doorman tooting by a cart of luggage. "It's an airport, man," said the doorman as he toted the bags to the trunk. "Now I just know you want to express your appreciation."

Gersham slipped him two bucks, slammed the door behind his passengers, a distinguished-looking old man and a well-dressed young woman; then he steered into the heavy traffic, honking his horn.

The freeway was jammed with cars. A three-quarter moon, intensely-orange and partly hidden behind the ragged

clouds on the eastern horizon, loomed above the shimmering cities on the far side of the bay. To the south where the white and red rivers of going and coming traffic converged beside the dark shadow of an undulant mountain, shone a cluster of bright signs—orange, purple, green and blue. In the starless sky above them, a jet with its landing-light glowing zoomed towards the black expanse of water between the moon-crowned, distant cities and the arcing highway.

Gersham kept thinking about Michele, one moment cussing himself out for having gotten involved with her to begin with, the next moment peering in the rearview mirror at the old man and well-kept young woman in the back seat who spoke formally to one another and were obviously on some kind of sophisticated, socially-acceptable, cash-and-carry basis, and thinking that the whole country was set on this you-pay-your-money-you-get-your-ticket foundation; so what did it matter if Jud Gersham paid for sex? But he knew that how other people acted was no justification for his own actions; knew that he was just scrounging around for a casuistic defense, building his saddle on his horse, so to speak; and, after .a rambling discourse with himself, he decided that the honest thing to do was admit that he was hungry as hell for that young, little body and plump, pretty face. He kept feeling his lips with his tongue. “If I got it, I got it, as the Professor says.”

Several years before he’d had an affair with a woman he’d met in an art class and had come out of it with venereal warts. For the longest time after that, he’d gone to a dermatologist to have them burned and frozen off. So he was no stranger to V.D. and knew it assumed all kinds of subtle forms, none of them pleasant. In any case, V.D. was not the point; the point was that he couldn’t return to the prodigal state he’d been in then. What he had to do, he told himself as he had repeated often before, was build up the walls, contain the emotions, force them into creative expression, pursue the old virtues and a noble ideal of sound body, sound mind, compassionate spirit.

And what of the way she met his eyes? Was there more in that than monetary interest? Maybe she needed counsel or

help. If only he could find the strength to give that to her instead of looking for a fuck. But one thing was certain, he couldn't allow himself to get involved with her again.

All night long, as he buttressed this resolution, the fear of disease gnawed away in the back of his mind. But the fact that she was tainted, that she had an aura of corruption while seeming like the girl next-door, far from decreasing his fascination, increased it. And so he argued with himself all the more, and steeled himself against any further liaisons.

Several evenings later, he noticed her walking away from one of the larger hotels. He pulled to a stop and gestured with his hand as it to say, "You need a lift?" At the same time he reassured himself that he would just give her a ride and keep working.

She came running over to the cab. Once more she was dressed in tennis shoes and jeans with a T-shirt that said, "Cal Tech," a small, leather purse fastened to her belt, and her letter jacket under her arm.

"Hi!" she shouted. "I can't take you. I'm not doing so good."

"Hey, that's all right. I'll take you where you're going. I'm just cruising around."

"You sure?"

"Yea, come on."

She hopped in the front seat, folded her jacket on her lap, and turned towards him with a smile . "I usually walk when I can. To get the exercise, you know. Did I tell you I ran cross-country?"

"You're kidding," he replied; and it struck him that she did have the healthy glow of an athlete.

"No, I was pretty good... Well, I wasn't tremendous or anything, you know. But I was okay."

"So that's where the jacket's from?"

"Uh-huh." She held it up for him to see the big "H."

"So what's the 'H' for?"

"Hiller High in Scranton."

"Scranton, Ohio?"

"No more, no less. The one and only."

"You finish up there?"

"Naw, I took off."

"Took off? Why?"

"Oh, all kinds of reasons. Guess I was bored."

They headed up the street. The hotel she was going to was on the other side of Nob Hill. She was in a talkative mood. She jabbered away about some race she'd been in where she downed a whole cup of honey for energy. "And I got sick. I came in last. Can you believe it? Absolute last. I was so embarrassed you know, I just wanted to die. This other girl comes up to me and looks at real puzzled. 'Hey, what happened to your motor?' I go, 'It conked out!" Now and then she smiled at him, interpreting his glances; but he was determined let her leave.

When they reached her destination, a new, fifteen-story hotel, she paused a minute as if expecting a proposition. When none came, she tapped his arm, shouted "Hey, thanks a lot!", and dashed across the street between the heavy traffic with an animal grace that was delightful to behold.

That night he kept thinking about her. He felt good about having talked to her and controlled his appetites. He was impressed with her concern about staying in shape. It occurred to him that she was probably just as vigilant about getting check-ups for V.D. So his worries about disease had been overdone. But obviously her life wasn't as rosy as Jensen had pictured it; she was short of cash and seemed so eager to be regarded as something other than a hooker, to be related to on a personable level. He began to hope that he could be a kind of big brother to her, provide her with a friendly ear while holding off from 1iaisons.

During the next few days, he saw her a couple of times, once in a coffee shop in a sleazy hotel, once on a corner (so now she was playing the streets).She was always alone. He asked Jensen if she lived by herself; Jensen said, yea she had used to live with this Korean chick from Pusan who'd gotten her started at tricks, but they'd argued a lot and finally split.

He began to notice that there were all kinds of kids on the streets who apparently were homeless. They hung out in little groups on Market Street and around the Greyhound Depot, or loitered in the several hamburger joints and one

poolhall that stayed open all night.

Then one evening Gersham picked up a teen-aged couple, fidgety, long-haired blond boy who spoke in spurts, and a thin, bright-faced girl with scared eyes and a great mane of frizzly black hair who talked in a calmer, more even-toned voice and seemed intelligent and thoughtful. The boy kept complaining of dry lips, and saying, "I know I can con him, Ellen. I know I can con him." The girl sighed and said sure he could if he set his mind to it, and if he was worried about his lips he'd better do what she'd done.

"What's that?"

"Quit the speed."

They got off at a dumpy, little bratwurst place with open doors and plastic chairs; and the girl walked up the street towards Union Square, throwing her hips at passing men with a tired, mechanical movement.

Jud Gersham watched her go off and then glanced at the long-haired boy who had hiked off in the other direction with flicking head, swinging arms and all sorts of extraneous motions and was now pacing back and forth in front of a four-story hotel with a drag bar on the ground floor and a green neon sign that said, "Rooms."

So there was more going on then he'd known about despite his six years' pushing hack. And where did these kids come from that all of a sudden were everywhere he looked?

For another week or so he didn't see Michele though he thought about her a lot. Then finally one night he discovered her walking along the main street in the hotel section downtown. He drew up to the curb and motioned to her. She came running over to the cab, a strange combination of graceful and clumsy in her slit-skirt and high heels. He was glad to see her. He no longer had expectations of anything other than conversation.

"How you doing?" he asked her when she had settled in the front seat.

"Oh, pretty good, I guess."

"You need a ride?"

"Yea, I'm only going a few blocks," she sighed. "Just down to the Brown Jug on Hyde and Ellis. I got this dude

there I see. He lives next-door."

He started off. "What kind of dude?"

"Oh, I don't know. He's kind of kinky, you know. But I guess he's okay.

She acted more flustered than he'd seen her before. The rainy, winter season had set in. Tourist business, as usual at this time of year, was slow; and, besides, the hotel unions were on strike and the big hotels were half-full.

As they stopped outside an apartment building by the bar, she blurted: "Did I tell you? my place got broken into?"

"Oh, no!"

"Yea, with a crow bar."

"They get your stash?"

"Yea, a couple hundred."

"Wow, you must have been crushed."

"Yea, it gave me the creeps, you know. But I moved. I'm in this other place now. It's more secure and there aren't roaches or nothing. It's pretty nice."

She no longer bothered to come on to him. As she talked she raised herself on the seat and gazed down the street. It was evident in how she survey the scene like an animal peering out of its hole, wary of predators, that a more frantic dimension had been added to her life.

A couple of men staggered out of the Brown Jug, conversing loudly. "Hey, what's with that broad that tends bar? She got a problem?" "Yea, she's got a problem all right. She needs to get rammed."

As they passed the cab, they nudged one another and peered in. Michele sighed, turned her face away from their view, and watched over her shoulder until they disappeared around the corner. "Don't mean to keep you waiting. But you know how it is. You never know who'll call the cops. Sometimes they do it just for something to look at." She started opening the door.

"Hey, no need to hurry. You can sit here as long as you want."

"Naw, I better go."

"You need money or anything? I got some extra. I had a big night."

She wrinkled her nose. “No, Charlie gave me a bunch.”

“Charlie Jensen?”

“Yea, and some pot.”

“Hey, you sweet on Jensen?”

“Naw, it’s strictly business, you know. But he’s a nice guy.”

She stared down the street again and then leaned over and bussed his cheek. “Well, I gotta hit it. Hey, thanks a lot!”

A week or so later, he heard she’d left town. Jensen said she’d gone back to Ohio where her parents still lived.

4

Jud Gersham regarded her as just another person who’d come in and out of his life he’d learned to think of this impermanency as a part of the scene. He was getting closer and closer to his time of departure for the Midwest which was no as he foresaw it, about six weeks away; and getting increasingly apprehensive about how he could survive back there around his family and still maintain his artistic identity and his will to art. In addition to this, he was more worried about money than ever before. Despite his six nights a week of driving, he’d saved only $1000; and, after moving expenses, what was that? On his day off he had the option of going in as an extra. Soon he was working seven shifts a week. He was pushing as hard as he could, ten hours a shot without stopping, going home to bed, getting up, working out, heading back to the streets, staying clean of booze and grass.

But it was now the middle of winter; the constant rain had reduced the tourist business to nothing; he felt as if whatever he was containing with so much force would suddenly break out. Jane Morrow hadn’t been keeping in touch that whole part of his life had gone down the drain. His father had undergone an operation for cancer; he felt that, though the situation wasn’t urgent, he needed to get back to his family as soon as he could. And his face had hardly come back, just enough so he could click some kind of tendon in his jaw and squeeze his eye closed while his muscles trembled and made a buzzing sound that he could hear while

lying alone in his bed. In short, everything was askew. He told himself he was reaping what he'd sown in the past. But hadn't he always been diligent? Even in that prodigal period, hadn't he been assiduous in his search for something to hold on to. "Have faith, work hard, trust in artistic mission," he kept saying; while what he really wanted to do was just forget it all and get blasted.

One evening after another continued with this feeling of suppressed tension; and, despite his efforts to manufacture some cause for hope, he felt anxious, desperate, and worst of all lonely; while he told himself that loneliness was inevitable because of his face. As for Michele, when he thought about her, which wasn't often, she appeared to him mostly as .a symbol of his confusion about sexual morality. He was making notes to himself regarding "the ennoblement of instinct," a phrase he'd read in Chekhov.

A month went by. He assumed she wouldn't be back, then one night at three o'clock as he finished his shift discovered her on the sidewalk outside the garage dressed to the hilt in enameled high heels, fishnet hose, and a low-cut velveteen gown with a fake mink stole around her bare shoulders. As he swung into the garage, she saw him and waved.

He felt glad to see her at first as if meeting an old friend. But then something in him quickened, and he understood that there was more to it than that. He was in a vulnerable mood and knew it—heavy traffic, skimpy business, and some woman he'd taken across the bay had run off without paying her fare. An hour before he'd stopped for a bottle of wine which he intended to guzzle as soon as he got home.

When she waved, he pulled to a stop with the cab straddling the sidewalk and rolled down the window. "Hey, Michele, how you doing? Hey, we thought we lost you to the Wild East. When you get back?"

"Few days ago," she replied, swaying her thin, adolescent hips with an exaggerated motion as she approached him.

"Oh yea? So where you living 'now?"

"Admiral Hotel."

He looked into her blue eyes, expecting to find the clearness there he remembered. But instead he found a faint suggestion of contempt and self-contempt, a more deliberate and subtle seductiveness than had been there before.

He was familiar with the Admiral Hotel, a dirty, five-story brick building in the dingy part of town he'd taken her to the last time he'd seen her.

"So how come the Admiral?"

"It's cheap."

"How was Ohio?"

"Well, you know, it's Ohio. No doubt about that."

"You didn't like it?"

"Oh, I don't know. I felt weird. I don't know what to say to people back there. I got bored. Things like that."

"You see your folks?"

"Yea, they're a mess."

"How come?"

"Always fighting, you know. My mom really eats it up. My dad's always beating on her. Don't ask me why she sticks around. She's gotta be sick."

"You ask her?"

"No."

"Your dad have much to say?"

"Naw, he's on the sauce, you know. Lies around with his shirt off watching the tube. And then he comes on to me. Can you believe it?"

"Sexually?"

"Yea, he goes, 'Geez, I didn't know what I was doing. I'm so crocked up and everything." She laughed and shook her head ending up with a smirk.

"He never did that before?"

"I don't know. Guess I blew it out."

These revelations merely confirmed what he already suspected. So that had been her childhood then: turmoil and a rude introduction to sex in its most masochistic and selfish forms. And did she, like her mother, crave submission? The thought of it filled him with a strange excitement which in one instant recognized as nothing more than a wish for control and in the next instant expelled from his mind. He

peered into her eyes; she shrugged her shoulders and looked away. A moment of silence intervened. Then he said, “So you came back.

“For a while at least. Figure I’ll save up to leave.”

“Where would you go?”

“Hawaii or Bermuda or some place like that.”

Again there was silence. She leaned towards him and touched his arm. “So how about you? You have a rough night?” There was a huskiness in her voice which changed the tenor of the conversation.

“Yea,” he responded, thinking she could sense that he was tired and easy prey. “The weird thing is I always forget you can’t make it in winter,” he went on to cover up his confusion. “I mean, I’ve been through this—how many?—six times. And I always think it’s gonna be like summer, dynamite nights.”

“Yea, and then it’s a grind,” she answered softly, dropping her hooker routine just as suddenly as she had begun it, and giving him a soulful, needy look that once more changed the whole mood of the interaction.

The plaintive expression on her face brought out a softness he’d forgotten he was even capable of. “You’re sorry you came back then?” he said, groping for some way to connect with this more genuine side of her.

She gazed at him as if trying to determine if his interest was sincere, then looked up the street and shook her head. “Naw, not sorry, really. I suppose this is where I belong. Sometimes I get scared, though.”

“Scared of what.”

“Oh, I don’t know. The clients. The cops. But mostly, you know, of everything all together. I can’t explain it, I guess.”

“You could be a cocktail waitress or something.”

“Yea.”

“You don’t sound too enthused.”

“Well, main thing, I’m too young.”

“How old are you anyhow?”

“Seventeen.”

“Wow, just seventeen,” he said, shaking his head

slowly. “Just seventeen.” You’re not even legal then.”

“You thought I was older?”

“Yea, I guess I did. I don’t know what I thought, really. Jensen said you were eighteen or twenty or something like that.”

“Well, yea. I probably told him that. I lie.”

“Well, there’s other jobs.”

“Sure, scooping French fries.”

“Couldn’t you just go home and live there and avoid them?”

“Naw, they don’t want me around. Anyhow, like I said, I can’t stand it. I get bored.” She sighed and turned away.

He glanced at the clock on the back wall of the garage. Five minutes over already. He gestured at the clock with his head. “I gotta punch in.”

“Okay,” she replied. As usual she acted as if she hadn’t expected anything but conversation. But as he shoved the transmission into drive, she touched his arm again and shot him a knowing glance.

As he drove in to the air-hose, he watched her in the rear-view mirror. He wanted very much to talk to her. Maybe he could offer to take her to breakfast. But she’d say she had to work; why not his place instead? And in the end it would revert to cash. What did it matter, though, really? She was lonely. So was he. The money was just a formality to preserve her pride. And as for the legality, it seemed like no more than a formality considering what had already happened.

He ran into the drivers’ lounge to get his waybill punched, came back to squirt out his cab, and rode around to the gas pump which was only about fifteen feet from where she still stood, now shivering and with her arms folded to keep warm. She kept looking at him.

“Where to?” he asked the gas-man, conscious of her nearness. “Downstairs. Park it tight.” He nodded, drove out around where she was standing and then over the sidewalk again, giving her a wave which she acknowledged with another meaningful widening of her eyes as he headed down the narrow ramp to the basement.

As he gathered his things together, shaking his head at the brown bag thar contained his wine, and then trudged up the back steps with the bag, his jacket and his maps all piled together on his orthopedic seat, he continued arguing with himself, bringing all the old considerations like money and disease; and now age; but he knew already that the battle was lost, and, in the midst of his arguing, was already plotting how he'd point with his pursed lips when he passed and meet her down the street out of the sight of the gas-man.

Crossing the back of the garage, he glanced again to the open side by the gas-pump and saw that a Chicano driver known for pushing pills had come up to, her now and was talking to her with all kinds of overdone Latin gestures and grins. It occurred to him that maybe the Chicano would strike up a deal with her before he had a chance to make his own bid. He hurried into the lounge, threw his things on the pool table, and paid his gas and cab rental with the biggest bills he had.

As he stood by the window, watching the cashier count them out, throwing his jacket on, stuffing his wad of bills in one pocket, his bag of change in another, trying to get himself organized as quickly as possible, he noticed that his legs were trembling. He tried to act normal, but his voice wavered when he shouted, "Yea, that's right, two over. Take it easy. So long."

When he emerged from the lounge, he immediately looked to the sidewalk and discovered she was gone. With his bag of wine and orthopedic seat hitched up under his arm, he strode to the street and looked up and down. No one in sight. So she had gone with the Chicano dude then. But maybe not. He charged along past the dark shops to the next intersection, and, not seeing her in either direction, turned away from his apartment towards the hotel she had mentioned, meeting a bearded panhandler with a stocking cap who always worked this neighborhood at night.

Without even waiting to be asked, he handed the panhandler a fistful of quarters. "You see a little hooker with brown hair?"

"Naw, they all went in."

"You see her go in?"

"Blue eyes. Skinny, little ass. Looks like a kid?"

"Yea, more or less."

"I know who you mean. She hasn't been around."

"Okay, fellow. Thanks a lot." He wheeled around and trudged up the hill towards his apartment. "Just as well. I'm better off without her." The further he got, the angrier with himself he became. "What as ass-hole. Fuck me."

Meanwhile, between his self-directed curses, he kept going over what she had said. So she was a kid then, just seventeen, a juvenile with hurt and confusion in her past. That's what her trip home had meant to her, and if he bought into it he'd be an accomplice to injustices already done. Now she'd come back resolved to find success on her own terms with the newly-finished seductiveness he'd observed in the garage. But he'd caught a glimpse there of something else, a needy, lovable woman who intrigued him more than any woman he'd met in a long time. And the way she looked at him with those little-girl eyes. Was it naive certainty he read there, the expectation he'd give in to her again, or an appeal for help? Deep inside of him he believed that a special bond had been established that first night, that despite his avoidance of a second liaison, or maybe even because of it, because it indicated he wanted to connect with more than her sex, she regarded him as a secret ally or friend. If only he could overcome his selfishness and be that to her instead of succumbing to his passions.

"But I have to be realistic," he scribbled in his journal as soon as he got home. "I'm not going to be any platonic big brother because I want her too much. And what could I do for her really? She doesn't need my money. I'm not keeping her here. Best thing to do is lend an ear if she needs one but otherwise keep my distance." He returned to work the next evening determined that from then to when he left for the Midwest he'd make a solid push for money and self-discipline.

Two mornings later when he swung into the garage, she was outside on the sidewalk with the Chicano pusher she'd been with the night he had the wine. She flashed her gummy

smile at him as he drove in to the air-hose; he didn't stop to say hello, thinking he'd meet her again as he left. But as he emerged from the lounge after getting his waybill punched he saw her taking off in a cab with a silver-haired man in dark glasses. "Just as well," he muttered to himself. "Guess that's the way it's supposed to be." But as he climbed the hill, looking up and down the dark streets to see if she'd come back, it occurred to him that maybe she thought he hadn't cared enough to .ask how she was; and that disturbed him, he noticed, more than it should have.

Several more times he came across her at the garage when there were other drivers present and no chance to pair off. She always hung around when she saw him as if wanting to talk. Either that or she sensed how much he wanted her and was challenged by his resistance. Or could it be, incredible as it seemed, that she'd developed a crush on him, and the more he stayed away from her the worse it got? He always said a few, friendly words as he came out, and studied her face for a moment trying to figure out what she was after. But she met his stares with seductive smiles; and so he went on, glad he'd been spared a tougher test, and debating with himself again what difference it would make one way or the other if he paid for what would just be an avenue to the intimacy they both needed. But he distrusted his perceptions and motives, and whenever he met her made a firmer resolution to keep his distance.

This continued for another couple of weeks. After evaluating his money situation, he decided to postpone his departure a month. About the same time, his father had another small medical crisis which passed in a few days but made him feel more urgent about saving money quickly and getting back to his family. He was driving as hard as he could, but it seemed as if the more he pushed the less he made. And Jane Morrow still hadn't written. He talked to her on the phone now and then but it was obvious that she was losing interest in keeping in touch. He felt angry at her and angry at whatever had prevented his face from healing, including his own intemperance. He kept fighting off the urge to get stoned or drunk or give the prostitute a nod.

Then one windy night when it had been raining for hours, the worst kind of drizzle, just enough to mess up the windshield and not enough to keep the wipers from creaking, he parked by a fire hydrant to eat his supper of cottage cheese and an apple (to increase his earnings he no longer allowed-himself a formal break), and had just settled back on the seat, looking at the mist-shrouded lights and buildings down the street, when someone tapped on the far side window and he turned to see a pretty, blue-eyed woman peering in at him: “Hey, Gersh, is that you? It’s me, Michele.”

It was the first time she’d ever used his name, and it ran through his mind that probably she hadn’t known it before and had asked Jensen what it was. In any case, he was glad to see her. He leaned over and opened the door. “Hey, Michele, nice to see you. Come on in.”

“You sure it’s all right?”

“Really, I can’t think of a more pleasant surprise.”

She smiled brightly, felt the seat which was wet where the window had been slightly open, and sat down in the middle by the meter, shrugging her shoulders. “Well, it’s nice to get out of the rain. It’s so gloomy, isn’t it? I was really getting cold.”

He handed her his jacket. “The heater doesn’t work, I’m afraid. But maybe this will help.”

She smiled again, displaying her uneven teeth, and drew the jacket around her shoulders. Her face was flushed from walking; she was wearing a tan T-shirt and jeans. Beneath the moist T-shirt her nipples could be seen. He glanced at them and looked away.

His carton of cottage cheese was sitting on the meter. “I wish I had something better to offer you,” he said. “But this is all I have. Unless you want to drive somewhere.”

“No, that’s okay. I’m not really hungry. But I’ve got some grapes if you want some.” She held up a brown bag.

“Yea, I’ll have a couple,” he replied, drawing away from her a little an noticing that she seemed flustered.

“Did I tell you?” she said after a pause. “I got nabbed by a cop.”

"Oh no! When was that?"

"Last Friday."

"They book you?"

"Yea, took my picture and everything." She laughed. "I hope I looked okay."

"You mean they threw you in?"

"Yea, kept me all weekend."

"Where was that, downtown?"

"Yea, in the courthouse."

He shook his head and gazed at her young face, trying to detect how she felt. But it was hard to read her moods; she treated everything so lightly.

"It must have bummed you out," he began after another moment of silence.

She wrinkled her nose and looked away from him towards the sidewalk. "Oh I don't know. I guess so. This dude that picked me up, he really put me through a trip, you know, flashed all this money at me, and asks me exactly what I would do, all the details, you know. And then he goes, 'Hey, guess what? I'm a cop.' And he flashes this badge at me."

"Hey, he's not supposed to put you through a number. You could get him for that."

"Sure, get him how?"

"What an asshole, though."

"To say the least."

They sat looking down the street where there were two stoplights in exact symmetry with one another; when the first turned from red to green, the second turned from green to red, the yellow providing a moment of imbalance. Beyond the stoplights was a blinking orange sign, indecipherable in the mist.

"You ever been in there?" she asked after a long silence.

"Where you mean, in jail?"

"Yea, in the courthouse or whatever."

"Couple of times."

"What you remember about it?"

"Crowded. Dirty. Nothing to do."

"Yea, the same routine."

He realized that she wanted to talk about it and tried to continue the conversation. “So what you do then, bide your time?”

“Well, one thing,” she answered, raising her head, her upper lip pouting. “I didn’t eat their old food.”

“How come?”

“I guess to be stubborn. Didn’t want them thinking they could push me around. Haw! They’re all going, ‘Leastways take it and give it to somebody else.”

“So you take it then?”

“No way! Just kept to myself on the bunk.”

He nodded his head slowly, seeing more tenacity than selfishness in her unreasoned resistance. A childish tenacity but admirable nonetheless. She kept coming closer to him as if expecting to be held. For a while he pretended not to notice. Then he reached over and swept her hair back from her forehead.

She lowered her eyes. “Then there’s these three dykes, you know, this weepy little black chick who I knew before ‘cuz I used to play the hotels—

“Yea, I remember.”

“—and she did, too, you know, and she used to get all pissed at me—

“Defending her turf.”

“—and this fat lady with short hair and this other chick who thinks she’s all elegant and everything but she’s skinny as a rail. They keep coming up to me, you know. Guess they thought I was queer.”

He, too, had thought that maybe she was gay and that’s why she found it so easy to move from man to man without attachments. But apparently it wasn’t so.

“Coming up to you how?”

“Oh, I don’t know. All kinds of weird things. Like asking me to model. The black chick, you know, the hooker --She had this frilly underwear and she keeps asking me to put it on and walk around in it for her. ‘Come on, let bygones be bygones. Oh, Lordie, sweetheart, you’ll look so goo-oo-ood.’” She threw back her head and drawled out her “o’s”. “Haw! It was creepy, let me tell you.”

"What you do then?" Gersham said, brushing back her hair again. She leaned closer to him. He placed his hand on her shoulder. She nestled against him.

"You gotta put on a front, you know. If they see you aren't tough, they do you in. It's the same on the streets." Her voice became lower and more authoritative. But then, as if doubting her own statement, she shrugged her shoulders and added softly, "At least, that's what I've been finding out."

"So you scared them away?"

"Kind of for a while. But when the lights went out they came after me again. I don't think they were gonna hurt me or anything, you know. I guess they just wanted a good feel."

"They grab you or something?"

"No, I was on this top bunk, and they came up under me, you know, and held me down. Then they were gonna stick something inside of me. But I yelled and they ran off." She suddenly laughed. "I yelled so goddam loud, man! I woke up the whole jail."

She was leaning against him now, playing with the "extra" button on the meter. He kept studying her face, trying to determine if what she'd described had been traumatic for her. But she presented everything in such a calm, matter-of-face way, with her strange peals of laughter here and there, that he couldn't sort it out.

"I don't understand you," he finally said.

"What's to understand? What you see is what you get."

"Aw, come on, Michele. There's more to you than that."

"So maybe there is."

"That must have blown your mind."

"Well, like I said, you gotta be tough."

He shook his head in exasperation. She was wholly inside his arms now but he made no attempt to touch her with his hands.

For a long time they sat in silence and then she said, "I suppose you want to go."

"No, I like to hold you, Michele. I really do."

She looked up at him, her eyes twinkling mischievously. "You think I'm pretty sexy, huh?"

"Well, I wasn't thinking that at the moment. But yea, you are."

"Charlie says I'm a fox."

He laughed. "Well, Jensen ought to know."

"You think so, too?"

"Well, yea, Michele, you're a fox. I mean, look at you. Everything about you. You're a little doll."

She smiled all the more widely and squirmed closer to his body. He looked down and saw her breasts rising up and down. Her T-shirt was dry now, but he could still see her nipples, pressing against the cloth. Was she really turned on to him or just playing a game? He studied the nipples more closely but couldn't tell if they were engorged.

"So is that your big goal in life?" he asked. "To be considered a fox?"

"What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing."

"How come you say that then?"

"I don't know. I guess because you could have a lot more. I mean, I don't get it, why you hanging around here?"

"Doing the same thing you are."

"Well, yea, all right. But you could find some beautiful man to take care of you."

"You mean like you?"

"Not me necessarily."

"I suppose you care about me?"

"Yea, I do, to a certain extent."

"Well, I can take care of myself."

They lapsed into silence again and he was aware of her body pressing against him. He gazed down at her thighs and up to her pelvis and felt himself growing hard. She noticed his glance and ran her fingers through the hair on his arms. He wanted to respond but the situation was so ambiguously drawn; he wasn't sure if he was still a customer or a lover or friend.

"So where you headed now?" he asked, knowing even as his words came out that by the tenor of his voice he'd betrayed his desire and lost the battle to resist her. She smiled up at him, pressing her hips more snugly against him.

"Nowhere in particular. How about you?"

"Figured we could go up to my place."

"Well, can you imagine? I was just thinking the same thing."

"Only one small detail, I'm low on money," he said, expecting her to wave off the idea of pay. But she said nothing, so he continued. "To be direct with you, Michele. I don't know what basis we're on anymore."

She hesitated, running her fingers around and around on his arm. Finally she replied. "Well, how much do you have?"

He understood at once that she had rejected his bid to be a real lover. But maybe she was in dire need of cash. Obviously she lived on a more desperate level now. Who was he to deny her what she had to have to survive? He hesitated and then he said, "Thirty dollars is the most I can spare."

"Sure, thirty's fine."

He started up the engine and pulled out into the rain-wet street, thinking he'd made a mistake, that once again he'd be on an impersonal basis with her. But did it have to be that way? He just wanted to be with her alone. He felt powerless against his desire.

"You been working much?" he said, trying to make conversation, as they drove up the hill.

"Just that dude in the Tenderloin. Let me tell you, he's a trip."

Once more he thought of V.D. So who was this odd customer? Who could say whom he'd been with before or what kind of pool of disease he went in and out of to satisfy his appetites? He eased back on the gas pedal, trying to remember a drug store that stayed open all night. But none came to his mind and he didn't want to offend her anyhow by using a rubber.

As they got out of the car and hiked up the street, he was conscious that despite their brief closeness there was a new strain between them that hadn't been there before.

They went through the same routine of looking around the apartment and talking but in a quicker, more perfunctory way. When they entered the bedroom rather than waiting for

him, she undressed herself. Then she stood in front of him naked with an obliging smile on her pubescent face.

In spite of her more automatic motions, when he began she seemed carried away. But his mind was distracted. Even making love to her as he stared at he body, amazed by her beauty, he kept telling himself that his actions would maybe lead to disease or that in some way he might suffer for his excesses.

When she came around and lay beside him, though, he looked at her face and forgot his apprehensions. He just wanted to make love to her in earnest again, break through to whatever she really was; and he wanted her to know that he was making love to her like this and help her to come.

He felt himself sinking down into her; she whispered "oh" and began kissing and licking his face. He was moving back and forth inside of her, calling up all he had of sexual knowledge to bring her to an orgasm, listening carefully to the cadence of her breathing.

Again her sighing reached a crescendo and faded off. He eased his movement and peered into her face.

"What are you waiting for?" she whispered.

"Trying to get a sense of where you're at."

"For the Pete's sake, just come."

He started in again but the magic was gone and he noticed she was grimacing in pain. After a few minutes of rocking back and forth, he settled down on her and produced an artificial groan. Immediately she began squirming around. He disengaged himself and settled down beside her.

She got up and reached for her pants. "That was quite a workout. Holy Cow."

It made him angry that she dismissed the whole encounter in such a facile way. He thought there had been more to it than she'd admit. Far from feeling refreshed, he felt weighted down. He stumbled into his dark study and came back with three tattered ten's. He could tell by her face that she expected more. For a moment he considered going back for another twenty but instead he sat down on the bed and started getting dressed.

When she was getting her things together, he went into

the bathroom, pulled down his pants, and washed himself with the utmost care. He looked into the mirror and saw her reflection in the shadowed hallway behind him, watching intently.

They didn't speak to one another as they walked to the cab. He had just begun to understand what had happened, that she had come to him for counsel, and that somehow he'd allowed the situation to degenerate into this. He kept seeing her image in the mirror. So she had seen him then and knew that he considered her unclean.

He wanted to rescue the situation somehow. Instead of taking her downtown he headed in another direction. "Might as well go for a ride." He tried to bring up the subject again of her arrest, conscious as his words came out of their insincerity and weakness. She commented again that you have to be tough. He said maybe they could go somewhere and eat. She said she had to get going and find some more tricks.

As she got out, he held out another twenty. "Hey, you know. I think I made a mistake. Did I give you three ten's? I meant to give you twenties."

She waved it off and for a moment her childish face was set in an adult contempt. "No, that's all right. You said thirty. A deal is a deal."

Ruby Ellington

Among the dancers who worked the Strip in San Francisco was a 37-year-old woman named Ruby Ellington. She normally appeared at a place called the Garden of Delight where for a ten-hour shift she received $40 (this was in 1978 when the minimum wage was $2.80 an hour). Under the usual circumstance her job wasn't taxing; she had one fifteen-minute show every hour and in between numbers a forty-minute rest. But often she did what she and her colleagues termed "doubles," taking just a ten-minute break and then walking up the street to another club where she performed on the half-hour and earned an additional $35 per night. This was so exhausting, though, that at most she tried it a few times a week.

All of this proceeded according to a regular schedule which she had established years before. Early in the evening she met with her co-workers in the small dressing room by the alley where cars roared continually past to the pay-parking-lot next-door. Someone always had grass, and once in a while they were lucky and had coke. Then when the familiar jazz tune began which she never bothered to change anymore, she headed down the narrow hall to the so-called stage; it was really just a wooden platform surrounded by flashing lights. In the smoke-filled area around her, visible when the lights shone on them, were the grimacing faces of the men who laughed, yelled or cheered depending on their mood. Sometimes the club was so packed that folding chairs were brought in from the store-room, but often the manager and staff spread themselves out among the sparse customers to give the appearance of a crowd. When at last her shift was over, she ate breakfast, usually alone, in the all-night coffee shop around the corner. For an hour or so she sat looking out to the dark, deserted street. Then she took a cab hone.

Some twelve years before when Ruby Ellington had first arrived in the city as a 25-year-old woman who could have passed as a scared college freshman, this life with its fast pace and neon atmosphere had seemed exciting to her. It was a life which she had fallen into more than chosen, grabbed

unto to be good at something, just what she hadn't known. For several years at that time she had worked only three nights a week while directing her main energy into a modern dance company that did poorly for a few seasons and then fell apart. She had never really entertained the overblown dreams of the big time that others talked about, but had hoped that either the club or the company would lead eventually to a better dancing job of some kind. This, however, had never happened; many of her expectations had faded off; and she too had begun to show the effect of the years. Though still trim and young-looking with the same mane of red hair that she'd always been so proud of and thought of as part of her very identity and name (Ruby was her real name, not a stage name), she was all too aware of the little changes that had taken place in her body and face, the new wrinkles around her green eyes, the small aches and pains that she had seldom felt in the past. These changes were of great concern to her because, much as her life had devolved into boredom and routine, she still considered herself a part of the Strip, and dreaded the readjustments that she would have to make when her age became so apparent that she could no longer stay.

What she feared most of all was that when this finally came about she would be terribly lonely. Up until five years before, and for three years before that, she had lived with a black musician whom she had loved very much, a troubled man with a sad, bearded face who all the while she'd known him had gone back and forth between junk and methadone but nonetheless been kind and attentive to her and provided her with a bronze-skinned, green-eye son. That period—though fraught with crises, the happiest, most meaningful of her life—came to a sudden end, however, one night while she was at work, when in a fit of despondency he had killed himself and the child by letting the gas run in the one-room apartment the three of them shared on Russian Hill. She had never quite accepted this loss, never understood by what strange twist of karma her devotion to him and her son had materialized in their premature deaths. In her heart she believed that life was just and people got what they deserved

not in any afterworld but in their immediate existence. It was true that she and her lover had quarreled a lot, that his suicide had followed an abusive argument which when she recalled it gave he a pang of remorse. But in the main she had been loyal to him and supportive of his efforts at rehabilitation. As for the child: without a doubt she had treated him with affection and care. So how then had justice been served by her misfortune? Though she had no religious background to refer to except bits and pieces she had picked up through the years, and had always regarded herself as a free spirit immune from moral scruples, she began to suspect that her attempts at love had turned out so unhappily because her life over all, especially in her earlier promiscuity and routines on the Strip, had been somehow immoral, or, worse than that, a flagrant travesty of love and of what love might be. Since this suspicion had entered her mind, her affairs with men had been infrequent, brief and traumatic. Over the years, in fact, partly because of her involvement at the club, but more as the result of a relentless inner assault on her thoughts and feelings which she could not prevent, she had come to think of relations between the sexes in general as lewd and disgusting, and grown increasingly contemptuous of how, through a series of half-decisions and delays, she had given herself up to what seemed more and more the lowest tendencies in men. But still she had stayed. This was the great irony of her life, and it did not escape her. Though constantly presented as an object of desire, she was in reality more unapproachable and prudish, more adverse even to sexual fantasies, than many women with rigoristic morals. And yet in no way did she identify with such women or see herself as allied with their values. Her only associates were the dancers she worked with; they were the only ones, she felt, who perceived her life on its own terms.

Even here, however, in what she considered her proper milieu, her self-preoccupation had had its effect. Most of the women she'd been close to in the old days were gone. With those who had come in the intervening years she was on a more formal basis. She never talked to them about her principal concerns, and, in particular, not wanting to call

attention to it, never talked about age. She sensed too that her standing with the others had changed, that as she grew older she was being relegated not to that position of respect which she felt was due her because of experience but rather to an increasingly peripheral role; and this for the sole reason that, while keeping the appearance of youth, she was losing whatever it was on a deeper level—vigor, exuberance, hope—that marked off a younger person from someone older. She was very much aware of this, and to counteract this drain of vital energy listened continuously to what happened inside her, paid silent, brooding attention to any physical complication that made an inroad on her strength. This was her private battle, fought under the strain of her ever-worsening isolation, and she was proud that through her readiness she had warded off one small threat after another and maintained herself in such condition that she was called for encores as much as any performer at the club.

One evening, though,—this was in midwinter when it had been raining without stopping for a week,—she noticed a strange feeling inside her that she'd never previously had; it wasn't a pain so much as an indefinite ache, a kind of general dryness in her pelvis and lower back. She was in a down mood at this time. Two months before, as part of a personal campaign she'd begun to prepare herself psychologically for her break from the Strip whenever it occurred, she had moved from her North Beach apartment to a bedroom community about ten miles to the south, a move that had brought not only the disturbing confrontation with the conventional world which she felt she needed for her own good, but also the added expenses of cab fare (just partly paid for by the Garden) and increased rent. Then, a month after that her birthday had arrived, bearing the intensified fears of the future that lately cane with it, as well as an onslaught of memories of those long-ago deaths which were still a counterpoint to everything she did. For those deaths too had taken place during this gray season when the Strip was unusually quiet and the clubs just gathering spots for the sleazy regulars who made the shows seem all the more tawdry and aroused in her a lingering sense of self-

abasement and scorn. She was, in short, in a state of agitated depression, torn with her ambivalence regarding her whole life: on the one hand, afraid of change, clinging to the very things she hated; on the other hand, oppressed by the recollections and self-denunciations which they evoked in her, and imagining, as she did now and then, that the Strip would overwhelm her if she stayed too long.

She was as versed in her mental vacillations as in her bodily ups and downs, knew that her worst moods beset her in cycles and were often accompanied with ailments of one sort or another, and so she assumed that this strange feeling inside her was something minor, such as a case of flu or a cold, that had gotten a temporary hold because of her dejection. Likewise, though this dark mood had been more pronounced than any in the recent past (perhaps because 37 seemed so much more significant, so much closer to 40 than 35 or 36), she assumed that it would eventually fade out, taking with it the physical discomfort that it had brought. Even so, she responded with her typical vigilance, a that night when she got home did some of the stretching exercises that she had done so religiously in her earlier days as a dancer but neglected for several months. Then, the next morning, after sleeping late to give herself what rest she needed, she mixed a concoction of fruit, yogurt and vitamins in her blender, and drank it slowly while trying to calm down her thoughts. There was nothing to worry about, at least nothing new, she told herself, just the same, old memories and concerns, a change of address that she could undo if she wished. Indeed, that very night and in the next week there were occasional moments when she broke from her somber mood and containment to sudden sensations of expansiveness and light But, as if in defiance of her efforts, the dryness became more emphatic while at the same time, paradoxically, more indefinite, specific to no one place in her body, and related, if to anything, to movement itself; it was in the act of moving, particularly in making sharp, turning notions, that she most noticed it.

Night after night as she wound through her routines, bringing as much grace as she could to the raw choreography

the manager preferred, she was vaguely aware of this still not actually painful but nonetheless distressing, aridity inside her; and to avoid being reminded of it checked her motion so severely that by the end of each program she felt more exhausted from breaking her flow in this way than she would normally have felt from an evening of more strenuous renditions.

Alarmed by her extraordinary fatigue, she began to think that she needed medical help of some kind. Far from consoling her with the prospect of cure, this increased her anxiety. She only went to doctors in the most adverse of circumstances; the very going was an admission that something was seriously wrong. Moreover, she had a notion that doctors somehow fastened down illnesses that if left alone might go away by themselves; she knew of instances where people with minor problems had been hospitalized by doctors and from that point onward gone progressively downhill. Besides, there was the matter of money. To meet the new bills incurred from moving, she was already doing doubles sometimes four nights a week. Her medical insurance, which she paid for herself, covered just in-hospital expenses. Any office visit or test she had to take care of herself. In the bank she had a thousand dollars that she hated to touch. So what if this feeling proved to be more than the result of a passing mood? What it required restricting her hours of work while adding to her financial burdens? Or what if it was something worse, some terrible disease that would alter her whole life?

The question of whether to see a doctor, whether to give the feeling such an official status, was constantly on her mind. While she went through her nightly schedule, she argued endlessly with herself regarding her condition, putting off from one day to another any decision about seeking medical advice. Then one night, after coming down the hall utterly drained followin4 her last performance of the evening, she heard two of the younger dancers whom she hardly knew talking about an orthopedist that one of them had seen with favorable results. She listened closely to his name, jotted it down in the notebook that she always kept in

her purse, and the next morning, when she awoke and recognized the same, dull sensation in her hips and knees, she fumbled for the notebook, looked up the orthopedist's number, and called and made an appointment for that very afternoon.

As it turned out, his office was in a tall building in the downtown area near Union Square where years before she had wandered after getting off the Greyhound bus on her first afternoon in the city. It was a chilly day; a light rain was falling, though amidst the swirling clouds were patches of light. Because she considered it a special occasion, she wore her best outfit, a brown tweed suit. Feeling somewhat odd in these conservative clothes she walked through the hotel section with her red hair blown back, her lovely face set firmly, and a black umbrella in her small, gloved hand. Here too, as on the Strip, there were memories all around, in the wide sidewalks streaming with people, the shop windows with their colorful displays, the square with its neatly-trimmed hedges, beds of daffodils and pansies, and slowly-waving palms; but these memories were of a less oppressive kind, more whimsical and evanescent, a vague remembrance of a girlish woman who had been more optimistic and whole. After that came the office: the receptionist with her glowing, youthful face; and then, at last, the orthopedist, a not- so-much handsome as respectable-looking, middle-aged man whose entire bearing spoke of the refinement and decency which she felt that she herself lacked. But for all of her anticipation and self-consciousness, nothing much transpired. He listened patiently to her complaints, ordered sediment tests for arthritis and x-rays of her pelvis and spine, shook her hand in a dignified manner, and told her to return in a week.

She was glad to get away, glad that the tests had just been tests and that the results were seven days off. She felt satisfied that at least she had made a step towards restored health. As for the feeling itself, it fade off and then flared up again to a new intensity in the midst of which were two images, it seemed, almost like movie scenes of her walking, in one scene a young, graceful girl, her red hair tied gypsy-

style with a blue bandanna, in the other a matronly woman (was she that?) who, despite her brown tweed suit, could not hide the confusion and corruption inside her.

So steadily did her discomfort grow worse that by the time the second appointment came around she was convinced that something drastic was wrong. With foreboding she rode the cab to the square (again the sky above the buildings was gray), ascended the elevator to the eighth floor where the office was located, and, after sitting in an almost-empty waiting-room with a frantic woman whose tow-headed child kept staring at her, she followed the receptionist to a small white room where the doctor soon informed her that the tests had been negative: there was nothing wrong with her at all.

"But what does this mean?" she said, not quite believing what she had heard. Even as she turned towards him in an effort to find some hidden significance in his calm expression, she felt the tension behind her knees, such an extreme tension that it took an effort to keep her legs from bending. "I just know there's something wrong. I can feel it."

"Can feel what?"

"Well, for one thing, this tightness behind my knees. But more than that, just this overall dryness. I can't explain it." She was standing in the erect posture which was habitual for her, with her spine extended, chest expanded, and shoulders thrown back: a posture like that of a girl taking ballet who at every moment stretches her torso or rises on her toes. And her face too, her handsome, womanly face with its prominent cheekbones, deep-set green eyes, and athletically-gaunt, nearly cachectic flesh, had the startled look of a frightened child.

"Ah," he intoned, stooping to feel her knees and then rising again and peering at her. He also had an appearance of intensity, though of an intellectual rather than physical sort. His blue eyes were warm and compassionate, but around his tightly-compressed lips was a rigidity that suggested the compassion extended only so far, to where began science, business, hard facts. And apparently he was used to vague ailments that were beyond prognosis or treatment. He sighed,

had her go through a series of movements, none of which produced any particular or localized pain, and then looked again at her charts. “What you’re describing,” he said softly, “is a matter of your subjective assessment of how you feel. But some people feel pain or discomfort when others feel nothing. In any case, what you present is too nonspecific at this point for me to be of much help. Unless, of course, there’ve been other factors. Then maybe I could suggest someone else. Have you been under some kind of strain?”

His gaze was so direct and intelligent that she felt an instinctive trust in him. Still she could not bear to look at him long. Nor could she force herself to divulge her private concerns. He seemed too eminent and established. How could he understand? “No, nothing I can think of,” she replied, shaking her head.

“Then I would just say, take care of yourself. Rest if you can.”

She realized that by these words of concern he meant to indicate that the interview was done. She felt, however, that nothing conclusive had been decided, and this disturbed her very much. Again she glanced at him. He regarded her steadily but by shifting his clipboard from his right to his left hand betrayed his eagerness to go. Nevertheless, she hesitated more, looking out the window where the sun had just broken through the clouds. Far below was a rain-wet street so gleaming with sunshine that the cars and buses coming towards her appeared to be gliding down a river of light. Because of her night hours she so infrequently came out in midday that this effect dazzled her for a moment and made her feel all the more poignantly that with no recourse to anyone now she was being cut off from something vital and needed.

Observing her consternation, he turned his full attention to her again

“I noticed on your records that you’re a dancer.”

She had never before thought of this as anything to be ashamed of except in her own thoughts, and for many years had been proud of her profession. But she sensed a slight condescension in his voice, and, to her surprise, felt her

cheeks turning red. “Yes, I am.”

“So this is a matter of more concern to you than it would be for many people.”

“Yes.”

“Well, then I should explain to you, Miss Ellington, that these symptoms you have may well be just age. I don’t mean the kind of age that shows up in your face, but something much deeper which has to do with changes in the makeup of your bones. There’s no need for these changes to be a cause of alarm, but they will make you feel differently inside. We all have to get used to the idea that after a certain age our bodies aren’t the same. Most probably you know this already, but don’t know all the subtleties involved. And someone like you who’s been so involved in conditioning her whole life is bound to feel these subtleties more. Even so, it doesn’t follow that they’re of more consequence in you than in anyone else. You just have to work with what you have, learn to deal with a body that’s not the same as it’s been in the past. If you have more serious problems, you can come back. Or I could prescribe some valium, I suppose. Would you like me to do that?”

“You mean to relax?”

“Uh-huh. To help you calm down if you feel pressured in any way.”

“Naw, I went through this whole trip, you know, to clean up my act. And I don’t want to go back to that messy state any more.”

“Well, good for you.”

“So it’s just age then,” she said to herself as she hiked up the street which a few minutes before she had viewed from the window. The sun had retreated once more behind the low-flying clouds. People hurried along the sidewalk. She hardly looked at them. “Just age.” She felt that she should be terribly relieved that the feeling was this and not something more harmful or constraining. And she was relieved in a way. But that age was so insidious in its development had never occurred to her before. Not wanting to go immediately to the Strip, she walked along past shops which in this neighborhood, a distance removed from the

main hotels, were less colorful, more mundane—a photography store, a place selling Japanese paintings and fans, an antique shop with a clutter of dusty nick-nacks in the window. These too she barely saw. Five blocks later she came to a crowded delicatessen where she ordered a sandwich that she didn't eat and sat looking outside. Her mind was awhirl. "Just age," she repeated, "and now my body will be dry." But this dryness, what was it? If it was, in fact, just age, the same enemy that she'd faced all along, then it could be fought with familiar weapons: physical discipline, correct nutrition, a constant mental keenness. This gave her hope. She ate her sandwich and went out.

A half-block later she saw a woman coming towards her, obviously about her own age, perhaps more than 40, obviously free, judging from her tastefully-refined, expensive clothes, of survival concerns of any sort, but 40 nonetheless, and very elegant with an alert, pretty face, large, expressive dark eyes, carefully-coiffured, slightly-graying, brown hair, and a slender lissome body like a girl's. She noticed this in a flash as she passed, noticed most of all this woman's combination of age and vitality, her look of being in life, a part of life, fully alive. And 40. Yes. Perhaps older than that. So age, indeed, could be resisted. But what a simple thought! It made her laugh, almost, to realize that she'd forgotten that so much came down to vigilance. Yet had she forgotten? No, not forgotten, really, though everything, it seemed, was distorted by her fears. Well, then, these senseless fears had to be disciplined out. She hailed a cab and sat watching the rush hour crowds that pressed with counter-purposes up and down the street. People of all sizes, shapes and ages: some with that look of vibrant life; others with that other look of utter loneliness and desperation which city dwellers often have. Far from feeling defeated, she felt defiant, suffused with new vigor.

Arriving early at the club, she went to the dressing room. No one was there. Slowly she undressed, still lost in her thoughts. Then, noticing the floor-length mirror across from her, she crossed the room and stood in front of it, staring at her naked body. It struck her as strange and

incomprehensible that she was what she was. For the image that met her gaze was that of an astonishingly-beautiful woman, not slender and girlish like the woman she'd observed by the deli, but so much fuller in dimension, so much more frighteningly feminine than that, with long, well-muscled legs, gracefully-rounded, lean hips, a narrow waist, swelling, shapely breasts, and carved into her finely-sculpted face the unapproachable-looking green eyes which gave her an air of haughtiness that even when she didn't want it she could not help but affecting.

The club was packed that night with furniture salesmen dressed in leisure suits and white shoes who were in town for the biggest convention of the year. During her first performance she was given a great deal of applause. All through the night she felt stronger and stronger, so strong that she forgot to ask herself if the dryness was still there. She danced as in fever and after her last number was twice called back for encores which she proudly supplied.

A chorus of ‘‘wows" greeted her when she returned to the dressing room.

"Hey, you see that Ruby? She was looking like Vegas or something! She had them white-shoes panting!

She laughed and settled down into one of the threadbare easy chairs by the battered lockers that lined the side of the room, glancing around at the perspiring bodies of the other women which in the direct light from the single, overhead lamp looked more ungainly than lovely. On the lime-green, barrack-like walls were clippings from dance magazines and artsy notices of on kind or another. She felt happy, triumphant, and the rest of the performers, sensing her mood, kept joking with her and saying that she better get a raise or something if she danced like that every night.

There were five others in the room when she first came in. Despite all their banter, they dressed hurriedly and left, first three of them together talking about Tai Chi, then the last two hand in hand, their laughter echoing in the hall. With the room empty again, she found her high spirits abated. For a long time she sat staring at the wall. Then she jumped up, muttering to herself as nowadays she did more and more:

"What the hell am I doing I'm going to be here all night." She leaned down to feel her knees, too tired to tell if the ache was still there.

Ten minutes later, having decided not to eat breakfast as usual at the restaurant around the corner, she emerged from the front door of the club and looked up and down the street for the cabbie who often stopped by and gave her a reduced fare home. The neon signs along the Strip were already out. Down the block to her left was a cafe that stayed open after-hours. Several taxies were parked there, her driver's not among them. The wind gusted up the sidewalk. From the orangish-red clouds above the dark buildings, a steady drizzle fell. Two long-haired kids sat in the shelter of an awning playing a harmonica and guitar by the closed liquor store to her right. Soothing music, but the rain made her anxious. She pulled up the collar of her rabbit-fur coat and withdrew into the dry niche of the doorway, her face blank with fatigue. The events of the day passed through her mind. She heard the orthopedist saying, "Just age." After that came the woman by the deli, the graying, vibrant woman with the tasteful clothes. Then she felt herself dancing in what now in retrospect seemed an indistinct, formless, almost dreamlike violence of motion. And suddenly it occurred to her that she had been dancing without her normal restraint, without her normal dignity of movement. The others had seen this. Their congratulations, perhaps, had been feigned or tongue-in-cheek. That was why they had left the dressing room so quickly. But didn't they always leave quickly? Well, yes, except on a special occasion. This, however, had been no special occasion, just an evening of the typical conventioneers' gusto which she had played up to more than the rest. There was something contemptible in that.

Even as she was berating herself, two men in leisure suits came staggering along, apparently quite drunk. They were furniture people who had been at the show. One of them, in particular, she recognized; he had a thin, boyish face and his dark-rimmed glasses seemed too large. The second man was older, maybe in his mid-thirties, with a bulbous nose, flushed cheeks, and a fleshy chin.

"You get a load of that red head?" said the older, more heavy-set man who was carrying a brown bag full of what appeared to be glossy magazines.

With a start she realized that they were talking about her. She backed further into the doorway and lifted her hand to her face as if to wipe her mouth.

"The one with the hair all over the goddam place?" replied the younger man. He had a manner of walking, with his head up and mouth open, that made him look foolish, but he was affecting a macho swagger, swinging his long arms widely and shaking his skinny head from side to side.

"Yea, what a fucking siren! Hey, let me tell you... Hey, just tell me the truth... I know you're the old, proverbial married man. But how'd you like to stick your dong into that?"

"Haw-haw-haw. Kreston, you're too much. Hey, but there's one teensy-weensy consideration, you know."

"Oh yea, what's that?"

"Haw-haw. Crotch-rot. Where you think these broads hang out?"

"How should I know where they hang out?"

"All over the place, that's where. And you get a good look at that red head? You get a real, good look at her?"

"Saw her from distance just like everybody else."

"Well, I saw her up close. That goddam bitch is old."

"Old? What you talking about?"

"Fucking over-the-hill is what I'm talking about. I tell you, I saw the bitch up close."

She lifted back her head as though slapped in the face. Once more she peered up and down the street for her regular cab, but the driver was still nowhere in sight. She felt unbearably tired; she kept shaking her head. "I am a goddam bitch. The dopey white-shoes is right." Her lower back was aching; her upper legs were so tense that she could feel her buttocks pressing together; and at the top of them in her tailbone was a dull, pulsating pain. She leaned her shoulder against the side of the doorway and stood this way with her eyes closed for such a long time that she almost lost her sense of where she was. Then she opened her eyes and

noticed a cab coming towards her, not her usual cab but nonetheless a way home. She flung up her hand.

That night she had a terrible dream. She was on the stage at the club, dancing in an exaggerated tempo. To both sides of her and behind her were flashing lights—red, purple, green and orange. Beneath her feet was the surface of the platform which in this continually-changing illumination appeared insubstantial, almost fluid, composed of waves of color. In front of her in the smoke-filled recesses of the serving room loomed the faces of the men in the audience; they floated in the throbbing light as if not connected to bodies; at least, she could not see their bodies or was unaware of them. In all of this there was nothing very different from what she experienced every night. But somehow the atmosphere was more intense. The color had assumed a somber heaviness which in reality they couldn't have. Or they, were somehow not the same colors at all, or heightened to an impossible pitch. And the air that pushed down on her from the black vastness of the ceiling, it too was thicker, more inescapable than air which existed in real life, so compressed and viscous that after dancing in this fervent manner for several minutes that seemed endless she could not endure the strain any more, and gradually, inexorably her movements slowed down until even to lift her arms and legs required a superhuman effort. Still she kept on. Then something inexplicable happened: the outer shell of her body became transparent, revealing her inner parts, most prominently her bones which were not at all healthy in appearance but rather a dry, tallow color and desiccate-looking, streaked with cracks and striated marks. She herself knew that this revelation was taking place, and, embarrassed, searched the shadowed faces of the men to see if they noticed, though apparently none of them did. She kept staring at them to be sure that this was true, noticing, as she gazed back and forth, the faces of the skinny man with the oversized glasses and the heavy-set man, his companion. They had their heads thrown back in a constant leering expression that seemed to grow continuously more hideous and yet it remained the same. Then her eyes drifted to the

corner of the room where from beneath the door to the kitchen a shaft of yellow light shot out.

Next to this, not directly in this light but faintly illumined by it, were her lover and child. They saw. She wanted to explain that it was all just a dream. Even in her somnolent state, she recognized the situation for what it was. When she left the stage, however, and waded towards them, her movement became all the more labored; the men surrounded her on all sides, caressing her breasts and hips as she passed. Then the thin man, moving without effort between the milling bodies, leaped up to her, bent down to her crotch, and nibbled away at her madly while the others laughed. But soon he popped up and pronounced, “Rotted, rotted, rotted to the core.”

She awoke in alarm, shook her head, jumped from the bed, and went to the window. It was already after daybreak. The sun, in fact, was high above the tidy houses and eucalyptus trees across the way. Beyond these houses and trees was a patchwork of other buildings and vegetation, the buildings mostly white or various shades of pastel, the vegetation turgid and green, the sky brownish-yellow with a layer of smog that prevented a clear view of the barren slopes in the distance. She peered at the sun, noticed its glare on the moving cars below the window where traffic streamed monotonously by with a soporific roar. Then, with a sigh, she crossed the bedroom to her small kitchen,—here the walls were covered with batiks and there were plants of all sorts amidst a clutter of canisters, packages, dishes, nick-nacks and clothes,—made and drank a vitamin concoction which she hardly tasted, returned to the bedroom, pulled a foam-rubber mat from the closet, placed it on the floor beside the dresser, and settled softly down to begin her exercises. The tension was still there. Now her legs felt heavy as if the blood was pressing out from inside. Perhaps they were swollen. She leaned forward to feel them. Not swollen at all. She stretched herself further. The feeling in her tailbone was also still there. Was it really a pain? Not exactly, more muted than that. “What’s going on? What’s going on?” she whispered to herself. “Can it just be age? No,

it's got to be more." She crawled from the mat into bed, pulling the covers on top of her. Again she could see the setting of the dream: the somber colors and weighted air. "Rotted," the thin man said. She rubbed her eyes. "Ridiculous thoughts. I got to relax." Then she remembered the orthopedist: "Valium, if you're under strain." Her purse was on the chair by the bed. She fumbled for her notebook, reached for the telephone and dialed.

No sooner had she spoken to the nurse when she regretted that she had called. But she had already given her name, and now the doctor himself was on the line sounding serious and attentive. Not knowing what to say, she blurted, "I changed my mind about the valium. I better get it after all."

"But you said you didn't want to start up on chemicals again."

"Well, yea, I said that. But there's this general tension, you know. just can't deal with it anymore."

"And otherwise the symptoms are the same."

"Yea, I guess they are kind of basically the same but with more of an edge. I feel more strained."

"I could set you up for counseling, if you think it would help."

"Naw, the money, you know."

"It may be available for a lesser price than what you expect."

"No, I don't... I just couldn't do that. The medication is all I really want."

He hesitated and then complied. She picked up the pills on the way to work. They were tiny and yellow, an innocent drug. She had used them once before. In the cab she took two. They helped a lot. Then, after her first performance, she took a couple of more, enough to produce a sense of languor, not really a stupor, but her motions felt more fluent and unconscious than they had been in a long while. Encouraged, she repeated the same dosage the next evening. But towards the end of the program, to her dismay, the dryness asserted itself even in the midst of her trancelike movement, asserted itself so strongly that what it made her think of was a knife

scraping along the inside of her bones. And later at home in her bedroom, as she lay listening to the traffic outside, she had a feeling that her lover and child had come back. They were there, behind and to the left of her where she had seen them by the door to the kitchen in her dream, their faces indirectly illumined by a shaft of yellow light which when she turned towards it wasn't really there. What was there, in fact, behind and to the left of her bed, was an oblong window on which, since it looked out to an alleyway, she never raised the shade. Not for an instant did she believe, truly believe, that her lover and her son were actually there where she imagined them to be, that their felt-nearness was any more than an illusion created by the afterglow of her dream. Nonetheless, despite the decreasing vividness of the remembered images and setting, the mood of the dream lingered on for several more nights; she still had a sense of an unnatural compression in the spacer around her; and the vague presence of her lover and child, though she explained it away as much as she could, was a source of continuing distress.

Meanwhile her mind was awhirl. She thought to herself again that the dryness could not be just age; it was too pronounced, too relentless in its development, to be just that. And it could not be tension, not tension alone; for if it was tension, then wouldn't the valium, by inducing relaxation and thereby diminishing the tension, have diminished the dryness as well? No, it could not be age or tension, nor anything as simple as them by themselves. Something more basic was wrong, and it was connected with her lover and her child, with her past. The way they had looked at her in the dream: did they blame her for their deaths? He had warned her, her lover had, of the tragedies to come, had said that he could not bear to live anymore, that their life in general was no good and the boy foredoomed by his mixed blood, an offense to both races with no place to go, had said again and again that in her deepest heart she despised him, the father, for being black. And she had denied it again and again, had tried repeatedly to reassure him and portray their situation in the most positive way. Even so, those words of

anger at times had burst forth. Maybe what she had done had not been enough. Maybe, as he had implied, she had really wished him harm. But no, no, no, she would never accept that this was true. So much of that, even his most hateful accusations, had been the product of a moment, islands of darkness in the midst of what in the main had been a decent life. And there had been those other moments of tenderness and genuine love. If anything, what they were, what they had been, the three of them, were common victims of the power or force or whatever it was—was it God?—that had never cared for her anyhow and was now extending its punishment, its curse, to the physical health which was all she had left and which she had worked so hard to maintain against loneliness, sorrow and age. Those first misfortunes had been a warning to leave. Out of cowardice and fear of change she had stayed. And so now her bones were tallow-colored, dry and streaked with the white, cakey matter that when the light shone out from inside of them was so hideous to behold.

Even as she thought this, though, another voice in her was saying: “Ruby, Ruby Ellington, this is a paranoid, illogical thought. Think about it a moment. This makes no sense at all. There is no light inside of me. My bones are not really dry. And I’m not actually evil. There is no curse on me. I’ve done nothing wrong. Where all this comes from, pure and simple, is my mind. am making things up that don’t have to be. And when I listen, listen, lister to these made-up aches and pains, what this does, it just creates this tension. And because of this tension—now let me get this straight—because of this tension I’m all tied up. I’m not flowing anymore. Isn’t that where it’s at? I’m not moving like I used to. I gotta calm down. Gotta tap into the center. Draw the motion from there. From where? From the navel. Yea, the navel, the navel. How’d I forget?”

This struck her as a sudden revelation. “The navel. Drive through from the navel.” Someone had said that once in those early days when to understand movement had been so important to her. Everything was moving. The universe was moving; the planets, the stars, they were all in continuous motion. This too she recalled. To dance was to connect with

this motion on a mystical as well as a physical plane, and where this motion came from was through the navel. It was a Carlos Castenada kind of trip in which what had to be done was to be one with the music, and not only with the music itself, with the sound that made it up, but also with the holes between the sounds; there too there was a pattern that had to be attended to in order to harmonize with the Tao, the flow. All of this she had heard or talked about years before in excited conversations, and it came back to her now as a mish-mash of vaguely-related ideas which nonetheless offered hope. Because if she could learn to move again, learn to move as she had moved before the dryness appeared, then maybe, by connecting with that cosmic motion, she could free the energy which the tension had constricted, and with this liberated energy return herself to health.

She began taking a couple of more pills every night, not enough to make it impossible to perform, but enough to induce a continual stupor in which only the movement was real. And she tried to perceive of the dryness in a different, more positive way, as intrinsic to the movement, organic to it, arising like it in that magical center where some vital connection was taking place. For several nights, it seemed, this approach brought marvelous results. She felt almost as if she were swimming, and was conscious while she danced of a fixed point inside of her around which her gyrations revolved and through which the motion, the energy, was flowing, flowing. But whenever she took less of the drug, there was the dryness again. Was it really just a part of the movement? No, it was separate from it, opposed to the motion, a genuine dryness, genuine ache. Was it going away? Perhaps it was, perhaps ever so slightly. She couldn't tell for sure.

Another week went by in this manner, with her feeling at one moment that she had found a path to cure, and at the next moment suspecting that all of her philosophizing about movement had been nothing more than a retreat to ideas from her youth which now for some inexplicable reason seemed empty and worn out. Or, worse than that, what they amounted to, these ideas, was an excuse for the small, yellow

pills which, though innocuous enough, still came down to an addiction of a sort which she had promised herself she would nevermore permit. But how to unravel this situation, what to do next, she didn't know. She thought of seeing the orthopedist again and arranging for the counseling that he had suggested. She wanted very much to talk to someone, really talk. But she could not force herself to make the call. Several times she made awkward overtures to various women at work, tried to tag along with this or that clique of dancers as they left. Even when she managed to do this, however, she felt old and out of place. She sensed too that the others had noticed the decreasing quality of her performances or had observed that she walked stiffly and was serious all the time. Rather than calling attention to this, betraying her condition even more, she pretended to be light-hearted and carefree and affected a suppleness she no longer felt.

Night followed night. Was she making progress? She didn't know. Would the dryness stay forever? Surely something could be done. If counseling was needed, she should compel herself to try. She alone would bear the blame if she did not. The shame of it, though. To think that she, Ruby Ellington, had sunk so low. And the cost. Even if reasonable, as the orthopedist had said, there would still be a fee, a drain on her resources. How much would it come to? Twenty dollars? Maybe thirty, maybe more. To pay that amount again and again would be a problem in itself, a further complication. Could she find the energy to do another double per week? No, she was already fatigued. She needed rest. Should she dip into her savings? Then she would have nothing to rely on if forced to quit. Perhaps there was in fact a curse on her. Perhaps she was in fact rotted to the core as the thin man had proclaimed in her dream. No, no, no, ridiculous thoughts. Or perhaps what was wrong with her was something very serious that had escaped the orthopedist's notice. Well, then she should arrange to see another physician before it was too late. But she would just repeat the same statements, give her the same, slightly quizzical, slightly contemptuous expression while

prescribing a course of action which she could not afford. And there too there would be a fee, her little bit to keep the doctors in style. Well, they would get no more from her, no more of her hard-earned cash for doing nothing and looking wise. Where she had made her mistake was in moving from the city. Before that she'd had money to spare. Now every cent was allotted. Was there no going back? No going back to the city where at least she fitted in? No going back to her youth, which was gone, as the distinguished orthopedist had said? And what o the pills? Were they justified or not? Already they were three-quarters gone. Let them run out! No, to dance without them seemed inconceivable now. Then she would buy them on the street. Never would she return to that doctor again. Whatever she needed, she would get on her own.

She kept arguing like this with herself, feeling more and more angry because nothing could be done, more and more burdened with her self-imposed isolation, more and more aggrieved by how with her fellow dancers she was pretending to be something which she no longer was, no longer could be; and increasingly, as she pursued these inner arguments, it seemed to her that they went nowhere at all, just circled around and around and wound up where they had started with no added meaning, no conclusion. She tried to rethink her ideas about movement, the ideas which had been her reason for consuming the valium in ever-larger quantities; but when she tried to do this all she came up with was a jumbled mess. So now her mind was going too! Well, what had she expected from her abuse? "Let it be then," she muttered. "Whatever has happened, I brought on myself. Yea, I brought it on myself with my fucked-up life." Still she wanted very much to clear her mind. She told her self again, "I gotta get help, professional help," and replied again that she could not bear the shame or expense. But talk to someone she must! Was there no one to confide in? Had she no real friends? Was intimacy itself a condition of youth requiring a sincerity which age did not allow? "Serves me right," she said between her teeth. "Serves me right to hack it alone. Even as she denounced herself, however, even as she

repeated that she had received what she deserved, she persisted in hoping that if only she could talk to someone as to an old friend, speak to someone from the heart, then maybe she could sort out her whirling thoughts, figure out the dryness once for all, resolve how to act. Gradually, unconsciously, without ever deciding to do it, and while still taking as many pills every night, still heeding every nuance of sensation as she danced, she shifted her main attention from her speculations about movement to this problem of how to establish human contact again, substituted this human connection as a goal in her mind for the cosmic connection on which she had been so strongly focused for two weeks, and like a schoolgirl began looking around for potential friends.

But if she could not persuade herself to confide in the women she performed with, these dancers who alone understood her life for what it had been, then to whom, really, could she turn? She knew very well that, despite her move to the suburbs (or perhaps because of it, because she no longer had access to city doings as before), her small, personal world had become increasingly confined. She came to work, danced her ten hours, ate breakfast alone, rode home again, came back. Nothing ever changed. And, although she had thought of widening her horizons somehow, she doubted that she actually would. The setting was always the same—a four-block stretch of neon lights. And the people among whom she was now trying to find friends were the same people that she had seen many times and gotten to know already as well as she probably could.

Just the same, she looked and considered. And what came to her mind at once were various men. There was the manager of the Garden, for instance, a self-satisfied hustler named Richard Lammot with whom years before she had had a liaison. Now and then, between his little crudities, he was especially solicitous with her, like the master of a harem with an erstwhile concubine She felt a vague identification with him as she did with anyone with whom she had ever had sex. But what had passed between them in their brief affair, what she had learned of his true character and

predilections, she could never forgive, never forget. Then two clubs down the street was a barker, an intense, long-haired young fellow who nodded when she came by an glanced at her with dark, knowing eyes. He no doubt had an interest in striking up an acquaintanceship. In that look of cognizance, however, she recognized a wish for domination of the most unsophisticated kind. Never again would she submit to a glance like that. She had worked too hard for an existence of her own; fraught though it was with confusion, still it was he own. Then too there was the cabbie who took her home from work. He was older, middle-aged, on this account less threatening than the barker, courteous to an exaggerated degree, vigorous and optimistic in an appealing way; and yet in the midst of his little gallantries, like running around the cab to open the door, there were those occasional, perfunctory passes that kept her on her guard. No, she could not talk to him, not to a man. The chance of complication was too great.

With the dancers and these men excluded, there was only one other person that she felt any interest in at all, a lady named Emma Mueller who just three months before had begun working at Leroy's Cafe, the restaurant where she ate breakfast every night. She had never spoken much to this waitress, merely observed her across the room. Still what she had seen she had liked: a strongly-built, firm-featured woman, maybe in her late 50's, with neatly-trimmed gray hair and direct blue eyes, who treated everyone, even the down-and-outers who stumbled in now and then, with a gentle attentiveness and well-tempered blend of sympathy and toughness which suggested that she also had had her fair share of hardship and had somehow come through it without bitterness or self-pity. This quality in the waitress impressed Ruby very much. More and more she keyed on Emma Mueller as a possible friend, sensing in her a basic wisdom that might point the way out of her dilemma.

Just how to go from watching her to talking to her, however, she didn't know. She observed that in spite of her regard for her customers Mrs. Mueller (as the dancers called her) was actually a shy person, sparing with words,

restrained in manner, awkward in personal conversations, and especially reluctant to speak about herself. Besides, it seemed to Ruby Ellington that as she increased her resolve to break out of her loneliness, the dark mood that had begun with the dryness increased to a proportional intensity, as if to apply a counterforce to any initiative she tried. Though he dream in which she had seen herself dancing was now more than two weeks in the past, though the images from that dream were every day vaguer in her memory, still the feeling of compression that had originated with the dream persisted; the air still felt heavy; the colors around her seemed unnaturally heightened and pervaded with yellow tones. And all this was at its worst late at night when, exhausted from an evening of confronting her symptoms, she took her regular seat by the window in Leroy's Cafe and glanced back and forth from the waitress to the street. Not that she made no attempt to think of something to say. But whatever she thought of she turned over in her mind and judged as foolish before it reached her mouth.

It seemed so ridiculous that she should be paralyzed in this way over matter like just talking to someone that really amounted to nothing of consequence at all. Yet she could not compel herself to speak; and so she merely surrendered to her mood, eyeing the waitress so often that she started to imagine that the older woman had noticed her attention and felt a strain in her presence.

Another week went by with her feeling frustrated and helpless to calm her thoughts or escape her self-containment. With apprehension she noted that the valium was almost gone and began looking around on the street for the Philippino longhair that came by whispering "downs."

Then one evening, as it had done twice before, the dark mood suddenly and for no obvious reason gave way. Everything seemed spacious again. The air was no longer yellowish and compressed. She danced with a fluency which she had not experienced since her first night on the pills. Though she was aware as ever of the dryness inside her, in her hips, her knees, her shoulders, her spine; it felt muted, more distant from her consciousness. As she performed,

peering out into the large, dimly-lit serving room where on this occasion there were hardly any customers at all, she watched the red and blue light flashing on the walls and thought to herself that everything was all right. She was dancing. Despite the dull, grating sensation in her limbs, she was dancing. And she would continue to dance, continue to fight for sanity and health. As for the valium, perhaps she had transcended her need for it, perhaps she had learned how to move again, perhaps she had pushed through once for all.

When her shift was over, she left the club with her tote bag under her arm and headed as usual for the restaurant around the corner. There had been a wet fog that evening; the sidewalk was covered with a thin layer of droplets that sparkled in the pulsing neon light. Coming into the cafe with a look of exultant liberation on her gaunt, lovely face, she nearly collided with Emma Mueller who was standing by the door with a dishrag in her hand.

"Had a good one, looks like," the waitress said in her matter-of-fact voice, not smiling, though her whole bearing expressed the quiet goodwill so characteristic of her.

"Well, yes, actually I did," the dancer responded in a much friendlier much less distracted way than she normally did. "And for me nowadays, let me tell you, the good ones are few and far between."

"Now that's not what I heard, Miss Ellington. But just the same I'm glad you did well. You get a nice hand?"

"Well, the ironic thing was... nobody there."

They both laughed. This was the first time that they had shared a good laugh, and it seemed to dispel the strain between them.

They went into the restaurant together, Ruby taking her usual seat at the end of the counter by the windows that looked out to the street. The interior of the restaurant was small; there were ten stools along the counter and two rows of five tables between the counter and the fake-brick wall, illumined by red lamps, that divided the cafe from the nightclub next door. From beyond the wall came the muted sound of feminine voices; it was now after hours and the nightclub was closed. All of the tables in the restaurant were

empty except for the one in the farthest corner where a bearded, old man was asleep with his head on his arms.

While Mrs. Mueller brought coffee and prepared the omelet that she ordered every night without fail, Ruby Ellington sat with her lips creased in a slight smile, repeating to herself the comment she had made which, though just a factual statement, struck her now as having been a clever remark. Once she had been adept at repartee, and she felt gratified that this lighter side of her personality, which had been so much a part of her when younger, had come to the fore again if only for a moment.

There was an interval of silence with the laughter that had passed between them still hanging in the air, as if suspended by this expression of amusement on the dancer's face.

Mrs. Mueller came over with the omelet, returned to the cooking area.to pour some coffee for herself, and then with her cup in her hand crossed second time towards the performer, stopping behind the counter about ten feet down where there were glass-doored shelves with displays of pastries and pies.

Ruby was aware that the waitress had situated herself at a distance that without much ado would permit either a conversation or continued silence, whichever were preferred. She told herself that this was the moment to make the simple human contact that she desired so much. But, despite her, expansive state of mind, she could think of nothing to say. And so, after glancing again at the waitress, she ignored her altogether and picked away at her breakfast, hardly tasting it at all.

An almost tangible strain arose in the air once more where the laughter now had wholly faded away. Emma Mueller, apparently also somewhat ill at ease, took out a pack of cigarettes and extended it towards her. "Care for smoke?"

"Oh, no, thank you," she responded, attempting by the softness of her voice to make up for her lack of words. "I used to smoke a lot, but I gave it up a long time ago."

"You did, huh? Well, good for you. Bad habit."

"Yea, so they say."

Again the conversation faded off, this time more pronouncedly. With a heavy step, as if fatigued, though with her back still upright, the waitress returned to the coffee machine and began changing the filter for a fresh pot of brew.

The dancer had given up on her efforts to make herself eat. She watched the other woman as she slid the new filter into place and thought to herself that she had missed her chance, that there had been that single moment when she might have capitalized on the laughter that had passed between her and, Emma Mueller and said something to her that would have put them on a more personal level. But had she done that? Oh, no. She had let that moment slip by. And just so her entire life had slipped by, with many opportunities neglected.

She looked from the waitress to the old man in the corner and from him along the side of the room, past the coolers, pie shelves, stacks of dishes and orderly rows of glasses and cups behind the counter, to the window that faced the street. Now the signs above the nightclubs were out. By the news shack on the corner, the Gypsy woman who worked there held a paper in both hands, as if displaying the headline to passing cars. But no cars were passing. The intersection was deserted. The wide spreading pavement reflected the red, yellow and green of the unheeded stoplight across the way. Beside this semaphore, to the left of the row of transient hotels, shops, bars and restaurants that continued to the right as far as she could see, was the narrow street that led into Chinatown. There pagoda-like roofs with upturned eaves jutted out against a backdrop of more distant buildings where here and there a light or group of lights shone intensely amidst a gray-blue pattern of crisscrossing right angles obscured by the fog. High above these low buildings were the taller structures of the San Francisco downtown. They too war shrouded in fog. And in that fog were memories that she recognized and expelled from her mind.

She no longer felt free of her concerns. Just as inexplicably as they had left, they had returned and settled

down on her again. Even as she sat on the stool, peering out the window, she could feel the tension in her back and legs. The amused expression was gone from her face, replaced by a sad expression that had deepened the bluish shadows around her green eyes.

Though busying herself with the dishes piled up by the sink next to the coffee machine, Emma Mueller glanced every now and then across the room. When the coffee was done, she came over with the pot in her hand, filled the dancer's cup, and, after setting the pot once more on the machine, took a seat four stools down from where Ruby Ellington was sitting.

"Whole different scene when they put out them lights," she said in a tentative voice, gazing out the window where the performer had been staring

"Yea, takes away the magic real quick," Ruby answered. She realized that Mrs. Mueller was making a third attempt at starting a conversation, and the way she had done this, clumsily but with an unmistakable sincerity, impressed her very much. She turned on the stool so as to face the waitress more directly. "But I guess it all works in. The quiet too."

There was another interval of silence, this one less strained. The old man in the corner roused himself, lifted his face which was gray in color and wrinkled with weariness and age, then, saying nothing to either of the set his head once more on his arms.

"To me, I don't know," the waitress said, taking out another cigarette, "it all seems a little strange. I suppose I haven't been around long enough to feel like I fit in."

"No, you haven't, have you?" the dancer responded softly, glancing at her. From a distance this woman had appeared so secure; she had not expect to discover in her any unsureness at all. But, far from dampening her interest, this admission of vulnerability, muted as it was, made the waitress all the more intriguing. "What has it been, three or four months?" she said to continue the conversation, though she had a fair idea that Emma Mueller, had been around that long.

"Yea, let me think. You're right. Just about four months,

a little less."

"And where were you before that?" Now that she had begun to talk, she felt like pushing through whatever small Obstacle got in the way, and was a bit surprised by her own volubility.

"Oh, for a long time in Oregon where I grew up. Then in all kinds of different places, the mountains last of all."

"The California mountains?"

"Yes, Mother Lode country."

"You don't say."

"Uh-huh."

"What were you doing up there?"

"Oh, I've always just worked at this or that. And I had a family up there."

"You mean your own family?"

"Uh-huh."

"So where are they now?"

"My old man passed away. Kid's on his own."

"He the only one you had?"

"Uh-huh. Just one."

There was something about the matter-of-fact manner in which this was said that made Ruby Ellington think that there was more to this, more emotion involved, than the waitress wanted to admit. And Emma Mueller looked to the side, let the subject hanging, and in other subtle ways seemed to imply that she didn't want to pursue this line of questioning anymore.

Ruby Ellington noticed this at once. So there was some kind of sorrow there, she thought to herself. It seemed as though the proper thing to do was to let the conversation fade off into silence again. But she felt agitated now; she wanted to keep talking. To change the topic of conversation slightly, she said, "So you been around quite a bit. So how come it seems so strange to you then? I mean, this whole scene around here."

"Oh, I don't know. It's such a different setup from what I'm used to, I guess."

"So why'd you come around?" It seemed to her that her questions were more brash than sensitive, but still she went

on.

"Wanted a change."

"And now you got it, huh?"

"Yes, that's for certain."

"Well, people around here, they're kind of faded but they're basically all right."

"How you mean 'faded'?"

"Just generally worn out."

"Well, yea, I can see that. But I guess what really seems odd to me is the nature of the job. People come and go. I see them. I almost feel like I know them, know what they'd do in such and such a situation. Like you girls for example—"

"So she thinks I'm a girl, or much younger than I am," Ruby mused, feeling hypocritical for not calling attention to her actual age, but unable to bring herself to do it.

"—I see you all so much that it seems like I know you. I hear this and that about different ones. But I never really talk to anyone. Like I say, I suppose it's the nature of the job."

"You've never waitressed before?"

"Just in small towns."

Again there was silence.

"I guess what I'm saying," the waitress continued, "is I got this craving to be more involved."

"Involved in what?"

"In everything, in life."

To Ruby Ellington this statement by Emma Mueller, uttered though it was with her characteristic gentle firmness, seemed overly-idealistic and out of keeping with her position and age—a statement such as a young person might make, implying an intense benevolence and expectation that was poorly suited, she thought, to the everyday world. At the same time, not dwelling long on this judgement, she was newly impressed with the waitress' straightforwardness and lack of pretense, her willingness to let down her guard. She peered into her face which, though pale in complexion, was oval in shape and wide across the cheekbones like an Indian's face, with the nose and mouth regular in proportion, the eyebrows lightly-defined above her quite ordinary blue eyes. It was a plain face with everything in place and nothing

striking in any way. And yet this very plainness and simplicity of design, seeming as it did so consistent with her bearing and manner, gave her an air of honesty and substance. Her eyes, despite their common appearance, added to this effect; they were wide-open and direct to the point almost of staring, though with little suggestion of the bewilderment, curiosity, or strong emotions that usually produce such looks; her stare seemed to result from habitual attentiveness and alertness.

Noticing these eyes, Ruby nodded thoughtfully. “Funny that you should feel not involved when you seem so ready to connect. I mean, you’re like you’re Zen or something. You’re always tuned in.”

“Do you really think so? You’re so nice.”

“Just telling the truth.”

“Well, I appreciate your kind words none the less.”

Once more there was a pause. The dancer kept nodding, glad that she had managed to express her admiration for the older woman’s openness which seemed to her at this moment to be a quality that few people had. She thought to herself again that Emma Mueller was very different from the person she had seen from a distance, not at all as self-assured as she had expected her to be. Still there was that basic strength in those steady eyes.

It occurred to her that she had seen eyes like that before. Just where she couldn’t decide. Then, suddenly, an image which she had not thought of in a long while entered her mind: the vaguely-remembered face of her mother who had died when she was three years old. Her mother too had had such strong, quiet eyes. Indeed she recalled little about her except this caring look.

She recognized the association between this quickly-passing image and Emma Mueller, and, glancing at the waitress once more, said to herself that yes, there was something very motherly about her, perhaps that was the basis of her appeal. Along with this, as often happened on those infrequent occasions when she recalled her childhood, she felt a deep bitterness and regret for having never really known a mother’s love firsthand. After her mother’s death,

she had lived for many years with her father, a drunkard whom the welfare officials in Newton, Kansas, where she had grown up, had tried to take her away from, claiming that because of his drinking he was a bad influence on her. They had not succeeded at this, however, and, being without sisters, or for that matter without accessible close female relatives of any kind, she had had almost no maternal guidance at all during those middle-childhood years. Then, following her father's death from cirrhosis when she was fourteen, she had lived in another rural, Kansan town with a great aunt, her mother's sister, a preachy woman who had attempted to make her ear dresses and dragged her to church, and who otherwise had shown little interest in her except on the first of the month when the check arrived from the county fund for dependent children. At sixteen she had run away.

The outside door swung open. Two dapper young Arabian men, their black hair and neat mustaches gleaming, entered the cafe, poking one another and smiling at her with their white teeth flashing as they passed.

The waitress rolled her eyes. "Well, here we go. These hotshots aren't about to wait around." She went behind the counter, drew two glasses of water, and crossed over to them with the water and some menus in her hands.

"Good evening, gentlemen, or is it 'good morning'?"

Apparently they didn't understand English. They pointed to various items on the menu and soon were arguing in their own language, staring back and forth. One of them waved his hand in disgust, leaned over to the jukebox selector, and without even looking at it closely plunked in a couple of quarters and punched out some tunes.

The music started, waking up the old man. Seeing him awake, the waitress nodded and brought him a cup of coffee. Obviously he wasn't a paying customer, but she didn't seem to mind.

Ruby Ellington raised herself on her seat, stretched her slender body, and ran her thin hands through her great mane of disheveled red hair, noticing as she did that the Arabians had turned to watch her change in posture.

They smiled again; but far from feeling an interest in them, she felt angry at their intrusion. She watched the waitress as she brought the coffee to the old man, moved by this simple act of generosity which seemed so typical of her whole attitude to life, sensing that in this attitude, perhaps, or in what it signified, was the very answer to her predicament which she had hoped Emma Mueller might provide.

What this amounted to, however, was just a vague stirring in her mind. And meanwhile there was that more familiar stirring, that continuous, almost mechanical recitation and analysis of her concerns which went on unremittingly despite her new-found hope, despite the half-stupor and exhaustion caused by her evening of dancing and the pills. Then too, though it was perfectly understandable why the waitress had broken off the conversation at this point, she could not help but thinking that she had brought it on herself by doing something wrong. And had she really talked? No, not really, not really talked. Well, there would be other nights to talk, she told herself. Still she felt that for some inexplicable reason this was the only chance she would have.

She realized that she was being as irrational as always. “I gotta stop this,” she muttered. “Gotta stop this. I really do.” But she could not prevent the tired circling of her thoughts.

Now that the mood in the cafe had changed to one which was no longer conducive to talking, it seemed ridiculous to keep hanging around. Her breakfast was cold. She rubbed her eyes, resting for a moment behind the buttress of her hands. “Yea, I gotta get going. I’m going to be here the whole goddam night.”

But the thought of going home filled her with apprehension. There was only darkness there, and the vague memories and images that were constantly with her despite her efforts to dispel them from her mind.

She shook her head. “What an idiot I am. Can’t even decide to go home. I gotta calm down.” She glanced at the waitress again.

Emma Mueller, her large hand on her hip, stood by the

char-broil pit, watching the flames shoot up around the two steaks that she was cooking for the Arabian young men. She looked towards the window just as the dancer was reaching for her tote bag. “No need to hurry,” she called.

“I guess I should go,” replied Ruby, standing.

“Well, have a piece of pie, why don’t you? It’s on the house.”

The dancer shrugged her shoulders and sat down. “Oh yea? Well, that’s kind of you, Mrs. Mueller. Maybe I will.” She felt relieved to have an excuse for staying, if for no other reason than to procrastinate her return to her own lonely world.

The waitress brought the men their steaks and came over with the pie and more coffee. “Don’t be so formal. Just call me ‘Em.’ Hell, we see each other all the time.”

Well, all right,” responded the dancer, smiling. “In that case, just call me ‘Ruby’.” Even as she smiled, it occurred to her that it had been a long while since she had smiled, that this simple gesture of good feeling was oddly alien to her now. She understood that once again Emma Mueller was making a special effort to be friendly, and this both amazed and impressed her because she found it impossible to imagine that anyone would have any interest in her at all.

“Goes with your hair. That your given name?”

“Uh-huh.”

The waitress returned Ruby Ellington’s smile with her own, which was close-lipped and self-conscious. Her wide-open eyes regarded the dancer steadily and seemed free of judgement or qualified acceptance. She left briefly to bring coffee to the Arabians and the old man, then came back to where Ruby was sitting, standing behind the counter because the jukebox was still playing, and it was difficult now to talk against the noise. “You know, I don’t mean to be nosy, Ruby. But you always seem so distressed.”

It struck the dancer that this woman was making a deliberate attempt not only to converse with her but to know her on a deeper level, and once again she was surprised and flattered by this interest. At the same time, she felt intimidated and tense. She leaned forward on her seat. “Do I

really? What makes you think that?"

"Written all over your face."

"What's written?"

"Like I say, worry, distress. I don't know what else to call it."

Ruby nodded thoughtfully. "Well, I guess you could say that this isn't exactly the greatest period in my life." Now that she had broached the subject, it seemed strange to her, and very selfish, to talk about her problems.

"Am I being too personal?" Emma Mueller asked after they had both fallen into silence once more.

Ruby met her gaze for a moment, lowered her eyes, and looked up at her again. "No, not at all," she answered softly. "I appreciate your interest. I really do."

She peered out the window. By the news-shack on the corner, the Gypsy woman, with her hands in the pockets of her tattered gray coat, paced back and forth, her kerchiefed head hardly visible above her hunched shoulders and turned-up collar. Except for her, not a soul was in sight. Then a cab and delivery truck rolled by and vanished from view. The semaphore across the street switched from green to red. This slight change in lighting cast the intersection in a different tone.

The waitress too was staring outside. "The thing is, like I was saying before, I stand here, I watch. And you, of all the girls.., well, it's so obvious you're different."

Now Ruby Ellington felt that she just had to clear up the matter of age. "I'm not exactly a girl, you know. But I'll forgive your poor vision."

The waitress nodded. "I didn't mean to be condescending."

"I know you didn't," she replied, anxious to reassure her. And I was aware that you're older than the rest."

"Yea, it must be pretty obvious."

"No, Ruby. Not that at all. You look very young. And you take care of yourself so well. But I heard, you see... I know your general story."

"What do you mean my general story?"

"How you came here. Your hardships."

"You mean my lover and kid?"

"Yea, I heard all about it. It must have been so difficult."

Again there was a lapse in conversation. Ruby felt sad. The very mention of that incident called up a deep anguish inside of her. And yet there were grounds for hope. At least she was talking to someone, someone who cared, about these matters that she had held within herself for so long.

"The only reason I mention it," the waitress went on, "is because, like I said, you seem so distressed. And I always think to myself, 'Well, maybe it's that.' I don't mean to pry."

"No, I don't feel that you're prying," the dancer said after another long pause. "It's no secret what happened... Everyone's aware... But I don know... When I say I'm not in a good period... I suppose all that has something to do with it. Undoubtably it does... But what's been coming down lately, it's more comprehensive, I guess..."

"More comprehensive how?"

Ruby leaned forward and frowned. She wanted very much to communicate but had forgotten how hard it was to do. Besides it seemed so out of tune with how self-contained she had been, with how she had learned to keep everything to herself. She closed her eyes. "Well, only way I can say it is it's just a whole, more comprehensive routine with my health included, and because of my health my job..."

"You mean you're sick or something?"

"Yea, kind of, I am. I can't explain it exactly."

"You can try."

Ruby felt encouraged by this persistent attention. Yes, she could try, she thought to herself. Strange as it seemed to speak from the heart again after so long a period contained in herself, far as she was from understanding, really understanding, her malaise, yet she could try. And it didn't matter if trying was hard. She had to break through and now was the time.

She began hesitantly describing how the initial symptoms of the dryness had appeared, how she had regarded these symptoms at first as nothing more than a physical manifestation of the dark moods which, she explained, came again and again in regular cycles, though

this latest dark mood had lasted for "what was it?"—she counted on her fingers—"wow, almost six weeks.'

"So I was thinking I could discipline it a way, you know, exercise and eat the right foods. But it didn't go away. It just got worse and worse..."

And so she went on, feeling more and more fluent as she spoke, so much so that to her amazement the words flowed from her mouth. She was talking a she had when younger, in a soft, dreamy, excited voice, with many elegant gestures of her small, white hands. Her brilliant green eyes grew larger an smaller and then larger again as she related the development of her illness trying even as she did to gain some new insight into what had transpired.

"Then I started thinking, 'Well, something here is cosmically wrong.' You must think this is pretty absurd. But they say there's this certain physical point where the energy comes out.

Emma Mueller listened intently, her broad, honest face set in a frown, her large hands clasped in front of her wide hips. Now and then she nodded.

"Well, I don't exactly know it in those terms. But, yea, I can see it. And what the doctor said, well, yea, I can understand the factor of age. But, hell, Ruby, you're not that old. How old are you anyhow?"

"Pushing 40."

"No!"

"Well, close enough. I just turned 37."

"Well, I was thinking in your early thirties, maybe, judging from what I heard of your background and all. But numbers, what do they mean? The important thing is, you look so good."

The Arabians were still arguing in the background, talking in their native language with all kinds of sibilant and aspirant sounds. The jukebox was cranking out a fast-moving country tune which seemed oddly out of keeping with their angry exchanges. The old man in the corner lifted his head, ran his hands through his unkempt gray hair and beard, and, rubbing his eyes, came walking across the room towards the door, stepping gingerly as though he had sore feet. "You

know something, Em? You're a damn good lady. What the goddam, being all right with a joker like me. But I got this deal going. I'll get back to you somehow." Soon he went out.

His exit brought the discussion to a momentary halt. The dancer watched the interaction between the old man and the waitress, once again admiring her low-key compassion. At the same time, her mind raced back and forth ova what she had told of the story of her battle with the dryness. She was very much aware that out of shame she had not mentioned the valium which she was taking now in twice and sometimes thrice the recommended dosage. Then too, because she feared making Emma Mueller uneasy, she had not carried her story as far as her resolution to make friends.

To her surprise, however, and with what seemed to her an astounding sagacity, the waitress, when she resumed the conversation, quickly led it in the direction of these omissions. "And you've been taking medications, haven't you?" she asked, regarding her with her steady blue eyes.

"Yea, to relax," the dancer responded, looking away.

"And have they helped you to do that?"

"To a certain extent," she replied, though she knew very well that her agitation and whirling thoughts had continued in spite of the pills, that what they had mostly provided was a bone-deep weariness, or, when their effect was strongest, the trance in which she danced. The valium had become an indefensible crutch; even to think of this made her ashamed. She sighed and looked back to the waitress. "The deal is, when I started taking... medication... it had to do with getting back to the right kind of movement, as I mentioned before... She explained the rationale for the drug which she had repeated countless times to herself, how her worries had become so omnipresent that they had prevented her from focusing on her dancing. "So I was looking for a way out of my mind and back into the movement." But this argument no longer seemed convincing to her.

The waitress listened patiently until the dancer was through with her explanation. "You see," she finally said, "the way I look at it, you've been talking about all these philosophical ideas about movement, or whatever, and how

you've been using the medication to get back to it, or in it, but you ignore the most obvious fact of all."

Ruby was playing with her piece of pie from which she had taken only a few token bites. "What's that?"

"Well, you're very much a loner, am I right?

She had never thought of it in quite these terms. "Yea, I guess I really am. Didn't used to be so much, but I sure am now."

"And so, in a way, you're totally cut off."

"Yea, pretty much. You're right," she answered softly.

"Well, you see, what I'm getting to is you're talking about all these cosmic connections, and how, because you don't have them, you've screwed up' your energy flow, or whatever. But how about a connection with other human life?"

Once again Ruby Ellington was impressed by how the waitress had projected her story into the areas which she herself had left out, and not only that, but drawn the same conclusions in the process. "Yea, I did think about that," she replied. "I thought maybe it had something to do... with not feeling right... But I didn't know how to change myself around."

There was another interval. Then Emma Mueller said: "And something else I've wondered about." She paused. "Am I pressing you too hard?"

"No, please go on," the dancer responded. Now that they had carried the progression as far as she had herself, she was curious what the next step would be.

"Well, there's the whole matter with men."

Ruby smiled and looked down. But the smile quickly vanished. Her lovely face grew serious again. "You think that's related too?"

"I don't know. Who am I to say? You're the one that's talking about feeling so basically cut off. And, as I said before, I heard all about you from the rest of the girls, overheard their conversation one night..."

"They talk about me?"

"Sure, and with a lot of respect."

"Really?" This surprised her very much. "What do they

say?"

"Oh, just that you're very intense, very dedicated to dancing—"Ruby swelled with pride"—but that when it comes to men, you stay clear of them, never have affairs or dealings with men of any kind... And when you really stop to think of that, a woman like you, a living Venus... Isn't that a little odd? Or how does that effect you, hon, year after year? I just don't understand it, I guess... Or maybe I do, but even so."

The dancer watched Emma Mueller as she spoke, noting the earnest look in her eyes. This was a subject which she had not thought about, had not permitted herself to think about, in a long while. "What you're saying, it' true... I do stay away from men. The weird thing is, I'm not sure why. I don't even understand it myself. I used to think of myself as sensuous, years ago..."

"Years ago? You didn't notice them A-rabs craning their necks?"

"Well, sure, I notice things like that. I mean, I know I look okay, me look at me, and so on... But that's not the point. The point is that deep inside of me... " She was struggling to find her words. "Inside of me, I'm not the same..."Even as she said this, it struck her as an indisputable fact, the central fact of her whole existence. She had changed inside in some drastic way, and not just physically but psychologically also. She had once been a sensuous woman; she was one no more. Why had this happened? She was thinking very hard. She knew only that this change was related to the great tragedy, in her past.

"Because, you see, after Marcel, my lover, died... took his life...I don't know... That was such a tremendous shock... I was trying so hard... And my kid..." To her surprise she felt tears coming to her eyes; she managed to restrain them. "So after that, you know, I was just totally zoned.

She described how she had left the Strip, wanting to get away from the memories, but stopped short of saying that she had suspected then that maybe her misfortunes had come upon her because her life at the Strip had been wrong. It seemed absurd to say it; she didn't want to present herself in

a bad light.

"But, anyhow, when I came back, everything was different. I was doing the same routine. I even went out with men. But nothing was there. I didn't feel anything, any desire or affection or whatever. I know it's ironic, dancing all these come-on dances and feeling like that. I don't mean I'm a dyke or anything. But that sensuous part of me was gone."

"But doesn't everyone need that, need affection, need love, or the. hope of it at least?" the waitress replied. "Or on your cosmic level, doesn't the female need the male, or vice versa, for some kind of basic balance? What kind of life is it, anyhow, entirely alone? I'm not talking down to you. I'm alone now myself. And I'm much older than you. I don't Forsee any immediate changes. But you... Your opportunities are so much greater... I'm just trying to talk in terms of your own ideas... Because it's odd, in a way, you being here, as you say, in the midst of all this come-on commotion, all these flashing signs, and feeling distant..."

"Well, yea, but I don't feel distant... This is still my life. I'm a dancer. I'm a dancer through and through."

"And yet you're so opposed to what it represents... Aren't you at war with yourself? And if you're so cut off from everyone, from life, where does that leave you?"

"I don't know," she answered softly. "I guess I'm just not a sexual creature anymore. Maybe this is the way my life is supposed to be, neither here nor there." She repeated these words to herself, "not a sexual creature anymore," and then in her mind added to them what the waitress had said, "war with myself."

The door swung open a second time. Two men in denim coveralls came in. She looked outside and saw a disposal truck parked by the curb. So the early-morning workers were already out. She glanced at the clock: a quarter to five. She had talked for almost two hours. And now, unmistakably, the conversation was done, had gone as far as it could. She felt very tired but sensed that she had made great progress in resolving her problems. Turning to the waitress, she met her kind eyes. and with an affectionate expression thanked her for her help.

Emma Mueller smiled—not a close-lipped smile as before, but with her teeth showing. They were stained with nicotine and she had a tooth missing on the side of her mouth. Her smile, though, was as genuine as everything about her. “Well, I guess we can’t figure it all out in one night,” she said, shrugging her shoulders. “But come back, Ruby. You’re all right.”

“Well, thank you, thank you very much,” she replied, returning the smile. All the men in the room were looking at her. “I appreciate how well you listen.”

“Nothing to it. I got big ears.”

She went out, felt the cool, moist air on her forehead and cheeks. Just a block away, at the bottom of a small hill, were the concrete buttresses of the Pyramid Building. Only its bottom levels could be seen; the upper stories were hidden in fog. Huddled in the doorway of a bank across the street was the bearded, old man who had been in the restaurant. He nodded. She waved. At the corner, meeting the Gypsy woman at the news-shack, she bought a morning paper as she habitually did. Without even looking at the headline she tucked it into her purse, giving the vendor twice as much as the paper, cost. This too she did from habit, out of an un-self-conscious sympathy for little people. Turning the corner, her tote bag under her arm, her exquisite features set in thought, she continued alongside the clubs, where all the doors were barred and locked, glancing for a moment towards the open-air cafe at the end of the block. It too was closed for the night; corrugated metal awnings had been lowered between the fake-marble pillars that fronted the sidewalk. In the adjoining intersection, stoplights blinked off and on, coloring the nearby buildings in an unsteady yellow light. Further down the street, where the roadway dipped over the crest of the hill that descended to the waterfront, a single, diagonally-crossing span of the San Francisco-Oakland Bridge divided the eastern sky into what appeared to be two distinct segments: the lower segment, beneath the dark lines of the bridge’s downward-arching, supportive cables, was already aglow with the first silver-blue of dawn; the upper segment, above the cables, was still a night-time, darker blue that

blended high above the horizon with a swirling mass of grayish-black fog which, having encountered the strong winds that swept across the bay, had spiraled upward from the city's ragged silhouette.

She felt excited, filled with some strange, new hope. And yet she felt uneasy, exposed, known again by someone as she really was instead of as the facade which she had tried so hard to maintain.

What had impressed her most was Emma's comments about men. Though she had gone over her concerns again and again, she had never thought of them as related specifically to her attitudes towards men and sex. Now it seemed very clear, struck her as a further revelation, that these attitudes, while not being the sole cause of her distress and feelings of imbalance and dryness, nonetheless contributed to them to a considerable degree. Because was it not true, as the waitress had suggested, that these attitudes in themselves, since unnatural, were unhealthy? Unhealthy? Yes. And if they were unhealthy on the psychological level of how she felt towards life around her... Well, wasn't her body also, in the final analysis, just something felt?... And hadn't her attitudes towards her body, and how she had used or abused it at the club or in her attempts to regain her health, resulted in other feelings, the sum effect of which had been to deprive her of her sensuality, and, as Emma Mueller had observed, place her at odds with herself? Who could say the extent to which these various feelings, though operating on different levels, were related to one another?

This plunged her into deeper musing. "Not a sexual creature," she repeated once more. "Not a sexual creature, at war with myself... But at war with myself in what respect?... Now let's get this straight. Let's nail this down... At war with myself in the respect... that... in the first place... I am doing something here at the Strip which, when it comes right down to it, I don't believe in anymore... Or, worse than that, believe is wrong... But I don't really believe that it's wrong. I don't know that it's; wrong... What I should do is quit... But where would that leave me? What would I do?... No, I don't want to quit... That will come soon enough...And that's not

the whole problem. There's more to it than that... Because where I am really at war with myself... in the second place... is I want to be healthy, want to be healthy more than anything else, want to be clean and intense... And I'm not trying for that anymore, not really trying... I'm getting more and more fucked up. Not eating correctly. Depending on pills... It's not even whether it's an addiction or not... It's just the principle of not being clean... Do I want this to happen? Do I want to let it go?... No, I don't want to do this. I gotta get clean..."

She went on in this way, trying to force herself to sort out her confusion. By the sidewalk cafe at the end of the block, she stopped and peered up and down the street for a cab. Not a vehicle in sight. She sat down on the first step of the stairs that led up to the theater above the cafe, her eyes fixed on the eastern sky where now a thin line of pink had appeared on the horizon.

She was very tired, so tired that for once she allowed her posture to sag and slumped against the corner of the building by the stairway. But her mind kept churning away. Suddenly it occurred to her that, despite her efforts to think clearly, she had lost track of the insight that had started her out. "But I've been forgetting the main point.., and this is what Emma was saying... that on a much, much more fundamental level... I'm a woman, right?... A biological female. What does this mean?... I mothered a child. I really did that. I manufactured life... I've got a womb inside of me, is what I'm trying to say... And I'm not even relating to that anymore... So what does this do? What does this do in the end?... It throws everything off-kilter, like Emma said... It's like the Yin and the Yang... There's a certain physical orientation that's necessary there, a certain kind of feeling... And that feeling is gone... It's just not there... So what it
boils down to is some basic cosmological balance, or whatever, is all screwed up..."

She thought to herself again that she had once been a sensuous woman And now she was far different than that. "Not a sexual creature," neither female nor male, but neuter and outside the cycle of life. Was this really what she had

become? How could it be otherwise, if this were the case, that that this fundamental sterility would effect every aspect of her existence first and foremost her physical state? Because in itself this lack of sexual feeling was a kind of dryness; a person without such feeling would be like tree without sap.

But how had she begun as a full-blooming tree and ended up as a tree like this, devoid of vital juices? How had this great change taken place? What had happened anyhow besides the two deaths? What had transpired inside of her that had placed her at odds with her biological well-being? What had caused this drastic alteration of what she was in her innermost self? It seemed to her now that in the answers to these questions lay the solution to her predicament, the path back to wholeness which thus far she had sought her various strategies for cure. She needed to transform herself on this deep, psychological level, regain the healthier attitudes of her youth so that this more positive outlook would replace the negative one which had pervaded her life since the tragedy occurred.

No sooner, however, had she reached this conclusion, that the only hope for her resided in somehow readopting this more affirmative perspective which she had long before lost, when she thought to herself that there was really nothing new in this proposition. Was this not precisely what she had wished for all along? What did this proposition mean except that she wanted the dryness to end, which of course she had wanted since the day it began? And now, at 37 years of age, three years from 40, to assume a new, or, actually, old, attitude towards her body and towards men and sex—what would this amount to from day to day? A return to that experimental, promiscuous life which she had led in her late teens and early 20's? Making subtle overtures to men, looking for romance in every male glance? Even as these ideas entered her mind, they struck her as out of keeping with her present character and situation. No, she could not start again where she had been in the past, as if in the meanwhile nothing had happened. And yet there was no doubt that a basic repulsion to what she had once regarded as

beautiful, a basic alienation from flesh, had sunk roots like a cancer in every fiber of her being.

Throughout the evening and night, from the first moment when she had broken through her dark mood and experienced once more the sudden and inexplicable expansion and lightness that brought a respite at times from her agitation and feelings of compression, and, after this, during her excited, groping conversation with Emma Mueller, and while caught up in the spell of the unrelenting flow of thoughts that followed this conversation, she had paid little attention at all to her physical condition, only noticed now and then, between her comments and reflections, that the tension, the dryness, was still there in the background, silently waiting. Now again she became acutely aware of the terrible strain in every part of her body. In her shoulders, especially, it had reasserted its presence. It was almost as if, taking advantage of her slumped posture, the tension had pulled her shoulders tightly together towards her neck. She sighed, stretched herself extended her legs. There too the tendons seemed taut as though they'd been twisted with pliers. Her pelvis felt dry; in her tailbone was a dull, been throbbing pain.

While stretching, she realized that she had drawn her buttocks together around this muted pain as if to squeeze it out. She forced her buttocks to relax and rubbed her eyes with her hands. "This has gone on too long. I just gotta get going. I really do..."

She jumped up, fastened the top button of her knee-length, rabbit-fur coat, and, with her tote bag and purse cradled in front of her in both arms the now-stiffer morning wind sweeping back her great mass of red hair from her thin, troubled face, hurried towards the corner by the news-shack where it had occurred to her there might be a better chance of hailing a cab.

She felt thoroughly distraught, confused by her continuing distress. Was this not a moment of renewal? Certainly all of the elements for renewal were there. But the ceaseless train of thoughts that went on as if with a will of its own despite her fatigue and the half-stupor caused by the

pills had left her with the final impression that what she really needed to do was beyond her power to accomplish. And yet what exactly was required that was impossible to effect? She could not remember what, if anything, she had decided to do.

What she had retained more substantially was a sense of a progression of events which was not pleasant to recall. To begin with, prior to her performance of the previous night, she had been in the midst of the dark mood which had enclosed her like a capsule, unable to see her surroundings except through the thick glass of this capsule which had colored everything in somber tones. Then, during that performance, while looking out to those familiar flashing lights around the stage, she had broken through this capsule somehow, and, propelled by the energy of that breakthrough to freedom and space, had talked from the heart to another human being, revealing her deepest secrets. Now, when she looked back at that talk, She felt, of all things, most essentially, shame; and, just as dramatically as it had fallen away from her, the capsule had descended upon her again, this time bringing with it the recognition that her original condition had been graver than she had supposed, extending not only to her fears, perceptions and sensations, but to her instinctual foundation, that is, to the very core of her animal life.

Even in her most insecure moments, she had always thought of herself a woman with whom, from the standpoint of appearance, at least, few could compare. Now she could not stop asking: Have I lost my femininity? Am I a woman at all? It seemed as if these questions had cut themselves so quickly and firmly into her consciousness that there was no need, even, to repeat them to herself; they resounded inside of her again and again.

She had just begun walking when she saw a blue and white taxi zooming in a perpendicular direction through the intersection towards which she was headed, its yellow top light distinct against the blurred outlines of the dark buildings beyond it where the dim light of dawn had not yet started to show. She flung up her hand but the taxi went by.

She recognized this cab as from the same company that the driver drove for who usually took her home; and, though she did not in the least expect that he would still be out at this hour of the morning, she found herself thinking about him. Of the men who came tangentially into her life, he was by far the most decent one. Why was it with him, and with the other men who made passes now and then, she was so completely unapproachable, even to the point of not engaging in simple conversation? This was just another example of how rigid and anti-life she'd become.

Just as she reached the news-shack, this same cab appeared at the intersection behind her by the sidewalk cafe. Apparently the driver had seen her and circled the block. The cab rounded the corner and pointed at her.

While watching its approach, she continued her self-analysis. If it was true that she had become rigid and anti-life to the extent even of not talking to friendly men, and if this attitude was effecting not only her social interactions but every aspect of her life, then she would have to apply her discipline to change this. In so doing she would take a small steps towards the reorientation she needed.

To her surprise, when the taxi pulled smoothly to the curb, she peered into its dimly-lit interior and discovered that the man behind the steering wheel was her regular driver. It seemed odd for him to show up like this at the exact moment when she was thinking about him since the occasions when. she did were few and far between.

Now that she had made up her mind to speak more with men, his unexpected appearance struck her as a premature complication of her thoughts. She would have preferred to adjust more gradually to her resolution before being forced into action. But no better time than the present, she told herself, sighing, as she regarded his shadowed figure with her serious green eyes.

He swung open his door and came around the back of the car, swinging his muscular arms. He was a hardy fellow in his mid-forties with rugged features of a Mediterranean type —broad forehead, square jaw, aquiline nose, thin-lipped narrow mouth—in an angular arrangement that, combined

with his ruddy complexion and ever-present Irish cap, gave him the rough-and-ready look of a stevedore or outdoorsman. He was wearing a T-shirt; he almost never wore a jacket, even in the chilliest weather, and gave the impression that he shunned encumbrances of any kind.

"Hey, there, bootsie, you stayed out late," he sung out in his deep voice, which was vibrant as always with his characteristic jauntiness and good-natured familiarity. This was a quality in him that she normally liked, but now she felt threatened by it.

"Why, yes, I did," she replied softly, standing with her arms still folded in front of her like a schoolgirl around her tote bag and purse. "I just love it, you know. I'm a lady of the night."

"Ha-ha-ha. Well, I have to say, Miss Ellington, you do it up all right. You're looking beautiful. You really are."

"I'm so glad to hear it. I try so hard."

With men she had an entirely different manner of acting from how she acted with women, depending on wisecracks or on tongue-in-cheek naivete or sophistication to maintain her distance. She had once been quite proud of this verbal dexterity and had used it consciously to play the role of femme fatale. At the moment, however, she listened to her own comments as they came out of her mouth, and instantly judged them as foolish, just a further example of how she refused to deal with men on any meaningful level.

The driver kept staring at her, nodding his head again and again, with his big grin fixed on his tanned, virile face. He apparently was far less critical of her than she was of herself. "Well, it looks like you're in luck," he said with his thick, brown hand on his hip.

"Oh, am I really? You mean you had a lottery and I won a free ride?" Whether she liked it or not, she thought, she could not stop herself from making stupid remarks.

"Not exactly, not exactly, Miss Ellington. But, as it happens, yours truly, one of the more prominent cabbies in the city, got out of the garage very late." He looked at his watch. "So I may have time to convey you home in your customary style."

"Wow, what a relief. And here I was standing here all worried that I'd wind up with just an ordinary driver."

"Ha-ha-ha. Well, you got the best." He strode around the cab and in his gallant manner made a little bow and threw open the back door. "Or ride in the front if you want to. I call that 'deluxe'."

She understood the subtle distinction. "Oh, deluxe would be beyond my comprehension. Style alone is almost more than I can grasp."

Soon they were zooming up the on-ramp to the elevated, deserted branch of the freeway which led in a wide arc along the waterfront side of the San Francisco downtown to the junction about a mile in the distance where it connected at the end of the bridge with the main arterial to the south. The air was so damp that all that could be seen of the morning colors in the eastern sky was a faint reddish-orange glow on the clouded windows across from her on her left. She wiped off a circular area of the window beside her, on her right, and looked off to the tall, rectangular forms of the buildings which appeared and disappeared in the drifting fog. Most of these buildings were dark, except for here and there where an entire floor of lit rooms made a horizontal band of yellow light that floated in the low-flying, orange-tinted gray clouds.

She felt drained, and overcome with the lassitude that often succeeded an evening of dancing and pills; and yet she kept staring at the back of the driver's head, and repeating to herself, "that's a man," as if this were a profound observation. It occurred to her also that she didn't know his name, but this seemed less important than the fact that he was indeed a man.

With his window partly lowered, he gazed outside the charging car, inhaling the fresh air. Implicit in his very posture was a love of movement and life. Despite his overdone, obliging performance of the small courtesy, and compliments which apparently he thought were required with women, he was appealing in her never-failing optimism and vitality. So why had she maintained such a distance from him? Out of caution? From moral squeamishness of pride?

Instead of decreasing her sense of isolation, her

discussion with Emma Mueller had just made her all the more conscious of her need for human contact. She felt completely talked out and still uneasy about how she had revealed herself so fully. Now, to her bewilderment, she found herself yearning to talk more, if only to convince herself that she was not as negative and emotionally askew as she'd begun to fear. She could think of nothing to say, however. And she felt tired, so tired.

But wasn't there something unhealthy in this also, she asked herself wearily as she listened to the drone of the motor and hum of the tires on the surface of the road, something unhealthy and inexcusable in this lack of the will and energy to break out of her condition? He made no further effort to engage her in conversation. One of the things that she had always liked about him was that when she kept silent he left her alone. Now she wanted to be bothered. His continuing silence made him suddenly more formidable than she had thought him to be. But how could he know what was happening in her mind?

There was no way he could know. She closed her eyes. "Just give me a minute... In a minute, in just a minute, I will think of something to say... just need a minute to rest." Inside of her there was a pleasant, undisturbed darkness. She could feel the hypnotic motion of the cab.

Hardly had she settled into this comforting darkness, however, when the voice inside of her rose up again: "Not a sexual creature... at war with myself... Not a woman at all... Completely dried up... Can't even talk to a man... Basic principle fucked up."

She sighed, opened her eyes once more, and peered over the meter and rushing blue hood of the cab to the wet, gleaming roadway in front of the advancing headlights. To either side of the lunging car were cement retaining walls which seemed to hold its motion in an inevitable course.

Immediately before them, slightly to the left, was the illumined clock on the Ferry Building tower. The black hands on the clock said five minutes after five. It loomed up beside her and vanished behind.

The road banked to the right towards the main

interchange by the bridge where in the near distance she could see the crisscrossing lines of the onramps and exits that composed it, beside which, juxtaposed against them, were the erector-set supports of the bridge. Further in the distance, visible through the interstices of this lattice of concrete and cement, was a triangular patch of reddish-orange. That was the bay, imbued with the first light of dawn. Further still, where the silver-blue southern sky was broken here and there by the derricks and towers that jutted up from the angular
horizon, was a dimmer area of reddish-yellow light that rose, fell and changed shapes like the aurora borealis. That was the steel yard where the welders were working with their torches.

For a moment she was awe-struck by this sight. She leaned forward, thinking it was that, that, which she ought to talk about. But she could not speak. She sunk back on the seat. The voice rose up again: “Dry, very dry.”

He apparently noticed this change in posture or heard the clicking sound that her mouth made when it opened and closed. Sensing this recognition on his part, she glanced at the rear view mirror where his shadowed reflection could be seen. He was staring at her.

For an instant he net her eyes and then looked away. “So you have a good night?”

“You talking to me?”

He laughed. “Far as I know, you’re the only one back there.”

She shrugged her shoulders. “Yea, as they say in Arizona, it was pretty good all right.”

“Lot of customers?”

“The usual panting maniacs. You know how it goes.”

They had rounded the curve to the main part of the freeway. A truck came roaring by and left them behind. Aside from it, they were the only vehicle on the road. The sky ahead of them was a startling blend of night-time blue and morning orange and red. “Why not talk about that?” she said to herself. “Why not talk about that, that terrible beauty?”

She glanced once more at the rear view mirror. He was staring again, his eyes cringing with amusement.

"And loaded to the gills."

"Loaded who?"

"All the panting maniacs."

"Absolutely swimming."

"Ha-ha-ha."

"And ain't that a strange one, when it's me that's going down," she remarked, surprised by what she'd said. She watched his eyes where they floated within the frame of the rear view mirror before the larger, moving frame of the windshield where now another area of the still-sleeping city could be seen, a faraway dark hill with three blinking red lights that faded in and out of the swirling fog.

"Well, all I can say, Miss Ellington," he said, his eyes narrowing, " you don't look like you're sinking to me."

She smiled —a mirthless, overdone grin which from inside of her she could feel was almost crazy. "Oh, it takes a good look to see it, you know. Just as quickly as this expression appeared on her face, it was gone.

From how his head with his brown cap had tilted, she could tell that he was thinking. Either that or he was intent on the road which now was curving sharply again towards a dismal landscape of fog-shrouded hills and distant, vaguely-discernible small houses where lit windows glowed from the grayish-blue haze of the sunless valley before them.

After completing the turn, he twisted around and gazed at her from over his shoulder. "Okay, sweetheart, well, now I'm looking good. What's with this slow curve? Going under, hell. I can never tell when you're joking.' His voice had taken on a more intimate, more fatherly tone.

She found this sudden change amusing. It recalled to her mind her old power over men. She didn't like his protective condescension. How far he was from understanding her moods! "Well, naturally I'm joking," she replied, bristling with contempt. "I'm such a free spirit, you know. All I do is fool around."

She knew very well that she was cutting off his attempt to place himself on a friendlier basis; and no sooner had she

uttered these words when she thought to herself, “What a fucking royal bitch.”

“Ha-ha-ha. You’re a strange one, aren’t you?”

“Oh, not so strange. I like to think I’m perfectly sane.”

“But you’re always so quiet,” he persisted. “Free spirit or not.”

“Lost in my soaring thoughts.”

“Now you’re getting mysterious, huh?”

“We women can’t help it. It’s in our nature, you know. It goes way back.”

The window beside her had clouded again. She made another circle and peered outside towards a treeless slope with rust-colored, waving grass and sad, little bushes that rocked back and forth in the silent wind. Once more she closed her eyes. But still she could see the bushes bending back and forth. She had seen such plants once from a boat with a glass panel that permitted a view of the bottom of the ocean. They swept like that from side to side to gather oxygen and food. Only those ocean plants were animals with some kind of conscious life. And these bushes were just bushes, and dry, so dry.

Again she became aware of the dull, throbbing pain in her tailbone. Her legs and lower back felt as if they were fused to the seat. She wanted to throw off the tension, but some force was pulling her down into the tension, down into herself. “Yes, drowning,” she thought. “And not only drowning but dry.” It almost made her laugh. “Drowning and dry. At least I’m unique.”

She drew in a deep breath and stretched herself forward from the seat, lifting her thin hands to her forehead, yanking back her red hair. Glancing to the rear view mirror, she met his staring eyes and looked away.

“You know,” he said, “I always wondered... I don’t mean to be nosy...”

“No, go ahead. Be nosy. Let it all hang out,” she replied, flashing her crazy smile again with her upper torso still extended, her hair still drawn tightly back. Lacking its normal, wide frizzy border of red, her face looked very small, like a child’s face almost, and her luminous green

eyes, set in their deep sockets between her wide brow and high, prominent cheekbones and gaunt cheeks, seemed large, very large, amidst these lean, bony surroundings over which the skin appeared to have been pulled too taut. Her teeth were glossy white, her complexion pale but radiant with the contained intensity, like that of a bow stretched to the breaking point, which she suggested in her every movement and gesture. “No harm in being nosy. What the hell.”

“Well, what I was wondering... A woman like you... You got all these guys panting, like you say...”

She shut her eyes and spoke very slowly, her words coming out one by one. “Well, they are not really panting. I was making a joke.”

“Well, yea, I know that. When it comes right down to it,. they’re just regular guys on a vacation from their wives. Just the same, every night there’s this line of men.”

“I never saw a line. That must have been next-door at the so-called adult bookstore. It’s cheaper, you know. And they get to see more.”

“Ha-ha-ha. I bet you go home and settle back. ‘Hot dog, peace and quiet at last’.” Peace and quiet, yes. But I don’t have a dog.”

He laughed, obviously taking this as a clever allusion to sex. She had not intended this allusion;. And now, having understood it herself, it struck her as coarse and demeaning, and she did not appreciate the familiarity in his response.

“Please curb your damn laughter,” she said. “I don’t like laughter at my expense.”

He seemed surprised by her change in tone. “Hey, I’m sorry, really. I thought you were making another joke.”

“Crudity, let me tell you, is not in my repertoire.”

“I didn’t take it as crude. Holy cow, you’re sensitive, aren’t you?”

“Sensitive enough to watch out for myself.”

They drove on for a while without talking, the drone of the motor rising up in the air where their voices had been. Here the landscape was darker. The hills to the east had blocked out every trace of the dawn.

“But being serious a minute,” he continued at last. When

she made no objection, he went on. “A beautiful woman like you. You go home by yourself. Or so the story goes...”

“The story where?”

“Oh, I don’t know. On the streets. Just different people I talk to.”

“Why would you talk about me?”

“Don’t talk about you in particular. Various topics come up. I’m always. carting you women back and forth. But you’re different from the rest.”

“How’s that?”

“Oh, I don’t know. More soulful. You seem dissatisfied.”

This further development she didn’t care for at all. It seemed like an echo of what Emma Mueller had said. But the waitress she had trusted; this driver’s motives seemed more suspect. It wasn’t him exactly that she felt unsure of, but the line of questioning he’d pursued which had led too quickly in an intimate direction. She was disgusted with herself for having allowed the conversation to descend through apparent crudities to this presumptuous level.

She sat back on the seat, her voice very cold. “Well, I guess you could say that I have what I want. In any case, what I have or don’t have is none of your business.” Suddenly whatever interest she had had in him was gone; she just wanted to be by herself and could hardly tolerate his presence.

He glanced at her and shook his head in exasperation. “Hey, you said, ‘Be nosy.’ So I was just kind of going on without thinking about it. I take you home all the time. I was just trying to make conversation. I didn’t mean to get too personal.”

She realized that he was right, that she had encouraged him to ask questions; she was confusing him because she was so ambivalent herself, trying to attract his attention and not really wanting to receive it. Besides, she felt worn out from her verbal fencing, too worn out to continue in this vein. “Yea, I know you didn’t,” she responded softly. “Forgive me, all right? I’m not thinking too clearly. Yea, I did say, ‘Be nosy.’ But now I’m too tired to keep this up.”

She closed her eyes and found herself thinking once more about Emma Mueller, her broad, honest face and earnest concern. She heard herself talking. “Like a schoolgirl,” she muttered. “Like a kid. No, not really like a kid. What I said was okay. But I was raking up the past. No profit in that.’

The very thought of the past seemed to push her down further into her returning dark mood.

When Emma’s face faded out of her mind, another slowly took its place. It was the face of her deceased lover. “Marcel, Marcel,” she whispered, feeling almost as if she could gaze into his troubled brown eyes. “Marcel, you know I loved you. Sure we talked a lot of shit, but I really loved you.’

Tears came to her eyes. For a moment she could see him as he had looked when she first had met him, sitting by himself in the back corner of a coffee house on Upper Grant. He had always hated poseurs, and hated it too when she went into her routine with men, her wisecracks and coquettish gestures.

He had been so envious at times, so needy and weighted down with cares. She had wanted so much to save him and in the process to save herself. He alone had understood that there was a part of her that sought to be decent and clean.

They were close to her apartment now, already turning off the freeway to the winding road that led down the hill towards the bay. Once more the eastern horizon could be seen. The sun had just risen; its ghostlike sphere shone feebly from the low gray clouds above the silver water. The orange and red coloring was gone; the sky overhead was still a dark blue.

Looking back to the driver, she felt a sudden sympathy for him. He had sunk down more into the seat and was driving with his left elbow propped on the window frame and his head resting on his left hand. She reflected again that she’d been unfair with him.

“And how about your night?” she asked, leaning forward.

He stirred as if from a daydream. “How about it what?”

You have a good one? How’d it go?”

"Well, let me put it this way, hon. It went very well except for one small incident."

"What kind of incident was that?"

"The old knife to the jugular."

"Oh no. You got robbed?"

"I guess you could call it that. Or maybe it was just a permanent loan. I didn't ask him the terms... Anyhow, I should have seen it coming. This guy was being so nice, so over-nice and sweet, you know... That's a sure sign."

"How terrible!" she exclaimed, sincerely moved. A vague image came into her mind of a hand with a knife, the blade against her throat. Her city experiences had given her a fear of ever-present dangers, and it took very little to bring out this fear. "But if you knew he was being too nice, why you let it happen then? You were off in the ozone or something?"

He laughed. "Yea, like you say, off in the ozone. Or not really in the ozone. What it was, I was thinking about Wyoming."

"Wyoming?"

"Yea, you know, Wyoming. I used to work there on a ranch. I had this one horse I used to take care of. Wasn't even my own horse but I'd ride him around. Yea, I was dreaming about that, and this dude throws up his hand. Street-dude, you know. YBM. Very suspect. I think to myself, 'Don't mess with a spade.' But I'm in this country attitude or whatever. Soon as he get in he's acting so polite, I'm telling myself, 'This shoe job has a tool.' I start heading for this busy street with all kinds of lights where I'm going to develop motor problems, if you know what I mean. But he senses what I'm doing. Out comes the blade."

It was hard for her to listen. The thought of the knife made her queasy. Besides, she could tell by the tone in his voice that he assumed that she shared the racial hatred implied by his remarks, and this disturbed her very much. She felt at first that she should make some statement to clarify where she stood. Even as he spoke, however, she realized that, despite her resistance to it, despite what she had seen of what such hatred had done to one black man

whom she had loved, she still in fact shared in it on some primitive level. “Marcel, forgive me,” she whispered to her deceased lover as if he were sitting beside her. She wanted to purge her mind of these negative feelings. And she did manage to do this very quickly by an inner shaking of her head that reverberated inside her. But it occurred to her, right after this, that she had been extremely insensitive with the cabbie also, so engrossed in herself and her coquettish games that she had failed to look through his rough facade to the person beneath it. “How terrible,” she repeated, continuing her comments on the robbery. “I could see it from a bank or something. But from someone who works for a living, what a shame.”

What she was actually thinking about, though, was how even in a simple situation like this that called-for a true interaction she had given herself once more to her self-absorption.

For his part, notwithstanding his biased remarks, he defended the man who had robbed him as much as put him down. “The way I look at it... You see, sometimes I get a perspective on all this... Times are hard, hon, especially for these bucks. They can’t find any work. The fucking cabbies... we won’t pick them up. Everyone treats them like crooks. So it gets to be that they start giving out what people expect...”

His understanding and forgiveness in the face of his small misfortune impressed her very much. She found herself thinking more highly of him. At least he was trying to be compassionate and fair.

Soon they arrived at the three-story, brick building where she lived. She paid the fare, leaving her usual generous tip. He jumped out to open the door and waited as he always did until she had crossed from the cab to the building and turned her key in the lock. She turned around and waved. He smiled and drove off.

Her apartment was on the second floor. She passed through a small lobby where a single, brass-stemmed lamp cast a V-shaped area of light on the immaculate, dark walls, wearily ascended the red-carpeted steps, and at the top of the

stairway reversed her direction to the part of the hall that extended to the front of the building.

She seldom climbed these stairs without a feeling of dull resignation. The building was modern, smelled new. But something about it was alien from what she had been in the past. It was too tidy, too comfortable, too padded and quiet. This morning, however, she felt relieved to be back in familiar surroundings.

Even so, her mind kept churning, going over every aspect of what she done all night. She was still thinking about the driver, telling herself again that she had not addressed the substance of what he was. He had been the victim of an injustice. Except for her last-minute, token show of interest, she would not have discovered that at all. Emma Mueller too had indicated a hidden sorrow of some kind. Had she tried to find out what that hidden sorrow was? No, she had not tried, she had withdrawn behind her stupid shyness, she had let the allusions to that sorrow go by, jus*t* as she had let the driver's racial comments go by, and not only let them go by but surrendered to the hatred they conveyed. "Forgive me, Marcel," she said once more.

"We used to rap about that. We both understood." And so she went on. But she could not excuse herself for this transgression of the limits which while living with him she had established to the childhood prejudices that despite her efforts to unlearn them had continued into her adult life.

In her tiny, plant-decked kitchen she set her purse and tote bag on a chair, opened the refrigerator, stared at the fruit, milk and yogurt inside, closed the door without eating, stood lost in thought. On the table by the chair was a stack of unpaid bills. She picked them up, skimmed through them, shook her head in exasperation, threw them down again, and waved them off with her hand.

Five paces took her into her bedroom where all the shades were drawn. gray light illumined her small dresser, vanity chest, unmade single bed, and the boxes of unpacked belongings piled by the corner closet. She sat down on the bed and felt behind her knees. The tendons there felt strained; her pelvis was aching. Without washing or looking

in a mirror, she slowly undressed and settled on the bed. With her hands folded on her stomach, she gazed at the ceiling.

Yes, hard times were imminent. The cabbie was right. People were becoming soulless and hard, going after one another's throats. Her own job was in jeopardy. Rent was due in a week. She had just enough to pay it. The remaining bills would have to wait. Should she go to the bank? No, let the savings alone. Another double then? Three already this week. Better to relax. The money would come. What mattered was the job. Dancing was her life. She had to keep dancing, at least for a while. What's-her-name had kept it up until 50. Tremendous conditioning. That was the trick. Good diet, exercise, adequate rest. The pills were maybe helpful. Hadn't they helped to a certain extent? No, decidedly not. It was clear, very clear, they were a danger to her health. And anyhow they were going to run out. That would be another crisis, and only two days away. Should she return to the doctor? No, never again. Get the pills on the street. No, the pills had to stop. Was her health really failing? There were no real, no visible signs. Only the dryness. The dryness. And that she'd created herself. That came from the tension. Relax. Relax. She needed to relax. She was just the same as she had always been. And yet not the same. She was different. Different all over. Different inside. Not a woman anymore. Insensitive, closed-up. All of this was connected in some way.

She closed her eyes. "Connected in some way... Insensitive and hard... What is it I've lost?... Not a sexual creature... At war with myself... Just think about my problems... But I gotta figure this out... Don't I have a right to figure this out?"

Her mind returned to the events and impressions of the previous night, from her first sensations of liberation while dancing, to her long discussion with Emma Mueller in the cafe, to her reflections on that discussion by herself, the driver's virile face, the orange and red sky, the glow of the welding torches, the robbery, the knife, the hatred which she did not want to have but which still was there inside her with

her dryness and guilt; and all of these events and impressions seemed to revolve around the central idea that she had lost her femininity somehow, lost the basic vitality which she needed in order to be positive about life.

"Not a sexual creature..."

She unfolded her hands, reached over to turn on the small lamp on the eatable beside her, propped herself up against the headboard, and gazed down her naked body at the white fullness of her bosom, thinking that these very breasts before her had once suckled a child. She pricked her nipples until they stood up rigid with blood, wet them with saliva and plucked at them softly, trying to remember how it felt to have a tiny mouth at her tit. But she could not recall that feeling exactly, could not recall how it felt to have the milk sucked out. What did it matter? Her child was dead. Tears came to her eyes. She fought them off but kept staring at her tits. A child had fed there. That child had come from her womb. She placed her hand on her stomach, followed the thin line of red hair that began at her navel, grew thicker and coarser in texture and darker in color, and expanded at last in to the luxuriant growth of her mound. In that tufted hair was the opening to her womb. She ran her hand through the resilient fibers, gently touched her vagina, traced her slit with her fingers. Such a long time had passed since she had touched herself in a sensuous way. Yes, this was the opening to her womb where her child had been. Her womb was still there inside her. But now it held nothing, neither child nor man nor the promise of life. It was a useless womb and as such no womb at all, nothing more than a cavity, maybe dry like her bones with the same cakey matter inside.

She pulled back the pink lips of her vagina. They looked very dry. The sight of them did not enflame her in any way. She pushed her middle finger between them. There it felt moist. But perhaps what caused this sensation of moisture was really just warmth, the dry warmth of the useless cavity inside her. Perhaps her womb anymore was incapable of moisture. For a long time she dwelled on this thought. It disturbed her very much to think that the dryness extended even here, to her womb, to the very center of her

womanhood.

"But how ridiculous, how ridiculous, how very ridiculous," she said to herself. "I have my periods every month. The blood flows out. That alone is evidence...

Evidence of what? Blood was just blood. Vital juices were something else. Vital juices depended on a state of mind. And if she had lost that state of mind... If she no longer desired...

She touched herself lightly again, trying to think of some fantasy that would arouse her, beginning with Marcel and how he had loved in his gentle, slow way. But to dwell on him was too painful. She tried to conjure up some other male figure, passed over the images of various men she had seen in the movies or on the streets, and then, to her surprise, found herself thinking about the driver and settled on him. What was his name? It was a common name like Tom or Bill. His way of loving would be rougher. She imagined him biting her neck. This too was disturbing, however; she pushed him from her mind and, without seeking a replacement, merely stroked herself with her fingers

Soon her vagina did in fact moisten. For a long time she stared at the glistening folds of blood-engorged flesh, feeling more curiosity than passion, as if looking at an object disengaged from her body. She ran her fingers over the wetness and raised her hand to her nose. It had a salty smell like the ocean. She needed to do what she had said in the taxi, she thought, she needed to drown in this wetness, this ocean; she needed to surrender again to this sexual sea. Just to experience this immersion once more, just to sink once more into this submarine world where there was nothing but animality and desire, would be a step towards regaining the basic balance she had lost.

She turned out the lamp beside her bed. Through the drawn shades the gray light still shone. She got up, even as she rose feeling the dryness in her pelvis and legs, pulled the drapes in front of the windows, lay down again. Now it was dark. Sink down, she told herself. Sink down. This is how she had to sink down. Sink down and open. Sink down and drown.

Hardly, though, had she sunk into this darkness when she became suddenly aware once more of the strangely palpable presence of her lover and child, a presence which began with just a vague sense of their nearness, as of someone in an adjacent room out of sight, and then grew gradually stronger until she could see them as she had in her dream, not in her direct field of vision but from the corner of her eye, behind and to the left of her bed by the tall, narrow window, always covered with a shade, that looked out to the walkway between her building and the one next-door.

She knelt on the bed, rested her left forearm on the headboard, and, with her face lifted as if sniffing, eyebrows knitted together, lips puckered, eyes wide-open and glowing in an expression that seemed at once plaintive, inquisitive and unbelieving, reached for the shade, pulled it back, and peered outside.

Nothing there but the blue shadows that fell on the plank fence beside the walkway. On the fence was a vine with tiny purple flowers. She watched them as they bent in the wind. The sky above the roof-line of the building across from her was oppressively gray. Someone came to a window facing her own. She let the shade fall back into place, settled down in the bed, and covered her head with the blankets.

Yes, Marcel, when he was free of the junk, had made love in such a gentle way. But often he had not been free of it or had been on something else and then he had gone limp too soon or not been able to enter her at all or not been desirous of her. Yet still those words of love, those affectionate words, now punctuated in her memory with others of desperation, anger, self denigration... And when he was clean! When he was clean, how he had loved her! She had wanted him so much. What a noble cock he had had when he was manly like that, such a long, elegant cock, so exquisitely molded... And when he had pushed into her, then...

The cabbie would make love like that. His penis would be rigid and full of blood. The veins would stand out as if about to burst. He would fuck very hard. She knew very well how a man like him came on and how he wouldn’t stay

around when the screwing was over.

On her dresser, beside a little model of a Japanese temple, was a hair brush with a plastic handle. She took hold of the brush with her right hand rubbed the bristles lightly back and forth through the thick red hair on her mound, pulled back the prepuce of her clitoris with her other hand, gently caressed the glans with her fingers, ran them up and down along her slit; and then, feeling herself aroused, really aroused, for the first time, and feeling encouraged by this faint upsurge of passion, she began probing her vagina with the handle of the brush. Growing more excited, she rammed the hand inside her and plunged it in and out. A wave of shame came over her; she stopped.

"Well, at least I'm still a woman," she said to herself. "At least I still got juices inside me. At least I'm not totally, zeroed-out dry." But she was very much aware that the desire which she had elicited at last had come forth only after a battle with another part of her that wanted to suppress it. Moreover, even after coming forth, this desire had seemed detached from her somehow: superficial, fleeting, and worst of all demeaning.

She closed her eyes again. She felt so tired that the prospect of sleeping was scary. Why she didn't know. But fall asleep she eventually did and then, as was often the case, her dreams (if such they could be called) were tortured and disconnected, composed of black-and-white fragments like scenes in old movies, vaguely-threatening situations from which she fled with labored, viscous motion, held back on every side.

Several times she awoke in a cold sweat, went to the bathroom to wash. Noticing her nakedness, she put on a nightgown. This soon became so damp from perspiration, however, that she changed it for a T-shirt.

Late in the afternoon, near the hour when she normally got ready for work, she woke up for what seemed the last time, and lay for a while in a half-dreaming state, musing on a series of memories that passed through her mind—not episodes so much as places and moments, most of them occurring in sunlight or involving tenderness or wonder.

She dozed off once more and dreamed she was in an old car heading down a long hill towards a body of water far below her between steep, partly-forested slopes. This scene, as it appeared to her mind, was not in black and white like her dream-fragments of only hours before; but instead was conveyed in vivid, almost magically-resplendent colors. The slopes, where bare, were brown and red. The trees they wore like a skimpy beard were silver-leaved aspens in the valley, dark green spruce and pine further up when the smooth surface of the lower slopes broke into the jagged bluffs at the top, yellow-green cedars in the crevices of these rocky up reaches of the sprawling land or along the ridges of the slopes where their ragged outline could be seen against a blue sky so innocuous that it muffled her inner pro test at its sameness. The two-lane road beneath her, winding like a ribbon between meadows with goldenrods that waved in the wind, was the dark gray of new pavement. The water in the distance gleamed with an intense, glittering white light that made it look not like water at all but like something immaterial and formless, bound by no earthly law.

At the bottom of the hill, where the road curved around the base of a red rock, frozen pirouette, a tower twisted off, it seemed, from some nameless cathedral, was an immense, concrete dam of the sort which once when very young she had visited with her father. The road led across the top of the dam. Next to the road was a sidewalk and wall. People strolled back and forth, looking off. She too, in her dream, walked along this wall, gazing below her at the water that streamed from the dam's foundation and curved like a golden thread between the gray rock and variegated trees. So struck was she by this sight that she hardly watched where she was going and collided with running child, a small, pretty girl about seven years old. Afraid that this youngster would fall beneath her, she reached down and steadied herself on the girl's slender shoulders. In so doing she met the child's eyes. They were green like her own, and large and well-meaning, with that look of innocent forlornment and utter hopefulness which children sometimes have who at an early age are subjected to disappointments or indignities

which they don't understand. For a moment she drank in these waiflike eyes; then the girl skipped away with the lissomness of a fawn, her red hair glowing in the sunlight.

That was all. Still when Ruby Ellington awoke, she lay for a long while caught in the spell of this dream. That small, radiant face—she had seen it before. Where had she seen it? When had that been? Suddenly it dawned on her that this child whom she had seen so vividly as if standing before her with the color and presence of real life, this child so full of disappointment and hope that these conflicting attitudes were apparent at a glance, this child with the sincere green eyes, was herself. It sent a chill up her spine to recognize this. Yes, that ingenuous girl was herself. The child's face, and whole scene in which this encounter had taken place, with the gleaming reservoir between the sparsely-wooded slopes, the golden river below the dam, the aura of sunlight in the girl's red hair and animal grace in her movement, lingered in the dancer's mind with an inexplicable persistence and strength. But what she remembered most of all was the sweetness in those childish eyes, the sweetness which was there despite the injury and premature sadness in evidence also. Such an ungaugable sweetness and that little person was herself as she once had been.

As she stared at the dark ceiling, her thoughts still focused on this lifelike face, another scene from her past came back to her, seemed to grow out of the first as if organically connected to it. She was walking across Russian Hill with her five-year-old son, on her way to Chinatown where they often went, she and her son, to buy fruits and vegetables from the sidewalk vendors on Stockton Street. Their route led past a wall that commanded a view of the city. Here they paused to look off. Directly below was the Strip. To the left were the white and tan apartment buildings and pale eucalyptus tree on Telegraph Hill with at its summit the gray, oblong form of Coit Tower. To the right was the San Francisco downtown; it too looked tan and white. The hum of traffic could be heard. It was a beautiful day. The sky was cloudless and blue. Beyond the Strip was the bay where a freighter made its way toward the arching spans of the

bridge. Far in the distance, above the green band of an offshore island, were the haze-veiled cities on the other side of the water. What struck her most in retrospect was this bluish-green water. It had glittered in the sunlight like the water at the dam, and her son, her bronze skinned, green-eyed, exuberant son, who even at that age, notwithstanding her efforts to shield him, showed in his look the discord and insecurity of his parents' life, had peered at this scene with the same sweetness and hope in his young, glowing face.

That sweetness, that hope—where had it gone? How distant it was from her now, how far from her grasp! How had she lost it? What precisely had it been? It was something intangible, a kind of coloring which, when she had had her son and in her childhood, had been present in all she did. Not that her actions themselves, at these times in her life, had been other than those of everyday existence. But the atmosphere around these actions had been different. And in that difference was the sweetness, the hope. It was an openness to life and thus related to the sexual openness which she had lost. Still it was not only this attitude of sexual receptivity; it was infinitely more than just that. A certain quality. Emma Mueller possessed it. She had seen that sweetness and hope in those direct, honest eyes. It was tenderness maybe, or love.

Yes, maybe love. And though Ruby Ellington seldom dreamed anymore of romance or the love of a man, and saw no other immediate possibility of bringing love into her life; yet she wanted to recover this feeling of tenderness and acceptance.

She heaved a great sigh, jumped from the bed, paced around the room, so lost in her thoughts that she paid no attention to her bodily sensations. Was the dryness not one and the same with this lack of sweetness? Was there no way to get that sweetness back? She turned her focus abruptly from her mind to her limbs and felt the dryness inside her in her spine, her legs, her pelvis, her womb.

How could she do this? How could she get that sweetness back? She could try to be more open somehow. She could try to resurrect her sexual feelings. But hadn't she

said this before? Hadn't she tried? Hadn't she talked with the waitress, revealed her most intimate fears? Hadn't she attempted to connect again with her sexual self? And, if all this was good, if she was on the right track, then why, when she thought back to Emma Mueller and the driver, when she glanced at the hair brush on the dresser, did she feel most strikingly the acutest shame? Yes, shame, utter shame. And a terrible guilt as if she'd done something evil. But what had she done? Was it wrong just to talk? Perhaps even to speak about fear was ignoble. Or had she done wrong in her fantasies of sex? No, it could not be evil to think, merely think, about something which once had been so beautiful, so sacred, so natural to her entire being.

She crossed into the kitchen, feeling confused and exasperated by her inability to reach a conclusion. No, what this was not evil but rigidness and pride. She was too proud to talk, too proud to admit that she had passions like everyone else. And she did have passions. Had she not felt them only hours before? Too rigid to let down her guard. Too rigid to change. The rigidness and the sweetness, the pride and the sweetness, were at odds with one another. She needed to let go of her inflexibility and pride, needed to relax.

True, true, very true. And yet was it not also true that she had to hold on to that pride in order to defend herself against the continual insults she encountered from men? And did she not require that rigidness in order to control her appetites and maintain her health? Was it not health which mattered most of all? Again she felt confused. She sat down and rested her chin on he hands. Yes, health mattered most of all.

She stared at the stack of bills on the table. If she lost her health she would lose her job. And already her job was in jeopardy. Hard times were imminent, as the driver had said.

Gazing absent-mindedly around the room, she noticed her purse where she had left it on the chair. Her bottle of valium stuck out at the top. She rearranged the bottle so the yellow pills could be seen. Her medication, as the waitress had called it, was related to this also. It was somehow the

symbol of her struggle for health. She had used the pills to sink herself in a stupor in which what she had sought was just to know the movement again as it really was. And from that movement, from that sense of fluency which she had experienced once more, she had tried to recover a feeling of health. Yes, it all came down to health. Health was the way back to balance, the way back to sweetness and hope... And the pills? With regard to them, there was only one significant fact: they were no longer an aid but an obstacle to health.

They were fogging her mind. Whether they were precisely an addiction was not as important as what they represented in terms of her will or lack of will to health.

So it was clear, very clear, what she needed to do. She pushed the stack of bills aside and poured out the pills in the middle of the table. They made a little pile which she divided into groups of six. Six was the amount which she allowed herself every twenty four hours, not stretching them out but instead concentrating them all in the evening so as to derive the maximum effect while she danced. There were two groups of six with three pills left over. Fifteen in all. She scooped them up and walked with them to the bathroom. “The thing to do is flush the fuckers down.” But she could not get herself to discard them. She returned to the kitchen and separated them into portions of decreasing size: five, four, three, two and one. That was a more sensible approach. to wean herself gradually until they were gone. She let out a long sigh. A sensible approach. She would prove that her willpower was strong by quitting the pills.

But didn’t she need this medication, or whatever it was, in order to dance well? Didn’t her whole life and livelihood depend on how she danced? Didn’t she need to remain in that unthinking state for a while? If her motions were constricted, wouldn’t that cut off her energy again? No, all this was self-deception. She had no more energy now, from the drug, than she had had before she started. What she needed, what she needed was to fight, was to fight against her pride, against her pride and bad habits, against her bad habits, fight her way back to sweetness and hope... Still that was so vague.

So general. So general. In specific terms then, in specific terms... Well, first of all, the pills. To quit them. As she had said. And then other people. Same as before. She had to make friends. Emma Mueller was the logical choice. She had to go back to the waitress and be open and trusting. And somehow change her attitude to sex. Weed out the guilty feelings. Turn back this tendency to isolation and self-hatred. Then last of all that childish face—her own face, her son's, the possibility of sweetness and hope. Could she hold on to that image? She shut her eyes. The image, though slightly faded, was still there. Well, she should try to keep it then.

She sighed once more and looked at the clock above the sink. A quarter to six. Much later than she'd thought. Her first show was at seven-fifteen. No need for panic. She rushed across the room, raced through her shower, dressed quickly, and hurried out, thinking that maybe she'd find a cab faster on the street. A red taxi came by. She flung up her hand. Soon she was riding downtown. The front wheels were rattling. She kept repeating what she needed to do. Stop taking the pills. Be a friend to the waitress. Be more sexually open. Her mind went on. But the more she rehashed her resolutions, the more insubstantial they seemed. She kept looking back at her dream, trying to maintain, if not the conjoint image of the two faces she had seen, since this image now had paled even more in her memory, then the emotion at least of tenderness which these faces had awakened. That emotion, however, had also dimmed.

As the cab headed north on the freeway, she could see the city skyline in the distance. The sun had just set. A light rain was falling. Above the clustered, light-studded downtown buildings the churning clouds were violet-red. A bank of fog pressed against these silhouetted buildings from the west. In the east, partly obscured by another wall of fog that had covered the bay, were the far-flung orange lamps of the San Francisco-Oakland bridge. The windshield wipers creaked back and forth. A sickening sound. The rain made her uneasy. She felt anxious, alone. She didn't know why. But as the taxi zoomed off the down ramp and plunged into the jammed, noisy traffic by the throbbing neon of the Strip,

she recalled her resolutions and clenched her right fist.

She headed straight to the dressing area which was almost deserted. Just one other dancer stretching herself in the corner of the cluttered, paint bare room. The roar of a car rose up in the alley. Lights traveled across the burlap on the windows. Then the windows were dark. The only illumination was the bulb overhead. She sat down and took out her pills. Now was the time to take one instead of two. How stupid, though. As if they were acid. And she felt so disturbed. What did it matter? She needed to calm down. Yes, it did matter. She had to get clean.

She took out a single, tiny pill, stared at it a moment, tossed it down her throat. So what good was one? She was using it for nothing. No, that was the point. Reduce them to zilch. She undressed herself and put on her costume. Her music began. She walked up the hall to the stage, reached down to feel her knees. Dry, very dry. When would this end? Three slow steps took her up to the platform. She paused in the shadows and peered at the red and-blue flashing lights and floating faces of the men. The serving room was crowded.

Convention of some kind. She felt too alert. She didn't want to go out. Was there no way to avoid this? No, she had to dance. She pushed herself forward into the pulsing light. Now the dappled floor seemed unsteady beneath her. Waves of color. Not solid. She started to dance. Her body felt rigid. She just wanted to quit and go off by herself. Still she forced herself to keep moving. At last the music stopped.

She returned down the hall, feeling already fatigued. "I can't perform like this in total consciousness. Holy Cow, this is blowing my mind." The dressing room was lively; the women were passing a joint. They held it out to her; she waved it off. "Vegetarian, you know. I never indulge." The joint circled once more. Impulsively she grabbed it. "I didn't know it was a vegetarian dooby." Everyone laughed. She took a long drag, jammed the smoke in her lungs. "So what am I doing?" she muttered. "A Peter for a Paul." She had promised herself to stay clear of grass. She got up and left the room, went out the back door, and for a while stood by

herself looking up the narrow alley to the gray apartment buildings and lighted windows at the top of the steep hill on one side, then down the alley to the street at the other end where a part of the sign at Leroy's could be seen. Emma Mueller was there.

She should stop and say hello. But she could not get herself to do it. Instead she pushed through the door again and paced back and forth in the hall. It was almost time for her number. By the platform she stopped.

Voices could be heard beyond the curtain that separated the back of the stage from the serving room. "Wait till you see who's coming up next. Least I think she's on deck," said a man to someone who apparently had just come in.

"This outrageous redhead with bazooms like Mae West. Not exactly poetry in motion, if you know what I mean. But wait till you see this bitch's caboose.'

She raised back her head and closed her eyes. Bastards. Pure bastards. They were nothing but bastards, the whole screaming crowd. How had this happened? How had she, Ruby Ellington, descended to this? Just a carcass is all she was anymore. Not even a dancer. Meat for the dogs.

Her music had already started. But she could not go out. She went back to the dressing room and sat down. The others were still smoking grass. She reached for the joint and took another drag.

One of them nodded. "Hey, Rube, don't you hear? They're sounding your number."

She sighed. "Number or not, I cannot go out."

They all looked at her. "You sick or something?"

She shook her head, her eyes shut, her words coming out slowly. "Bastards. Pure bastards. I just can't face them right now."

"Wow, total burn-out. Hey, someone spell Rube. She's all worn down."

It felt good for a moment to have the attention of the group. But she couldn't accept it. She felt ashamed. She jumped up, noticing the tension in her pelvis and legs. "No, I'm going. I'm going. I'm just acting crazy. Really, I'm fine. Just let me go to the can." She grabbed her purse. In the

background she heard the manager, Richard Lammot. "Where's that goddam Ruby Ellington?" Someone answered: "Coming right now." She rushed to the bathroom.

She needed the pills. Her job was involved. She took three instead of two, headed up the hall. "So much for my willpower. So much for my big resolutions." Jensen, his corpulent face contorted in anger, watched her approach from the open door of his office on the far side of the stage. "Where the hell you been?" She didn't reply. She went up to the platform. "Let him ram it up his rear." She felt a little foggy from the grass. "Just get lost in the motion." Soon she was dancing. "The motion, the motion. Everything's all right. Just get lost in the motion. Everything's all right."

Later in the evening she took several more pills. She had used seven by the time she left the club. She started towards the restaurant but something held her back. A blue-and-white taxi came by. It was her regular driver. He waved and slowed down. She nodded at him and shook her head no. A few minute afterwards she hailed another cab. All the way home she cussed herself out.

"So much for my new lease on life."

Lying in bed, she continued her self-condemnation. So that's what she was, just meat for the dogs. The thought of it. Disgusting. She switched on the lamp beside her bed and peered at her image in the mirror. Her red hair was matted. There were dark shadows beneath her sunken eyes. Goddam bitch. Rotted to the core. She switched off the light again. What had happened to her discipline? What had happened to her feelings? Had she given up? No, she had not stopped fighting. She had not given up. She could not allow this...a senseless decline. At stake was everything. At stake was her life.

She got up, yanked the bottle of pills from her purse, poured them in her hand, strode with them to the bathroom, flung them in the commode. A turn of the handle. They were gone. She returned to the bedroom, threw herself in to bed, covered her face with her blankets. Now she had done it. Goddam stupid bitch.

No, no, no. It was right. It was right. She had to get rid

of them. She had to get clean. A matter of principle. It was right. It was right. Had she forgotten so soon what she'd lost? She could get it all back. Her health and her balance, sweetness and hope. If she made a clean effort she could get it all back. She had taken the first step. It was right.

She felt suddenly calm. For the first time since that morning, her mind was quiet and dark, so wonderfully quiet and dark. Then once more she saw the dam below the slopes and behind the dam the gleaming water, saw them not, with the same vividness, however, as that with which she had originally seen them, but with a more remembered than actually visualized presence. Once more she caught a glimpse of the graceful child whom she had recognized as herself. Once more this image of her childhood self faded and grew into an image of her son. And from this second image other sunlit images and moments emerged, all of them likewise not as vivid as those which had come into her imagination previous to her dream of the dam, but somewhat vaguer in definition and dimmer in intensity. Just the same she felt an upsurge of hope.

Yes, she could get it all back. The elements were there for finding her way now to something different and new which would maintain what was good, sacred and wholesome in these memories from her past. And she too could be whole again if she could build on these elements and not be timid in seeking them out. She thought of Emma Mueller and reminded herself that the waitress somehow embodied these qualities of strength and hope which she sought. Why had it been so difficult to return and see her? She was just defeating her-self, doing harm, by avoiding circumstances conducive to her true development. At last she fell asleep.

When she awoke in the morning this hope of renewal was foremost in her mind. But while dressing for work she began thinking about the evening before her—a whole night without pills. This prospect disturbed her very much. As she rode downtown in a cab, her agitation increased. So the little, yellow pills had become more important than she'd thought. Well, let them be important. Then all the more challenging

the fight to give them up. Going early to the dressing room, she found it deserted. The lime-green, barrack-like walls were reassuring in their grimness, a grimness which she had known for many years. There was nothing to worry about. Was she not a professional dancer? Had she not faced such evenings countless times before? But the ten performances ahead of her seemed more formidable than was usually the case.

She felt terribly tense. Several other women came in. She wanted to ask if anyone had a joint, but her pride kept her silent.

Her music started. Without speaking to anyone, she went up the hall to the platform and looked out to the flashing red and blue lights. Just three faces in the inconstant shadows—Oriental faces, smiling, Japanese businessmen, obviously drunk, easy to please. She breathed a sigh of relief, pushed herself unto the stage, began dancing stiffly, feeling the tension inside her which had increased even more. Had it really increased? No, it was the same, just the same, neither a pain exactly nor an ache but a far-off suggestion of both. The music stopped. She went back down the stairs and up the hall to the dressing room. “This is fucked up. This is going to blow my damn mind.”

None of the dancers were smoking dope. “Looks like everyone’s clean,” she said, hoping that someone would laugh and pull out a joint. “Clean, shit,” one of the women replied. “The old cupboard is bare.” So there would be no grass then either. Good enough. Good enough. She sat by herself in the corner, stretching herself with a nervous persistence, bouncing against her tendons which she knew she shouldn’t do.

“Hey, Ruby, you know you’re on doubles?” somebody asked. No, she hadn’t known it. She shut her eyes and sighed “No, where I got them?” “The Temple.” “Well, I better move on.” She grabbed her fur coat and left, noticing on the clock by the stage that she had ten minutes to spare. She walked to the news shack on the corner, looked up the intersecting street to the flashing sign on Leroy’s Cafe. Now was the time say hello, just say hello. But she couldn’t get

herself to do it. She turned in the other direction towards the disco down the hill where the Phillipino longhair who sold dope could sometimes be seen by the steps that descended the dance floor. No, she couldn't look for him. She wheeled around and head for the Temple.

Soon she was dancing. She tried to get lost in the motion but she was much too alert. Back to the Garden. No one smoking grass. Her music began. Out to the platform. Again she felt a great distance from the movement. The music finally stopped. Down the hall to the dressing room. She reached for her coat and headed out. Once more she halted at the news shack and peered at the sign above the cafe. "What the hell is wrong with me? So what's the big deal?" Across the street to the Temple. Now the serving room was crowded. She hated to go out. Six more hours of dancing and walking. At last the program was done. Without waiting for her regular driver, she flagged down a cab.

Later in bed, she kept arguing with herself. "I did the right thing. I avoided the longhair. No, this whole approach is wrong. I'm making it harder than it has to be. Goddam glutton for punishment. It doesn't make sense to do it all at once. I should go and see Emma. She would listen at least. What the hell am I playing shy for like a kid? But this whole thing is stupid. Little yellow pills. They're not really an addiction. I'm just looking for an out. Well, I can't allow these outs anymore. Gotta stay keen. Best thing to do is calm down. The pills would help me relax. No, I'm just making excuses. What I need to do is figure this out, lay it out in plain, simple terms." But she could not sort it out in her mind. When she fell asleep, her dreams were fragmented and anxious.

By the next evening she was all the more tense and disturbed. When she saw that she wasn't down for doubles, both the prospect of dancing and of the long, empty minutes between numbers was oppressive to her. The nightclubs were crowded. Construction trade convention. A lot of drunk, frustrated men stuffing money down the brassieres of the wide-eyed cocktail waitresses who were rushing back and forth with sandwiches and booze. She could hardly bear the

thought of displaying herself before them. She recalled what the voice behind the curtain had said. Was it just two evenings in the past? It seemed so long ago. In between numbers she was restless. Her mind kept rehashing the same old questions and answers about her condition, the same old self-accusations and defenses, as if some faceless tribunal inside her was conducting an endless, inconclusive trial.

Towards the middle of the evening, when she was feeling extremely distressed, she walked down to the corner and on an impulse went up the block by the restaurant, not intending to stop there but just wanting to see if Emma Mueller was actually working. Yes, there she was in the back of the room, bent over a table with a coffee pot in her hand. The cafe was busy—conventioneers also, with jovial faces. She continued into North Beach past the coffee houses and small bars and shops that had once been her hangout. Memories were all around. People were laughing. Laughing about what? Their laughter seemed empty and moronic. She kept looking, looking. Looking for who? For the Phillipino who sold dope. Well, she could not permit herself to look for him. She turned and headed back.

Now it was raining. A steady drizzle came down. Her body felt twisted to one side. Again she passed the cafe, feeling terribly lonely, and yet unable to get herself to go in. She glanced at the softly-illumined interior of the restaurant, spying the waitress near the front window, and both wanting and not wanting to be noticed by her. When she had almost gone by, she saw a hand go up; Emma Mueller had gestured. She nodded and went in, glad that her senseless avoidance had been brought to an end, and feeling foolish because of how she had waited like a prima donna for a special summons.

It occurred to her too, as she pushed through the door, that since she had gone to the restaurant for the longest time every night without fail, and had stopped going there after talking with the waitress, that probably Emma Mueller had taken note of her absence and was now maybe angry or offended.

Let it be then; let it be. She braced herself for a

reprimand, and almost wanted to be scolded like a misbehaving child.

The waitress came across to her at once. “Ruby, it’s nice to see you. Where you been?” Her manner was restrained as always but nonetheless friendly. Even so, the dancer immediately observed that this greeting, though friendly, was more muted than before. It was obvious that the waitress did indeed feel slighted, but that out of large-heartedness’ she chose not to express her resentment and instead to focus on whatever was more positive between them. This impressed Ruby very much.

“Oh, I don’t know,” she replied. Her mind had gone blank. Now that she was in the restaurant, she didn’t understand why she had stayed away. “I was just wound up,” she blurted, saying the first thing that came to her mind.

“Wound up about what?” asked the waitress softly, regarding her steadily with her wide-open blue eyes. There was still a suggestion of distance in her voice, but that distance seemed already decreasing.

“I don’t know,” she repeated. She struggled to clear her mind but could not get a handle on what the nature of her self-preoccupation had been. She knew that she had been worked up because of trying to give up the pills. But as to how this was tied into her related, deeper problems, or even into her everyday life, she had at the moment no idea at all.

“I was worried,” the waitress said. “Thought maybe I’d offended you in some way.”

“Offended me?” Ruby exclaimed. There was a contrite tone in the other woman’s voice which she had not expected and which struck her as grossly unjust because she regarded herself as completely at fault for this new awkwardness between them. “Offended me? Hell, no, Em. I mean, you were fine. You gave me an ear. I appreciated. I really did.”

Peering into Emma Mueller’s broad, honest face, she saw there the warmth and simplicity which from the start had been so appealing to her, and discerned by how the waitress drew back her head slightly and blushed that this reassurance was important to her, far more important than she, Ruby Ellington, had thought it would be. But there was something

there also which she hadn't noticed the other night, or which at that time had perhaps not been there, a look of anguish and distress.

In the way the waitress returned her intent gaze, there was a sudden recognition, Ruby thought, on both their parts, that this distress had been communicated between them. The waitress lowered her eyes, looked up again, and flicked her head at the crowded room. "All kinds of business, as you can see. But I'm glad you're here. Can I get you some coffee?"

Ruby nodded in assent and watched the waitress as she crossed the room, observing once more, when Emma Mueller turned in her direction, the worried look on the older woman's face. She wondered to herself, strange as it was to contemplate this, if her two-night absence from the cafe was the cause of that distress, told herself that, yes, oddly enough, this was apparently so, the waitress was much more sensitive, much more like herself, than she had supposed; and because of this at one and the same time felt a power over the waitress (which she immediately renounced in her mind) and cussed herself out for her timidity in staying away—yes, nothing but timidity and vanity had kept her away. Then Emma Mueller turned in her direction again, presented that drawn expression once more, and she thought to herself that, no, her own absence could only have been a partial cause of that anguish, something more serious was wrong. Perhaps it had to do with the hidden sorrow regarding her husband and son which the waitress had suggested by her reluctance to talk about them.

Suddenly she felt a deep concern for Emma Mueller. She wanted to return the interest and sympathy which the waitress had extended to her only a few nights before. And what this required, first of all, she told herself, was that she get to the heart of whatever was behind that look of distress, a no easy task because of Emma's shyness and her own.

Just as she was thinking about how to broach this subject, the waitress herself, in a manner uncharacteristic of her, made a comment which indicated that she wanted to talk about what was bothering her. This was after she had gone several times back and forth from the demanding customers

to the dancer and had brought her another free piece of pie. “Well, things are happening very quickly,” she said. “I guess I’ve been in a tailspin too.”

Ruby Ellington, sensing that this was an overture to discussing the problems she wanted to help with, that this was her chance to be the strong person and good friend that she wanted so much to be, leaned forward, her facial muscles tense. “Oh yea, so how is that?” she asked, feeling as she spoke that her response was bland and inappropriately flat, that it somehow didn’t indicate how she really felt. Once she had regarded herself as a good listener, and had even imagined that she was the sort of person who would make a good counselor for people with problems. Now in listening to anyone she felt extremely self-conscious and was always judging what she did as she did it. Still she wanted to listen, wanted to help.

“Well, the short of it,” replied the waitress slowly, “is I’m leaving tonight.”

“Leaving? Leaving?” For a moment this turn of events seemed almost incomprehensible to the dancer. “What you mean, leaving? You quitting this job?”

“Yea, quitting this job,” Emma answered with sadness in her voice. “And not only quitting this job. I’m quitting this whole city. Going back to the Mother Lode. Things are going on there that I got to take care of.”

“Quitting this city,” Ruby Ellington was thinking to herself. “Quitting this city.” In other words, Emma Mueller would be gone. She was trying to focus on the concerns which she sensed the waitress was going to talk about, but at the same time she couldn’t help thinking to herself that what this meant, this departure, was that something very important to her had slipped through her fingers. She had assumed that Emma Mueller was a permanent fixture almost, that getting to know her was a simple matter of taking the necessary steps whenever she got up enough courage to overcome her shyness. Now it struck her all at once that she had blown it, that this woman who might have been a genuine friend was leaving before these steps had been taken.

Still how selfish it was that she was thinking about this,

about what she herself had lost, instead of about whatever was causing Emma Mueller to go. “But I don’t understand,” she said, her face contorting with puzzlement. “What do you have to take care of? How come you can’t just go up there and do it and come back?”

“What do I have to take care of? Well, the first thing is, my house.”

“You got a house up there? You mean you own it?”

“Yea, a nice little house and some land. And they’re mining up there again, scrounging around for the little bit of gold that’s left in them old mines. I guess it’s worth digging for now ‘cuz the price of gold has gone up so high. Property’s worth more. People moving in. Most of them living in trailers. You know how it is. So I got a chance for a killing. And I need the money real bad.”

Ruby nodded slowly as she listened. It occurred to her with fresh impact that Emma Mueller would be gone. Maybe she would come back, but the chances were as great that she wouldn’t. She was so struck with this thought that she forgot that the waitress had said that selling the house was just the “first thing,” as if something else more serious was wrong. “Well, that’s too bad,” she commented after a long pause. “Yea, it’s just too bad. I hate to see you go.” Once again, as her words came out, they sounded unconvincing, devoid of the emotion she felt. Or did she really feel it? She wasn’t sure.

The waitress smiled—not her usual, well-meaning smile, but one which in the way her lips pressed tightly together, for the first time expressed a deeper resentment. “It’s not exactly as if we’ve been close friends. We could have been maybe.”

Ruby raised back her head and closed her eyes. What came to her mind at once was that she deserved this admonishment and had no rightful claim to affection or trust. “Well, you have every reason to be offended. You were so kind to me.” Her words came out slowly, one by one. “So kind to me, and I acted... Well, I was a total asshole, really... But what you don’t understand... I’m not always doing what I want to... It’s like I can’t make myself come around.”

She didn't want to look back at the waitress and see that accusative expression again. But when she opened her eyes she saw that the waitress' face had softened.

"I guess this is just a rough time for me, Rube. As I say, a lot of things going on. I don't mean to shove it off on you. Hell, what's the big deal? You were only gone for a couple of nights. It was just that it was right after I had made such an effort to help. So I couldn't help thinking that I'd done something wrong..."

"Yea, I know that, I know that. But, like I said, I appreciated, I really did. What come out, it wasn't what I wanted. 'Cuz the basic phenomenon here... the real part of me is thinking something different, if you know what I mean, from what the other part of me is doing." She couldn't explain. She fell into silence again. She wanted very much now to make up for her insensitivity and emotional blindness. But some of the conventioneers behind her were hollering for coffee.

Emma Mueller glanced in their direction and shrugged her shoulders. "Well, as you can see..."

Ruby glanced at the clock. It was already the time when she normally returned to the club. She waited around a few minutes, hoping that the waitress would come back. But this would clearly not happen. Several new customers had come in. She put her money on the counter and went over to where Mrs. Mueller was standing by the coffee machine. "Well, I have to go, Em. But I'll be back to see you after work."

The waitress looked at her with her alert, kind eyes. Her face no longer expressed anything but goodwill. "I wish you could do that, hon. But I'll be leaving in two hours. Next bus won't go until tomorrow."

This further complication upset the dancer even more. "Well, I'll come back between numbers then, in a half-hour or so." She felt that it was important to bid goodbye in a more formal way by making a special trip back.

"No need to do that."

"I want to."

"All right."

Outside it was still raining. She had waited till the last

minute to go. She ran around the corner to the club. Her music was already playing. She set her coat and purse on a box behind the stage and climbed the three steps to the platform. While conversing with the waitress she had almost forgotten the tension inside her. Now she became aware once more of the dull pain that accompanied her every change in position as she danced.

As she looked out towards the red and blue flashing lights and vaguely discernible faces in the crowded serving room, she was thinking about what had transpired between herself and Emma Mueller. She went over the few words that had passed between them, acted them out in her mind, and in the course of this realized that she had failed to accomplish what she had set out to do when she had recognized the distress in the other woman's face; she had failed to find out what was really behind it. She recalled now that Emma had said that selling the house was just her first concern, and in retrospect decided that this had to be so, that selling property, especially when a good price was almost assured, could not in itself be a sufficient cause of such anxiety. So what was the further concern? What was the more important cause of distress which the waitress hadn't talked about?

She counted it up to her own insensitivity and confused state of mind that she had made no attempt to get to the heart of the problem. But was that what actually had happened? No, she had just run out of time, just run out of time. Well, now she would have another chance to be a better counselor, a better friend. She tried to imagine what could have the waitress so worried, and came to the conclusion that whatever it was most probably concerned her husband and son. There were no grounds for believing this except for Emma's previous avoidance of the subject. But Ruby could sense that this was so and had always trusted her intuition.

As soon as her performance was over, she put on her coat, went out to the rain-damp sidewalk, and walked along below the neon signs to the corner news shack and then up the other side of the block towards the blinking red letters that said "Leroy's Cafe." Her pace was now much slower than it had been a half hour before. She felt strangely

apprehensive. It was as if a load had been put on her shoulders, a task relegated to her which now she had to dispatch. This task was to break through her shyness and communicate as a genuine friend—a simple task and yet it filled her with trepidation. Besides, she was afraid that by returning after being told that it wasn't needed she would put a further strain on her interaction with the waitress, and that this is how their aborted friendship would end, in mutual embarrassment. She wanted to avoid this if she could, but felt that she had to force herself to find out what really was wrong and offer her help.

As she came around the corner, she saw that the restaurant was much less busy than before. This meant that there would be less distraction but also less chance of an encounter which would be awkward for them both. For an instant she thought of turning back. She resisted this temptation, however, and like an automaton pushed through the door and took her usual seat by the window.

Emma Mueller noticed her as soon as she came in. She was in the back of the room, writing down an order on her pad. A few minutes later she came across and sat down next to the dancer. Her stiff carriage and the slight tension in her face indicated that she felt ill at ease also. "I know the only reason you came back is to let me know you care," she said right off the bat, as if to dispel the strain between them as soon as possible by bringing the matter to an immediate head. "And I appreciate that you want to say goodbye. But you've already done as much as you can."

Ruby was relieved that the situation had been dealt with so directly. She too, anxious to avoid any silence that might cause discomfort, at once declared what was on her mind. "What did I do though? I haven't done a thing. I can tell that you're worried about something. And I want to be the kind of friend to you that you were to me."

In her eagerness to blurt this out, her speech had lost its previous blandness. She was very much aware of this, aware that her words had acquired a spiritedness which before they had lacked. She felt buoyed up by this and hopeful that for a short while at least she would break through whatever was

flattening her voice and speak with an intonation •that would make her emotions more convincing.

Emma Mueller looked away. Now it was obvious that she was indeed embarrassed. “There’s really nothing more to tell you,” she quietly replied.

Ruby thought to herself that she had made a mistake—either acted in poor taste or pushed something into the forefront which would have been better left alone. Or maybe her intuition had just been plain wrong. Yes, she had lost even that. Again she closed her eyes and spoke slowly. “Well, then, forgive me. I thought you had said something, you know, about the house just being the first thing... And so I was trying to get to whatever reality was behind that... you know, whatever was the real problem... I didn’t mean to pry...”

“Well, I didn’t take it as prying,” responded the other woman gently. She hesitated a moment and rose from her seat. “Got to look after these customers a minute. I’ll be right back.” She crossed the room to the tables where the last little group of conventioneers were sitting with empty coffee cups in their hands.

In the meanwhile Ruby was berating herself for having caused unnecessary strain at the last moment. Now it seemed as if there wasn’t much further to do except say goodbye and make an awkward exit. But how stupid it was that people should confront such barriers in the simplest of interactions. It came down to her clumsiness and inability to engage anymore on the most basic level with other human beings.

She began looking through her purse for her money.

Just then the waitress came back and sat down. “You know, I just have to say, I’m aware of the tension between us. It’s because we know one another a way and yet don’t. Or maybe we had this expectation of the roles we would play in one another’s lives, bigger than actually happened. So now we feel let down. I don’t know for sure what has caused it, I guess. But that tension is there. And I’m sorry for whatever I’ve done to bring it about. Because I can tell you’re a person worth knowing. You might be a little confused at the time being, but you’ve got a reservoir of

strength."

Ruby flushed and looked away, surprised by this sudden change of mood, and touched, very touched, by the waitress' straightforwardness and kindness and by how she was making such an obvious attempt to rescue the situation despite the risk of looking clumsy.

"And you're perceptive, you know. You really are. You're right that I said selling the house was just the first problem. And you go from that and realize that something else is wrong. That's not such a tricky thing to notice, maybe. Just the same, a lot of folks would let it slip by. But you're different, Ruby. Inside you care. You see how I am, though. I don't often talk about myself. I suppose it goes way back. I come from quiet people."

"Yea, I can see you're quiet. I can see you don't like to dwell on yourself," replied the dancer, still struggling to express herself as before, but encouraged now by Emma's sincerity and praise. Her self-esteem had sunk so low that she found it hard to accept that anyone whom she respected could regard her as perceptive or wise; and yet she wanted so much to believe that the powers of judgement and counsel which she imagined she had had in her younger-adult years had not been entirely lost, wanted to evoke these powers from her past to assist her troubled friend. "Maybe the reason you don't like to talk about yourself," she went on, leaning forward, "is because you think people would be burdened by what you say. I sure don't feel that way myself. I'd like to know what's got you down. Maybe it will help you to sort it out with someone else."

All at once it seemed as if the strain between them was totally gone, and as if they both knew this, both knew that they had broken through to a deeper level of communication.

"Well, the main problem," the waitress said haltingly, "what it comes down to is my son." And she started to tell how, just as the dancer had suspected, her dealings with her husband and son had been for her a source of great difficulty and sorrow. This had been the case, she explained, from the boy's early childhood. He had always been rebellious, disrespectful, and worst of all cunning in getting from others

what he wouldn't work for him- self. It was almost as if these qualities had been a part of him from his birth. Her husband, a stern physical man who, despite his occasional tenderness, had seen reality in black and white, as sin or not sin, spiritual or worldly, with no other gradations or refinements, had adopted the attitude of not sparing the rod, to which the child had responded with increasing resistance. By the time her son had reached his teens, she said, he and his father were no longer on speaking terms. At age 15 the boy had run away, and while working on a ranch in Montana had gotten kicked by a horse, an accident which had left him with a scar on his left cheek from his eye to his chin. After that, though this misfortune had been enough to bring him home for several years, he had gotten into more and more trouble with everyone who in any way was in a position of authority over him—the teachers at school, social workers who tried to help him, and finally the local cops. Now just a few days before he had been arrested for stealing some tires from a used car lot.

"Just petty theft, you understand. Nothing all that serious. Nothing he can't overcome if he wants to. But sometimes I feel like the real problem was me."

"You feel like you didn't give him the proper guidance?"

"Not that so much. He's the type, he listens and he doesn't. I figure out that I did what I could. What I didn't do, though, was enough interceding."

"Interceding with your husband?"

"Yes. Calming him down. I was helpless when it came to that. And when I look back at it now, I can't help asking what came first, the boy's misbehaving or the man's heavy-handedness'. Was the boy really that way from the start pr was the old man so mean to him that he brought that contrariness out? Or maybe he created it in a way, found whatever was bad in the boy, and despite his good intentions, instead of weeding it out, gave that badness what it needed to grow, which was mainly bitterness and anger, his own bitterness an anger. Because, you see, he was never satisfied with what he was. He thought he had failed."

"Failed in what?"

"Mostly in various schemes to get rich that didn't pan out. He was a very sullen man, poisoned by his disappointments, and angry at himself not only because of those disappointments but because he couldn't get rid of that poison inside him. It was almost as if that anger at himself for not being what he wanted to be spewed out from him on everyone else."

"But what could you have done against that?"

"Well, like I say, I could have interceded. But the truth is... well, I was afraid of him a little myself."

"You mean he was violent with you?"

"Just on rare occasions. He was one of those weird people, you know, who combine a love of God, as they see it, with a love of force. And when he was in a certain mood, yea, he turned that force on me. Sometimes I think that was what he wanted from me most of all was a feeling of domination. Not that he was brutal all the time. But when I tried to oppose him, he could get pretty mean, and bring up all kinds of Bible verses to back himself up."

"That was when you were trying to intervene?"

"Not all the time, but sometimes, yea."

"So you were caught in a bind. What could you have done?"

"I could have left."

"Why didn't you then?"

Emma Mueller let out a long sigh. "Oh, I don't know. I started out, I suppose, like so many, with this ideal of family love. And kept hoping that that would eventually happen, that by patience and attentiveness I'd be able to turn it around. But it all got whirled up in that anger. I didn't have the wisdom and courage to stop it. And in spite of his temper I loved that man and couldn't think of living without him. So it was my selfishness, in other words, my own needs against the boy's."

"But you said that you were trying to save your family."

"Yes, I sure was."

"So it wasn't just selfishness then."

"No, I guess not. I was trying now," said the dancer,

struggling to make it right."

"And what you're talking, doesn't all of it just pertain to the past? I mean, so you made some mistakes, you didn't stand up to the old man. But your husband is dead. Now there's just you and your son."

Looking up at the clock, she saw that it was already time to leave. But she felt that she hadn't really been helpful. She turned back to the waitress and waited for her response.

Emma Mueller nodded slowly. 'Yea, I know that. It's all in the past. But my son still resents me for what I did, for how, as he sees it, I sided with his father against him."

"So that's where that came from then."

"Yea, I suppose that's right, from the boy, from his accusations whenever he comes around, which isn't all that often. He knows I feel guilty. He's always making demands."

"What kind of demands?"

"For money, mostly. And I wouldn't mind giving him whatever I can, except that he takes it and uses it for what he knows will get me down, mainly booze and drugs. So I wind up contributing to his downfall."

"But isn't there anything positive between you?" asked Ruby, trying with all her might to think of a solution to the situation.

"Yea, at times we talk. At times I feel as if there's some love between us."

"Well, you were talking before about how your old man kind of pulled out the evil in him and made it worse by being so strict. Can't you cater in that way to whatever in him is still good, seek it out and help it grow?"

"Yea, I maybe could do that."

"How old is he now?"

"Nineteen."

"Even so."

"Yea, even so."

The conversation dropped off. The waitress, by looking up at the clock, indicated that she too knew it was time for the dancer to leave. "Well, I appreciate that you tried to help," she said as they got up.

"I just hope I did some good," the dancer replied. Even as she said this, however, she thought to herself that there had been something maudlin in what she'd done, that like a bad social worker she had tried too sincerely to help, and made Emma ill-at-ease by her too-obvious intent.

"Yea, you did. You really did. It was sweet of you, hon," responded the waitress. Her voice was very tired.

By the door, at Emma Mueller's suggestion, they exchanged addresses.

"Just a formality," Ruby reflected. They hugged for a moment. It felt very strange to have the other woman's large body in her arms. Then Ruby went out, relieved that the farewell was done. "Well, I did my best," she muttered as she rounded the corner. "Now let it be."

Soon she was dancing again. She kept going over what had happened. The main question in her mind was whether she had actually helped. It almost seemed as if the waitress had gone through the ritual of talking about herself for no other reason than to let Ruby think that she had been of assistance, out of pity almost. She recalled that Emma had said, "I appreciate that you tried to help"; and wondered why she hadn't just said, "that you helped.

The more she considered this, the more it seemed to her that the comments she had made had been commonplace and almost stupid. Before her shift was over, she had forgotten the affectionate words that had passed between herself and the waitress here and there in their talk. What she mostly remembered was her awkwardness and lack of subtlety in giving advice.

At the same time, she was thinking about the odd similarities between the waitress' background and her own—odd because their personal histories were so much alike in a way and yet so fundamentally different. In both their pasts, someone had run away from home because of too much strictness, as Ruby had from her churchy aunt. Still it wasn't Emma herself who had run away but ironically, her son. Both she and the waitress had been loyal to troubled men with the same kind of anger at what life had meted out which Emma Mueller had described. But her own man,

Marcel, had turned that anger on himself, while Emma's husband had directed it at others. Now both these men were dead: Marcel by a suicide; Emma's husband, she assumed, from natural causes. Both she and Mrs. Mueller had had just one child, a son. Both of those sons had been source of sorrow: Emma's son by living so defiantly; her own son by dying. And so on down the line: similar histories but different. Then too, the dancer realized that, as she did herself, what the waitress mainly felt about the past was incompletion and guilt, a sense of things started with the right intentions but somehow gone wrong.

Now Emma Mueller was already on the bus, she thought as she left the club and headed out to the street: already on the bus and on her way to confront her son and her past with that look of distress on her face. Had Mrs. Mueller really just talked about her past in order to even the score and allow the dancer to do a good turn? No, she had been wrong in thinking that, she decided, paranoid as always. Probably the waitress had welcomed her interest and concern.

Yes, that had to be so, she told herself again. Because what was Emma Mueller? A lonely woman. Yes, a very lonely woman, isolated by her fear that in what she had wanted most to succeed at, a family, she had been a failure. Looking back to her first conversation with her, Ruby understood that when Emma had gone on and on about how bad it was to get cut off from other human beings, she had not only been giving advice, but also, as people often do, telling someone else what she thought she should beware of herself. That's why she had said, in her unassuming way, that she wanted to be more "involved" with life around her, using that college word that sounded out of place on her tongue—because she had read up here and there on what to do about loneliness, and had decided not to let failure make her as bitter as it had made her husband.

So they could have been friends, Ruby thought, could have been genuine friends, sharing mutual concerns. But now that was over. Did it have to be? After all, they had exchanged addresses. She could write or go to see her, keep up that connection somehow. She had never been one to

write letters, though; and she knew that a friendship kept up like that by trips back and forth was not the same as one that existed on a day-to-day basis. No, her life would continue now as it had been before. Emma Mueller was a part of the past.

It made her feel sad—much sadder, she mused, than what was warranted by what had actually happened. A person who might have been a friend was gone. There were other potential friends all around. But somehow this potential friend was different. It was almost as if all her hopes for a more balanced life had left with the waitress, as if that woman with the direct eyes had come to represent for her the lost sweetness which she had known so fleetingly in her second dream, and been trying so hard to regain.

As she thought about this, the tension inside her increased. She walked past the cafe and looked inside, as though to underline in her mind that the waitress was gone. Had she done her best to make use of the opportunity to know her? No, she had stayed away until the last minute—not realizing, of course, that the waitress would be leaving, but nonetheless allowing the time to slip by. She became more and more fierce in her self-condemnations.

"I could have had a friend. I blew it. No, I didn't actually blow it. What did I do? She just had to leave."

Since talking to Emma Mueller, she had hardly thought about the pills. Now, newly aware of the strain in her back and legs, she darted her eyes up and down the street. Again she repeated her resolution to fight her way back to health, keep herself free of any chemical crutch. This time, however, she repeated it more weakly, and, after passing the restaurant, continued up into North Beach, looking for the Phillipino longhair and thinking to herself that the battle was lost.

Another fellow came by who she knew sold downers, latter-day hippie in a rawhide coat. She let him go by, didn't want to deal with a stranger. Too much shame. What she wanted was so innocent and stupid. Unable to find the Phillipino, she turned and headed back towards the clubs, disgusted with her lack of self-control. "Every damn little

thing that goes wrong, I'm looking for an out."

It was no longer raining. The buildings in the distance were hidden in fog. She felt lonely and tired, but when she paused to rest the tension behind her knees was so disturbing that she went on. The logical place to go was home. She hated the thought of those red-carpeted halls. A blue-and-white cab crossed the intersection in front of her. Behind the steering wheel was the driver who had used to take her home. There too was an opportunity for a connection, one of a different sort which she had also been avoiding. "Not a sexual creature," she said to herself. She watched him go by.

A few minutes later, she hailed another cab. The driver was an Oriental who could hardly talk English. The windows were clouded; she didn't bother to wipe them off. Her pelvis and legs felt terribly try. She couldn't relax and kept rubbing her eyes with her hands.

That night she tossed and turned. When at last she fell asleep, she had another, third, dream, this one not in the magic, vivid colors of her second dream, but again in the somber, weighted colors of her first, the dream in which she had seen herself dancing with her bones lit up from inside so that everyone could see the dryness inside her. In this third dream she was walking with someone who like herself was dressed in a hooded cape because it was raining. There was hardly any space between the buildings all around her, and the gray clouds were so low in the sky that they seem connected to the rooftops, or else, where the buildings were higher, prevented a view of their upper stories. This time, even in her dream, when she turned towards the person who was walking with her, she recognized who it was. It was herself as she had been at about 16 years of age. She was wearing her hair, which at that time had been brilliant red, in the pony tail with ringlets by her ears that she had adopted in her first year after running away from home since that manner of wearing her hair had been forbidden by her aunt. She and this younger version of herself were on their way to see where she lived, which turned out to be in a two-room dwelling that looked like an apartment at first, and then, as they entered the door, became a small house, though the

taller buildings on all sides leaned together above it and prevented any outlet to the sky. In the first room, the one they entered together, there was just enough room for a single bed, a dresser. and an eatable with a lamp. She was ashamed to show this younger version of herself the cramped, impoverished situation in which she lived.

Just as she experienced this acute shame over her condition, and turned to the other woman to make some apology, this younger version of herself disappeared and appeared again outside the window where, dimly visible in the fog and pouring rain, was a small group of people—among them Emma Mueller, the orthopedist, and the skinny man with glasses who in her first dream had pronounced that she was rotted to the core. As she looked at these people, they seemed to grow farther and farther away until she could make out only their forms and not distinguish their expressions anymore, except for the thin man who was closer and whose face wore a perpetual leering half-smile with his mouth curved up on one side. She watched these figures retreating, feeling a great sadness at their increasing distance, and wanting very much to stay in touch with them, even with the leering thin man, because she felt lonely and very hurt by the younger woman's departure.

About the same time she noticed that by an almost imperceptible lessening her bedroom was getting smaller. This disturbed her very much. The air too had become more compressed, and the colors in the room had grown more intense, more heightened and somber, in the odd way that had occurred in her first dream. In fact, she realized in this, her third dream, that this somberness of tone had first appeared in her first dream; and in thinking back to that first dream understood that even as she did this she was dreaming. She made an effort to wake up; but this effort seemed to whirl her down further into her dream so that she soon forgot about trying to wake up, and, finding herself now several feet away from the window where she had seen the younger version of herself among the fading figures there, wracked her brain for what to do. Her thinking too, however, was heavy and weighted down. Moreover, her

motions, when she decided to move back to the window and tried, were almost impossible to control. Only with the greatest concentration could she take one slow step at a time. And, when at last she reached the window, she discovered that the people she'd been watching there were now entirely hidden from view. All that could be seen was a gray, motionless mist which gave no indication of any real spatial depth.

Looking back into her small room, she observed that behind and to the left of her bed was a second window, oblong in shape like the window in her bedroom in real life over which she kept a shade always lowered so that what lay beyond it could not be seen. This window in her dream had a shade lowered over it also. She wanted very much to look behind that shade and see if anything besides the gray, monotonous mist which she had found outside the first window could be seen outside the second. Again, to reach this window required a great effort. At last she made her way to it, pulled back the shade, and looked out—that is, looked towards what she had expected to be out, but discovered that what was actually beyond this window was the second room of the house which by this time she had forgotten about. It was a cluttered little room with an A-frame roof like an attic, and with no lights in it at all except for a low yellow light beyond some large objects in a corner which seemed more distant than the apparent dimensions of the room should have strictly allowed, as if pulled out of proportion from outside.

She was overwhelmed with a sudden desire to explore this second room, and tried very hard to remember where the door was that led into it. But no door could be seen, and even the first door which she had come through with the younger version of herself had disappeared completely now so that the room in which she was standing was not only considerably smaller but closed off from all sides, and the air around her all the more compressed and stale. Her few furnishings in their cumbrous solidity were oppressively grim.

She couldn't bear to look at them. She turned back to the window and tried to push it open, not really wanting to go

into that second room (since it too had grown smaller now and the light in it had paled), but feeling that somehow she was supposed to go into it and wander around in that dark, cluttered space. Hard as she pushed, however, the window wouldn't open. Then she noticed that in the back of the room, in the corner that seemed pulled out of shape, where the indirect, ever-dimmer light was coming out from behind the several objects that stood there, two figures, one large and one small, were silently watching. She couldn't make out these two figures exactly, and could not see their faces at all; but she knew who they were.

She woke up feeling extremely upset. That afternoon and evening her agitation increased to an almost unbearable degree. She took a cab to the club, put on her costume, went up to the platform to dance, scarcely aware of what she was doing. Once more she was scheduled for doubles. She couldn't bear to dance, couldn't bear to wait around between shows, couldn't sit down; everything was intolerable to her. She wanted very much to get stoned, but no one had any grass. On her breaks she wandered up and down the street, looking for the Phillipino. It occurred to her that she could go up into North Beach and try to score some pot. But she didn't want to start smoking again on a regular basis. Better to stick with the pills. They were all she needed. "Just something mild to help me relax."

A couple of times, as if to punish herself, she walked past the cafe. "So I blew it. I blew it. I could have had a real friend. Serves me goddam right."

About ten o'clock, when she went up to get a paper at the news-shack on the corner, she looked down the street towards the basement disco, and saw a long-haired, dark-skinned man in faded jeans coming up the hill from the doughnut shop down the block with a cup of coffee in his hand. It was the Phillipino. She headed for him, forgetting to take her paper from the Gypsy, though she had already paid for it and left her usual generous tip.

He had not gone down the stairs to the open door where the music blared from. He was leaning against the frame of the outer entrance by the sidewalk looking very skinny and

nonchalant, with the collar of his denim jacket up around his brown neck, a cigarette in one long thin hand, his Styrofoam cup in the other, and his dark eyes glazed, profound, and contemptuous all at once in what was either a pose or maybe really a state of mind he'd achieved from being on the street and close to poverty for so long. Years before she had known him on a casual level; in fact he had hung around now and then with her lover, Marcel; but she had long ago forgotten his name. He was by no means a big-time pusher, at the most made enough to live on and keep himself in dope. Still he liked to play up the role.

Seeing her coming towards him, he immediately went into a little act. "Hey, big Ruby Ellington. And looking for something. This never-ending nightlife is getting her down."

Because she had known him before, she had assumed that this would be the least humiliating way of coming up with the innocent drug which she would have been embarrassed to ask for from anyone else. Now she found that even with this man whom she considered nothing but a low-life she felt ashamed.

"Please spare me the cool-guy routine," she said softly. "I'm just looking for a muscle relaxant. Valium, Librium, anything like that." It sounded stupid when she said it. She was sorry she had stopped.

"What's wrong with a drug store?"

She closed her eyes. "Can you get them or not?"

"Come to think of it, I know this pharmacy assistant who's very obliging for a fee."

"I'd like them tonight."

"Must be quite a spasm."

"Yea."

"Promptness costs money. You know how it is. Bends me all out of shape. I'm so utterly relaxed."

"Yea, I can see that."

He said he would meet her at bar-closing in the alley by the bookstore up the block, and offered her a couple of Quaaludes to keep her calm in the meanwhile. She hesitated and took them from his palm, popping them in her mouth as she rounded the corner again. She had never used them

before, had thought of them as opting out. They had such an immediate effect that severe of her co-workers at the Garden had to wake her up for the next show. She tried to explain that nothing was wrong; she was just very tired. But her words came out so slowly that she kept her mouth shut to conceal her condition.

She managed to get through the performance and headed for the other club where she was dancing that night. Again she fell asleep in the dressing room. She could tell that all of the women knew she was stoned and were covering for her. One of them diverted the manager's attention when she came down the hall.

By the next number the effect had worn off enough so that she could hide her condition better. One show followed another in a hypnotic daze. At last she was done. She gathered her things and went out. True to his word, the Phillipino was standing by the bookstore.

"There you go, big Ruby. I didn't mean to give you a hard time. Me and your old man, in the old days, we were just like this." He held up two skinny pinched-together fingers. "Ruby Ellington, those are sacred words. Sacred words, you hear me? 'Cuz you were sacred to him." He went on and on like this in a half-drunken monologue, and refused to take the extra money he had demanded for his promptness.

She thanked him for his kind words, paid him as much as he would accept and, spotting a cab, hailed it down, taking three of the new pills as the can sped south on the freeway. By the time she got home she was so out of it that the driver had to help her to the door. She stumbled up the steps and threw herself in bed with her clothes on. "It's all right. It's all right. I just need a reprieve. I'm not giving up. I just need a reprieve."

The next evening she took two more of the pills on her way into town in the taxi. During the course of the evening, she took five more. Seven in all.

That night when she got home she poured the pills on the kitchen table and counted how many she had. She had asked for a hundred. The Phillipino had given her a hundred and thirty. She had already used ten. There were a hundred

and twenty left. If she restrained herself and took only six per night, how long would they last? About twenty nights. Less than three weeks. Then she would make another effort to quit them. If she couldn't quit them all at once, then she could go back to the Phillipino and get more. It was as simple as that. But maybe she should arrange for the next pills very soon, just in case he skipped town as he did now and then.

No, that was absurd. She needed to quit. The dryness was still with her, was it not? This was just a reprieve in the battle, something to help her relax and regain her balance so that, after a moment of rest, she could fight all the harder, fight as she always had fought. Had she not been struggling? Yes, she had been struggling. This was just a reprieve. "Just a reprieve. I'm not giving up."

The next night she again took seven pills. The night after that she felt especially tense and took eight. With each pill she used, she worried anew about how many were left. But no need to worry. Relax, relax, relax.

These pills were different than the ones she had had before. They were tan instead of yellow. Their effect was stronger and more profound, and the state of mind they created more pervasive, so much so that she felt at times as if she had not entirely awakened from her third dream; the compressed atmosphere and heightened, more somber colors which she had experienced in an incipient form in her dark moods, and then with increasing oppressiveness in her first and third dreams, had intensified now to such a degree that she labored constantly under the impression that life as it was for her now, as it had become, was not life as it had been, was not reality as she had known it before. Everything—the buildings, the people, the lights—seemed more crowded together. Objects in the distance seemed not really in the distance at all, but like shapes, lines and points arranged on a flat surface, only known to be farther away because of how they overlapped or were positioned with respect to one another. Her vision, which had always been acute, started to blur. The thought that now, in addition to her other problems, she would need to get glasses, disturbed

her very much. Most of the time, though, she hardly bothered to look around her. She rode to work, waited in the dressing room, climbed the three steps to the platform, danced in the flashing red an blue lights, rode home again, lay alone in bed in a continuous, dreamlike daze.

And yet, even in the midst of this daze, her mind kept churning, reviewing and analyzing the whole history of the dryness. She tried to remember exactly how it had appeared and gotten worse and worse, and what she had done to understand it and ward it off. It had begun as an outgrowth of her moods, of the latest and most severe of them, had it not? Yes, it had been associated from the onset with that. And those moods, in turn, had always been related, she assumed, to the deaths of her lover and child, and to whatever she had done to bring about those deaths—if indeed she had done anything, which she both believed and doubted. But, in any case, the dryness had appeared and grown worse. And what had she done about it? Well, first of all, the movement. She had thought that it could be treated with right movement ("right" in the Buddhist sense of right action, right effort; she had heard fellow dancer talking about this); had thought that by moving as she once had moved, and connecting through that motion with the cosmic motion all around her (was she not in the midst of a great cosmic reality? how could it be denied?), she could free up her own energy and somehow scoop down into the dryness and whirl it away. But that hadn't happened. Had she given it a good try? Perhaps she hadn't tried hard enough. Well, then, she told herself, she should try again; and she did. And for a while, in fact, it almost seemed as if these new, stronger pills, by virtue of the stupor they caused, had dispelled her dryness once for all, a development that for a couple of nights gave her a new influx of hope. But then, as before, the dryness slowly and steadily, from deep inside her, as in expanding concentric circles, came out until she could feel it even in her fingertips as she danced.

So the answer was not movement, she said to herself. But of course it was not movement pure and simple. Had she not been through this progression before? Had she forgotten

what Emma Mueller had hinted at, that the way she moved was related to something more comprehensive, which came down to her entire attitude to life: how she had allowed herself to become cut off from other people (as Emma, despite her advice against it, had also done)? Had she forgotten the child by the dam, the hope of renewal that the image of her childhood self had called forth? Yes, she had allowed herself to be cut off from that child too, from herself as she had been, and from what that child had evoked in her, a memory of long-lost sacred things. In this also her separateness, her closedness, had taken its toll. Had she forgotten that this closedness, moreover, extended to her sexuality, her womb; that her womb was no longer what it had been, no longer the pink moist womb of a healthy woman, but caked now with whiteness, dry? And if the dryness was there in her womb, if because of this dryness in her womb she was not a sexual creature anymore and was therefore different from life around her—well, what was this but her just reward? Yes, her just reward for how she had compromised her sex, put herself up for display, given up her beauty to the lowest appetites in men. That was why the deaths had come. Had they come because of that? No, she could not believe it. She would not believe it. Ridiculous thought, that her womb was dry! And yet she could feel it: feel the dryness there in the very center of her being; feel how when she danced her womb was in the center of her dancing, a dry cavity inside her; feel how the dryness in her womb radiated outward to her limbs, became there the persistent ache that flared up when she made dramatic moves. And now this had increased to a never-before-imagined degree. To avoid it she altered her routine, diminished the range of her movement so as to experience this flaring up less often. She could not confine her movement in this way, however, without sacrificing the quality of her act; she fretted constantly about what to do. In any case, was this an answer? No, it was not an answer; it was just an avoidance. The answer was in the closedness which Emma Mueller had pointed out.

She went on and on like this, imagining that her

condition had greatly worsened, denying that this was actually so, rehashing old solutions and looking for some new twist to them which she might put to use, trying to think clearly but always feeling that her thinking was muddled and blurred and worst of all non-conclusive, taking more pills than she regarded as wise, worrying about when the pills would run out, dancing one performance after another in a half-stupor, with the gnawing thought in the back of her mind that her very presence on the stage was a pretense, a deception; in spite of her attempts to be reasonable and reject groundless fears, she couldn't stop herself from suspecting that she wasn't a woman anymore, that her womb was actually dry. For years, while feeling that there was no place, really, where she could be at home except the Strip, that this neon world was her own, she had been, on the one hand, repulsed by the crudeness of what her life had required, and, on the other hand, aloof from this crudeness, contemptuous of the men who responded to it and the dancers who took it seriously, regarding herself as not only superior to them but to the whole environment in which she lived. Her womb had been something different to her then, the one part of her which she had kept untouched by this crudeness. She had kept it to herself, kept it undefiled, kept it from being invaded by these surroundings towards which she had such ambivalent feelings. Now it seemed as if, along with the dryness, her ambivalence had intensified to a much greater degree.

As never before she feared leaving the Strip, feared being thrust from this familiar situation where at least she was known into an alien one where her past would count for nothing, feared the financial problems which this severance would bring; and yet as never before the Strip seemed threatening to her, seemed as if it wanted to take from her the last shreds of dignity and health which she had preserved for herself. As never before she yearned for the attention and approval of the men she danced for; and yet as never before she despised them. She found herself in a strange state which combined sexual attraction and repulsion.

Her act changed drastically from one night to the next:

first from energetic and wide-sweeping to more restrained and limited in range of motion in order to avoid the dull pain which occurred whenever she made sudden moves or stretched herself too far; then from the resultant reins-in routine, which for her was untypically reserved, and which she noticed elicited little audience response, to one which was an odd amalgamation of seductive gestures and angular movement, the product of her attempt to provoke a reaction from the men while at the same time holding herself back from any motion causing pain; then, in disgust at this seductiveness and angularity, which she was acutely aware of, to a ballet-like smoothness which puzzled everyone including herself. She brooded constantly on the worsening quality of her performances, brooded on the diminishment of dignity which she felt her appeals to the men had rightly brought her, brooded on her lack of fluency and grace, and now increasingly (since she had observed the manager watching her more often and more closely) brooded on the prospect of losing her job. These worries about her dancing, assaulting her along with her old worries about how to end her self-imposed isolation (which now had settled around her all the more inexorably) and about whether or not, by being immoral, she had invited her misfortunes on herself, were so overwhelming that she hardly knew where to turn.

What she did know, however, was that she was getting older. Yes, every day she was getting older. She could feel the oldness in her bones. When she walked down the street, the sidewalk jarred her whole body. She bought shoes with thicker soles, but they didn't seem to help. Behind her knees she could feel a continual tension. When she sat reading the paper, an occupation which in the past had given her a small amount of pleasure, the words came out one by one; focusing on each word in this way, she lost her sense of what the entire sentence or article meant. Her vision was so blurred that she didn't like to look around. She kept thinking that she needed to do something practical to improve her situation. Practical, practical: she repeated this many times to herself.

In the midst of the foggy turbulence created by her self-preoccupation and the pills, what came to her mind again and

again, as a kind of motif, was her persistent fear that on some basic level she had lost her femininity. No sooner would she recognize the recurrence of this notion in her endless trail of self-accusations and defenses then she would vehemently deny it, shaking her head. One practical thing which she told herself she needed to do was to quiet these doubts by proving to herself that she could still function as a woman, even if this meant forcing herself into some ridiculous fling. As had not been the case since her teens, she was bothered by sexual thoughts; rather than turn these thoughts into fantasies, she expelled them from her mind; she regarded them as not only crude but out of keeping with her age. Even so, when she lay in bed at night, various images of men passed through her mind. Foremost among them, to her continuing surprise, was the driver whom she had been avoiding since her conversation with him in his cab. The significance of this did not escape her. Why he appeared so often in her mind, she told herself, was not so much because he was physically attractive (though more and more in retrospect it seemed that he was); but because, as she had decided before, he was the sort of man who would provide what she wanted and leave. Not that she took him lightly or discounted his enthusiasm for life (which, she had to admit, appealed to her greatly); just that this probability of an automatic out, as she saw it, was an important factor so far as any potential liaison was concerned. There would be no complications; it would just be a test. She didn't know if she could enjoy sex like that anymore; but she did know that she needed a test, and that anything more involved than a short affair would be impossible; she could never open herself again to any more than that. He was always in the back of her mind as something which almost as a duty to herself she had to confront. Just the same, she kept away from him.

More than two weeks went by like this in a continual daze with her feeling increasingly that she was losing control. Already the tan pills were running out. The Phillipino again was nowhere to be found. Now at least there was grass; a couple of the girls had come up with some primo. It was there if she wanted to smoke it; but, fearing

that a too great confusion would result from the grass plus the pills, she had left it alone. Her performances had gotten worse; she knew that they had gotten worse, and was very much aware of Richard Lammot the manager's glance which she avoided whenever she passed his office behind the stage. She knew the end was coming. Yes, it was coming. She couldn't stop it anymore. That's why he was watching all the time. She kept waiting for the end; and while she waited a greater and greater anger rose in her at what she had been and had become.

Finally, one night when she was walking up the hall, he called out to

her: “Ruby, Ruby, you got a minute? Hey, listen, babe, I’m sorry to say it, but we gotta have a serious talk.”

“So now’s the time,” she thought, drawing in her breath. All evening she had been in a state of extreme agitation. The pills were almost gone; for the past several nights she had rationed them out; only three remained. Besides, her period was due any time, a further cause of apprehension; she worried now that each would be her last. She knew very well that it was irrational to expect menopause at 37; still she had lately heard of some instances where this had happened, and that had been enough to arouse her concern.

As she had emerged from the dressing room and started up the hall, she had noticed that the door to his office was open, and heard him slamming what sounded like a book or stack of papers on his desk. Concluding from that that he was in a bad mood, she had started to turn in the other direction towards the back exit. But just then one of the other dancers had come out behind her, and, not wanting to call attention to her avoidance, she had continued up the hall. Now, looking into his office, she saw him standing behind his desk with his eyebrows knitted together and his lips pursed in exasperation. He was a heavy-set, middle-aged man with a thick black mustache, thinning black hair, gray at the temples, a red fleshy face, and pockmarked cheeks.

“A talk about what?” she replied, immediately flushing, her voice tinged with the suppressed anger which had been gathering inside her. He had not yet clearly indicated

displeasure, much less given notice of dismissal; even so, she assumed that firing her was what he had on his mind.

He sighed and held up his hands. It was generally known that he didn't like contention, especially with women. He had a way of sidestepping any kind of confrontation. "Hey, come on, Rube. You know what you're doing? You're jumping the gun. Lighten up for a minute. Just cool it a sec and sit down."

"I'm okay where I am," she responded. Maybe all he wanted after all was just to talk out some point of business. She cautioned herself not to get on his bad side. He did have a temper. And he wasn't loyal; he would fire people on the spot who had worked for him for years. That kind of temper was nothing to play with. She had to get her anger under control. But she felt so tense and impatient. "Just get to the point."

"These new angular movements. Then you're doing ballet."

She gritted her teeth. So now he was going to tell her how to dance. The thought of it, the presumption. He didn't know a thing. He was nothing but a low-life. Somehow he had weaseled himself into this position where he was a caricature, a joke. And he couldn't be direct; he had to throw a slow curve.

"You don't like how I'm dancing. Just say it."

"Just say it, Rube? Just say it? Okay, then, I'll say it. What the hell is going on?"

"You mean with respect to my act?"

"Yea, with respect to your act," he replied, mimicking her dignified cadence. "Because I tell you what the deal is, look here on the honorable bossman's desk." He gestured with his fat hand. "Mucho problems. Mucho bills. You know what I'm saying? The usual idiots are coming around looking for the usual stuff. And here's Ruby Ellington, waltzing around. You're waltzing on the stage. They're waltzing out the door. That's all I'm saying, Rube. What's this new routine?"

"What it is," she answered, her voice rising again. "What it is, Richard, is for once, for once in twelve years...

in twelve years at this joint, Rich, I got this idea to do something creative...” But inside she was thinking, “It’s not creative though. What a crock of bullshit. It’s not creative. It’s bad. I’m all done.”

He had stood while she was talking with his hands raised as if to calm her. Now he came around the desk. She stepped back a little, staring fiercely) at him. Since her affair with him years before, when he had tried to make love to her in what she had regarded as disgusting ways, she had come to hate everything about him. She hated his complacent facade, which she knew hid the cutting edge that he used from time to time against anybody he had it in for. She hated his corpulent face which repulsed her because of its fleshiness and general look of self-indulgence and lack of discipline. She even hated his office where to one side beside a stereo was the leather couch on which he sometimes seduced the younger, more confused women after hours. Still out of job scare she had learned to guard her tongue.

“Don’t you dare touch me,” she shot out when he approached her.

He stopped and shook his head. “Let me tell you something, Rube. You’ve always been an impossible woman.”

“I don’t care to hear your comments about anything I am except your employee.”

He groaned. “My employee. My employee. All right. What you gotta do as my employee then is spruce it up.”

“Spruce it up how?” she asked in a shrill voice. In the old days when he had been infatuated with her, she had had all kinds of weapons to use against him. Now with a sting of humiliation she understood that that old power had diminished to nothing. And why had it diminished? Because her beauty had left her. And, worse than her beauty, her fluency, her grace. Yes, her old power had vanished because her youth and femininity were gone. Without them she had no recourse on the Strip. After all her years of working at this club she had less to fall back on than a girl who had been there a month.

He let out a long sigh. “I don’t care how you do it,

Ruby. You hear what I'm saying? I really don't care. Just give them what they want. You know what I mean. Hang your boobies in their faces. Give them a corner on your twat. I don't give a damn what you do. But you better do something or you're going get canned."

Her hand flew out. Before she knew it, she had hit him.

He fell back, his face contorted in pain and surprise. Then, having regained his balance, he grabbed her shoulders and pushed her against the wall.

"So now you're getting violent."

She pulled away from him and ran up the hall. "You know where you can stick it!" She flung up her middle finger. He hollered something behind her; she slammed the door before she heard it.

In a rage, her face stinging with shame, she hurried up the block to the news-shack on the corner, as if making her way to some refuge, though she had no idea where she was going and not the slightest expectation of being pursued. She was astonished by what she had done; she kept defending her action to herself. "I can't believe I hit him. Serves the fucker right. The nerve of that bulldog, to talk to me like that." At the same time, however, the terrible reality was sinking in that by slapping the manager she had slapped herself out of a job. "Now I really blew it. This gig is over. This whole life is done."

She realized too, as she mumbled these words to herself, that there was another side to this also, that, paradoxically enough, she was not only angry and bewildered, but relieved that the separation from the Strip which she had feared for so long had at last come to pass. There would be no more dancing in distress, no more humiliation before condescending men. She was no longer be a dancer. Could this be true? Painful as movement had become, a life without dancing was hard to imagine. And what of her constant money problems? She had savings enough to last how long? At the most a few months. So right off the bat she would be scrambling for a job. Yea, she'd be scrambling like crazy. This damn gig was done. Just as quickly as she had swung from panic to relief, she swung back to panic again. Was this

life really over? Was there no going back? She could return to the Garden, eat humble pie. She had done that once before when she had needed cash for Marcel and the child. But to do that now, just for herself; she could never bow to that level again. Well, there were the other clubs where she did doubles; she could apply to them. No, Lamott with his petty revenge would do his best to turn the other managers against her. So she really had blown it. “Yea, this gig is over. God damn fucking temper. What an asshole I am. What a moron. Now I’m in some hell of mess.”

She had turned from the news-shack to the narrow street that led up into the North Beach neighborhood where she had lived years before. The sidewalks were deserted. It had started to rain. The only person in sight was an old man lying in a doorway with a piece of cardboard over his head. She stopped by an antique store where in a garish display all kinds of nicknacks, jewelry, pots and pans, trinkets, and dishes with tourist places painted on them, were arranged around a manikin in a Twentyish hat with a wide brim and feather, a manikin that bore no real resemblance to her except in being female in appearance; and yet she took her coming upon it to be a by-no-means accidental indication of her own state of mind, burdened as she was by the trappings from the past that impinged on her from every side. Across the street on the corner, its store-front windows bordered by the same green awnings, was the coffee house where she had met Marcel. She turned around. No, she could not go on here where there were so many reminders of how she had failed. Well, where could she go? To Leroy’s Cafe?

She could order some coffee, calm herself down. But there too she had failed in waiting so long to talk with Emma Mueller that a friendship with her had not formed until the last minute. No, she could not go back to that cafe. And she didn’t want to go home, didn’t want to lie alone amidst the images from the past that always lurked there.

She felt so alone. Her whole body felt tense. Remembering the pills, she took out the small vial that contained them. Only three left. That was the immediate problem: how to get more pills. She poured out two of them

in her palm, peered at them for a moment, put them back. "No, I don't need any more. What I need is to quit," she slowly pronounced. "And the way to quit is to ration them out. Ration them out, and plain and simple stop. Nevertheless, as soon as she started walking again (now, for lack of a better destination, heading back to the Strip), she scanned the street for the Phillipino or any one who looked like a pusher, squinting and blinking to clear her vision. But no one at all could be seen, much less anyone selling dope. "Just as well," she mumbled, gritting her teeth. "Now more than ever I need to get in control." Even as she said these words, however, another voice in her was saying that the battle was lost. Yes, the battle was lost; it was just a matter of time. As if in recognition of this, her body grew tenser. She could feel the strain in her back and legs and inside the strain the dryness that she knew far too well: dryness in her back and legs, dryness in her pelvis, her womb.

So her attempts to save herself had come to this. She had lost her temper, lost her job. And what was she now? She was nothing. An old woman. No, not a old woman. Just 37. Just 37. Nonetheless done. Her womb was dry. Her femininity, her beauty, her life as a dancer, all of that was gone. She was nothing, nothing. Nothing remained. She kept blinking her eyes. The lights on the few windows yet illumined in the mostly-dark downtown buildings on the other side of the Strip had fuzzy haloes around them. They seemed pressed against the geometric shapes in the distance; the urban landscape in front of her was flat, lacking spatial dimension. She had a feeling that she was walking in a dream. Yes, a dream like her third dream. The air felt so heavy. The sky above the city was violet-red.

Reaching the Strip, she stared down the street towards the sidewalk cafe at the end of the block. The signs above the nightclubs were out. Some kind of yellow object stood in the street by the cafe. She squinted fiercely and blinked her eyes. For an instant she saw the whole scene distinctly. The yellow object was a taxi. It stood alone on the rain-wet empty street. To both sides of the cab were night-dark silent buildings. The stoplight on the corner was green. As she watched, it

clicked upward to amber then red. Everything was so weighted down, so oppressive, She didn't want to keep looking. Again her vision blurred. She leaned against a doorway, rested her shoulder and head on the frame, closed her eyes. If only she could escape from this ever-present thickness. She took out the vial of pills, poured them out once more in her palm, divided them into portions of two and one, and, after a moment of hesitation, threw the larger portion in her mouth, thinking, as she swished them back and forth with her tongue, that these tiny tan pills would hardly provide the freedom she wanted. She swallowed them and again shut he eyes. "I just want to get blasted. I want to get blasted so bad. But I just can't permit that. I gotta stay clean."

For the longest time she leaned against the building like this, with her eyes still closed, while the events of the evening whirled through her mind, bringing with them the redoubled understanding that her life on the Strip which actually done. Had she wanted it to end? Was this something else which she had brought on herself? Had she pushed herself into this separation which, though inevitable in the long run, might have been delayed for several more years? Maybe so, maybe she had done that. Goddam stupid bitch. Was there really no chance of getting a job at some other club? Was Lamott vindictive enough to prevent it? Yea, that was the other side of his weakness and self-indulgence; that was how it came out, in petty muscle flexing. Was his influence so great? No, ironically he was almost universally disliked. Just the same, if he insisted on it, the other managers would team up behind him. What of Reno, Las Vegas? What an idea. What a joke. No, that wouldn't work because what her problem boiled down to was not Lamott but age. If only she were younger, she could have a second chance. A chance at what? At ruining her life? Yea, she had fucked up her life; she had thrown it away. Now this awful dryness. Her failing sight. Everything was going at once. And to make it worse she was out of the pills. Or nearly out of them. She took out the vial and gulped down the last one. "Now everything is gone. Serves me goddam right. But I

gotta do something. Gotta do something right now."

She almost leaped from the doorway and started walking again. Not wanting to approach the Garden, she crossed the street to the clubs on the other side. As she hurried along in a daze, not looking around, no longer trying to order her thoughts, and saying to herself again and again that she wanted so much to get stoned, she heard someone calling, "Hey, Miss Ellington, is that you?" Now who would address her as "Miss"? Turning she saw some figures in a dark alley between the buildings. She couldn't make them out. She squinted and blinked. They came into focus—some dancers she sort of knew from a club called the Den of Venus where she often did doubles. One of them, a slight girlish woman with long black hair, held up a fat joint. "We've got some Maui Zowie. You want to join us?"

"Hey, all right, I sure do," she replied, drawing in her breath as if already inhaling the smoke into her lungs, and conscious, as she answered, of how throaty and womanish her voice sounded, how so much older and more matter-of-fact, so much more lacking in affect it was, than the spirited voice of the young lady who had yelled. They smiled as she came up to them, the girl with the black hair most widely. There were five in the group, all of them, judging by their appearance, in their early 20's, though the black-haired girl (whose name, she now recalled, was Lisa) could not have been much more than 19. They were in an exuberant mood; with expansive gestures they pointed to the back of the buildings where the alley dead-ended at a cement-block wall. She followed behind them like a mother with her children, feeling the dryness in her legs as she walked. Life was going on for these others, she thought; her life had changed. She was a moving lie, a shell hiding the sickness inside her. Had they really wanted her to tag along? No, they had seen her passing, assumed that she had seen them, and out of niceness, because she was one of them, asked her to come. Well, she was one of them no more.

She stood a little to the side of them, shivering in the damp wind, her hands deep in the pockets of her rabbit-fur coat, her red hair blown back from her thin troubled face,

watching hungrily as a match flared up and was applied to the first joint. Then the joint made its way from hand to hand towards her, glowing with fire as each dancer took a drag. When it got to her at last, she drew on it hard, compressing the smoke into her lungs with such force that she could feel the pressure building in the upper middle of her chest. For as long as she could she held the smoke inside her, drawing in more air to pack it down more tightly. Then she blew the smoke out, shaking her head. “I did try to resist,” she said to herself. “I’ve been resisting. I really have. But this is a special occasion. My life here is done. I just want to get blasted. I need so much to relax.”

Far from feeling relaxed, however, she felt distracted and at odds with the cheerful mood of the other women. Now and then, to cover up her self-preoccupation, she threw some comment or joke into the continuous lighthearted conversation. Meanwhile she was telling herself, though, that she had made a mistake, that her very presence in this group was another small step on the road to ruin. But already the joint was coming around a second time. She took it in her hand and drew on it harder.

They finished the first joint and lit up two more which both circled at once. The more stoned she became, the more unfathomable the whole situation appeared in her eyes. It was as if she was getting an effect from the grass which she had never gotten before. Beyond the waist-high wall which they were leaning and sitting on was an empty parking lot; further in the distance were the tall buildings of the San Francisco downtown. Most prominent among them, and only a block and a half away, was the Trans-America Pyramid, its base blocked from view by the two-story brick building on the other side of the lot, its triangular form cutting diagonally across the rectangular forms of the buildings behind it, its apex hidden in the reddish-gray fog. Gazing at these buildings, she suddenly saw them for something which up to this moment she had never seen them for precisely; they were like primitive creatures with spirits of their own, so definitely and with such undeniable occupation of space did they loom up before her when again for an instant her vision

unexpectedly cleared; they were real, weirdly real, and yet not real at all, devoid of personality and volume, mere projections of her mind. And the low sky above them, the cloudy sky which reflected the multifarious colors of the late-night lights on the quiet streets below: it was not a great vaulting sky, the kind the Indians had looked at, but a far more ubiquitous and ponderous presence that pushed the buildings down into the concrete earth.

Then too, though standing with these other dancers who supposedly were her colleagues, she felt in no way connected with them. What this was for her, she mused to herself, was a kind of farewell ceremony, a ritualistic ending to her life on the Strip. These others didn't know that. How could they possibly have known this significance which she had kept to herself? Of course they didn't know. But if they did, would they care? They seemed so alien and distant. Their very laughter seemed strange. It was a sort of animal sound; and they were raising back their heads and baring their white teeth like neighing horses when they laughed.

She kept looking back and forth from the buildings and sky to the dancer next to her, the young one named Lisa who had yelled at her from the alley. This exquisite creature kept rubbing against her and turning towards her with her friendly unpretentious smile. Now she appeared even younger than she had seemed at first: 18 at the most, maybe even 17 or 16. If that were true, how could she be working the Strip? Perhaps she had lied about her age. In any case she was lovely. What was most striking about her was the contrast between her face and hair. Her face was light, almost ivory, in complexion; her small nose and thin lips had a kind of medieval refinement, like those of a woman such as Botticelli might have painted. Her hair was a deep raven-like black, having little in texture and form of the restraint implied in her facial sculpting; it was thick and lustrous and appeared to be naturally curls. She had made an effort, it seemed, to comb her hair straight; but around he forehead and ears were ringlets that had apparently come into being of them selves from contact with the moisture of her skin; there were tiny beads of perspiration on her brow. She had large

gray eyes with long curving lashes and thick eyebrows with a classical arch—again between the darkness of her pupils and ocular hair and the glowing whiteness of her forehead and cheeks
that same opposition of tone with the grayness of the irises at what seemed an exact chromatic midpoint, though around the pupils were faint rings of blue. As she waited for the joints, she kept rising on her toes and bending down to touch her head to her knees; then she would wing up again, her eyes full of laughter.

With every drag of grass this girl's radiant face and supple body were for Ruby Ellington all the more incredible, so amazing in their loveliness that she was awestruck by the sight. It was as though she had never seen a human being before, never before observed the intricate nuances of detail in a human body and face, as though she had never before realized, in particular, that a woman could be so unearthly beautiful. Not that she was attracted to her on a sexual level; not that so much as unmitigated wonder. She felt a terrible envy, a strange kind of envy that pierced through her and hurt her and yet was more akin to reverence than malice. There was no bitterness in it; she wished this Lisa no harm and if anything felt a maternal solicitude for her. Just the same it set in motion once more the doubts about her own femininity which had been in the back of her mind for weeks on end. She too was a woman. Perhaps she had been as lovely as this; perhaps to some extent she still was. What had she done with her beauty? What could she do with what was left of it now that her sexuality had faded to nothing and her work as a dancer was over? Now, with this life behind her which had risen and fallen in consort with her feminine powers, with no new life or friends to take the place of what she had had in the past, she would be all the more lonely and cut off, all the more an odd sexless creature. Her demise would take its inevitable course. This thought disturbed her so much that she couldn't bear to stay any longer. She said something forcedly cheerful, something which even as she said it seemed pathetically lacking in the vibrancy of the young women beside her. Then she thanked them all and bid

them good night.

As she turned to leave, the black-haired girl turned also. She held up a joint. “Here’s one for the road, Miss Ellington. Have a nice trip home.” She flashed her friendly smile.

“How sweet of you, Lisa. How very sweet,” Ruby answered softly, sincerely touched. As she headed up the dark alley to the street with the joint in her breast pocket, this girl’s shining face remained in her mind. That face. She had seen it before. Ah, yes, the child in the dream, the child by the dam. So not the same face exactly. Still that same expression of hope. And the child by the dam had been herself. Herself. Her own face, when she was younger, had worn that expression. Now it was gone. But how beautiful, how good, this Lisa seemed! The mere fact that such beauty and goodness existed filled her with a lingering amazement. At the same time it made the farewell to the Strip which she told herself she had just completed seem even more unsettling and profound.

A light drizzle was coming down. She had forgotten it while smoking the grass. Now she felt the cold rain on her face and hands. Along with this, she remembered the dryness inside her. Emerging from the alley, she looked across, the street to the Garden where the lights were out and the doors locked from outside with padlocks and chains. So Lamott had left. Now that the coast was clear, she had a sudden desire to go and stand in the doorway. Why she didn’t know. She went across towards it, feeling the tension in her legs as she too each step. The pavement felt hard beneath her feet. Her body felt twisted to one side. Her vision was blurred.

Standing in the doorway, she watched the street for a cab. Here at least she felt secure. This club had been her home. Her mind kept churning around. She could see herself in Jensen’s office. She heard herself saying, “For once I decided to be creative”; and thought to herself again what a falsehood that had been; she had not been creative. “What I was doing, I was just avoiding the dryness.” An image came to her mind of Lisa stretching herself and bending down to touch her head to her knees; and with the advent of that image she experienced the same painful jealousy once more.

"Yea, I was just avoiding the dryness. He saw it. Everyone saw it. Not the dryness exactly. But everyone knew that something is wrong. Because something IS wrong. Something is fucked up in my system. So this is the end. The dirty bastard. I'm glad I hit him. Yea, this is the end. This is not my home anymore."

She pushed out from the doorway to the glistening sidewalk where the water was running now in a little stream from the parking lot beside the Garden to the street. Looking up towards the news-shack on the corner, she saw that by some chance happening it was closed; the square of plywood that swung up to form an extension of the roof had been lowered and locked. The wet pavement of the wide untrafficked intersection gleamed with a green pool of light projected from the stoplight across the way. Below this green pool was a smaller, more oblong pool of flashing orange from the "wait" sign as it blinked off and on. Far away two fog horns sounded: the first frequent and shrill, the second low in tone and with a slower cadence. The wail of a fire engine rose up in the air, hung there a moment, and faded again.

She was walking towards the news-shack, not knowing why she was going in that direction, and noticing again how the sky was violet-red and pressing down on the night-dark buildings beyond those pools of green and orange. Now it occurred to her that if she went as far as the corner she would not be able to stop herself from looking to the right and seeing there, a hundred feet or so up the perpendicular side of the block, the flashing red sign that said "Leroy's Cafe." What could be gotten from that? It would just remind her of the friend she could have had, and the breakthrough to something never quite defined which she had advanced towards that one evening when she and the waitress had talked, and then lost hold of again. No, she couldn't go further; she paused. "What the hell am I doing? I can't hang around here all night." Again she scanned the deserted street for a cab, but none was in sight. She shook her head. "I gotta get home. I can't keep walking around."

The rain started coming down harder. Instinctively she

sought the nearest shelter which happened to be the doorway of a closed store. Withdrawing into it, she found herself staring at her own reflection in a panel of glass at a right angle to the sidewalk: a reflection which, owing to the darkness of the store's interior, was as distinct as in a mirror, though with not at all an ordinary background. For what she saw behind her in the glass was the semaphore which a moment ago had cast pools of green and orange light on the pavement. Now there was one pool, red. She could see it reflected around the reflection of her face as a diffuse redness like an aura; and could see, above and to the left of her image, the reflection of the spherical beacon which was the cause of this effect, its perimeter broken to her view by the overlapping outline of her hair, which in this reddish light was all the more startling in its natural redness.

She stared at this reflected arrangement of image and light, which was like a painting almost, so strongly was it ordered within the square frame of wood that bordered the glass, continued to stare as the broken sphere behind her image turned from red to green, to green and orange, to amber, then once more to red, moving down and up the glass in staccato tempo as it changed. Again she thought to herself that she was very stoned. Why else would these colors seem so heightened, so charged with luminance beyond what existed in ordinary life? Why else would the saturated air press on her so inexorably here in this little cubicle off the street, while the clicks of the semaphore, when again it went through its cycle of colors and came back to red, that all-pervasive red, seemed so remote from her, so discrete and sharply-defined, with each click majestic in actual space? The fog horns: the one shrill, the other rasping and low: how else could they convey this magic significance which otherwise stayed hidden? And her face, displayed in this redness which seemed to rule the other colors: she could not deny it—what a beautiful face, so hard with sorrow and self-containment, and yet so feminine, so soft and inviting.

Yes, so soft, so inviting. She knew what men desired. Was she even now, despite all these changes, despite advancing age, nonetheless what men desired? How could

she doubt it? It had to be so. And what did this mean? That men wanted to take her and hold her and push inside her with that odd appendage called a cock? Push inside her with that pillar of flesh. How strange! How strange! Still it was true.

She peered at her reflection intently. Once more the semaphore was red. What an incredible face! Or, more incredible, that she was behind it: she, Ruby Ellington, her. With her hair in disarray, its color highlighted by the aura around it, the loose strands of it curled, as Lisa's hair had been, if not by the moisture of her face (if indeed that treasured moisture was gone), then by the wetness of the rain and wind, into ringlets that rimmed her face and made her clean features all the more sculpted in appearance, her feverish green eyes in their deep sockets seeming all the more unapproachable and inflamed, her lips not thin and refined like the girl's, but full, very full, her cheeks gaunt with her vigilant self-discipline, she did in fact look beautiful, yes, amazingly lovely, though not with the budlike beauty of the black-haired young dancer, but with a fiercer beauty like a sunset, a beauty waning, angry at its decline.

She let out a long sigh. Waning beauty; even so, it was beauty. And who could say how long such beauty could last which was not precisely the beauty of a sunset, not precisely subject to natural laws? No, there were other factors which she could control.

Other factors which she could control. Her mind whirled around. Other factors which she could control. "These are the factors which I have worked on all along... Like, for instance, nutrition... What does this factor of nutrition involve?" Already, however, she had lost her train of thought. She struggled to remember where she had begun. "Other factors which I can control... What this all relates to is the dryness." Even as she spoke she became aware again of the tension in her back and legs. Once more she recalled Lisa stretching, her black hair springing as she bent lithely down and swung up again, her gray eyes laughing. What a marvelous girl! What an open trusting smile!

The mere idea of openness sent her off in another

direction. Open, open. “And what this dryness relates to... my whole attitude to sex.” As she rocked back and forth, trying to force this thought into her mind in much the same way as a few minutes before she had forced the grass into her lungs, she could feel once more the hollowness and dryness inside her—in her very center, her womb, where once there had been moisture and life. Yes, the dryness was there despite how lovely she appeared. With her eyes half-closed, her reflection in the glass now seeming less believable, less real, not as real at least as this dryness inside her, as if withdrawn to the outer edge of her awareness, though she knew far too well that she was still standing in the changing light with the sky pressing down, she concentrated her attention, as much of it as she could marshal, on this central sensation of arid hollowness, focused on it with all the power of her consciousness, sunk into it, rested there a moment in this dully-throbbing desiccate world, tried to understand, understand. And now, as she did this, she could feel another, more proximate, more definite sensation like something twisting her insides and scraping them out.

So the dryness was not only still there; it was getting worse. Now it was digging into her abdominal wall, tearing away at her tissue. Well, let it be; let it be. But what a senseless paranoid thought! “This is just an example... Now let’s get this straight, let’s nail this down... This is just an example of how I take a feeling, a feeling... I mean, I could just be hungry. I could be having hunger pains or something.” Or maybe what it was... Yea, what the hell, it was plain old cramps. “My goddam period.” She drew in her breath; her abdomen reacted with a spasm of contractions. “Hah! That’s what it is! Well, let it flow!” To be sure of it she pulled up her dress and felt between her legs. She could feel the moisture all right. Moisture, wetness. When she drew out her hand the tip of her finger was red. “Yea, that’s what it is, my goddam fucking period. And here I am telling myself that what this is something which is the goddam opposite—right?—of what it really is. I mean, I’m saying like an idiot, this feeling is dryness, this feeling is dryness,

this feeling is dryness... And what is this feeling? It's not the goddam dryness, it's blood... And the very fact that this blood is coming out..." Again she lost her train of thought.

Whether articulated or not, however, the conclusion which through all of this she had gropingly arrived at remained in her mind, amplified by her relief that her period had come: she was still a woman; all of her fears had been groundless; again she had proved them invalid. To her surprise she found herself touching her breasts, running her hands down her stomach, caressing her mound, becoming aroused. Yes, she was still a woman. No doubt about that. No doubt about that. Men still desired her. How could they not? The slightest contact with a man would allay her unreasonable fears. But would that ever happen? Would she ever again have sex with a man? Yes, she would do that. She would make sure she did it; she would take that test when the time was right. She gritted her teeth. Her life wasn't over; her womanhood hadn't come to an end.

She had surrendered for just a moment to the sexual excitement which the touching had evoked. But thinking about what had ended or not ended effected another turnaround in her mind. Because, regardless of whether her active womanhood was over, her life on the Strip, she said to herself, undeniably was. Now she had no job, no source of cash. All at once she was assaulted with a host of worries about what the future would bring. She had never been on the books at the club, never been an official employee so far as the government was concerned; her earnings had been under the table, not just her occasional tips but the entire amount. This was an arrangement which had made it possible for her to escape paying taxes, and which for security reasons she had told herself many times she needed to end; weeks had turned into months, months into years, however, and still she had not. As a result she had no legal right to unemployment compensation. Her procrastination in this, when she considered it now, seemed unforgivably stupid. How long would her savings hold out? Three months at the most, perhaps only two. Welfare she regarded as beneath her. So what could she do to survive? The chances

were that she would need to go back to the kind of menial work she had done in her early 20's: a sobering prospect. And even to find a job like that would require a great effort at a time when her energy was frightfully low. All this raced through her mind in bits and pieces. She pushed out from the doorway into the rain. Where had the others gone? Their voices could no longer be heard in the al- ley. Most likely they'd left. She had been so absorbed in her musings she'd not seen them leave. She slapped her face. "I gotta clear my head." Almost in the same motion, though, she checked her pocket to make sure the joint she'd been given was still there.

In a daze she continued up the wet gleaming sidewalk to the boarded-up news-shack, glanced up the other side of the block at the flashing red sign on Leroy's Cafe, took a couple of steps towards it, stopped. No, she couldn't go there. This whole era was done. Becoming suddenly aware of the cold rain on her cheeks, she retreated into a third doorway, this one by the cigar store on the corner. With her arms folded and head inclined against the frame, she peered up the un-trafficked street at the yellow opening of a tunnel a few blocks away. Above that opening, dotted here and there by arc lamp which to her blurred vision were not so much points of light as fuzzy blotches that swayed back and forth in the wind, was the dark form of a hill, the ridge of it broken by the round waving shapes of trees and angled tops of buildings, they also dark, and silhouetted against a sky which in that direction, though still a prevalent violet-red, had overtones of orange and green. That was Lombard Street, she thought to herself, where the signs on the motels along it made that multi-colored glow; and the dark hill between, this hill wrapped in night, was Russian Hill where she had lived with her lover and child when they had died, Russian Hill where she had not gone for years so as not to remind herself of those memories which anyway could not be forgotten. The recognition of this filled her with a dull weary sadness. "What the fuck am I doing?" she mumbled. "I gotta go home." She kept scanning the flat hazy landscape for the top light of a cab, though what she felt like doing was just

sinking down to the sidewalk and sleeping right here where she could close her eyes with no further effort.

Even so, despite her sorrow and fatigue, despite her awareness that to continue in this way was not only non-productive but destructive, her mind kept repeating the same tired litany of accusations and denials, analyses and qualifications. Already she had lost the sureness regarding her vitality and femininity which she had so gloatingly regained a few minutes before. Without a doubt, she said to herself, the image she'd seen in the store window had been that of a beautiful woman; but somehow this beauty, though maybe real, seemed just on the surface; it belied the deeper reality of the dryness and of what the dryness meant. Without a doubt her period had arrived; that biological process was still working at least; in touching herself, just now and that night in her bedroom, she had felt an undeniable excitement; she knew very well, however, that some force within her opposed any sexual expression made it seem bad, and worst of all pulled her down into the self-hatred which oppressed her. Sex, the most basic physical function for a woman as a woman, had become repulsive to her.

This made her pause. Had it in fact become repulsive? No, not repulsive so much as, notwithstanding her occasional excitement, almost non-existent and beyond comprehension. She was a neuter person, was what it came down to, as she had told herself before. Then what of the fantasies which increasingly disturbed her, these often violent fantasies of being fucked in a frenzy? Did she not at times entertain them with a genuine passion? With passion, yes. How quickly, though, She repelled them! And on a scale of such breadth that when she said no to them it was with her entire being

But consider this: Had she had a chance lately, in the past five or six years, to encounter sex as other than speculation and vaguely-remembered behavior, as something real, as actual flesh? No, what it had become in her imagination and memory was out of keeping with what it was in actuality; it had assumed. a dimension, complexity and significance which was not called for at all, which was

just a projection of her sickness, her dryness, her tension, her self-doubts and fears. What she needed, as she had concluded before, was to experience sex once more as not so complicated and awesome but much simpler and more approachable than that, an instinctive connection. She had to make contact with it again if for no other reason than to clear her thoughts about it and re-learn what it was: what passion was, what a human body felt like which wasn't her own, what her own body felt like when touched by someone else. Would that ever happen? Yes, it would happen. She had to make it happen.

She sighed, wanting so much to stop, but her mind kept churning. Even she did this, however, even if, for the sake of experiment and self-assurance, she managed to force herself into bed with a man, even if she pulled it all off, felt those oceanic feelings once more, felt a presence and naturalness there in the realm of flesh which she had not felt in the longest time, even if she did this, what would it prove? It would just prove her desperation. It would just prove that she had degenerated enough to separate sex from love and deal with men on the superficial physical level on which she had started years ago. Started and remained. Her whole life had been a travesty of love. Why deny it? She had not even loved those whom for a short while had been hers to love, had not loved them enough at least to prevent their deaths from her lover's self-destruction. No! No! No! She had loved them. She had loved them with all her heart. But that too was gone. It didn't matter anymore. Yes, it yet mattered, mattered what she had been, what she might be. She had to prove to herself that she was still a woman, could still function as a woman, that she still was capable of passion and normal feelings.

Looking out once more to the wide empty intersection, from which now the rain in rivulets rushed down the hill towards the Trans-America Pyramid and fog-shrouded buildings beyond it, she watched the semaphores as they clicked through their cycles, from red to green to green and flashing orange to amber to red, that dominant red, noticing again how the colored light was reflected on the wet pavement which further up the street towards the yellow

opening of the tunnel and in every direction gleamed with red, green, amber, orange or white. In the distance the foghorns kept moaning. How was it that her life had come to this? Had she been so unworthy of the decent existence which everyone else seemed to find? She felt so alone. Her struggles, she said to herself, had been so unique from the start; how could she expect to be other than isolated like this? Who could understand that she had actually tried, that she had tried as hard as anyone else?

She drew in a deep breath and closed her eyes. Blotches of colors such as didn't exist in ordinary life, colors more intense than those on the pavement, lumbered like primitive beasts across her field of vision and began to turn in a quickening circle that made her dizzy. She jerked open her eyes and shook her head, anchoring herself on the reassuring solidity of the news shack. If only the Gypsy were there! She would have been so glad to say hello to someone instead of standing here alone with the sky pressing down on the yawning expanse of the street.

Glancing towards the tunnel once more, she noticed on the dark building outside it the moving reflection of the lights of an approaching car. Soon two headlights and a top light appeared. A taxi. Good. Now at least she could leave—go home for the last time as a dancer, sink into bed, forget her humiliation and past. She stepped out into the pouring rain and raised up her, hand. The cab, she saw now, was blue and white. Immediately she thought of the driver she'd kept away from, and in the next instant recognized the man behind the steering wheel as him. "Now this on top of everything else," she mumbled. She was in no mood to defend her actions, and he was just the type to press for an explanation. Still she was relieved to see someone she knew.

The sign on the corner went red. The cab halted across from her with it headlights pointed in her direction. She could vaguely discern his face behind the windshield as the wipers creaked back and forth. The sign changed to green. The taxi glided past and in a graceful U-turn swung around to her and pulled smoothly to the curb.

"Fine how-do-you-do," he said, getting out of the seat

and peering over the cab at her, his tanned rugged features creased in a smile. “I talk to you a little, you avoid me like the plague. Now you need a cab, you hail me. That’s what it takes, I guess, a goddam storm.”

“I wasn’t aware I’d been avoiding you,” she responded, knowing, as these words came out, that she had uttered a lie. Another lie. What difference did it make? She herself was a lie. Her whole existence was a falsehood. She had been avoiding him indeed. And avoiding him why? Because he was a man, because that scared her off like a pubescent girl. Well, here he was. In her stoned state of mind his appearance struck her as an almost logical extension of her thoughts. This was the time for the test. Tired as she was, much as she wanted to postpone it, this was the time. The circumstances were just right—were they not?—for a one-night affair with no complications. This was her last trip home from the Strip; she would never see this cabbie again. Even her period had conveniently arrived to remove any fear of pregnancy which she might have had and set in glaring isolation her greater fear of sexual numbness and decline. All this raced through her mind in a moment. Everything was right. It was all in order, all as it had to be. This too was a fated part of her farewell to the Strip. Getting laid. Would it actually happen? Most likely it would. He would do what she wanted; she just had to make the few subtle gestures required. And what was that for Ruby Ellington? She had been through this before. Well, let it come. It almost seemed hilarious to her. She threw back her head and smiled crazily at him. “But I just might take you tonight for the kicks of it, you know, give you a break. What an incorrigible cabbie. You just drive around all night?”

He laughed. “Yea, hopefully with this understanding between me and the streets that I treat them right, I drive over them correctly, so they give me what I need to survive.”

“And do they?” she said, gazing at him, her face drawn tight with what appeared to be amusement, though behind her cringing eyes and curled lips he brief hilarity had already left her to be replaced once more by the same dull weary sadness which she had felt while looking off to the dark form

of the hill above the tunnel. Again she thought to herself that this was the time to force herself into a sexual test; she could see herself beside him in bed, beside this masculine body which would come on top of her and push inside her; and again this expectation elicited from her not so much passion as curiosity and apprehension. Her eyes roamed up and down his physique. He was standing with his hands on his hips; as usual he wore a polo shirt and jeans and no jacket, belt, jewelry or impediment of any kind. His hips especially she noticed; they were in fact not hips at all, so direct were the lines from his armpits to his short stocky legs. What impressed her most about this was its maleness, its non-superfluity of design. When he bent his arm, his bicep swelled. How strange! And there where his pants bound in his crotch was his cock.

He kept staring at her, his grin never leaving his face. "Well, this particular night I don't sense any great cooperation, if you know what I mean. When it's raining like this, kills the damn business, people stay home. So what do I do? I just drive around."

"Drive around doing what?"

"Drive around doing nothing. Playing the lights."

So that's what he was like then, she observed to herself. A regular loner. It didn't surprise her at all. She had a sudden understanding of him, that despite his bravado and cheerfulness he was a very lonely man. She had known men of this sort before. Chances were he lived in some downtown hotel. Nothing to go home to. Better to keep moving, better to be on the streets, than sitting in his room, which she could see in her mind—a small room with a dresser and bed, smelling of cigarettes, with a cloudy mirror in the bathroom that he only looked in to shave, and his pants and shirt, when he went to bed, draped over a chair. Such a man, more or less, her own father had been. And he, despite his drinking and occasional drunken advances, had been generous and caring. She had always felt a deep sympathy for men of this kind. All at once she felt ashamed of how she had been seeing him solely in terms of her own sexual needs and not looking at him for what he was in himself. What he was

another person like herself who lived at night and was somehow on the margin of the world in which more conventional people lived. The sexual connotations which she had placed on her meeting with him just like that fell off and were gone; for an instant they reentered her mind, but now they seemed so contemptible that she refused them even the smallest con-sideration.

For a moment they stood in silence and then he said: "Well, as I understand, you want a ride. And really, hon, I won't bend your ear. You can have perfect silence if you want it. I just want to get out of this damn town."

"Well, then let's go," she replied in a serious voice, having gone from her new understanding of him to a vague feeling of kinship. "I do want to get home." He held open the back door.

She gestured towards the front. "No, I think I'll ride shotgun. You know how it is, I'm in a looking mood." She had no intention of looking, however, so much did her blurred vision disturb her when she did, and for that matter had no intention anymore of pursuing her original idea of coming on to him at the appropriate time. Now again what she felt most strongly was an acute sense of loneliness; she just wanted to be with someone, anyone, for the fifteen minutes or so that it would take to drive to her apartment.

He swung open the front door. "In that case, my pleasure."

Soon they were on the freeway, coming around the wide arc between the city and the bay. It was still raining hard; the windshield wipers creaked back and forth. As they passed the large clock on the ferry building tower, she noticed that it was earlier than she'd thought, only a quarter to four.

The roadway turned to the west, converging with the main route from the bridge. To her right were the downtown buildings which an hour before she had wondered at from close range. Now they were a mile or so in the distance, floating in a sea of violet fog. She kept looking back and forth from them to the scene in front of her beyond the charging blue hood of the cab where atop Mount Sutro the

red lights of a television tower blinked off and on with a monotonous persistence. She felt terribly lonely, but could not find the energy or words to say anything to the man beside her.

True to his promise, he made no effort to intrude into her silence. She was aware of his presence, however, aware that since she'd taken the front seat he probably expected her to begin a conversation by and by. Moreover, she knew that she would indeed begin this conversation, that she would have to do this in order to prove to herself that she could. "In just a minute I'll do it," she said to herself.

Meanwhile all of her worries and fears about the future were stirring inside her once more. She recalled the events of the evening, particularly her argument with Richard Lammot, replayed it word by word in her mind, defending her actions to herself, but wound up concluding that she had made a terrible mistake by bringing her life on the Strip to a premature and unnecessary end.

"Did I tell you?" she said at last, startled by how her voice shot out. "I'm all washed up."

He turned to her, his eyes narrowing in disbelief. "There you go again, the usual Ruby, off the deep end. Now what do you mean, you're all washed up?"

He said this in the same fatherly tone which in their previous talk she had found so offensive. Now she was more ready to accept it and in fact drew, some comfort from his deep steady voice. "Just what I said is what I mean. The big honcho treated me to this number, you know, about how I'm getting too slow and better flash some equipment, if you know what I mean. So what I flashed was my fist."

"You're kidding? You hit him?"

"Let me tell you, the bastard had it coming."

"Ha-ha-ha. So you popped him, huh?"

Suddenly it seemed funny to her. "Yea, I popped him. Didn't I just say that? Didn't I just say I gave the bastard his due?"

She laughed. She had a delightful melodious laugh when she let loose with it which nowadays wasn't often. It struck her as odd to hear this sound coming from her throat.

"You said it all right. Ha-ha-ha. What a riot."

It almost seemed hilarious. But when she flung back her red hair in a louder more contemptuous volley of laughter, she noticed that her laugh had taken on a brittle sound like the laugh of an old woman. It was not at all youthful; it was dry. "Paranoid thoughts," she said to herself. Once more she remembered her period. Right now she was bleeding; the dryness was just a delusion. At the same time it occurred to her that she'd taken no measures to stop up the flow. She could feel the moisture between her legs. Looking down to her lap, she saw that her dress, where it pressed on her inner thighs, was stained with tiny spots of blood. She pulled her coat around her. "I'm losing my mind." She let out a deep sigh and shut her eyes. The blotches of strange colors were still there, not moving together now but swarming in every direction at once.

She jerked open her eyes and shook her head. The freeway was turning from the west to the south. Alongside the elevated roadway was an immense power plant with tall chimneys that spewed white smoke into the yellow light glaring down from the water tower beside the rows of stacked transformers in the yard. She watched this yellow-colored smoke as it churned steadily upward towards the low oppressive sky, a sky which here was not violet-red like the sky downtown but instead a somber gray, thinking to herself that there was something ineffably significant in this motion, only to decide a moment late that what this imagined profundity came from was from being so thoroughly stoned. "And to make matters worse, you know, I'm totally wasted. I was smoking some reefer and it was dynamite stuff."

"Ha-ha-ha. So you decided, 'Well, this is it, fellows. I'm going out in style.'"

"Yea, something like that," she replied, feeling grateful for how he was trying to lighten up her mood, but not really sharing in his levity at all.

Even when she laughed or joked, the same desperation was still with her. It didn't matter what she did; there was no way to escape it. And here he was, a halfway decent, halfway attractive man. She looked across at him, ran her

eyes up and down his strong legs, again feeling more wonder than desire. She no longer expected that anything more would happen with him than this last conversation, and she was glad, so utterly glad, to be free of the expectation of a sexual encounter. Still she kept thinking about how unfathomable it would be to have a man inside her again.

On the freeway which now loomed several miles ahead of them was hardly any traffic at all, just the widely-separated tail-lights of the cars which moved with them between the dark hills on both sides. Now and then at distant intervals the headlights of approaching cars flashed up on the southern horizon like ignited matches, dimmed to a steady glare, approached them steadily, whizzed past, and disappeared in the darkness behind them. She was so stoned that she had no idea how fast they were going; it was as if the entire freeway was moving along with them like a giant carpet. She could tell by the frown on his face that he was thinking very hard.

"Well, let me tell you something, hon," he said in his presumptuously familiar way, turning towards her. "So you powed the old man. Well, good for you. But don't think that means you're all washed up. Hell, a doll like you. You're one of the best lookers on the Strip."

She glanced across at him, her green eyes brightening for the first time since their conversation had begun. "So tell me more lies. I just eat them up like pancakes."

"Ha! You're a crazy lady, aren't you? I ain't telling no lies. I'm telling plain facts."

She grew serious again. "Well, you're very kind. But, so far as being washed up is concerned," she struggled to think clearly, "the biggest fact is, all those dudes hang together, the managers, I mean. So I'm done on the Strip... How I look, what's it matter?"

"Course it matters," he said slowly.

"Yea, but jobs, you know... We're talking about jobs."

"You really think they'd do that, blacklist you like that?"

"Damn sure of it."

"Well, that's too bad."

Just to follow the conversation required a great effort from her, and now the reality of her situation came down on her with all the more grimness.

"So you ever think of this? Say fuck to them all. Head for Vegas or Reno or someplace like that."

For a moment she considered this possibility again. There too, however, after all the inconvenience of moving, the problem in a year or two would be the same as the one she faced now. "Too old," she replied, thinking to herself that age was only part of the problem, that the dryness was more at the heart of it, whatever it was.

"Hey, now look who's telling lies." He shook his head. "You could get a job wherever you went."

There was a tone in his voice which indicated that he thought well of himself for making these reassuring comments. She noticed this tone. Something in her didn't like it and resisted being susceptible to it in any way. But at the same time she counted it off as the same odd kind of male vanity which she had never been able to understand and didn't imagine men came without. She found herself warming up to him, especially to his exuberance which she found extremely appealing. It seemed so strong and positive, such a contrast to the contained fearful world in which she'd been living so long.

"So who was this guy you hit? You talking about Rich Lamott? he asked after a pause.

"Nothing but the same, the honorable Rich Lammot, manager and pervert.

"Ha-ha-ha. Well, that's the truth, all right. And he's the one who was calling you slow."

"Well, yes, slow, but using his own special low-life vocabulary, as you might imagine."

"Hey, just between you and me, babe, who's he trying to kid? You ever see the gut on that beast. Needs a wheelbarrow to walk down the street."

She laughed. She found her mood lightening all the time. "I wasn't aware that you knew the good gentleman so well." She could think of nothing more delightful than having Lamott abused.

"Hey, I know all them people. I used to work at Louie's. You know old Louie's. Used to be there on Montgomery and Broadway."

"You don't say. And Lamott worked there?"

"Hustling booze."

"When was that, Mister—? You know, I don't remember your name."

"Costenzi. Joe Costenzi. 'J.C.,' they call me

"So when was that, J.C.?" She thought to herself that she was being as adroit and carefree as she had been with men when she was younger. All that was needed was a little something to prime the pump. Now she felt quite carried away with the sound of herself talking.

"Well, we won't go into dates."

"But you worked there, huh?"

"Manager of Discipline, as we used to call it."

"Oh, let me guess. You were the bouncer, right?"

"Now you got it. Pretty sharp."

"Well, I don't imagine you'd have any problem."

"Hell no. Hey, I don't want to brag or nothing. But in them days, let me tell you, none of them would mess with me."

She watched his chest puff out with that strange male vanity again like a peacock showing its tail-plume. "So you knew all the big shots?" she asked, as much to encourage his amusing display of conceit as to find out the answer to her question, though the answer too, she was surprised to discover, was a matter of absorbing interest for her.

"Yea, if that's what you want to call them. Me, what I call them is the small-time big-time, if you know what I mean."

"I think I get the point," she replied laughing, noticing as she did that her laughter no longer sounded brittle. Her heavy mood had inexplicably left her. She was starting to enjoy the conversation and getting increasingly intrigued with him. He had a down-to-earth quality that she liked very much.

"So why'd you quit then?" she inquired. "You just get tired of the whole scene?"

He pointed outside the window. It had stopped raining. They were outside the city proper now in a less populated area where the buildings were farther apart and the air clean of fog. Far below them was another freeway, a line of white lights which here and there fattened out into clusters of brighter colored lights like a string of glowing beads. Beyond this string of lights, which to her vision was hazily defined, lay the dark expanse of the bay; further still in the distance were the shimmering cities on the other side of the water which despite their proximity she had never bothered to go see. His gesture was apparently directed at these far-off places. “Because I felt contained in that little world. This is what I like—freedom, movement.”

He had spent his entire life, he said, moving from one place to another. As a child he had been an orphan. “Well, not an orphan exactly. But my mother went berserk, you know.”

“What do you mean, ‘berserk’?”

“She just flipped out. We lived out in this little town in South Dakota, you know. I guess she couldn’t take it. My old man was always catting around. She went so bananas, they locked her up. And there was my pa, stuck with this kid. I was the last in the litter. So he gave me to the nuns.”

“How old were you then?”

“I guess about three.”

He had hated the orphanage, he said. As soon as he could he had joined the Army. About the same time the Korean War had begun. He had been at Inchon and Pork Chop Hill. But his commander had gotten the idea that he was so big and burly that he would make a good boxer. And so he had wound up representing the regiment in an inter-service meet. He had lost that fight, but his trainer for it had looked him up later in civilian life and signed him on as a sparring partner for Rocky Marciano. From there he had gone into pro boxing on his own in a bush league circuit in Oklahoma and Texas, moving constantly from one small town to another, and fighting the same guys again and again for little more than expenses. Finally he had worked his way up into bouts that paid better, but the handwriting was on the

wall, he said, that he had already made it as high as he would. After ten years in the ring he had decided that enough was enough. With the money he'd saved, a considerable sum, he had bought his own rig which he had used to haul agricultural products.

"Grain, fertilizer, feed, tractor parts, animals, you name it." And so he had continued his unsettled way of life. "Eventually, though, the big companies got to me, started starving me out. Well, actually, to tell you the truth, it was the union that dealt the final blow."

"How was that?" she asked. She was still very stoned and aware of this because what he said was coming to her in bits and pieces with her body so sunk in the seat that the pain inside her had given way to a pervasive numbness while far below her the tires whirred and bumped on the concrete surface of the road. She had been telling herself that owing to her mental state it was impossible to take in everything he was saying, and had been listening mostly to his manner of speaking which was pleasantly virile. Now she realized that she had in fact not only absorbed his whole story but comprehended it with such clarity that she could picture in her mind the various situations he had been describing: the orphanage where he'd lived as a boy, the makeshift rings where he'd fought, and especially the anonymous small towns that he'd been in and out of. She could see them with their water towers and baseball-field floodlights sticking up above the elm trees, could see the miles of flat highway between; such places as these she had known in Kansas as a girl. His childhood struck her as sad: abandoned by his father, with a mother who must have seemed unloving and strange. Then his wandering around, the logical outcome of his fragmented youth. And the failure of his business which must have been quite a blow for such a simple man. He was indeed a simple man. That was the endearing thing about him. She wanted to know more.

"How did the union get into it? You were in the union?"

"No, not in the union, was the problem. I mean, I couldn't have been in the union, you know, since I owned my own rig. What we had, a group of us, was what we called

an association. Course it wasn't legit in the union's eyes."

"So they came down on you for that?"

"No, see what happened, to make a long story short, I still had my sympathies. I didn't know a lot about my family, but what I knew was important to me. And my father, my grandfather, my grandfather's brother, they worked on the railroad, they were all union men. I had that in me from way back. I' never had a chance to act on it, though. It was just a feeling, if you know what I mean. Well, comes a day I was driving this load of oranges into this supermarket, pickets all around me yelling not to go through. So I didn't. I just couldn't do it. Damn fruit went to rot. Then I head for the local, I say, 'Hey, you ought to help me with this. It's going to push me under. I'm in the red.' They look at me like I'm from the Ozarks or something."

"So you lost your rig?"

"Lost every penny."

"Wow, that's too bad."

"Guess I had it coming for being so dumb."

"Nothing dumb about that," she said, peering at him. In his observance of the picket line she sensed a quixotic idealism that she found intriguing.

"You were just standing up for what you thought was right."

"Yea, even so, considering the result, I couldn't help thinking it was dumb at the bottom."

After going broke, he said, he had come out West and lived on the skids for a while in the wino district in east L.A. "But I knew in my heart that I couldn't keep living like that. So I got a job washing dishes in a joint dowl there and scrounged up enough to take the bus up to Frisco. Came out of the depot and saw this cabbie in line. Just like that the idea struck me, 'Why not push a hack?' Turned out this guy's boss was looking for drivers. I hired on right away. And there I was in the commotion again. I like the commotion. It's in me, I guess."

"And that's when you met Jensen, when you came to the city?" she inquired. She was sitting with her arms folded and still with a sensation of numbness all over her body. She

gazed ahead at the white ribbon of the lane divider and dark light-dotted landscape beyond, thinking to herself that in the very movement of the vehicle was something of what this man was and had been.

"No, way before then, right after I quit boxing when I was trying to figure out what to do. Like I said, I was restless. Just kept on the move, going here and there."

"How come?" she persisted, for some reason which she couldn't understand wanting him to say himself what she suspected, that what drove him on was his memories of his childhood and his loneliness.

"Oh, I don't know, I guess I just wanted to find out what was going on. Never could stand it in no office or warehouse or nothing like that. I just wanted to be out in the real world. I just wanted to know what the real world was all about."

This wasn't the answer which she had expected; apparently he didn't make the connection between the past and present which she'd been making herself. Still what he said seemed so true to what he was now. The more he talked, the more drawn to him she felt. That he had had such difficulties and disappointments and fought his way back from them impressed her greatly; she admired his vigorous optimism and high-spirited way of looking at life. When he talked about the real world, she thought to herself that she hardly knew any more what the real world was, that she had lost the hunger for experience she had had when younger. That hunger, like so much else in her, had faded after the deaths. She had contented herself for so long with just going back and forth from her job on the Strip and never taking vacations anymore or wondering what life was like in other places, so preoccupied had she become with her self-contained existence.

She understood too, as he talked, that life for him was different than it was for her, that life for her now was somehow not real, not tangible, but elusive, evanescent, and yet too real in the stark immediacy of her fears and distress. Or maybe what it was that despite his greater age he had held on to the enthusiasm which she had lost and by so doing had escaped the dryness which was closing in on her so fast.

She even started to think that she had been wrong in regarding him as nothing more than a brief interval in her isolation or a potential one-night stand. Maybe he could be a genuine lover. She found it hard to believe that she might be still capable of that kind of relationship, however, and it bothered her too that in all his years of wandering around he had never tied himself to a woman. Was this really the case? If so it augured poorly for any sort of affair. But hadn't she sensed this about him all along? Now it seemed more important to find out for sure. "I suppose you're the kind who loves them and leaves them," she said. "You mean you never met some nice woman who made you want to settle down?"

He grinned and nodded. "Here comes the third degree."

"Am I pressing too far?"

The smile left his face. "Naw, hell, I don't mind questions. Kind of a compliment, you know." He was quiet for a moment. "To tell you the truth, I did have this girlfriend once that I really cared for." His voice had grown more serious. Evidently he regarded this topic as not one to be dealt with in his usual carefree manner.

"And what came of her?"

"Died real sudden."

"Of what?"

"Some kind of fever. Just what it was I don't know."

"So when was that?"

"Oh, years ago, when I was in my 20's."

"How sad."

They drove on for a while. "Oh, there've been others," he added. "But none like her."

"But none like her." So that was the crux of his story, she observed to herself: that one great love, and every woman since then had been compared against her. The similarity between his past and her own struck her at once.

Had she not done the same, centered her life on a love that was gone? She looked across at him and noticed that his face had paled as if the recollection of that death had drawn out his color from inside him like a sponge. She felt a greater kinship with him on account of what she had learned, felt

attracted not only to his exuberance but also his sadness. At the same time, however, she was more wary of him; he had confirmed her suspicion that he was the type who avoided attachments. So why after regarding that as such a plus only weeks before when she had considered him as nothing more than a sexual possibility, did she regard it now as such a minus? Something basic had changed; he seemed a deeper threat than he had previously seemed. Her mind whirled around. Was she afraid of him? Why? Was it just healthy caution? Caution, fuck. What it came down to was that she had lost her spirit of adventure, her zeal for life.

"So how about you?" he asked after a pause. His deep voice seemed to pull her back from her confusion and anchor her again on the landscape. She was glad for his presence; the prospect of being alone was even more frightening than the prospect of having a liaison with him. They were still passing, along the same ridge high above the dark water of the bay. Now they were about five miles from where she lived. "How'd you ever wind up in a gig like dancing? You just got attracted to the lights? Moth to the fire, as they say?"

Something about how he said this made her feel that he really wanted to know about her. Soon to her surprise she found herself talking about things she hadn't told anyone for years: how she had mostly avoided her father when she was little because he was always drunk and always trying to feel her up; how after he died she had lived with her aunt who had talked about nothing but God and looked down on anyone who didn't belong to the church, especially the younger folk whom she had considered too lively and loud; how finally she had taken about as much of this as she could, and on an impulse, after overhearing her aunt's comments to some relatives, had left; and how for the next couple of years she had hitched around the country by herself, staying with various people she met, and mostly getting rides with truckers, whom now and then she slept with, sometimes because she wanted to and sometimes for no other reason than to spite her aunt for what the old woman had tried to for her to be. "But I made them work for it, let me tell you."

"Ha-ha-ha. I bet you did."

She laughed. Now she felt carried away, puzzled almost by what she had been and by the great energy and thirst for life which she had had in those years.

"So where'd you go then?" he asked with a grin. His normal ruddy color had returned to his face. From the way he looked at her it was clear that he was delighted with her exploits.

Encouraged she continued. For a while after that, she went on, she had lived in Los Angeles, with the intention of becoming an actress since every body had raved about her looks, especially her red hair, but with no idea of how actually to go about this. Then she had met this handsome long-haired guy in a halfway house on Sunset Strip and gone with him and the group of people she met through him up to Big Sur where they had lived together in a house near the beach, working all kinds of jobs to pay the rent, eating off food stamps, and growing dope in a hidden cove in the foothills above the coastal highway. "This was in the days when the hippies were just starting, you know and everything seemed like it was leading to this big cosmic secret."

"Ha-ha-ha. And you were blasted night and day."

"Yea, I gotta admit that helped a little bit. I got so blasted once, the sunset was green. Can you dig it?" She was surprised to hear her words coming out in the way she'd spoken then. "Wherever I went I was seeing mandalas."

"Ha-ha-ha. You got me on that one. What the hell's a mandala? That some kind of spirit?"

"Designs, you know, like snow crystals or something. First I was walking along the beach. I could see them in the water. When the sunlight flickered, you know. Then I went in the house. They we re floating in the air like dust in the sunlight." Even as she talked, she saw them again in her imagination. That had been a marvelous experience; for just instant life's meaning had been close to her grasp.

As she contemplated these glowing designs, they drew further from her and seemed to be shining in the distance beneath her. From an amorphous pool they became something more definite in outline, a gleaming lake below

sparsely-wooded reddish-brown hills. It was the reservoir by the dam which she had seen in her dream. Once more she glimpsed the plaintive face of the red-haired lissome girl whom she had recognized as herself. All this happened in a flash. In a second flash she compared herself against the hope and innocence in that face and felt acutely ashamed, she knew not why

"Hey, you're too much! You must have been whammied. Crystals in the air! But what a great life! How long you bum around on the beach?"

His voice called her back from her musings. "Oh, not so long," she replied, disappointed that he had failed to pick up on the larger significance of what she had attempted to describe. She felt very tired. A new onslaught of self-castigation had arisen inside her. Still she felt a great need to explain what she had been.

She pushed ahead, her words coming out slowly as though through syrup. The group she'd lived with had split up eventually, she said. She and her boyfriend had also parted. Not knowing what else to do, she had gone back to the road. "But it wasn't the same. I got weary real fast. So I took a bus to Frisco, the Mecca, you know. I mean, everyone was saying, 'It's happening there.'"

"Ain't that like you? Looking for the action."

It seemed to her now that he was just making empty comments, and, worse than that, typing her blindly as the sort of person who he apparently thought would have led a life like hers. Had she in fact, she asked herself, looked only for action? No, for something nobler than that; what she wasn't sure.

Despite her dissatisfaction with his response, she went on with her story. Now and then she glanced at him, telling herself that she no longer cared what he thought, though another part of her was saying she did care. San Francisco had not proven to be what she expected, she said. Whatever she'd been looking for she hadn't found. Within the first year she had moved from the Haight, where she had started, to North Beach, working as a counter girl in a deli, then as a cocktail waitress in a happy-hour tavern downtown, and then

as a waitress, “volunteer from the audience,” and regular dancer on the Strip. All this she related with a sad thoughtful expression on her thin lovely face, speaking as though in a trance. Then she told him about her boyfriend Marcel, and how he had been on the junk, and how he and her son had died from the gas.

“Oh, no! Oh, no!” he cried when he heard that. “That must have been real hard. Hey, you must have been so goddam wiped out. It’s a real wonder you kept your mind after that.”

His sympathy seemed so genuine that she couldn’t help being taken by it. She looked back at him, met his steady gaze. Yes, he cared on some level. Why he cared, though, she couldn’t fathom. Nor, in the wake of the self-diminishment which inevitably followed a recollection of those deaths, could she understand why he had shown any interest in her background at all.

While recounting her past, amazed though she’d been with the buoyancy and drive which she had had in that period of her life, she had been struck with the general impression that, far from being substantial, what her life amounted to was a patchwork of odds and ends leading to nothing important or, conclusive. Now she found herself reliving the moment when she had come home that night and discovered the gas running and her lover on the couch, his face already rigid with the sculpture-like unrealness which bodies have in death. Then she had rushed into the next room and found her son still breathing and applied mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on him, though as it turned out he had died before the ambulance got there.

The boy’s face had been peaceful, she recalled. Marcel’s face, however, had been tortured, angry, twisted in a frown. She dwelled on this for an instant; she had never before thought of his death as an angry action directed at her, obvious as this might have seemed. Now it occurred to her suddenly that such indeed it had been. So much she had failed in letting him know she had loved him.

The spacious mood which she had experienced briefly in talking about her adventures was with her no more. She felt

herself being pulled down into her darkness again and resisted with all her strength. For just a short while she wanted to keep free of the gloom inside her. She peered out the window at the rushing-towards-her of the wet surface of the road. She felt very stoned. She shut her eyes. The strange colors inside her began spinning around. This time she surrendered to their spinning, and only wanted to be spun all the more, spun out of consciousness and into some world where memories could not exist.

"I know how it is, just the mention of all that brings you back to when it happened," his voice said in what seemed like the distance.

She opened her eyes. "Brings me back to what?"

"To those deaths."

To those deaths. To those deaths. She nodded but didn't answer. They had left the freeway now and were heading down the hill towards her building. At any moment they would be arriving, she thought. She hated to think of walking up those red-carpeted stairs by herself. And yet it no longer seemed so easy or desirable that she would make some facile gesture as she once might have done and that just like that he would follow.

As the cab drew closer to her apartment, she tried to sort this out in her mind. Why was she assuming that this had to be a one-night stand or nothing else? Would it not be better just to indicate a general interest? Did she really have that kind of interest? No, his rough restless past was frightening to her. Beneath his enthusiasm she could sense a great need which she was afraid she couldn't answer. Even if she met that need, she told herself, he could not be counted on to stay. Any kind of affair, she reasoned in a frenzied flurry of thought, would have to remain on a superficial level. It would come down to sex. So what was wrong with that? What was wrong with sex and nothing else? It would provide a relief from her loneliness. It would provide the test which she had told herself she had to go through in order to prove to herself that she still could function as a sexual creature. But what kind of crude woman would use a man like that? Had she resisted the crudity of the Strip all these years for no

other reason than to wind up like this? To wind up like what? What was she talking about really? Just sleeping with a man. Mutual consent. What about this prospect was so terrifying to her? She didn't know. But it was terrifying. And the thought of being alone filled her with a like apprehension. No course of action seemed right.

He seemed to sense what she was thinking. When they pulled up to the curb in front of her building, he flipped up the flag and gave her a knowing glance. "Well, here it is, sweetheart, home sweet home. Too bad the ride was so short."

She recognized that this was the cue for her to come back with an invitation. This was the time to make the subtle gesture which she had told herself would be so easy to make at the appropriate moment. But she could think of nothing to say and had no idea what she wanted. "And so am I," she replied in a weak clouded voice.

The fare was $7.80. She gave him a ten. He fumbled around in his money bag as if looking for change. "No, keep it," she mumbled. "You've been real nice." She turned the handle of the door and got out so quickly that she was already out when he came around to open it for her.

He backed up a little to let her pass. She glanced at him and saw the hunger in his gaze. This just threw her into deeper confusion. She strode by with a formal nod.

So it had not been meant to happen. Good enough. Good enough. She continued towards the door of the building with an empty feeling inside her, already berating herself for having failed to take advantage of what she sensed would be her only chance in a long while to make the acquaintance of a decent man. Cowardice was what it amounted to, she said to herself: spinelessness, fear. She glanced across the small front yard to the dark waving forms of the eucalyptus that bordered the sidewalk. It had stopped raining at last but the gray sky above the trees seemed unbearably close. The arc lamps in the distance were blurred; vague smudges of light on a flat somber backdrop, they swayed back and forth. As if from habit she squinted, not even bothering to check if her vision had cleared.

She reached the front door of the building. The mere sight of it was depressing to her. She fumbled for the key, aware without looking that the driver was still behind her, waiting as he always did for her to push open the door before he left, though now his waiting had taken on an added significance which she could almost feel in the air.

Was it too late to change her mind? She darted her eyes at him. He was sitting in the cab with his forearm resting on the frame of the open window. He nodded and smiled. She turned around. “You know, I was thinking, you maybe could come up for a minute if you want to. There’s some wine as I remember, and someone gave me a joint.”

“You sure you want me to do that?”

No, she wasn’t sure at all. Nonetheless she called back, “Didn’t I just ask?”

“Sure, what the hell, that sounds real nice.”

A chill went up her spine.

With a sudden motion he threw open the door of the cab, pressed down the lock, flung the door shut again with a metallic thud that seemed out of keeping with the stillness of the pre-dawn morning. Then he yanked on the door to make sure it was locked, and came across towards her swinging his muscular arms. “Well, as they say, life is full of surprises.”

“Is that what they say?”

“Yea, that’s what I hear.”

She fumbled around with the keys once more. With more than ordinary difficulty she stuck the appropriate key in the lock while he stood behind her not speaking. She was having second thoughts about what she’d done. “You’re not worried about your cab?” she inquired, hoping he’d remember he was due a the garage or something, sparing her the trouble of making some awkward last minute excuse.

“Naw, day driver is off. Cab just sits in the lot. I give the mechanic a fin. He doesn’t notice the time. I’m happy. He’s happy. You know how it goes, the world revolves on tips. Never say thanks. Who gives a damn about thanks? Wave a buck in their snoot. That’s what the bastards want.”

So there would be no easy exits, she thought. There had been a time in her life when the prospect of being alone with

a virile man would have filled her with excitement. Now what she mostly felt was foreboding.

The second-floor hallway with its immaculate white walls was as quiet and sterile as always. “New building,” she said.

“Yea, so I see. They build ‘em with toothpicks.”

It seemed odd to have his large body beside her. Already by a slight incline in her direction, a slight overhanging of his massive shoulder over hers, he indicated a premonition of possession. She could smell the musky odor of his body, a strong masculine odor. Such a long time had passed since she had smelled that odor; she had almost forgotten what it was. She was aware too of the fainter more delicate fragrance, highlighted by perfume, which her own body gave off.

At the door of her apartment she again had trouble finding the right key. Suddenly she felt afraid. She hardly knew this man at all. What if he turned out to be an absolute brute? Still she couldn’t rouse up the courage to tell him to leave, and so, when at last she opened the door, merely let him stride in behind her, accepting his presence in her apartment with the same weary acquiescence with which she had accepted the whole night’s sequence of incredible events, from her argument with the manager, to getting stoned, to her reflection in the store window, to standing alone in the rain, to meeting up again with this man whom she’d avoided precisely because she had feared that this situation might develop which she was in the middle of now.

She sat him down at the table where her bills were still stacked in a pile. The bills. The bills. What use to think of them now? She pushed them aside and went to the cupboard for the wine, poured the driver a glassful and started pouring one for herself. But then she remembered that the orthopedist had said something about not mixing booze and the pills; so she took a seat on the chair next to him and pulled out the joint from her pocket instead. She held it up in the air. “I gotta warn you, I’m in a real mood.”

“Hey, you better watch that, babe. Too much of a good thing.”

"I wasn't asking for advice," she shot out, her green eyes flashing.

He waved his hand. "Hey, Ruby, do what you want. What the hell, we're relaxing. Ain't we relaxing? You do what you want. What the hell."

Seated at the small table in her kitchen, he seemed very large. His stocky legs, which he had extended in front of him, spanned the entire width of the room to the cupboard. He drank the wine in big gulps, finished off the first glass, and poured himself another. "Nice place you got here. You make them wall-hangings yourself?" He pointed his thick index finger at the batik on the back wall where her plants and nicknacks were arranged on shelves.

"Yea, long time ago I made them."

"Hey, pretty nice. Real artistic, you know."

"You really think so?"

"Yea, I like your sense of color."

"Oh yea? Thanks a lot."

As she drew on the joint, forcing the smoke into her lungs, she tried to imagine how her kitchen looked to his boxer-driver eyes. Did he think to himself, "This is a woman's kitchen"? Is that what he thought? That he was not a man of interiors was apparent in his every gesture and movement. He looked as if he felt restive and contained. He was eager to get on to something. To what? Well, of course, to bedding down. Just where did she expect this routine to lead to? Hadn't she told herself anyhow that this was what she needed to prove to herself that she still had those animal feelings inside her? When she looked at him, however, she felt nothing like desire. She thought to herself that she was tired, very tired. She just wanted to fade out of existence and forget him. Nonetheless she braced herself to do whatever was required to rescue herself from her fears.

She offered him the joint. He took a perfunctory drag but seemed more interested in the liquor and her. He kept glancing at her with an expectant expression. Now and then, when she shot her eyes at him, she found him staring at her pelvis and breasts.

So it would come down to fucking. All right. Good

enough. Her mind raced ahead. Was there no chance of getting pregnant? No, her period would be all the safeguard she needed. Was she having it for sure? She looked down to her dress and noticed again the splotches of blood on her dress; she'd forgotten about them. Had he seen them? She studied them more closely. They were small splotches, more brown in color than red. They could easily have been regarded as part of the fabric. But, if he had seen them, what shame!

"I'm going bananas, is what this means," she said to herself. "No, I'm not going bananas. I'm just totally stoned."

She took another fierce drag from the joint, excused herself abruptly, and, with the smoke still compressed in her lungs, her lips pressed tightly together, pushed through the kitchen door to the bathroom which was at the end of the narrow hall between her two rooms.

Standing by the sink, she pulled up her dress. Her hose was clotted with dry blood. She yanked it down from her hips. A trickle of blood was running down the inner surface of her lean thigh. Not a full flow, just the beginning, but undoubtably her period. Undoubtably blood. Her womb was still going through that cycle.

She reached for a washcloth, turned on the water to wet it, and for a long time stood with her hands cupped beneath the spigot, feeling the strange, formless fullness of the water in her palms and the rushing, tingling sensation that it made when it overflowed her hands and trickled down her bottom fingers to the drain where it made a gurgling sound like a faraway stream. Then she cleaned herself carefully, applied a pad to the crotch of her hose, washed out the splotches of blood on her dress with cold water, and stood waiting for the wet spots on her clothing to dry while she observed herself in the mirror, seeing her face reflected now with her electric combs, scented soap, vials of perfumes, a collage of pastel-colored objects, arranged on the shelf behind her: a more expected and ordinary background than she had seen on the Strip, and yet her image seemed no less profound. This beauty was her; this face was part and parcel of what she was. How could she doubt her feminine powers?

Even as she stood looking in the mirror, however, she could feel the dryness inside her, in her pelvis and legs and most disturbingly in her lower stomach, her womb. Her talk of the deaths had disturbed her also, in particular her belated recognition of the undeniable anger in her lover's dead face. Had she forgiven that anger? She must have known of it before. Did she have such anger in herself? This consideration threw her into a deep contemplation from which the sound of coughing awoke her. She had forgotten that there was a man in the kitchen waiting for her to return.

"Thought you got lost in there," he remarked when she got back.

"Oh, don't mind me. I'm off in the ozone."

"The ozone, huh? Well, I don't know much about the ozone. But I know how it is with you women. Gotta get everything right." He laughed heartily, evidently considering this a great joke.

She barely noticed what he'd said. Instead she was thinking, as she sat down, that she was indeed very stoned, so stoned that her meditations in the bathroom now seemed oddly cut off from her as though an immense chasm of time had intervened between the present and that moment in the immediate past. It occurred to her too that she had been quite rude in asking this man into her house and then getting so carried away with her own preoccupations that she had hardly kept him company at all.

"So your name is Cosenzi," she said, trying to right the situation by a new show of interest. She leaned over towards him. Her green eyes were glossy and, despite having just been to the bathroom, her red hair was in wild disarray.

"Cos-TEN-zi," he replied. "Joe Costenzi. But like I say—"

"Yea, I remember, 'J.C.'."

"Now you're cooking."

"Italian, I betcha."

"Italia sempre," he responded in an accent that sounded authentic.

"That's where your people came from?"

"Pizzaland, somewhere. I never asked for details." He

stared at her with his presumptuous eyes. “How about you?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I’m kind of a mongrel. You know what I mean, whole bunch of different things.”

“Well, you don’t look like a mongrel.”

“Oh yea? Thanks a lot.”

They fell into silence again. She picked up the remaining half of the joint, applied a match to it and drew on it hard. There was an altered mood in the air, a sort of mutual expectation. She had no doubt anymore that for good or bad this conversation would lead to her bed. She kept glancing at him as if to understand what he was.

He broke into a grin. “You sure are giving me the ol’ once-over.”

“Am I really?”

“Sure are.” He looked down at the table, rocked his empty glass back and forth, then looked again to her, his eyes narrower and his jaw set firmly, don’t imagine there’s something behind it.”

“Something like what?”

“I guess you must know.”

“How crude,” she thought. She got up and went to the sink, feeling, as she took the three steps from the table to there, a profound separation between her actions and herself. And yet in spite of this division she felt extremely lucid, and could not help observing how even in this simple motion of crossing the kitchen there was something lonely and sad. Whether she was with another person like this or alone, she said to herself, made little difference; the sadness was still there; it was impossible to break out of it or break out of her loneliness. Then, as quickly as this dichotomy had happened, it ceased; once more she felt totally contained in the sensation of dryness which was so familiar to her. It was in her womb most of all, but she could feel it too in her arms and legs and even in her fingertips as she reached absent-mindedly for a dirty cup on the counter and ran the water over the cup and her hands.

By another abrupt reversal, she became aware of the man across from her once more, so aware of him that it seemed as if she could feel his gaze as it moved up and down

her body and rested on her buttocks, which in response to his imagined touch tightened then relaxed. A shiver ran through her. She leaned against the sink. She felt a stirring inside her which she had not felt in a long while. “So what is this?” a voice in her was saying. “Is this desire?” Yes, this was how she had felt when she had had normal feelings. This was desire. She had an urge to go to him. She wanted him to take her and be very rough, very rough and then very gentle, very soft.

She returned to the table, brushing against him. His arm closed around her, a strong muscular arm. He pulled her down on his lap. She could feel that beneath his pants his cock was already hard. He pressed his mouth against hers so forcefully that it pushed her lips into her teeth.

“You’re hurting me!” she protested when she looked up once more into the yellow light of the room. His face was so near to her now that she could see the fine wrinkles around his eyes. She had not noticed before that his eyes were so dark that the pupils and irises blended together; there was a meanness in them too which she hadn’t seen until now. She tried to get up.

He held on to her tightly. “Hey, you’re quite a filly, aren’t you?” He grabbed her jaw and jerked her face towards him so that again she was peering into his dark eyes. All at once she felt drawn in to the very coldness which a moment before had scared her. She was conscious of his hardness beneath her. She reached forward and pressed her lips to his rough cheek. He sunk his teeth into the nape of her neck and nibbled up to her ear. His thick fingers fumbled with the buttons on the front of her dress. She could feel her nipples engorging with blood.

“So I’m still capable of passion,” she said to herself. She closed her eyes. The very idea of it was beyond comprehension. Her mind whirled around. She felt herself sinking into a sea in which this word “passion” echoed in the background. Then she opened her eyes once more and searched his face, trying to understand how this man she hardly knew had become the source of this feeling she’d forgotten. But in his features she nothing reassuring or

familiar; his face was cold and distant.

She wrenched away from him. “I can’t pretend what I don’t feel!”

He looked up at her like a man awakened from a deep sleep. He stared at her in confusion. “No one asked you to pretend.”

Against this simple statement she had no defense. She crossed the kitchen to the sink again and gazed out the window above it to the plank fence on the other side of the small central mall between the two wings of her building. The mall was so dark that the little garden there could not be seen, but above the fence an arc lamp swayed slowly in the wind, throwing a stark un steady light on the tangled vines that grew along it. Beyond the fence was the back of another building with an exterior stairway, the shadow of which crisscrossed its surface with dark lines. All of the windows there were dark except for one on the third floor where behind a drawn shade a silhouetted figure moved back and forth. Glancing at Costenzi, she saw that he still had the same disconcerted, puzzled expression on his broad rugged face.

He stared at her intently. “If you want me to leave, just say so. Hell, you invited me in.”

She didn’t respond.

He pushed back his chair and jumped up. She thought he was going to yell something and storm out the door. But instead he crossed the room with heavy steps and leaned against her from behind, pressing her into the counter, with his moist lips by her ear. “So what is this, doll, the quiet treatment? Hell, I don’t know what I did. But forgive and forget. I got carried away. You know how it goes, I’m a little bit drunk.”

She listened to this as in a hypnotic trance. For some reason looking at the figure behind the drawn shade had made her feel lonely in the unbearably cut-off way she’d felt for so long. So now she had a man beside her. What did it matter who he was? “Now you know how crazy I am,” she responded softly.

“Ha-ha-ha. Well, let me tell you something, sweetheart.

I'm used to crazy dames."

"I kinda figured you've had your share of women."

"Hey, more than my share. But you take the cake."

"The craziest, huh?"

"Not the craziest, the best."

"So that's how it is, huh?"

"Yea, that's how it is," he replied, leaning over her shoulder from behind with his mouth still by her ear. 'And one other thing, babe, you weren't pretending."

"So now you know my mind. What can I say?"

"Let's just say I know women."

"Know the road signs, huh?"

He leaned against her harder and nudged her with his lips. "What you call them, sweetheart, I don't care. What I care about is you."

His arms closed around her. She offered no resistance. She could feel his kisses, little explosions on her face. More fumbling around; he undid the front of her dress. His fingers circled up her stomach to her bra. He lifted it up and played with her nipples. Then he grabbed her right breast so fiercely, she cried out in pain. "What the hell are you doing?"

His hands dropped from her breasts and poised in midair. He withdrew from her briefly, then settled down on her again, his fingers enclosing her arms. "Didn't mean to be so rough," he said in a low voice. "You know how it is, I was getting turned on. How can I help it with a looker like you?" Once more he began his persistent advances.

It all seemed so amazing to her. Here was this man breathing in her ear. He was pressing against her with his warm lips. He had pulled back her shoulders to make her breasts stand out. But somehow she felt detached from what he was doing. She gazed at the white mounds of resilient flesh that sprang out before her. Her nipples were rigid in anticipation of his touch. These were the shapely breasts of a young woman. Without a doubt this was so. For moment she could see them as she imagined they appeared to him. She was pleased with what she saw, pleased that her physical discipline had kept her breasts so firm. But trying to view

them through his eyes just increased her amazement all the more. Why were they so attractive to him? What did he see there? His mother's tits? No, something more basic than that. What he saw was beauty. This beauty was her. Even as she gave herself up to the sensation of his caresses, she kept wondering how that could be.

He turned her around and stared into her eyes. "No need to talk about pretending," he said, licking the tip of her nose.

She pulled up his shirt and ran her hand through the thick hair on his chest and stomach. Only a man would have hair like that all over his body. And there where his lean flesh curved smoothly to his narrow waist; his pants were so tight that they pinched his brown skin. Only a man proud of his physique would wear tight pants like that. His crotch was bulging with his erection. She wanted to touch it. Beneath that bulge was a penis, a cock. These words too resounded in her mind.

Again his lips pressed against her ear. "Hey, you know it's a bit comfortable standing here like this. If you weren't so goddam beautiful I wouldn't care. But all I can think of... Well, I guess you must know what I saying."

"Yea, I think I know what you mean . The only place I got more comfortable is my bed. Don't suppose you'd be interested in that?"

"Bed, you say? What the hell, doll, I'm not even sleepy. But maybe we can think of something to do."

She led him out of the kitchen, walking deliberately to prove to herself that she was in complete control of her actions. But she felt so stoned that each step was a small world in itself, disconnected from what came before and after. As she pushed through the door to her bedroom, she felt astoundingly fluent. On entering, though, she stumbled on a throw rug, and, in reaching to balance herself, knocked down her hairbrush and little plastic Japanese temple. They plummeted to the floor.

"With all the grace of a dancer!" she exclaimed. When she squatted down to pick them up, she listed to one side.

He leaned over to brace her. "Hey, there, Ruby, let me give you a hand.'

With what seemed no effort at all, he lifted her up and set her on the mattress. She shook her head and looked around the room. The shades were drawn, but between them and the window frames a muted gray light could be detected, the first sign of dawn.

He sat down beside her and threw his arm around her slender shoulders, peering in her face. “Hey, I thought you were gonna dive out the window.”

“Fat chance of that.”

“Listen to her talk.”

She could smell his musky odor and the liquor on his breath. Once more chill went through her. He pressed his mouth against her cheek and started nibbling again. “Big ol’ savage,” she said. “Is that why you bite like a monkey?”

He threw back his head. “Ha-ha-ha. You don’t like to be bitten! Well, that’s a fine one! Ha-ha-ha.” He drew closer to her and spoke more softly. “Hey, you know something, schnooks, that don’t surprise me at all.”

“Oh yea? How come?”

“You’re a high-class lady, that’s why. I knew it right away.”

“Got my number, huh?”

“Yea, I sure do.”

He reached over and kissed her. She let herself be pulled against his chest, marveling at how warm and suddenly encompassing it was. His thick hand was probing her breasts. He was trying to be more gentle but still rubbing s hard that what she was mostly aware of was discomfort. Gradually, though, she found herself sinking into this roughness and liking his touch which had acquired a wavelike intensity pulsing out through her nipples. With her eyes now shut, she could almost see a picture in her mind of the roughness spreading out from her breasts in two overlapping, spiraling streams of concentric circles tinted with the unreal colors that had been swarming inside her all night. She thought to herself again that she was extremely stoned; maybe the grass had been laced with something else.

With a writhing motion she sank back on the mattress beside him with her head at the foot of the bed and her legs

spread apart. He pulled up her dress and ran his fingers up and down her hose, pressing lightly on her calves and inner thighs. She felt his caresses going around and around as he made his way slowly towards the emptiness which she could feel at her center, the great yawning emptiness full of darkness and dryness.

In the midst of this, however, she opened her eyes, gazed absent-mindedly towards his immense shoulders and serious dreamlike floating face, and noticed behind him, to the right of the headboard, the oblong window which looked out to the walkway between the buildings, the shade before it faintly illumined by the yellow light of the arc lamp beyond. Immediately she though of her lover and child, saw their faces as she had seen them in the cab, as they had been at the moment of death; and once more she had the eerie feeling that they were somehow behind that drawn shade, watching what she did.

She shook her head to this notion, closed her eyes, and right away surrendered to his touching again, now all the more determined to expel these memories and delusions from her mind, and prove to herself that she could be as much a woman as she'd ever been.

He tugged at her hose, trying to yank it down from her hips. She arched herself up to let him peel it off. He noticed the red-stained pad between her legs. "Bleeding, huh?"

"Yea, it bother you?"

"Naw." He leaned towards her face. "Kind of turns me on all the more, to tell you the truth."

He pulled back from her and fumbled with his zipper. He lay on his back and went into a wrestler's bridge to shove off his pants and underpants together. His cock popped out and bounced up and down. The glans was so swollen it seemed to be throbbing. She thought to herself that his cock was very big: not long so much as thick, however, with the same kind of short thickness as his arms and legs. It was a plug of a cock, not the elegant kind Marcel had had. She could hear herself talking to him as he sat with the needle by his arm: "Marcel, can't you see what this is doing to you? Can't you see what this is doing to Jason and me?"

Again the sensation of wet lips on her face brought her back to Costenzi. Apparently he was not one for elaborate foreplay. Already he was pushing his cock against her upper thigh as if to make her aware that it was there that close to her and ready for ramming.

She reached down with her small white hands and with two drawn-back fingers felt the immense glans of his penis. With the other hand she grasped the shank which was of such girth that her fingers couldn't join, indeed could encircle only half. "You're so large," she remarked. But the squat, bulldog shape of it was somehow offensive to her. She wasn't sure whether she wanted him or not.

"Hey, not to brag or nothing, but it runs in the family, you know. My old man is sixty-eight, still fucking like a bull."

Such a common man, she thought. Such common vanity. Isn't this what she had sought? Just to confront a basic man? He started kissing her again. Once more she felt herself carried away by his caresses. And yet inside her was a horrible fear. What was the nature of this fear? she asked herself even in the midst of his assiduous advances. That she wouldn't open? A senseless fear then: she could feel how her vagina had moistened in anticipation of his entry.

Again his throbbing cock rested on her thigh. He had supported himself on his knees. His shoulders hovered above her. Glancing up at him, she saw his hulking frame relieved against the yellow light that shone in from the kitchen (the door of the bedroom was slightly ajar). He kept kissing her face while with his hand he positioned himself near her slit. She knew that at any moment he would try to mount her. Now, however, nothing was happening at all. She reached down to her crotch and discovered that the lips of her vagina had drawn tightly together.

He seemed to take the presence of her hand there as an indication that he had failed to do something of basic mechanical importance. He grabbed her hand and wrenched it out of the way, then rubbed his fingers over her slit with the same explorative motion she'd employed herself. Instead of doing it just exploratively, though, he kept pushing harder

until he managed to shove his finger inside her. Again she felt a sharp pain which radiated outward and became more and more the expression of some deep hunger within her. She waited for his cock to press against her, waited for it to pierce the tenderness of her groin which tingled now with a pulsing sensation like an electric current.

He jammed a second finger inside her and gave a fierce final yank that sent a bolt of excitement through her whole body. He withdrew his hand and, with his arms encircling her upraised thighs, braced himself on his knees and repositioned his penis at her slit. His shoulders sank down upon her, forcing her legs to both sides. His tongue flicked in her ear. She could feel the tip of his organ pushing inside her, and then to her alarm could feel herself tightening and resisting penetration. With a short quick snap of his hips he swung into her harder. She arched herself up in a spasm of pain. “Oh! Oh! Oh! That hurts me! Stop!”

He pulled back from her with an exasperated grunt. “What the hell are you doing? You keep going hot and cold.” He settled down on her panting, his heaviness pressing her against the mattress.

She closed her eyes and raised her hand to her face. “You’re coming on too strong,” she replied between her teeth. “I told you before, it’s been a long time.” She knew very well, however, that he was right; she had been going back and forth between desire and repulsion. Already she was thinking that her worst fears had proven true: she could not function as a female; she could not open up. And already she was defending herself against this self-assessment: he had proceeded too quickly; he was nothing but a clutz. In any case, she observed to herself, it was all too clear now that she had become too complex for a one-night affair. There was too much to deal with, too much past. She had made a mistake; she just wanted to be off by herself.

Her mind whirled away. She was making love to Marcel. He couldn’t get hard. Soon they were fighting. Cutting words back and forth. Then the cruel words came to a crescendo and stopped. For a long while they lay together not making love but entwined in one another’s arms. “Can’t

you see what this is doing?" she whispered again.

So there had in fact been anger. Yes, that anger had been there. How could she deny it? How could she have forgotten the constant battle that had gone on between them even in sex?

Once more she sensed with alarm that Marcel was in the room. Next to him was her son. They were by the oblong window behind and to the left of her bed. She had no need to look in that direction. She could see the window in her mind, a tall narrow muted-yellow rectangle with a bright-yellow edge. Her lover and child stood in the shadows in the corner of the room where the oblique light from the arc lamp outside the window illumined their barely-discernible faces from below. They were watching her as they had in her dreams. Marcel and Jason. Jason, her son. Such a long time had passed since she had permitted herself to say that name. Just to say it brought tears to her eyes.

A firm grasp on her shoulder returned her to Costenzi. He kissed her eyes. "Hey, what's with the tears? You're making a big deal outta nothing. All you gotta do is relax."

She glanced at him. Did he really care? No, he was regarding her steadily like a hunter stalking game, his sweaty brow furrowed with concentration; he appeared to be contemplating a puzzle. In the seriousness of his face she saw how intent he was on bringing his instinctive task to a satisfactory end. So his show of concern was just a seductive tactic. Indeed he was already going through the preliminaries once more with a doggedness that amazed her: biting her neck, kneading her breasts, running his hand up her legs, while he crooned in her ear, "See, you like that, don't you? This time I'll be super-gentle. Come on, sweetheart, it's gonna be nice."

As if to prove his point, he caressed her more softly. Despite his predictable progress, she felt herself becoming excited again. His fingers moved round and round through her pubic hair to her clitoris. He pulled back the prepuce and stroked the glans with an exquisite lightness that she would have thought impossible from his thick coarse hands.

She knew that the moment for another attempt at an

entry was approaching. She threw back her head and tried to relax, her whole being attentive to his every touch. Her arousal at first had been just on the surface, in her nipples and clitoris; now it dove inward to her womb from which it undulated outward with rising strength.

"Coming out of the dryness," she said to herself. And yet if these were waves of passion, she reasoned with a slow turning of her clouded mind, then they could not be from dryness, then they had to be coming from moisture and life. She wanted so much to confirm that this was so. She arranged herself beneath him, licking his rough cheek with her tongue. She lifted up her legs and rubbed her crotch against his muscular thigh.

When again he came down on her with the full weight of his torso, however, she felt herself closing up. With a rush of panic she understood that she was in danger of repeating the same calamity a second time. She reached for her mound to check if she was moist.

He grabbed her hand and jerked it above her shoulder. "No need to help," he whispered in her ear. "I know what you need, baby. And you're gonna get it pretty soon."

Another bolt of excitement shot up inside her. She kept waiting for him to press against her once more. She wanted to prevent him, wanted to say no. Still she was hoping that if he went slowly she'd be able to take him in. His lips settled on her face. He began kissing and nibbling. She could feel his penis connect with her slit. He leaned into her harder. She felt a dull pain. Was she opening up? Ever so slightly she was. The tip of him at least had pushed inside. He eased off the pressure. With his glans still resting on her vagina, he ran his tongue around in her ear, worked her clitoris with his hand. He was very silent now; she could hear his heavy breathing. He came down on her again, pressing against her with a more forceful, more spiral motion. The pain flared up greater. She moaned. Yet she was hoping. She gritted her teeth and dug her fingers in his back. His efforts became more regular in cadence. She could feel the resilient hardness of his cock as he jabbed and withdrew, jabbed and withdrew. His lunging grew more emphatic. She knew he was trying to

jam himself all the way up inside her.

Far from yielding, though, her body resisted his probing with mounting stubbornness, her muscles closing tightly around the opening to her womb. With each ingress of his shaft the pain within her rose up more sharply. “I just can’t do it,” she groaned. “I can’t open up.”

He yanked back her hair so hard that she yelped. “Let me tell you something, sweetheart, you don’t know what you want.” Still grasping her hair, he pulled back from her cleanly and flung himself on her with a vicious thrust.

“Oh!” she cried. “That hurts so much!” But he made no move to disengage, just kept stabbing at her again and again while he held her down with his burly chest and arms. She looked up at his perspiring face which now, in the silver light that filtered in from the shade-covered windows on the eastern side of the room, could be seen more distinctly. His forehead was wrinkled in a frown, his eyebrows knitted in anger. He was further inside of her now, driving deeper with the same persistency with which he had circled for the kill.

For a long while there was nothing in her consciousness but his pounding and the pain. Then inexplicably the pain subsided, faded to something faraway though she still could sense its presence in the background, a throbbing counterpoint before which another rhythm rose and gained ascendancy. To her great surprise she realized that she was nearing a climax. “All right,” she sighed. “Fuck me! Yes!”

He lifted her legs, raising her buttocks off the bed, and rammed at her with all his might, while in the same motion he stuck his finger up her rear end. A terrible pain like a flash of white light pierced her to the quick and wrapped itself around her. “You’re tearing me in half!” she screamed. “Oh! Oh! God damn you! Stop!”

He threw himself from her and lay beside her heaving with exhaustion. She felt his withdrawal from her rectum as a sucking sensation like a defecation. Her vagina was burning. She could feel a stinging in her womb. Deep in her colon was a pulsing pain. The shame of it, she thought, that he had used her like that.

She glanced at him. His massive shoulders moved up

and down. His jaw was set in anger; he met her gaze with a hateful stare. She looked away from him to the narrow vertical strip of earth and sky that could be seen between the shade and the frame of the window across from her head. She had assumed that it was after sunrise, but the clouds had grown so dark again that it seemed like night. She'd lost her sense of time. She noticed drops of water on the glass and heard a soft patter on the awnings outside the windows. Would the rain never stop? A single eucalyptus tree, framed by the shade and the edge of the window waved back and forth in an erratic dance. Then, in the bottom corner of the vertical strip which she was gazing at in a painful trance, she saw a tiny patch of red sky.

So the night was over for sure. Her last night on the Strip had ended like this in foolishness and humiliation. She had tried to show herself that she could still function as a woman, and in her self-designed stupid test she had failed. Had she actually failed? Was she alone to blame? No, his ineptness had played a part. Still she could not prevent herself from concluding that the main fault was her own. She was still very stoned. The air in the room felt too heavy to breathe. She wanted him to be gone, this man out of nowhere, whisked away somehow at this very moment, cleansed forever from her mind.

At last he said: "You got a real problem there. I suppose you know that."

She let out a long sigh. "If there's any problem, buddy, it was mutually created."

"So that's the way you see it, huh?"

"Yea, like it is."

"Ha-ha-ha. Well, you better believe it. Because if you knew the damn truth..."

"And what is that?"

"Hey, sweetheart, let me tell you one thing, I've fucked a lot of dames, and most of them have gone away raving."

"Oh yea? Raving with disappointment, I guess you must mean."

"No, from passion, they call it. I don't suppose you know what it is."

"Know enough not to look for it from a farmer like you."

He sat up on the side of the bed and reached for his pants and underpants which were crumpled together on the floor. "Let's just say it didn't work."

"On that we agree."

In words at least, she told herself, she had held her own against him. Her anger, though, had risen and subsided as quickly as her evanescent desire. In spite of her self-defenses, she still suspected that she was mostly at fault for the general mess. She had done everything she could to let it be known that she had wanted to get laid. She had wanted a test. Well, now she knew for certain; something was drastically wrong. Now without a doubt the dryness was in her womb. She felt weighted down with the evidence that her malady, whatever it was, had invaded this last outpost of her life. And not only her malady had invaded her womb, but all of the sleaziness of the Strip which she had avoided for so long. She felt as if she had been defiled, dragged through the mud in a way she'd never experienced before. In the back of her mind was the continual refrain: "So now I know it, I'm totally dry. Well, I fucking deserve it. I'm a no-good bitch."

"Suppose you didn't expect all this to happen," he said. He was still on the side of the bed with his underpants in his hand. "Suppose you didn't expect me to come on. Maybe I was hallucinating or something. I thought I heard you saying, 'Fuck me. Yea.' I mean, what's the point of this, really? At least tell me that."

She glanced at him again. His face had softened. She couldn't help thinking she'd done him some kind of injustice with her vacillation. She sighed, trying to gather her thoughts. What had he done that was so bad? Stuck his finger up her asshole? Big deal. What was that? It had happened before; it had excited her at times. Still she felt so abused. Her head was aching.

She closed her eyes. "Yes, yes, J.C.," she replied, speaking very slowly and precisely, "I did expect you to come on. But the weird thing, you see, without going into it deeply, this particular trip has never come down the old

tubes until now."

"I just don't like the insinuation that I did something wrong when all the hell I did was make love."

"No, no, no. Listen carefully, man. Listen carefully, will you?" She opened her eyes and stared wearily at him, thinking him now so ugly and boring. "No one's putting it on you. You hear what I'm saying? No one is saying it's your goddam fault. Like I just said, it's my own fucking hang-up. I admit it. I admit it. So leave me alone."

She looked from him to the rumpled sheets on the bed. The bottom sheet was spotted with blood. She had forgotten about her period. Had she bled so much? Then she turned back to him and discovered with a start that the glans of his penis was split on the side, a neat fissure like an apple broken open. The thick limp shaft of his cock was covered with dry blood.

She understood at once that he had torn it open by thrusting so hard. The sight of it made her wheezy. "Oh," she exclaimed, gesturing at him. "How could you have done that? How awful! It's grotesque!"

He shook his head. "Well, you might take into consideration that you 1ocked up like a wringer."

She covered her eyes with her hands. "I don't want to see it! Do you hear what I'm saying. I want you to go! I mean right now!"

He pulled on his underpants and pants and scrounged around for his socks and shoes. "Hey, let me tell you, darling, I was just looking for an excuse to take off."

"So you got it. Go."

"One other thing," he said, pulling on his socks. "You think it proves something 'cuz my dick got tore? You're a goddam phony, is what you are. Who you think you're fooling with that two-bit come-on? Like you're some kind of siren when you're a fucking cold fish."

"Okay, now you've made your little speech," she replied in a shrill hysterical voice. "Are you satisfied? Have you got it all out?"

"Yea, I got it all out, and you know it's the truth."

"Then kindly leave."

He grabbed his shoes and, with them in his hands, jumped up and stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind him. There was an interval of quiet during which she thought to herself that he was putting on his shoes in the kitchen. Then he went out, slamming the second door too. She heard his heavy footsteps in the hall and on the stairs. With a distant thud the outside door of the building swung shut. On the street below her windows an engine turned over and started. She heard him clunk the transmission into gear. He revved up the motor and was gone.

So much for that. So much for men. So much for her test. She was something a world different now from what she had been in the past. No longer a dancer. No longer a sensuous woman. No longer clean inside. No longer undefiled. She could still see his ruptured penis. It made her feel nauseous but she could not force it from her mind. She felt as if she were floating in air; her limbs and torso seemed non-existent. But her insides were burning; they existed very much. Now and then she glanced at the red spots on the sheets. She examined her crotch and observed that a tiny stream of blood still ran down her thigh, whether yet from her period or from some injury he'd inflicted she wasn't sure. How shameful, she thought, to lie here like this in this blood from her womb which maybe had some of his in it too from his horrible wound.

In spite of her shame, though, she couldn't move, couldn't help thinking that these red-stained sheets were what she deserved. Her whole life had been filthy. Now the filth was inside her, the bloody filth of his blunt ripped cock. She felt extremely tired, but whenever she shut her eyes she confronted the strange unreal colors which had been in her mind all night, whirling so violently now, when even for an instant she gave herself to them, that out of fright she kept her eyes open, while the voice within her kept saying, "So now I'm totally dry. Totally dry and dirty through and through. Stinking bloody cunt. My insides are rotten."

The traffic had increased on the street below her windows; a car came by every five or ten seconds. From this she concluded it was about six o'clock. The sky once more

was so overcast, however, that it seemed as dark as night. Was it morning or not? Had she not just a few minutes ago seen a speck of red in the eastern sky? She reached for the electric clock which normally sat on the end table by her bed and found it broken on the floor. So that too had been relegated to uselessness like her. Good enough. Good enough. Who cared about the time? She had nowhere to go. Nowhere to go, and such would be the case she knew not how long. The rain was drumming on the awnings outside her drawn shades. She lay on her back, watching the shapes projected on the wall at the foot of her bed by the headlights of the cars on the street below as they approached from a distance and zoomed past with a roar, shapes of muted light which began as narrow trapezoids at about window-level in the corner of the room by the closed door to the hall, grew wider as they slanted upward to the left, and then, meeting the perpendicular plane of the ceiling above her closet on the opposite side of the room, where her unpacked belongings were still stacked in cardboard boxes, bent into hexagonal distortions, and faded from view. For a long while her eyes involuntarily followed this procession of changing shapes as they glided across the wall and ceiling in the dark; then, hearing the lash of the rain on the window by her head, she turned towards it and gazed absent-mindedly at the eucalyptus tree outside her building (that is, at what could be seen of it in the vertical opening between the frame and the shade), noticing not so much its overall form as the light-dark interplay of the masses of leaves as they swayed back and forth in the wavering light of the windblown arc lamps and charging cars. The sky beyond the tree was a monotone gray.

There was something pleasant and reassuring in the motion of the branches; she wanted to close her eyes and surrender to the rhythm with which they danced, and would have done so with no hesitation were it not for the blotches of colors still swarming inside her. At last she could keep her eyes open no more; with a sigh she gave in. She began to turn around as if lying on a raft in a sea of swirling water. The blotches rose up around her, in color as unreal as before,

and just as sinister in form. Soon, however, they became more regular in outline, trapezoidal like the shapes she had seen on her wall, though in unnaturalness and somberness of color and in multiplicity of inscrutable meanings they were as strangely resonant as they had been all along. Even so, they moved in a predictable path from a point below her on her right to another above her on her left where, as the trapezoids in her bedroom had done on encountering the ceiling, they bent into V-shaped hexagonal distortions and faded out of sight. In the dark-gray circling clouds above the light-gray choppy water that spun her raft in a counter-direction to the sky, no corner could be seen that might have accounted for this phenomenon; there was no corner there, just endless curving space. Still from this lack of corners and intersecting planes she drew an inexplicable comfort; the raft in fact was no longer turning around; it had become a kind of platform or stage, smaller than the one at the Garden of Delight, but surrounded like with it with flashing lights. Only these flashing lights were not just red and blue as were the actual lights at the club; not just red, purple, green, and orange as the neon-hued lights in her first dream had been; but a jarring mixture of these actual and neon lights with the starker red, green, amber, and orange of the semaphore which she had seen reflected behind her image in the store window by the news-shack while she waited for a cab; and with those same unreal-colored trapezoid-hexagons in the background, advancing and retreating now and invading the stage so that in order to keep dancing (as from the moment she had seen herself on the platform she had been compelled to do) she had to wade through these shapes and flashing lights as through the waves of a viscous sea. It made her so weary to dance like this in the midst of such random motion; she wanted so much to stop the shapes from changing back and forth as now they were doing very rapidly and with no logic at all. And yet she kept dancing. The colors had flowed together, it seemed, though remaining separate in conjoined streams; now they were somehow pervaded with red. They were on all sides of her at once; then she grew larger and they were inside her in her womb. She could see herself

quite clearly, far below her in this multi-colored red-toned sea. She was an old woman with a cavity inside her caked with dryness and blood. Cringing faces floated all around her, among them the faces of her lover and child.

She woke up again, hardly aware that she'd awoken. She stared at the trapezoids of light that passed across the wall in front of her, almost expecting them not to be whitish-yellow, as they were, but instead to be the unnatural colors she had seen in her dream. She could still feel the burning inside her, and still almost feel the agitation there, the menacing shapes, the flashing lights. The rancid air in the room, with its heavy smell of sex and sweat, seemed just as down-pressing as the gray sea without lines or corners in which her dream had taken place. The redness wasn't there, it was true; and yet she was aware of a general redness in her mind which projected to everything she saw, so that, though the objects before her eyes were not actually red, still they had the quality of redness. She kept looking from the trapezoids on the wall to the tiny stream of blood that yet ran down her thigh. So what was blood? Some sort of fluid combination of the various components, whatever they were, needed for life. Well, let it run out, this horrible redness. Let it run out because now her own blood had his blood in it too from his wound. Let it run out because she was rotten inside.

Soon she fell into a deeper state in which she did and saw nothing. Then she awoke again to see that the sky outside her drawn shades was no longer the monotone gray of the muted day but the darker gray of night. With a start she got up, went to the window, pulled back the shade. It was raining once more. Beyond the swaying eucalyptus that had served as a kind of entrance to her dream, a solitary arc lamp swayed in the wind, throwing a silver sheen like moonlight on the wet deserted street. Among the rectangular forms of the houses and buildings which here and there with the bending trees were silhouetted against the churning clouds, only a few lighted windows could be seen. Apparently it was late at night. How long had she slept? Had a full twenty-four hours gone by? For lack of an extension cord she had never plugged in the clock in the kitchen; with her bedside clock

broken she had no way to tell. Several blocks down the street was a shopping center where she supposed she could find out the day and time; there was a restaurant there that stayed open all night. To expend that amount of energy, however, to walk into a public place and stand there in the full view of other people, seemed impossible to do. She felt too ashamed. Better to stay here in this darkness alone; she was glad in fact that her existence had come down to this, a timeless continual night.

She threw herself on the bed and closed her eyes. Again she could see the setting of her dream, the stage surrounded by lights, see herself dancing there; and though this scene was no longer as vivid as when she had experienced it the first time; though indeed she could no longer actually see this scene, but instead could only remember it, albeit with a more emotion-charged intensity than most memories have; though she was very much aware that the dream itself, with its strange colors and unusual compression, had little bearing on reality and had been distorted and heightened by her anxiety and stoned state of mind; yet what she recalled of it, which was mostly the laborious motion of dancing there in that murkiness among those advancing-retreating flashing lights and sinister shapes of fantastic red-toned colors, seemed an almost-real and logical extension of what her life before this had been—seemed so real in fact that she had trouble separating this dream-world ordeal from the other events which had taken place in the past several days.

Had she really argued with Lamott? Had she hit him? Had she lost her job at the club? Yes, she had done that. Her life as a dancer had come to an end. Had she wandered through North Beach by herself, stopped by the coffee house with green awnings where she had first met Marcel, walked back to the Strip in the rain? Yes, that too she had done. Had she gotten stoned with the girls in the alley across the street from the Garden? Yes, with lovely Lisa with the gleaming white face and black hair. Had she stood by the wall and looked off to the fog-shrouded buildings, and seen in them at once a looming presence, a reality, and a flatness, an unrealness, that she had never noticed before? Yes, she had

seen that. Then, later in the store window, that reflection of her face with the changing light of the semaphore behind it, and in the distance the wail of sirens and drone of the fog horns: that had also happened. She had caught there for an instant an inkling of some great mystery in the city night which had intrigued her since her earliest days as a dancer; though now, in thinking back to it, she had no idea what that inkling had been or what this mystery of the city night entailed.

She let out a long sigh. And Costenzi, the cab ride, the tired overtures, the blood: that too had really taken place, and right in this room, right on these sheets which were still stained with red. Once more she thought of his ripped penis and started feeling nauseous again. She shook her head and expelled the image from her mind. The deep sense of defilement which she had had from the moment of his last painful penetration, however, could not be so easily shaken off. What seemed most shameful to her was that she had asked for it herself. Had she not, in the thralls of that deceptive wave of passion which had come and gone so quickly, encouraged him to drive deeper inside her? Had she not whispered, “Fuck me, yes”? These very words, when they returned to her mind, brought a stinging sensation to her face, a terrible feeling of humiliation, as if her innermost self, the one part of her being which she had kept for herself, had been exposed to the eyes of the whole world, though she knew very well that Costenzi alone was aware of her downfall. She felt as if something sacred had been subjected to utter desecration.

Then too there was the grimness of her overall situation. No money, no job, no friends: this was what she amounted to at an age when most women had families, security, a decent life. She jumped from the bed, gazing with wonder at the mess in her bedroom. She passed through the hall to the kitchen, noticing as she did that she was no longer stoned. “What a fucking time to be straight!” she mumbled to herself.

On the kitchen table she found a last piece of the joint that she had smoked whenever it was that the driver had been

there. Carefully she attached it to a hairpin and applied a match. She drew on it hard. It crumbled into ashes. “So much for that.” She sat down on the same chair she had sat on when Costenzi had been beside her, asking herself again if that whole episode with him had actually happened. She ran her hands through her unkempt red hair, tapped her fingers on the table. Across from her was the large green bottle containing what was left of the wine she had given to him. Yes, he had drunk that wine; he had been on this empty chair beside her. But the immediate question was how to get stoned. Surely the pills were out of her system by now. So get a buzz from the booze. She reached for the bottle, poured a large glass, gulped it down, poured another, finished it off just as quickly, poured a third, rocked the bottle back and forth to see how much was left. Another glass if she were lucky. But liquor at least could be gotten in a store. She threw back her head. “Yea, that's the next step, a wino.” Soon the wine began taking effect. Far from improving her mood, it increased her depression. “I should have never let the bastard in. Damn hit and run. But what did he do? Just wanted to get laid. And I encouraged him. I encouraged him all along. I’m the one who set up the show.”

She leapt from the chair, crossed into the hall, collided with the doorway of the bedroom, flung herself on the bed. The sight of the red-stained sheets reminded her again of what had happened. Once more she thought of how his cock had split at the top with that neat little fissure in the pink flesh of the glans. Once more she felt nauseous and tried to drive the image from her mind. This time, however, she couldn’t rout it off. She leaned over the bed to barf on the floor, and to her surprise lost her balance and fell with a thud to the crumpled throw rug beneath her. The jolt of the fall rescued her for a moment from her distress. Then she thought of the blood again and started vomiting in spasmodic upheavals that shook her whole body. She continued like this until there was nothing left to throw up, and then her body kept up its violent retching though all she coughed up was saliva and air.

When at last she stopped puking, she raised herself up

on her arms and tried to get up, but felt herself getting dizzy and sank in exhaustion to the floor, making no effort to avoid setting her head in the mess around her.

After lying like this in a drunken stupor for an indeterminate period time, she fell asleep once more, and following a long slumber awoke to discover that the sky was still dark. Whether minutes or hours had gone by, she didn't know. She stared at the vomit around her, which now smelled very bad, and cursed herself for having descended to this level, but kept lying where she was with no attempt to move.

Again she fell asleep; again she opened her eyes to darkness, all the more confused as to how much time had transpired. The stench in the room was unbearable now. Finding herself with a strange hysterical strength, she jumped from the floor, rushed to the kitchen, came back with a pail of hot water, scrubbed the floor until every trace of the vomit was gone, ripped the soiled sheets from the bed, threw them in a hamper, then took a long shower, douching herself many times. On emerging from the shower, she put on a clean T-shirt and underpants with a pad, remade the bed with fresh sheets, and lay down once more.

"So now I'm cleaned up," she said to herself. "But I'm still a goddam slut." Despite her frenzied activity, she hadn't put up the shades; the slice of sky that could be seen hadn't lightened. She had no desire to do anything and only wished that it would stay constantly dark so that she could sleep on and on without interruption.

Day followed day in this same timeless darkness. For the most part she stayed in bed. Now and then, feeling hungry, she went to the kitchen, opened the refrigerator, stared at the fruit and yogurt inside, and returned to her bed without eating. She hung up blankets over the windows in the bedroom and a large Turkish towel over the single window in the kitchen so no light could filter in.

Whether to be stoned was no longer a question. She couldn't stand the sight of anything associated with the vomit or what had brought it on. On one of her trips to the kitchen, she noticed the wine bottle on the counter with that

last glass of booze still in it. She poured the wine down the drain, washed out the bottle, pushed it down into the trash basket beneath the sink so that its green glass could no longer be seen when she opened the bottom doors of the cupboard. Later, finding a couple of the tan pills in the bathroom beneath a box of tissues, she flung them in the toilet, turned the handle, and watched them swirl around and swish out of sight. The mere thought of what had happened made her feel nauseous again.

She kept falling in and out of periods of sleep that lasted she knew no how long, while the events which had led to her argument with Jensen and liaison with Costenzi kept going through her mind, all of them seeming in retrospect to have taken place in the same foggy atmosphere which had envelope her life since her bout with the dryness had begun.

In recalling these events her shame grew ever greater, grew in fact to proportions which in her more objective moments she realized were not justified by what had actually happened; even so, she could not prevent her feelings of humiliation from becoming more and more intense. She felt ashamed because she had been inept in sex, told herself that her encounter with Costenzi had proven once for all that she could not function as a woman; and yet she didn't really believe that her affair with him had determined anything conclusive, or that it had had any significance at all beyond just being a sordid affair. She felt ashamed because she had been "immoral," even used this word which sounded strange when she mouthed it to herself; and yet she didn't know exactly how she had been immoral or what she had done that most people hadn't done at some time or another and excused themselves for. She told herself again that her life, because of what she had been in the past, had led inexorably to her present condition of ruin, though when she tried to figure out just what about her past had been awful enough to bring on her misfortunes she merely came up with the same old answer that her promiscuity as a young woman and later routines on the Strip had been a travesty of love and had thus made love impossible for her on any level: an answer which, as before, she both accepted and rejected.

How she explained all of this, though, how she defended herself against it, had little effect on the all-pervasive sense of shame, defilement and sexual alienation which grew worse every day. A voice in her, moreover, was constantly calling her to task for what she had been and become. It was in a way like her own voice; it came from deep inside her as if she were speaking to herself. But in a way too this disapproving voice was an exterior and vaguely-familiar one which she remembered from somewhere. She couldn't identify it at first; then she recognized it as the voice of her great-aunt. At times, as she lay in a half-sleep, she would hear this voice distinctly and have surprisingly clear memories of various incidents which had occurred during that period of her life just after her father's death when she had lived with the old woman, would hear her aunt saying, as she so often had, that she was bound for no good and would do nothing of value. Such comments as these she had dismissed at the time with contempt; now she drew added humiliation from them, imagining how delighted her aunt would have been to see her predictions come true. She recalled going off by herself even then to the parking lot behind the drug store where she would meet with her friends in a little niche between a warehouse and grain elevator by the single railroad track that came through the middle of the town, and thinking to herself with defiance that her aunt was right, that she was bound for evil and didn't care, though now to be so wrapped up in what was either evil or something like it was not so pleasant at all.

Often too she would think about her father, and how when she was only ten years old he had come home one night, his breath smelling of liquor, and sat down on the bed beside her, started giving her a backrub, and then caressed her buttocks as well, and how she, not knowing but really knowing it was wrong, had lain there without moving, feeling the pressure of his large hands on her flesh. And then the more unspeakable things he had done which had never really amounted to sex or exposure of himself, but which she had likewise allowed and been so ashamed of in her mind.

She had not decided to think about her father and aunt; her memories of them had arisen unsolicited from within her along with the old woman's stern voice. But, since these memories of them had combined so strongly, in this period of darkness and self-examination, with her feelings of degradation, she couldn't help wondering as never before if there wasn't some direct connection between the shame she had always felt in the past in relation to her father and aunt, and the shame she felt now with regard to what she conceived of as her downfall. More and more, as she recalled these events from her childhood, she saw herself as having been greatly injured by her father and aunt, and felt towards them an ever-increasing bitterness and anger.

Towards others also, of whom she imagined herself a victim, this anger grew while she lay in bed mulling over what had led to her ruin. She would think of Richard Lammot, the manager at the Garden of Delight, and how during their brief affair years before, when she had just started at the club, he had tried to screw her in what she had regarded as disgusting ways, and, remembering this, feel bitter towards him. Then Costenzi with his bloody cock: surely he had known that to push so hard would hurt as much as it had; surely he had done that out of his hatred for women, maybe even out of his hatred for his own mother who in her madness had left him behind. Who could say where such malice came from? But malice it was, and in a situation which was supposed to be one of making love; at least that's what everyone called it.

She would think of Marcel. She no longer doubted that the anger towards him, which in its full range and significance she had only recently admitted once more to herself, had been not only a part of her life with him but a constant undercurrent of the interaction between them. She had been angry at him, on the one hand, because he had not been the real man which she had told herself she wanted and needed. But, on the other hand, when he had been clean and had come on to her more often, that too had made her angry, to be pressured like that. Already at that time a dimension of strangeness and guilt had existed in the bedroom for her, a

dimension which had not been there as dramatically in her earlier more carefree years, but which nevertheless, she understood in retrospect, had been looming in the background even then.

From where, though, had this dimension arisen? Had it not originated in her aunt's severity and father's incestuous liberties with her? Yes, she said to herself, that it had begun with them could not be denied. Again, in contemplating this, she would feel a great anger towards them. And the others: had they not reinforced this strangeness and guilt, rubbed salt in the wound that had begun in her childhood? Yes, they had done that; this too could not be denied. She could not prevent herself from feeling hateful towards them. And thus her anger circled from her father to her aunt to Lamott to Costenzi to Marcel and back to her father and aunt, each revolution becoming more intense.

Her greatest anger, however, she reserved for herself. Despite how she attempted to direct the main blame for her predicament on others, in her deepest self she continued to believe that she alone had been the principal architect and builder of the devastation which had begun in her childhood and run its relentless course throughout her life. It was as if she herself was in the middle of the circling anger which came always back to her; and, in turn, in her deeper center, her womb, she could still feel the dryness and defilement which were the net result and emblem of what the devastation had wrought.

She tried to keep lying in bed, but more and more to do this was unbearable to her. She couldn't sleep. Her body ached not only from the dryness but now as well from lying for so long with no movement. The continual darkness in which she had found some comfort for a while no longer provided an escape from her distress. She did at times manage, by withdrawing deep inside her, to attain a half-sleeping state of mind in which her limbs floated away so that she could no longer feel the throbbing pain in her legs, arms and upper back. In this state of mind her worries and self-accusations also retreated to a more distant point in her consciousness where, though they kept passing through her

thoughts, they were less pronounced. Along with this her anger subsided. But it seemed as if by withdrawing to her center in this way she brought herself face to face with the contamination inside her. It became more acute, acquired with redoubled intensity the knotted or scraping sensations which the dryness had had in her worst previous flare-ups and during her last period; she had stopped bleeding now but could still feel the burning in her womb, which in the darkness she imagined as glowing from the burning with a pulsing redness. Sometimes she would see herself dancing, as in her fourth dream, in a gray viscous sea with flashing lights around her and shapes of unreal colors rushing back and forth. When from this distressing half-sleeping centered state she sought wakefulness again, her practical concerns assaulted her with growing strength.

Her rent of $300 would be due in several days. To pay it she would have to go downstairs to the apartment of the woman who managed the building. As usual there would be a little ritual of small talk while the woman slowly wrote out the receipt. Even this amount of contact she dreaded. That $300 in a single blow would reduce her savings by nearly a third. Then soon after that her utilities bill and medical insurance premium would be due; they together would consume another hundred dollars. The remaining $600 was exactly enough for two months' more rent. But then she needed food; she had to force herself to eat. And she had to get out, go somewhere; she could not go on like this, hiding in her apartment; there would be expenses (cab fare, bus fare, money for coffee) involved in that. She had to look for a job. This too she shirked from. This too would bring tremendous shame. To think that at age 37 she had no skills at all. People would see in her very bearing that she was nothing but a failure. And she would have to dress up, pretend to be normal, carry on a conversation with whomever would interview her for whatever position she applied for, acting sane and collected, when the truth was, it seemed, that the very pillars of her mind were crumbling from one moment to the next.

But was she really in a condition which excused her

from action, or was she merely exaggerating her plight out of laziness and fear? She hadn't looked in the mirror since the night she'd gotten stoned with Costenzi. One afternoon, when her worries and self-incrimination reached all of a sudden a frantic height, she forced herself to go into the bathroom and stare at her reflection. Her hair was uncombed, a wild mass of red and orange curls around her lovely face which had grown thinner and more striking from her two-weeks' near-fast. Her green eyes in their deep sockets looked sad and withdrawn. She didn't appear as healthy as she would have wanted to be, indeed saw nothing at all in her appearance which suggested vibrant life. But, as for craziness or derangement, such a condition she couldn't see. No, this woman before her wasn't insane; this person, without a doubt, had her faculties intact. So what had prevented her from acting? She was nothing but a coward.

She yanked at her hair. Such a mess she was in! She combed it fiercely. The comb caught on the snarls. She threw it down. Yes, nothing but a coward. She took a shower, douching herself again and again, went into the bedroom, opened her drawer, set a fresh slip on the dresser, sidled past the stacked cardboard boxes to her closet, pulled from it a blue blouse dress with a banded V-neckline, tie-sash and short dolman sleeves, a conservative dress suitable, she thought, for applying for a job. But what job would she apply for? She had no idea at all. She lay down on the bed. What was the use of kidding herself? It was impossible to do. She was nothing now. No longer a dancer. A coward. She pulled the blankets over her head and for a few minutes found relief in the darkness. Soon, however, in the middle of the darkness, she could feel the dryness, the contamination, the burning inside her. Her aunt was saying, "Bound for no good." She leapt from the bed, pulled on her slip and dress, went to the bathroom again, and stared at her image with hatred while she jerked a comb through her red hair, taking a pleasure almost in the pain of ripping through her gnarled tresses. Then she grabbed her purse and went out, not knowing where she was going, not knowing even if it was night or day.

For some reason she assumed it was night, assumed that she would push through the front door of the building to the same gray sky and rain-wet streets she had observed now and then from her windows during her two weeks of seclusion. But as she approached the small lobby where the mailboxes and door buzzers were located, she saw the glare of sunlight. So it was the middle of day. She took a deep breath and went out to the busy street where cars roared past in the gleaming light. She walked along quickly with a puzzled expression in her squinting eyes, her mind still churning with half-completed thoughts and self-denunciations, her attention going back and forth from her inner deliberations to the buildings, trees and traffic around her on which fell the same intense sunlight. Coming as she was from the darkness of her apartment, she felt amazed, almost frightened by its splendor. It was as if she had just emerged from a tunnel through which she had been passing for the longest time with no hope of reaching the other side. Two blocks from her apartment she came to the shopping center where she had thought of going before to find out the time but had not gone because of her shame. Heat rose in waves from the great expanse of the car-covered blacktop. Then she was hurrying along the shiny walkways in the interior of the center past little shops with brightly-colored displays. She hardly looked at them. Everything had an air of unrealness about it, as though this too, this strange bright place with people milling all around her, was nothing more than a dream. Her body felt tired and disjointed; it seemed odd to be using the limbs which she had tried to forget.

Why was she hurrying? She had nowhere to go. Not knowing what else to do, she stopped in a snack counter by an open court with potted trees and escalators which carried a constant stream of people to and from the two upper levels that could also be seen; there too the walkways were filled with people, some of them walking swiftly, some gazing at the merchandise in the windows, some looking lost in thought, some laughing and talking with one another. So life was going on, going on with such exuberance and purpose. She had never liked shopping centers; something about them

had always seemed alien to her; they were too mundane and ordered and polished for her taste; just the same she felt envious of these people who appeared so much more vital and well-adjusted than herself. At the same time, however, she felt an inexplicable exhilaration, felt as if she had come to a point already from which she could sink no lower, that from these depths some new direction had to present itself which would lead up and out to a better life. Had this not started happening already? Had she not left her apartment and come to this center? Was she not sitting here at this counter making plans for the future?

"Making plans for the future." At least this was what she should be doing, she thought. She leaned over the cup of coffee which she had bought, but not even sipped at, and frowned. She kept looking around her. Her vision was still blurred. For an instant, by blinking fiercely, she got her sight to clear. The resultant crystalline view of the court was so disturbing to her, however, that she closed her eyes and ran her hands through her hair. "Plans for the future," she repeated. "This is the end of an era, the start of an era, for me. I have to accept that. I really do."

Yes, some new direction was needed. What would this new direction be? She tried to get a fresh perspective on everything that had happened. She was no longer a dancer. She felt tremendous shame. Even as she sat in the midst of these people who were walking around and laughing and talking, she felt cut off from them by her special condition. They were whole human beings; she was just a part. She was a person who had been wounded and who had never fully recovered from this wound. She had coiled around the pain of this wound so that now her existence was like a clenched fist. She had thought of this before but still she kept going through it. Where had this wound come from? she asked herself once more. From her father, her aunt, the whole litany of people who had circled through her mind again and again during her two weeks of self-imposed darkness. They were the cause of the wound; they were the cause of the shame. She unfortunately had added to them herself. And what this shame came down to, what this wound amounted

to now, was that she was sorry for what she had been. Well, wasn't it possible then to forget what she had been, to become in the future something entirely different? She gazed at the wholesome people around her. Nobody knew who she was. She could refuse to reveal her past to people like this who might look down on her for it, and thus present herself to them as a totally new kind of person. She in her own mind, moreover, could repudiate the past. She could renounce all the degradation in it, renounce her father and aunt, renounce her earlier promiscuous life, her routines on the Strip, renounce if not Marcel and the child then the situations at least which had led to their deaths,—renounce the whole sequence of events which had brought about her ruin.

She got up again, leaving her coffee untouched. She walked along past the shops, not looking at them. Was this then what would be required? Would she have to leave behind everything she had been? Would Ruby Ellington, the dancer, cease to exist? As strong and right as this idea seemed on the surface, it was nonetheless profoundly distressing to her. Coming to a second coffee shop by a sporting goods store, she ordered some more coffee and sat down at a table where a newspaper was lying, the want ads in view. A completely different person: just what did this mean, for instance, in terms of jobs? She kept staring at the paper while she tapped her fingers on the table, not actually reading the ads, not wanting to confront what was in them, but very much aware of their nearness. At last, with a sigh, expecting the worst, she reached for the ads and started paging through them. Instinctively she looked for "dancer" under the letter "d". "Dancer wanted," said the only ad under this listing. "Must be in her early 20's." She set the paper down and stared at the blurred shops on the other side of the walkway, taking no notice at all of the objects in the windows. That part of her life indeed was gone; at least it was gone in the exact form in which she had lived it before.

Just as she was pronouncing this to herself, a handsome woman came by in a smartly-tailored suit. Looking at her, she caught for a moment an inkling or remembrance of the

dreams she had once entertained of being a person of action of some kind. Why, she said to herself, did she persist in seeing this change of direction, which had been forced on her, in a negative light? Maybe there was some way now to become something which she had wanted to be in former years, but had never tried to be because she had gotten so mired down in the life of the Strip. Maybe there was even some way she could make a full circle, go towards the future, that is, while spiraling backward to her past to draw from it the best of what she had been, if anything good could be found there at all. She closed her eyes and thought very hard. What sort of jobs had she dreamed of when younger?

The first thing that came to her mind was a counselor. What a joke, she reflected, that she should be a help to anyone with problems when her own mind was so unstable. Someone, however, had once told her that she would make a good counselor. It seemed to her now, as she recalled this, that it had been Brian Harro, the long-haired guy she had met on Sunset Strip and gone with to Big Sur. Yes, it had been him. She pressed her mind for the details. A teen-age girl had somehow started living with them in their house by the beach; someone had picked her up hitch-hiking or something; she didn't remember the exact situation, but she had befriended this girl whose fifteen years of life had been rather stormy and unhappy, and that was why her boyfriend had made that comment to her, which was something to the effect that she was a natural with kids like that. So all of these years, because of that one compliment, she mused, she had kept the idea in the back of her head that maybe she really did have abilities along these lines. Was that all there was to it? No, in her early years on the Strip, during the days when she had bee with the modern dance company, she had been very popular among the other women, especially among those who were younger than she; everyone had always been coming to her for advice. And so she had thought from time to time that, if she had a notion to do it, she could get work of some kind as an advisor to girls with backgrounds similar to her own. She realized in thinking about this that she had thought about it now and then on a

more superficial basis in the years since Marcel and Jason had died, on the night, for instance, when Emma Mueller had left on the bus. She had wanted so much that night to be a good advisor to her friend. Whether she had actually done so, she had never been sure. Maybe she had; she felt in a way that she had. She picked up the want ads once more. Her eyes ran up and down the columns of tiny print the letter "c" where there was in fact a job called "counselor." She read the ad slowly: "Counselor in a halfway house for young women. Master's or equivalent required."

She set the paper back down. She was not quite sure what a Master's was, though she knew it was some kind of advanced degree. The truth, she thought, nodding soberly, was that, regardless of whatever abilities she might have or not have, she had no formal training beyond the tenth grade. And, worse than this, she had no practical idea of how to proceed in the world, of how to go about getting a job of any kind other than those which she had already had. She reached for the want ads again and skimmed through the listed jobs—accountant, secretary, clerk—growing more and more depressed as she realized that for most of them she lacked the necessary qualifications. The only one she could qualify for was waitress. She had six months' experience at that at least from her brief stint as a cocktail waitress before she began on the Strip. So if she took a job as a waitress, what would that mean? Was this the magnificent change in store for her after these thoughts of a new lease on life? She would be doing again what she had done fifteen years before. All of her training and discipline as a dancer would have been for naught. Her anger rose up in her once more, her deep anger towards the people and conditions in her past which had brought her to this state of worthlessness and humiliation and ruin. And, as always, the anger circled and came back to her. "It's my own fault," she muttered to herself.

She got up once more, went out of the center and across the parking lot towards the street where she lived, all this turning in her mind. If this was indeed the point she had come to, she said to herself, then, much as she rebelled

against the idea, she had better accept that a break with her past was the only course left, the only option. Her past had been broken from on any account, as the result of the events which had taken place in the previous weeks; still what attitude to take towards this development was a matter of importance to her; she felt that if the situational break which had occurred because of her argument with Lamott was in fact a permanent one, a permanent rupture from the world of dancing, and that if, furthermore, there was no possibility of using her experience from that world in her present life, then a complete psychological break had to be forthcoming also. She would need to work her way up, she told herself, through ordinary jobs. The person who would do this would not be the Ruby Ellington of the Strip but someone different and new. Her life would lack the romantic trappings which it had had before. It would take place in a more mundane setting, like this shopping center perhaps.

The sun was already setting in the western sky above the eucalyptus trees and apartment buildings in the distance. She glanced at it a moment, noticing that her vision was still blurred, then sank once more into her thoughts. Reaching the end of the lot, she came upon the restaurant there that stayed open all night, a one-story place with a fake-brick exterior and red and orange tables inside. In the window was a sign: “Help wanted. Apply within.” She stopped and stared at the large windows behind which people could be seen eating and talking. Well, she had told herself that she needed to start with ordinary jobs, and maybe in this shopping center even. She took a few steps towards the door and spun around.

Ten minutes later, feeling greatly confused, she arrived at her apartment. She pulled off her dress and lay on the bed mumbling to herself. So what was wrong with being a waitress? It wasn’t being a waitress in itself that was wrong; it was cutting herself off so severely from what she had been in the past. But hadn’t she decided a half-hour before that this was precisely what she needed to do? Was this not the only way to get rid of the dryness and contamination inside her? Even now, as she lay with a blanket over her head, she could feel the burning in her womb, and, though she could

not actually see it, could sense the red glow that the burning made within her. She could perhaps, in order to stay in touch with what she had been, go back to the city and live near the Strip, get some kind of a job there. But what purpose would that serve? The Strip, and all it had meant to her, both in itself and in what had led to her life there, had been the main cause of these feelings of desiccation and defilement, had it not? Well, then, as she had told herself before, strange and unnatural as it might seem, she had to tear herself away from her past life with all of her strength, even tear herself away in her mind. There was no way to do this which would be exactly right. As for the waitress job, if she got it, surely there was no shame in that. She had always respected working people. Perhaps there was even some noble way to go about it. Emma Mueller at least had brought dignity to it.

Yes, this is what she had to do, she kept telling herself, but in her heart she couldn't quite accept that this would be required. The thought of Emma Mueller evoked memories of the Strip which to her surprise brought up in her a nostalgia and longing for that neon world; with an exasperated sigh she drove these memories from her mind. On Mrs. Mueller, however, she allowed herself to linger; at the same time she realized that, although her contact with Emma had consisted of just two conversations, she had come to think of her as almost an old friend, or at least as the most significant person in her last year on the Strip, the one person who had tried to help her and offered her a glint of hope. Where was Emma now? Had she straightened out her problems with her son, got him out of jail? Had she sold her house? If so, what had she decided to do?

She recalled that the older woman had promised to write. Perhaps right now there was a letter in the mailbox; she hadn't checked it for several days. In the midst of her angry speculations about how she would have to cut herself off from what she'd been, the prospect was appealing of reconnecting with her past. Something told her that a letter would in fact be there, that this letter would provide a clue as to how to go ahead to a new life while still keeping in touch with her former existence.

Suddenly, to read this letter was a matter of great importance to her. She got up and put on her dress and in her stockings went down to the lobby and opened the mailbox. No letter there. Just an advertisement for a supermarket. She felt a sinking sensation inside her. That no letter was there seemed a confirmation of what she'd been thinking; the past was gone, she told herself again, as if this were the final proof in a long debate which had been inconclusive until then.

She returned upstairs, feeling tired and uneasy, took off her dress, lay down on the bed. What this meant, what this meant, she said to herself, was , that on the night when Mrs. Mueller had left she had been no help to her at all. Out of politeness and for no other reason the waitress had talked about sending a letter. There had been no genuine affection in it. Emma was just another person, then, who didn't care about her and in the end had hurt her. Well, let it be. She covered her head with a blanket. Once more she could feel the dryness and burning inside her. "Bound for no good," her aunt's voice was saying. She jumped from the bed. "I gotta do something. I gotta do something right now."

An hour later Ruby was in the restaurant by the shopping center, filling out an application. At a table in the corner were a couple of men who kept staring at her. Was it because she was attractive or because she was strange? If only she could pretend enough composure to get through the application, then she could go home and lie down and be satisfied at least that she had tried. She did not at all expect to get the job.

To her astonishment the interview went smoothly. The person she talked to was not even the manager but the swing-shift cook, a relaxed older man with a wide Slavic face and bald head who no matter what she answered said, "Good." She gave only sketchy details of what she had done on the Strip. He seemed satisfied that she had kept the same job for a number of years. After phoning the manager, he informed her that if she wanted to she could begin the next day, working sunshine or graveyard, as he put it, whichever she preferred. She hesitated, thinking the night-shift would be

more what she was used to. Then she remembered that she had told herself she needed a complete break from the past. So she asked for the day-shift, and, with her new uniform which he brought out from a closet by the kitchen, she headed home, amazed by what had happened.

She had walked just a block when it occurred to her that her alarm clock was broken. She returned to the center, bought one, and sat for a long while in the coffee shop by the sporting goods store where she had read the want ads. She was not going to be the respectable things she had dreamed of, she mused, recalling her idea of becoming a counselor, but a common waitress as she had feared. Again she said to herself there was nothing shameful in this, still it seemed like a comedown from what she had been. Whether she wanted to or not, she was leaving her life as a dancer irrevocably behind her. Although she had told herself as much many times, the reality of how complete a change this would entail had just sunk in. Once more her anger rose up; she recognized it and reflected that, besides being a person now with no identity and meaning, she would have to face the future with this bitterness inside her which she couldn't control.

Later, as she crossed the parking lot on the way back to her apartment, she saw the restaurant in the distance, its orange sign distinct against the reddish-purple sky to the north in the direction of the city. She had not even noticed its name. "Bimbo's": it seemed so inane. She gazed at the colored sky beyond it. There in the city, she thought, were other signs, the signs and lights and commotion of the street which had been her home but which likewise had brought about the dryness and her ruin. Ambivalent feelings welled up inside her: longing, anger, shame, regret. The lights reminded her of her last dream. As sometimes happened, though she'd recently taken no drugs of any kind, she all of a sudden felt stoned, cast down into the heavy atmosphere in which she had lived for so long. She could feel the contamination inside her, the glowing redness in her womb. Much as she had loved the Strip,—yes, she had loved it, she admitted to herself,—that world had been the cause and

result of every misfortune in her life. Well, now she had a chance to renounce the past as she had told herself she needed to do. She clenched her fist. “I’m gonna make that break. The old Ruby Ellington is dead.”

That night she tossed and turned, waking up now and then and repeating, “The old Ruby Ellington is dead.” At six the next morning she got up, showered, and put on her uniform which consisted of a green apron worn over her own white blouse and a brown skirt that adjusted at the waist. She was as slender now as she had been when she was 18 years old. As she walked through the cool morning air, she peered at the red sky in the east with the puzzled expression which had become almost habitual for her; her green eyes glowed from the deep sockets between her broad handsome forehead and high prominent cheekbones. “Yea, the old Ruby Ellington is dead,” she pronounced aloud. “I just gotta make this the best it can be.” Again she clenched her fist. “Cuz I can't go back. I'm not what I was anymore.”

So she told herself at least. But that morning as she hurried between the customers—well-dressed, respectable-looking men, for the most part, who apparently lived in the fine houses on the hill above the center and stopped here for breakfast on their way downtown—she noticed that now and then one or several of them were undressing her with their eyes. She had the suspicion, which she didn't actually believe yet couldn't prevent herself from entertaining, that they somehow knew who she was and what had happened to her or somehow discerned that the body beneath her clothes was not at all healthy but diseased, contaminated, dry.

To make matters worse, they were demanding and gave exact ten-percent tips. By the time she left she was exhausted. On the way home she detoured to a liquor store and bought a half-gallon of wine. In her apartment, as soon as she arrived there, she poured a large glass. The taste of it made her nauseous. She emptied the bottle down the drain, then lay on the bed and covered her head. Her mind whirled around. She decided to quit the next morning. When the alarm sounded, however, she got up and went. Again as she moved among the men she felt utterly ashamed. One decent-

looking fellow asked her politely how long she had worked as a waitress; she told him to mind his own business.

He left a large tip. As she put it in her apron, she thought to herself that her failure and bitterness had made her into a regular bitch.

Day followed day. She worked and went home, sometimes stopping in the center in the same coffee shop by the sporting goods store where she had sat before, finding in this unremarkable place, which had only recently acquired meaning for her, a modicum at least of the continuity which she had otherwise lost in her disrupted life. She told herself she had come a long way. From her previous addictions, she had returned to the rigidest health rules again. Even so, her physical symptoms persisted. Her vision was still fuzzy. She felt separated from everything around her as by a shaded transparent shield, felt angry, deficient, strange; and all of this, as before, seemed related to her womb, to the dryness and impurity there which she was unceasingly aware of, whether at work or walking back and forth from her apartment or at home by herself where she felt cut off with a deep loneliness that knotted her insides and made her feel hollow.

Sometimes too, in spite of her absence from the Strip and the memories it held, she imagined that her lover and child were still there by the oblong window behind and to the left of her bed which had come to have such a magic significance for her. Growing more and more determined to leave all of this in her past, she made a sudden decision to move, and that same afternoon—this was two weeks or so after she'd begun at Bimbo's—found an apartment in a garage behind a brick house with a large wooded yard. She moved the next day, aided by the Slavic cook and a kid who washed dishes at the restaurant.

Her new home had just one room; in the back corner was a bathroom; the yard side was set up to function as a kitchen with a sink, stove and refrigerator built into cabinets along the wall. It occurred to her, as she stood here alone for the first time, with her boxes stacked all around her, that this apartment in its simplicity was not so much a departure from

what she had been as an ironic return; she had often lived in such plain quarters when younger. It almost seemed as if she had played a trick on herself. And out-side the window that faced the yard was something else from her past, a giant acacia tree which now in early April had just budded with a promise of bloom.

Such an acacia tree had towered above the door of the basement apartment on Russian Hill where she had lived with Marcel and Jason. Had she noticed this tree before moving in? She didn't know.

In any case she was amazed, not only in this but in her life overall, by how much and how strongly she remained the person she'd been despite what was now a complete change in situation and despite the care she had taken to reveal nothing to her fellow-workers about her previous life. What disturbed her most was that her feelings of contamination had continued as before. She yearned for some way out of these feelings, yearned for some kind of purgation of the corruption within her. She was constantly trying to figure out how to go about this, filtering out anything that didn't pertain to it and focusing intensely on anything that did.

Among the people she worked with was a waitress who appealed to her for this reason, a young woman named Ellen Serven with a pretty face and sad blue eyes who treated everyone with kindness and was always cheerful in the presence of others, though when she sat or stood by herself, as she did now and then at the side of the room, the sorrow in her eyes seemed to cover her face and even extend to her posture which at such times suggested dejection and fatigue. Ruby observed that during her breaks this little waitress (she was not much more than five feet tall) read a pocket Bible or religious books; when she spoke with animation it was usually about spiritual subjects, and with obvious sincerity and conviction, moving her small face close to whomever she addressed and shaking her head from side to side. She often talked about what she called "sacred things." Life went nowhere and was empty and dry, Ruby heard her saying, unless one found his way to whatever was sacred and worthwhile. The dancer kept thinking about this; she did

have a feeling that something in life, or life itself, was sacred, though how this applied to her own existence she wasn't sure. The word “dry” especially stuck in her, mind; she began to wonder if her inability to comprehend the sacred was connected with the terrible dryness inside her.

One day she and this waitress happened to take their lunch breaks together. Ruby, who by this time was quite curious about her coworker, asked her a few questions about where she had grown up, and so on. Ellen Serven quickly brought the conversation to an intimate level with her unguarded responses. She launched into a story of her life which she described in terms of her spiritual development. She had led a foolish youth, she said, speaking as if she were 40, though she claimed to be 26 and with her fresh innocent face could have passed as 18. In her teen years she had been wild and flirtatious, she asserted. Then at age 20 she had noticed a persistent numbness in her hands and feet. Soon she had developed a spastic gait which was diagnosed as due to multiple sclerosis. After several months the symptoms had vanished; the doctor had warned her, however, that they well might return. For a couple of more years, suspecting that her disease had come about as a punishment for her wildness, she had lived cautiously and prayed a great deal. She had, she said, become more and more confident of her health, then had started going to parties and doing “sinful things.” At age 23 the disease had again manifested itself, this time more pronouncedly. For five months she had been unable to walk; sometimes her limbs had moved of themselves, or she had felt them moving when in fact they were not. During this ordeal she had prayed continuously for the courage to accept whatever her fate would be. Her full health had returned. Since then she had maintained the devotional zeal which she had developed during those five soul-searching months.

“Do you really think your disease came about because you were evil?” Ruby asked, intrigued by the obvious bearing of this on her own situation and suspicions. “What you described, the things you were doing, they don’t sound so evil to me.” Compared to her own life, she mused, they

were mild. Only a naive person would have regarded them as bad.

"But I abused my body. I abused it," replied the little woman, leaning towards her and shaking her head back and forth. "I abused it, you see, and no one can do that. Because the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, and, if you defile it, God will destroy you."

Ruby felt a chill go up her spine. She made no attempt to deny what the waitress had said, merely listened to the rest of the story of Ellen Serven's life, which had led through various small changes to this restaurant and her involvement in some church. She had been there, she said, the previous night. "People were slain in the spirit of God. Praise the Lord!"

"And what does that mean?" the dancer inquired. She had never much cared for language of this kind.

"Whatever was evil in them was killed off, was slain. Then the spirit can live, the body can be whole."

That night as she lay in bed Ruby reflected a great deal on this conversation. Had she abused her body? She knew very well that she had. Compared to Ellen Serven, she was a horrible sinner. There was something about this very word "sinner," however, about the churchiness of it, which repulsed her even more than the thought of having sinned. Likewise with the idea of God. She'd never thought of God as a real living Person who dealt with people on such an intimate level. Her sense of ultimate justice was that it was more impersonal than that, a matter of karma and of mysterious cosmic workings that no one knew about exactly. This she had gotten from the circle of people she had lived with in Big Sur, and later from her lover's artists-friends. She had assumed that their way of looking at things was generally true and somehow more progressive than the religious ideas she had heard about so sketchily as a girl.

She couldn't sleep. She found herself thinking about her aunt and the small white church on the hill in Kansas where the self-righteous old woman had dragged her at times, decked up in "respectable clothes" that had seemed to choke out whatever in her was trying so hard to emerge, the plain

church from which, escaping the service now and then, she had stood looking off to the flat curving horizon outside the town which here and there was broken by farm buildings surrounded by elms. She remembered that her father had regarded the church with scorn. Anyone unique, as she recalled, had done the same, like the Gypsy woman who had lived by the creek where she ran a blacksmithing outfit that had come down to her when her husband had died. Ruby had admired that feisty woman so much, how she had stood up to the authorities when they tried to take her license away. And who had gone to the church? Cyrus Hiram, the chief officer of the bank which, so she had heard, had during the Depression repossessed a number of small farms worked by the same people who sat beside him in church. Wally Nordstrum, the sheriff, who had been the scourge of the rebellious youngsters in town and later had left in disgrace because someone had seen him sneaking out of the Gypsy's house at the break of dawn.

She recognized too the clear connection between the waitress' spiritual ardor and her fear of a new flare-up of her disease, recognized that Ellen's wish for full health was the ulterior motive behind her zeal. And yet the purity and goodwill that had come about as the result of her condition could not be denied. This she understood with growing appreciation as she worked beside the young woman whose never-failing warmth and willingness to do small favors for everyone was truly astounding. She never engaged in gossip, never spoke ill of others behind their backs, and went with any grievance directly to whomever was the source of that grievance, and resolved her problem in a frank, friendly manner. She was liked by everyone. From a distance at least. Few employees had much to say to her. Her conversation usually turned to the same subject, God, and the others seemed to consider this tiresome when done to the exclusion of everything else.

Ruby, however, found herself listening more and more. Much as the whole tenor and tone of such religious talk was alien and almost offensive to her, she couldn't help being impressed by the sincerity of what was said. Besides, the

general drift of it, though she never brought up this subject directly or talked about her past, was related obliquely at least to the possibility of personal renewal, and this she found of great interest. She started to think that maybe she had been too hasty in dismissing religion as a whole because of what she had seen of it in her aunt. Perhaps the little waitress was a better representative of what it could be.

Her thoughts about these matters were fraught with contradictions. She had told herself she needed to break with the past. If she got saved, as Ellen called conversion to her way of thinking, wouldn't this be returning to the worst of her childhood? Even so, she kept thinking about it with such persistence that it almost seemed as if something foreign had inhabited her body. Had the feelings of contamination not been so strong, she would not have allowed it. But she could still feel the corruption inside her, the glowing redness in her womb. A month had passed since her liaison with Costenzi, and still she felt his blood inside her mixed with her own. Lying in bed at night she saw his ripped cock. Her aunt would say in the background, "Bound for no good." Her father's large hand would caress her buttocks. "Rotted, rotted, rotted to the core," the thin man from her first dream would pronounce to a room of laughing men. Was there nothing sacred to her? she asked herself again and again. In answer to this no words came to her mind.

Instead she would look out the window to the acacia tree in the backyard. In the morning, especially, she did this, and her thoughts filled with the memories which she had told herself to leave behind.

"You're always talking about the sacred," she said to Ellen one afternoon. "So what's sacred to you? You never told me."

The little woman responded that swimming, for instance, was sacred to her. She swam a mile every day. It kept her spine supple, and sometimes she swam extra laps and offered them up for various people. "Like you," she said laughing, looking at the dancer with an expression of concern.

"So why do you do that?"

"Because I like you. Because I can see you're in a period of ferment. You never talk about your past, but I can sense your sadness. I can tell that you were something in the past you don't want to be anymore." She went on and on about how finding the sacred for herself had also involved a great struggle.

As she worked that afternoon, Ruby thought about this. She had expected something more profound. So swimming was sacred for Ellen Serven. Well, then dancing was sacred for her. But this led back to her ongoing quandary, which was that she was trying to escape the past and kept returning to it.

In the next week she talked to her new friend at almost every break, regarding her pretty face and sad blue eyes with an enduring curiosity but also with suspicion. Much as she felt drawn against her better instincts into the young woman's religious obsessions, another side of her disliked this "Ellie," as everyone called her, for her unfailing cheerfulness which sometimes seemed forced, as though arising in the same deep fears which were the source of her spiritual fervor. And the little waitress seemed to sense how the dancer felt and maybe even distrust her because of her greater age and the tidbits of information which Ruby had dropped here and there about her worldly background.

Their awkward friendship nonetheless continued. Ellie brought the dancer a pocket Bible and inspirational book to read in her spare time. Out of courtesy Ruby took them home, but they seemed out of place in her apartment. She, couldn't look at the Bible without recalling that her aunt had kept a large leather-bound version on the coffee table in the living room where everyone could see it. She skimmed through it a few times; it was written in the old style, however, and the artificial-sounding language disturbed her. The other book she'd be given was a journal-like account of the spiritual progress of a 19th century noblewoman who seemed to exaggerate both her early condition of sin and the bliss she gained in her relations with God. This too the dancer found quite offensive; and yet she could not merely dismiss it with a smile or headshake of incredulity, as she

once might have done, because her feelings of contamination were not only still with her now but had grown more acute, as if fed by her fears that the waitress was right about how God punished people who had defiled their bodies.

Ellen Serven was constantly asking Ruby to attend the Wednesday night prayer meeting at her church. She described it as a highly-emotional experience and said that for many people it led to the rebirth which they longed for. After much hesitation the dancer consented. The little waitress came by in a clunky big car with a muffler that rattled on bumps. They rode off together. Their conversation, as usual strained, began on the restaurant, how the dayshift could hardly handle the load and everyone seemed tired, then went predictably, under Ellie's guidance, to how tiredness was just a kind of yearning for true rest in God.

This, said Ellen Serven, she desired more than anything else. "I want to see Him, really see Him. I want to make it, you know. Wouldn't it be wonderful if the Lord would come right now and take us to heaven?"

Ruby replied that she had always imagined it would be boring in heaven.

"Boring in heaven? Boring in heaven?" the young woman exclaimed. This apparently was incomprehensible to her. "Oh, you don't understand. But you'll learn, you'll learn."

It was a beautiful spring evening. They passed a small park where ducks were swimming in a mirror-like gleaming pond. Ruby peered at them, as she often did when her focus went from her inner concerns to the world around her, with an uplifted face and puzzled frown. Then she turned back to her companion who when she drove sunk so far down in the seat that she appeared even smaller than she was and seemed to have a fair amount of trouble keeping the big rattletrap on the road. The subject of religion seemed poorly suited with the softness of the evening, too solemn, too self-conscious and private. And yet, even as she sat with one hand on the dashboard, not quite trusting Ellie's control of the car, she could feel the dryness inside her, the old weary knotted sensation in her lower abdomen and tightness in her legs and

buttocks. She drew in a deep breath and looked forward to the upcoming service with mixed apprehension and hope.

She had expected, since Ellen Serven was such a common person, that the church would be a small one in a working-class section of town; instead it was a large modern building in a suburban neighborhood with elegant houses and well-kept yards. This church with its gray stone porticos was not at all like the one she remembered from her battles with her aunt; still it had the same pontifical air about it in the very arrangement of the flowers in the neatly-ordered beds beside the sidewalk. The grass on the lawn had been so carefully trimmed that not an eccentric blade lifted a rebellious face to the sun which was now already setting above the Spanish-style mansion across the street. A man in coveralls there, clearly not the owner but a hired steward, was trimming the shrubbery, clipping away with a monotonous regularity that seemed projected from the church to all the fine houses in sight.

Ruby and her friend were met at the door by two women with kind eyes who enclosed them in hugs. “Praise the Lord,” the little waitress said softly, her face glowing and joyful. “Praise the Lord,” the women responded, though they already had their arms extended to greet the several people just behind

The interior of the church was quite ornate. The entire side behind the altar was glass, a mosaic of different-sized rectangular windows beyond which the eastern sky, streaked with red and purple, could be seen. They took a seat in the back corner.

Soon the service began. The preacher, a well-nourished exuberant man who looked like a 50-year-old boy, came forward from behind the altar and started talking in a low voice about how in order to live the seed had to die. The seed needed darkness to break forth to light; it needed the earth to break forth to air. He expanded on this idea in several directions, coming back to his point, that the seed had to die. His voice became louder, more rhythmical and insistent. “Yes, it has to die in the ground,” he yelled, almost chanting. “The world is nothing but sin and desire.” A man

hollered out, “Has to die in the ground.” Soon others were shouting and clapping their hands: “Has to die in the ground. Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!” A tall thin woman with a dough like complexion, clad in a plain brown dress that reached to her ankles, stepped to the piano and started playing along, her dull eyes lighting up when her long fingers touched the keys. The congregation burst into song: “In the ground, in the ground, His holy light is found.” People spoke in garbled voices. The preacher yelled out what one woman was saying: “The ground is deep, but the depths are the Lord’s.” A skinny old fellow who had shuffled in behind his wife with his bald head sunk into his bony shoulders, and whose mouth hung open in an imbecilic stare, all of a sudden squatted down and jumped up with an amazing resilience, considering his age, then hopped around the room like a rabbit, his booted feet on each bound landing flatly on the wooden floor with a thud. His little wife followed behind him with her arms outstretched as if to be there to catch him in case of a cardiac arrest.

The transfigured old man might have been comical in another setting. To Ruby, however, he seemed to represent the contagious fervor in the church.

She was impressed by the idea of the seed breaking forth from the darkness, took it indeed as a description of her own situation. She closed her eyes and could feel the dryness inside her, the red-toned dryness and contamination which had been there in her center, her womb, since the night of her painful ordeal. She thought of what the preacher had said about the world being nothing but sin and desire. She herself had been the conveyor and object of this sin and desire; she had been a kind of goddess of lust; she wanted so much to cleanse herself of this corruption. She thought of Costanzi’s ripped cock, the blood, the vomit, her two weeks in darkness by herself, swinging back and forth between a limbless burning half-consciousness and a distressing awareness of her appendages and practical problems; and a hope sprang up in her that this submergence in darkness and pain had been a period of germination for a new life which would begin at the present moment with a dramatic purgation. Was this her

rebirth? Was this faith in God? Then maybe God was real, was really in this room. And what she needed to do was admit she'd been wrong, accept that she'd been evil, and rid herself forever of the impurity inside her. She waved her arms. "Praise the Lord," she whispered, though the words seemed strange on her tongue. With her eyes still shut, she tried to imagine that she'd become a yawning openness; she began a slow dance and shook her red hair. She could feel nothing but the motion, however, accompanied as usual by a grating sensation in her bones; she could feel nothing at all like the presence of God.

As she twisted from side to side, the heel broke on her shoe. She lifted, her foot to examine it, and became at once aware that several men were staring in her direction. She glanced at them, noticing in particular a longheaded man with glasses who reminded her of the man in her first dream who'd announced to the audience at the club that she was rotted to the core. In his eyes and those of the others, she saw something familiar, the glint of desire. She sat down and took off her shoes, now not wanting so much to accomplish a spiritual catharsis as merely to avoid these looks which evoked in her such unbearable shame. She gazed across the room. The preacher swayed back and forth. The old man who had hopped around the room had fallen to his knees in front of the altar. Everyone was in a state of excitement. A striking young beauty with long blonde hair had gone into a kind of dance on one side that had the men bug-eyed all around her. Even the boyish preacher was looking in her direction.

Already, however, the emotional outburst had subsided. The music had stopped. Ellen Serven took Ruby's hand and smiled, her small face agleam with beatific contentment. The dancer wanted to jerk her hand away but forced herself to leave it there in the young woman's moist fingers. Something disturbing had taken place; she hardly knew what is was. Yet the moment she had seen those eyes peering at her she had said to herself that more was happening here than singing and God. Later, as she filed out with the others, she noticed the preacher talking to the blonde, leaning

towards her with a solicitous frown on his pink effeminate face, while he held his pelvis back from her at an exaggerated self-conscious angle, as if to protect himself from any warmth emanating from her body.

In a lounge in the basement coffee and cookies were served. Everyone was embracing: "Praise the Lord. Praise the Lord." Ruby had imagined that among people like these the little waitress would be in her element and have many friends. But here too Ellie stood shyly on the side. When not smiling at someone, her face grew instantly sad.

The lounge buzzed with conversation. There were about seventy-five persons in a space the size of two classrooms. A middle-aged woman within earshot of the dancer was talking about the blonde who had attracted so much at-Hi in the church. She was engaged to a lawyer, the woman said. He was old enough to be her father but nonetheless quite a catch. "A social crusader, you know. Always into some cause. He just won a suit for some Indian tribe in South Dakota. Millions of dollars, and he gets ten percent of that for himself." He was running for Congress, another woman put in; stood a good chance of winning, according to the polls. He was a generous man, a friend of the church; out of his own pocket he funded the "Young Pioneers."

Soon he stopped in to pick up his fiancé who not long before had strutted into the room with the beaming preacher. For a moment he stood by them, waving at everyone with a wide confident grin on his fleshy bulldog face. As Ruby and her companion left the church, she saw him and the blonde driving away in a Mercedes Benz.

The dancer watched all of this with a feeling of distance and repulsion. In the brief interaction which occurred in the lounge between the lawyer and his woman, she could tell that their relationship was one of convenience for them both. So the beautiful creature who had danced the wild holy dance in this respectable church was nothing but a legal call-girl, a whore. Ruby had more respect for the hookers on the street; at least they maintained their independence. And this lawyer with his self-proclaimed concern for justice: Christian or not, she sensed him as evil on a sinister level which in her

own life she had never even approached. To think that these people, because of some perfunctory observances on his part, regarded him as a man of God! As for the suppressed sexuality and unnatural affection in the church, the waving of arms, the pretense of talking in tongues—all this left her in a whirl.

She and the little waitress said nothing on their way to the car. It was dark. Ellen Serven drove along with both of her hands on the steering wheel as if in precarious control of a team of unruly horses. Her small face was glowing; she glanced at the dancer, her eyebrows lowered in concern, said she had seen her dancing, seen the sincerity and "spirit-raising" in it, and knew the Lord would bless her for her prayers. But Ruby Ellington felt that she had not prayed at all, that she had been caught up in some kind of chicanery,' had acted the fool.

"Did you feel that? Did you feel the Spirit?" Ellie persisted, fastening her sad blue eyes on her and leaning towards her while still continuing down the street.

The dancer braced herself on the dashboard. "Yes, in a way, I suppose,' she replied, wanting only to get away as soon as she could from her zealous friend. She had a hollow feeling in her stomach. Her words, when they came out, were high-pitched and faint. She was just starting to understand that she had placed more hope on the service than she had admitted to herself. Had she been rash in her judgement of what had happened? Had she made too much of the lawyer? Had she, because of her own distorted sexuality, imagined the same in the people in the church? Maybe she had. Even so, the whole setting there had seemed so alien to her. Yes, that's what had been wrong, she reflected. Over and above these other considerations, she had just plain and simple been in a place where she didn't belong.

They pulled up to Ruby's garage apartment. Ellen shut off the motor, obviously expecting an invitation to come in. But the thought of more talk about God was more than the dancer could bear. Still, instead of taking the hint and saying good night, the waitress went on and on about how it took a long time to get the right feeling, the right sense of God, how

God couldn't be grasped all at once, but had to be approached in small steps, how His presence had to be realized again and again in the most ordinary situations.

"Well, I will certainly try," said Ruby with her hand on the door.

"Have you tried before?" Ellie asked, unrelenting.

"I suppose to some extent I have in my own way."

"And what way was that?"

Ruby shrugged her shoulders. Why she was continuing this conversation she didn't know. She said that maybe she had tried to find God in her youth, especially in the months after her father's death; but, even as she said it, this seemed like a lie. Then maybe in all her wandering she had tried to find Him; at least she had tried to find meaning.

"Well," the little waitress responded, leaning towards her and shaking her head back and forth, "it comes down to the same thing."

"Yea, I suppose it does."

"Because God is the source of all meaning."

"Yea, I suppose He is."

Once more the dancer thought the conversation was ended, but Ellen Serven pressed for details. She wanted to know more about what Ruby's journey had been, what exactly she had done. And so in brief sketchy terms, despite her resolution never to talk about her past, Ruby described her life on the Strip

"You mean you were an actual stripper?" Ellie inquired with large eyes, though it was impossible to tell from this if she was overwhelmed by this information as by something she had never heard of before on so specific a level, or just overwhelmed by the magnificence of the fish she was trying to catch.

"Yea, I was that. But small-time, you know. I never made it big."

"Still what a life!"

"No doubt about that."

"You were immersed in the world."

"I suppose I was."

They talked for another fifteen minutes or so, the

waitress asking more and more questions, in the course of which it was quite clear that she looked upon all of this as unquestionably evil, as the workings of the Devil in the world.

"Well, no wonder you feel a need for God," she said. Evil was always an insult in God's face, she asserted. God always sought vengeance. She had heard of some German philosopher once, a terrible man -- she didn't remember his name but it began with an "N" -- who had spoken out against God, and because of this he had gotten syphilis and gone insane.

Ruby felt weary. "You've been so kind to be concerned about my welfare," she said weakly. "But now really, Ellen, I have to head in."

She watched the waitress go off, then walked into her apartment, locked the door behind her, and threw herself on the bed. What Ellen Serven had pronounced was exactly what she'd been thinking herself for the past couple of months: that her whole life had been nothing more than an expression of evil, that the only way out of this evil, which had brought on the dryness and defilement, not as the working of some impersonal karma but as that of a personal and angry God, was totally to reject what she had been all those years. Now, however, with a fierce new mysterious strength, something within her rebelled against this idea that her life as a dancer had been so corrupt. She had thought this herself, it was true; but having someone else say it made her want to defend her past existence.

The more she dwelled on this, the more angry she became. She had lived her life as best she could. Who was Ellen Serven to portray it as evil? No, she would not dismiss her past so easily, she asserted to herself. What she would dismiss instead was the foolishness of this talk of God. Her life too had had its sacred moments and places. She tried to recall what they'd been. All she could think of, however, was her aunt's admonitions. Hearing that stern face in her mind made her angry once more at the whole litany of people from her past who had helped to make her what she had become. Her anger circled around and came back again to herself. She

could feel the burning inside her. Why did she allow people to abuse her? Why did she abuse herself? Before she fell asleep, she decided to avoid the little waitress in the future as much as she could.

The next day she saw Ellen Serven at work. The other woman came over right away, sat beside her, and started talking about what she had thought about after they had parted the night before. “I got to thinking that maybe I’d been too negative about it. It’s positive, though. It’s leading to God.”

“I need to tell you right off,” Ruby interjected. “I just can’t take no more of this holy bullshit. I gave your church a try. It’s a good church. I like it all right. But this kind of trip is just not for me. Only way I can say it, my life has been different than that. Hey, I don’t want to offend you, Ellie, ‘cuz you’re a sweet kid, you really are. I just think we need to keep more distance between us. It’s getting to be, it’s like we’re engaged. No hard feelings, Ellen. But you dig what I’m saying? We’re on different wavelengths, sweetheart. I don’t want to be chums.”

Ellen Serven went over to get herself a cup of coffee, her shoulders sagging. She came back with the coffee, sat down beside the dancer once more, leaned over and peered at her with her sorrowful eyes. “Well, okay, Ruby, but, I just want to tell you, this saddens me so much.”

Despite her resolution to be firm, the dancer was touched. “Well, it saddens me too,” she replied in a softer voice. “But that’s not the point. The point is that when two people are traveling together, you know, there’s gotta be this to-some-extent-mutual destination in mind. I mean to some extent they gotta have their eyes directed the same way. And you and me, Ellie, we don’t have that, we really don’t. You think we do but we don’t. All you talk about is God. I’m so sick of that program. I gotta get my mind free of all that.”

“You can’t escape from God.”

“So maybe my God is different from yours.”

“There’s only God and Mammon. And what God said is clear. Lust is evil. I didn’t say it. Don’t blame me.”

“Who’s talking about lust?”

"That's why you're angry."

"Why should I be angry about lust?" Ruby asked between her teeth, growing more and more impatient with the little waitress who continued to gaze at her with her well-meaning blue eyes.

"Because you think I judged you. But I didn't judge you. Who am I? God is the only one who can judge."

"An unbreakable record."

"Well, maybe I am. But I try to do what I think is right."

"Okay, granted, Ellen. You try to do what you think is right. Look at it from this perspective then. I also try to do what I think is right. Can't you understand that I need to make up my own mind? Don't you agree that I have a right to think my own thoughts?"

"Yea, I agree, so long as they're directed to God."

Ruby let out a long sigh. "But how to deal with God, this is something I gotta figure it out for myself."

Ellen Serven pressed her lips together and looked to the side.

"See what you're trying to do," the dancer continued, "you're trying to argue."

"I'm not trying to argue."

"Oh, yes, you are, Ellie! Oh, yes, you are! And what you want me to do is argue back."

The little waitress moaned. "I was just discussing."

"Discuss or argue, it's the same damn thing."

"No need to swear."

"See, what you don't understand, Ellen, is the artistic mind. What I'm trying to say, I can't line up my thoughts, one-two-three like boxcars, and make decisions like that, especially on anything as vital, or whatever, as this. I have to step back and let things circle around, let them take their own course, if you know what I mean. Then when they fall into place, it's like I get a direction. I gotta go with the flow, as they used to say. This is something I learned from dancing. I'm a dancer, Ellie. You don't understand because you've never seen me in that role. Even so, it's what I am, a dancer. If there is a God, He made me this." With an exquisite gesture of her small white hands she indicated her

full bosom, face and red hair in a manner which seemed more puzzled than vain. “Maybe He had a reason. I don’t know if He did. But, like I said, I gotta figure this out for myself.”

She was surprised to hear herself making this confession. She had not realized before how true this was, that she was in her essence a dancer and would always be one.

Ellen Serven shook her head in exasperation and sighed. “All right, Ruby, so we’re enemies then.”

“Now who in the hell said anything like that?”

“Well, if people know one another, and they’re not friends, well, what are they then? They’re enemies , right?”

“You know damn well there are a million variations.”

“No, I don’t know all the variations. I don’t want to know them. Either I care with all my heart or I don’t care at all. The way I look at it, it’s as simple as that. And I care about you, Ruby. I care about you so much that I was thinking in terms of your spiritual salvation. So I don’t know what to say about keeping distance. It just saddens me, that’s all. I tried to be a good friend. I don’t have many real friends...” Tears came to her eyes. She shook them off. “But if that’s what you insist on...”

Ruby closed her eyes. “Yea, it’s what I gotta insist on.”

That afternoon Ellie seemed distressed. After working the noon rush, she asked the cook for permission to leave. At about three o’clock she went out, not even glancing at the dancer as she slumped past with her religious books in her arms.

Ruby felt disturbed. She kept defending her actions to herself. After all, she had a right, she said, to peace of mind; she had a right to choose her own friends. But she kept thinking about the little waitress and how even in the lounge in the church she had stood by herself looking self-conscious and lonely.

She kept thinking too about her assertion that in her true character and substance she was a dancer first and last. “Yea, I am a dancer,” she repeated again and again as she rushed back and forth between the tables and looked out to the

parking lot and the muted sun in the western sky An hour later, the phone rang. Ellen Serven had been in an accident. The police had come across a receipt pad from the restaurant in the car. She was unconscious; they wanted to know if anyone could supply more information about her.

Business was slow; the cook let Ruby off to go see her. She rode the two miles to the hospital in a cab. Ellie was still in the emergency room. She had regained consciousness, however. As it now appeared, her injuries were slight. An overnight stay would be all she needed. Even so, she was too tired to talk. Ruby kissed her forehead and left. As she walked home, she thought to herself that all this had maybe happened as the indirect result of their conversation. So hard, perhaps, had Ellen taken rejection that she had paid even less attention than usual to her unsteady control of the car. This was at first just a suspicion in Ruby's mind. That night, though, as she lay in bed unable to sleep, she became increasingly certain that such indeed had been the case, and felt more and more relieved that Ellen's injuries had been minor.

The next morning she and her coworkers learned that Ellen Serven had a low blood count and would have to stay in the hospital another day. Ruby went down to see her again.

Ellen trembled when she talked. She said that the accident had come about because she had been so pushy and inconsiderate with the dancer, and taken such a sinner's interest in Ruby's worldly past. I had no business seeking out evil like that. And I was so self-righteous, so spiritually vain!"

"You aren't vain," Ruby Ellington replied, shaking her head. "You're the humblest person I know. Hey, and you weren't inconsiderate or pushy. Forget our stupid discussion. We were both worked up. I like you, Ellen. I want to be your friend. So why don't we just cruise for a while? Nothing to be apologetic about. You just rest and get better. We miss you at Bimbo's. We want you back."

Despite such assurances, Ellen Serven was weaker the next day. When the dancer went to see her she noticed that

the visibly-beleaguered young woman had trouble controlling her head when she shook it back and forth; sometimes she appeared to do so against her will. She had trouble forming her words. When she got excited her arm motions were jerky.

Ruby went home fearing that this was the first indication of another flare-up of Ellen's sickness. She discovered the next day how well-founded her worries had been; Ellen had reached a point of almost complete paralysis. She could only move her neck and head. Her facial expressions were spastic. She found it difficult to say anything at all, and seemed on the verge of tears that never came.

The dancer went about her chores at the restaurant with the bedridden young woman a constant presence in her thoughts. She was now convinced that not only the accident but Ellie's neural dysfunction as well had in a mysterious manner resulted from her emotional distress. She had no doubt, moreover, that what alone had led to this distress was the conversation they'd had on the afternoon of the crash. That this had happened gave her a whole new perception of Ellie as a fragile creature who lived in fear of loneliness and ill health, and whose mental state was precarious, and intimately connected with her physical condition. She felt terribly sad about this; she wanted to make up for whatever she had done to pierce the little woman's defenses, allowing the disease to rush out like angry water through a hole in a dyke. At the same time, though, she dreaded her daily visits and left the hospital each evening profoundly disturbed.

Several days later, the severity of the sickness abated, to the extent at least that Ellen could again move her arms and make normal facial expressions. She was still, however, unable to rise or turn herself in bed.

Now on a mechanical level it was easier to communicate back and forth; in all they said to one another there was nonetheless the usual strain. The dancer struggled to find something to talk about of mutual interest, but their conversation more than ever stayed on religion and God.

Ellen had written out a passage from the Bible which she identified as Proverbs 3:12: "Whom the Lord loves He

chastises; even as a father in his son He pleases Himself." She wanted to discuss it. What did it mean? Was it true?

"What it means, I guess," Ruby replied, responding to this question only out of concern for her friend, "what it means is this God of yours—"

"And your God too."

Ruby let out a deep sigh of exasperation. "That He might inflict injury or distress or whatever on someone, and do it out of love because He is trying to give this person a test of fire or something with this person's good in mind." She walked over to the window which looked out to a driveway where an ambulance was rolling in with flashing red lights. She turned back to the waitress.

Ellen Serven leaned towards her, shaking her head. "Make her into a warrior of the Spirit."

"Yea, you could read it that way."

"Well, thank you so much!"

Ruby Ellington went home feeling irritated and trapped. She felt that her mind was being poisoned by this endless holy talk; and yet she had no expectation anymore that she would desert her friend in the midst of her ordeal.

To her astonishment, however, the waitress announced the next evening that these visits of Ruby's just had to come to an end. "Because, you see, you're a wonderful human being. But you are just a human being, and you've become an obstacle in my journey to God. You make me have doubts and I start believing that the evil in your life was all right. Please understand me. I'm not saying that you personally were evil. I don't judge you on that because you saw it from your viewpoint not mine. But I hate the evil; I have to hate it because it's of the world, and the world just pulls us down. I have to keep my mind clean and unconflicted. Especially now since this is happening again, this disease. I just need to be with the Lord, really be with Him, you know, and ask Him how come. He'll answer me if I ask. He'll open the door if I knock. That's all I want Him to do. You understand what I mean, this is my dark night of the soul. I'm afraid to face it alone. But I have to force myself to do it. Because when I'm alone, when my house is at rest, then I'll meet

Him. I just know I will."

In response to this long explanation, Ruby just nodded her head. "I can understand that you need to be by yourself," she said softly. "And, like I told you before, you're a sweet kid, Ellie. So what can I say? I wish you the best."

As she stood outside waiting for the bus, she recalled Ellen's little speech and felt no regret. If anything she was glad to be rid of the burden of the daily visits which had become so oppressively religious.

Later, though, as she lay in bed, despite herself still dwelling on a vivid remembrance of Ellen's glowing earnest face and sorrowful eyes, it occurred to her that this intense lonely woman, who in the short span of a few weeks had grown to be such an influence upon her, had just like that become another piece of the past that would fall to the side with no continuity, no ongoing meaning. This disturbed her very much. It was a selfish realization; she knew that in her selfishness she was reducing this suffering person to nothing more than an element in her own existence. She told herself that she should feel compassion. She tried to feel compassion. But all she felt was sad. To whom, she asked, was this sadness directed? Certainly, she responded, not to herself. No, not that anymore. Then maybe she did care; maybe the sadness was for Ellen Serven. Or perhaps what she felt so bad about was how hard it was to make contact with not only the little waitress but anyone she attempted to touch. She began to cry, for whom she didn't know. At last she fell asleep.

The next afternoon she twice started to phone the hospital but hung up before anyone answered. After work she hailed a cab, intending to visit her erstwhile friend, but after a few blocks redirected the driver to her apartment where she sat alone staring at her boxes of belongings which were still unpacked in the corner by the bed.

Three more days went by in this manner. She kept telling herself that Ellen Serven was a thing of the past. Even so, her distress grew worse. She felt as if she had been jilted by a lover. How strange, she mused, that she should feel like that. She couldn't understand why her reaction was so

inexplicably strong. Then too, dark night of the soul notwithstanding, she could not help suspecting that, in how the sick woman had returned the rejection which she had received herself, there had been some spitefulness, some malice. She began to feel not only spurned but angry, and with self-contempt took note of the hateful thoughts in her mind which were as pronounced and continuous as were her sympathy and good wishes for her former companion.

There was another side to this also. It was not just that Ellen had been lost as a friend, but that the whole search for the sacred in which the young woman had so centrally figured, had now for the dancer come to an abrupt and inconclusive end. She started to get an overview of what had happened in the six weeks since she had left the Strip; and what struck her about this was that, in spite of her antipathy to Ellen's religious obsessions, she had nonetheless been herself concerned, during this entire period, with what the waitress would have referred to as a spiritual task: she had been concerned with getting rid of the feeling of contamination which had resulted from Costanzi's forceful entry and replacing that sense of defilement with a more positive attitude towards life; concerned, that is, with self-renewal and spiritual rebirth. She was not at all adverse to this sort of thinking; it was in fact in tune with her mystical conception of the nature of things. No longer had she any doubt that the contamination and dryness were related somehow; perhaps they were aspects of the same condition. Much as she had tried to cure herself of the dryness, much as she had tried to purge herself of the sense she had of having been dragged through the mud and exposed to the world in her self-imagined corruption, she still felt the same, she still could feel the red-toned burning in her womb which radiated to her limbs; she knew very well that something yet was profoundly askew. That this was the case was constantly on her mind, along with her ambivalent emotions towards the ailing woman who for a short while at least had given her hope that through some kind of contact with the sacred these terrible feelings could be overcome.

The question which most perplexed her, with respect to

all of this, was whether this search for the sacred, as more and more she called it in her mind, had been a total fluke, a desperate step in an ill-chosen direction. In her deepest self she could not accept that this was true. Without a doubt certain features of this search, it seemed to her now, had been poorly suited to her particular needs. She felt quite sure, for example, that Ellen's church, for herself if not for others, had been the wrong way to proceed. If this was so, however, if this most prominent element of the search, as Ellie saw it at least, had been in the final analysis wrong for Ruby Ellington, the stripper; then how could she continue this search minus the religious trappings which to her own sensibilities were so offensive?

She recalled that, in the conversation which she had had with Ellen in the restaurant on the afternoon of the accident, she had asserted to her that she was in her essence a dancer and would always be one. Maybe through dancing, she reflected, maybe through that neon world which she had told herself she had to leave behind, she would discover an approach more fitting for a person who had lived all her adult life in that milieu; maybe she would come to that understanding through the intuitive process which in that same conversation she had tried so hard to describe. These speculations, unfortunately, led her nowhere; she felt herself now completely severed, in her actual day-to-day existence, from what she had been. All she knew was that she had to keep looking for the sacred, and somehow accomplish a dramatic reversal in her life.

She wanted to talk to someone about this. Ellen Serven kept coming into her mind. She had not recognized, she admitted to herself, just how close a kinship she had felt with that woman. Perhaps, she told herself, it was still possible to salvage the friendship; perhaps she had too easily accepted Ellen's decision to go it alone. What she needed to do was be more supportive instead of debating ideas, or discuss these ideas with her somehow without allowing them to cause unnecessary contention. She kept watching the phone, hoping that out of loneliness the sick woman would break down and call.

Finally, unable to wait any longer, she went over to the hospital and up to Ellen's room where she found the waitress in a wheelchair with a Bible in her hands. On the bedside table next to her were religious books and a notebook open to a page of scrawled writing on which the word "Lord" stood out at the top.

Ellie looked up and smiled when Ruby came in, but her face immediately clouded. "I still can't see you," she said.

"What you mean, you can't see me?" the dancer replied. Only with a great effort could she stop her voice from rising. She had not realized how angry she was. "You talk all the time about love and the Spirit, and you try and get vengeance like everyone else.

"Vengeance for what?" replied the little woman, her head shaking back and forth. Her face at once softened; she clasped her hands together to keep them from moving.

"You know what I'm talking about," the dancer rushed on, still surprised by the intensity of her feelings. "I told you I needed distance, so you tell me the same thing. It just comes down to vengeance, and you put it off on God."

Ellen sighed. She closed her eyes. "I didn't think of it as vengeance. But maybe it is. I know my motives aren't pure. But even so... What I am... What I am doesn't matter... If I'm good, that doesn't matter. Only one person is good. And that's the Lord. And all that matters, is that I do His will... And what His will is... I can't describe it exactly. But I know for certain I have to face this alone." Tears welled up in her eyes. She looked away.

Ruby sighed and went to the window. Beyond the parking lot below her, a half-block away, was a corner store, painted a bright orange which in the horizontal rays of the waning day appeared fluorescent. Some dark-skinned children there were bouncing a ball against the store's cement foundation. In the distance, visible through a jagged cleft in the rectangular forms of the pastel buildings, cars streamed past on a burdened freeway beneath a bare hill with a billboard that cut a wedge in the rosy-colored sky. "His will," said the dancer after a pause. "How do you know that, Ellen? You're just making words. I can't figure you out. We

had a kind of friendship, you know. I felt cornered one day. I said the wrong thing. I offended you maybe. So I messed it up. But what we started, I don't feel like it's ended. And in my own weird way, I care about you, you know what I mean? I mean, the truth is, really, I don't care about you or anyone else. But I care more about you than about anyone in a long while. What I'm trying to say is I was starting to care."

"Yea," Ellen softly replied. "I believe you care. I might even believe it more than you do yourself. Because that's you all the way, you don't trust anymore that you have the capacity for good. And yet you want to trust that you do. You want to be opposed. Just in the same way as I do, I guess, or, better said, as I did. Because I can't stand up under that opposition any more. You see, what you don't understand is I'm so weak right now. I'm so weak in my spirit. And the only way I can get stronger is to face this by myself, as I tried to explain to you before. So forgive my vindictiveness..."

"Ah, you weren't being vindictive. I was just trying to get you back. I was being vindictive myself."

"Well, forgive whatever I did that caused you distress. Forgive my self-righteousness. Forgive how I used you to make myself feel like I was better than you. I think of you fondly. I really do. But now I have to ask you to go"

Ruby felt a great upheaval of emotion. She crossed the room to the waitress and kissed her forehead. Her mouth lingered for a moment on the little woman's moist skin. She gave her a hug. "Pray for me to your God."

"Yes, Ruby, I will."

"And I'll keep you in my thoughts."

"Thanks so much for how understanding you've been."

The dancer raised herself up, pressed Ellen's hand, and, with a silent nod of farewell, went out of the room and down the white-walled hall to the elevator, where, as it descended, she took comfort for a moment in its boxlike seclusion. "That much is settled at least," she said to herself. "Whatever that was, it's over. It had to be over. Now what I gotta do is go my own way."

"Go my own way," she repeated as she rode home in a cab. Already it was dark. The driver moved in and out between the red-tail lights of the cars in front of them, constantly advancing; though always, when they emerged from a small group of cars, there were more tail-lights ahead. The swaying motion was calming; she closed her eyes. "Go my own way. Be a dancer, an artist, like I've been all my life." But in the back of her mind she could still see Ellen Serven's sad eyes.

All night long she saw them. Poor Ellen. She too had to go her own way. Well, bless her then in terms of her God. Bless her in terms of whatever people with no God found blessed. Give her credit at least for her courage. Yea, give her credit for that.

So Ruby Ellington kept thinking until near dawn she at last fell asleep. Soon after that, the alarm clock sounded. She jumped for the clock, slammed off the buzzer, and sat on the edge of the bed with her head in her hands. At once her mind started churning. "Yea, that trip is over. I gotta go my own way." She clenched her fist.

For a short while, as she hiked to work, too absorbed in her thoughts to take note of the brilliant colors in the eastern sky, she felt as if she had accomplished some kind of breakthrough. Later that morning, however, she looked out to the parking lot and shopping center beyond it, where everything seemed so ordered and mundane, and realized anew, now all the more pronouncedly, that to keep mumbling to herself about being a dancer would lead in these circumstances to nothing at all. In this restaurant she was not a dancer. How she approached her routines chores, so long as she got them done, meant nothing either.

"And what good am I really? Have I ever done any good? Was I good for Marcel? Was I good for Jason? Sure, I was good. That's why they died. Was I good for Emma? Was I a friend to her when she needed a friend? Yea, I was a friend. That's how come she didn't write. Was I good for Ellen? ..."

She went on like this that whole afternoon and evening, and the next morning started again, thinking, even as she

repeated this litany of names, that what Ellen Serven had said was true; she no longer believed she was capable of goodness, no longer believed she could do anything of worth. It was a hopeless situation; she couldn't stop her self-hatred from gaining force day by day. She grew more and more irritable and was constantly angry. Her anger circled, as before, from her father, to her aunt, to Costenzi and Lamott, then back to herself. With the customers especially she was impatient. Either she snapped at the slightest provocation; or, when she managed to hold her bitterness in rein, she was courteous to them with no sympathy behind it. She knew that in her actions was no humanness at all. She was like a walking shell with nothing inside it. Nothing inside but the dryness. She was dry and no good and filled with corruption. Let it be then; let it be. She told herself she didn't care, despised herself for amounting to nothing after years of labor that had never been acknowledged.

At the same time, however, she unceasingly yearned for a way to turn her life to good; she wanted so much to transform her meanderings and misfortunes into something substantial of positive value. She was acutely alert now, not on drugs of any kind. Her diet of fresh fruit and vegetables, yogurt and fish was such as a devotee in an ashram might have eaten. She was exercising every day against the dryness, in a kind of dance of resignation to it. And yet the dryness was still there; she still felt as if nothing could purge her of the contamination inside her; she still had the same burning sensation in her womb, and the same dull pain in her limbs, lower back and pelvis which had been with her for so long. Since her night with Costenzi, moreover, she had not touched herself in any sensuous way. Her sex was non-existent, it seemed. She had given it up; it had faded away from neglect. There were constant douching. Her vision was still blurred. She could hardly bear to look around her. Everything seemed like a distraction. But a distraction from what?

From the search for the sacred, she more and more admitted to herself. The part of her which she had held in abeyance she increasingly gave to this search which in the

back of her mind she suspected was not really a search but delusion. She kept thinking about what was sacred and how to regain it, thought about it so much that she grew utterly tired of dwelling on this subject. And yet she could not prevent herself from examining each new shred of a possible insight in the most tedious way.

Along with this, she had more frequent and poignant recollections of the Strip, feeling at once a growing nostalgia for those years and a redoubled repugnance for what she had been. And now, as never before, her bitter-sweet remembrances of her life as a dancer seemed to blend in her mind with those of her childhood, both with unhappy memories of her father and aunt (which to her puzzlement evoked not only her usual anger but also tenderness and pity) and happy memories of sunlit moments and caring friends she had had back then. She had a sensation of being in the midst of a ferment which was leading in a definite direction.

And where? Towards the sacred. This was her constant obsession.

It was now late April. The acacia tree outside her window was in glorious bloom. Something about it reminded her of the dream she'd had months before of the red-haired girl by the dam whom she had recognized as herself. She would think again of that plaintive face and lissome youthfulness, and whisper, "That too was me." In her imagination she would see the water gleam-ing in the reservoir beyond the dam; or find herself once more on Russian Hill, by the wall where she had often stopped with her son, and see the bay gleaming in the same way in the distance between the white and tan buildings of the San Francisco downtown. Recalling these memories and images, she would fill with a deep longing to reconnect with the sweetness she had known years before.

At times also she would remember Russian Hill as it had appeared on her last night on the Strip while she stood in the rain by the news-shack waiting for a cab, a dark light-dotted form between the yellow opening of the tunnel and multi-colored sky; and say to herself that on that hill there was something which when the moment was right she would

have to confront. Maybe whatever this was nothing more than the house where she had lived with her lover and child; maybe it just had to do with those deaths which had been so central in her life. Maybe too, as she had later suspected, during those two dark weeks in her apartment by herself when she had still now and then seen in her mind a vivid picture of how her face had looked in the store window on, that same corner by the news-shack with the semaphore going through its green-amber-red cycle in the background and a neon aura around her head, what she had to confront, and understand, was more significant and far-reaching, some mystery or magic associated with the city-night world in which she had lived for so long. Maybe all of this was related besides to whatever she had so fleetingly observed in the young dancer Lisa, in her white radiant skin and black hopeful eyes; or to whatever she had encountered in Emma Mueller with her openness and tough-minded generosity; there had been something in both those women which she had tried to grasp but not been able to hold.

Thus she went on from day to day, trying to work her way through her drastic changes in mood and sort out the memories and thoughts that unceasingly passed through her mind. More and more she found herself thinking of Emma Mueller, wondering if a letter had ever come; for a couple of weeks she had not gone to her old building to check the mail; she had left no forwarding address, merely asked the manager to keep whatever came. Not wanting to get trapped in a conversation with the garrulous woman, she had put off stopping by, and anyhow had told herself that if Emma had really intended to keep in touch she would have sent some kind of a note in the first several weeks after leaving the city. Perhaps, though, Ruby started to think, a letter had in fact arrived and was stacked away somewhere in her former manager's apartment. One evening, on an impulse, she walked up to her old building, and to her delight received a packet of mail which included two letters, one of them marked "E. Mueller" in the left upper corner.

The manager as usual tried to engage her in small talk, asking all sorts of personal questions which the dancer

answered in the most evasive manner. When at last she succeeded in backing out the door, with the undaunted woman' following her into the hall and chattering on with scarcely a pause for breath, she abruptly broke in, excused herself, and wheeled around to dash down the stairs. With the letter still unopened in her hands, she hiked up the street. Since it seemed a special occasion and she had nowhere to go, she headed for the coffee shop where she had stopped on the afternoon when she had applied for the job at Bimbo's. She ordered coffee and a roll, and carefully tore open the letter, noticing with satisfaction that it was five pages long.

She had sold her house, Emma Mueller wrote, and, after a long discussion with her son, had achieved what at first she had thought to be a reconciliation with him, though a few days later he'd left, taking some of the money from the house which she had given him, and leaving only a note to say goodbye. She had, a week or so before that, talked to the man from whom her son had stolen the tires, and persuaded him to drop the charges for which the boy had been arrested and detained. So he had been free to go wherever he wanted. "I was glad of that because maybe another chance is all he needs. Still it made me sad, the way he took off without so much as a handshake or hug. It was almost as he did it that way because he knew it would hurt me. So once again I was confronted with how I failed to be for him the kind of mother that I had wanted so badly to be when I started out. And that in turn reminded me of my husband, and what I'd maybe done to help bring about his unhappy end. So I was doing a lot of reflecting, is what I'm trying to say."

In spite of this, she went on, she had found some solace in just being there in the surroundings where she had spent so much of her adult life. The house and town were full of memories, she said, "places that are dear and almost sacred to me. Even so, I didn't have any doubts about whether to sell the house. It didn't seem so important anymore to possess it in an actual, physical way. I mean, you have to learn what to hold on to, and what to let go. And that's so hard to do without inflicting damage on yourself. I've endured enough damage. I've caused enough damage, a lot

of times with the best of intentions. I don't want to endure or do damage anymore. But I do want to keep some kind of connection with what's sacred to me. Because what's sacred, that's everything; that's what matters. At least that's how I look at things now."

She herself, she continued, was going on a long trip by bus. She had purchased a two-month pass which permitted her to lay over wherever she felt in the mood and head out again when the spirit hit her. Maybe at some point in the future she would return to San Francisco. "But, howsoever this turns out, I just want you to know, Rube, my talk with you the night I left was just a tremendous help to me, put everything into perspective that had happened with my husband and son, and made me realize that I can build a new life regardless of what I've been in the past. But, like I say, you've got to decide what to hold on to and what to let go of, what had meaning and what didn't count. To figure that out and go forward without denying what's behind involves a struggle but has to be done. I maybe would never have realized this so strongly if you hadn't listened that night to my story of my husband and son, and made your few comments which were right to the point. Thanks for that, Ruby, thanks for helping me to get going on my own. Because I've got something now which I haven't had in a long while. In plain and simple language I guess you'd call it hope. Yes, hope is what it is, and when you've got hope, then everything appears in a different light."

Ruby sat by herself at a table in the corner of the room, oblivious of what was happening around her. She read the letter several times, touched by the expressions in it of affection and esteem. Then she got up, left the cafe, and walked along between the people streaming up and down past the crowded cheerful shops. She paused at a display window which she didn't look at, and, after standing there for she knew not how long with her hand on her chin, continued down the walkway lost in thought.

So she had helped Emma Mueller. So that unpretentiously noble woman regarded her, Ruby Ellington, as a genuine friend. Her self-respect had sunk so low that she

found this at first quite hard to believe. Could it be that Mrs. Mueller had said those nice things from concern or pity rather than from an honest assessment of what actually had taken place? The dancer considered this a moment, her lovely face contorted in a frown. No, Emma was too matter-of-fact, too sparse with words, to give out compliments that weren't deserved. Ruby let out a sigh. How wonderful to think that she could do something of value! How wonderful to know that she had a real friend! Just to have this friend, though distant, gave her a sense of security which she hadn't had in a long while. There was one person in the world at least who cared about her and understood her.

And who needed her too. She kept thinking about what Emma had said about her son and how he had left without saying goodbye. How sad that was. Poor Em. And just what had Emma meant by her husband's "unhappy end"? All sorts of ideas raced through her mind. Maybe she had been wrong in assuming that he'd died a natural death. Maybe he, like Marcel, had taken his life. Maybe he had suffered another kind of violent death. In any case, Ruby mused, the sorrows which Emma was dealing with were without a doubt of the same order as her own; and that made the bond between her and the other woman seem even stronger.

In reading the letter, the dancer had at once noticed, moreover, that Mrs. Mueller had addressed the very concerns, of sacredness and what to do about the past, which had been foremost in her own mind. Perhaps this was just the result of their having separately developed similar preoccupations; but Ruby saw in it, besides, an uncanny perspicacity; it almost seemed as if her keen friend had somehow sensed what she'd been thinking herself. She had, from the start, regarded what Emma had to say as, by some mysterious working of direct import in her life; now she was all the more willing to accept that this was so, and take what the letter contained as hinting at a possible direction out of a life-situation which she increasingly felt was ill-suited to her nature.

It impressed her too that Mrs. Mueller had talked about these matters with no reference to the Bible, religion or God.

Her thoughts went back to Ellen Serven, and at once she grew sad. She recalled that the little waitress had often talked about the same subjects, more or less, as those which Emma had brought up in her letter. And yet what a different reaction she had had to Ellen compared with what she was having to Emma now. With Ellen she had always felt not only attraction but aversion. This aversion, she knew, had been to the sanctimonious air with which that pious woman, despite her humility and lack of affectation, had surrounded herself by talking constantly about unworldly things. That was why she had balked so much at accepting Ellen's message, Ruby thought to herself, because that religiousness had seemed so out of tune with everyday problems. Emma, however, did not have that sort of rarefied atmosphere around her; what she had written was fresh and down-to-earth; still, in her expressions too there was a concern with the sacred, or with whatever in life was good and worthwhile.

As she passed between the shops, not looking around her, the dancer kept thinking about this. What intrigued her, in particular, was what Emma had said about how important it was to come to terms with the past. She had said—had she not?—that in order to do this she had found it necessary to go back to the actual places where she had lived before, even those places where she had made mistakes and to which it was hard to return. And by doing this she had gotten a sense of what had been sacred in those years and could be sacred in her future. "But why did this happen?" Ruby asked herself. What did such places have to do with the sacred? "Memories," she answered; memories were the key. Somehow, in meeting up with them again, the dross of experience fell to the side; what one recalled was not the bits and pieces but those infrequent moments which had pointed to the larger meaning behind those distant events. It was in such memories, and in the places which evoked them, more than in any kind of church or devotion, where the sacred could be discovered. Was this really true? She paused and put her hand on her chin. No, not true at all. She started walking again. There was nothing wrong with Ellen's

church, for example. She could see no fault in it, or churches in general, except for how people were led, under this or that banner, to do and rationalize actions which were often small-minded and cruel. No, what finding the sacred came down to, it seemed, was where for various people a certain kind of connection could be made. But a connection with what? A connection with God? Who or what else could be a source of the sacred? Short of this, however, short of a sureness about the existence of a Presence like that which, though majestic and all-encompassing, could yet be engaged with and talked to as to another person,—short of anything as definite and conclusive as this, what the sacred amounted to, so far as she could see, was some kind of deeper meaning or mystery not readily apparent and only glimpsed at now and then. And each person had to work his own way to an individual vision. Having gotten this far, she let out a sigh.

Hardly had a minute intervened, however (a puzzling minute during which, finding herself now in an interior courtyard by the escalators that carried potential buyers to and from the upper-level shops, she squinted, blinked her eyes, and, with her face uplifted, stared at the central fountain there, the yellow lights above it, and the vines twining down from overhead), when her mind began churning again: if finding the sacred, she said to herself, was a matter of deciding what for oneself had meaning, and what in one's past had been worthwhile and had pointed to this deeper significance which she wanted so badly to understand, then what this meant, what this only could mean, was that at some point or another she would have to return to the Strip. She would have to figure out how to hold on and let go, as Emma Mueller had advised.

She started walking again, now down the main aisle to the door, not even noticing the four children who came running towards her, tugging and pulling at one another, until she collided with the smallest of them, a tiny girl with dark eyes who peered up at her in confusion. "Didn't even see you, little doe eyes," she said softly. "Now you go along. I'm glad you didn't fall."

The sight of this child called up in her for just an instant

a memory of her dream of the girl by the dam, the dream which lately at night had been so much on her mind. A warmth of emotion suffused her. How beautiful it all was, she mused: the fountain, the yellow lights, the hanging plants, this child. If only she could muster the goodness to do justice somehow to beauty like that!

Reaching the end of the walkway, she pushed through the door and out to the parking lot in front of the center. The sun had just set. The sky in the west was violet-red. Against it the orange sign that said "Bimbo's" stood out before a backdrop of swirled ragged clouds. She headed towards it, her eyes lowered in thought. She clenched her fist. She would find that goodness, she said to herself. If in order to find it she would have to return to the Strip, then she would do that, notwithstanding the struggle which she had waged to leave it behind her. How would she go back, at what time, to do what, for what reason? She didn't know. Nonetheless, it was clear that she would have to make that full circle to recover what she'd been. Suddenly, she felt a deep peace, an almost exultant exhilaration. So Ruby Ellington, the dancer, hadn't died after all! She strode towards the restaurant, having no idea, really, what all this meant in practical terms. Still there could be no doubt that something somehow was drastically altered. Then it occurred to her that what had made this difference was precisely what Emma had talked about: hope.

As she approached the restaurant, she decided to go in. She took a seat at the counter and ordered some coffee. The contents of the letter kept going through her mind. Where was Emma now? she wondered. Maybe in some small town in the Southwest, maybe in Chicago or New York. She wished her a silent blessing, and looked from her coffee to the parking lot outside where the arc lamps were already lit and it was fast growing dark. This night-time scene, with its nostalgic overtones, seemed suited to her mood. Why, she asked herself, had she avoided working this shift which was so much more in tune with her true disposition? She had resisted it, she responded, because she had told herself that she needed to forget her own past. That no longer seemed so

important, however; indeed, it seemed wrong.

The Slavic cook, his broad face beaming, came out to say hello. She asked him how he liked working at night. He said it was a good shift; the customers were working-people, understanding; he liked the atmosphere; it was a part of his nature. A few minutes later, he nodded in his obliging way, and went back to the kitchen. She thought to herself that she liked the atmosphere too; it was a part of her nature also. She had forgotten how much she liked it, in fact; the arc lamps in the parking lot, which cast a white sheen on the blacktop, the passing lights of the traffic, and even the semaphore on the corner, which was going through its green-amber-red cycle in the background, had an influence on her which she felt was leading in the positive direction which she had yearned for.

While drinking her coffee, she looked from the parking lot to the letter in her purse, and noticed beside it the rest of the mail which her former manager had given to her, several piles of it which were obviously bills, and a fourth envelope that had an address printed in a hand which she didn't recognize. So engrossed had she been in Emma Mueller that she had completely disregarded this other mail. She reached for the bills, wanting to get them over with as soon as possible. She tore them open one by one. The first was from a clothing store where a couple of months before she'd gone on a spree. This bill amounted to almost $200. She frowned. The others together came to only $50 or so. Still $250! Her financial situation, always precarious, had been, throughout her spiritual speculations, a matter of continual concern. So she would need to pick up some extra shifts; she was not in the habit of letting bills go unpaid. She pressed her lips together and opened the envelope with the hand-printed address. In it, enclosed in a folded sheet of blank paper, were five twenty-dollar bills. She stared at them. Now who would have done that? Emma? No, the writing, though obviously a woman's, didn't appear to be hers. She felt relieved and at the same time offended; she had never been one to accept charity, but there was no one to refuse.

Despite her resistance to taking the money, however, she

couldn't help thinking that coming upon it in this unexpected manner was just another aspect of what in general was a fortunate turn of events. Some kind of all-embracing change was taking place in her life, taking place of itself. And this night-time scene, she thought to herself, was a part of this change. It was pointing to what now seemed an inescapable conclusion: she had to come to terms with her past. Perhaps this very night, she said to herself, she would return to the Strip and attempt that reconciliation. She paused, put her hand to her chin, and slowly shook her head. No, not right now. But the time would come. There was no need to hurry; everything would assume a telling pattern when the moment was right. She would rely on the artistic process which she had tried so hard to explain to Ellen Serven, the organic method by which she would loop backward somehow to incorporate what she had been and go forward with that to something better and stronger. She wanted so much to do this; she wanted so much, after all her self-denunciations, to leave them as far in the distance as the vomit and blood.

As she left the restaurant, another waitress, recognizing her as a fellow employee, came up to her and asked if she'd be willing, the next evening, to take over her shift, which went from before midnight to six in the morning. The dancer at once agreed, seeing in this, besides a chance to earn the extra money she needed, a further manifestation of the same force which had carried her so relentlessly from her last night on the Strip to Costenzi to Ellen Serven to Emma's letter and this. The following evening she was at the counter again, feeling on the verge of some great breakthrough which was yet beyond her ken.

As the cook had said, the clientele at night were mostly working-people—janitors, cabbies, drivers of other kinds, garbage collectors, waitresses, nurses, cops who worked at night—good decent people who gave generous tips and walked over to pour themselves a cup of coffee when she sat down for a break. Then there were a few seedy-looking types from she knew not where; and one old woman with crudely-chopped-off gray hair who approached the restaurant from the empty lot across the street with three bags which she

moved forward in a methodical manner, carrying the two smaller ones up about twenty tired paces, then returning for the third which she dragged along on the ground. On reaching the door she left her bags outside, entered the restaurant with suspicious glances all around her, and took a seat by herself in a dark niche of the room just inside the window from where her belongings were piled in a crumpled heap on the sidewalk. She had a round, plain face with coarse black whiskers on her chin and upper lip; in a spurt of clipped-off words she ordered coffee and a roll, and sat mumbling to herself, glowering around her, and now and then jerking her head back and sniffing as if struggling for air. Later some teenagers roared into the parking lot in a cavalcade of four souped-up jalopies that were rigged for low-riding with hydraulic lifters. They came noisily inside and took a booth in a corner across from the old woman.

Ruby Ellington waited on the customers, feeling for the first time in a long while as though she was with people of a sort she was comfortable with.

On her breaks she sat and looked out to the parking lot and dark landscape beyond it. There was an intimacy in the darkness which she'd forgotten; she noticed how the darkness held the buildings together as in a single curtain on which the white and colored lights before her were like an embroidered design.

She noticed also that her vision was not as fuzzy as it had been. At times, for an instant, it was startlingly clear. She felt more alert. Indeed she was acting towards everyone as if more aware of their actual presence beside her. From this more conscious state, she kept fading, however, into her habitual self-absorption. When this happened, her vision would blur; the dry- ness would flare up inside her again; she would feel once more the great anger which she still harbored in her heart for the various individuals in her past who had done her damage. She realized that this was taking place, that she was swinging back and forth between attentiveness and self-preoccupation, goodwill and anger; she made a deliberate effort to stop herself from brooding, and watched the scene before her with the puzzled

expression which she had developed in the past few months.

The teenagers were of special interest to her. They were obviously a rebellious bunch. She saw in them a reflection of what she had been at that age, saw it in their exuberance and in their brazenness to her when she came to take their order. Far from judging them or being offended by their impoliteness, she regarded them with sympathetic understanding, responding to their demands with courteous forbearance. Only when they began gesturing towards the old woman with the chopped-off hair did she admonish them. "Hey, no need to do that," she said quietly with a kind thoughtful voice that had in it no trace of condescension. "She's a poor struggling person, doesn't have all her senses." The teenagers stared at her for a moment and turned their conversation to another topic.

Among these young people was a girl with short blonde hair and a lean, narrow-hipped figure that made her look like a tomboy. She smoked one cigarette after another, and had a high staccato laugh, with a series of "ha's" following one after another in rapid succession. From where Ruby sat at the counter when business slackened, her conversation could be heard; she was in the midst of an argument with a girl several years older than she who had apparently tried to play the big sister. "Hahahahaha. Hey, listen, Jennifer, you don't need to tell me. Hahahahaha. She's always doing it. She thinks she's my mother."

"Maybe if you'd listen, you'd learn something sometime," the other girl replied.

"Hahahahaha. Listen to her. So why listen to you?"

"I'm three years older than you are, for one thing."

"Yea, three years older. But what have you done? You ain't done shit."

Ruby, conscious that she was eavesdropping, took a seat further down the counter. But the restaurant was quiet now. There were only a few customers at the tables, including the old woman who was mumbling away in an almost inaudible voice. The young people could still be heard in the background. Their arguing had become more intense. The two girls were glaring at one another while the boys beside

them shook their heads.

"Hey, I'm not going to sit here and listen to this said a boy with a John Travolta haircut. Two other boys clucking all night," rose too, except for the blonde one who remained in her got up, and the girls.

"You mean you're not coming?" asked the older girl who had been trying to play the big sister.

"Just leave me alone. I've had enough of you guys.

self. I can make it by myself."

"Where you gonna stay then?"

"I said leave me alone. I did all right before I met you. I'll do all right when you leave."

"Okay for you, Amy. But you'll be sorry."

Amy (as it appeared from this the blonde girl was called) puckered her lips and stared into space. The others went to the counter and the other girl called back, "Come on, Amy, forgive and forget."

The blonde girl didn't answer. With a pouting expression on her face she watched the group as they reached their cars, gestured at her once more, and at last drove away. Then she lowered her eyes and rocked her cup back and forth.

Ruby went over with a pot of coffee and nodded at the girl's empty cup. "Care for some more?"

"I had hot chocolate."

"That's okay. I'm trying to get rid of it," said the dancer, lying. I wanta wash out the pot."

"In that case, I'll take some."

Ruby filled up the cup.

"Thanks," said the girl.

"Like I say, I was going glancing up at her. to throw it out."

Their eyes met for a moment.

Soon after this, the old woman pulled looked away. herself slowly from the seat and came to the cash register where she drew a handful of dirty coins from the pocket of her knee length black coat and sorted through them slowly. She set two quarters on the counter, evidently thinking that this was enough to pay for what she'd had. Ruby took the

two quarters, rang up thirty-five cents, gave the woman a dime and nickel, and placed fifty cents of her own tip money in the till to make up the difference between what the woman had paid her and the actual cost. The woman went out the door, retrieved her three bags, and began her back and forth methodical movement, this time heading in another direction across the wide expanse of the carless blacktop in front of the closed shopping center.

Ruby walked over to change the filter in the coffee machine then returned to the counter and sat down. The old woman was now about a half-block away where she could be seen beneath an overhead light, setting one bag down and giving it a little jerk, apparently to make sure that the top of the bag, which was about three feet off the ground, wouldn't fall over to the pavement and require a deeper bend. By the next arc lamp, however, this did in fact happen, and her posture slumped with an exaggerated frustration that seemed grossly out of proportion with the smallness of the inconvenience of having to stoop a little farther. Ever so slowly she bent over to the pick up the end of the bag, then began her journey once more.

"Like you said, a struggling person," a young voice remarked.

Ruby looked across the room and saw that the blonde girl, Amy, was gazing at her. "Yea," she responded softly. "Wonder where she's going. Suppose she's got her own places."

"Yea, ain't it true?"

"I seen a guy like her by the railroad track one morning. Real hobo, you know, like in the old movies. Only it wasn't like you think."

"How's that?" asked the dancer. The girl's sudden change of mood, from insolent to soulful, was interesting to her. She imagined that behind it a deep loneliness much like the loneliness which she herself had felt at was times during her years on the road; she had gathered, from what the girl has said before, was that this Amy was on her own, moving from one place to another. "You think it's groovy, but it's not."

"What is it then?"

"I don't know. Kind of grim."

The only other customers in the restaurant now were two men who had come in from a bakery truck. One of them had put some coins in the juke box. The noise of the music provided the woman and girl with a kind of wall of privacy from the men who were sorting out their orders and planning a route for the morning

The dancer nodded slowly. "How you happen on this hobo?" The girl was appealing to her; she wanted to find out more about her.

"I was traveling all around, hitching here and there. And when it got to be night, I'd just camp out wherever I was, you know. One thing I learned, there's always some kind of protected place somewhere. Like once I slept in this lot where there were all kinds of empty truck trailers, you know. It was real neat in there. But this particular night, well, what I found was this old shack. It wasn't really a shack; I finally figured it out, it was an old hamburger stand or something because it had shelves inside, and there was a window towards the front, all boarded up."

"So where was this?"

"Little town in New Mexico called Gamerco. Right outside of Gallup. A weird little place, brown cliffs all around that looked like rubbish, you know, and these little scroungy trees, and all these drunk Indians passing cheap wine around in the bushes. Let me tell you, it was gross."

None of these details were really needed, Ruby thought to herself. The girl was trying hard to let it be known that she had been around and knew the ropes. "This hobo talk to you?" she inquired. She found it endearing that this Amy, with her face in one moment suggesting toughness and in the next unsureness, wanted so much to make a good impression.

"Yea, it was early morning, you know. I was getting my things together outside this shack, or whatever, where I'd crashed for the night, and then down below me, in this dip, or whatever, where the track came through, I see this dude very slowing getting his act together, if you know what I

mean, rolling his blanket up, you know, doing the same things pretty much as what I was doing. And I thought to myself, 'This guy needs to do it, and I don't need to do it.' Somehow or another that made a lot of difference. Then he comes walking by, and he kind of does a double take when she sees me sitting there, you know. He comes up to me. He goes, 'Hey, this ain't no place for a girl. If I'da seen you last night, I'da raped you. And I'm a half-ass decent man."

"He was telling you the truth. Trying to do you what he thought was a favor. Trying to scare you, it sounds like."

"Yea, come to think of it, I suppose he was."

Soon the two men from the bakery truck came up to the counter to pay their bill. Now only she and the girl were left in the room. The cook was in back, organizing the supplies for breakfast. She went over to where the teenager was sitting, pulled out her cigarettes, and extended them towards her. "Care for one of mine?"

The girl reached for one. "Sure enough. Why not?"

"Looks like it's just you and me."

"Yea, I can see that. Well, I hate to tell you, but I don't have any lettuce. So if you want to kick me out, go ahead. What's it to me. I couldn't care less."

Ruby bit her lips so as not to smile. "No, I like your company," she replied. She was telling the truth; she liked the girl and felt motherly towards her. "I'll treat you to breakfast, in fact, if you'll hang around so I don't have to look at these damn walls by myself. You can owe it to me, if you're proud."

"Naw, you make me feel like a con-man."

"Okay, then, a piece of pie. The pie is getting stale. I'm going throw it out."

"How come you want to do that? I know the pie ain't really stale."

"I'm on a diet. I like to watch people eat."

The girl smiled. "You got all the answers." She lowered her eyes. "I am kind of hungry."

"Cherry, apple, or coconut cream?"

"The coconut sounds pretty good."

"Coming right up. One coconut pie."

Ruby came back with two pieces of pie, a large piece of coconut, the largest she could find, with a scoop of ice cream on top of it, and a smaller piece of apple pie for herself.

"Thought you were on a diet," said Amy.

"Just decided to quit it."

"How come?"

"I don't know. I'm in a mood."

They talked for about a half hour more. For some reason Ruby felt a compulsion to find out more about this tomboyish girl. As it turned out, her full name was Amy Terner. She seemed reluctant at first to talk about herself, hen all of a sudden did a complete switch and started talking freely. She was 16 years old. Her parents had separated when she was 14. She had felt herself being used as a pawn in the battle between them, and so she had left. Since then she had been wandering around by herself, staying mostly with people she met on the road, like the kids she'd been with in the restaurant, whom she had stayed with, she said, for the past few weeks, walking around by herself in the city during the day when the others were in school, and sometimes returning in the evening, or spending the night in the poolhall downtown that never closed.

"I wandered around like that myself for quite a while," commented the dancer when the girl came to the end of the story. "So I got a general idea of what you've been through."

"When was that?"

"Oh, years ago, when I was your age."

"How come you did that?"

"My parents were dead."

The girl nodded, her eyelids dropping. "I knew you'd been around."

"How'd you know that?"

"I just can tell," she responded flatly, staring across the room. There was in her blue eyes a continual suggestion of resentment and defiance, while it was apparent also that she wanted to be listened to and regarded with concern.

As for Ruby, who through all of this was aware that she was playing the advisory role which Emma Mueller had praised her for, and which she hoped she was still capable of

assuming and doing well, she was experiencing in her interaction with the girl a gratification of astounding intensity and depth; it was as though she was reconnecting with an essential part of herself that had been held in reserve.

Soon the day-shift waitresses started coming in. The sky was lightening in the east. She tapped her young friend on the hand. “My shift is over in half an hour. If you’ve got no place to stay, you’re welcome to crash in my apartment.”

“I’m not the best person to invite.”

“Oh yea? How come?”

“I steal.”

“Well, I’ve got nothing to take.”

“Okay, it’s a deal.”

The dancer went over to help with the morning menus. Later she glanced at the youth and saw that she had fallen asleep in the booth. Again a deep emotion rose up inside her, and to such an extent overwhelmed her that she diverted her gaze in confusion.

When her shift was over, she woke the teenager up. In the red light of dawn they headed across the parking lot and down the street towards the wooded yard where Ruby lived.

On the way there, Amy Terner became more voluble, as if the motion of walking made it easier for her to talk. Swinging her thin boyish arms, she asked the dancer what she had done all her life. Ruby briefly described her years on the Strip. The girl found this of great interest; she said she had thought of joining some sort of dance company herself. Though in everything she told of her family background there was a hint of strife, her parents, she claimed, had been well-to-do; before quitting and running off, she had gone to a private school in the foothills above San Diego; she had taken ballet lessons all through her early grades; her teacher, she said, had encouraged her to continue; she still thought about it from time to time. No sooner had she touched on the subject of dancing, however, when she started in about, how she was thinking about going back to school and becoming a doctor. She was overflowing with hopeful ideas about her future, but gave the general impression that she was extremely capricious. She had been living, she said, in a Zen

monastery in the Santa Cruz Mountains, trying to learn meditation, but had gotten quickly bored by the lack of physical movement. Then she had headed up north with this guy she'd met on the road who was on his way to work on a salmon boat in some little town on the Oregon coast. She had traveled with him until he had made a detour to visit his folks. Then she had doubled back to San Francisco where she'd run into the kids she'd been with in the restaurant.

As the two of them approached the dancer's garage-apartment, the girl was talking again about the guy she'd met on the road. "I know exactly where he's going. He gave me his address. Just imagine, a fishing town with little boats! I could hitch up there in a couple of days. When I want to get somewhere I really fly!"

"Yea, I bet you do. You sweet on this fellow?"

"Kind of, you know. But I wouldn't stay there forever. A couple of weeks is all I can take."

"You never get tired of moving around?"

"Naw, I don't get tired of it. I've learned to treasure my freedom," Amy replied. In response to this gentle rebuke, her eyes clouded with resentment. "If you don't have freedom, then your life is nothing, then you're nothing but a coward," she added in a voice edged with anger. After studying the dancer's sympathetic face for a moment, however, she quickly readopted a more confiding tone. "Naw, I do get tired," she said softly. "I want to find something solid, you know. And I just can't find it, so I keep on moving. You know what I mean, it's just my way."

Later, while the dancer cooked breakfast for them both, the girl kept on talking. It was now quite apparent that she was starved for attention. Ruby was extremely tired from her long hours; she had worked the day-shift the day before, then, after only a few hours' sleep, had returned to the restaurant for the night-shift. Still she wanted to listen; she sensed how much the girl needed to talk.

From dancing, wandering, boyfriends and freedom, the young woman had switched tracks somehow and gotten unto the topic of her parents. The gist of her story, as the dancer understood it, was that she had had a troubled childhood

indeed. Her mother and father, before they had separated, had never gotten along; they had both been involved on the sly with other people, and obsessive, it seemed, in their sensual excesses. In oblique terms the girl described various scenes which she had inadvertently come upon, and which had lowered her opinion of her parents to an irreversible degree. Ruby nodded as she listened, her lovely face pervaded with a maternal solicitude which, for fear of seeming overly protective, she was trying not to show.

Though she gave to this the attention of a seasoned veteran of life for whom no kind of perversion or craziness could be new or shocking; though she understood in a vague way that her appeal for the younger woman lay precisely in this breadth of experience, this recognition of her own corruptibility and weakness, which precluded any self-satisfied rash judgement; yet she found herself responding to these related events with a freshness and interest that surprised her. She had heard it all before, it was true; but what she had not understood, as least not so strikingly as she did now, was that even in these most desperate of human dealings there was a deeper dimension which was somehow akin to the sacredness and sweetness which she had been attempting to regain.

The sun had risen higher in the eastern sky. Outside the window across from the couch where, having finished her breakfast, she had reclined while listening to the girl, the acacia tree in the backyard, its branches laden with yellow blossoms, swayed slowly in the early morning breeze, carrying with it as always the memories of the house on Russian Hill which for so long, she had tried to forget, and to which, during the past few months, she had been gradually returning with a growing sense of there awaiting her on that hill, when the moment was right, some unavoidable and necessary confrontation with her past. One memory in particular arose in her mind, of a certain day, in early morning when she had sat on the steps in front of that house with her lover and son. Marcel had been clean at that time; he had taken some acacia blossoms from the tree on top the hill and formed them into a garland which he had placed on

her head. What she especially remembered about this morning was the yellowness of it: the resplendent yellowness of the tree in the sunlight, and how across the street the same yellow light had set the eastern sides of the several houses and single high-rise there in sharp relief against the blue-green tranquility of the bay where, slightly muted by tumbling mist, the Alcatraz beacon came round and round with an instantaneous flash that could hardly be seen before it was snuffed once more by the wide-spreading serenity of the sky, water, and land. Little Jason, his green eyes joyful, his bronze skin glowing like a child Egyptian god, had laughed and laughed at the wreath of yellow flowers; they, the three of them, two of them now dead, had been so together that morning.

Ruby Ellington was so taken by this recollection that she closed her eyes in an attempt to bring it more clearly into focus. Opening them again, she looked back to the acacia tree in the back yard, and saw, juxtaposed against it, the girl, who had gone to the kitchen side of the room to get something from her pack, and who, on noticing her glance, turned towards her and smiled: such a hopeful innocent smile that the dancer was all the more bewildered by the strength of her emotions.

"You're tired, aren't you?" the young woman asked. She no longer made an attempt, as she had done in the restaurant, to toughen her speech with "ain't this" or "ain't that" and slang expressions that didn't sound natural to her.

"Well, I suppose I am, in a way," the dancer replied. "Just the same, I've enjoyed talking to you."

"How come?" said the girl, peering at her intensely.

"Because I can see how hard you're trying, I guess, how much good energy you have. There's a kind of purity in it, and it's beautiful, really, to someone like me."

"Why would it matter to you? You'll never see me again. I'm nothing to you."

"You are something to me. I like you. Whether we meet again, that's not the point. The point is, we met, we helped one another."

"I didn't help you."

"Oh, yes, you did."

"All I did was eat your food."

"No, you shared yourself. You talked, And when you talk, I can see a lot in that of what I was myself. It gives me a whole new perspective on what I am now."

"What kind of perspective?" the youth persisted, coming over to the living room side of the apartment and plopping down on the floor.

"Oh, I don't know," the dancer answered. What she had really been thinking was that through this girl she had realized that it would be really possible, in the right setting, for her to be of assistance to young women like this. But she didn't want to say this directly, didn't want to lose the teenager's respect by admitting her own insecurities and sentimental aspirations.

After an inner struggle with herself about how confidential to be, she decided, however, that to maintain such a pose would be phony and wrong. So she told the girl about how, ever since leaving the Strip, she had felt like a useless person whose past had gone to naught; and how at times she'd thought that she might make better use of her past by being a counselor of some kind. "I mean, with young women like you. I suppose that puts you off, because maybe you think I tried to test myself out on you or something. But I haven't done that, I honestly haven't. It's just that in talking to you I understand how much I want to do that. And, more than that, you're so much like me, I mean, like I was, and, like I said, so pure and full of good intentions, and I've waged this battle, you know—I don't imagine at your age you can appreciate what I'm saying—to get in touch again with whatever was good in me once, and so you kind of represent that to me, or remind me of it, and seeing that too makes me want to be of some help somewhere so that my life, you know, doesn't end up a waste." She paused and searched the girl's face for disapproval, but found instead that it had taken on a protective air which was quite becoming to her. She shook her head. "Now I suppose you think I'm strange. But I was just trying to be open with you so you would know who I really am."

"I don't think you're strange," Amy Terner replied. "And I think it's a good idea, your being a counselor, I really do. Because you're a special person. You are. I just can't think of anyone who'd be better at something like that than you." She lowered her eyes. "Only thing I don't understand, where would you do it? You mean right here? Or are you looking for a job or something?"

This was an aspect of the idea which the dancer hadn't thought about herself since being stymied by it a couple of months before, on the afternoon in the coffee shop in the center when the possibility of being a counselor had first reentered her mind. "Oh, I don't know," she responded, somewhat embarrassed at being so lacking in a specific direction. "I suppose the logical place to do it would be back on the Strip. That's the only place where I fit in. I might could even work as a waitress or something like I'm doing now, only I'd be with people that I could relate to better."

Even as she said this, it struck her as being a kind of missing piece it a puzzle which she had worked on for a long time. She felt a great stirring within her, and hardly knew what to make of it exactly.

"Well, like I said," Amy commented softly, "that would be all right. It really would."

The dancer peered at her, amazed by how, with the situation altered, the girl was displaying now such self-possession and wisdom. "The weird thing is, here I was trying to be a kind of mother to you, and you wind up being a mother to me."

"Helping one another."

"Yea, I guess that's what we've done. And I have such hopes for you, Amy. I just think you have so much potential, if only you're true to the best you can be," said the dancer, trying to speak from the heart, though she judged her own words as trite and commonplace.

If there was triteness there, however, it went unnoticed. "Well, thank you for that," the girl answered. Her face grew soft and thoughtful. "I'll remember what you said."

Now it seemed as if their conversation had come to a natural end. Ruby Ellington, scarcely knowing what she was

doing, got up and went to the sink and started collecting the dishes from the table.

"No, please let me do that," the girl insisted, coming across to her. "You get your rest."

"That's kind of you, Amy."

"I appreciate how you listened."

"You listened too."

"Yea, I guess I did."

"So best thing to say, we're just plain old friends."

The girl smiled broadly and extended her hand.

Ruby shook it warmly, nodding as she smiled in return. She went over to the corner closet and pulled from it the foam mattress on which she usually slept. "You can rest here if you want to. I'll sleep on the couch. And help yourself to the bathroom." She lay down on the couch. Soon the clinking of dishes and sound of running water could be heard in the background. She shut her eyes. Once more she saw a picture in her mind of the girl's smiling face with the acacia blossoms behind her. Then this image faded off, and she found herself again, for just an instant, by the house on Russian Hill with her lover and son. Within a few minutes she was fast asleep.

Waking after sunset, she turned on the lamp beside the couch, immediately looked for the girl, and discovered she was gone. Just as might have been expected; the youth had indicated her eagerness to leave. Even so, when Ruby saw that empty room she felt terribly sad.

She got up and went to the kitchen side of the apartment, wondering if her departed guest had left a note of any kind. On the table by the sink was a piece of paper with a message scrawled on it in lines of several words each like a poem: "Sun was shining. Breeze off the sea. I took a good look. It was blowing on me. Something was saying, 'You just gotta go.' But thanks a lot, Ruby. You helped me flow." Added to the note was a postscript: "I took an orange from the frig. Didn't think you would mind."

As she stood reading this note several times, the dancer noticed that, clearly visible in the hip pocket of her coat, which was right next to her on a chair where she had hung it

that morning, was a wad of dollar bills from the previous night. She remembered what the girl had said about stealing, and remembered too how many bills were in that wad (she had counted them, as always, before coming home). She picked them up and counted them again, not really suspecting that the young woman had taken anything, but wanting to reassure herself that there had been no false motives in what had passed between them. The number was the same; the money hadn't been touched. Then, in putting the bills back in her pocket, she discovered a small piece of orange peel. So Amy had noticed the money and had placed the piece of orange peel there as a way of saying that she had cared too much to take advantage.

She lifted the peel to her nose and smelled its delicate fragrance. She went back to the couch and lay down, thinking about what had happened. Where was Amy now? She reached for the clock. Ten after ten. Most likely in some sort of shelter she'd found on the side of the road. As she herself had done at that age. She thought about what the girl had said about freedom, and it seemed as if she could almost hear herself, during that free open period which had preceded her move to San Francisco, saying the same thing in much the same words. Such an emphasis on freedom had been proper at that time, she said to herself; what was proper now, however, was entirely different. What she had to do now was bring her life to fruition, find her way to the sacredness which she dwelled on so much, find some way to be the good influence which she wanted so much to be.

But was she not on the verge now of actually making this happen? In an agitated state of mind she paced around the room. She recalled what she had said to the girl about returning to the Strip, taking a job there, the same kind of job, if necessary, as that which she had been doing anyhow at Bimbo's and then just living there in her old milieu. What was wrong with that?

She paused, deep in thought. What was holding her back from returning, she asked herself, if not to do that precisely then at least to consider how that old situation in which she had lived for so long might lead to the new situation which

seemed so close to her grasp? And had she not told herself that in order to come to terms with the past, in order to understand what was worth holding on to in it, she would have to confront the most painful aspects of that past existence—the most painful aspects of what she had been on the Strip, and of what she had loved and of how and why she had been disappointed in that love, and how lost her sweetness, her life, and grown drier and drier; until now, from first Ellen Serven and then from Emma Mueller and Amy, she'd at last gotten hope? Yes, she had told herself that. That had been the meaning of Emma's letter: "To figure that out and go forward without denying what's behind involves a struggle that has to be done." Was this not what Costenzi, the vomit, the darkness, and all of her yearning since then had been leading up to? Yes, it would have to be done at the proper time. And when was that time? She knew in her heart that the time had come.

She let out a sigh. What had she to wait for anymore? She had the next day off. There was no excuse for delay. She took a quick shower, put on fresh jeans and a sweater, and went over to the phone to call for a cab.

Fifteen minutes later she was in a taxi on her way downtown. She told herself at first that what she was doing made no sense at all. What would she do when she got there, just walk around? But when the freeway curved around a familiar hill and the city skyline appeared in the distance, with the gray-blue fog pressing in from the west and the tall lighted buildings in the east floating like ships in a red-violet sea. She had the feeling that she was following some inevitable course of action and was ever so close to coming to terms with what she had told herself she needed to face.

As the cab descended the ramp towards the neon lights of the Strip, she felt as if she was coming home. "Yea, coming home," she whispered, "to what has been my only real home in the world."

She directed the driver to head up to the end of the Strip and circle back. As she rode along, looking at the costumed women and barkers and flashing signs—the winter season had ended now, and, judging from the people that thronged

the sidewalks, there was some kind of convention in town—she was impressed anew, as she had been years before, by how different this place was from any other she'd seen, by how it evinced a restless teeming energy which was everywhere apparent: in the intensity of the hype and pretense of the barkers, in the exuberant gestures of the men passing up and down the street, and most of all in the graceful confident beauty of the dancers who stood at the doors of the clubs or strutted back and forth from one establishment to another.

She took in all of this with a knowing thoughtful glance. At a younger age, she might have mistaken the commotion for more than it was, might have not recognized the marquees for what she knew them to be, a facade behind which was a more than average amount of desperation and injustice, suffered, ironically, by those who were displayed as paragons of what was beautiful in life. At the same time, however, she sensed, as she had in listening to Amy Terner's talk of her parents' excesses, that there was to this world also, as, to theirs, another dimension which had escaped her notice before, a dimension which, though admittedly perverse, was yet somehow connected with sacredness and goodness—connected in a special way which seemed peculiar to the city night, and which for this reason, she thought to herself, was perhaps related to the mystery or magic of the city night which had intrigued her before and which in her constant speculations she had tried to figure out without success.

After paying the cabbie, she walked up the street by herself, not the part of it by the clubs, but a few blocks up from the main area of the Strip where she could see the scene from a distance. From here the neon lights of the clubs, and other lights of street lamps, traffic signs and illuminated windows, divided to her sight by the red-white flow of jostling cars, looked like a glowing collage. At the opposite end of the Strip, above the three- and four-story buildings to the left of the taller downtown buildings on the southwest horizon, an orange moon, its fullness cut into an angular shape by two intersecting girders of the San Francisco-

Oakland Bridge, its dreamy magnificence seeming earthbound like just another piece in a giant stained glass window behind which some unseen deeper light shone constantly forth, was rising above the bead of yellow lights that outlined the vague silhouette of the bridge against the violet sky in the background. Then too, on a corner across from her, its sphere of luminosity, to her still flattened vision, appearing larger and rounder than the distant unnaturally-altered sphere of the moon, and locked like it into the forms of the city, a semaphore kept going through its cycle: red, green, green and orange, then amber, then back to red, that all-pervasive red which she remembered so well, and which reminded her at once of how her face had looked in that same red light in the store window by the news-shack on her last night on the Strip, and of how, after her liaison with Costenzi, She had seen that redness around her in her dream, and then felt it inside her in her womb. Even now, despite the hopeful changes in her life, the dull pain was there in her pelvis and legs. It was not as emphatic as before, however; and this scene before her, which in her last few months on the Strip she had found so containing, now somehow gave promise of a more open-ended existence. She felt indeed as if she had come back from a sojourn in a foreign land and was seeing her own land from a fresh point of view.

Again she thought to herself that there was something here she had to confront. Where would this confrontation be? She knew very well where it would take place. She looked behind her at the dark light-dotted form of Russian Hill. That's where it would happen, she said to herself, on that hill where She had lived with her lover and son. And she would go there soon, in just a short while. In just a short while, she repeated. She let out a sigh. But first there was something else she needed to do; she had to walk past the clubs which she had been viewing from a distance, enter that neon atmosphere once more and recall what she had been.

Two blocks down from her, in the direction of the bridge, she could see the red flashing sign on Leroy's Cafe. She nodded her head. That was the first place to go; she

could sit there a few minutes at least, and collect her thoughts before she went on.

She made her way to it, thinking again about what Emma Mueller had said about finding out what in the past had been good or bad. To her great surprise, when she approached the restaurant, she saw her old friend inside, standing by the counter as if she had never left.

A group of five men came towards the door when she pulled it open. They smiled and stepped to the side to let her pass. With them gone, the cafe was empty. Except, that is, for Mrs. Mueller who came across beaming with her arms extended. “Ruby Ellington! Now who would have thought!”

They embraced.

The dancer smiled. “Just came back for a look around.”

“And I’m glad you did. I was trying to find you. Was out to where you used to live. How come you didn’t leave a forwarding address?”

Ruby shrugged. “I don’t know. Guess I wanted to make a clean break.”

“And you couldn’t do it.”

“No, not completely... I got your letter. I was thinking a lot about what you said.”

“I didn’t say much.”

“Much or little, it meant a lot... And here you are. I can hardly believe it. What did you do, you just came back to your old job?”

Emma Mueller nodded slowly. “Kind of like that... But, for Pete’s sake, Ruby, come in and sit down. No one here but you and me, and I just decided to close down for the night.”

“You got the authority to do that?”

“Whole lot more authority than I had before.”

Not knowing exactly what Emma meant by this statement, Ruby sat down and looked around her. For a moment she drank in the scene, thinking to herself that it was right, so undeniably right, to be in this restaurant once more, and here on the Strip where she was what she was and would always be, a performer, a dancer, a woman of the night. Even as she mused on this, however, she realized that she didn’t want to return here as that, as the same kind of

person precisely as she had been before. And so, within a few seconds, she went from assurance to confusion again. Then she glanced at Emma Mueller who regarded her warmly with her steady gaze.

"I kind of figured," said Emma, "that leaving the Strip was what you had in mind. I heard about your little discussion...

"What little discussion?"

"The ol' roundhouse right."

The dancer's face lit up in a smile. "Now who told you about that?" In spite of the consequences of her action, she couldn't help looking back to it and still feeling glad for what she had done. But she had assumed all this time that no one knew what had happened that evening except herself and Costenzi, who she doubted had told anyone else since gossip seemed so foreign to his nature as she understood it.

"Couple of the girls were on the stage getting stoned when you went in to talk to him. They heard the whole thing and saw what you did through the curtain. You were a real sensation, let me tell you. Everyone was saying, 'You hear about Ruby?' No kidding, honey, you ought to feel proud."

Ruby Ellington did indeed feel proud, so proud in fact that she felt blood coming into her face and tingling at the roots of her hair. So what she had done that night had not only been known of, but accepted, admired. She scarcely knew what to say. There was a moment of silence during which Emma Mueller kept nodding, as if to repeat, 'You ought to feel proud.' Then out of embarrassment the dancer changed the subject. "Well, I still don't know why you came back. You said in your letter you were going to travel."

The older woman, as always, seemed ill-at-ease when the attention shifted to her. 'Well, yes. And I did for a couple of weeks. Got as far as Chicago and then headed back... But here you are sitting without so much as a cup of coffee." Having fabricated this awkward out, she turned abruptly and crossed the room, returning with two cups of coffee and a piece of pie which she set in front of her friend.

"You didn't like it?" asked Ruby, who by now was familiar with the other woman's shyness, and didn't intend

to let her change the subject, as she seemed about to do. She recalled what Emma had said in her letter about how disappointed she had been in her efforts to connect with her son; recalled also what she had said about her husband, the allusions she had made to his "unhappy end"; and sensed that this and the trip and her coming back to the Strip were all related somehow.

"Well, yes, I liked it," Emma replied, sitting down on a stool a ways down from the dancer and folding her large hands on her lap. From the determined expression which appeared on her broad face, it seemed as if she had decided to get right to the point and unburden herself of something which was important to say.

"Then how come you stopped?" Ruby persisted.

Mrs. Mueller frowned. "Well, best way to say it, I was in this kind of ferment, you know. I had been back home, as I told you in the letter, to the very places where I had tried so hard and yet made so many mistakes. I had seen my son, who, as I told you, still holds that silent resentment towards me. I had tried to clear the air with him, if you know what I mean, talk to him from the heart. But he wouldn't let me do that. So I was running all around, trying to get him out of the charges, for stealing, you know, that I mentioned to you. I had gone to the place where my husband took his life—

Ruby leaned towards her. "Took his life?" Though she had suspected this as one of many possibilities, to have it now confirmed struck a deep chord in her. "You never told me he took his own life."

"Well, I suppose I avoided it somehow. But, oh, yea, he did. Stuck a knife in his chest, a butcher knife from the kitchen. I discovered him myself while his body was still warm."

Ruby shook her head slowly. "I'm so sorry that happened."

"Worst thing about it, after it was all over, I looked back at it and realized the anger there had been in what he had done, not just anger in general but anger in particular at me. I tried not to resent him for that, tried not to feel angry in return. I did feel it, though, and it was like a beast inside me

taking all my strength. There was a point even, about the time I met you, when I understood that this was happening, and was powerless to stop it while I knew in my heart that I had to come to terms with that anger by and by. You know what I mean, Rube, the anger was holding me back. I had to learn to forgive, is what I'm trying to say. I had to learn to accept. I wanted to do that there, in that town, at that house, because, as I told you in my letter, I had this idea of looking around there by the house, and finding out, as I said, what had been good and sacred in my past before I sold it off. But I couldn't forgive, I couldn't accept. Oh, I could in a superficial kind of way, but I couldn't do it deeply. So I went on my trip. I was just moving aimlessly around. Always, though, with this idea, that I needed to forgive and accept, in the back of my mind. Then I got to Chicago where I stayed overnight in this cheap hotel. And I was standing that evening on the L-train ramp a few blocks away, looking back and forth from State Street, with its theaters and people and lights, to Lake Michigan, on the other side of me, which was gray and cold-looking and kind of grim. And just about then this train pulls up, and this little guy, some kind of spastic, gets off with a bunch of papers—I suppose he sold them—under his arm. Kind of hopped along with his body twisted and his tongue hanging out. Something about him was sad, you know what I mean; he couldn't control what his body was doing. felt this great sympathy for him, is what I'm trying to say. And it was almost like that was a window or something; it opened my heart, and I forgave, I accepted. And that very night I started back here."

"But why here?" asked the dancer, who had been listening intently. Now that she knew the circumstances under which Emma's husband had died,—that he had killed himself like her own lover, Marcel,—she had a deeper sense of kinship with this woman across from her who throughout the whole ordeal of her dryness had been such an inexplicably persistent influence on her life. And this talk of anger, forgiveness, acceptance. She was very much aware of the anger she had felt towards not only Marcel but Costenzi, her father, her, aunt. Had she come to terms with this anger?

Had she come to terms with those who had wronged her, accepted the conditions of her own life? No, she had not done that, at least not yet. In the solution which her friend had arrived at she sensed the beginnings of a solution for herself. “Why here?” she repeated. “You were here before for such a short while. What made you come back here?”

Mrs. Mueller frowned. “I guess what brought me back,” she responded after a pause,” was that I wanted to put what I had decided into action somehow. It didn’t seem like enough just to say to myself, ‘I forgive, I accept.’ I had this desire to become a new person. I don’t suppose anyone can do that, really. Just the same, I was hoping to be a better person, at least, than I had been before. And I couldn’t do that in my home town. There were parts of me there that I could take with me, of course, that could make me stronger I wherever I went. Like I said in my letter, I had to figure out what to hold on to and what to let go of. But that town was just no longer the right place to be. Because, it may sound sappy, but I wanted to do more than merely survive, I wanted to be of service somehow. This idea of service had been growing on me for a considerable time; the anger, I guess, had got in the way. Then that same evening in Chicago, not long after seeing the spastic, when II was walking along State Street by myself with all kinds of people around me, people dressed in fine clothes, people in what we used to call rags, people with happy faces, and others who looked unhappy, or angry or just plain insane, I got to thinking—I don’t know how to explain this exactly, because what I can’t describe is how it hit like a wave—that if you want to be of service you’ve got to go to the problems. And all the problems are in the city, as I once heard that someone said. Now that’s not entirely true, but a lot of the problems are here.” She gestured at the street.

“And so you came back.”

“Of the cities I know it’s the only one where I halfway fit in,” said Emma Mueller with a shrug. She glanced at her friend. “I suppose you think this is all a bunch of hogwash.”

“Not at all,” the dancer replied, her forehead wrinkled in thought. Far from being critical of the other woman’s pronouncements, she had been listening with interest and

respect. All this rang true in a way, what Emma had said about forgiving and accepting and putting this attitude into action in one's day-to-day life. There was no need to press further and ask how she intended to be of service doing something as common as working in a restaurant. Ruby knew very well that what Emma had in mind was simply to be helpful here on the humble level on which she had been helpful before, by being attentive and concerned about the people she met while going about her routine chores. She looked out the window at the streaming people and honking cars that were everywhere in sight, thinking that this idea of service which her plain-speaking friend had talked about was much along the lines of what she had been contemplating herself. To have someone else put this into words made the notion she had had of coming back to the Strip and just living here and being of help wherever she could seem not as far-fetched or corny as she had feared it to be. All of her yearning to turn her life from the confusion in which she had floundered so long into some more positive state where she would be of benefit to others arose in her once more, though the precise details of how she could do this were still undefined in her mind.

She wanted to express what she was thinking, but her thoughts were too turbulent to speak. "So you're working back here, at Leroy's," she remarked at last, as if to keep the general topic which they had been discussing still hanging in the air.

"More than that, I own it."

Ruby looked up in surprise. "What you mean, you own it?"

Put down my money, what I got from the house. So now I own it. I live in a room in the back."

"You own this restaurant?" Ruby repeated, hardly believing her ears. The puzzled frown which had become so characteristic of her appeared on the fine brow above her deep-set green eyes. She swept back her red hair and stared at Enna Mueller. "The money from your house was enough?"

"No, not enough in itself. But this strange thing

happened the day I got back. Remember the old man who used to sit in the corner by himself?"

"Guy with the beard?"

"Yea, the old man that I used to give free coffee. You know how he was always saying he'd make it up to me someday. Well, the poor fellow died. Turns out he had a fair amount of money. He was kind of an eccentric, I guess. Don't ask me where the money came from, or why he didn't spend it on himself. All I know is he left a hunk of it to me."

"Left you his money?"

"It wasn't a fortune, you understand, but it came to forty grand. So that got me over the hump for a down payment on this. I'm in hock to the bank to a certain extent, but if I can do this right it won't be long before I truly own this restaurant, and I can't tell you, Rube, how much that will gratify me, to have this little outpost where I can be human."

"It's all so amazing," the dancer exclaimed. The idea which immediately came into her mind was that this was maybe a place where she could work and bring all her vague notions into actual practice. It was an exciting idea; she was already asking herself if it would be an abuse of friendship to inquire about a job.

But Emma Mueller beat her to the punch. "The manager in your apartment building said you were working in some kind of restaurant yourself," she began. "I would have gone there to see you, but she didn't know where it was."

"You wouldn't have had far to go. It's right down the street by the shopping center. You maybe passed it."

"Yes, I did."

"Ruby, the waitress."

"No shame in that."

"Never said there was."

"Still you implied it."

"Guess I do feel it's a comedown, you know. I wanted to make a change to something better or stronger, wanted to be of service, I guess, in much the same way as you were describing yourself. I had all these half-baked ideas, you see, of being a counselor for women in a half-way house or something. I suppose that sounds stupid to you."

"Not stupid at all. You'd be good at that, honey. Let me tell you, these young dancers... Maybe you weren't close to them as a friend, but they sure thought a lot of you from a distance. You should have heard them talking about what happened with Jensen. They've even been talking about an association or union or something. They've had a few meetings."

"Well, that's astounding," Ruby replied. Though far too experienced in the pitfalls of developments like this to take an initiate's pleasure in them (there had been organizing efforts before that had never got off the ground); still she felt proud of the part she had played in causing this to happen. Perhaps with a more level-headed approach it could be turned to good. Per- haps, if what Emma said was true, she could be of help in this process, assuming, that is, that she would have the right setting to work from, a setting in which she would have some kind of ongoing contact with the women on the Strip. And what could be more ideal for this purpose, or for her notions in general, than the restaurant in which she was sitting now? Again she told herself that she should inquire about a job. But she couldn't get herself to ask; why she didn't know.

Emma Mueller interrupted her thoughts. "You should claim your old job. You've got it coming. It's your right for all the years you put in here. The other women would get behind you in some form or another. I know they would. I've heard them talk. Maybe you think you're too old. But the truth is you could still pass for a woman in her late 20's. You've got another fifteen years if you keep yourself in shape."

"You're just being kind."

"I don't deal in falsehoods. Look in a mirror."

Ruby considered this a moment. She glanced at her reflection in the glass of the pie cabinet behind the counter, and the image she saw was lovely indeed. But at almost the same instant another image came into her mind; she recalled how her face had looked in the store window by the news-shack on her, last night on the Strip with the red aura of the semaphore around her head, recalled how alienated from

herself she had felt at that moment, how everything, including the arrival of her period, had been magnified out of proportion to the actual situation which had existed at that time. How far she had come, she thought to herself, since that terrible night; and yet the essential elements of what had been her predicament then persisted still; for even, as she mused on this she could feel the red-toned dryness inside her in her womb which still felt dry. She remembered too how ashamed she had been in the end to uncover herself before the eyes of the men. Years before she had regarded those eyes with detachment or amusement or at times with satisfaction when she saw in them the passion she aroused. But all that was past. “No, I could never go back to that anymore,” she said, shaking her head. “No, I just couldn’t do it... And yet the weird thing, this is my world. This is the only place I know of where I can be what I am.”

Emma Mueller nodded slowly, her lips pressed together. “Then come work with me.”

This was exactly what Ruby had been hoping the other woman would say. She studied Emma’s dim blue eyes. “You really mean that?”

“Hell, yes, I mean it. Why you think I was trying to find you? I mean, I was wondering how you were doing, of course. All the time, though, I was plotting... You see, I’ve got this plan.”

“What kind of plan?” the dancer asked. She was already overjoyed at the prospect of being able to work with her friend and having a way to return to the Strip without having to humiliate herself before Jensen or go back on the stage. Now, looking at the other woman’s newly animated eyes, she sensed that, whatever this plan might be, it would be of great importance in her life.

“You and me,” said Mrs. Mueller, inclining her large shoulders in the dancer’s direction, with her rough-hewn hands brought forward for emphasis and formed into fists, “we could run this place together.” It was obvious now that this is what she had been leading up to all the while, with her mention of Ruby’s possibly dancing again just a gesture to the past. “The way I look at it, this place just happened on

me. It's what you call it, karma. Here I am in a position where I never expected to find myself, as not just a worker but an owner. You don't know what this means to me. And I need a partner. I need you. You can be a co-owner with me."

Of all the plans which Ruby might have imagined, this would never have occurred to her as a possible one. What struck her at first was that, much as this idea filled her with excitement, she had no right at all to what was being offered. "No, I couldn't do that," she replied. "It wouldn't be legit. I don't care how you came on the money. I don't want any favors from you. And anyhow you don't really know me."

"Yes, I do. And I trust my sense of what you are."

"Even so, I don't want to hone in on what belongs to you. Now, if you need a waitress, that we could work out, I'm sure," the dancer concluded. She sat back feeling strangely drained by having made this refusal, but just the same she was glad that she had resisted the temptation to take advantage of what now appeared to her to be naivety in the extreme.

Mrs. Mueller brought her hands together and rubbed them back and forth. "I knew you would say that," she responded. "And I don't fault you for being proud. No, sure as I'm talking, that's an admirable trait. What you don't understand, though, is how I look at this myself. So let me try to explain it. Numero uno, I can't run this place alone. That would come down to slaving. Who wants that? Numero two, you would bring in business. And you would give this restaurant a certain kind of atmosphere I'm after. You're more of a personage than you'll admit. But I can see what you are, Rube. I can see what you could be for this whole community here. It is a community in a way, and for my own reasons, as I told you before. I want to be part of it too. You're my door into that. Numero three, I'm not giving you a free 'in'. What I'm proposing is that, as part of your salary, you work your way into an ownership with me. We put it down in writing: for each of the next five years, Ruby Ellington gets ten percent of the business until it adds up to half. In the meanwhile she is employed as co-manager. I've got it all figured. I've been thinking a lot."

The dancer hardly knew what to say. She felt satisfied that the other woman did indeed have a well-thought-out plan, that she had her own good reasons for what she proposed. As for her own possible part, this was the fulfillment of her most heartfelt dream, that she could somehow recapture what she had been and turn it to a positive purpose, that she could find a niche in life where she belonged. She shook her head. “What can I say? You must know how much I want to do this. Only one thing I ask.”

“What’s that?

“When and if you draw up that agreement, put in there that if you change your mind you can ask me to go.”

“Okay, on the condition that I pay you for whatever part you've already earned.”

“If you want it that way.”

“Yes, I do,” Emma Mueller said firmly, “because I want you to feel sure that I mean what I’m saying.” She went over to the coffee machine, came back with a pot of coffee, refilled the two cups on the counter, and raised her own to her lips as if drinking the coffee was a sacramental act or some kind of ceremony of agreement. The dancer also lifted her cup to her mouth. Then Mrs. Mueller sat down with a serious expression on her face. She apparently felt that something else had to be said before the deal was final.

She leaned forward with extended hand’s. “Well, I can’t tell you how satisfied this makes me. I’m not quick to get close to people, but I’ve always had this feeling of kinship with you.”

“Thank you so much,” the dancer replied, still overwhelmed by the marvelous changes that were taking place in her life. “I have the same feeling for you.”

“And I think we can make it. I really do. Make a living at it and do some good on the side. Not a whole lot of good, mind you, just a common amount. And we’ll be independent. You see, as I said, I’ve been studying on this for quite a while. The way I look at it, Rube, what it comes down to in this country is if you don’t own you’re owned. You may think that’s overly simple. Still in a large sense it’s true. And most people are owned. I found this out a long time ago.

Now don't get me wrong. I'm not saying they're bad people. I'm not saying it's their fault. But most people in this country are owned. They allow themselves to be owned because they can't find a way out. And the only way out of being owned is to own. There's a whole lot of them who work hard all their lives trying to get out of being owned by owning something themselves, and despite all their work they never make it scot free. Yea, I learned this a long time ago. For me this goes way back. My mother and father, fifty years ago, they started out owning a little piece of land. But the bank took their land when they faulted on a mortgage; this was during the Depression, of course. My father was a Mohawk, just a quarter-breed, though; he couldn't get no land from the Indians neither. They moved to the city, my dad and mom, as so many people were doing back then, moving here and there looking for work. My dad got a job in the steel mills, worked sixty hours a week, and still he was owned, didn't own his own house. Now when you come to think of that, it just ain't fair. We lived in a rowhouse in South Pittsburgh by the J & L mill, worn-out building that belonged to someone who didn't live there and never came around. My grandfather who had bought the farm where my folks lived for a buck an acre in 1890, or whatever, of all of us in our family he was the only one who wasn't owned, I mean, the only one who wasn't giving all his strength and years to make someone else rich. And, like I said, we had to mortgage the farm to buy seed in the 30's, when there were dust storms all around, and then when the crop failed the bank took the land and sold it later when the prices went up. That was the most own-ourself period for a while, in the late 20's and early 30's when I was a kid, most own-ourself period I ever knew of at least, until I finally paid for my house up there in the mountains after giving the bank as much again as that little house was worth. That's all I'm saying. It's just not fair. And mark my words, Ruby, we'll get to them bankers someday. But right now this restaurant here is a chance for you and me to own. It will take us a few years to pay off what we still owe on it, I know. We'll still be in hock to the bank for that period of time. But it's going

to be ours. And I'm so glad you're coming in on it with me. Let's shake on it, partner. We'll do our best."

They shook hands, then for several minutes sat in silence as if to pay recognition to what had just been agreed on. Ruby Ellington kept looking back and forth from the red interior of the restaurant to the street, where everything in sight—the crowded-together buildings, the semaphores, constantly-passing traffic, flashing signs on the nightclubs, and even the news-shack on the corner—were all of them so comfortingly familiar. She felt inspired by what Emma had said. What a fortunate turn of events, she thought to herself. So she would indeed be returning to the Strip, not as a dancer exactly, but still not as something foreign to that. No, this was a way she could build on what she had been.

It occurred to her too, as she glanced at the news-shack and noticed how the Gypsy vendor, bundled up as always all out of proportion to the actual cold, was shivering in the wind, that she would no longer have the financial problems which had been such a burden in the past few years. At the same time she recalled the mysterious gift of cash which she had received in the same packet of mail in which Emma's letter had come. Suddenly it became extremely important to her to determine for sure that Mrs. Mueller had not been the source of that money. If she had been the source, then that would be charity without a doubt, and this whole arrangement, which they had just agreed on, would in her mind be called into question again. "One thing I gotta ask you," she said. "You send me some money?"

"What kind of money?" Emma replied, betraying at once by her disturbed composure that she knew what Ruby was talking about, and was only asking for details in an attempt to cover up.

The dancer at once took note of this and felt strangely disturbed. "I got some cash in an envelope with no return address." She almost felt now as if there was no need for further explanation.

"I'm not the kind to do that," Emma replied. But seeing that she was discovered she went on after a moment of hesitation. "I've got to admit, though, I know where it was

from. Joe Costenzi, the driver from Pacific, he sent it to you."

Ruby leaned towards her. "Sent it from where? You saw him somewhere?" At the very mention of his name she felt ashamed. In her mind for a moment she reexperienced the exact instant when he had forced his way so painfully inside her.

"He came up to me in this town in Wyoming where I had stopped on my bus trip. Little town in the midst of this flat treeless country, and with more mobile homes than actual houses because all kinds of people had moved in to work on the oil rigs. They were having a boom, is what I'm trying to say. You could see the rigs wherever you looked, pumping away, on the edge of town."

"So what was Costenzi doing out there?" the dancer asked. In spite of the horrible memories which she still had from the night which she had spent with him—all those memories of awkwardness, confusion, pain and blood—she had towards him also, she realized now, a suppressed concern, maybe even a muted affection, the same kind of affection she had for every man she had ever slept with. And she couldn't help wondering too what he was doing in Wyoming. She remembered that Wyoming had been especially important to him, that he had spent some of his younger years out there; she knew very well that what it meant to him was virility and freedom.

"Said he was working on the rigs."

"And he asked about me?"

"Asked for your address. Said that he had been your regular driver and that on his last night in the city you had told him that you'd quit your job. That was the first time I had heard that. Maybe, though, I had already sensed that somehow, because when he told me it didn't take me by surprise. Said he owed you some money. I gave him your address. Maybe you think I shouldn't have done that. But, let me tell you, this man is all right. I knew that from before; he used to stop in this restaurant a lot. He's a generous fellow, that's one thing about him, the kind who gives with his right hand, as they say, and his left hand doesn't know what he's

doing. Just like that he does it. Kids especially he likes. I've seen him give what I knew was his last twenty dollars to some bum who didn't deserve it. It's not like him to judge who's got it coming. Or to gloat about it either. He's not concerned about whether he's good. And he seemed so intense about getting the money to you."

"Well, it didn't occur to me that it was from him," Ruby remarked. She understood at once that what he had tried to do by sending the money was to make amends for the damage he'd done; and she understood too, more clearly than she had before, that the wrong had extended both ways, that she in her own confusion had struck such a blow to the virility which was so important to him that the very next day, if the story he had told Emma was true, he had made these profound changes in his life. That was where Wyoming came in; he had reasserted his claim to that masculine world. It stood in his favor that, after his disappointing encounter with her, he had fought his way back to what was natural to him. So more power to him, she said to herself.

"What he is," Emma Mueller went on, "is the salt of the earth. A good, simple man. Somebody, another cabbie, told me once he gave Costenzi a book for his birthday. Hardback book, it cost a little bit. So what did ol' Costenzi do? Read the book and gave it away. He's like some kind of religionless monk; he doesn't believe in having possessions. I've never even seen him wear a jacket. Never seen him with a watch, hardly ever seen him look at a clock. He's like a lot of night-time cabbies, I guess, seems to have some kind of mystical connection with the night, and that's the whole reason for his existence; at least it was for a long, long time. And the way he struts up the street like a rooster. I heard he was striking in his younger days. And such a devoted student of the old school of how men and women should act. Always calling women "sweetheart," even an old broad like me. But behind all of that, as I was saying, if you can forgive his awkward gallantry, that man is all right. He's decent, he's kind, a lover of freedom and life."

"Yea, that he is," the dancer responded sincerely. She recalled how, during their ride together from the Strip to her

apartment that night, she had been so impressed with these very qualities in him—qualities which since then, in her bitterness, she had forgotten. Now, however, for some inexplicable reason, she no longer felt it necessary to deny what was good about him; she no longer felt hateful towards him.

In doing this, in granting him the benefit of the doubt, she felt a relief; it was almost as if a burden had dropped from her shoulders. Was this the forgiveness which Emma had earlier said was so important to arrive at? Perhaps it was. And there were more accounts, she reflected, which would have to be settled at the proper time.

Emma broke the intervening silence. “Something else I should tell you, a third person’s going to work here, whom you also know, I think, young pretty girl named Lisa Gwerti. Black hair, white skin like ivory.”

“I do know a Lisa,” Ruby Ellington replied. Though she hadn’t remembered the girl’s last name, she realized at once to whom Emma referred, the nymph-like young woman whose gracefulness and beauty she had found so impressive on her last night on the Strip. Why, though, would someone with such obvious employability as a dancer be looking for a waitress job when there were nightclubs all around? “But I thought she was dancing.”

“Broke up with her boyfriend. He was treating her bad. Just moved into a place by herself. Too much for her to handle, she says. So she wants out of dancing until she sorts it out.”

“Well, I’m so glad she’s around,” Ruby responded, her eyelids lowering in thought. She recalled how on that same night when she had gotten stoned with the other dancers the girl had smiled at her so sweetly and given her a joint. Since with this girl, as with Emma, she had all along felt a continuing bond, it struck her now as wholly logical and meant to be that Lisa Gwerti would be at the restaurant too.

“Of course she’ll be on a different basis. You and I will be in charge. But I know she’ll be glad to work under you. I told her I was trying to find you and she was enthusiastic about it.”

"Why would she be? She hardly knows me."

"I suppose she identifies with you because you're known as a loner, and that's pretty much what she is herself. She's an odd girl, in a way, extremely bright for her age. She just turned eighteen. But emotionally she's way behind. What it boils down to, I guess, is she's looking for guidance. You were talking about wanting to be a counselor. Well, there's your first client. Unofficial maybe, but sometimes when it's unofficial it works much better, don't you think?"

"Yea, I imagine it does." Ruby Ellington sighed. She thought of Amy Terner, the blonde teenager she had met at Bimbo's, and how that girl too had been so hungry for adult attention. To be regarded by young women like this as an older woman who "understood" was just what she had hoped for; even so, the prospect of this made her feel apprehensive. "You know, it scares me kind of," she said after a pause. "I don't know what I could do for someone like her."

"Nothing to be scared of. Just play it by ear. You should feel proud that people take to you so strongly."

"I didn't know they did," she replied, her brow furrowed in her habitual frown. And the truth, she mused to herself, was that in fact, though this had often happened in her youth, no one had taken to her strongly for many years until something had changed a short time ago. Something had altered on a deep level; she could feel that she had a more hopeful air about her. This had been the case even before Emma Mueller had brought up the subject of the restaurant. Some essential change was taking place not only in her circumstances but in her whole being. It still seemed tentative, experimental; and yet she wanted so much to make herself fully into this new person which she could feel forming within her.

She felt a great stirring inside her. Again she thought of the confrontation with her past which she knew still awaited her on Russian Hill. She nodded slowly and reached for her coat, glancing across at Emma who on her broad honest face still showed her satisfaction with what had transpired. "Now, Emma... well, thanks to you, I feel so excited. And there are certain things I have to tend to in my own mind."

"I understand."

They smiled and embraced.

"Tomorrow morning I'll stop back. Will you be here?"

"If you don't see me in the restaurant, knock on the door in the alley. Knock real hard. I sleep like a log."

"We'll go for coffee and work out the details."

"Yes, we'll do that, Ruby. And I'm so glad."

The dancer went out, feeling the cool breeze on her cheeks. In the distance, between the yellow opening of the tunnel and multi-colored sky, was the dark form of Russian Hill. She started hiking towards it as she lifted her arm to look at her watch. It was nearly two a.m., bar closing time. The streets were jammed with honking cars, the sidewalks crowded with people, the signs above the clubs flashing off and on. High above the downtown skyline, the full moon stood aloof and alone in the dark southern sky.

She could hardly believe what had happened. She would be returning to the Strip, returning with a definite role to play in this small world which she knew so well, the very role which she had hoped for. If only she could be worthy of this good fortune! Emma Mueller would be working with her, this woman who already had been such an influence on her. And Lisa Gwerti, beautiful Lisa, who for some reason regarded her as a potential advisor and friend. With her, and with others like her and Amy Terner, she would perhaps be of actual help. And all this would lead—now more than ever she yearned for this to happen—to the sacredness and sweetness which she had lost, and which, if she regained it, would make it even more possible for her to be of benefit to life around her.

Before she had walked a half-block, with these hopeful thoughts whirling through her mind, she saw a lovely creature with long black hair and fair skin like ivory approaching her with smiling gray eyes. It was Lisa Gwerti; she recognized her at once, and braced herself, fearing mutual strain.

As it turned out, however, her concern was ill-founded. The girl shouted "Miss Ellington" and fell in beside her as naturally as if they had been sisters.

Soon Ruby mentioned that she would be working at Leroy's; and, as Emma had foretold, the girl was pleased. "Then it will be the three of us. Well, that's just grand! I'll work real hard. I just can't keep dancing right now. I broke up with my boyfriend. Did Emma tell you? Yea, I thought she would. Ain't she a gem? She's been so kind. So it will be the three of us them. Well, that's just grand."

The girl was so voluble, in fact, that Ruby found it hard to imagine how anyone could feel ill-at-ease in her presence. All that was needed was simply to listen. Then she remembered that Emma had said this Lisa was a loner. So maybe what this rapport between them came from after all was a unique affinity for one another. This passed through her mind as she walked along, her head inclined towards the girl whose energetic chatter she found quite endearing.

"I was bummed out for a while. But not so much anymore. I've been doing meditation. This place in the Mission. 'Awakeness' they call it. They take the word 'Enlightenment' and they call it 'Awakeness' is what I'm trying to say. You keep your eyes open. That's the key."

"And why is that?" Ruby Ellington asked. She found it endearing too that what was so familiar to herself, so almost passe, was new and exciting the young woman beside her.

"Because you forget what reality is, become so lost in your own mind, I mean, that you forget to check your inner conceptions with the world that actually exists. It can reach all kinds of extremes."

"What kind of extremes?" Ruby Ellington asked. Despite how dated, how much a part of her past, these ideas seemed, the notion had been gaining on her all night that everything that was taking place was meant to happen; and so she was listening with great interest and attention, imagining that whatever was said was being said for a reason and had some far-reaching significance as to the nature of the future life which seemed to be unfolding itself to her at every moment.

"Well, a concrete example: you lose your ability to see. Your vision gets blurred."

"Why would it do that?" Ruby replied, squinting to

make out the corner ahead of them where the red sphere of the semaphore had a fuzzy edge. At once she applied this comment to her own situation; she was very much aware of how self-preoccupied she had been in the past several months, and how her vision had become worse and worse.

"Because you don't want to see. What's there doesn't matter."

"Why wouldn't it matter?"

"Because you've seen it before, or it's become a source of pain. This was happening to me. I was so absorbed in myself on account of being worried about all these changes in my life."

And so the girl went on, while Ruby, watching her, was struck, on the one hand, with the apparent relevance to her own predicament of what was being said, and, on the other hand, with the exquisiteness of physical features which had impressed her before, the classical symmetry and refinement of the young woman's oval face with her almond-shaped gray eyes, small nose, thin lips, ivory skin, and raven black hair.

They had walked a half-block to the next intersection where the semaphore on the corner, after going through another cycle, had come back to red. Lisa paused and looked to the left; obviously she had planned on heading in that direction, and now wasn't sure whether to leave by herself or tag along with her older companion. "If you're not going anywhere in particular, I'll show you where I live," she said with hesitation. "It's in Chinatown near Portsmouth Square." Apparently she wasn't sure whether this was a breach of decorum with someone so much older than herself.

Ruby, amused by this deference, agreed to go. Indeed she was delighted at the opportunity of spending more time with the girl. They crossed to the left, leaving the bright lights of the Strip behind them, walked for a block along a non-tourist commercial street in Chinatown past closed shops where fish swam in glass tanks beneath smoked geese that hung by their shriveled necks from hooks in the ceiling, then turned left once more down a narrow side street cluttered with piles of garbage and stacked-up empty crating

boxes towards the tourist section a block below where the few signs that could be seen were out for the night. The only sound which rose above the persistent under-hum of distant traffic was the clinking of an awning on a waterpipe beside a dusty-windowed shop with a display of watches and clocks, some in time and others not. Ruby took in a deep breath, drawing into her dilated nostrils the cool air that smelled of ginger, rotting vegetables, fish, and fog-damp cardboard and wood. How good it was to be back on these dingy streets where enormous roaches crawled on the sidewalks and where everywhere she encountered the strangeness which she once had loved so much.

The girl, in the meanwhile, kept chattering on about how, as she saw it, meditation was related to dancing, because to dance with vigor required being in tune with the harmony of the cosmos. Again all of this was familiar stuff which Ruby had talked about many times in conversations with her lover Marcel and his poet friends, and which, as she remembered so well, she had tried, without success, to apply to getting rid of the dryness. The Oriental words which Lisa threw in here and there—like wu wei, for instance, "effortless movement," in which, said Lisa, awakeness was also essential, since this awakeness, or alertness, was what made it possible to connect with the vital forces of the world—these words too were familiar. There was nothing here which Ruby had not heard and thought of years before. Just the same, as she walked along, looking beyond the gilded eaves of the buildings to the small lonely white moon in the red-violet sky, she continued to suspect that in all of this there was a personal message (from whom she didn't know) which she was meant to take note of and learn from. "Awakeness," "alertness," "effortless movement," she repeated to herself.

They had turned unto the main tourist street in Chinatown now where all the shops were closed and the sidewalks deserted. The girl was talking about Tai Chi, the slow exercise dance which Ruby had practiced many times. Then she was talking about the I Ching, which she was studying, she said, because she had come to the realization

that life required different attitudes at different times, not just large attitudes such as commonly thought of, but subtle variations of them of the sort which the I Ching, with its 54 signs and 54 aspects, or attitudes, described. She had thrown the I Ching and had come up with the sign, “Agitation,” so she figured that this was a time to let things whirl around. “Then, when they fall into place, that will be the time to act.”

Ruby recognized at once that, though she had herself called it intuition and the artistic process, this was the method which she had used to feel her way back to the Strip through the many small changes which had taken place in her life since she had left. “And you believe in all that?” she asked, half-amused at this foolishness which she understood herself now to be a part of, and half-thinking, as before, that there was a message in this meant especially for her.

“I wouldn’t say I take it seriously, I guess. I mean, in my own mind or to most people I wouldn’t admit that I did. But in my heart I take it seriously, I really do. Because I base my life on it more than anything else... I don’t mean on the I Ching in itself, but on this whole idea of being alert to not only what I used to be alert to, but to how the dream and reality of life go hand in hand... I wish I could explain it... I just believe that nothing is accidental, I guess.”

“So everything happens for a purpose.”

“Yea, kind of like that,” she responded in her youthfully-resilient voice. She spoke rapidly and freely with many gestures of her smooth white hands which were as elegant in appearance as her Botticelli face and long and thin like a musician’s hands.

After walking another two blocks, they turned once more to the left down the hill past some dark restaurants to a block-size park with a red pagoda at its center. Further down from the park, its upper stories shrouded in fog, was the immense triangular form of the Transamerica Building. Having reached the park, they swung to the right through the narrow alley which bordered it on the uphill side. The ground floors of several of the buildings which faced the park were occupied by Chinese stores and restaurants, all closed for the night with sheets over the windows. In the

middle of the alley, next to one of these shops, Lisa stopped at a door with an oval window through which a stairway could be seen leading up out of sight. She shrugged her shoulders. “This is it.”

The stairway was dark. Her apartment was on the second floor above a store front market. It was a small place with one large room and a tiny kitchen too small for a table. The windows looked out through some scraggly Lombard trees to the red pagoda and base of the Transamerica Building, above which, in the several stories which could be seen, all the windows were dark.

Ruby sat down on the only real furniture in the room, an old battered couch. She looked around as the girl put on hot water for tea. In one corner was a cot with a crumpled sleeping bag on it. Here and there were wooden crating boxes of the sort they had seen stacked up on their way down the hill. The largest of these boxes served as a coffee table. There were pillows on the floor. The simplicity of the setting reminded her of apartments where she had lived herself when younger. Again she thought to herself that it was so pleasant to be in surroundings where she felt at home.

She noticed too that her body felt different. The dry feeling in her pelvis and legs was not as pronounced as it had been before. Her vision, though still somewhat blurred, was more acute. The scene across from her seemed to focus in and out when she blinked her eyes. She remembered what the girl had said about how not wanting to see effected vision. How long had it been, she asked herself, since she had really looked to see what was there? It intrigued her also that the young dancer, in her eagerness to learn about Oriental ideas, had moved to Chinatown as if to surround herself with the right atmosphere for study. At least she imagined that this was so, and Lisa Gwerti, when she came back in the room with a jade-colored teapot and two cups with Chinese characters on them, immediately confirmed what she had suspected.

“I decided to move here because it’s kind of a spiritual center for me,” she said, placing the teapot and cups on the box coffee table and lighting the large candle that sat on one

side. Soon the room was dimly lit with flickering light, and the girl, with a graceful motion, sank into a cross-legged position and stared at her with her large gray eyes.

"Yes, I can see that," Ruby replied. She saw in all this the extravagance of youth, but at the same time found this kind of intensity appealing. It was intensity of the sort which she had found so appealing in Ellen Serven, she mused to herself; it was directed, as had been Ellen's intensity, to spiritual concerns; and yet how different these young women were from one another.

She no longer had any fears of being ill-at-ease or causing strain. And, as it turned out, Lisa Gwerti was as eager to talk as Amy Terner had been. She had lived in this apartment for only three weeks, she said. Before that she had lived for a year or so with her boyfriend. He had been kind to her at first but had gotten more and more possessive and physically abusive. So the relationship had become a real threat to her freedom and intolerable in many ways. For a couple of weeks, after breaking up with him, she had lived with some friends in a crowded apartment where she had slept on a mat on the floor. Then one night, while walking through Chinatown as she often did by herself, she had come across a "for rent" sign in the alley, talked to the proprietor of the sweat shop below, and moved in the next day. Her boyfriend had looked her up once and pushed her around, but some other guy had intervened, and that was the last time she'd seen him. Sometimes, she said, when she was in a paranoid mood, she worried that he would come back and do a better job of beating her up. She didn't know whom to talk to about it.

"Surely, though, it's not just a matter of talking, if you're in physical danger," Ruby replied. She had been watching the young woman's plaintive face as she spoke, and feeling greatly drawn to her, and so she was glad for a chance to express her concern. "Can't you go to your parents for help?"

"My father is dead. My mother... just too busy, you know. She has all kinds of lovers. We don't get along. You know what it is? She thinks I make her look old. But I don't

care what she thinks. It doesn't matter."

"It doesn't, really?"

"I guess it does in a way. What really gets to me is not having anything to rely on for sure. Maybe I'm just afraid. Not so much of my boyfriend. As I said, that just happens when I'm in a crazy mood. I don't think he'll come around anymore. I heard he's got another girlfriend in this town he went to. And that's in Nevada, if what some people told me is true. No, I'm not really scared of him. What scares me... I guess you could say it's the city. Sometimes it seems as though it's right at your door. Six in the morning, the machines downstairs are pounding and hissing. Cars are honking. Everywhere you go you get pushed and shoved here and there. And all these old men are watching me pass. Old men or worse. Lot of creeps, if you know what I mean. And yet I want to be here. I feel like there's something here I'm supposed to learn. You ever get that feeling yourself?"

"Yes, often I have," Ruby Ellington answered. She was thinking again of the mystery or meaning which she had always in her mind connected with the city and in particular with the city night. She knew very well what her young friend meant by being at one and the same time drawn to the city and afraid of it.

"The loneliness is hardest of all. But there again I fear it and yet I want it, I seek it, even cause it, I guess, by living by myself when I don't have to. I mean, I could find a way out of the loneliness if I tried. At least I think I could."

"Of course you could."

"At times, though, I wonder. Because when I try, I just do it a while, and then I get so absorbed in just being here and trying to learn. I'm a student, really. Or kind of I am. Don't ask me of what exactly. I suppose of the city, like I said. I just want to see with open eyes, like I was mentioning before. Still the loneliness of it. I was sick for a few days, you know. This was just after my boyfriend was trying to scare me back with him. Just lying here by myself. Got all dizzy whenever I tried to get up. So sick I hardly knew what to do. And I kept thinking to myself, 'So what if I die on this couch? How long will it be before somebody finds me?'

That depressed me, to think I didn't have anyone to check on me and see if I was all right."

Ruby nodded slowly. She realized now that the girl was more frightened even than she had admitted at first. "Well, I got a solution."

"What kind of solution?"

"Me."

"How you mean that?"

"I'll come around."

"Why would you do that?"

"In my own way I care."

The girl lowered her eyes. "I almost believe you."

"You've got the best reason to believe me; it's true."

"And we'll be working together at Em's."

"Yes," said Ruby, "and, as you would say, that will be just grand." She peered into Lisa's gray eyes. Already she was devising some way to be of further assistance at the proper time. Perhaps, she was thinking, she could offer her money, if that was a problem. She would have money now herself, thanks to Emma Mueller and the new situation which had come about through her. In any case, she would be available if needed; this prospect filled her with a deep inner joy.

Indeed it seemed now as if between herself and this girl, as between herself and Emma, a bond had been established and mutually accepted. In her heart she felt sure that this bond, like the other, would become stronger and increasingly significant in her life. She sat back on the couch and looked out to the red pagoda in Portsmouth Square and the triangular form of the Transamerica Building beyond it, looming up beyond the window frame in the red-violet sky

Lisa too appeared to have become lighter and more elevated in mood as a result of this statement of kinship. She got up, went to her tiny kitchen, and, as she stood there making more hot water for tea, turned back again with youthful enthusiasm to the philosophical concerns which she had brought up before, all of them having to do with Asiatic ideas of one sort or another. Every morning, she said, when the machines started downstairs, she went over to the park

and did Tai Chi with some Chinese women who didn't speak English but greeted her with welcoming smiles.

"What I'm trying to understand is the whole idea of chi. What chi is, is force on the most basic level, of what is needed for life. Life-force is maybe a better way to say it. That sounds corny, like Star Wars or something. But this goes way back to the Sutras and the Tao and the Bhagavad Gita. I don't really know what I'm talking about. I'm just saying these things off the top of my head. I'm just starting to learn about them."

She went on to say that not only was the universe, the sensible world, a manifestation of a great single force, but also each person evinced this force in a particular way which was natural and inevitable for that person. So each individual was a smaller life-force in his own right. "I suppose there's nothing new or startling about this. I grew up as a Catholic, and I suppose, going back to that, I could use less exotic words like spirit or soul. But, you see, the special meaning in this other word for me is that, as I understand it, this chi isn't separate from the world like spirit is; it's one and the same with the world, or maybe at the most a deeper dimension of it. That's why I'm so into observation, I guess, because I'm trying to see how the chi is moving in the midst of all these mundane things. And this other idea of the individual chi (which I've seen written in English with an 'ih' on the end of it, so that it comes out 'chee-uh' or something; but it's a Chinese word so how you spell it doesn't matter): this has become important to me because it doesn't just mean 'soul'; what it means also is that a certain person is conditioned or shaped by his or her own situation in life to such an extent—I wish I could explain this—that there's a corresponding highly-limited and almost-predefined way in which this person can realize himself or herself and be effective. It takes a lot of searching—heart-searching, feeling—to find out what for a given person this path involves."

"But why call it a path?" Ruby asked. She had heard all of this before in one form or another, either from other dancers here and there, or from her lover or his poet-friends. Still she wanted to understand just what Lisa was talking

about; it seemed urgent for her to comprehend this clearly.

"Because that's another aspect of chi'ih. It's not just a matter of situation or effect. What it also involves is connecting with what I guess you could call the Oversoul or God. You know what I mean, it's an atman-Brahman kind of thing. Only not just a single experience of it, but one leading to another, and all of them together leading, like I was saying, to that central force, or sacredness or spirit. It doesn't matter what you call it. What matters is that you can only get there by being true to what you feel in your heart you were meant to be, by being true to your life as it has happened, and to what your life has made you as a person. And where this takes you is your path, is what I'm trying to say." She threw up her hands. "I can't explain it. I'm sorry."

"You're doing all right," Ruby responded. What struck her at once was that Lisa Gwerti was talking about the same concern with the sacred which Ellen Serven and Emma Mueller had also talked about; though, as she said, she was addressing this concern from the perspective of her own life, and in her own peculiar manner, by means of these exotic concepts which were apparently so important to her. As had been the case with the ideas which the girl had spoken of on the way from the Strip to her apartment, these concepts were for Ruby old and soiled with use; she saw in them the extravagance of youth, and no longer felt comfortable with terminology of this kind. At the same time, however, she realized that the intuitive path which Lisa described was much like the artistic process—or so she had called it—which she herself, in her long discussions with Ellen Serven, had tried to articulate and defend.

She was greatly impressed, moreover, with Lisa's idea that each person had an individual way of being in the world which was somehow planned or maybe even to some extent assigned and by which that person could achieve a certain amount of rightful good influence and draw closer to the sacred and understand and express it if not in words then in action that felt right. This idea, in fact, seemed like a crystallization of the whole series of questions and answers and speculations which had brought her back to the Strip.

She could not help noticing also how easily and naturally the girl had taken to her and accepted her as not only an advisor but also a friend. So maybe what she had hoped for, and what Emma had insisted on, was true, that she had a special facility for getting along with young women like this who had backgrounds like her own. If so, this facility was part of her own path, her chi'ih. And where had it arisen? In the very conditions which had led her through her early promiscuity to the Strip, had driven her away from it, and brought her back, and which, ironically, she had tried so hard to forget.

Lisa went on talking about her mystical preoccupations. She returned to her subject of an hour or so before, the importance of being alert and constantly watching. "Because everything has meaning, everything has meaning." This, she said, was related to chi'ih. "The world itself in its material reality is a sign, or a bunch of signs working together. I mean, this takes place somehow on a personal level. To guide you, you know."

Ruby listened with as much attention as she could muster. The words, "everything has meaning," she especially took note of. But she was still dwelling on the topic of a moment before. So her life had not been a mistake; her life had fashioned her into a person with unique possibilities for action. This realization filled her with such excitement and hope that she wanted to go off at once and clarify it before it was lost, wanted to understand it in its full ramifications.

When, a while later, there was a lapse in conversation, she smiled at her young friend, said she guessed it was time to go, and drew her legs towards her to rise. As she did she saw on the floor, dimly lit by the candle flame, a book of the I Ching which was open to the sign, "Emergence." "The seedling is struggling to break forth from the ground to new life," said the text below the large ideogram on the top of the page. The ideogram consisted of three broken lines above solid, broken, and solid, with text below it saying "Kan, Water over Zhen, Thunder." She rose, went over to the girl, and kissed her on the forehead. "Thank you for your hospitality, Lisa. I hope we'll be friends."

The girl smiled widely, her gray eyes sparkling. “We will, Miss Ellington, and I’m so glad.”

Ruby went down the narrow steps to the alley and along by herself between the Lombards on the side of the park and dark windows of the sweatshops, then up the hill to the main street in Chinatown and along it towards, the Strip. The sky above the curled eaves of the buildings was purple and red but it no longer seemed as down-pressing as it had seemed a few months before. No, something basic had changed; that heaviness was falling away. Maybe, as the I Ching had said, this was a time of emergence. “The seedling is struggling to break forth from the ground to new life,” she repeated to herself, recalling the prayer meeting she had gone to with Ellen Serven, the long almost chanted sermon about how in order to live the seed had to die.

Maybe she had gone through a kind of death, Ruby thought, and through that death had come to this, a new life. She considered this with lowered eyes, both believing and not believing that such things as the I Ching could have a personal significance of this nature. She remembered what Lisa had said, “Everything has meaning. The world itself is a sign.” With her left eye screwed up, her forehead drawn together in a puzzled frown, she gazed around her at the deserted street and watched as an orange-eyed white pigeon came towards her, made a circle on the sidewalk in front of her, as if dancing for food, and looked up at her, its beak raised in expectation. Maybe this too had a meaning of some kind. She didn’t know. Who could say where meaning existed of itself or where she created it with her superstitions and imagination? She just knew that a new period was in fact upon her, and that all of the elements of this had somehow converged at a meaningful time.

In her mind she kept going over the marvelous events of the past several days: how she had first, after reading Emma’s comments about the importance of the past, decided to try working again at night; how, while reconnecting with that old part of herself, she had met Amy Terner; how Amy had taught her that she could, as she had hoped, be of help to young women like her with backgrounds like her own; how,

after Amy's departure, on an impulse almost, she had come back to the Strip; how then, in the midst of this emotional reunion with her former home, she had met Emma Mueller once more and through her had found a situation which—wonder of wonders!—would allow her to reconcile with what she had been and do the exact kind of activities she had been thinking about; how Emma and then Lisa had offered their friendship, and deliberately or inadvertently provided the bits of wisdom which had been passing through her mind for the past several hours. She had told herself, she recalled, while riding into town in the cab, that this would be a night of confrontation with her past, with not only what was pleasant in it, but with what was painful also. And indeed all of these events seemed to have led directly to this confrontation. So now the task ahead of her, the immediate necessary task, was to sort this out in her mind, and once and for all come to terms with her past, and her future as well. She could do this with the new insights which her friends had provided; their wisdom, it seemed, was somehow a part of this confrontation, or was what she was meant to use to get through it; she felt this so strongly it was impossible to doubt.

Emma Mueller had talked about forgiveness and acceptance. Forgiveness of whom, as applied to her own situation? Forgiveness of all those towards whom she harbored a resentment for the damage (the undeniable damage, she said to herself) which she had suffered throughout her life. Her aunt, her father, Lammot, Costenzi, and, if need be, Marcel: could she forgive them? She wasn't sure she could do it from the heart. Acceptance of what? Acceptance of her life as it had developed, acceptance of her path, as Lisa called it. Could she do this firmly, and, with her whole being intact at last, face the future with resolve? These questions whirled through her mind; she felt herself again, as so often before, in the midst of a ferment. Only this was not the sterile kind of ferment which had held her down for years; to the contrary, it bore a promise of the emergence which the I Ching had announced.

Reaching the end of the three-block stretch of

Chinatown between Portsmouth Square and the Strip, she paused to look down the empty street towards the clubs. All of the neon signs were out for the night; several taxies with their top lights on sat in front of the sidewalk cafe a couple of blocks in the distance. She stared at this scene, thinking that this was truly where she belonged. Then she headed in the other direction towards the dark hill above the yellow opening of the tunnel.

Five minutes later, feeling exhilarated and strong, she was climbing up the side of the hill. On the lower part of it, where the buildings were crowded together, a motley amalgam of old and new, was a cathedral in an unlikely spot between the cable car tracks and a modern high-rise; it seemed too large for the corner lot which it filled to the utmost, seemed too ordered and stately amidst these urban surroundings which, in their variety and haphazardness of architectural forms, suggested such disorder and conflict of interest. She stopped in front of it, her thoughts going back to Ellen Serven, and from her to Emma Mueller and Lisa Gwerti. All of them had talked about the sacred, and tried to find it in their own ways. As for herself, she too had sought it. Had she found it? This church before her was sacred for many people. Did she herself regard it as holy? No, it had no such meaning for her; it was a building and nothing more. So where was her own sacredness then? This was something else, she told herself, which as part of this night of confrontation, this night of emergence, she needed to determine. She continued up the hill.

Soon the sidewalk turned into steps that ascended more steeply past elegant houses with wooded yards and large picture windows that looked off to the city and bay. Her pressing questions for a short while left her mind; she found herself thinking instead about a day some fourteen years before when she had climbed this hill the first time. She had been 23 then, older than Lisa was now, but with the same kind of youthful exuberance and hope; had been in the city for only a few days, staying near the bus depot, where she had debarked, in a dirty redbrick hotel occupied mainly by seamen who, so they had told her, spent their days in the

union hall trying to get on a ship. Their nights they spent in the bar around the corner. Whenever she walked down the hall there were eyes at every door. To get away from that and the general grimness of that section of town, she had gone on a long walk by herself, with no idea at all what the next block would bring. First she had strolled down Market Street along sidewalks that thronged with people as at a fair; then she had taken a diagonal route along the cable car tracks, past the big hotels, and through Union Square, finding herself, before not too long, at the gates of Chinatown, from which she had headed up the hill along the same narrow street which just ten minutes before she had walked along after leaving Lisa's apartment. The street had been crowded that day; vendors were hawking life chickens in cages, spearing fish in open tanks; musicians played on every corner and here and there in the doorways of shops. Coming upon a colorful procession, she had watched some kids with play swords kill a paper dragon; then, on reaching the other end of the street, had gotten her first glimpse of the Strip, which in that midday light had looked almost boring and for her personally not significant or in any way prophetic. From there, seeing this hill and wanting to get a view of the city, she had turned towards it and climbed these very steps. Looking above her, she peered at the vines and flowers below the large houses at the crest of the hill, and imagined how they had looked on that sunny afternoon.

On that sunny afternoon fourteen years before. Fourteen years! When she reached the top of the steps, still feeling exhilarated and not in the least fatigued, not in the least conscious of any dryness inside her, she stood and looked off from the cement wall which severed the street here and made it into cul-de-sacs on both sides. Here too she had been in that sunlight. She had gazed off at the city with its traffic-packed streets and white-buildinged hillsides. The bay, in the distance, had gleamed with fluid gold, a pool of it such as she had seen in her dream of herself as a child by the dam, the same sort of pool of light which she had so often, at this same wall, pointed out to her son. But now the city, as she looked at it, was surrounded by night. And she too, she

thought to herself, had gone somehow from sunlight to darkness. That daytime-hopeful red-haired girl had taken on the night-time existence that had become her life.

This was her chi'ih; this was her path. But what did this mean? What did this really mean? She wanted to know once for all. Did this mean that that sunlit scene by the dam would no longer be a part of what she was? Even now she could see that lovely child looking up at her with trust. She let out a sigh. Somehow she had to maintain contact with that girl, that child inside her who was not just an image from a dream but herself as she had been; somehow she had to maintain contact with that light. That too was a part of her life, a part of her path, a part of her chi'ih. But just how to do this she didn't know.

Her mind went back to Emma Mueller again. Acceptance, forgiveness: perhaps that was the way. In any case, it had to be done. All this worked together, she felt, by virtue of some deep association which was still beyond her ken. And the sacred places that Emma had talked about. Where were her own sacred places? Where were the most meaningful memories of her past? She knew very well where they were. She turned around and strode towards the dark buildings behind her on the summit of the hill.

A half-block from the wall was the Chinese grocery, still with the same name, where she had come at times with her son. She stopped in front of this store, finding it hard to believe that this place could have continued with such little change, that it was now just as it had been fourteen years before when she had first seen it, and as it had been eight years after that when she had bought groceries here with Jason, while he, his father, and other people who had been important to her at those times had faded from her life.

Right here she had stood with her child. For an instant in her mind she could see him running up behind her with the silver kite as large as himself which for several weeks had been his delight. She broke down into tears. "Jason, Jason, you know how much I loved you." A car came by and slowed down. Embarrassed, she turned away from the street and stared at the list of items on the window. Then, when the

car had passed, she walked down the block to the next corner and headed down a perpendicular street with apartment buildings on one side and, on the other, large houses atop an elevated part of the hill. On this block, about half-way down it, was the gray Victorian house where she had lived in a basement apartment with Jason and Marcel.

She saw it at first from a distance, a vague form in the darkness silhouetted against the multi-colored sky in the west, where low-flying clouds reflected the signs of the motels along the commercial street a few blocks away. Just that vague form in the darkness, but the door and small porch, through which when living there she and her lover and son had entered their apartment, were dimly illumined by an overhead arc lamp. The door itself could not be clearly made out; the alcove outside it, however, formed by a trellis with flowering vines, could be seen below the acacia tree in the backyard. The tiny flowers on the vines looked red in the lamplight against the clouds behind them which appeared orange and green; the acacia tree, the same which she had thought of so often, was in full bloom, its yellowness heightened by the lamp's amber glow.

She hesitated, then approached resolutely until she came to the bottom of the steps that led up to the house. Now she could see the door, and the window beside it that looked out to the street and the bay in the distance, the window where, after several arguments, she had watched for Marcel's return, knowing full well that the watching accomplished nothing at all. And often she had gazed out that window at the bay. In happy times she had done that. Had she forgotten that there had been those happy times also? How much had happened there, behind that door, in that apartment where now, most likely, other people lived! So many words had been said there: tender words and words of destruction.

Her eyes began to water again. Noticing the flowered vines on the trellis, she recalled a moment in that alcove when Marcel had cried too, cried because, as he said, he had not been a real man to her; and she had held him in her arms and caressed him like a child. Such a battle he had had with his addiction! Such a struggle, through his youth and

manhood, for the dignity which others took for granted, the dignity which he had never to his own satisfaction achieved! And yet, because of what that struggle had made him, because of the poet he had been without knowing the strength and truth of his expression, he had been a force in the world, or a force at least among his circle of artistic friends. He had been a chi'ih which had existed only once and would not exist again. And that chi'ih had brought with it a particular path; though, unfortunately for him, as for Emma's husband, whose battle except for this had been so different, he had succumbed to the darkest side of that chi'ih and followed it to a self-inflicted death. Maybe, as she had suspected, he had meant that death as an act of violence against her because of what she had been unable to be that he needed. But all that had happened in that last period of derangement when his life had been so out of control. She recalled what Emma Mueller had said about her husband, that despite what he had done she had taken it into account and forgiven him fully. "Forgiveness and acceptance," she pronounced aloud. Could she forgive Marcel for the worst he had been? She raised back her head. Yes, she could forgive him for that. Could she accept him for the best he had been? Yes, she could accept him, could fully accept his role in her life.

Once more, as when she had allowed her bitterness towards Joe Costensi, in part at least, to be banished from her mind, she felt as if a burden had dropped from her shoulders.

More difficult than this, she continued, carried forward by the momentum of her thought, could she forgive the conditions which had taken her son? She considered this as she watched the acacia branches on the hill moving back and forth in the wind. Again she saw him running up behind her; then she saw him as he had looked in death, his eyes closed as in peaceful sleep. Had he suffered in the end? No, he had died without knowing what had happened. Had she neglected him in any way? No, she knew in her heart that she had loved him with as great a love as any mother had ever had for a son. Had he judged her harshly? Would he judge her harshly now, if he could see her standing here on Russian

Hill? “No, he would forgive me,” she said to herself. “And not only forgive. He would care.” Well, she too could forgive—forgive him for being susceptible to death, forgive the conditions which had brought his death about.

With a feeling of quiet joy, she turned from the house and headed back towards the wall on the crest of the hill. How about the other people whom she had told herself she needed to forgive? How about her father who in his drunkenness had used her? How about her aunt who had laid upon her the sterile mantle of moral rigidity and guilt which had stifled so much of what in her had been inherently good and yearning for expression? How about Costenzi, Jensen, the various men who had taken advantage of her at a time when she had been too young to realize the repercussions of her actions?

Costenzi, she observed to herself, she had already forgiven; in the restaurant she had done as much as that. And in his case at least, she noted once more, the abuse had gone both ways. Costenzi had come to her with the need that had built up in him over the years as the result of his mother’s insanity and father’s neglect. He had come to her still in the midst of the struggle which had begun in the orphanage and which had become more and more intense through the course of that long unsung odyssey during which he had sought the feminine attention and approval which on those few occasions when it had been offered he had been unable to accept. That was his chi’ih; those were the circumstances which had shaped him as a unique force in the world. His intensity in sex, his need to be virile in the way his father had been, his alternating attitudes of intimacy and bravado, could be understood in terms of his life as a whole: of his early rejection on account of his mother’s madness, his obvious yearning to make the feminine into something which would not let him down a second time, or third time, really, when the death of his first love was thrown in the balance. These conditions were what had made him imperfect; they were the reason he needed so much to break through those vaginal lips to the original womb. By the same token, these conditions had given him his unique desire and capacity for

freedom. He had made that freedom his mistress. Well, let him be. She had done him a disservice, she saw this so clearly now: played on that great need, teased him into the arena in which the worst of his past would most come to the fore, the very arena in which, for the sake of his self-esteem, he had to win; then denied him that victory, made it impossible to achieve.

She had realized this in the restaurant, but not as dramatically as now. What struck her once more especially was how much damage she had inflicted on him in her effort to prove herself: to prove that she could still function as a woman, when the most womanly thing would have been to be more caring. She felt so sorry for the wrong she had done him. As for the damage which he had inflicted in return, surely, through the money he'd sent, he had tried in his own way to make up for it—as if money could right any grievance except in courts of law. Just the same, his intentions had been good. "Well, bless him then," she said to herself. "Let him be what he has to be." She had no bitterness towards Joe Costenzi anymore.

No bitterness at all. How amazing that this had happened, that she had come from such anger to this understanding. Yes, understanding was what it was. Understanding of what? Of what had made him what he was, of his whole life in terms of his particular struggle, of his strengths and weaknesses as arising from that unique constellation of fate, circumstances, disposition and events which had been his path, which had made his chi'ih. "To understand is to forgive": she had heard that somewhere a long time ago. And now at last, she mused to herself, she was starting to understand these people in her past for not only what they had been to her, but also for what they had been in themselves, within the limits of their own worlds.

She had walked slowly for a half-block to the corner, not looking around her, lost in thought. Now, having turned towards the Chinese store where she had stopped on her way to the house, she paused behind a new high-rise and sat down on a wooden box that held a small tree. She watched its slender branches swaying back and forth. Soon she would

be like this, she said to herself, a seedling that had broken through to the air, with tiny leaflets that faced the sun. Somehow she would find a way for there to be light in her night-time existence, just as she was finding light now in the dark spots in her past. All that she had to do was to follow through on what she had begun and complete this confrontation, this emergence. If she needed to forgive before she could go on with a sound spirit and heart, if understanding was the key to forgiveness, then she must try to understand everyone who had wronged her, and, wherever possible, forgive them. From there she could go on to everything else that needed to be figured out: her future life, her sexuality, the dryness, and how light and sacredness could exist in her world.

She thought of her aunt. Now there was a case. What was the hidden history, hidden reason, in that proper woman's past? She tried to remember what she knew about her. Could she even remember her name? She had been the sister, as Ruby recalled, of her mother's father. Her mother's maiden name had been Barth. The old woman, therefore, would have been a Barth. And her first name had been Gertrude; no, Gladys. Yes, that was it: Gladys Barth. And what had been the nature of her life? What had been her struggle? Well, to begin with, she had been the daughter of a preacher. That much Ruby knew for sure. Thin angry reed of a man. She had heard him once, had Ruby, when he was very old, in his 90's, and she a girl of 9 or 10, preaching with an upraised fist in the white church on the hill. Fire-and-brimstone sermon, full of weeping and gnashing and threats of perdition and eternal pain. She could see his lean face and accusative eyes, and could see her aunt's face beside it, a wider face, just as intense, which might have been called attractive were it not for how that anger and harshness had given it an air of gloom.

Yes, no doubt about it, old Miss Barth had had anger in her eyes, anger, in her face and bearing and in everything she said and did. This the dancer had never dwelled on before. Undeniable anger. But anger at what? Ruby struggled for an answer. Most likely, she thought, at her isolation. Most

likely, morose as that woman had been, she had gone her whole life without masculine attention. Unless she had been different when younger, but the story was that she had lived with her father most her life, her mother having died when she was a teen. He, in his fear of sin, had kept her pure behind closed doors. And so she had become a genuine spinster in the worst kind of way, a closed-up woman with no knowledge of the world outside of daytime Main Street and Wednesday and Sunday church. Then too, what had made her situation more grievous, as Ruby recalled, was the formal manner which she had never broke from in the slightest way, even with the circle of so-called friends who never seemed to regard her with any true affection or warmth. Inside of that shell of reserve, though, what had Gladys Barth really been like? How had she looked at herself? Ruby strained to gain some insight into her aunt's existence.

What came to her mind after a moment was an incident that had occurred several months after her father's death, when she had first moved in with her aunt. One day, after coming home from the dentist, Miss Barth had matter-of-factly announced that several teeth had been pulled, and, in the same unemotional way, opened her mouth to show what she said, owing to a lack of money, would be a permanent gap on one side. Then she had gone out by herself to the backyard where she had a garden—marigolds and irises, mostly—which she tended with exquisite care. Later, on going out to play, Ruby had come upon her and found her crying. More from curiosity than concern—already at that time there was enough friction between them to dull any tenderness that might otherwise have resulted from their proximity to one another—She had gone up to her to ask what was wrong. “I’m being foolish,” the old woman had replied. Ruby remembered distinctly that she had said that with bitterness in her voice, and had seemed startled when Ruby appeared, as if discovered in the midst of a shameful act. “Foolish and vain,” was what she had said, and something else—now it was coming back—about how it didn’t matter because she was so plain.

Ruby hadn't thought much about this incident when it had happened; this declaration had seemed like simply one more of the endless train of them that had proceeded from the general grimness and Biblical strictness which she disliked in her aunt. Now, however, as she looked back at it, she perceived in it a great sorrow and sense of insufficiency and unworthiness of love. And, wonder of wonders, she felt sorry for the old woman whom she had hated for years, and right there Ruby forgave her aunt for the injury which her uprightness had inflicted.

Again it seemed as if a great burden had dropped from her shoulders. She was very much aware that this had happened, and that it had happened, as Emma said, as the result of her forgiveness. She got up and walked a short distance further to the Chinese grocery store where she sat down again beneath a large bush with spade-shaped leaves and sweet-smelling blossoms. The smell of them was familiar, like something she remembered, only not quite the same. What was she thinking of? Lilacs. Yes. And there had been a lilac bush in her aunt's backyard, beyond the garden by the big gray garage that had once been a barn. All that was coming back to her now, and her childhood was returning too. She was no longer afraid of the pain it contained.

Her father was next. The mere thought of him sent a pang through her heart. In her mind she could see the apartment she had shared with him in the year before he died. In the kitchen was a coal stove; the table and chairs there were painted white, the walls blackened from the smoke that escaped when new coal was put on the fire. Next to the kitchen was the small room, actually a storage closet, where she had slept; the windows looked out to a trestle bridge, half-hidden by cottonwoods and poplars, that crossed a stream. How many times had she laid there and listened as a train rumbled past! How many times had she watched the gray smoke rising from the tall chimney of the power plant in the distance! And then, in the larger room on the other side of the kitchen, was the couch where her father, often in drunken confusion, had slept: her father, a slave of his

addiction, as Marcel had also been; devoted to the bottle yet hating it so much. And in his own way devoted to his daughter. She knew that too.

Still the liberties he had taken, the caresses never frankly sexual and never just fatherly either. She frowned. Setting aside for a moment the fact that he had been her father, what really, besides that, had he seen in her at that time? A child, of course. A person unspoiled by the cynicism and discouragement which, along with the bottle, had kept him down. Yes, that was what he had seen in her: something undefiled. He had seen his own kind of sacredness, in other words, and in his intoxication had wanted to touch it. But what else had he seen there? An image of his departed wife? Maybe that too he had seen; maybe he had tried to find in her, in her physical resemblance to her mother, a continuation in the flesh of the woman who had died. That was what in his drunkenness had surfaced from his tormented depths. Had it also been lust? Had it been lust distorted into some kind of contemptuous irredeemable form? No, she said to herself, what he had been trying to do, that self-hating, disappointed man, was to cheat the reality that had visited him with the death of his wife. Could she forgive him for those drunken excesses? Yes, that she could do.

With a sigh of relief she got up again and started walking slowly towards the wall. She glanced at the sky. The moon was high in the sky above the dark buildings, its outline blurred to her imperfect vision. She squinted hard; its silver sphere became more distinct. For an instant she studied it with furrowed brow, then returned once more to her deliberations. Who else needed to be forgiven? She ticked off the list of names in her mind: her father, her aunt, Costenzi, Marcel... And Lamott. Yes. Richard Lammot, the manager of the Garden. “Still what did he do? He fired me all right. But I had it coming. I was dancing bad.” She was making her way slowly towards the wall. “No, there’s more to it than that. The whole sexual routine. I mean, the general implication... I could have gone farther if I had done what he wanted... And all those years of dancing for next-to-nothing

when he was making a bundle." She went on for a while, cataloguing his abuses: small offenses, but serious in their cumulative effect, an effect which, she knew, was still falling on Lisa and the rest, falling on them from Lamott and others like him.

How then forgive him? She paused by a flowered yard about half-way down the block to the wall. How forgive him when he was helping to cause this effect which was doing harm to the few people she cared for? It could not be done. No, here what was required, she said to herself, was something else. Maybe better to call it justice. Yes, justice was what it was. There had to be some way to stand up for what was right, and to do that not from vindictiveness, not from hatred or bitterness or anger, but simply out of a desire to create a situation that was fair. She thought again of the association of dancers which Emma Mueller had mentioned, and how to achieve anything from an idealistic idea like that would require most of all a level-headed approach, the ability to see both sides and act with firmness and prudence. And, where the Strip was concerned, who more had knowledge of all the factors than she herself? Who more had the harshness of experience to proceed with toughness and restraint? She clenched her fist. This too was a part of her path, a part of her chi'ih; this too her life had prepared her to do. And she would do it with a sense of fairness. She started walking again.

So, aside from Lamott, was everyone forgiven? Towards whom did she still feel anger? Who still stood in the way of her emergence? Who was preventing her yet from becoming a person who could be a good influence on others? She reached the wall and looked off. It was now close to morning; already there was a line of glowing blue on the eastern horizon. She rested her elbows on the wall, gazed out to the city below her where now, except for in a few downtown buildings, all the windows were dark. Again she thought to herself that somehow or another she had gone from what she had been as a child and young woman to what she was now, a woman of the night. And with that she realized that there was another person yet to be forgiven, a

person who to such an extent had become a part of this landscape that her whole being was tied up in it: Ruby Ellington, herself. Towards no one had she felt such anger as towards herself. Now the final task in this night of confrontation, this night of emergence, was clear: she had to forgive herself for whatever she had been unable to forgive herself before. She had to accept the totality of what she had been.

What was it exactly, she asked herself, which she had in the past found so hard to forgive? Was it the deaths? Yes, them to a certain extent, though she had, at the house, already accepted the role of those deaths in her life. So what remained? An assortment of things came at once to mind. Indeed, the whole course of her life from childhood onward seemed wrong. But, regardless of what her life had been, she said to herself, she had to accept and forgive. She could not proceed until this was accomplished. How had she done it for the others whom she had just forgiven? To begin with, by understanding the nature of their lives. Understanding was the key. And, if that was true, then she had to try to understand herself, understand her own life as it had developed.

She kept staring at the scene below the hill, thinking once more that it was uniquely tied in with her whole existence, with her whole substance and meaning. Who more than herself, she mused, could be so integrally connected with what she saw before her? The street below her was dark; the signs on the clubs were out for the night; but she could imagine the Strip as she had seen it many times, as she had seen it just a few hours before, with all the neon signs flashing, the sidewalks crowded with people, the streets packed with honking cars. This was her proper domain; there could be no doubt anymore that she was part and parcel of this world. How, though, had this come about? Had she ever made a formal decision to take up this life? No, not a definite decision; it had come about, it seemed, as the result of small changes in situation that had led, as in overlapping circles, from one set of circumstances to another. What had these overlapping circles, these sets of circumstances, been? She

wanted so much to understand how Ruby Ellington, the dancer, former dancer, had become what she was.

She closed her eyes. Where was the place to begin? In her mind she tried to arrive at some point of origin, and found herself again at the dam where in her dream she had seen herself as a girl. Now she could see the setting more distinctly, see it almost as vividly as if it were real. The sun glittered from the trees on the red-brown slopes. In the distance the reservoir gleamed. The golden stream that poured from the base of the dam wound through the woods out of sight. Such a marvelous scene, so free of the heaviness and blurriness of outline which she had known since the beginning of the dryness. She just wanted to be there as fully as she once had been. For a moment she drank in the scene. Then the girl whom she had recognized as herself was standing before her. Once more, as in her dream, she was struck by the hope and joy in the girl's green eyes, such hope and joy that those eyes seemed transfused with the light all around in the crystalline air.

And yet what she could see there also was disappointment and hurt: the same disappointment and hurt which she had seen in her dream and which had given the girl such a waif-like appearance; only now it made a deeper impression on her. How had this hurt come to pass? How had that initial yearning, that initial closeness to light, been worn away and lost? If only she could understand this, she said to herself, then perhaps she could accept the hurt, that had taken place, perhaps she could understand what she had become, perhaps she could figure out once for all what could be good and sacred in her life

Again she closed her eyes. Again she asked herself how that hurt and disappointment had come to pass. And the scene which came to her now was one when she was younger even than she had been at the dam, only 3 years of age. It was the night of her mother's death. Through a half-open door she could see her parents in a small room in which the only light was from the lamp at the side of the bed. Her father was leaning over her mother, saying, "Winnie, wake up." That was all she could remember. What had happened

after that she couldn't recall. But that damage had been done there—damage, ironically, for which no one was to blame—could not be denied. So that was where it had begun, that wearing away. That was where the yearning had been twisted into something with a sense of loss.

Then all those years of shameful existence in unkempt apartments smelling of booze, the existence in which her father had seemed so inextricably caught and bogged down, years during which she had looked at such envy at girls who had mothers, at girls who had everything which in her mind she associated with maternal care: packed lunches in bags, houses with flowered curtains and backyard swings, windows that glowed with a cheerful light which, try though she had, she could not project into her father's world. Then too all his insecure affections, including not only those which in retrospect she recognized as sick, but also the genuine kindness, the dolls, the drunken words heavy with sorrow, guilt and love. Then, after that, her father's quiet unattended funeral. That had been another blow: to realize for sure what she had suspected all along, that few people held him dear or regarded him as a friend. He had become something to her in his casket, in the middle of that empty room where only a few distant relatives had dutifully gathered, that she had never seen him for before that: a pariah, an outcast. And so, therefore, was she; or at least so she had reasoned in that time of mourning when relief and loss had blended so confusedly into the dull aware- ness that, whatever he had been, he was gone.

Then the difficult transition from his disorderly existence, in which religion had seldom been mentioned or alluded to with scorn, to her aunt's rigid world of moral scruples and meretricious prayer: that frowning face from which came nothing but platitudes and rebuke; the words heard in the hall, "Just like her father. Bound for no good."

Even then, however, the hope, the yearning, hadn't died out. It had sprung up again like a resilient flower. She thought back to the day when she had at last mustered up enough courage to leave, the day when she had gotten a ride with a friend and her parents to another town where the

county fair was being held, then, instead of going to the fair, walked out to the edge of town and stuck out her thumb, as some others had instructed her to do. Then all those years on the road. What they were now, she mused, was nothing more than a collage of open places, youthful faces, strong masculine arms.

Strong masculine arms. That was something else that had happened, she noted to herself, that had effected the yearning. Despite how her aunt had said again and again that she was evil, she had, in fact, through her teenage years, avoided masculine arms of any kind, much more so than her friends; and yet she had sensed—was this not true?—that her own body, because her father had touched it, was not as pure as the bodies of other girls her age. And so she had been all the more intent on keeping what purity she had. This she remembered well. But on the road it was different. Her father, her aunt, the little town on the Kansas plains, within a few days, had seemed far away. And every man she met, it seemed, had come on to her in some subtle or not so subtle way, while at the same time a great curiosity had swelled up inside her, a curiosity to know. Two days out, in Colorado, she had allowed a blond youth with a backpack to hold her. But he came on too quickly; she fought him off. Then, a few days later, with the brown hills of California wavering in the heat, she had been picked up by another fellow, this one wearing a suit and driving a Porsche, and older and shrewder enough to approach more slowly. In Barstow they had stopped for dinner in a dimly-lit restaurant where an elegant dinner was preceded by wine. Then, with her head still spinning, they had left again for L.A., cruising down an eight-lane freeway through the gleaming reflections of white and red vehicle lights on the mirror-like concrete surface wet with rain. All night long they had rode in the pouring rain, talking about reincarnation and how they would come back if they could. She would have liked to be a tree, she had said, with the wind pushing against her. Then in L.A. they had gotten off the freeway in a town by the ocean where the rain came down so hard the streets looked like rivers. All night long they had kissed and embraced with the rain pounding

on the roof above them. Then in the morning the sun had broken out. The blue sky had stretched beyond the ocean horizon. It was almost as if those rivers in the streets had run into the sky and gotten swallowed up by it. And just like that her childhood was gone. Just like that she had her purity no more.

Had it happened as simply as that? Had that too been a hurt? Had that too worn away at the light and the yearning? No, as she recalled, the yearning after that had just grown stronger. The sweetness, the light, the hope, had all grown stronger. The gloom of her parents' deaths, the darkness of the existence she had shared with her father, the containment of her aunt's self-righteous world, had been thrust aside by something fiercer, by some great force within her, some great zest for life. Perhaps that great force had been herself emerging for the first time; perhaps that had been the first, real manifestation of her own life-force, her chi'ih. One man had followed another; the next after that fellow in the Porsche a month or so later; then several in close succession, men whose names she now couldn't remember; then one she had lived with for a couple of months, a frantic kid, already an alcoholic, who had pumped gas in a small town in the San Joaquin Valley. Then truck drivers, hippies. All carefully selected. But so many men. She had found some deep richness in sexual contact—had she not? —which had pervaded everything, which had made the world glow. Or maybe where that glow had come from was from the beauty of the places she had passed: the soft greenness of the hills with the ocean just beyond.

But why was she so hesitant, she asked herself, to admit that that had been a beautiful time? Had it been a beautiful time? Yes, it had been marked overall by such a reverence for life around her. She had been so friendly then, had spoken to everyone she met on the road, had looked forward to the sunrise each morning, the new experiences that each day would bring; she had treated no one with condescension, had attempted to foist on no one her own opinions and views, given everyone the benefit of the doubt; she had truly loved every day. She saw herself standing on the freeway on-

ramp, her red hair blowing in the wind. Then she too, as Lisa did now, had had the glowing brilliance of youth. That whole period had been suffused throughout with such freedom and hope. When had that ended? When had that been worn down, that something which had reasserted itself against the darkness and restrictions of her childhood? When had her childhood world come once more to the fore? When had she taken on once more her father's gloom, her aunt's containment?

She recalled the summer when she had returned to L.A. a second time, the summer when she had met Brian Harro and gone with him to Big Sur. Six years had gone by since she had left Kansas, exciting years in which she had seen many places, met many people. And yet, when she had arrived there, as she remembered, she had had nowhere to go, had wandered around until she came to Sunset Strip. So lonely she had been. In all these memories of those years, had she forgotten the terrible loneliness which she had felt even in the midst of her freedom? Had she forgotten the walks by herself through little towns, how she had looked at the lighted windows in the houses and wished so much that one such house could be her own, that she could walk in the door of that house and be accepted and feel at home? Had she forgotten the anger she had felt so often during sex, the anger at being used and wanting to be used in order to get the affection she needed so much? Had she forgotten how, on those frequent occasions when of her own accord she had left one lover or another, she had done that aware that the greatest hurt in that separation was falling on herself? Had she forgotten how much she had yearned to be not just fucked but really loved?

Still she had denied herself that love even when it had been there for the asking. With only one person had she sought it at that time, with Brian Harro, when after several months alone on Sunset Strip hanging out in parking, lots and pool halls her loneliness had sunk in deeper than ever before. With him, for the first time, she had sought something more than isolated experiences of closeness and affection; she had sought something which would intensify

and grow. She thought of herself at Big Sur in the arms of that young man who had meant so much to her then and whose handsome face she could no longer picture clearly in her mind, remembered how she and this soul mate of that period of freedom had walked along the beach at night, watching the silver line of moonlight that traveled along the crests of the waves as they rushed to the shore. She had loved him so much; such a pure uncluttered love she had given to him for a while.

Why then had he left her? In all her dealings with men he was the only one who had spurned her. Had she cared too much? Had she tried to place on him the dreams of permanent love and motherhood and of having a niche in the world which up to then she had tried to place on no one else? Was that what had happened? Had she scared him away? Or had he seen in her, because of what she had told him, what none of the other men had seen, that she was hopelessly defiled, that even as a girl she had been defiled? And, in the years after that, had she not known, always known, that the defilement was there? Had she not suspected that any man would see it whom she really let inside her? There had still been moments of abandonment, moments of ecstasy, true; but everything after that was already contained in the darkness which had lurked in the background. Why had she not understood this before? Why had she not understood how contaminated and guilty she had felt? Had this not been the case even with Marcel, though she had been as loyal to him as a devoted wife? And then the Strip: the performances in the flashing light; the exposure which she had defended to herself, but which in the back of her mind she had regarded as shameful; the deaths; the sense of defilement and guilt turning into the dryness. Yes, that was what had happened; the guilt and the darkness had turned into the dryness, become one and the same with it, and that was what had made the atmosphere so heavy around her. She had tried so hard to hold herself off from the sordidness of the Strip, tried so hard to become pure again, undefiled, untouched, had forgotten how far the touching went back. Had she not known in her heart, however, that her father’s caresses could

not be so easily shrugged off, that they would return to plague her? As in fact they had, with the sense of contamination which she had gotten from that night with Costenzi. And so the dryness had acquired the redness, the blood.

But it had not begun with him. It had not begun with the Strip. It had not begun with the deaths, not begun with her promiscuous youth. That was the central point to remember; it went way back; it was there already in her childhood, that sense of defilement which she had always fought. And she had fought it. She had cared. She had striven against that defilement from the start. Even in the midst of the worst she had gone through, the worse she had done, she had been searching for something, searching for a way out of that defilement, searching for the same thing that Ellen Serven and Emma Mueller and Lisa Gwerti had searched for, for some sort of sacredness, some sort of good. All had striven in their own ways, within their own paths, within their own chi'ih's. Ellen had gone by the way of churches and of acceptance of her disease; Emma by the way of disappointment in marriage, reconciliation with her past, undramatized devotion to the welfare of others; Lisa by the way of her exotic ideas. All were striving. As she, Ruby Ellington, would strive.

Now she had a clearer idea than ever before of the nature of her life, the nature of her struggle. Her struggle had been against that sense of contamination. Her struggle had been with the way her body felt. From her father's touching, to the touching of the men she had slept with, to her routines on the Strip, to the dryness, she had struggled with her body in a uniquely intimate way. And, far more than the average person, she had struggled with her sexuality too; it had become for her a form of expression, a form of searching. Exactly the sexual experience, her nearness to it, was what had made her life different from her childhood on. This, oddly enough, had been her way of being in the world and learning about it; this had been her chi'ih. Had she not found something sacred in those arms? Had she not found something holy in that corporal life? All that had been for

some purpose; she felt this now so strongly. All that had been part of the striving, part of what had given her any wisdom or capacity for goodness she possessed. Even her promiscuousness had been a part of it—was this not true?—a part of her particular journey, her individual path to the sacred. Was there not something noble, after all, in this life which had gone not through the easy path of moral squeamishness and caution, but through the more arduous and rock-bottom path of encounter with the passions of the world? Could it be that even in carnal knowledge, even in sex for and of itself, there was a path to the sacred, there was something holy?

She looked off to the dark hills of the city. On the far side of the bay the eastern horizon was ablaze with orange and red. Yes, even in carnal knowledge, she responded, and perhaps in the most perverse of things, there were paths to the sacred. Had she not thought of this before? Had she not seen in the peculiar coloring of the night a peculiar sort of message? Had she not sensed a hidden meaning, a hidden sacredness, behind the flashing lights and signs? She remembered what Lisa Gwerti had said: “Everything has meaning.”

Maybe that was the mystery of the city night which she had tried to understand: that the night had a meaning, that it led to the sacred as much as the day. Even on the Strip there was something sacred. Was there not as much striving here, as much elevation of the heart and soul, as in any place where men and women gathered? All the energy here, did it not aspire to something which was more than passion, more than lust? The men who came to the clubs, what really were they seeking? Were they not trying to find here, in the flesh, some evidence of the sacredness which they had lost, the sacredness which pervaded all existence? Was there not something sacred in their desires, the desires which before she had dismissed with such contempt? Was there not something sacred, something holy, in the coffee shops, the traffic, the lights? Was there not a song here, a great discordant song, as strong and as sanctified as any pious mouthings or wavings of hands?

Yes, she thought to herself, there was a sacredness here, which wasn't to say that it was better than any other kind of sacredness, just to say that it wasn't less. It was just to say that it was a particular kind of sacredness which she herself knew more about, and towards which she could strive with more assurance. As for what, beyond that, the object of this striving could be, she would not say the words which could not be spoken. All she knew was that here too there was a sacredness of some kind. This had been and would be the sacredness in her life, not a sacredness divorced from the reality of the world, but accomplished in its midst, among the everyday inter action of human beings. This is what she had been looking for, her right and proper path. And in the very rightness of it, the felt-need and goodness and kinship of it, there was a holiness and value and maybe even a purity which could not be found among those who were self-consciously pure.

The sun, a glowing sphere of orange, had just appeared above the cities on the far side of the bay. She saw its reflection on the windows behind her on the hill, glowing like fire. Then this fiery brilliance grew softer. The light, in concentric circles, expanded towards her, enclosing first the distant shore by the other side of the bridge, then the island in the bay at the bridge's center, then the pillars of the bridge on its proximal side, then the buildings below her on the Strip. All of this within her range of vision, she thought as she watched the light fan out—those faraway hills, above which rose the green dome of Mount Diablo, thirty miles to the east; the now more clearly-visible cities on the other side of the bay, a thin line of white, brown, and green between the vastnesses of sky and water above and below them; the looming span of the bridge; the hills and streets around her, from which now the hum of traffic could be heard;—all of this was real.

And she too Ruby Ellington was real. Her life was real. She ran her fingers over the rough surface of the wall. As real as this stone, as solid as it. Yes, all of this was real. And connected together, a single fabric of which she was a living part.

She blinked her eyes and noticed, to her amazement, that her vision was no longer blurred. For an instant it scared her to see so distinctly. Then she gazed out once more, newly impressed by the immensity and oneness of the scene before her: land, sky, and human constructions of one sort or another stretching for miles on all sides. She could feel the wind on her face. Yes, all this was real. What a pleasure to see it! What a pleasure to drink it in!

To have the air all around her, a light-bearing sea! She stood up and stretched out her arms as if to take in the light that was expanding towards her. Yes, this was her world. How beautiful it was.

And the light would continue. She would live in darkness, in containment, no more. Even in the night it would continue, in the sacredness she had found there, in the flashing lights, the commotion of the city. And it would continue in her friendships, her work, in the warmth of kinship which she had discovered. The light would continue and so would the sweetness and hope which she had known as a girl. She brought her hands together. Could she accept what she had been? Could she accept what she would be? Yes, she could accept it, she said. And it seemed when she did that the light entered inside her. She no longer felt dry, she no longer felt defiled. The red-toned dryness was gone.

So it would be an emergence indeed! Well, thank Lisa Gwerti for that. Thank Emma Mueller. Thank Amy Terner. Thank Joe Costenzi who had taken her to the most painful depths. Thank Ellen Serven for her idea of the sacred. Thank Ellen's God, whoever He was; though she had a feeling that, if there was such a God, than He was a God who accepted all and refuted nothing, a God for whom good and evil were mirror images of one another, and towards whom, even in worlds which the self-righteous regarded as unholy, there were paths as various in form as human beings were various and complex.

With an inner joy she began walking down the hill. Was the dryness really gone? Could she still feel it in her back and limbs? Yes, she could faintly feel it, but it seemed more distant, seemed like no more than the normal friction that

accompanied movement. And she no longer had a dry feeling in her womb. That too had vanished. She kept looking at the street below her, saying, “Well, all right, then, this will be my new life. Right here, right now. Just wait and see what Ruby Ellington will do.”

She was imagining that all of her physical ills had just like that left her forever. But by the time she got to the corner below the hill by the restaurant, the scene had changed. The Strip she saw now, from closer range, with the sun higher in the sky, was not the Strip of the night with its flashing signs, not the Strip of her encounter, enshrouded in darkness, not the Strip of a half-hour before, transfigured by the magic of dawn, relieved against the orange of the bay. Now, in the indifferent light of day, the buildings before her, revealed in their smallness and imperfection, looked naked, almost ugly, and devoid of meaning.

Once more she felt a strain in the back of her legs. With a start she realized that the insights which she had just arrived at were already slipping from her, that she would need to regain them again and again. “So this won’t be easy,” she said to herself. “This won’t be done in a single step.”

Like a saint before a vision she stood there, her lovely face raised up, her red hair blown back by the wind, as if expecting to find in this matter-of-fact urban scene some further dimension as yet undefined.

John Grafton

1

John Grafton arrived in San Francisco with an orange pack on his back and a red bandanna around his shoulder-length brown hair. In his hip pocket, where he could feel them to make sure they were still there, were his traveler's checks, two books of them, each worth a hundred dollars. For a month he stayed in the downtown YMCA, which he liked because he could work out at the gym free of charge. Then he moved down the block to a studio apartment in a three-story gray building managed by the middle-aged Arab who worked as the night clerk in the Y. In exchange for vacuuming the front lobby and hosing off the sidewalk a couple of times a week, he received a discount on his rent. Even so, his rent was still $115 a month, and he worried all the time about money and how to get a good job.

He was a thin fellow in his early 20's with clear brown eyes, handsome features, a face long and thin as he was, and a dreamy absent-minded look. Everything about him was intense; he spoke with exaggerated gestures, shaping his lips as though about to stutter, but he never actually stuttered and seldom spoke unless addressed or under the burden of some intimate matter that just had to be said. His father, whom he had feared more than loved, had died when he was 14; his mother, with whom he had been very close, had died when he was 18 and had just finished high school. Since then, after a brief stint at a community college, he had wandered around from town to town, doing odd jobs and staying with people he met on the road. Finally, after returning for several months to his home town in Nebraska, he had come out West with no idea, really, what he wanted to do, except that he had a vague notion that he might be good at some kind of art. He had done a pencil sketch in his last year of high school which had won him an award, his only distinction in those years, and since then had done sketches in the 3 X 5 notebook that he always had with him. But he was unsure of his talent and kept all this to himself.

For a while he worked in a mattress liquidation

warehouse, unloading truckfuls of unmatching mattresses that came up from some bigger warehouse in L.A. The money per hour was all right; but he could only work when the shipments arrived, and so, to his distress, wound up using part of his traveler's checks to help pay his rent. He never had enough cash to go out for an evening of fun or buy decent food; he ate mostly bananas, which at this time, in spring of 1978, were selling for thirty cents a pound. To supplement his diet he stole cottage cheese and shrimp, which he hid in his armpit and snuck out of the store under his zipped-up Army jacket. At last he got a job on the dishwashing line in an insurance company employee cafeteria where, in addition to steady part-time work, he received a free lunch. But he still kept taking the cottage cheese and shrimp, stealing almost from habit, and without the sense of right and wrong that he would have had if the theft had occurred on a more personal basis.

The insurance company where he worked was on the side of Nob Hill above Chinatown and the financial district. The cafeteria was on the fifth floor. During his breaks he went out on the outdoor walkway behind the men's locker, room and looked out at the city. Beyond the curled eaves of the Chinatown buildings and immense high rises of the downtown area, the blue-green expanse of the bay could be seen. Now and then a ship passed by, cutting a thin white line in the placid water. He had never lived in a big city before. At night he took long walks by himself; there was no end, it seemed, to the nooks and crannies of the crowded hills. As he walked along, he thought about various art projects that he planned to do when the moment was right—sketches and paintings that would capture the essence of the city, and especially of the city at night, with its flashing lights and unnatural skies, where from the first he found a strange beauty which he had never known before.

In spite of his excitement about being in a new place, however, he was often lonely. He had no close friends and was too quiet and self-preoccupied to talk very much to the people at work. Sometimes he went downstairs in his apartment building and visited the Arab manager who, when

in a genial mood, fixed rice pilaf and humous and talked for hours on end about how his brother in Egypt was a Coptic bishop and he himself was a lawyer who had lost faith in the legal profession and turned to real estate instead. All of which John Grafton accepted with suspended disbelief until he was arrested for shoplifting shrimp, and the Arab, whom he had confided in at the last minute, showed up in court in a rumpled gray suit and managed to have the charges commuted to disturbing the peace. To have been spared the ordeal of jail was a great relief, but the Arab was too condescending to be a real friend. Young Grafton still felt a constant need for intimacy of some kind, and he felt like he was somehow sinking down in the city and being overcome by forces he couldn't understand.

One foggy night when he was out walking along, beset as never before by this sense of losing his grasp and being made by the city into something he didn't want to be, he found himself on top of Nob Hill where there was an immense Gothic cathedral, a square park bordered by small trees, and several well-lighted elegant hotels. Cabs rushed in and out of the courtyards in front of the hotels; the sidewalks were crowded with well-dressed people.

With his thin sad face inclined to one side, and his long hands buried deep in the pockets of his Army jacket, where he had the couple dollars in change that he had allotted himself for the night, John Grafton watched the smiling men in tailored suits as they got out of expensive cars and led beautiful women through pillared doorways; and he suddenly felt forlorn, and thought to himself that all his artistic dreams were just a delusion which he used to keep himself from admitting that, when it came right down to it, he amounted to nothing.

Feeling worthless and lonely, he left the hotels, and, moving quickly, with his habitual long athletic strides, he headed down the hill towards the fog-covered downtown buildings at its base. After going two blocks down the steep incline, and to his surprise passing the insurance company where he worked, he arrived at the main street of Chinatown which was dark and deserted. At the same intersection was

an old redbrick church with a religious bookstore that faced the street. He was looking at the books in the window when he heard music, some kind of exuberant melody that sounded foreign. Turning in the direction from which it was coming, he noticed that the basement door of the church was ajar and there was a light inside. He went over to the door and found a poster outside it: “Looking for friends? Join us for folk-dancing every Friday from 8 to 12.” Though he was always moving, always active, he had never tried dancing of any sort and thought of himself as too clumsy to do it well. But he was in such a desperate mood that, after a moment of hesitation, he pushed through the door.

A plain young woman was sitting at a card table just inside. “How much does this cost?” he asked her. “One dollar,” she responded, lowering her eyes. He peered into the room, which was a small gymnasium with a tiny stage at the far end, and observed that, among the twenty or so people there, who were dancing around in a long line to music coming from a phonograph on another card table by the stage, was only one pretty woman; and she had the attention of a stocky man in knee-high socks and shorts. In front of the line was a wiry, bearded, affable-looking fellow who danced with nimble movements, smiling at the others as he brought the front of the line back towards those at the end. Behind him was a white-haired couple who seemed too refined to be dancing at all. Then came two dark women in saris, a tiny mini-skirted creature with too much make-up, a black-haired amazon in boots who looked like a Russian peasant, and an odd assortment of others who were mostly out-of-step and seemed ill-at-ease. Bringing up the rear, with the pretty woman just before him, was the bruiser in shorts. He clearly regarded himself as more adept than the rest of the dancers, and kept throwing in little quick-footed flourishes here and there, and slapping his thigh with his hand.

All of this John Grafton took in in an instant before even reaching for his money, and the sight of it was enough to give him second thoughts. But, feeling too sheepish to leave after coming through the door, which had swung shut behind him, he carefully took out four quarters and placed them in

the shy woman's hand.

Now the immediate question that faced him was where to go to be as unnoticeable as he could. In the opposite corner of the room, next to a third table with coffee and cookies, were several people in the shadows who could hardly be seen. That seemed like the place for non-dancers to hide. Holding his thin shoulders stiffly, and conscious at every step of his heavy, unnatural walk, he crossed the floor and, heaving a sigh of relief, drew up to the first of the non-dancers, a little man with glasses. Out of politeness he nodded hello. The little fellow, acutely embarrassed by his nod, seemed to shrink within his body, which was larger in the center like the body of a bird. Grieved that he had committed some kind of social indiscretion, Grafton turned away. With his hands in his pockets, he withdrew into the shadows, and gazed with a puzzled expression at the motley line of dancers as it wound round and round in the bare-walled room.

The music came to a stop. There was a brief interval in which the dancers stretched and rearranged themselves in the line. Then another tune began, a more spirited one that had the stocky prima donna waving a handkerchief above his head and clicking his heels together behind him. Once again the bearded man was leading the dance with an exquisite control that no one else in the room came near to matching. As he brought the line close to Grafton he smiled. Grafton nodded and looked away. Then a heavy-set woman in a full-pleated skirt with a large wrinkled face, as she came past him, reached for his hand. The line broke for a moment to let him in.

One, two, three. Skip. One, two, three. Skip. One, two, three. Skip. Skip. Turn. He tried very hard to follow along and almost succeeded. But he kept thinking to himself that never in his life had he done anything more foolish. He just wanted to leave. The dance came to a halt. Not knowing what to say to the woman who had seized his hand, he bent to the floor to tie his shoes. Then the music resumed, a different dance. One, two. Turn. One, two. Turn. One, two. One, two. Skip, skip. Turn. His feet kept sticking to the floor.

Again the music stopped. Someone called for a break. Ever so slowly he made a move for the door, only to be intercepted by the smiling leader in the middle of the room.

"Well, you're a new face," said the leader, bowing and then laughing at his bow, as if to say that a bow was not actually the proper thing to do, but then again, in these circumstances, what was?

"Yes, very new," John Grafton replied, leaning towards the other man with an intensity all out of proportion to the occasion, and preceding his remark with a circular motion of his hand, as though drawing the words from his mouth on a string. "This is the first big city I've lived in. I've only been here six months."

"And I can just imagine," the bearded man shot back, "you've already adopted some new urbane identity to go along with your new urban existence." His glowing face and merry eyes gave the impression that at every moment he expected some amusing turn of events. "And here you are in your new glory, dancing up a storm!"

Grafton smiled and shook his head with his mouth wide open while he tapped his index finger at him in agreement and stood like a farmer with his big feet far apart. He could think of no response, and would have stood in this position for another half-minute, growing more and more embarrassed by his speechlessness, and more and more blank-minded and intense, had not someone called out for another dance.

To make a subtle exit now seemed impossible to do. The leader winked and nodded at the forming line. John Grafton shrugged his shoulders and raised his hands in a wordless gesture of submission. Together they headed towards the other side of the gym—Grafton walking stiffly with his thin face contorted in anticipation of some new remark he might have to respond to; the bearded man, who soon introduced himself as David Howard, gliding across the floor with graceful steps, while, never pausing for breath, he chattered away with the same springiness in his voice as he had in his feet.

"And have you done this kind of dancing before? Not

this kind precisely? Well, who could tell? How you're tripping around like a pro! And you look so athletic! I can just imagine you've been racing up and down the hills like a genuine madman. Please tell me you don't! I'm a weakling myself. A rush to the mailbox and I'm ready to die! But I'm at peace with my softness. It's so comfortable, you know. I take the buses up the hills, and when I'm in a hurry roll down. But don't believe it! I'm too skinny to roll."

The music started again. David Howard took Grafton's hand. Watching his sure-footed movements, Grafton felt more at ease than before. All the while they were dancing, the bearded man kept up a light banter. Grafton could think of little to say to his remarks, but he felt as if there was no need to respond very much. The few comments he made Howard turned into jokes; he was not as aware of his slowness as he normally was. Through several dances he continued this way, for the first time really enjoying the motion. Then some- one called out it was time to close. Everyone went for their coats. He parted from Howard, who once more bowed with a laugh, and went for his jacket which in the middle of a dance he had thrown over a chair.

Returning in a moment with his jacket slung over his shoulder, he saw that David Howard was engaged in a conversation with a young bald-headed fellow in ragged jeans. For several minutes he waited to say goodbye but the bearded man was looking in another direction. He went out of the church by himself and stood on the corner, scanning the dark street for a cable car or bus. Suddenly again he felt terribly lonely. He dreaded going home by himself to his grim little apartment. The thought of wandering alone on the streets was equally unpleasant. So then wait for Howard and the others to come out of the church, he said to himself. But he was afraid that this would be an imposition; he was thoroughly convinced that no one could find his company of interest. With a sigh he crossed the street to start climbing the hill.

A voice called out behind him. It was David Howard, who, with his bald friend, was just leaving the church. "We're off for Market Street," he cried. "The trolleys run all

night."

"Well, I'm going to the Tenderloin."

"They all run up that way."

He fell in beside them, sure in his own mind that only out of courtesy had they invited him along. All the shops in Chinatown were closed. Buddhas stared out from displays of jade jewelry and carvings and painted tea sets and fans. At the gate of Chinatown they passed a hamburger joint crowded with seedy clientele. Then they headed through the financial district where there was no activity at all. A cab roared by with a clunky U-joint that sounded as if it would fall off at any minute. They all laughed at that. The bald-headed man, who soon introduced himself as Kevin, without giving a last name, was as high-spirited as David Howard, but not as quick-witted. Now and then, when Howard made a humorous remark, he repeated it or added some small variation, and raised back his wide, homely face in a loud guffaw.

John Grafton strode beside them with his hands in his pockets, smiling at the jokes but never offering any comments of his own or laughing aloud. He felt good in a way because he had started out the night so lonely, and now was with these two potential friends; he was starting to think they really wanted him along. At the same time he couldn't help observing with mild alarm that Howard and Kevin were becoming more and more affectionate to one another and now were traveling arm in arm. The thought entered his mind that maybe they were gay. He knew nothing about the gay world except for what he had seen of it walking the streets by himself. He neither regarded himself as gay or possibly gay, nor felt repulsed by people who were. He had no definite feelings towards gayness beyond the same curiosity which he felt towards everything unknown in his new surroundings. About sex in general, however, his limited experience having been traumatic, he was anxious and confused. To make matters worse, he was extremely naive and painfully aware of his ignorance.

Soon David Howard, who was walking in the middle, threw his arm around Grafton too. He felt odd being held in

this way, but made no attempt to draw away from his companion's arm. Then, as they were standing on the safety island on Market Street, looking down towards the Ferry Building for the single light of a trolley or tram, he noticed that Kevin's pants were unzipped, and that, since he was wearing no underpants, his private parts were clearly in view. That had to be a slip-up, he thought; for it to be on purpose seemed incredibly crude. He kept wondering which it was, then saw the youth's hand make its way to the opening and hover there without tugging on the zipper.

"So they're gay all right," he said to himself; and, with the same mixed excitement and foreboding which he felt towards so much in his new city life, he peered at their faces more closely as if to discern in them something not present in the faces of people who led normal lives.

As a trolley approached, Kevin zipped up his pants. They got on together and took a seat in the back. A black dude in a turban was sitting not far from them with his soundbox blaring and smoking a joint. The operator didn't seem to mind. All the passengers were young. John Grafton stared out the window at the buildings and lights. Did he really want to go home by himself? No, what he wanted to do was to keep moving somehow through the city's darkness. In his apartment was nothing of interest. Here in the city night, however, was something he was meant to find. And how different it was to be seeing all these sights and sounds in the company of other people. Whether they were gay or not seemed unimportant. He wanted to stay with them for a while, keep listening and looking. But he could already see, a half-block ahead, the corner where he had to get off. He reached for the cord.

David Howard touched his arm. "You could come over to my place for some wine and more dancing. I don't know about you, by my eyes won't close until they see the setting sun."

Grafton hesitated a moment, not sure if he was getting himself in some kind of situation he had best avoid. But he had the next day off, these young men seemed basically all right. He had no reason, really, not to say yes. And he felt so

curious about them. He nodded assent.

They got off the trolley by a supermarket that was closed and headed up a dark narrow alley to the building where Howard lived, a four-story structure with a red-rugged lobby with fake marble pillars and gilded wall-lamps.

His three rooms, paneled with artificial oak, were cluttered with records, plants, articles of clothing, newspapers, magazines, pads of paper, and well-used books, that, like those in a bookcase on the far wall, were mostly on philosophical and religious subjects.

Howard brought out some wine, turned on the stereo, and began looking through his records for folk music of one sort or another. Soon the three of them were dancing around in the small living room and adjoining bedroom, which, since there was no wall between them, formed a large area with three windows on one side that faced the alley where they'd walked. Again Grafton noticed that Kevin's pants were unzipped, and again he regarded this with more curiosity than offense.

After the second tune ended, the two men exchanged a mouth-to-mouth kiss. Young Grafton had never seen men kissing before. He found it profoundly disturbing. All through the next dance he considered in his mind how to make the least awkward exit. The thought occurred to him that he could simply excuse himself to go to the bathroom, which was near the door, then slip out unseen. But his Army jacket was on the other side of the room by the couch. To leave that behind would be a major loss.

Another dance went by. A fourth started up. The men paused in the middle for a more passionate kiss, and David Howard took Grafton's hand as if to include him in the display of affection. He felt confused and afraid. He could hardly wait for the music to end. When at last it did he took a deep breath and with no explanation went to the couch for his jacket and turned around and shrugged.

"Leaving so soon?" Howard exclaimed, coming across to him with light feminine steps. "We've offended you, I'm afraid."

Grafton stood with his jacket in both hands, his mouth

forming a sound which was long in emerging and which he finally brought forth from his mouth with a downward motion of his arms, his sad face full of the struggle of speaking. “No, no, David... You didn’t offend... No, no, I just gotta get home.” He could not talk without being overwhelmed with a sense of his deficiency. He was deeply sorry now for having caused such an awkward confrontation. He had already laid the entire blame for it on himself.

Howard reached towards him with concern in his large gray eyes. There was no merriness in them now. They had become all at once serious and pained, as though reflecting the distress in Grafton’s face. “I assumed, you know... I’m sorry.” He accompanied him to the door. “I hope you won’t take this as canceling out our good time together. We did have a good time. It would be so nice if you stopped at the church next Friday.”

Grafton hesitated, then promised to be at the church on the coming Friday. With his jacket over his shoulder, his mind still buzzing from the events of the evening, he headed down the steps, through the red-rugged lobby, and out to the alley. Walking quickly, with his head bowed in thought, he passed between the dark buildings, and turned down Market Street where no trolley could be seen. In the distance, relieved against a late-night purple sky, the downtown buildings floated in fog. How strange it was, he mused to himself, that he had come to this city alone, and now was hiking down this street in a part of the city he’d never been in before, having spent the evening with two homosexual men.

Now that he was by himself once more he again felt lonely. It struck him, as it sometimes did when he was alone, that he was a person who, unlike most others, shared nothing at all of what went on inside him. Thus it had always been. Even in his boyhood he had been a loner, regarded by adults and children alike as somewhat odd. His home life too had been far from ideal. All through his childhood he had witnessed vicious arguments between his parents, with his mother the constant victim. He had never actually seen his father beating his mother, but he had heard his father’s

warnings and seen the results. His mother he had regarded as a kind of saint, sacrificed to his father's excesses. She had been his one ally in a hostile world. Even in her, however, he had confided little. And he had never in his mind outlived his shame at not being as virile as his father had wanted him to be, and at having lacked the courage to stand up for his mother against his father's abuse.

As he walked along, going over what had happened with David Howard and his bald friend, his thoughts drifted back to his younger days. One scene in particular came to his mind. He was 10 years old, lying in the converted tool shed behind his parents' trailer which for years had served as his bedroom, when he heard, as so often before, a loud argument between his parents, with his father's voice harsh and overweening, his mother's soft and pleading. Then his mother cried out in pain. He got up and crossed the yard and climbed up on a box to look in the window. His mother was sitting on the couch with a welt on her cheek. He left in great agitation and ran through the stand of cottonwood trees that surrounded the trailer. For a long time he stood in the darkness, looking up at the stars and feeling helpless and distraught. He picked up a stick and started back, then threw it to ground and broke down in tears.

Another scene from the past followed from the first. He was in a shabby room in a tenement in Omaha, Nebraska, where he had come with several others on a dare from an acquaintance at school. In the shadows in the corner a naked prostitute was washing herself at a sink. She came back into the half-light around the unkempt bed in the center of the room. She gestured at him. "Let me look at you. You're just a kid. Never had it before? I bet you want to go inside. Yea, you'd like that, honey. Ha-ha-ha." She was laughing but her eyes stayed sad. Her face was worn and jaundiced but lovely somehow and full of pride. She pulled him towards her. He felt himself getting hard, then at the moment of entry felt himself go soft. "I don't think I can," he mumbled, as much to himself as to her. With skillful hands she brought him to hardness again.

From this second scene grew a third. Another naked

body. A friend of his mother, a widow whose family he had stayed with on his return to Nebraska a couple of years after his mother's death. The light was fuller now, the body more wondrous. Still he couldn't get hard. Then he saw himself with the hooker once more. He was pulling up his pants when he noticed fresh blood on the sheets. He wanted to ask her, "Are you sick? Did I hurt you somehow?" But the words wouldn't come.

2

John Grafton had learned since then that there was a certain time, during something called a period, when a woman shed blood. Just how or why this happened he wasn't sure. Despite his experiences with the Nebraska prostitute and his mother's friend, which together had provided him with almost all of his incomplete knowledge of sex, he had no idea, really, of what constituted sex beyond the basic fact that a man's rigid penis entered a woman's vagina. What a vagina looked like, actually looked like, he didn't know. He was too sheepish about this even to satisfy his curiosity in a porno bookstore, and out of embarrassment hid his ignorance from anyone who seemed on the verge of finding him out.

The passionate aspect of sex was all the more mysterious to him. He had a sense that a woman liked to be held and touched by a man more than a man liked the reverse—a sense, in other words, that a man somehow did and a woman was done to. Sex, however, as he had furtively seen it here and there, on TV and in the movies, seemed to involve a kind of forcefulness also. Yes, women liked that roughness too, or so he supposed. What then distinguished sex from mere brutality? What made it different from the brutality he had witnessed as a boy?

All of this left him in great confusion, especially, concerning what he knew of sex firsthand. The blood he had seen on the hooker's bed was from her period, he said to himself. Of course it was from something as innocuous as that. A part of him believed this and dismissed that experience as of little account in his present life. Another part of him, however, kept on suspecting that the damage he

imagined had in fact been done, that he had inflicted a horrible wound, and would inflict such a wound on any woman he entered. Or perhaps, as he had imagined too, the blood had come from some kind of disease. Never mind that no physical symptom had appeared. Maybe the disease was in his system.

He worried also about how his penis had gone soft with the hooker and how with his mother's friend it had not got hard at all. When he managed to quiet his thoughts of damage and disease, which even at times of greatest suspicion he regarded as far-fetched, this other more basic fear, that maybe he was impotent, persisted as something more sensible, more worthy of a reasonable concern. Often at night he played with himself until he got hard, then stared at his phallus, not quite believing that his body was capable of this simple masculine function. He was terribly afraid that, if he ever attempted intercourse again, he would prove incompetent once more. True, his penis got hard when he was by himself. But before a woman, before that awesome flesh, that was something different, he told himself. And if he did succeed in entering once more, would there be harm, would he spread the disease?

As for the gay world, here his understanding was stretched to the limit. How could a man be attracted to another man? It struck him as almost inconceivable that it could be so. And what went on beyond the kissing? How could anything like sex be accomplished? The possibility that it was anal never occurred to his mind. Still he felt himself to be a sort of sexual outcast, divergent from the norm; and gay men were also divergent, it seemed, and therefore outcasts in their own way. They were allies somehow; he felt drawn to them, though not so much on a sexual level as on a level of a feeling of affinity or kinship.

Even so, he had no desire to cement himself in the outcast role which he had arrived at more by accident than by choice. What he wished for most was to rescue himself from the strangeness of his sexuality and past, and live a normal life. He wanted to be a man like other men, a full-fledged man with a wife and children. Whenever he saw a

man walking down the street with a woman on his arm, a wince of pain went through him. He thought of himself as deficient somehow, not only on a sexual basis but in the very fiber of what he was. He doubted that such a blissful relationship with a woman could ever be his; this more than anything else was the cause of his sadness.

All week long, after leaving David Howard and Kevin, Grafton mulled over what had happened, and wondered to himself, as he stood at the dishwashing machine throwing plates on the conveyor belt, whether, if he went back to the church, he would be causing complications he had best do without. Surely there were other potential friends in the city who weren't gay. But Howard, especially, was different from other men he'd met, so appealing in his gentility and warm-hearted humor. What did it matter that he was gay? He went back and forth from one decision to another, while he thought to himself, knowing full well how he did anything important in an impetuous rush, that in the end there would be no decision at all but merely the impulse of the moment when Friday arrived.

Several times on Friday, as he worked, he changed his mind about what to do. On the way home he decided once for all not to go to the church. In his apartment he took a shower and paced back and forth. Then he grabbed his Army jacket and headed out. By the store on the corner he stopped to buy a carton of cottage cheese which he ate as he walked, using the torn cover as a spoon.

Not knowing where to go, he hiked down Market Street towards the wharf, moving along quickly, as though in a hurry, as he always did, destination or not. By the cable car tracks he turned up Powell to Union Square, then diagonally across the square to the financial district and Chinatown gate. Only then did he realize where he was going. Was he really going to the church? He reached its red tower, heard the music coming from the basement door, and continued past, berating himself for not having the courage to enter. Several hours he wandered around, feeling more and more lonely. Then he turned back for home and unlocked the door to his apartment with a sick empty feeling inside him.

So that was that, he told himself. David Howard, then, would be a thing of the past. A few days later, however, on returning from work, he was surprised to find Howard waiting at the front door of his building, dressed in a tan trench coat which made him look taller and more distinguished and older than he had seemed at the church. So he didn't always go around in jeans and only at night; clearly he had a daytime existence also.

"I was just at the library," said Howard, bowing. "An afternoon of reading. I'm quite the intellectual, you know. And, lo and behold, what should I see on my way to the tram but the YMCA. I remembered that you said you had stayed there. I went inside. The clerk there, an Arab, said he knew you quite well. He gave me your address. I walked up the block, a little walk I must say. And here I am at your doorstep, presented by fate. Am I a welcome sight, red eyes and all? Or should I hide my face in my books and continue up the street?"

John Grafton opened his mouth, inclined his thin face to one side, and struggled for words. "Hey, no. Hey, really. Glad to see you. You want to come in?" He flicked his head at the door. He was genuinely glad, and all afternoon in fact had been telling himself again that he should have gone to the church, and thinking about stopping by at Howard's place that evening.

Howard shrugged and smiled. Grafton led him inside. His apartment was on the second floor, a single room, unfurnished except for a coffee table in the middle of a faded green rug. Two large windows opposite the door looked out to the one-way street in front of the building where traffic roared past with hardly an interval of silence. Next to them was a tiny walk-in kitchen with a smaller window by a fire-escape. All of the walls in the apartment were glossy white; he had painted them himself with enamel supplied by the Arab, applying it thickly to fill up the cracks. Already, however, the paint had begun to peel; and, since he had put nothing on the walls because he was waiting to put his own paintings on them, the general effect was rather stark. He slept on the floor in his sleeping bag and ate his meals, the

few he had at home, sitting cross-legged by the table. Aside from his backpack in the corner, there were no objects in the room at all: no books, no boxes, no plants. He did have one book, a tattered "History of Western Art," but he returned it to his backpack when he finished reading. There too, in his pack, he kept his sketchpads and pencils. He couldn't stand to have objects around him unless they had an immediate use or meaning.

David Howard, showing no surprise at the bareness of the room, plopped himself down on the floor and started making little circles on the coffee table with his finger. As soon as Grafton sat down beside him, he began to talk, leaning towards the younger man to make his voice heard above the noise of the traffic. "I felt so bad about what happened. I assumed you were gay. You must have understood all at once that Kevin and I are gay. That's why you left in such a rush."

He paused as if for confirmation, but Grafton merely peered at him with his face all contorted. He went on. "Surely you understood. But, under those circumstances, it must have been a shock. Was it a shock?"

"Oh, I don't know," Grafton responded slowly. "I guess in a way."

"How reticent you are! Well, if through me you came upon an unpleasant experience, why, you have no idea how sorry I am. I had no ulterior motives. I just wanted to get to know you better." He made little circles again. "You must think I lead a peculiar life, dancing around with a bottle of wine, cavorting with faggots from sunset to dawn. But really, John, I'm quite normal. I work, I play just like everyone else."

He explained that he was employed as a caseworker in the city welfare department. "In a horrible old building. Looks like the Bastille. And the people I talk to, pathetic types! Still I like it all right. That side of life has always been appealing to me. The dingy side of life, I guess you would call it, the perverse, the out-of-the-way. Now I'm sounding peculiar again. But I haven't led all my life as a flaming fairy. No, all this is rather new. I went to college. Would you

believe it? Yes, I endured those four years. And I was quite a participant in the campus scene. Even belonged to a fraternity and had a girlfriend. Still all the while the impulse was there. Then finally I acted." He suddenly broke off. "But what a fool I am when I open my mouth! What do you care about my sexual background? All I came to say is let's be friends."

Grafton lowered his eyes. He had never in his life been presented with such a forthright offer of friendship. He found it hard not to see some sinister purpose behind it. But what could this purpose be? Surely it wasn't sex; he thought of himself as completely unattractive. Surely it wasn't theft; he had nothing to be robbed of except his backpack, and his traveler's checks, of which now only $40 was left. No, this was an offer of genuine friendship. "Well, I do kind of like you," he said at last.

Howard, who had been watching him intently with his hands folded on the coffee table, broke into a smile. "You're so charming, John, in your dearth of words. I like you too, very much. You see, I have many friends. I suppose people would say that, 'David Howard has many friends.' But it's a case of much in numbers, little in depth. And you, John, you have a special appeal. You're so down-to-earth, so real. You really are."

Grafton smiled, a wide boyish embarrassed smile that changed slowly into, a frown. He still found it difficult to believe that his friendship could be wanted. Maybe Howard's interest, hard as this was to imagine, was sexual after all. "I just want you to know," he said, lifting his hand to his mouth as if to catch his words as they came out and buffer their impact, "I am not gay." He felt so sorry that it was necessary to make this proclamation, but the thought of a sexual confrontation was terror-striking to him.

"Well, yes, I can see that," Howard replied, his voice slightly higher in pitch. "And you are, you know, so blandly straight. But who am I to care about your narrow range? I'm already far too involved, and on a sexual level and you aren't my type."

Grafton once more lowered his eyes. For some reason he

couldn't fathom he felt hurt at not being regarded as desirable, even by another man. But of course he wasn't; he knew that he wasn't, that he would never be to either men or women desirable to the extent that other people were. And now he was messing up a chance to have a friend. He looked up at Howard. "I didn't mean to offend you."

Howard softened. "I know you didn't. And I would like to be your friend," he added slowly. "So forgive me, my friend," Howard answered, his voice regaining its characteristic lightness of tone. "Forgive me, John. I'm far too often an ugly person. It all comes from my guilt. Yes, I feel guilty at times. Horrible curse. And I take out my guilt on everyone else. But let's forget my rudeness. Please forget it and I will too. I know a Chinese restaurant, two blocks from here. Thread-bare chairs, delicious food. And cheap enough for it to be on me. We can order some wine."

At the restaurant they took a seat in a large booth in the back. A worn-looking man in a gray work suit sat at the counter eating soup. At a table by the window were three hookers in brightly-colored clothes who kept staring at the street.

"They look so beautiful," said Howard. "So divine! But they're not real, you know; they're nothing but queens. And the men who pay them—it's oral, you see—they never find out."

Grafton leaned forward. "I don't understand what you mean." Despite their obvious costumes, he hadn't identified them as hookers. "You mean they're men?"

"Well, it goes without saying. Look at their hips."

Grafton studied the outline of their bodies, but could see no great difference between their hips and those of a svelte woman. He kept glancing at them, amazed by their beauty, which seemed so authentic. What would possess a man to dress up like a woman? He had heard that it happened but never actually seen practitioners of the art. And what did Howard mean by "oral"? He could vaguely imagine what he meant. Still he wasn't sure if what he imagined was right, and he didn't want to let on that he didn't know. All of this was new to him, and quite intriguing.

The waitress brought some wine. Howard starting talking about his boyhood in North Carolina. His father, he said, had been a minister in a well-to-do church. His mother, who had never taken completely to the role of minister's wife, had, while he was growing up, undergone one nervous breakdown after another, and on two occasions, when her state of mind had reduced her to hand-wringing distress, had been committed to mental institutions. "Now my father is dead. Gone, I suppose, to seventh heaven, such a good preacher he was. He died about ten years ago, when I was in college. Yes, believe it or not, I'm 33. Oh, you don't need to say it; I know I look 25. And my poor mother, six years after that, swallowed a bottle of her favorite pills and floated away on a cloud. I lived with her until that sad day. My life after her death underwent a drastic change. For her sake, you see, I had kept my true nature secret. I could never have dealt her such a blow. Religion alone was enough of a cross to bear. She could never live up to my father's expectations. Neither did I breathe the rarified air in which he dwelled. I couldn't get the Spirit, is what I'm trying to say. As far as I was concerned, the Spirit was something he called in from the wings whenever he needed a little cash. He was the sort of man too for whom dedication is a vice. So dedicated was he to his holy ideas, so much more dedicated to them than to other people, even people like my mother and me who were really a part of his day-to-day life. I have those tendencies to ideas myself, I'm ashamed to say... But I won't go on." He paused and looked out the window. "If there is a Spirit for me, it's right here in the streets. You may think I'm talking peculiar again... I won't bore you with an explanation."

"No, please go on," Grafton pleaded. His words came easier now. He felt comfortable and relaxed. He had drunk several glasses of wine. Never before had he felt more in the right place, more in his proper milieu. And all this that Howard was describing was extremely interesting to him. Though Howard's father had been a minister, and his father a mechanic; though Howard's father had been given to the sort of religious concerns which his own father had despised; yet he saw a parallel between his own past and Howard's, which

had to do with how their mothers had both suffered unduly at their fathers' hands.

"What do you mean, the Spirit is in the streets?" Grafton inquired.

Howard went on about the Buddhist idea of the Godhead in every object. "If that's the case, then the Godhead is here, in you, in me, in this bottle of wine, in the most mundane of things, and in the most repulsive too. Like a roach, for instance; the Godhead's in that. Now for sure you think I'm crazy. But I've never been so serious in my life."

They finished their meal and walked through the neighborhood where Grafton lived, a poor neighborhood of dilapidated apartment buildings and corner bars. In a crowded disco where music blared and colored lights flashed off and on, they had a few more drinks and talked and talked, talked more than Grafton had in several years. Then long after midnight they parted with an affectionate hug.

Later, as John Grafton lay in bed, all that he had seen and heard kept going through his mind: the beautiful women who were really men, the Spirit in the streets, the Godhead in the most common thing, the booze, the flashing lights. How could he paint a picture of that, he asked himself; how could he paint a picture of this life which existed here and was so different from what he'd known in the past? Unable to sleep, he got up for a drink of water, and stood in the white glare of his tiny kitchen, watching the roaches scurry beneath the burners on his stove. In these creatures with their flat dirty carapaces and long antennas and legs he could see nothing redeemable; in fact he loathed them with all his heart. And he didn't know what Howard had meant by the "Godhead," a term which he had never heard before, and which, because he identified it with religion, he regarded with suspicion. So much in his new life, however, drew and repulsed him at once.

The following Friday he met Howard at the church and again joined the motley line. He felt different this time, more confident of his steps. There was even a new pretty woman he got himself to speak to, who to his dismay excused herself

and left. Still from this rejection he felt nothing like the blow he would usually have felt. He was looking forward to talking to Howard after the dancing ended.

He and Howard started seeing one another on a regular basis. Sometimes he went over to Howard's apartment. There too they talked but they were rarely alone. Every week, it seemed, Howard had a new friend. He began to get a picture of Howard's busy life. When it came to sex, especially, he was amazingly active. He could engage in it on what seemed a casual basis, without forming possessive bonds. Once or twice a week he went to the gay baths. He described for Grafton just what went on. "Imagine a big dark room, everyone is crawling around looking for another body, and someone in the background is squealing with pleasure. Oh, it's quite different, I'm sure, than anywhere you've been. You could come along if you wish, just for the experience."

"Oh, no, no, David," Grafton replied. "I could never do that." Even so, he wanted to see and learn as much as he could from a distance. Howard's friends were an interesting bunch of misfits, each of them odd in his own way. With some of them, apparently, Howard was sexually involved, but for the most part he played the role of benefactor and counselor, giving freely of his food, money, and time, and offering his couch and floor as a community bed. One of his friends was the bird-shaped little man that Grafton had stood by in the church. As it turned out, this little shy person was a reclusive photographer who in the middle of his one-room apartment had built a model castle that he was taking pictures of from different angles with variations in lighting.

Howard showed Grafton the photographs, which seemed to be of a far-off mysterious place. They were exquisitely done with the finest subtlety of contrast and nuances of gray. "Oh, quite an artist is our little Vincent! And so unique! Spends all day in his apartment with his castle. He's on emergency relief. I helped him get on. Then at night he's off to the glory holes on Sixth Street. You wouldn't think he's the type."

Grafton wasn't sure what the glory holes were, and still had no specific idea of what gay sex involved. He had heard

Howard say once that what a certain person needed was a dick up the ass, and out of this had got the impression that gay sex maybe involved screwing someone in the asshole. But this seemed so unappealing and unfathomable to him, and so essentially brutal, that he was afraid to ask if he was right or wrong. He knew now that his life had taken a turn which was beyond his understanding and maybe also beyond his control, a turn of the very sort that he long had feared would happen, towards a total submergence in the darker side of city life. Still he desired to go forward into this submergence as much as he wished to avoid it, and his friendship with Howard was enough to draw him on. These evenings of comradery and wine—never before had he known such closeness.

Even so, with the deep distrust of intimacy that John Grafton had felt since childhood, he balked at sharing the things he most wanted to share, his sexual concerns and his interest in art. Not that he didn't want to unburden himself of the secrecy that he regarded as almost a curse. But some inner force prevented him from showing the sketchpads he several times brought over to Howard's, hidden in his jacket; prevented him from talking about the Nebraska hooker and his fears of impotence and disease. These never-dealt-with subjects, however, remained always in his mind on just the other side of words, awaiting some magic moment that would set them free.

One afternoon, on an impulse, he and Howard took a tram to the ocean for a hike, traveling first along Market Street with its fair-like crowds and shops, then through the long tunnel that led to the Sunset District, 'then through several miles of apartment buildings that glowed in the late afternoon sun. At the ocean, by a block with a theater in the middle, a couple of restaurants, and a modern motel, they got off the tram, walked across the highway that bordered the beach, and across some sand dunes from which the tumbling surf could be seen. A moist breeze smelling of seaweed and fish blew off the waves as they crashed to shore. Sandpipers circled in the withdrawing water, looking for their evening meal.

"We've been friends now for how long?" asked David Howard, his bearded face glowing with the beauty of the scene. The sun had descended into a strip of clouds far out on the ocean where sky and water met in a multi-layered blend of gold and orange. "Two months, I figure. I remember the day when I stopped at your apartment. You seemed so suspicious. Are you still?"

"No, not so much anymore. I like you, David," Grafton remarked in his new, more visibly thoughtful manner, with a tried on for the moment fluency of speech like a new suit of clothes and with less dramatic straining and gestures. His speech with Howard was less tortured than with other people. "Sometimes I just wish we weren't so different. I guess at times I feel I don't understand you."

"You don't understand me because I'm more of a woman than you are," Howard replied with a trace of sadness in his voice. "Still I don't blame you, really. I don't understand myself a good part of the time, how all this came to be. Even being here now." He swept his hand towards the ocean sunset. "Do I wake or sleep?"

"Yes, how beautiful it all is," Grafton sighed. He had adopted Howard's form of exclamation, and certain other phrases that allowed him to be more expressive.

They sat on a sandhill watching the sun sink below the clouds, shine for an instant, an intense glowing red, then disappear in the swaying water which at once became more subdued in color. The seagulls were shrieking; the waves rushed in with majestic power.

"Yes, it's all so magical," Howard went on. He seemed profoundly taken by the scene. "I don't get out here very much anymore. I've become such a city person. When I was a boy in North Carolina I used to go for walks in the morning. We lived by a golf course where there was a little stream. Such a delightful place! The sun in the leaves! You can't imagine!"

"What were you like back then?"

"Oh, a great deal smaller than I am now."

"That I could have figured for myself."

"Not much different than other children, I suppose,

though always buried in a book or lost in my thoughts, or hanging around the kitchen with my mother when I should have been playing baseball or something. Even so, I was athletic, you know. I ran the dashes in high school, was good enough to place in the state meet. But I was always distressed."

"Distressed about what?"

"Distressed about my father's expectations, which I could never live up to, and about my mother's depression, against which I was ineffective despite my efforts to help. Distressed about my sexual feelings. Even as a boy in the locker room I had disturbing thoughts which I feared were evil. Yet they were there. 'Why are they there if they're evil?' I kept asking myself. 'Why has God made me this way? Why have I been given these feelings which other people don't have?' Within me I felt that a just God would not have created a situation in which one's deepest stirrings were at odds with good. I sensed, in other words, that what I was also good in a way. But all this was quite unconscious; I could hardly admit what a distant, hidden, more central part of me was thinking. I remember, for instance, in college, reading an essay on homosexuality by a pre-Freudian psychologist named Havelock Ellis, an essay which, interestingly enough, I came across again in the library on that afternoon when I stopped over at your apartment, and had with me in my bundle of books. Well, as a college boy I found this essay intriguing; and yet, how strange when I look back on it, I couldn't admit that what he was describing applied to me. I was still hiding my true nature from myself."

"And then when you found it?"

"When I found it... that was a marvelous day. I felt as if I'd stepped out into the sunshine, though I still kept it a secret, as I told you, until my mother's death. And since then I've had a constant adventure, a constant learning experience with a side of life I once regarded as depraved. Over the years, you see, I've come to regard my gayness as being in the scheme of things somehow. I mean, the universe is not so simple as some imagine, reducible to a male-female equation, a giant yin and yang. Oh, no, it's more complex.

This is something Ellis writes about; there's really no such thing as male or female purely, not even on a biological basis. There are countless variations, not just two, countless subtle differences in hormonal distribution and sexual predilection. And homosexuality, he says, has been a vital force in almost every society with any sort of moral grandeur—ancient Egypt, Persia, Greece and Rome, to give a few examples. Most probably it even flourished in the cloisters that through the Dark Ages preserved literature and learning. And often these antique faggots, forgive my jargon, these queers of old time, had the most noble of sentiments and aspirations; they were in fact almost always in the vanguard of all sorts of enlightened policies towards freedom of expression, and towards culture, art, and even religion in the widest sense. Why did this happen? Here I'm drawing on my own ideas, I suppose. It happened precisely because of what they were, because of how they were in contact at once with darkness and light, because they realized that the perverse and the sacred are mirror images of one another... as they are, Johny, as they really are."

He paused for a moment. Grafton, with his arms around his upraised knees, had been listening intently. The sky had dimmed to purple and red; the seagulls had ceased their shrieking; while the waves, never missing a beat, kept pounding on the sand. In the sky now, between the wind-whirled clouds, stars shone here and there. A full moon, hazy-edged in the landward mist, was rising from the eucalyptus trees on the other side of the highway. It seemed to John Grafton an eternal moment, and this talk of the distant past made him feel small and insignificant, and in awe of the great vault of sky that towered above him.

"You see," said Howard, "what people don't understand is that there's a spiritual dimension to my kind of life. It's like what I was trying to explain in the restaurant that night, the Godhead in every object, the Spirit in the streets. And surely the Spirit is in human flesh. People get scared of flesh. What are they scared of? Flesh is holy. Flesh doesn't have to be avoided; it's the rock-bottom substance of what we are. That flesh is evil is an old anti-life idea that doesn't have to

be held on to anymore. It's not only regressive; it's plain and simple bad, and causes a lot of psychological damage. Likewise with the false distinction between male and female that I was talking about. Flesh is flesh. It doesn't matter if it's male or female; it doesn't have to fit into some religious fanatic's paradigmatic view. Flesh feels the same no matter what gender you call it. It's reassuring and warm. And something else is there too, the other person's life-force. Maybe you could even say that this life-force is a kind of soul. I won't object. Because what people are after in sex, you know, is a little version of the great cosmic connection. What they're after is good, and their vehicle is flesh. You maybe think I lead a wild life, that my life is like a storm. But that's not how it is. I'm in the eye of the storm. And I'm searching all the time. Searching, searching for the Godhead. Truly for the Godhead. You may think I'm evil, but what I want is good. You may think I'm carefree, but I care so much!"

He paused and gazed at the ocean, then looked back to Grafton. "What I'm giving, I guess, is an apology for my life, for what I've been, for what I've become. But why should I need to defend my life when I've lived it to the utmost from my heart? Why should I defend it to you?" He shook his head. "The truth is, as I told you before, much as I've tried to live rightly, I still feel guilty. It all goes back to what I learned as a kid. It's an irrational thing. And, despite all the people I take under my wing, I don't have one close friend except for you. I'm so glad for your friendship." He gestured at the surf. "Let it be known before the ocean and sky, I'm glad for your friendship."

Grafton was moved. "I'm glad for it too," he replied, peering into Howard's gray eyes, where more and more he saw the sadness which before he had only seen on infrequent occasions when some incident or interaction brought them suddenly close. He realized that the older man had confided in him concerning some of his deepest feelings and fears, and he wanted to reassure him in some way, wanted to be the good friend Howard claimed him to be. But he could think of nothing to say. "I just want you to know," he finally

mumbled, “you’re all right with me.”

At the same time he noticed a plaintiveness in Howard’s eyes which until this moment he had not seen, a look of yearning which made him draw back. Why was he afraid? Was David Howard not just another person, neither male nor female, as he was himself? Even so, he felt no urge to touch him, and when the bearded man moved slightly in his direction, he got up and dusted off his pants. He started moving slowly down the sandhill towards the beach.

Howard regarded him with a puzzled expression on his face, shrugged his shoulders, and followed behind him. Together they walked back towards the place where they’d got off the tram. It was a pleasant night, hardly chilly enough for a coat. Grafton carried his Army jacket in his hand and looked off at the ocean where now the water was silver in the moonlight. Howard, striding beside him with his head more than usually bowed, seemed on the verge of saying something he never brought forth.

Now it seemed to Grafton that he had acted rashly, that maybe by jumping up and starting back he had offended his companion. He felt ashamed of how he had shrunk away from Howard’s almost imperceptible movement towards him. So what if he’d been touched? What, beneath the stars and moon, would that mean that was so important it mattered? What mattered was that he and this man beside him were friends. What he should do then, he thought, was throw his arm over Howard’s shoulder. But he couldn’t get himself to do it.

Meanwhile, all that Howard had said kept going through his mind. Maybe it was really true that people were neither male nor female exactly. If that was the case, then what was he? Was he, as he had suspected, less than other men? Was he some kind of neuter person? Why then were women so beautiful to him? He rebelled at the idea that he was less. All his secret questions about sex and the meaning of sex assaulted him anew. He wanted to talk about the terrible things that had happened in his life. He wanted to ask Howard the basic questions about sex that a boy might ask his father. But this too he couldn’t get himself to do.

As they waited for the tram Howard said nothing. And he was silent too while they rode downtown. Grafton kept glancing at him, trying to think of something to say. Now it no longer seemed urgent to discuss his own past, his own apprehensions. That would happen another time. “You’re being so quiet,” he blurted out. “You seem so disturbed. I wish I knew what to say. I wish I could be a better friend.”

David Howard turned to him, his face suffused with emotion. “You are a good friend. And I meant what I said about how glad it makes me. But I was just sitting here thinking that so much of what I say is a lie. My whole spiel about the Godhead, the Spirit. What a bunch of bullshit that is! I don’t care about the Spirit. All I care about is me. And I make such a big deal of sex as though it’s some kind of sacrament.

“What a phony twist! You want to know the truth? I told you you’re my only close friend. Well, I could have more friends, and still I don’t. You want to know why? Because I bring everything down to sexual level. I do. And so that moment of intensity is had. Then, because of embarrassment and guilt, the friendship is done. Not always right away, but after a while it happens. I create the whole situation myself, out of self-hatred, I suppose. It’s a kind of sickness. Forgive me for what I am.”

“There’s nothing to forgive,” Grafton replied.

Howard took his hand. “You’re so kind. You really are. And I’m so confused at times, so afraid of the future. Have you ever seen an old fairy? A pitiful sight!”

The tram came near to Howard’s stop. The bearded man seemed to be going through an inner struggle. He reached for the cord. “Do come with me for a while. I’ve got a little wine. We can talk.”

They headed up the dark alley to Howard’s building, climbed the steps to his apartment, put a record on the stereo, and settled on the couch with two glasses and a bottle of wine.

“I talked all evening about myself,” Howard began. “You were so attentive. You’re such a good listener. But you so seldom talk about yourself. You once told me that your

father was rather mean. ‘Always out for himself,’ I believe you said. And you said something—I can’t remember your exact words—about how he didn’t show you any love. Were you at war with him then?”

“Oh, not at war,” Grafton responded. “Not that so much.” And his shame rose up in him again at how he had not been at war when he should have been, and had let so much go by that he should not have allowed. “I avoided him, I guess. I just went off by myself.”

“And when you went off by yourself, what would you do?”

“Just walked around in the woods. Sometimes I went down to the pond to watch the beavers.”

“Such a country boy!”

“Yea, I suppose I was.”

“And weren’t you lonely?”

“Yea, in a way.”

“How sad.”

“I felt sorry for my mother, was all.”

“Your father was mean to her too?”

“Oh, more than mean.” He started to tell the painful story of the abuses he had witnessed. He told it as briefly as he could, in several minutes, and yet afterwards he felt exhausted and distressed.

“So that must have effected, then, how you felt about girls and women overall.”

“Yea, I suppose it did.”

“You never talk about that.”

Grafton squirmed in his seat. He wanted to go on, but he couldn’t force himself to go any further into the past than he already had. “There’s nothing to say,” he at last brought out. He felt suddenly oppressed. He just wanted to go off by himself as he had always done. He placed his hand on his jacket.

“You’re going to leave?” Howard exclaimed, leaning forward. “Oh, don’t leave so suddenly, please. I would feel so bad. There’s no need to talk about it if you find it disturbing. I was just trying to right the balance, you know, because you take such interest in me. But we don’t need to

do this. Oh, listen to the music. Beethoven's Third! I love it so much. This motif here. So delicate and hopeful! Let's just listen for a while. What a lovely evening we've had! Would you care for some date bread? Delicious bread! Made by Vincent, the little man with the castle. Oh, he's quite a power in the kitchen! And he doesn't even have a genuine kitchen, just a stove on one wall."

They sat back on the couch and listened to the music. How beautiful it was, Grafton was thinking to himself, so full of life. In his mind he could still see the scene at the ocean, the red sun descending above the silent swell of the ocean, the waves crashing to shore. Then, juxtaposed against this, he could see the other things he'd been thinking about: his mother's terrified face, the cottonwood trees where he had stood by himself in the dark on the night when he had looked in the trailer window, the prostitute with the jaundiced eyes.

He thought again about what Howard had said: that flesh was flesh, flesh was contact with life; that there was no such thing as male and female exactly, the universe was more complicated than that—so many variations; and all this seemed frightening and true.

But now, he said to himself, he had to go. He got up with his jacket in his hand. "I really should go." He was saying the words, but what he really wanted to do was stay and listen to the music, drink wine, and be buttressed by this one friendship against all in the world that was incomprehensible and scary.

"Don't go," Howard pleaded. "You said you want to be a real friend. Then don't take off when I'm in this mood. Stay here with me. We can sleep together. I won't touch you, I promise, unless you want me to. Or you can sleep by yourself on the couch. The walk home alone would be so grim. Oh, please stay, Johnie, we'll listen to music and talk. I know a lovely place where we can have breakfast together in the morning."

Grafton hesitated, feeling terribly confused. He didn't want to make the long walk home by himself, it was true. Neither did he want to sleep with his bearded companion,

really. He felt no strong physical attraction at all. He felt nothing beyond a desire for closeness. And flesh was flesh, he repeated to himself. David Howard was his friend. His friend was in need. What did it matter one way or the other? He sat back on the couch. “Okay, I’ll stay. But I don’t want to get all involved.”

“Exactly as you want,” said Howard. He turned over the record and went for the date bread. He came back with it, cut himself a piece, set the rest on the coffee table in front of Grafton, and went over to his bed. “Well, I’m going to sleep here.”

Grafton closed his eyes, trying to unravel his thoughts. Here he was in a gay man’s bedroom. Perhaps he was gay himself and, as Howard had done, had refused to admit his own true nature. Who could say what he was? He didn’t know for sure. He opened his eyes and stared at Howard. “I’ll sleep there too, but I just want to rest.”

“Bring the bread and wine.”

They took off their pants and got under the covers. He handed Howard the wine. Now they were drinking from the bottle and chomping away at the bread while Howard described some people he had met at work. John Grafton, though, was hardly listening. His head was spinning around. He felt as if he had made a mistake coming over to the bed, and yet he couldn’t get up the energy to leave. “So what if he tries something?” he was thinking. “What should I do?”

He settled back in the bed and sighed with apprehension. Howard talked a little more and turned out the light.

Now it was dark. He could see the dim square of light that the arc lamp at the end of the alley projected on the ceiling. Howard was clearly in the midst of a struggle with his passions. He came closer for a moment, then drew away, then put his hand on Grafton’s stomach. Grafton lay petrified with fear.

“This is more difficult than I thought,” Howard said softly.

“I thought you told me once you didn’t find me attractive.”

“I was just being coy.”

"I thought you said you bring everything down to a sexual level, and that ruins your friendships."

"Sometimes it does."

"Well, I can't help I'm not gay."

"How do you know? Have you ever tried it?"

"I don't even know what to try."

Howard flung himself back and laughed. "Oh, it's not so complicated as you suppose."

"Just the same, I don't think I'd like it."

Howard leaned forward, smiling. "Does this feel like a kiss?"

Grafton closed his eyes. His mind was spinning again. "Yes, it feels like a kiss."

"That's all I was saying at the beach. A kiss is a kiss. All that matters is the sensitivity behind it."

"Even so, I don't feel right about it. Please don't do it anymore."

"All right, I won't. I promised and I won't," Howard replied. But he was still lying with his body pressed against his friend's.

Now indeed, thought Grafton, it did feel good. His mind was rushing all the more rapidly around. What did it matter? Flesh was flesh. There was no such thing as male or female exactly. This man beside him was his one true friend. What did it matter? Flesh was flesh. He felt Howard's hand on his stomach again. He didn't try to push it away. The hand moved round and round towards his crotch. To his surprise he found himself getting hard. Then, to his greater surprise, Howard bent under the covers and started sucking on him. "So this is oral," he thought to himself. But he could feel nothing at all except the dull sensation of the sucking—no passion, no pleasure, not the least excitement.

At last Howard looked up at his face. "Don't you ever come?"

"Sometimes I do."

"Do you like what I'm doing?"

"I don't know. It just feels strange."

Howard sighed and came up from the covers. He plopped down beside him.

"You're not exactly afire."

"I guess I'm not. I'm sorry. I told you I'm not gay."

"Oh, please don't start on that again."

"All right, then. I won't."

For a long time they lay in silence. Then Howard fell asleep. Grafton stared at the ceiling, watching the square of light as it moved back and forth. Why was it moving back and forth? He raised himself on his elbows and looked out the window. The arc lamp was moving in the wind. His head was aching; he just wanted to leave. He peered at the clock beside the bed. A quarter to five. He sat up to put on his pants.

Howard woke up. "You're going?"

"I just gotta leave."

"You're impossible, John."

"I guess I am."

Grafton pushed out through the door and in a daze bounded down the stairs through the lobby and out the exterior door to the alley. There was the arc lamp again, swaying back and forth. The sky was dark. On Market Street there was no traffic at all. A chilly wind had come up. He zipped up his jacket and put up his collar. The horror of what he had done never left his mind as he strode down the deserted street with his long, athletic strides. At last he reached home. He took out his sleeping bag and stretched out on the floor.

But still he could remember how strange it had felt to have Howard's mouth on his penis. He looked down at himself with utter disgust.

The next evening he called David Howard. "I've been thinking all day about what happened. I didn't even go to work."

"You're making it into more than it was."

"I don't know what I'm making it into. I just know, I'm sorry, David, but I can't ever see you again."

"Okay, then," said Howard after a long pause. "Well, take it easy."

"I just want you to know," Grafton started to say.

There was a click of the phone.

3

John Grafton began again, as he had months before, taking long walks in the evening by himself. His loneliness now was almost more than he could bear. Why, he kept asking himself, had this one close friendship in his life come to such a sudden and unhappy end? Perhaps he had been wrong in making so much of sex. Perhaps he had been lying to himself about not liking what Howard had done. Perhaps Howard would get the same disease which he had maybe gotten himself from the Nebraska hooker. In the confusion of the moment he had forgotten about that, and forgotten about his fears of impotence and inflicting damage. But worst of all was the pervasive shame that he carried with him wherever he went. He was ashamed not only of what he'd done, but of what he was and how he couldn't change.

Even before his coworkers in the dishwashing line he felt ashamed, as if they somehow knew he had indulged in gay sex. On an impulse he quit his job and right away was in a panic for money. Through the state employment agency he got work as a night watchman in a downtown hotel. He was responsible for several layers of a parking ramp. Any sinister movement he was supposed to report on a phone. Nothing of the sort ever happened, however. Under a ceiling light in the corner he read his "History of Western Art," and for hours on end watched the street below where there were restaurants, theaters, and milling crowds. Often late at night, after leaving the hotel, he wandered around by himself, thinking about what Howard had said about the Spirit in the streets and how in common and even sordid things there was a spiritual dimension. Never before had he used big words like this in his mind; he felt as if it made him more of a genuine artist. He bought a beret which, with his Army jacket, became a kind of personal uniform, and tried to grow a beard but he couldn't.

In his history of art he came across some pictures of Mexican murals that made a deep impression on him. He wanted to do paintings like that, he thought, with all kinds of figures crowded together; only his pictures, he told himself,

would have semaphores and colored lights, and would somehow convey the atmosphere of the city night. In his pocket sketchpad he began making drawings of figures and groups of figures which he thought would fit into this kind of a painting, and pictures of various arrangements of lights that he planned to use as backgrounds. He could hardly wait every evening to go out again on his walks. He started to notice that there were all sorts of characters who hung out at night, desperate and deformed people who, he imagined, were too self-conscious to come out during the day. These were the people who intrigued him the most; they were the ones that, for some reason he couldn't fathom, he felt compelled to portray. From a distance he etched them in his mind, or, finding an inconspicuous spot, pulled out his pad. He drew with an ordinary pencil, too impatient for shading, and, when anyone saw him, slunk away.

Much as he was excited about his artwork, however, his loneliness grew worse, and with it his shame and the persistent notion that he was not like other men, that he was deficient somehow. What Howard had said about there being no pure male or female, but various degrees and combinations of both, far from giving him comfort, made him all the more obsessed with what he sup- posed his own make-up was, since he not only suspected that he wasn't male enough to win the interest of a woman, but felt quite sure he wasn't female either. His fear of impotence was an undercurrent to all he did; and the fears which he regarded as unjustified yet couldn't banish from his thoughts, that sex was somehow connected with damage and disease, were with him too, rising and falling with his fluctuant moods. Women were all the more wondrous to him. With a reverent, puzzled expression he stared at every pretty woman who passed him on the street, while about his self-doubts and apprehensions he spoke to no one. Indeed for days at a time he went without speaking. Even stopping in a store, when it involved any more than the simplest interaction, became an awkward ordeal. He swung his arms around and could hardly bring forth his words. What's happening to me?" he kept asking himself.

One evening, on the first of the two nights off he had each week, he came upon an old building where drawing classes were posted on the window. One class, he noticed, open to the public on a daily basis, was about to begin. The prospect of being with other people was almost frightening to him, but he was beside himself with loneliness, and had been telling himself that he just had to break out of his isolation somehow, and so he forced himself to go in. Within a few minutes, after paying a two dollar fee, he found himself, with a group of others, before a beautiful woman who was completely nude. He was so awestruck he could hardly draw; it seemed as if in drawing one part of her he lost sight of the whole. Then, during a break when, frustrated by his inability to mix with the others, he pretended to look over his drawings, another young woman, a fellow artist just as lovely as the model and with long chestnut hair, came over to see what he'd done. He was acutely embarrassed by her interest; he could tell by how she reacted that she was taken aback by his ineptness and searching for some polite remark. At last , she said just two words, "Real nice," which he took as insincere; and his own two words, "Thank you," when he managed to utter them, came out in such a high, unnatural pitch that she gazed at him as at some kind of strange person, and turned to talk to someone else.

All through the rest of the class he thought of that look, by which it seemed that not just she, but she in behalf of all women, had judged his work of minor worth; and, though he knew that under other circumstances his drawings were better, he couldn't forget the censure in her eyes. Even after he left the building, hurrying as usual but with no place to go except back to his apartment, he could still see that look and the glowing nakedness of the model. His thoughts were as hurried as his steps, and agitated and painful.

All his doubts about his manhood, all his fears that his artistic life was just a delusion, tormented him once more. Would he ever be a real artist? Would he ever do anything that women approved of? Was everything he hoped for the dream of a failure, a fool? Perhaps all of this was nothing more than what he deserved, the logical outcome of his past.

In his mind he could see his mother's thin anxious face, so much like his own. He had loved her so much, and yet had done nothing to defend her. And so his life had led from that dismal trailer to the prostitute's room to those lonely years on the road, and now to this. He could feel the sensation of Howard's mouth on his penis.

But had there been nothing good? What of the freedom he had felt sometimes in his travels? What of the magic and mystery he had learned of through Howard, the spiritual dimension of the city night? He looked around at the buildings, the traffic, the fog-shrouded lights in the distance, at all these familiar trappings of his night-time world. And for the first time since his arrival in San Francisco that magic and mystery was gone.

Arriving at home, he threw open the door, and what struck him at once was the paltriness of his existence. Discovering a roach in the kitchen, he flung out at it, nearly cutting it in two. Then, noticing that on the top half of the insect its legs and antennas were swinging wildly, he scooped it up on a scrap of paper, set the paper on the burner of his stove, turned on the flame, and watched as a ring of fire flared up on the edge of the paper, and in a diminishing circle closed in on the roach. For an instant it glowed like a tungsten filament, then fell with the ashes of the paper to the white enamel surface of the stove, shriveled up like a burnt seed. So much for Howard and his lofty ideas. Three steps took him into the middle of his single room, where still he had no furniture except his coffee table, though now there were pencils and sketchpads on the table, and books from the library on Mexican murals. Some of his angular drawings hung on the peeling walls. He tore them down but couldn't get himself to rip them up.

He spread his sleeping bag on the floor and threw himself down. But in his mind he could still see the naked model in the class. Then he saw the woman with the chestnut hair, saw her eyes grow large with interest, then small again with dismissal as she gazed at him and turned away. Then he was back in Nebraska in the cottonwood grove by himself, then back in Omaha in the hooker's shadowed room, then

back with David Howard, in bed with him with his head aching and his thoughts whirling around. Morning came. The sun glared through the window. The roar of traffic rose in the street below. He had no shades, no way to muffle the noise. He got up and paced back and forth. But he felt so tired. He just wanted to rest. Then he noticed how dark and quiet it was in his closet. For the rest of the day he lay there behind the closed door, while his troubled thoughts continued, until it occurred to him that the only way out of his torment was to force himself into the exact same situation which had been so disturbing the evening before. He had the night off; there was nothing to stop him except himself. He leapt from the closet, grabbed his jacket and beret, and, with his sketchpad under his arm, headed for the building where the art classes were held.

The closer he got to the building, however, the more his anxiety grew. Stopping outside, he peered through the window, and immediately noticed, already at a drawing table, the student with the chestnut hair. Just to see her again brought up a fresh upheaval of shame. Still he drew in a deep breath and pushed through the door to an outer room from which he could view the other artists at their tables with their eyes fixed on the model, this time a man. The sight of that nude male figure was even more distressing to him than had been the sight of the nude female the previous night. Though for a long while he lingered, he could not get himself to go into the studio. Then the first session came to an end, and he woman with the chestnut hair, perhaps on her way to the washroom, came suddenly towards him. He spun around, shoved through the door once more, and, not knowing where he was going, headed down the street, his thin face taut with defeat.

He had not even seen her closely; still he could imagine the look of disapproval she would have given him had she met him eye to eye— the look that said he was not an artist, not a man. With his head bowed in thought, he hurried down the sidewalk, his self-doubts and fears assaulting him again. By a store window he stopped to study his reflection. With his beret, his tattered Army jacket, his hollow cheeks, his

hungry eyes, he indeed did appear as he supposed an artist would. But that was far too easy, he knew. An artist was much more than that. An artist produced. As he himself had begun to do. But on such a humble level. The real struggle was still before him. Maybe it would be as lonely as he feared. Maybe in the course of it he would become the strange kind of person that his fellow-student with the chestnut hair had taken him to be, the sort of person, like Howard's outcast friends, that he'd once regarded as so different from himself, the very sort he'd been trying to draw. Maybe this was the sacrifice his art would require, that in attempting to portray this dark side of life he would fade into it and lose his separate existence. Maybe this was his mission as an artist, this is what would make him unique. Still what a lonely mission! How had it come about? Why or when exactly he had taken it up, he didn't know. And did it have to be so lonely? Other artists had friends. Other artists were loved by women. Some, at least, attained success. Might not he too succeed? Perhaps eventually, as he so much desired, he would prove himself to be good at something. But in his heart he doubted that any life-transforming kind of recognition would ever be his.

"Then why persist?" he asked himself. "For one reason only," he answered. "I can't turn back." He felt so strongly now that his whole life had led to this. And in a vague, painful way he understood that the cause of his isolation was less his commitment to art than his awkwardness with other people; just as, with even more vagueness and pain, he understood that the cause of his distance from women was less that commitment than his inability to unravel the knot of confusion and trauma that, since his boyhood, had with each passing year become more intricate and tightly bound. And yet this was what he was, what he had been. If his art came from anywhere, he told himself, it would come from this person whose reflection he saw in the window. If only he could produce something of value in the end! Then his loneliness would have been for a purpose.

He started walking again, contemplating the night-time landscape before him. It no longer seemed as devoid of

meaning as it had seemed the previous evening. Yet, as by an incomprehensible force, he felt held back from some breakthrough to the meaning of it all which with all of his being he needed to make. Somewhere there was a gate to this breakthrough, somewhere a key. He came to a halt, pulled out his sketchpad, and paged through his pictures of late-night characters and arrangements of lights. Perhaps in this too there was a promise of further understanding if only he could persevere. As soon as he closed his pad, however, his loneliness engulfed him once more. Coming upon a large health food bar, which, judging by the crowd outside, was a young people's hangout, he counted his change and ventured inside. Here at least, he was thinking, he could be with other human beings. Still, seated by himself in a corner with his coffee and roll, he felt all the more lonely because of the commotion around him. He took out his history of art from his jacket pocket and tried to read, but his attention kept wandering to the people filing in, all of whom, it seemed, after paying for their food or drink at the counter, went straight to some group of friends who shouted hello. And all of them, he noticed, were strangely dressed.

Thus he continued for an indeterminable time during which he felt so distracted he wanted to leave yet couldn't get himself to head out once more to the lonely streets he knew so yell, until near bar-closing, when the smoke-filled room was filled with noisy customers, a young woman came through the line who apparently knew no one. With her cup of coffee in one hand and at dish of pastry in the other, she crossed the floor towards the vacant table right next to him. He noticed at once how small and pretty she was, with dark eyes and dark curly hair, and how exotically attired, in flowing black silk pants with a purple sash around her waist, a chartreuse blouse, and black silk vest, and with brass hoops on her arms and large brass loops in her ears. She saw him glance at her and smiled, a smile that struck him as oddly mischievous, like the smile of a child in the midst of a prank. He looked back to his book, then again at her, and found her still smiling. He stared at the page in front of him, comprehending nothing.

"How you keep your head in that book," she said in a husky voice that seemed out of keeping with her petiteness. 'You're a student. I can tell."

For a moment he met her eyes, which now he saw were overlined with something dark and underlined with something green, trying to read there her motive for talking to him. Most likely she found him amusing, he thought, but maybe she had a sincere interest in him. He found that hard to imagine from someone so pretty.

He lifted his hand and shook his head. "Not really a student," he slowly replied, conscious with every word of how intense he was in his enunciation, and relieved that at least his voice had come out in a normal pitch. He studied her made-up face, expecting to find there the same disdain at his difficulty in speaking as he had seen in the face of his fellow-student in the art class. But her impish grin had given way to what seemed an expression of amiable regard.

"Even so, you love to read."

He drew in a deep breath and tried to speak like a man. "I guess I do. I read a lot." Now for sure, he was thinking, the blandness of his response would turn her away. But she gazed at him with her lips slightly parted and head cocked back, as though in the process of formulating some new remark.

"Myself, I read slow," she said, leaning towards him. "It's an awful bore. I mean, not what I read, but stupid me when I try to read it. And I just can't stand to be bored. I like lots of action."

She had a flippant way of talking that seemed half in earnest, half in jest, and reminded him of David Howard. And that made him sad once more about how that period of closeness had come to such a sudden end. At the same time, however, he found her manner intriguing, and felt drawn to it and amazed by it as he always was by fluent speech. He wanted to be as fluent in reply, but his mind went blank, so he just stared at her for a while, and then in confusion looked back to his book.

"There he goes again," she called out in her deep voice. "Mister Student No Student."

He was glad that she had persisted. Glancing back at her, he managed a smile. He had an altogether different appearance when he smiled. In his self-conscious grin was no hint of pretension. “All I’m looking at,” he said, his words coming more easily, “pictures, just pictures.” He made a square with his fingers, shrugged his shoulders, and stared at her once more.

“Dirty pictures! I should have known.”

Again he flashed his bashful grin. “Naw, they’re not dirty at all.”

“Oh, I don’t believe you!” she exclaimed. “I’ll have to look for myself so I know for sure.” She jumped up and, with the same coy expression on her face, came across towards him. “Just maybe now, young man, I’m going to tell your mother.”

At even the mention of his mother he felt a pang of sorrow. But the little woman was already beside him. He could smell her perfume as she pressed against him and peered at the pictures of abstract paintings that he had been trying to understand.

“Not dirty pictures. This is a let-down, let me tell you, for sure.” She flopped down on the chair next to lim. “And everything is so mixed together, and the colors are wild. You don’t have to tell me. I know it’s art. That’s why you say you’re not a student, really, cuz an artist is a kind of student, but not really a student, and you’re an artist, right?”

He opened his mouth to speak but could not bring forth an answer.

“Or you want to be one.”

He nodded assent. For some reason he felt a desire to tell her how much he wanted to be a real artist, and how he had been walking around by himself drawing pictures of people for his envisioned paintings of night-time city life. But he noticed that his sketchpad was lying on the table beside his book, and thought to himself that if she grabbed his pad and looked at it, as she seemed about to do, she would see how far he was from being what he wanted to be, and he would feel like a fool for talking about his dreams. So he just kept quiet.

"Well, I like artists. I really do. Cuz artists, I guess you could call them crazy. And from me that's a compliment, you gotta understand, cuz I like crazy people, I like crazy things. And I'm an artist myself. Or not exactly an artist, but the creative type. Cuz what I do—you're not going to believe this, I don't believe it myself—I'm a 'love dancer,' they call me. I take off my clothes. But in a very artful way, and I don't take them all off, you know what I mean. Maybe you think I'm some kind of pervert. But I don't relate to the perversion, although I am extremely sexual myself. What I relate to, pure and simple, is movement. See, in my very heart, in my very being, I'm a dancer. So dancing for me is like art for you. Still I don't read about it, cuz, like I say, my comprehension is zero, so why should I read?"

He looked at her blankly.

She paged through his book until she found a block of print. She placed her index finger on the first word and sounded it out. "Pri-mi-ti-vism." She smiled. "Was an at-tempt... to engage." She shrugged her shoulders. "With a pre... pre-ra-tion-al... sen-si... bil-ity." She clapped her hands. "See, I don't understand a single word. And I don't care."

He hardly knew what to make of her. Had she not come across to him, just as he'd seen women do in the movies who were after a man, and made a little joke, as those women always did, and leaned against him? So maybe, hard as it was to believe, she was really interested in getting to know him. Now that she was so close to him, however, he could see that her eyes were glazed. So maybe she was stoned, he thought, and that was why she was acting this way, though he'd never been stoned and had no idea if people did things when they were stoned that normally they wouldn't. She seemed as exotic as what she claimed to be—a dancer who took off her clothes; he could hardly imagine what that involved. Yet he felt strangely at ease with her, and it occurred to him that maybe because of what he was she could understand what he was trying to do. He wanted to justify himself to her, present himself as a substantial person. He thought of his sketchpad again. Perhaps he should show it to her.

But she had already noticed it. “And here’s your pictures. Can I look?”

He lowered his eyes. “I’m jus a beginner. You’ll think they’re bad.”

She leaned against him once more. “How can they be bad if they’re your true expression?” She opened the pad and shut it. “See, I saw one picture, an old bearded guy with a dog, and I liked it very much.”

He knew exactly what drawing she referred to. He had come upon this old man several times in places where lie couldn’t draw him, then one night in the bus depot had found him sleeping upright on a bench, and, seeing that the depot was almost deserted, had taken a seat across from him and pulled out his sketchpad and pencil. It was an important picture to him because he had assigned this man to a key position in a painting he had in mind. “Why do you like it?” he asked after a pause.

“Why do I like it?” she responded softly. “Because it’s really a picture. A lot of artists, you know, like those pictures we were looking at be- fore, all they make is blotches. Well, I don’t care about blotches. What I want to see is something from life. That’s why I like the old man with the beard, cuz I can really see him. It’s like he’s gonna pop right off the paper at me. Really, you know, I like it a lot.”

His face flushed with pride. He was so overwhelmed, indeed, by receiving this compliment from this pretty woman that he felt an immediate infusion of hope, and just like that the terrible feeling of loneliness and desperation that had been with him all evening dropped to the side. It was as if some shaded glass fell away, and suddenly he saw the scene around him more clearly as tables, corner lamps, and laughing people, around which no longer hung the oppressive air that had seemed so pervasive an hour before.

Her eyes lit up when he blushed. “Can I look at some more?”

“Yes, if you want to.”

She began paging through them one by one. On the first page was a picture of a man with an asymmetric face, his right eyebrow raised while his left seemed to be frowning,

his mouth contorted into half a smile. On the next was a sharp-faced woman in a flowered kerchief reaching her hand to the coin return of a public phone. Then came, in succession, an old woman pushing a grocery cart, a cabdriver smoking a cigarette, a little girl with a plaintive expression, a tough-faced boy who seemed quite sad. All of his drawings had a cartoon-like simplicity, and yet it was clear what they represented.

"See, what I mean, these are real people," she said. "That's what I dig 1 about them. Sometimes they seem a little off, but they always look like people that I can almost imagine I've already seen. Really, you know, you've got to do something with them. You should put them in a painting, a big painting of the city, and you could put in neon lights and put all kinds of traffic lights behind them."

He could hardly believe that she was saying just what he wanted to do. Somehow she understood. He could hardly believe that this was happening, that this exotic, pretty woman was giving him so much of her time. Abruptly, though, she turned her attention from his drawings to a large, muscular person in feminine dress who, when he followed his new friend's gaze, he thought might be a queen of the sort he had seen in the Chinese restaurant with David Howard, a man pretending to be a woman.

She slunk down in the seat. "I don't want that person to see me."

The large woman-or-man headed up some narrow steps that apparently led to an upstairs lounge.

"In fact," she said, "I'm sorry to be so sudden, but I'd like to go. If you want to, you can come with me. I've got a joint."

Though he felt a little scared of what the grass would do, he reached for his jacket and nodded his head. He wanted to stay as long as he could with this strange, pretty woman who seemed to know what he was all about, and any adventure was better than returning home by himself.

They headed out together. She seemed small beside him. She kept talking in her deep-throated voice. "I'm a regular junkie, if you want to know the truth. Just want to be loaded

all the time. When I'm not loaded, you know, only way I can put it, life is a drag. You maybe think I'm a mess. And I guess that's really how it is cuz I act all happy, you know, but I'm not really happy, and I'm all screwed up, I don't proceed in any logical manner."

In an alley behind some buildings they sat on some boxes and passed the joint back and forth. He was curious as to what it would do. Nothing happened at first and then he noticed that the noise of the traffic seemed farther away and was full of all kinds of small noises and changes in volume he hadn't been aware of before. And though he had many times gazed at the late-night sky, he had never before so profoundly took note of how unnatural it was in color, violet on the horizon across from him, above the dark silhouette of the buildings on top of Nob Hill, orange and red overhead where with snakelike motions the fog was swirling around, and, above the lights on the billboard at the far end of the alley, a diffuse bluish-green.

"You know, you're a weird guy a really weird guy," she said through her teeth as she compressed the smoke into her lungs.

"How come?"

"You don't like to talk."

"Yea, I guess I don't."

"Or are you shy?"

"Some of both, I guess." He shrugged his shoulders and looked again at the colored sky. Then he turned to her. With her dark curly hair blown back by the wind, her face seemed small and bare. Still how lovely she was, and, with her green paint beneath her dark eyes and her large brass loop dangling from her ears, how mysterious she seemed. Again for an instant, in her face and in the night-time landscape beyond her, he caught a glimpse of the magic dimension he had seen with David Howard, and, as some deep part of his mind on a separate parallel track went back over various moments he had shared with Howard, The mere fact that those moments had happened seemed awesome; they seemed, indeed, like not just moments but events in a journey that it struck him he'd been on since his arrival in San Francisco, a journey

that he'd been trying so hard to figure out, a journey that had led to this woman with the painted face. He peered into her eyes, trying to understand her but the more he studied her face the more unreal she seemed; he could not penetrate the aura around her.

"You know," he said abruptly, "I don't know your name."

"Now why do you want to know my name? Ain't I enough just as I am?"

"Yea, you're enough. But I still want to know it."

"Okay, then. Dalia Lamar."

He repeated it in his mind: "Dalia Lamar."

"That's not my real name anyhow. It's just the name I use when I'm dancing. You can see it on the billboard, 'Dalia Lamar'."

"The billboard where?"

"At this place I dance at. Let me tell you, it's a real dump. And they try to pass me off as sexy. Do you think I'm sexy?" She spread out her arms. "Well, I don't care if I am or not. Cuz what they pay me, I could do better as a waitress. But who ever thought I could be a real dancer? I just answered this ad in the paper and all of a sudden I was. And now, like I say, it's my whole life."

He nodded slowly, trying to draw together all she'd told him into a picture of what she really was. "Still it makes you sad," he said, finding that now, as he spoke, his words seemed to be coming out through a tunnel. "Or at least it doesn't make you happy. You said you act happy, but you're not really happy." Of the comments she'd made, this had most stuck in his mind, since it seemed so at odds with her exuberance.

She threw back her head. "Ha-ha-ha! See, what I say, I just say it, you know, on the spur of the moment. Did I say that? Well, it's just not true. I mean, see, the thing about me, I don't make sense. But I've got to say something, so I just talk. Or I don't suppose I've really got to. It's just the way I am. I dance with my words cuz, like I told you, I'm just totally a dancer. So what does it matter if I'm happy or sad?"

He shook his head. His mind felt too supercharged and

clouded to take it all in. He could follow her words as they came out, but he lost track of what had come just before, and found himself instead trying to imagine the place where she danced. He visualized a bar with flashing lights like the discos he'd been to with Howard. In the dim recesses of the room were all kinds of men watching this woman who was treating him now as a special person, a special man. Suddenly he felt jealous of all those eyes. It bothered him that she hadn't divulged her true identity. "So what's your real name?" he asked.

She jumped up. "My real name is nothing. My real name is something I left behind cuz I didn't like what I was." She started walking down the alley as if to leave him behind with no further adieu.

He ran after her. "I didn't mean to be nosy. I was just trying to talk. You said I don't talk. I'm just trying to be a friend."

She stormed ahead, not responding, until at the end of the alley she stopped and looked at him. "And I'm being crazy. I always act crazy cuz I'm just completely bizarre. That's something about me you have to understand. But don't try to understand me cuz you won't be able to figure me out. And you're such a puppy dog, darling. I don't want to confuse you. Anyhow, who says we've got to talk? I know I said I like to talk, but I don't like to either. So let's just walk, okay? You keep acting so straight. Don't you feel blasted?"

He had forgotten for a moment how different he felt. Already the words he and she had said in the alley seemed removed by a great chasm from the place where they had sat on the boxes getting stoned. "You know," he exclaimed with his face and head inclined to one side with an expression of amazement on his thin face. "I really do, Dalia. I'm totally blasted."

She laughed and took his hand "Well, then, enjoy it, Dexter. It's the best dope I've got. I'm going to call you Dexter, all right? Cuz you look like a Dexter."

He frowned. "No, don't call me Dexter. My name is John Grafton."

"Oh, poor little puppy! Don't make your face go like that! If that's who you want to be, it's fine with me. Come to think of it, you look like a john... And you don't even get it! You're impossible, you know. But, really, Johny, you're all right. Johny Grafton, the artist. Well, come along."

They started out once more. Her sudden changes of mood and contradictory statements had him bewildered; he realized that she was making jokes 'at his expense; but at the same time he sensed an underlying genuineness in her interest in him, and felt quite drawn to her, quite intrigued. In her silk vest and pants, with her purple sash around her waist and chartreuse blouse, she seemed a woman of a sort he had never imagined he would know at close range, a woman who lived in constant contact with music and movement, desired by many men. He looked around him at the buildings and lights. Everything seemed so unspeakably beautiful and full of hidden meaning. Then to his astonishment she took his arm. Was he such a man? Or was it just a matter of time before she discovered who he really was and decided to leave?

As if in fulfilment of his apprehensions, she came to a halt at the next corner and peered down an intersecting street towards the Chinese restaurant where he had ate with Howard. "Now," she said, "I've just got to get going."

He felt a turmoil of emotion, and hardly knew whether it came from seeing that restaurant and thinking of Howard, or from the thought that now she too, this possible new friend, would simply fade out of his life. Still he didn't respond; he was struggling for words.

She swung her hips against him. "No need to be so upset. You'd think I was your sweetheart or something."

He let out a sigh. "I don't want you to go." His mind was racing around. His apartment was just two blocks 4way. He forced the words from his mouth. "I live real close to here. I've got my own place. Won't you please come up? We can sit and talk. I like you, you know, and I'm just getting to know you." He raised his hands and shrugged. He had never had a woman in his apartment, and his idea, as it came about, seemed preposterous to him.

She pressed against him once more. “Just sit and talk? Now how do I know that you’re not weird? How do I know you’re not gonna throw me down and rip off my clothes and make me naked? How do I know that you won’t do that? Cuz you look so innocent, Johny, but, see, I know what men are like, and a girl can be too trusting, don’t you think?” She peered into his face with her mischievous smile.

He wasn’t sure if she was serious, but in a way she seemed to be asking him to do exactly what she said she didn’t want. A thrill went through him. The notion struck him now that maybe this Dalia Lamar, far from being just an exotic woman, was another sort he’d heard about who would give herself casually for sex. And this prospect filled him with foreboding of a sexual confrontation in which he might fail, or give and receive disease, or perhaps do damage. In his stoned state of mind the horror of what could happen seemed all the more awesome.

“No, I wouldn’t do that,” he replied. And yet he knew that just as, despite his qualms about homosexuality, he had slept with Howard; just as, despite his fear of loneliness, he had stayed in the city after his friendship with Howard had ended; just as he had smoked grass despite his hesitancy about it; so likewise he would be unable to prevent himself from trying anything this strange woman allowed.

“So you mean I can trust you?’ she was asking, but already they were walking towards his apartment. “Well, alright, Johny, I’m going to put you on your honor.” He just nodded his head, and, when they stopped at the next corner to let a truck lumber by, he noticed that his legs were trembling.

Again she took his arm. They reached his building, went through the lobby and up the stairs. He opened the door to his room and turned on the overhead light, which was the only light he had. It made his unfurnished quarters look especially grim, and, as he led her in, he felt ashamed of how he lived. On the wall he noticed a roach. It slid into a crack. He glanced at her. To his relief she hadn’t seen it.

“Oh, Johny,” she exclaimed, “you are a strange one, aren’t you? I mean, don’t get me wrong. I like people like

you, people with fire. Here you are in your bare little room, living your artist's life. But how come nothing on the walls? No artist should live with bare walls!"

"I had some drawings."

"And you tore them down! The temperamental type! Can't stand to be less than perfect! But no one is perfect. Look at me. If you only knew! Anyhow this is too much light. I've got another joint. We can sit in the dark and smoke and talk."

He went back to the door and flicked off the switch, then turned to see her standing, with her pretty face uplifted, in the half-light from the windows facing the street. Again he thought to himself that he was very stoned; he felt as if he was seeing his room for the first time, seeing it as something which in every detail spoke of his existence. And it occurred to him that he had become a much different person from what he had been when he had first arrived in the city, though how precisely he was different, or what he had been before, he didn't know. All this took place in an instant as he crossed the room. Then she took his arm and he lowered himself with her to the floor, while with a puzzled expression he gazed around him.

"Oh, yes, this is better," she said, taking out the joint from the pocket of her vest, and applying a match. "Oh, yes, this is really fine. We can sit and talk and be friends. it doesn't matter what we are. The city is so full of noises. You know what I mean, I just want to float away."

He watched as the flame flare up in the darkness, and when the joint was passed to him drew on it harder than he had on the first one. He closed his eyes and could feel himself drifting away just as she had said. From far away the sound of traffic could be heard, a persistent hum that rose and fell in volume like the traffic he had listened to in the alley, only this time it seemed more like a distant roar. A siren rose up and faded. The fog horns were moaning on the bay. He felt himself turning and jerked open his eyes.

She was looking at him with the same incomprehensible smile. For the first time he noticed what fine white teeth she had and how her lips curved around them in a classic arch,

and he noticed how when she drew in a breath her nostrils dilated, and how in the dim light from the street her eyes seemed no longer glazed but luminescent above the green paint on her lower lids. A deep yearning arose within him. He leaned towards her and took hold of her arm. She made no effort to ward him off. He leaned forward to kiss her smooth skin.

She pulled away and gazed at him with her laughing eyes. “Now you said you wouldn’t, Johny. I put you on your honor.”

He withdrew his lips and stared at her, his face full of bewilderment and distress. “I’m sorry, Dalia. I don’t know what’s happening. I shouldn’t have invited you up.”

She took his hand “Oh, Johny, Johny, you’re so serious, aren’t you? Such a worrywart, such a thinker, but sometimes, you know, you can think too much. And you give up so easy! Don’t you desire me? Don’t I get you all excited?”

“Yes, you get me excited,” he replied, feeling stupid for repeating the exact same words, and all the more confused as to what she really wanted. She seemed to be asking him at once to withdraw and advance. Maybe this was some feminine game he didn’t understand. Maybe he got her excited too. Could this really be? Could he succeed? He realized now that his penis was so hard it was throbbing. Maybe, instead of being less than a man as he had supposed, he was in fact a man of rare masculine powers, and her smiles and questions and even her resistance were an overture to the moment when she would give herself entirely to him.

Once more he kissed her cheek. This time she didn’t pull away. He moved his hand up her arm to the round of her shoulder. “This is a woman,” he said to himself. He traced the line of her clavicle to her neck, and, unable to stop himself now, ran his fingers down her chest to the top button of her blouse, not really believing he would actually undo it. Then to his surprise she unfastened the button herself.

“I know what you want,” she whispered. “You want to feel me. You want to feel my breasts, don’t you, Johny?” She stuck out her tongue and licked the tip of his nose.

"Well, I want you to feel me. You can if you want to."

With trembling fingers he separated her blouse to one side, towards the still-unrevealed aureole of her nipple. Then he saw it, that circle of redness. He touched the nipple, which he still couldn't see, closed his eyes for a moment, and all his existence was focused on that prominence of flesh. Then something about how it stuck up from her skin reminded him of his mother's friend and how she too had encouraged him with whispers and how even so he'd gotten soft.

She licked him again. "Do I feel all right? Do you like what you feel?"

"Yes, I like it," he responded. But he was thinking again of the possibility of impotence and shame. Could it be that she would allow him to touch not only her breasts but her secret places, that just like this the decisive moment would arrive? With both his arms around her, his mind dulled by the grass, he could no longer tell for sure if he had a hard-on. He moved his pelvis, trying to feel his penis against his pants. It was still kind of hard but not as pulingly hard as it had been just minutes before. What if she touched it? Would it go limp?

She kept smiling at him. Was he really turned on, or did she just find his ineptness amusing? He ran his fingers around on her breasts. She had small, round breasts, so much smaller and firmer than the breasts of the Nebraska hooker or his mother's friend. But those breasts he had been too hurried and anxious to really feel. He had never touched a woman's breasts at a time like this when he could do it slowly and look at what he was touching.

Still somehow he couldn't tune in as much as he wanted. "These are breasts," he kept telling himself, while part of his attention stayed on his penis, inside it almost, trying to make it harder.

She pressed her mouth to his ear. "I like it when you touch me, Johny. It makes me feel so good. Do you know that, huh? Do you know how it gets me excited?"

So she really enjoyed it, he said to himself. But something in how she talked seemed artificial and overdone,

and in his own fingers too he felt a lack of animation. He thought to himself that he was thinking too much. His focus swung wildly from her breast to his penis to his questions and apprehensions, then back to her nipples and painted face. A dizzy circle but he couldn't stop. Then his mouth was on her tit. How it got there he didn't know. He shut his eyes and felt himself being whirled away in a tunnel-like cloud with his mouth still pressed to her breast. Then, frightened again by this swirling motion, he jerked open his eyes and glanced up at her strange, painted face, which was thrown back now in response to his caresses. Her lips were slightly parted, her eyes half-closed.

That enraptured expression was enough to convince him of what a few hours before he had thought could never happen. "Yes, she does enjoy it," he said to himself. "She wants me to touch her. She wants me to touch her all over." He stared at her gleaming flesh and lifted his head to kiss her lips.

She opened her mouth and gave him her tongue. His hands moved down her stomach to her hips and then towards her crotch, towards the secret he didn't understand, the confrontation which he wanted so much to avoid and which yet he felt could now no longer be avoided.

No sooner had he begun his hesitant probing, however, when she tore herself away. "This is just too much! I can't allow this!" She jumped up and went to the window. "Just too much. You don't know what you're doing. This could be such a mind-blast for us both."

He was already up, standing in the middle of his empty room, watching her silhouetted face, with his hands upraised, his head inclined towards her, and his thin body tensed in a posture of acute alertness. He no longer felt stoned; with all his consciousness he was trying to interpret her cryptic remarks. He had listened to every word, but "you don't know what you're doing" resounded in his mind. Perhaps, he was thinking, he hadn't been forceful enough, hadn't acted enough like a man. Perhaps right now he should go over to her and take hold of her arm. But an image of his father loomed up inside him; he couldn't move. "I don't know what

I did," he said with a struggle. "Or maybe I should have done something else. I don't know... I don't understand."

"No need to, Johny. I just gotta go." She crossed the room to the door.

He followed behind her. "Don't just leave. Whatever I did, I'm sorry."

"It's not a matter of sorry." Without so much as glancing at him, she reached for the knob.

He grabbed her by the arm, and, surprised by his fury, threw her against the wall. "You got to talk. I feel so upset."

Her dark eyes widened. "The way you overpower me! See, you know what I like. But, Johny, Johny, you don't know what I really am. You don't know what a struggle I'm in. And I don't want to hurt you."

Alarmed by his violence, he released her at once. Still in seeing how her eyes had widened, he realized that his forcefulness had indeed turned her on. Profoundly confused, he merely stared. She opened the door a second time and slipped into the hall.

He ran after you. "Dalia, please don't go without talking."

"We just finished talking."

"I want to see you again."

She headed down the steps and out the front door with him behind her. On the sidewalk she stopped. Her face suddenly softened. "So sad," she said, reaching her hand to his cheek. "You know, I kind of like you, Johny. You're so unspoiled."

He took her hand in both of his. "So are you."

"Oh, no, Johny. See, you don't know. I've done it all. That's why it's so easy for me and so hard for you. Because you haven't had so many, have you?"

"Hardly none."

She smiled. "Well, maybe that's why you're so pure of heart, and that's why you're such an artist too. And I like that, sweetheart, I really do. But you deserve something better than me. I'm not what I seem. I mean, I'm an actress, see, only I don't know when I'm acting cuz I'm acting all the time."

"Acting at what?"

"Acting at me."

He gazed at her with a puzzled frown. "Well, I don't care what you are. I don't care what you've done," he said in a spurt of words that amazed him. "I just want to see you again."

She shook her head. "How come you want to see me so bad? Sweet guy like you, are you really so lonely?"

He nodded assent, not smiling at her kidding.

"So what are you saying, Johny? You want a date, a real date?"

"I just want to see you."

She smiled at his consternation. "Only nights I don't dance are Monday and Tuesday."

"Monday's good. I've got it off."

"Well, okay, then, at your apartment, seven o'clock."

He screwed up his eyes. "Will you really come?"

"I said I'll come."

She squeezed his hand and turned to go. He watched her as she cut across the intersection, headed up the block, and disappeared around the next corner. Then he returned to his apartment, spread out his sleeping bag, and lay on the floor. Again he felt stoned. The events of the evening passed through his mind. "Dalia," he kept saying to himself. Though he had just been with her a few hours, it seemed to him that no one, not even David Howard, had ever understood him as she did in the totality of what he was. He wanted to understand her as well. Whatever problem she had referred to, how she wasn't what she seemed, he wanted to accept that and be kind to her, exquisitely so.

He went over in his mind what he would say to her to let her know how much he cared. And how strange she had seemed under the arc lamp in the alley, he mused to himself, how beautiful and yet how unreal. He wanted so much to taste that strangeness again. Had it just been a result of the grass? No, it seemed more than a product of his intoxication, more than infatuation with her exotic loveliness. Somehow he had been destined to meet her. He thought again, as he had in the alley, that his whole life in San Francisco had been

a journey to her, a journey that had to do with the city night, and that maybe would require learning through that her the sexual secrets he had thus far he been unable to comprehend. If only he could overcome his apprehensions! If only he could function as a man! Over and over he relived the intimacies he'd had with her, and he remembered how when he had grabbed her she'd sighed, "You know what I like."

4

That's what in retrospect impressed him most of all, that she had liked that forcefulness, the same kind of forcefulness that he had despised in his father, and that had done his mother so much harm. And, looking back at that moment, he realized too that his little show of violence had excited him as well. He began to imagine himself making love to her, imagined it repeatedly in the next several days, and always, when he did this, what enflamed him the most was the thought of grabbing her once more in just the same way, and throwing her down, and ripping off her clothes, and making her naked, as she had said (the very word got him excited), and ramming himself into her until she was writhing with pleasure, then holding her more firmly and lunging at her again. When in his mind he saw her with her legs spread wide, her pretty face pleading for more as he flailed her with his cock, that's what made his sperm shoot out. And yet, even as he walked to the low sink in his bathroom to scoop the mess from his stomach and wash it dawn the drain, the horror of his fantasies loomed up before him. Damage, violence, what had they brought? He could almost see himself as a continuation of his father, and perceive in his own thin face, when he looked in the mirror, a remembered image of his father's face, especially in the eyes where he recognized a meanness he had not seen before.

Thus he went on, cleft in his inmost self, for several days more of un- endurable waiting, while his other worries beset him too. Why was he assuming that she wanted him at all? Merely because of what she had said, perhaps to mock him, perhaps in jest? Maybe when she saw him again she

would put him on a non-sexual basis. That would spare him the possible shame of going soft; still it was painful to contemplate such a rejection. But say he were not rejected, say she desired him, then, somewhere in this, was there not a chance of transmitting disease? Was he not diseased himself? Had he not, ever since that night in Omaha, been undetectably sick? And what of her, with her allusion to the many lovers she'd known? Who could tell what she had, what hidden little sores? His stomach was knotted. He felt disturbed. Despite how she had praised his artwork, he found it hard to draw. And, when he managed to do it, what came out were pictures in which angular lines were set against curved ones, dark areas against light; sinister figures stood in the shadows; naked women presented their behinds.

At last Monday arrived. Too restless to sleep, he broke from his usual night-time routine, bought a day-membership at the same Y where he had lived in his first month in the city, worked out for several hours, and sat in the steam room until his skin was red. Then, like a man just awaking, he went out into the fantastic light of the sun, which owing to his nocturnal habits he seldom saw, and lay all afternoon in a courtyard streaming with people, trying to get a tan, while still behind his closed lids, in the midst of that amber glow, he could see her laughing eyes. Later, at home, he took a shower, and paced back and forth. It was only six thirty, and time was going slow. He went over to the window and looked out. On the corner was a parking lot, beyond that a five-story redbrick hotel. Some children in front of it were taking turns on a green bicycle. An old man with a gray beard watched from the steps by the hotel's main door. At the methadone center on the other side of the street, an unkempt woman with frizzy hair and a gaunt man in a T-shirt were arguing so loudly that parts of their conversation could be heard above the roar of the traffic. But no small, dark woman in exotic clothes could be seen.

Minute by minute the clock in the kitchen crept up to five to seven. His scanning of the sidewalks below him became more intense. Seven o'clock. Most likely, he told himself, she was the sort who was always late; nonetheless

he felt apprehensive. Seven five. Seven ten. Could it be she wouldn't come? He strode into the bathroom, stared at his lean face in the mirror, recalled his fantasies of subjugation, and shook his head. Seven fifteen. He returned to the window. Now the children were jumping rope. The old man was lifting a bottle to his lips. The couple by the methadone center were embraced in a hug. But Dalia Lamar could not be seen.

He threw himself down on the floor and covered his head with his sleeping bag. Seven twenty. Seven twenty-five. He was hoping so much for a knock on the door. Seven thirty. He jumped up and returned to the window. The children were gone. The bearded man had curled up in the corner of the parking lot beneath a scraggly tree. The gaunt fellow at the methadone center was sitting alone with his head in his hands. But among the group of people, too dressed for the neighborhood, who now crowded the sidewalk with brochures in their hands, apparently on their way from some convention to their hotels, no small dark exotic woman could be seen. No Dalia Lamar. So she wouldn't come! What a fool he had been! She wouldn't come. The truth of the matter was all too obvious now, that in his begging to see her she had recognized his weakness, his lack of substance, his inability to pretend. If only he had acted more aloof! But now it was over, his ridiculous dream of being a man to a woman like that. He felt so ashamed. Had she forgotten about him completely? Had she simply decided to do something else? Maybe she had met someone brighter, more in command. Or maybe she was in some kind of trouble, lying somewhere needing help, or so burdened with problems she'd gone off to brood. Hadn't she said she was never happy? Though later she had taken that back, still she had said it. Maybe right now she was sitting in the health bar where he had met her, oppressed with concerns she had not shared. That gave him an idea. He grabbed his jacket and beret, bounded down the stairs, and headed towards the health bar, hoping to find her.

The large main room was filled with smoke. Among the customers there he saw some familiar faces. But Dalia

Lamar he couldn't see, and the bulk of the people were so outlandish in their costumes that he felt out of place. Even so, he continued inside, ordered some coffee, and went to the very same table, he had been at before. His eyes swung back and forth among the huddled bodies; in the dim recesses of the room. It struck him now, however, that he wasn't sure what she looked like, really, that had she been there without her baggy pants and green eye shadow he would maybe not be able to pick her out except for her small size and dark hair and eyes. He did in fact see a small, dark person in a denim jacket who was either a boyish woman or girlish man and kept staring at him with tired eyes. And he stared in return only to have those eyes turn away. In confusion he went out again to the sidewalk. It was raining now, a persistent drizzle. He didn't care.

Not knowing where to go, he headed up the street away from his apartment until he came to a small beach where there was a kind of amphitheater facing a little marina that was sheltered from the choppy waters of the bay by a long, curving pier with a round tower at its end. Beyond the amphitheater were the colored lights of Ghirardelli Square. He walked out to the end of the pier past fishermen and children bundled up in raincoats, and gazed off at the square, which looked like a medieval castle lit up for a feast. That made him think of Vincent, David Howard's artistic friend, and to his surprise he saw someone further down the wall who looked much like him. But when he lifted his hand in salutation, the sad-faced little man crossed to the other side of the pier and stood facing the bay with his body at an angle so that his eyes could not be seen.

John Grafton too looked in that direction, to the dark swaying surface of the bay, where white gulls circled against the swirling purple fog. Again he thought of Dalia Lamar. Was she now, as Howard had become, just another fragment in his past? With his entire being he resisted this conclusion, and, hurrying back in the now down-pouring rain, he stopped once more at the health bar, but he could see no one at all who resembled the fading image in his mind, even the small, dark person in the denim jacket could no longer be seen. In

exhaustion he headed home, flung open the door to his apartment, and noticed on the coffee table his neat stack of sketchpads. All her interest had been insincere, including her interest in his art. Again he made a motion to tear up his drawings, but wound up sitting with them before him while he contemplated his bare walls.

The next afternoon he resolved to forget her. As evening approached, however, he changed his mind, called in sick at work, and started looking for her once more. The first thing that occurred to him was the club she'd mentioned where she danced. He tried to remember if she had told him a name or location. All he could recall was that she had said it was a dump. He walked up and down the streets in the dingy neighborhoods where on his late-night walks he had noticed clubs. Some of them he couldn't find; those he did had no sign with her name. Then he remembered that she had looked down the street towards the Chinese restaurant where he had ate with Howard. Maybe she lived around there. He canvassed the neighborhood until he was utterly fatigued. Discouraged, he headed home, and saw a block ahead of him three women moving together, the two on the outside much larger than the one in the center, who was wearing black silk pants with a purple sash around her waist.

He quickened his pace to overtake them. The two on the outside were dressed in low-cut evening gowns. One of them was wearing a wide-brimmed hat. Extravagant dress for such a shabby part of town, but he hardly took note of them. His eyes were fastened on Dalia Lamar. He was sure it was her; he could see the brass hoops on her wrists. "Dalia," he yelled.

She turned around. Her small face showed neither gladness nor dismissal. "Johny," she said softly. "I suppose you're mad."

"I've been looking all over for you," he replied in an almost whining voice. "You promised you would come."

"What a sweet, little boy!" the large one with the hat exclaimed. "Dolly, honey, where did you ever find him? And he's so orgasmic! Tell him, someone, we don't always come! Some of it, sweetheart, is up to you."

These women were obviously not women at all but transvestytes. Still this fact as well as the play on double-meanings escaped Grafton's notice.

His face was set in an anguished frown, his eyes still fixed on the object of his obsession. "At least you could have told me you couldn't make it, "he said.

Dalia smiled for just an instant at the other's remarks, then waved off her companions. "He's not the kind for that." She took his arm and led him away from the others. "Really, Johny, do you know how eager you act? You should have more pride."

"I am eager," he responded. He was glad that he had found her, and, now that he had, he wanted to make a claim on her, though he wasn't sure how to do it or what to say. "I am eager because you said you would come and you didn't, so I got upset, and I was looking for you— you don't know how I was looking— and now I found you, so I am eager, Dalia, because I like you a lot.

She let out a sigh. "Do you really care so much?"

"Yes, I do care. And I was so worried about you."

"Worried about what?"

"Worried because, like I said, I didn't know how come you didn't show up, didn't know where you were or anything, and I thought you said you were coming for sure, no matter what, so I got to thinking maybe something was wrong, that you were in trouble or something." As he spoke, he gestured with his hand in front of his mouth, as if trying to shape his thoughts as they came out; while at the same time his facial expressions suggested, however, that what he had just finished saying was not quite right and thus gave him distress.

She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. "Poor sweetheart. But don't you listen, Johny, don't you see what I am even with my friends around me?" She peered into his eyes and shook her head. "See, what you don't understand, I'm crazy, Johny. C-R-A-Z-Y. Crazy, crazy, you know what that means? And here you are, trying to pin me down to appointments and things that I just can't do." She pressed his hand. "Cuz I'm totally bizarre. B-I-Z-A-R, or something like

that. I never could spell. See, I thought of coming to see you. Maybe I even wanted to see you, cuz you treat me decent, you know what I mean? But I was on my way there, I mean not actually but in my mind, and I said to myself, 'No, Dalia, no. Johny Grafton could not understand."

He stared at her, trying to make sense of what she was saying. "I want to understand. You don't give me the chance." All he could gather from her little speech was that she wanted him to be stranger than he was. "And I sort of understand already," he went on with downcast eyes. "You don't know, Dalia. I was even arrested for shoplifting." What this had to do with the discussion he wasn't sure, but he wanted to present some evidence that he was far from normal.

She laughed. "Were you really? Johny, Johny, you decadent thing! But I'm not talking about old-fashioned theft. See, I saw you in the health bar last night. It was packed with all those outrageous people. I suppose they're kind of sick, but so is my whole world. And I could see by how you were shifting your eyes around how ill-at-ease you felt. I even looked at you. I was going to go up and talk to you, you know. But I looked so different. I wasn't myself."

Suddenly it struck him that the boyish figure in the denim jacket had indeed been her. He studied her painted face and tried to imagine what she would look like without her make-up. Would she look like that, like a girlish boy? A disturbing thought occurred to him, but he forced it from his mind. "I don't care how you look," he brought out at last. "I just want to be your friend."

"You want to be lovers," she responded softly. "And that can't be."

"But we're lovers, kind of, already."

"Oh, no, Johny, love is deeper than that."

His face was contorted with distress. "Maybe you could love me, Dalia. You said you like how I am. You said you like my art. Aren't you lonely too?"

"I'm lonely in a way you can't imagine. Cuz it's lonely to be weird, and I'm weird and you're not. That's all there is to it, Johny. And I feel sorry about it. I feel sorry for you. I

feel sorry for me. But there's just no way to work it out."

"Please, don't go," he began again.

She didn't respond. She was already walking up the sidewalk towards her two friends, who were waiting on the corner a half-block away.

He watched her as she disappeared with them into an apartment building a ways further up the street, on the other side of a busy intersection. Then he turned and headed slowly in the other direction. A clock in a store said a quarter to ten. For another two hours he wandered around by himself, while her comments about his not being able to understand her perplexed him to no end. Despite what she had said, he still believed that she was destined to be a strong force in his life.

Unable to prevent himself, he returned to the building where she had entered with her companions, and, above a mailbox, beneath a large Number 9, found, with two others, the name, "D. Lamar." Then he noticed that the front door was slightly ajar. He pushed it open and searched the musty corridors until he found Apartment 9.

Loud music could be heard inside. He pounded on the door, which, after a momentary delay, swung open, revealing a group of partying people. Before them stood the large transvestyte who had been wearing the wide-brimmed hat. She was still dressed in his evening gown, but now her short, virile hair could be seen.

"Oh, you're the little cutie, aren't you?" the transvestyte said, no longer bothering to raise her voice to a feminine pitch, but still speaking in an affected accent. "I'll tell Dolly you're here. She's in a kind of trance, though, if you know what I mean. She just loves to relax."

Grafton peered into the dark room where people of a sort he had never seen before, including one man with a beard and lipstick, were laughing and dancing and passing joints. Suddenly it occurred to him that all of those he was watching were men pretending to be women, in various degrees of disguise, and the terrible thought which he had suppressed before returned to his mind, that maybe Delia Lamar was not a woman but a man.

"See, I told you I was weird," she said when she came to the door. Her eyes were glazed. She spoke haltingly. "And I've got some little habits, as you can see."

He wanted to ask her point-blank if she was a woman or a man. But when he scrutinized her, he could detect no evidence to support his suspicions. What struck him more was the sadness in her eyes. "I don't care what your habits are," he finally brought out. "Like I told you, I just want to be your friend."

"You know something, Johny," she said, "I'm starting..." She seemed to lose her train of thought. "Starting to believe, you know... How'd you ever find me? I didn't give you no address."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Saw you go in." Such a world as this he had never imagined. It frightened him, and yet he sensed that in some inexplicable way he needed to confront what he saw, and not only confront it but accept it, in order to develop as an artist of the sort he felt so surely he was meant to be. More inexplicable still, he felt an inclination, a palpable desire, to take it in. And when the smell of marihuana reached his nostrils, he wanted so much too just to forget his worries, and go inside with the others, and listen to music with Delia beside him, whatever she was. But ever so gently she was closing the door. "You've got to understand, Johny, sweetheart. This is no place for you. I'm not your lover. I can't be your friend. Now you just try..." She lifted her hand weakly and tried to get hold of her thoughts. "You just try to understand." She took his hand and kissed it and closed the door.

For a long while he stood there. Now and then, amidst the cacophony of music and laughter, he heard her husky voice. But it made no sense to stand in the hall by himself. With a sigh of resignation, he headed outside, walked several blocks in one direction, turned to his left, walked several blocks more, turned again to his left, and, hardly aware of what he was doing, made a wide circle back to the apartment building where he'd begun, this time going around back where it occurred to him he might see her at her third-floor window.

But there was no need to stare at the window. She was sitting on some brick steps on the side of the building that led up to a small backyard with a plum tree in bloom.

She perked up when she saw him. “Johny, you’re so persistent.” She shook her head. “And, to tell you the truth, I’m glad to see you.”

He was overjoyed.

“Cuz sometimes this whole scene, you know, is a little depressing... My whole routine about being weird... I don’t know, I just don’t know where I fit in... I can’t explain it, I guess. I’m so fucking blasted.”

He sat down beside her and broke off a twig with some blossoms on it. “Here, this is for you, because I think you’re all right.”

“You’re so sweet. Where you get that stuff? You go to a lot of movies?”

“Hardly ever.”

She jumped up. “Let’s go for a walk. I just want a change of scenery, you know. Or we could go to your place. I’ve got a dynamite number.”

“But you said you’re so blasted.”

“There’s always room for more.”

They headed down the alley behind the building. He didn’t know just how, everything had so swiftly turned around. But now indeed it seemed as if he and she would become true friends. He breathed in the cool air and peered at the lights in the distance. How lovely they were!

“Another weird thing,” she said. She was obviously in a voluble mood. “I lost my job.”

“Oh, no!”

“Yea, I lost my job. I’m not a dancer anymore... And that, you know, it was kind of my whole reason... See, I’ve never been a dancer anywhere else. So I was thinking I should apply at some other places... But all the complications, you know.”

“What kind of complications?”

“Related, see, to what I am. They’ve got their definitions. I don’t fit in... But it’s too much to talk about now.”

He didn't understand exactly what she meant. He no longer suspected her of not being a woman, and was in fact now all the more convinced that she was the loveliest woman he had ever known— lovely in her physical features and lovely as well in her needs. He was very much aware, besides, that she had all of a sudden decided to trust him and confide in him, and for this change in status he was exceedingly glad. He listened intently to her every word, and tried in every conceivable manner to show how much he cared.

At a corner store he stopped to buy some wine and two kinds of cheese. Then, in his apartment, they sat by the coffee table with two glasses before them. He poured out some wine. She lit the joint and nestled against him. Soon the sound of the traffic was far away. He gazed in wonder at her pretty face. She drew him down to her lips. He could hardly believe that she had accepted him so fully. All of his worries about impotence and disease, all of his fantasies of domination, seemed irrelevant to the reality of his passion. With trembling fingers, acutely aware of every subtlety of her flesh, he groped his way from her arms to her shoulders to her breasts, and then, with her sighing in his ear, to her hips, her buttocks, her groin.

In seizing her there he felt something small and round. He paused.

"So now you know," she whispered.

"Know what?" he whispered back.

She pressed her mouth against his ear. Her words came to him as across a chasm of darkness. "I've got balls."

It was what he had suspected and denied, and so surely had he denied it that he found her maleness more shocking than a complete surprise. Still he felt that, having been forewarned, he had no right to the distress that now overwhelmed him. "So you're not a woman," he said.

"Oh, yes, I am," she responded softly but with great insistence. "I've got a penis and balls. But it's not my fault. Cuz I am a woman. I'm just bizarre." She stared at him with wild eyes. "I told you, Johny. I told you, right?"

Yes, she had told him. How this coincided with all she

had said began to sink in, amplified by his intoxication. She had said that she was bizarre; by bizarre what she had meant was this. And he had begged for a chance to understand. He hardly knew what to do. He gazed at her face. It was the same exotic face he'd been kissing with passion. Did he want to kiss her more? Yes, he wanted to kiss her, wanted to kiss away her sadness. "Yes, you told me," he replied, "and I promised to try." He pulled her against him and stared out the window.

For a long time they lay in silence. Then once more she started to talk

"See, what you don't know, Johny, I was so small I didn't fit in. And in my heart I knew I was a girl. Still I acted like a boy. I was acting even then. Then I left home. I hitched up here. I was living with this macho fairy, you know. But it wasn't right. He was always up, I was always down. So I got to I thinking out loud what I'd been thinking to myself, and I started dressing like a woman, and acting like a woman, and the way I felt, I knew it was me. I even started taking hormones, you know, to get better breasts, and I might have a sex-change. But I don't have the money, I've got to wait."

There was another interval of silence. "So what are you thinking?" she asked when he didn't speak.

"I was thinking that in a strange way I love you," he said, "and I don't know what you are."

She took his head into her hands and stared into his eyes. "I am a woman. Inside of me I am a woman." She let out a long sigh and lay down beside him. "And you don't know how hard it's been to find out. When I lost my job at the club..."

"That's why you lost it?"

"Yea, see, I didn't really undress all the way. Then someone got suspicious. They asked me to strip. The manager, I mean. But I just ran out."

It was all beyond his comprehension. He was trying to think of her as a woman, then an image intervened of a penis and balls. But if she really was a woman in her mind... He pushed back her hair from her brow. She had the face of a

woman. He touched his lips to her mouth. She met them with an eager kiss. He felt himself being once more drawn in. He yanked on her hair. She relaxed into his arms. A thrill went through him. She wanted him to do as he pleased. His hands moved around to her buttocks. He pulled down her pants and began feeling her legs. She reached over to undo his zipper. His penis was hard. He began moving towards her to mount her. Then it struck him he didn't know what to do. "I don't know where to put myself," he whispered. All he could think of was what Howard had said about what a certain friend had needed. "Should I do it in your asshole?"

"Oh, yes, please do," she said. "I want you inside me."

Again he approached her. But just as he did he saw a roach on the wall behind her, its antennas moving slowly as if watching. And all at once the ugliness of what he was doing engulfed him: the thought of it, the asshole where shit came out, and shit was full of disease; the thought of pushing inside, maybe even ripping through. He broke down in tears and wept uncontrollably while she held him in her arms.

When at last he finished she untangled herself from his arms and got up to go to the bathroom. For the first time he looked at her closely and saw an undersized scrotum with a penis so small that it seemed like nothing more than a bulblike glans embedded in flesh. He watched her as she crossed the room in the half-light, no longer swaying with her affected feminine motion. Her body was long and virile, and her breasts no longer seemed to him like female breasts, but like male breasts that were bloated and distended.

When she returned she dressed quickly, becoming more womanish in appearance as she donned her silk pants and ruffled blouse. He realized that she was about to leave, and a sick, empty feeling came into his stomach. Suddenly he understood that she was more than a man or a woman, more than an asshole or penis or vagina, that she was a human being who had confided in him regarding her deepest secrets and whom he had failed to take on her own terms.

He went over to her and tried to hug her.

"Don't touch me!" she cried. She was so upset that her eyes were trembling in their sockets.

He backed off from her. “Dalia, please.”

“My name is Dale!”

He raised his hands in hopeless confusion. “Dale, then, please, please forgive me. I’ll try to be different. I still want to be your friend.”

She let out a long sigh. “This is all so absurd! You mean that, don’t you? Johny, poor Johny, you’re crazy too! And I wish you the best. I really, really do. But I don’t want to see you again. I don’t want to think about you. I just want you forever gone!”

She unlocked the door and slipped out into the hall. He listened to her footsteps on the stairs, then hurried to the window and watched her crossing the street in front of the building with long, mannish strides. Above the redbrick hotel beyond the parking lot, the sky was still dark. He tried to sleep but he couldn’t. He kept thinking that he hadn’t been what she needed, and in his inability had struck a blow to the very core of what she was. So he had done her damage indeed, though not in the way he had anticipated. And maybe through her he had been given a trial in which for the sake of his art he had had to prevail. In this too had he failed? He jumped up from his sleeping bag, grabbed his jacket and beret, and headed outside.

He kept walking down deserted streets that he vaguely recognized and left behind him, only to find himself later on these same streets again beneath a foggy sky that hid the tops of the buildings and wove them together in a single fabric of purple, gray, and shrouded lights. Though apprehensive of some danger he could not identify, he kept on walking by himself, his hands in the pockets of his Army jacket, his beret pulled down over his forehead. He had no idea where he was going, or where he had been, or how much time had gone by, and everything, it seemed, that before he’d held to had given way.